

## A NEW MONUMENT FROM NAPOCA DEDICATED TO *MERCURIUS*

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**Abstract:** In 2008, a rescue excavation was performed at 10 Episcop Ioan Bob St., on a site located in the western part of the Roman town at Napoca, close to the *forum*. The unjustified intervention of the developer as well as the works carried out in the building basement restricted much the research area. Part of a building with porch and courtyard paved with limestone slabs were identified. The most spectacular artifact is a column shaft with low-relief, depicting god Mercury with his specific attributes. The presence of this divinity on an architectural element made us hypothesise in relation to the building function: either a temple dedicated to respective god or a trader's house. The low-relief is the work of a local stonecutter and is specific to the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> – early 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD.

**Keywords:** *Napoca*; porch; building; low-relief; Mercury.

**Rezumat:** În anul 2008 a fost efectuată cercetarea arheologică preventivă în str. Episcop Ioan Bob nr. 10, într-un punct situat în zona vestică a oraşului roman Napoca, în apropierea forului. Intervenţia intempestivă a constructorului, precum şi efectuarea lucrărilor la subsolul clădirii, au restrâns foarte mult aria cercetării. A fost descoperită o parte dintr-un edificiu cu portic şi curte pavată cu dale de calcar. Cel mai spectaculos artefact îl constituie un fus de coloană cu basorelief, înfăţişându-l pe zeul Mercur, cu atributele specifice. Prezenţa acestei divinităţi pe un element arhitectonic ne-a determinat să emitem două ipoteze în legătură cu destinaţia edificiului: acesta reprezintă fie un templu dedicat respectivului zeu, fie locuinţa unui negustor. Basorelieful este opera unui lapicid local şi este caracteristic celei de-a doua jumătăţi a secolului al II-lea – începutului secolului al III-lea p. Chr.

**Cuvinte cheie:** *Napoca*; portic; edificiu; basorelief; Mercur.

In February 2008, in occasion of the attic works performed for the “Ioan Bob” School and the construction of a gymnasium there, the archaeologists of the National History Museum of Transylvania were authorized to supervise the development of such works and initiate the rescue archaeological research in the project surface.

The site is located in the western part of the Roman town at *Napoca*, on 10 Episcop Ioan Bob St., at approximately 300 m from Unirii Square, which overlaps the *forum* of the Roman town (Pl. I\*). Nearby, namely on 12 Prahovei St. (currently Samuil Micu) rescue archaeological investigations were carried out in 1995, when the first fortification of the Roman town was identified, consisting of a defensive ditch with rampart. According to the site supervisor, Viorica Crişan, this fortification element functioned until mid or second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD<sup>1</sup>, which corresponds to the second earth-and-timber phase of the settlement at Napoca<sup>2</sup>. The ditch removed

<sup>1</sup> Crişan 1996, 386, Fig. 2.

<sup>2</sup> A chronology synthesis of the town at Napoca see in Rusu-Bolindeţ 2007, 98-99.

a house dated to the first earth-and-timber phase<sup>3</sup> (AD 106-108/110), of the same provisional character as the buildings on V. Deleu St.<sup>4</sup>

At the time when the research works were initiated, the gymnasium footing, located at a couple of meters from the site on Prahovei St., had already been put in place (Pl. II)<sup>5</sup>, which irreversibly prejudiced any possible correlation of the archaeological results from the two investigated sites. In addition, most part of the building base-ment was excavated and prepared for the foundation frame execution, by casting the reinforced concrete slab. The single room where any archaeological intervention was possible (ca. 30 m<sup>2</sup>) was designed for the IT lab, where, in a first stage, the developer removed the concrete floor, excavated ditches along the foundations (at a maximum depth of -2.75 m from street level, 0.50-0.60 m wide, ca. 0.70 m deep) and removed the entire surface level up to the base of the footing reinforcement ditches (Pl. I).

In this area, although it was clear that the Roman level was deranged by medieval and modern buildings, we removed up to a depth of -2.75 m from street level the surface level of the land portion, free of any of the developer's works. The central part (1.20 × 1.20 m) remained unexcavated, the supporting pillar being located there. In order to examine the vertical stratigraphy, we carried out a test trench (1.00 × 1.00 × 2.00 m), towards the west side of the room, up to a depth of -4.65 m from street level and at 1 m distance from the northern wall of the room. Exceeding this level would have significantly put at risk the geological structure of the area and endanger reinforcement works. The entire trench was manually excavated and the collected archaeological material (modern, medieval and Roman pottery) was primarily recorded and transported to the National History Museum of Transylvania.

The archaeological research revealed part of a Roman building, namely its groundwork, as well as of other architectural elements (Pl. III-IV): two fragments of column shafts found *in situ*; a column base; a pedestal and pavement made of limestone slabs. One of the column fragments exhibits a low-relief depicting god Mercury (Pl. XII), which allowed us to hypothesise on the building function: either a temple erected for respective god or the house of a Roman trader, whose protector was Mercury. Unfortunately, further elements that would permit a more accurate chronological framing of the building are missing.

### General stratigraphy of the site

The most recent level identified is a poor quality wall fragment, crumbly, cut by the modern building foundations and the current works of the developer, with the elevation composed of two, three rows of cut limestone (0.10-0.35 m), bound with mortar. The wall, oriented north-south, 1.77 m long, 0.45 m wide and between 0.20-0.30 m thick, overlaps a demolition layer of the enclosure, identified on a portion of ca. 2.5 m<sup>2</sup> in the compaction area of the limestone floor. The mentioned layer was composed of dark-brown earth and many tile, shingle and brick fragments.

<sup>3</sup> Crişan 1996, 395.

<sup>4</sup> Cociş et alii 1995, 639-640.

<sup>5</sup> Drawings were made by the authors of this article and photos were taken by Cristian-Aurel Roman (Pl. II-XI) and Sergiu Odenie (Pl. XII).

The demolition level partially covered a limestone block ( $3.00 \times 0.45 \times 0.30$  m) oriented NW-SE, which was the platform of a column, of which survived the base ( $0.56 \times 0.56 \times 0.26$  m) and two drums from the upper part of the shaft (0.90 m long and diameter between 0.36–0.46 cm). The drum in the upper part is decorated with a low-relief. Current data indicate they represent the remains of a possible porch (Pl. V).

The block delimited a paving formed of limestone slabs, of which only seven were identified, among which two, sized  $1.10 \times 0.90 \times 0.10$  m, completely preserved. The paving (Pl. VI-VIII) seems to be the inside of a courtyard delimited by the previously mentioned porch and lies on a levelling layer, namely a substructure formed of gravel and sand in a 0.50 m-thick layer.

The whole structure, comprising the porch and pavement, titled to a level difference of over 0.50 m, due to the compaction of the soil on a N-S direction, from ca. 3 m east the western room wall. Such compaction is likely to have occurred in the pre-modern period.

In the western part of the room, at ca. 1.20 m east the porch, a series of levelling/filling layers were noticed, formed of both successive layers of brown earth with mortar and brick fragments and earth mixed with gravel and sand, with a maximum thickness of 0.70 m. The levelling layer covers culture layers, composed of various brown hue earths, potshards, mortar and small pebbles.

Architectonical elements are overlapped by a compact debris layer consisting of Roman tiles, bricks and shingles. The entire building had fallen onto its western side, with a level difference of ca. 0.50 m, likely caused by more recent construction works, which could not be yet identified archaeologically for two reasons: firstly, in the next room the concrete had already been cast; secondly, the alignment of the column platforms is too close to the room wall (0.65 m), which did not allow any further excavation in the area.

The sizes and orientation of the building cannot be specified as it is largely destroyed by medieval and contemporary construction works. The Roman period is practically represented by two inhabitancy levels: that identified below the building's levelling layer and the second, which marks the existence period of the building.

### The decorated column shaft

The single particular item discovered following these archaeological investigations is a limestone column fragment, decorated with a character sculpted in relief. The shaft is 0.31 m in diameter and 0.84 m high. The low-relief, 0.64 m high and 0.23 m wide, depicts Mercury, in a slightly deepened niche on the column surface. The god is rendered standing, with its specific attributes: *caduceus* in the left hand, supported on the left shoulder; pouch in the right hand; winged *calcei*; winged *petasos* on the head. His tunic is fastened with a round brooch on the right shoulder and the folds fall over the left forearm. Over the tunic, he wears *sagum*. The god is beardless and his face is framed by curls. The slightly sketched features and details as well as the traces of a jagged chisel, specific to the finishing degree of the monument, point to the work of a local artisan working in the stonecutters workshop in Roman Napoca. The

distinctive elements (*caduceus*, winged *petasus*, the pouch in the right hand) consist in the combination of Hellenistic and Roman origin attributes, specific to the classical Roman depictions of this divinity<sup>6</sup>.

The novelty in the god's image is the low-relief as individual element on the column of a Napoca building, placed so to be seen from the front. Associated with Liber and Hercules, Mercury appears on a pilaster coming still from *Napoca* (yet without the accurate mention of the find spot), which was assigned a funerary function<sup>7</sup>.

The artistic design of the low-relief column exhibits features specific also to other stone items from *Napoca*, the monument framing chronologically in the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> - early 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD.

In conclusion, we may argue that near the *forum*, on its western side, there existed a building whose function is uncertain. The low-relief rendering the image of god Mercury is the single element that may be associated with either a temple dedicated to respective divinity or a trader's house, who placed his business under the god's protection. Given that the site was overlapped by medieval and modern buildings and the area under archaeological investigation much reduced, neither any building limits could be traced nor any correlation with the archaeological circumstances nearby, namely the former street Prahova could be made.

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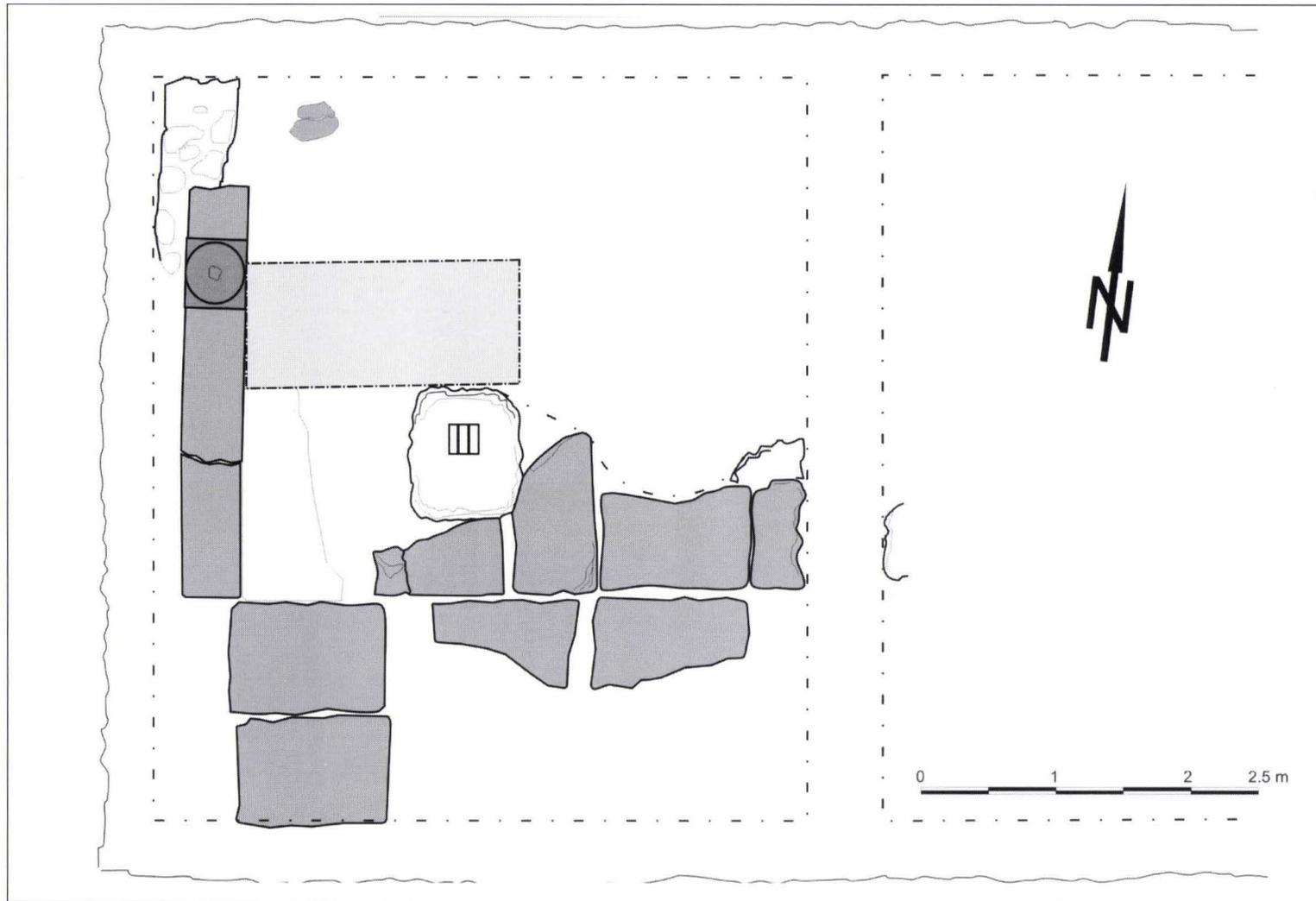
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<sup>6</sup> DA, s.v. *Mercurius*, 1818-1823 (A. Legnard); Siebert 1992, 370-371.

<sup>7</sup> Bărbulescu 2003, 116; the pilaster is exhibited in the National History Museum of Transylvania lapidary, inv. no. V. 30697.



Pl. I. Basement layout – part of the room where archaeological research was possible.



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Pl. II. 1-2. "Ioan Bob" School, inner courtyard.



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Pl. III. Column base and demolition layer of the building: 1. Southward view;  
2. Westward view.



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PL. IV. Wall fragment and column base: 1. Southward view; 2. Northward view.



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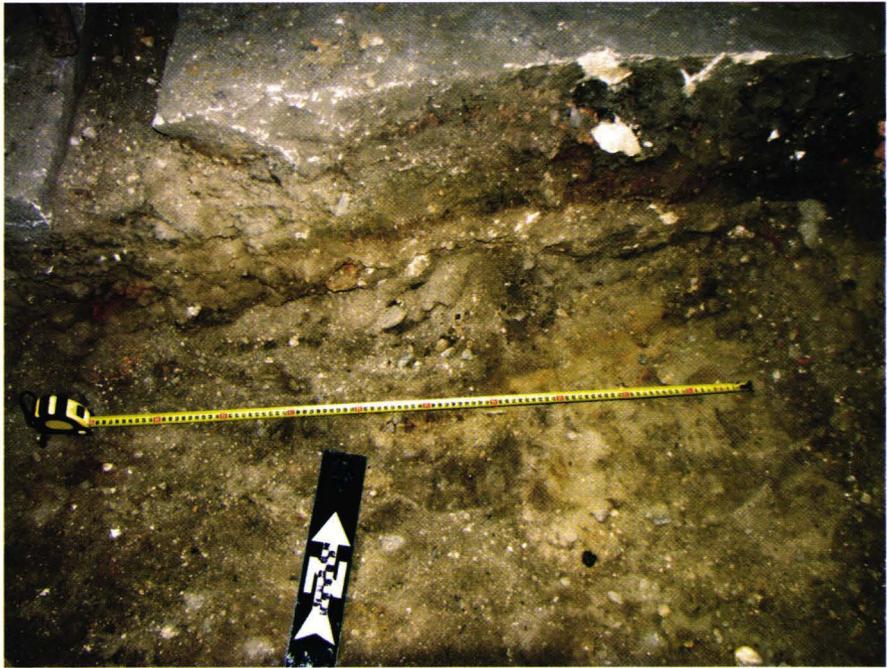


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Pl. V. Porch: 1. Northward view; 2. Perforated limestone block with attachment orifice; 3. Column shaft.



Pl. VI. Limestone slab pavement: eastward view.



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Pl. VII. Limestone plates paving: 1. Northward view; 2. Southward view.



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Pl. VIII. 1. Limestone plates paving - general westward view; 2. Porch and demolition layer with tile and shingle fragments - northward view.



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Pl. IX. 1. Demolition layer with tile and shingle fragments - northward view;  
2. Limestone plates paving and substructure: north-eastward view.

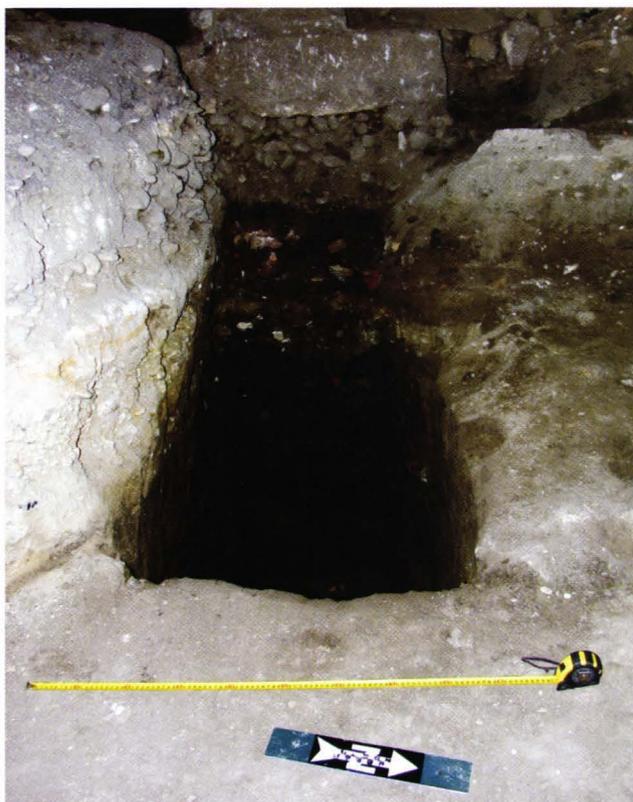


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Pl. X. Limestone slab pavement: 1. Southward view; 2. North-eastward view.



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Pl. XI. Trench: 1. Eastward view; 2. Southward view.



Pl. XII. Column fragment with low-relief depicting god Mercurius.