

A MOULD USED FOR MANUFACTURING METAL CROSSES DISCOVERED IN THE VICINITY OF THE EPISCOPAL BASILICA FROM HISTRIA

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Abstract: A mould for manufacturing metal crosses was found during the 2013 excavations in the Centre-North sector from Histria, in a chamber located in the close proximity of the northern axis of the *atrium* of the Episcopal Basilica (1a). The crosses were probably used during the religious services taking place in the Histrian *basilica*.

Cuvinte-cheie: Epoca romano-bizantină, *Scythia*, *Histria*, tipar, cruce.

Rezumat: În cursul campaniei de cercetări din 2013 de la Histria, cu ocazia săpăturilor din sectorul nord-estic al cetății a fost descoperit un tipar de cruce, în apropierea axei nordice a atriumului Bășilicii Episcopale. Crucile erau probabil destinate serviciilor religioase desfășurate în basilica histriană.

Archaeological excavations during the summer of 2011 that took place in the Centre-North (CN) sector at Histria allowed for new investigations in an area located north of the Episcopal Basilica¹. The archaeological research aimed to gather maximum information regarding the evolution of this particular sector during the last phase of the city's existence, mainly during the 6th century AD. During the 2013 excavations, alongside the usual vitrified fragments and pottery sherds, the above-mentioned area yielded a stone mould, used for manufacturing metal crosses. The present paper presents the artefact together with a few hypotheses and comments.

The item was uncovered in a layer of *debris* excavated while opening a new square (C14) located north of the northern annex of the Episcopal Basilica's atrium² and in the near vicinity of the

street west of the basilica. The excavation of this area permitted the observation that north of the first addition that had previously been excavated³, there was a second one (R1a – Fig. 1), linked to the first one. It is worth mentioning that the two chambers communicated with one another through a 1.85 m wide access way, while the altimetric level of the two floors was comparable. Moreover, the same materials (stones and soil – employed as mortar) had been used for the construction of the walls of the two chambers. R1 and R1a were constructively linked, with the exception of their western side, which was made of stone and mortar, a reminiscence of the previous structure that had been re-used. The excavation suggests that the two chambers were constructed and used in the same time, most probably tightly connected to the whole ecclesiastic assembly. Future research will hopefully confirm this hypothesis.

As in the case of chamber 1a, in chamber R1 (under excavation) the same stratigraphic situation was observed: one level (level IV) corresponding to two phases: phase IVA dating to the first half of the 6th century AD and phase IVB dating to the second half of the 6th century AD⁴.

Stratigraphically, the mould was found in the *debris* overlapping the IVB archaeological level, corresponding to the second phase of existence of the basilica. Since the artefact appear within the *debris* and not on the above-mentioned level, we do not exclude the possibility of an earlier dating of the item, respectively to the chronology of level IVA.

¹ The excavations started through the good-will of the regretted prof. Alexandru Suceveanu, who allowed the present author and Irina Nastasi to excavate this small perimeter.

² Suceveanu 2007, p. 21.

³ Suceveanu 2007, p. 49, pl. XXVI.

⁴ Suceveanu 2007, p. 17.

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The negative was made from a slate of limestone with a width of 7.7 cm. Later damage gave the item the shape of an irregular polygon with rounded corners. The damage affected also the area of the negative (Fig. 2). The latter has the following (surviving) dimensions: the right arm – 4.3 cm in length and 1.2 cm in width; the left arm – 3.7 cm in length and 1.3 cm in width; the vertical lower arm ending with a ring – 5.3 cm in length and 1.6 cm in width; the vertical upper arm, damaged at the extremity – 2.9 cm preserved length and 1.4 cm in width (Fig. 3). Given the fact the lower arm was preserved in its entirety, it was possible to observe that it ended with a groove for pouring the metal (0.4 cm wide and 1.6 cm in diameter). Here and there the mould still retains some of the manufacturing traces. At the present stage of research this item is the second one to be discovered at Histria. Another item, made from a fragment of tile, was also discovered in the area of the Episcopal Basilica.

Cross moulds, though of smaller sizes, have come from more remote areas, such as Străulești (București)⁵, Olteni (jud. Ilfov)⁶, Botoșana (jud. Suceava)⁷ etc.

Apparently, the mould was used for manufacturing simple crosses with flared ends (Fig. 4), a well-known cross type in 5th–6th century AD Scythia⁸. The simple cross with flared ends is a frequently used decoration pattern in ancient Christian times, whether we talk about the *al fresco* decoration, or we refer to elements of architectural sculpture – as they appear on some capitels from Tomis⁹ (Constanța, Constanța County), Callatis¹⁰ (Mangalia, Constanța County) or Ibida (Tulcea County)¹¹ or on some *cancelli* plates from Tomis¹² and Axiopolis¹³ (Cernavodă, Constanța County). Frequently, the same type of cross is found on funerary monuments at Tomis¹⁴, sometimes the monument itself has this very shape – as found at Callatis¹⁵ and Tuzla (Constanța County)¹⁶.

⁵ Constantiniu 1966, p. 673–675.

⁶ Preda 1967, p. 513–520.

⁷ Teodor 1974, p. 561 and following, fig. 2 and 4/3.

⁸ Barnea 1977; Barnea 1979.

⁹ Barnea 1960, p. 207, fig. 5.

¹⁰ Barnea 1960, p. 210, fig. 8.

¹¹ Barnea 1960, p. 210–211, fig. 9.

¹² Barnea 1958, p. 341–343; Barnea 1960, p. 207–208, fig. 6.

¹³ The plate was used to block the access inside a Christian monument dated to the end of the 6th century AD, unpublished.

¹⁴ Barnea 1979.

¹⁵ Popescu 1976, 91, p. 136–137, fig. 91 a/b.

¹⁶ Popescu 1965, p. 251–161, fig. 3.

Items produced with the mould would seem to have had a lower arm longer than the upper one. Given that the depth of the mould is only 0.4 cm, after the filling of the mould only a lamellar cross could have resulted, with a further thinning of the width due to the finishing process. Because of the damage to the mould (the break on the extremity of the vertical upper arm) we cannot estimate the real dimensions of the items produced with it.

Special attention must be given to the ring linked to the vertical lower arm of the cross. Two equally valid hypotheses may be proposed. One is that the respective ring was only a device to help the artisan to extract the piece following the cooling process, with the ring meant to be detached from the cross during the finishing stage. Supporting this opinion is the groove connecting the imprint of the ring proper to the lower arm of the cross (a groove that appears to be carelessly made and even deteriorated; the deteriorations might as well have been the result of an intense and repeated use of the mould). It is also possible that the ring was part of the item. We cannot exclude the possibility that the vertical upper arm, only partially preserved, had a similar ring. In this case, the resulting cross could have easily been a component in a more complex piece, probably a chandelier allowing for the hanging of several lamps, perhaps of glass, similar to those found in the annex on the northern side of the Episcopal Basilica's transept, near chamber R1¹⁷.

The stone used for the mould is Jurassic limestone. Yellowish-white in colour, this type of limestone was used in many of the constructions of Roman and Roman-Byzantine age in the whole area, Histria included¹⁸, having been chosen as construction material due to its qualities. These attributes could also have been important in choosing this limestone for the mould.

Despite a thorough examination, no traces of metal or slag were observed in the hollowed-out area where the metal was poured, traces that could have been left following the metal pouring. But inside the circular grooving there were traces of burning, also resulted from the pouring. This is only normal since the mould must have kept clean in what the circular ring was concerned, the latter being having been used despite a more precarious maintenance process.

¹⁷ Băjenaru, Băltăc 2000–2001.

¹⁸ Muraru, Avram 1983, p. 194.

There are a series of arguments supporting the hypothesis that in the near vicinity of the Episcopal Basilica at Histria there existed a centre for the production of liturgical items or items meant for use in a Christian religious context, in this case metal crosses. Among the arguments we would like to mention the stratigraphic context of the artefact, its location inside chamber R1 – near to the northern annex of the *atrium*, as well as the raw material employed for manufacturing the mould – limestone. The idea of a local workshop is not new, the possibility of manufacturing items with a religious character being mentioned on other occasions – e.g. on the occasion of the publication of a lamp deposit found in 1999 in an annex located north-east of the Episcopal Basilica, adjacent to its transept¹⁹. For the moment, the authors of the article favour the hypothesis of a local production of glass lamps at Histria – even though remains of workshops are lacking – or in centres located a distance away.

Regardless, chamber R1, excavated almost completely (with the exception of the northern wall where the structure is still covered by the baulk between squares C14, C15 and C16 in trench SII) did not provide any evidence of use as a workshop-proper (presence of a kiln, melters, or strong traces of burning), although its location north of the *atrium* is worth taking into consideration. It is obvious that such a workshop could also have functioned without any problems in the *extra-muros* area of the city²⁰, but the location (on the plan) of the lamp deposit suggests that the workshops could have operated near to a cult edifice. On the other hand, at the present stage of research, we can invoke only one pertinent argument against the hypothesis of a local workshop for religious items at Histria: the impossibility of identifying such a workshop. Moreover, archaeological excavations in the area near the Episcopal Basilica are far from being completed, the *insulae* to the north and south of the Christian monument have hardly been studied.

The discovery of the above-mentioned mould strengthens our belief that the production of liturgic

items seemed to have been controlled by the local Episcopal Basilica, as suggested by the increase of similar finds linked to such a production during archaeological excavations.

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¹⁹ Băjenaru, Băltăc 2000–2001, p. 471; Achim 2012, p. 138.

²⁰ Băjenaru, Băltăc 2000–2001, p. 485.

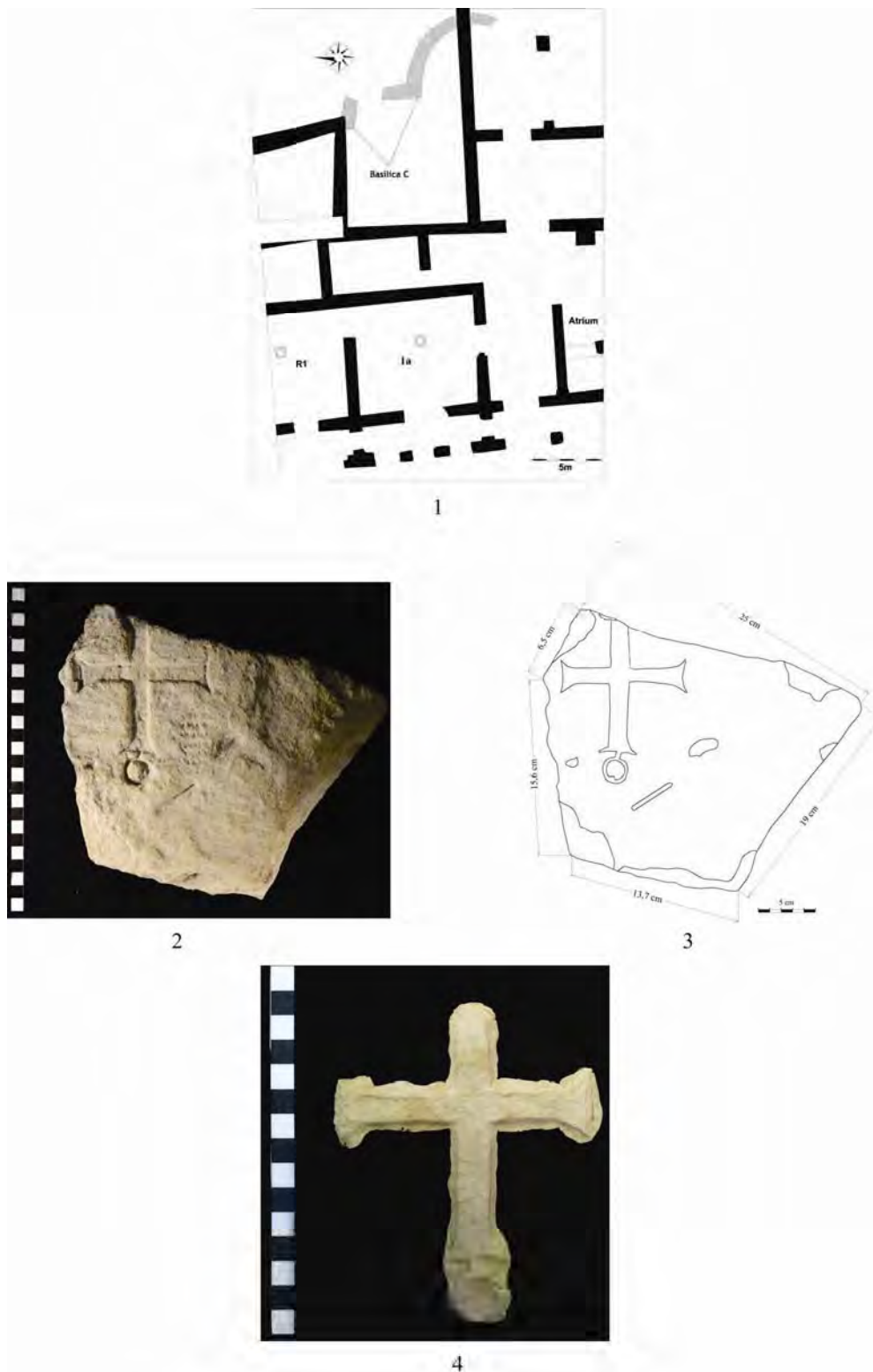


Fig. 1. Plan of the excavated area, Basilica C and precinct R1.

Fig. 2. Precinct R1. Cross mould (photo L. Clianțe).

Fig. 3. Precinct R1. Cross mould used (drawing L. Clianțe).

Fig. 4. Plasticine cross produced using the mould (L. Clianțe).