

Mihai Bărbulescu, *Arta romană la Potaissa* / Roman Art in Potaissa, Editura Academiei Române, Editura Mega, București – Cluj-Napoca 2015, 308 pages.

Arta romană la Potaissa [Roman Art in Potaissa] is Mihai Bărbulescu's latest book focusing on this Roman city, after the monographs dedicated to the Fifth Macedonica Legion and to the city, the volume dedicated to the fifth-century German princely tomb and the volume dealing with the inscriptions discovered inside the fort. In fact, this brief enumeration of Mihai Bărbulescu's books focusing on Potaissa indicates how a historian of Antiquity must be today, i.e. mastering all the auxiliary disciplines of history, as all these fields of study continuously provide sources for the better knowledge of a past era. Archaeological, figurative, epigraphic and numismatic sources are all pieces of a puzzle that a historian of Antiquity must be able to use in order to reach solid conclusions and to render a picture of a past society as close as possible to *how it really was*.

After a brief foreword presenting the reasons behind writing the book, the author's intentions and the chosen direction of study, the first part, i.e. I. Orașul și oamenii [The City and its People], describes the ancient city of Potaissa, as Mihai Bărbulescu envisages it. A provincial city, small on the scale of the Empire, cosmopolitan, dominated by the military atmosphere, a city with rich people who acquired artworks. The brief description of Potaissa is a pretext to stressing the role and the place of art and artisanal products in the city, in public and private spaces, in the daily life of the inhabitants.

The book is not and was not designed as a complete catalogue of all artistic monuments in Potaissa, but it does discuss all art and artisan fields, from stone sculpture, ronde-bosse and relief (religious, funerary, decorative), bronze sculpture, refined crafts, glyptic, coroplasty and architectural decoration. That is, everything connected to aesthetics, to the artistic expression of beauty. And art objects were not few in Potaissa. One can note the *genius* from the Museum in Aiud and the statue of a matron with child from the Museum in Cluj. Exceptional pieces, unfortunately fragmentarily preserved, were also discovered during archaeological excavations performed on Dealul Cetate, such as the head of god Serapis and the torso of Hercules.

Beautiful ex-votos from Potaissa probably decorated a temple of Dionysos excavated sometime during the 19th century. One notes the heads of Liber and Libera, carved in marble, once part of a statuary group, two bas-reliefs and fragments from Dionysiac groups (a Maenad, two Sileni).

The votive items are statistically few in the entire artistic production. Ancient temples are probably still under ground in the areas free of modern constructions on the slopes of Dealul Cetății, in Valea Sândului and on Dealul Zânelor, waiting to be discovered in the future.

The case of the funerary monuments is completely different. Mobile since Antiquity, they were moved and reused, as building materials among other things. Numerous funerary *stelae*, *aedicula* walls and altars are known from the territory

of Turda. Mihai Bărbulescu analyzes them in details in this book in a sub-chapter in which the archaeologist steps back and the art historian takes over. To the accurate descriptions of the monuments he adds subtle observations of stylistic resemblances, similar models employed and portraiture analyses. The author of *Interferențe spirituale* [Spiritual Interferences]¹ goes from artistic to religious and analyzes the funerary symbols contained by these reliefs that render consecrated scenes of the funerary repertoire, such as the funerary banquet, *Attis tristis*, *Lupa capitolina*, but also rare scenes such as the moira Clotho implored by a girl, a matron having her coiffure made by a *pectinatrix* or Apollo following the nymph Daphne.

The analysis of the artistic fields continues with statuettes made of bronze. Some of the most beautiful such items in the province are known from Turda, most of them imports, crafted during the 1st century of our era: Mars, Oriental Venus, Iupiter fulminans, Liber, or items such as the candle holders in the shape of an acrobat and a Silen displaying a refined craftsmanship. Jewelry items, glyptic items, coroplasty goods and architectural decorations complete this inventory of the artistic fields, completing the modern image over the arts in Potaissa. A consistent analytic chapter is entitled III. Artizani și ateliere [Artisans and workshops]. Attentive to details, the author attempts to and succeeds in identifying groups of monuments with shared technical and stylistic characteristics. As for the possibility of establishing the existence of certain *officinae* or the circulation of models through pattern books, Professor Mihai Bărbulescu is rather skeptical. He also identifies local products, including most of the funerary sculptures from Potaissa, and imports such as the marble plate with Hercules and Mercurius with the Norican kyma above their heads.

The final chapter, V. Soarta monumentelor de artă din Potaissa [The Fate of the Art Monuments from Potaissa] is an interesting chapter that abandons the research of monuments as art works, approached from an aesthetic perspective, and passes onto the realm of detective work. It envisages the life of the monuments from Turda since Antiquity until today, from the destructions of the post-Antique work to those of the medieval and modern periods and even of today. Destruction, but also reuse, storms, anthropic factors and natural causes are all elements that have threatened the artistic production of the former Roman city and continue to threaten it today. Collections that have disappeared, lost monuments, people's ignorance and evil intentions have all led to the reduction in numbers of the art monuments from the former Potaissa. The repertory of items on which modern people test their erudition would have been otherwise, undoubtedly, richer.

I have intentionally approached last the penultimate chapter entitled simply, like the book, IV. Arta romană la Potaissa [Roman Art in Potaissa]. There, under the pretext of defining the concept of provincial art, Mihai Bărbulescu discusses the issue of Romanization in the context of the post-modern cultural relativism that, in his opinion, also touches the historical studies focused on Antiquity. This is much more than a terminological debate and in this chapter one can observe, in filigree, the author's historical vision. Bărbulescu rightfully notes that the replacement of the term Romanization invented by Th. Mommsen with the term Creolization and the

¹ M. Bărbulescu, *Interferențe spirituale în Dacia romană*, Cluj-Napoca 1984, 2nd ed. 2003.

use of concepts such as imperialism and colonialism in regard to the Roman Empire are phenomena generated by the new ideologies. The author believes that the desire to demolish the old concepts / myths simply originates in the adoption of the new in the detriment of the old. In fact, each historian is the prisoner of his own social and cultural environment, of the *Zeitgeist*, and therefore today the resistance in face of Romanization is more significant than Romanization itself, the few local sherds are more important than the mountains of common Roman pottery fragments and the *limes* no longer divides, but it unites. For this reason the process of acculturation in provincial art is bi-directional according to some: not only the provinces adopted the Roman canon as much as they were able, but also the art of Rome became provincial. The author recommends moderation and common sense with the words of Marcus Aurelius: let us change what should be changed and preserve what should be preserved and let us have the wisdom to differentiate between the two situations.

In the end one must evaluate this book that is not only for specialists but can be read by any person of culture. It is a book of cultural history and the text is not charged with the anesthetizing jargon of professional art historians. It is a polemical book where Mihai Bărbulescu expresses with clarity his choices on how historical writing should be, on the one hand, and how it must redirect society, at its different levels, in regard to the cultural heritage of Antiquity.

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