

THE EPISCOPAL BASILICA FROM HALMYRIS AND THE CRYPT OF EPICTETUS AND ASTION

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Keywords: Roman Empire, basilica, apse, narthex, necropolis, crypt.

Abstract. The excavations carried out in 2000 on the North-West area of the Halmyris fort, Insula I, led to the unearthing of a building basilical plan. In the years that followed (2001-2004) the investigations revealed a basilica type building, with apse (altar), aisles, central nave, and narthex.

Cuvinte cheie: Imperiul Roman, biserică, altar, nartex, necropolă, criptă.

Rezumat. Cu prilejul săpăturilor întreprinse în anul 2000 în N-V fortului Halmyris, Insula I s-a identificat planul unei construcții basilicale. În perioada următoare (2001-2004) a fost dezgropată o construcție de tip basilical cu altar, nave laterale, navă centrală și nartex.

Within the “Roman Fort on the Danube” project that has been generously sponsored by Earthwatch Institute since 1999 a focus point of investigation within the Halmyris fort was the Episcopal basilica discovered in 2000-2001¹.

The Halmyris fort is located 2.5 km. east of the present-day commune of Murighiol, Tulcea County, in the extreme north-east corner of the province of Scythia (today Dobrudja), the so called *Extrema Scythiae Minoris*² (Fig. 1), at the mouth of the Peuce (the present-day Sfântu Gheorghe) arm of the Danube. In the 1st–6th centuries Halmyris held a key strategic position at the junction of the Danube with the Black Sea. The fort functioned in the area as a legionary garrison at the very end of the last segment of the Roman Danube frontier, and as a naval and supply base for military installations upstream river³ (Fig. 2).

Among a significant number of 3rd–6th century literary evidence on the history of Halmyris, two require particular attention in the light of our topic.

Notitia Episcopatum included *Halmyris* in the 6th century bishoprics of Scythia Minor, as Ἀλμυρῶν an indication which, at the commencement of the systematic excavations in 1981 had to be proven mainly by archaeological investigations⁴.

Outstanding evidence on late 3rd century Christian life at Halmyris is offered by *Vita Sanctorum Epicteti presbyteri et Astionis monachi*, an account included first in the *Heribertus Rosweyda's* *Vitae Patrum* published in 1615 and then in the famous Bollandian collection *Acta Sanctorum*, vol. II, *Julii 8, Parisiis et Romae*⁵. The eastern *Martyrologium* briefly records: ἐν Ἀλμιρίδι Ἐπίκτιτος καὶ Ἀστίων⁶. The account

¹ The project “Roman Fort on the Danube” commenced in 1999 and was uninterruptedly and fully supported by Earthwatch Institute in Boston, U.S.A. for at least 6 years. I avail myself of this opportunity to expressing again all my gratitude towards this helpful and important sponsorship in the research.

² Jord. Get. 266; cf. Proc. *De Aedif.*: [...] Σκυθίας ἐν ὑστάτῳ κεῖται Ἀλμυρίς ὄνομα.

³ Al. Suceveanu, M. Zahariade, *Un nouveau vicus sur le territoire de la Dobroudja romaine*, Dacia NS 30, 1986, p. 109-120; iisdem, *Du nom antique de la cite romaine tardive d'Independenta (dep. Tulcea)*, Dacia N.S. 31, 1987, p. 87-96; M. Zahariade, *An early and late Roman fort at Independenta, Tulcea county in Roman Frontier Studies 1989. Proceedings of the XVth International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies*, Canterbury 1989 Exeter, 1991 p. 211-223; M. Zahariade, *Vexillation in northern Dobroudja*, Dacia N.S. 30, 1986, 1-2, p. 173-176; M. Zahariade, *The Halmyris Tetrarchic Inscription*, ZPE 119, 1997, p. 228-236; M. Zahariade, M. K. Phelps, *Halmyris, a settlement and fort near the mouth of the Danube: interim report*, JRA 15, 2002, p. 229-245.

⁴ The text was published in 1867 under DE SS. EPICTETO PRESB. ET ASTIONE MONAHO. MARTYRIBUS ALMYRIDENSIBUS IN SCYTHIA: 540-551.

⁵ J.B. Rossi, L. Duchesne, in *Acta Sanctorum, Novembris*, tom. II pars prior, Bruxelles 1894, p. 1-156.

describes the life and acts of the priest Epictetus in one of the oriental provinces of the Roman Empire, his encounter with Astion who later became his disciple and their coming to Halmyris, their missionary activities full of miracles there and finally their torture and execution ordered by the duke of Scythia, Latronianus.

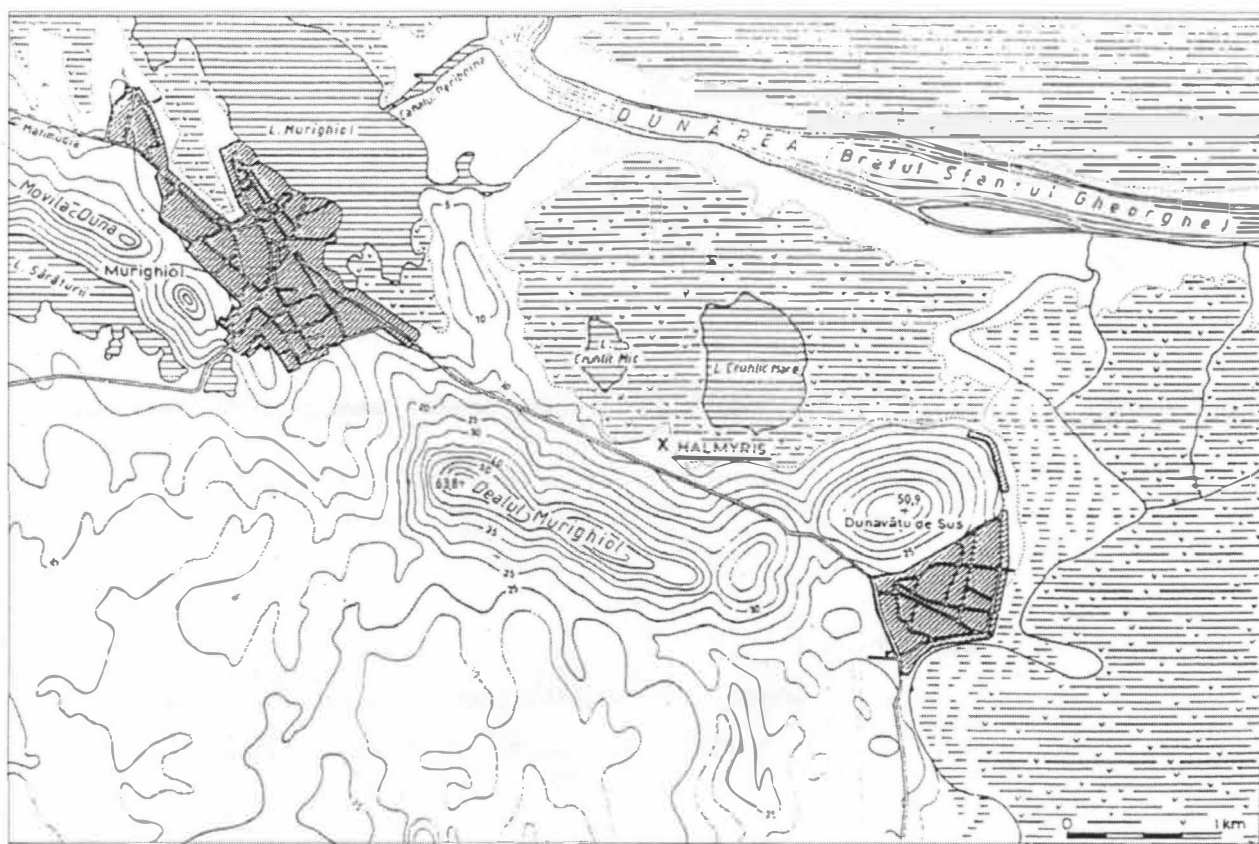
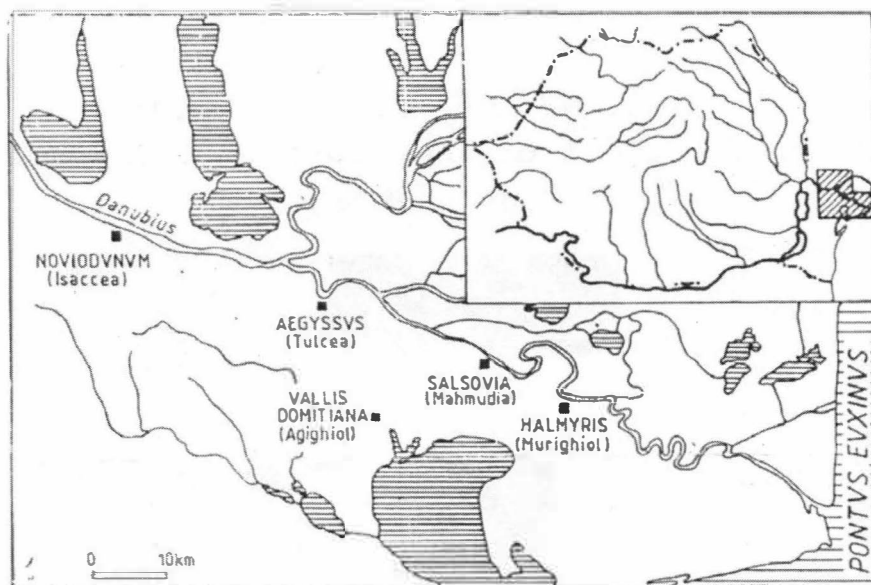


Fig. 1. a-b. Halmyris. The location of the fort.

⁶ H. Delahaye, *Les martyrs Epictète et Astion*, Académie Roumaine, Bulletin de la section historique, tome XIV, 1-5. (6), Bucarest, 1928.

Fig. 2. Halmyris. Satellite view.



In 1928, Hyppolyte Delahaye, the well-known researcher of early Christian life at the Lower Danube elaborated a special study dedicated to *Les Martyrs Epictete et Astion*.⁷ From his perspective “a basilica must have been undoubtedly erected at Halmyris in the honor of these martyrs. We hope that the Romanian archaeologists, worthy successors of the dear departed Vasile Pârvan will have the lucky chance to discover the vestiges of this basilica”⁸.

THE EPISCOPAL BASILICA

The excavations carried out in 2000 on the North West area of the fort, Insula I, led to the unearthing of a building of basilical plan. In the years that followed (2001-2004) the investigations were focused on this important monument and its immediate surroundings (Fig. 3).

The research area encompassed □ L – S 10/ L – S 15, □ M 10 – 15 and □ S 10 – 15 and revealed a complex of buildings, 20.50 m long on east-west and 18 m wide on north-south axis. It consists of the following main architectural structures.

1. A basilica type building, with apse (altar), aisles, central nave, and narthex. The size of this main building is 18.50 m in length, including the apse and 10m in width.. Both aisles are delimited from the central nave by two partition walls each with three abutments that bore the weight of columns. Two column bases are still preserved *in situ* on the top of the wall of the southern aisle. The 0.70/0.80 m thick walls of the basilica are built in stone and clay.
2. A rectangular 4.50 × 3.00 m room with 0.70 m thick stone and clay walls appears bonded against the southern side of the basilica. At the interior 0.75/1 m long flagstones benches, still visible run along its southern and eastern sides.
3. A 13.50 m long and 4.50 m wide rectangular enclosure with 0.75/0.80 m thick stone and clay wall appears as a later addition surrounding the apse to the east, north and south. It has three narrow entrances towards *cardo maximus*. This additional wall created a circulation area behind the altar, possible an *ambulatorium*.
4. A 19.00 m long and 7.50 m wide stone and clay annex building, without an interior partition is bonded to the south side of the basilica. The building has a 2.0m monumental entrance to the east. A well situated in the south east corner of the wall that surrounds the altar seems to have either served as an inside water source.

⁷ Delahaye, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁸ R. Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*⁴, 1986, p. 39-67.

5. A 5.50×3.25 m stone and clay rectangular room is situated in the south western corner of the annex building. Its position within the complex and the 0.80/0.90 m thick walls would suggest a significant elevation in which case we might witness here the existence of a *turris*.

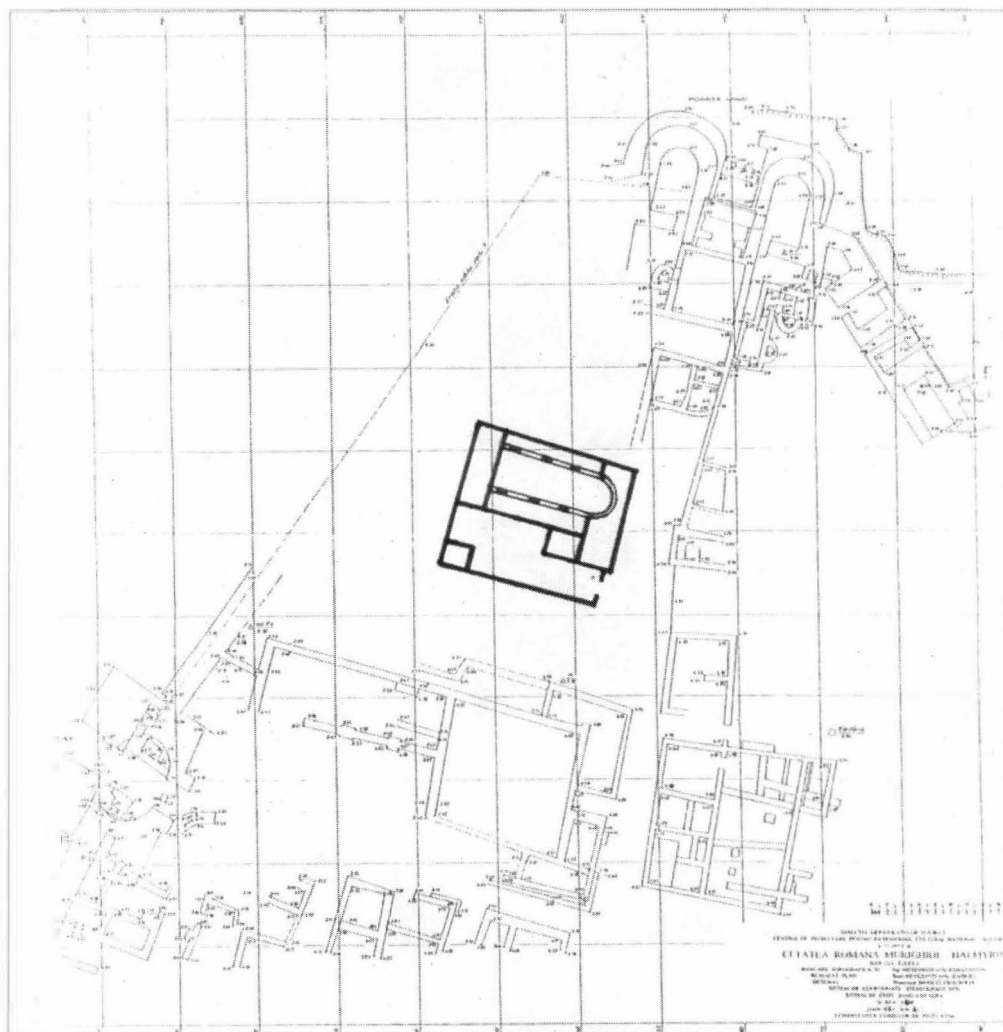


Fig. 3. Halmyris. Insula I.

If the 2001 excavations were concentrated upon the uncovering of the church surface and obtaining an overall plan, the 2002 focal point was the stratigraphy and chronological data on the ground formatting and the architectural development of the church complex.

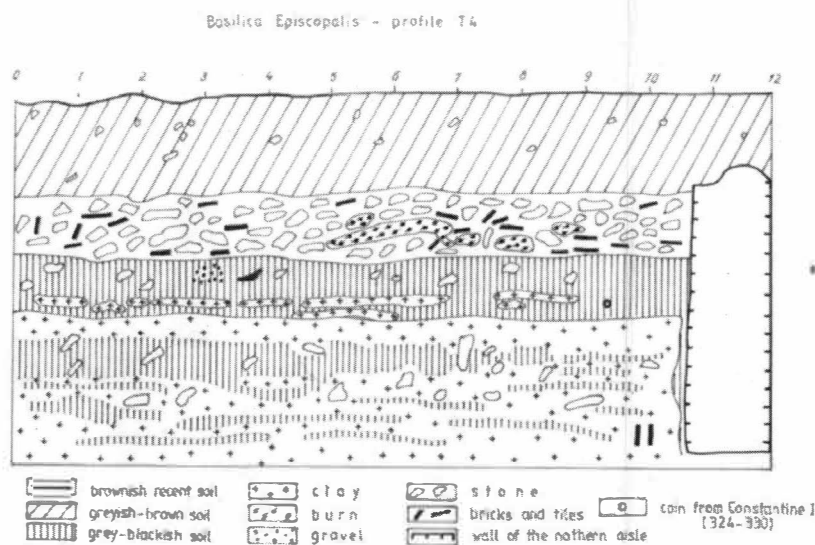
Trenches T 1, north-south oriented, inside the northern aisle, T 2, the *ambulatorium* area, T 3, next to the south west corner of the altar, T 4, in the nave aiming to explore the central area provided the significant amount of information on the earliest phases and later development of the church layout.

A good deal of information was obtained in T 4 as a reference point for all the investigated areas (Fig. 4). The stratigraphy sequence runs as follows:

A 0.05 m thick recent stratum of soil overlays a 0.60-0.70m thick post-antique layer without significant or very slight and non-typical archeological intrusions. At $-0.70/0.80$ m a first 0.50-0.60 m thick layer of debris mixed with grey-blackish soil is noticeable. At $-1.20/1.25$ m, a 0.25/0.30 m thick and massive layer of clay visibly covers the entire surface of the trench. A discontinuous 0.05/0.07 m thick layer of clay at ca $-1.45/1.50$ m appears mixed with medium size stones which seem to have formed the initial leveling of the terrain.

In the mid area of the trench, under the clay bed, a brownish-yellowish stratum overlays a vaguely outlined wall structure pertaining to a masonry that appears to have been dismantled to its foundations.

Fig. 4. Halmyris. The stratigraphy in T4.



At $-1.60/1.70$ m, underneath the clay and gravel fragmentary layer, a $0.10/0.20$ m thick stratum covered up a $0.50/0.60$ m thick alluvial soil with pre-Roman remains. The pole holes and their significant arrangement, visible in the alluvial soil indicate the existence of hovels in this area. The typical finds are 4th–3rd century Getic ware and Hellenistic pottery and roofing tiles. An amphora handle bears the name MOYΣΑΙΟΣ (Fig. 5).

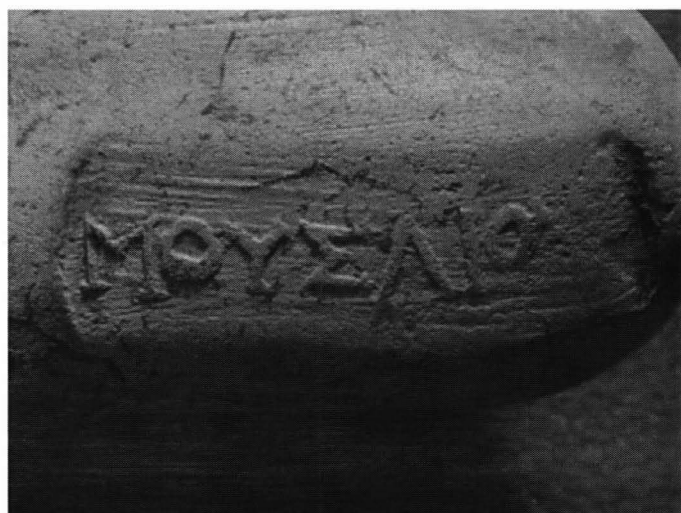


Fig. 5. Halmyris. Amphora handle bearing the name MOYΣΑΙΟΣ (Mousaios).

The stratigraphy suggests two specific phases in ground formatting and building process: a clay and gravel stratum was set as a leveling bed at $-1.45/1.50$ m after the removal of the 2nd–3rd century Roman structures indicated by the traces of a dismantled wall in T 4 that had affected the initial native settlement in this area. The ground was completely excavated, leveled up and then filled in with soil from outside the fort, possible affecting a certain area of the native-Greek settlement where the mixed Getic and Hellenistic archaeological materials originate from. Foundation trenches for the future of structures were dug in the well packed earthen platform that resulted from this operation. The massive soil cleaning appears in fact as an operation of ‘purification’ of the area from ‘pagan’ structures. This would be the only explanation of the complete removal of the early 2nd–3rd century constructions which certainly existed in this area of the fort.

A well packed stratum of clay at $-1.20/1.25$ m followed as a consolidation of the floor which was topped by the brick pavement.

In its initial layout the Halmyris church was built of simple, compact plan, with apse, a single nave and narthex, without any additional divisions inside (Fig. 6). The synthronon, evidenced by a 0.50 wide bench forms a compact structure with the apse. The basilica with transept at Tropaeum and the main basilica at Argamum *deambulatoria* separate this configuration from the altar.

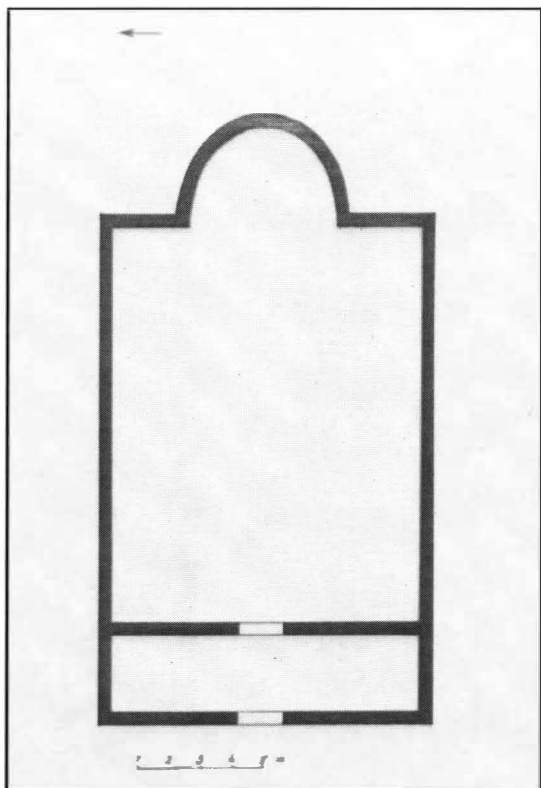


Fig. 6. Halmyris. The Constantinian plan of the church.

A coin from Constantine found at – 1.45 m on the clay bed that served as platform for the initial brick pavement, although slightly damaged appears legible as having being struck in 324-330 in the Thessaloniki workshops. It is a sheer indication that the basilica was built in the Constantinian epoch, although the piece as a *terminus post quem* could have circulated in a later period. Since the Milan edict of 313 acknowledged the Christian faith as an official religion in the Roman Empire, in the 24 remaining years of life, through word and action the Emperor founded the Christian church as a dominant religious power. The Christian architecture of the Constantinian epoch seems not to have known well established standards. Its most striking feature this period remains its variety. The architects who built edifices for the new religion have tried out the most diverse types: basilica type halls without aisles, the classical type of Roman basilica, basilicas with and without apses, with lateral wings (Lateran), with ambulatories, attached to central structures or with continuous transept, within the fortified areas, basilicas with or without *atria*. These variations were largely determined by the function of cathedral, martyrical basilicas and/or covered necropolises.

The new Christian architecture could not find its origin in the “pagan” religious architecture, both from practical and ideological reasons. The Christianity saw in paganism and in its entire architectural production the opposite of its intentions. The disdain was so profound that even the location of the Christian buildings did not follow previous occupied areas before late 4th or early 5th in the Eastern and 6th century in the Western parts of the Roman Empire, or even if it did, because of topographic or space saving the operations of expiation were so drastic that the terrain was radically newly formatted. In search of an original architecture, the Christian church finally ended up and returned to the public zone and official architecture. Within these search it inevitably had to combine the religious connotations with the requirements of the official construction. However, this type of building was already in existence and it was called basilica.

Modest basilicas were built before late 3rd–4th century, but only under Constantine the architects met the requirements of the Christian rite, creating new variations of the initial type of basilica. From the initial classical plan, the Christian basilica extracted two or three traits, which by 300 A. D. had become common characteristics to the majority of the basilicas, regardless their function: oblong plan, longitudinal axis, timber roofing, rectangular or apse like tribunal, division between central nave and lateral aisles. The church had to be brought to a monumentality recently created by the Constantinian spirit of Christendom and adapted to the liturgical requirements, financial resources and the social situation of local community⁹.

⁹ M. Zahariade, *Moesia Secunda, Scythia și Notitia Dignitatum*, București, 1988, p. 77-88.

Apparently, the building of a church at Halmyris would not have been imperiously necessary if the solid cult of the martyrs, Epictetus and Astion, executed here on 8 July 290 did not exist.

Another reason for the erection of a basilica within the fort during the Constantinian epoch would paradoxically rely on the military reorganization of the Scythian limes, after these territories were taken over from Licinius by Constantine. Significant replacement of garrisons took place along the Danubian frontier at Drobeta, Sacidava, Dorticum, Utus and these examples are only a few from the ample operation of replacing the old Tetrarchic garrisons¹⁰. At Halmyris, regardless its composition the garrison was a participant to the martyrdom of the two Christians, Epictetus and Astion and therefore the non-Christian soldiers were replaced. The new auxiliary regiment, yet unknown, was created after 324 from Christian soldiers devoted to the new religion and regime and needed a place to worship expressed in its most obvious forms, basilica. Here, the soldiers were going to venerate also the memory of the two Christian martyrs in a church built around the major point of interest, the martyrs' crypt.

Lateral interior walls as partition for aisles were a later addition. Two 2.50 m wide northern and southern aisles were thus newly created (Fig. 7). Bases of columns appear at every 2.90 m, a good indication for the existence of columns to support the roof of the building. The heaviness of the new roofing structures supported by columns is suggested by solid stone abutments, three on each aisle wall, built in *opus mixtum*, at 1.60/2.00 m in depth (Fig. 8). They considerably thickened the walls of the aisles and created a stability of the columns. The height of the partition walls of the aisles were likely very low compared to the pavement level. The columns arrangement would suggest either north-south transversal or east-west oriented roofing arches along the walls of the aisles. A new pavement could have been laid down on this occasion.

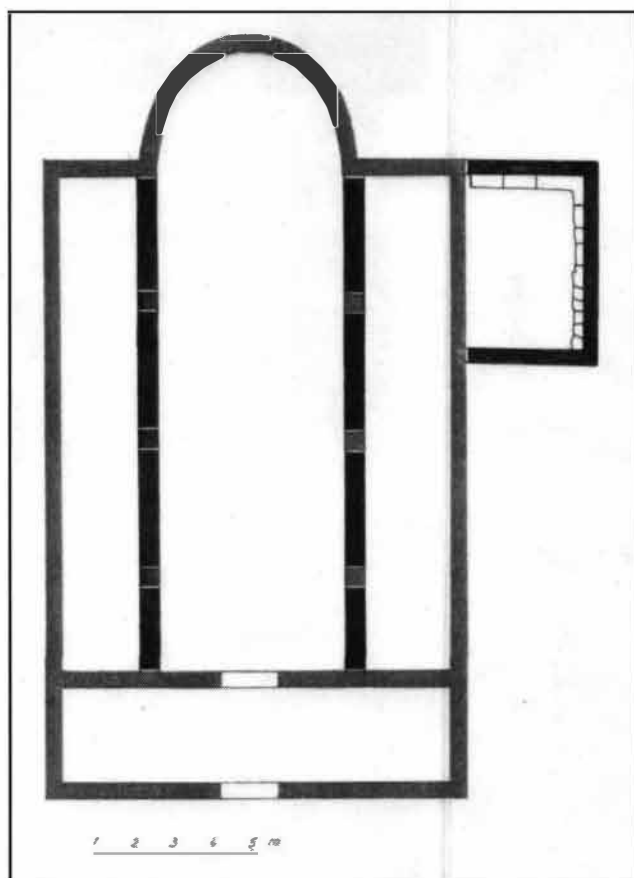


Fig. 7. Halmyris. The second and third building phases of the church.

Although significant modifications of the interior of the basilica have been undertaken in the second phase, the chronological sequence is only conjectural. There is no clear piece of evidence on the date of the building of the partition walls of the aisles with columns. Supposedly the operation must have occurred

¹⁰. C. Just. I 3.35 (36).

somewhere during Constantius II's reign, when the building activity to this type of religious edifices was carried and even increased on a larger scale in the Empire. Similar basilicas with narthex, central nave and aisles are known in Scythia at Histria, the basilica with crypt near the big gate, on the western side, at Noviodunum, the basilica bonded to the defense wall, or the basilica in its initial phase at Dinogetia.



Fig. 8. Halmyris. Abutment on the southern side of the aisle wall.

The building of a benched assembly room bonded against the southern side of basilica marks the third phase in its development. The benches were made of 0.50 m wide flagstone set along the eastern and southern sides (Fig. 9). The bottom of the foundation walls of this new chamber yielded a compact layer of tiny fragments of kitchen and fine pottery, glass, mashed bricks, and gravel. Five hardly legible coins of small module, typical to Theodosius II's reign and second half of the 5th century were found amongst this well packed layer of rubble. The functional reasons for this additional room become significant once the number of the church personnel in the 5th century and the requirements for participation at religious services increased.



Fig. 9. Halmyris. The stone benches in the room on the southern side.

If Zenon's law prohibited the establishment of bishoprics in other towns of the province of Scythia with the exception of the capital Tomis¹¹, its provisions certainly did not forbid extensions or reconstructions of the existing churches. The archaeological material found under the foundation of the southern wall of that room indicates a period of construction sometime between mid and late 5th century.

¹¹ I. Barnea, *Roman-Byzantine basilicae discovered in Dobrogea between 1948-1958*, Dacia N.S. 2, 1958, p. 337-339.

The last constructive phase of the basilica is marked by additional buildings on its eastern and southern sides (Fig. 10). The massive edifices almost equal the basilica in surface. The apse (altar) was enclosed by a rectangular layout building, set parallel to north-south oriented *cardo maximus* leaving a 4.00–4.50 m wide area for circulation. Three doorways opened to *cardo maximus* gave access within the area which can be seen as an *ambulatorium*.

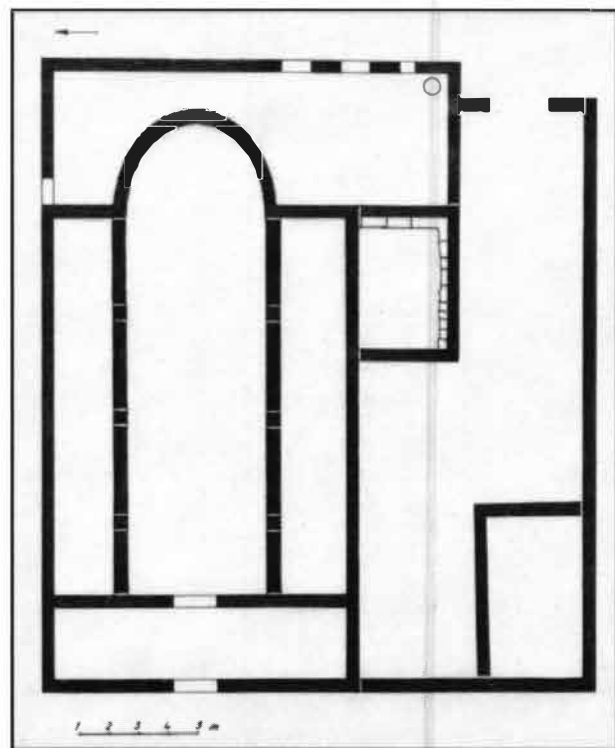


Fig. 10. Halmyris. The 6th century Episcopal basilica.

Concomitantly, another large edifice was built encompassing the entire southern side of the basilica. The 5th century benched assembly room was included within the new edifice. The long east-west oriented hall has no inside partition walls and seems to be an annex of the church covering the entire southern side of the basilica. The building of this edifice could have occurred in the first half of the 6th century, as indicated by two coins from Justin I and Justinian I, found at – 0.70 m near the threshold of the monumental entrance to the east. A small fragment from a vase of brownish color with stamped sign of the cross and the letters M Θ = M(ήτηρ) Θ(ηοῦ) printed over the lateral arms of the cross, found at –0.57 m, in □ P 14, shows clearly the ecclesiastical reasons of this edifice newly bonded to the church.

At the interior south western corner of this annex building a rectangular room appears as a second half of the 6th century later addition, as it is noticeable from the bonding of its walls against the annex walls and the clearly different building technique.

The coins from Justin I from 518–522 and Justinian I dated possibly after 538 are important chronological hints for the building activity in the 6th century. A later doubling of the altar with a supplementary wall appears at Dinogetia¹², but the new construction follows the round line of the altar, while at Halmyris, the inclusion of the altar within a rectangular wall was made in order to maintain a straight circulation along the south-north main street (*cardo maximus*). It is highly probable that the new structure surrounding the altar to the north, east, and south had small rectangular windows set at the upper part of the building as it is shown by a fragment of window glass found within the enclosure area (Fig. 11). The considerable quantity of window glasses found within this area seems to give reason for this reconstitution.

The massive extension in surface occurred highly probable when Halmyris was declared bishopric as clearly shown by *Notitia Episcopatum*. It is likely that Halmyris was known as a *civitas* through the merging of the two 2nd–3rd century civil entities, *canabae* and the military *vicus* (*vicus classicorum*), already by the end

¹² Hierocl. *Synecd.* 637.15.

of the 4th century when the text on the martyrdom of Epictetus and Astion, finally written up by that time speaks about *civitas Almyridensium*. Halmyris was reconfirmed as *polis/civitas* in 528 in the Hierocles' list¹³.

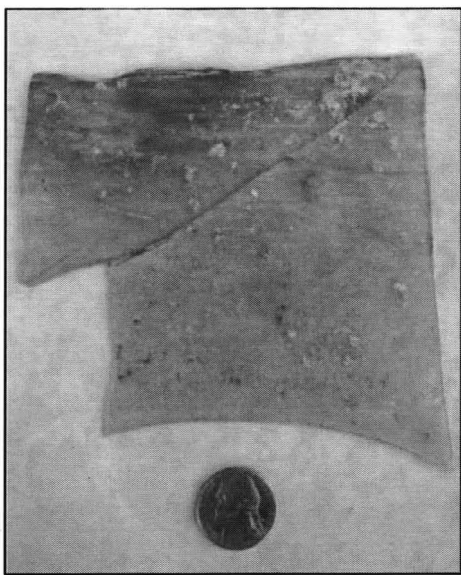


Fig. 11. Halmyris. Fragment of window glass.

Once Zenon's law bonds were abrogated by the Anastasian and Justinianic legislation, Halmyris became a bishopric as a result of its urban and demographic progress. The church complex underwent massive extensions and became a *basilica episcopalis* (Fig. 12). It is difficult yet to reasonably assign to a particular utility the building of the annex on the southern side of basilica: either housing the believers gathered here every year on 8th of July to attend the services for the commemoration of Epictetus and Astion, or as a shelter for the young catechumens, or workshops for the daily requirements of the church. Such edifices as annex buildings are well known in Scythia and elsewhere and they appear in the majority of the Episcopal centers.

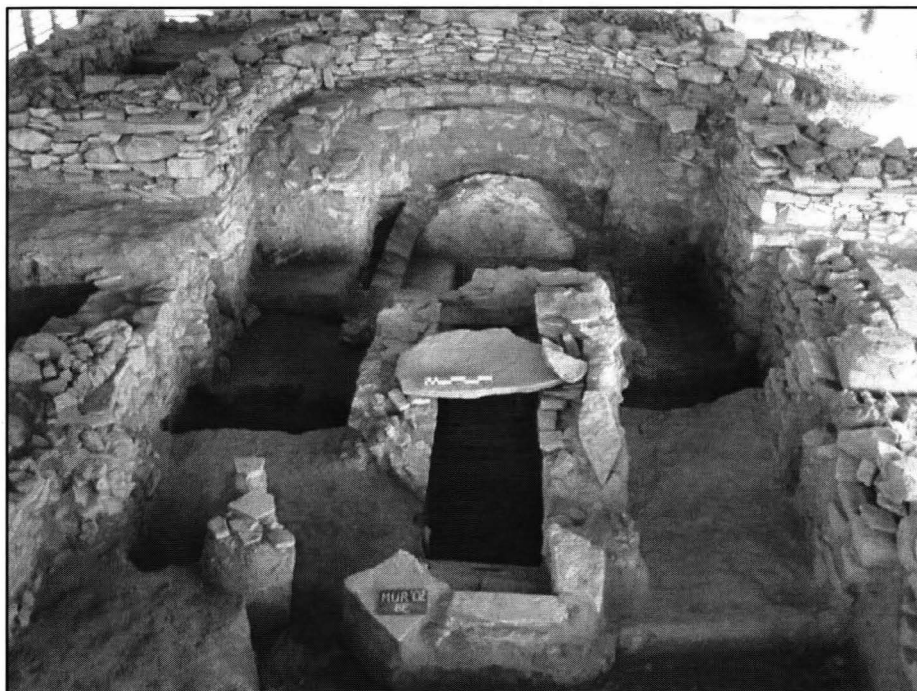


Fig. 12. Halmyris. The interior of the Episcopal basilica.

¹³ C. Scorpan, *Date arheologice referitoare la secolele VI și VII pe teritoriul Dobrogei. Rezultate inedite la Tropaeum și Sacidava*, Pontica 5, 1972, 365-366.

The archaeological evidence with regard to end of the Episcopal basilica at Halmyris is conjectural. Except the particular situation at the martyrs' crypt (see below) which is a reference point in this discussion, the only significant element is the circular stone and clay structure with traces of an oven to the east, found in the annex building. This type of construction brings back into discussion the question of the so-called *rotundas* buildings of the same circular form on the last levels of occupation at Histria, Tropaeum and Sacidava¹⁴. The 6th century pottery and a bone belt buckle found next to this structure is slim evidence for a more accurate dating. However, the circular building in the annex is a clear indication that towards the end of the 6th century the basilica was no more in use. The last occupation level (XIII) within the Halmyris fortified area is marked by small sized stone and clay, half-buried rectangular dwellings, datable with coins from Phocas over struck in 614, during Heraclius' reign. The coins associated with the specific type of habitat are certain elements for dating the last occupation level. Although there are no traces of fire were at the church surface, the end seems to have been rather sudden, as results from the investigation of the martyrs' crypt.

THE CRYPT OF THE MARTYRS

The *presbyterium* area was investigated in 2001-2003. Under a 1 m thick layer of collapsed, large well cut stone blocks coming from the altar's walls remains of a human skeleton in a crouched position have been found, laying down on a c. 25-30 cm thick well-packed clay bed (Fig. 13). Two 6th century oil lamps with visible traces of prior usage were found next to the skeleton¹⁵. The presence of the human remains is not accidental and the archaeological context indicates a burial in a certain ritual. The anthropological expertise identified the skeleton as being of female sex which increased the suspicion that the crouched position of the skeleton and the location of the interment points to a non-Roman and non-Christian burial rite, although Roman artifacts were used. One might think, maybe, of a high ranking person from outside the Roman world buried in this very place sometime in the late 6th or early 7th century, in a period when the Episcopal basilica had been taken out of use for some time. The collapsed stone blocks found over the skeleton showed no traces of mortar suggesting that the deceased was set on the clay bed and covered by a small room-like stone building¹⁶.



Fig. 13. Halmyris. The late 6th century burial.

The further research of the area disclosed that the burial was set on the top of a segment of a larger building complex (Fig. 14). Its general layout and positioning in relation with the altar indicated the existence of a crypt that typologically fits well the known pattern for this category of monuments in the Roman Empire, basically identified with *martyrium*/ *martyricon*. The Halmyris crypt is of *hypogaeum* type, situated under the altar and beneath the pavement of the church. In contrast with the stone and clay structure of the basilica and its

¹⁴ Fl. Topoleanu, *Ceramica romană și romano-bizantină de la Halmyris*, București, 2000, p. 186 nr. 475; pl. LIX.

¹⁵ For anthropological expertise see: N. Mirițoiu, A.D. Soficaru, *Studiu antropologic al osemintelor descoperite în cripta bisericii de la Murighiol (anticul Halmyris)*, Peuce S.N. 1, 2003, 531-536.

¹⁶ H. Baumann, *Câteva precizări rezultate din cercetarea monumentului paleocreștin din comuna Niculițel (jud. Tulcea)*, ActaMN 14, 1977, 256 pl. I/4.

annexes, the crypt is built of bulky roughly cut mid sized stone blocks alternating with flagstones, bound with white friable mortar. The building has two rectangular rooms (R 1 and R 2), N-S oriented.

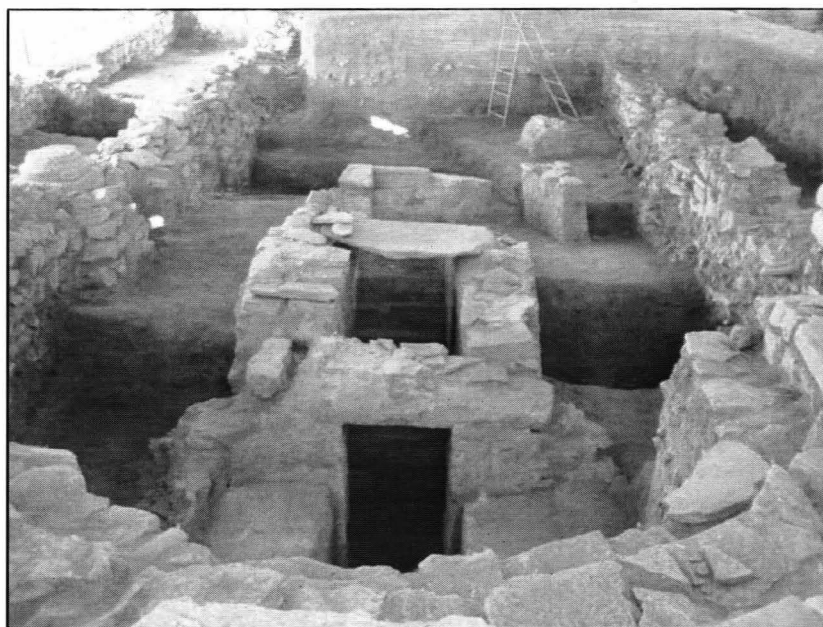


Fig. 14. Halmyris. The crypt under the altar. View from the East.

Room number 1 (R 1), on top of which the 6th century burial was found, is identifiable with the *dromos*, the common access room of this type of monuments. A 1.30m long and 1.20 m wide flagstone found in the collapsed masonry is very likely part of the ceiling of the access room.

Eight descending stairs under the brick pavement of the basilica gave access into that room from the west. A piece of pavement, preserved at 1.70m south from the northern aisle matches up exactly with the level of the first access step within the *dromos*. This significant element proofs that the pavement of the basilica, built at the same time with and around the *martyrium*, maintained its initial level from the 4th throughout 6th century. The *dromos* is 2.15 m long, 85/90/92 m. wide and 1.37 m. high. The walls are 0.65 m. thick on either side. The *dromos* brick pavement lies at – 2.10 m beneath the basilica's general level. The pavement is made of two different types of bricks: 28 × 28 m or 28 × 17.5 m. Remnants of small portions of plaster are still visible on the walls, (on the southern and northern walls, at the entrance in the second room). Important quantity of plaster mixed with rubble and dirt show an all over painted fresco on the *dromos* wall of which 99% is now destroyed. The fresco uses preferentially the red, green and black and the pictorial elements that were detected suggest vegetal motifs.

The green and red are used most, while black is occasionally. The combination fits well with the early Christian symbolism. The green is the color of vegetation, of the plant of life, the abundance in spring time. It is used to represent the triumph of life over the death. The green is also the liturgical color for the season of trinity and could be used during the Epiphany, at 6th January when the coming of the magi was celebrated. The red is the color of the blood shed during the martyrdom for the faith in Jesus and is used also as a liturgical color to commemorate the martyred saints. In the Niculitel crypt the intense red is used both to render the name of the four martyrs and also to render the blood shed: *ὦδε κὲ ὦδε / ἰχὼρ μαρτύρων*¹⁷. In the language of early Christian imagery, the decoration of the walls in the *dromos* of the crypt at Halmyris translates the entrance of the visitor to a green garden symbolizing the defeat of the death and the resurrection of life and reminds the onlooker the martyrs' bloodshed, a recollection that had to accompany him everywhere. The eight steps as a number in the early Christian symbolism stand for regeneration or resurrection.

¹⁷ J. Valeva, *Les nécropoles paleochrétiennes de Bulgarie et les tombes peintes* in: Actes du Congrès International d'archéologie chrétiennes, Lyon 1986, Città del Vaticano, 1989, p. 1254, Fig. 6 (Serdica); G. Gounaris, *L'archéologie chrétienne en Grèce de 1974 à 1985*, 1989 in: Actes du Congrès..., p. 2710 Fig. 18 (Veria).

The access to mortuary room (R 2) was probably done through an opened entrance marked by two sticking wings on each side. The upper threshold is a massive limestone block bearing a facing down 4th century inscription while the lower one is a large flagstone. Room number 2, (R 2), the mortuary room, is a 2.00 m long, 1.85 m wide and 1.88 m high vaulted room (Fig. 15). The north and south arches of the vault are the only preserved parts. The room was c. 1.75–1.80 m high measured from the top vault.



Fig. 15. Halmyris. The mortuary room. View from the West.

Two 0.50 m wide and 1.02 m high brick and mortar counters on each side, 0.82 m apart served as places for the two martyrs' caskets as a second burial after their interment into an unknown location (Fig. 16). The bottom room is paved with 28×28 cm and 28×17.5 cm bricks, as in the case of the dromos. The counters bear on each side rectangular panels in dark red with black borderlines.



Fig. 16. Halmyris. Counters on both sides of the mortuary room.

A thick, white plaster bedded on the eastern wall bears a painted fresco divided in two parts (Fig. 17). The upper register (Fig. 18) is the well-known semicircle like wall surrounded by the vault of the eparate registers, divided horizontally by a red stripe sided by black lines.

The upper register is the well-known semicircle like wall surrounded by the vault of the room. It is framed by a semicircular 0.05 m. wide red stripe. A rectangular black border line, sided at the interior by a thin yellow stripe, frames seven concentric circles, painted in black and sided to their interior by a thin and fine yellow streak.



Fig. 17. Halmyris. The painted fresco on the eastern wall.



Fig. 18. Halmyris. The upper register of the painted fresco.

The number of circles, as a blessed number symbolizes the perfection and rest and appears in the Holy Bible. God rested in the seventh day after the creation, St Paul indicates seven gifts of the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ says seven words on the cross, as there are seven seals in the Book of Life. The circles enclose figurative representations, but the state of preservation of the painting makes any identification very difficult. A wreath of flowers is likely. It is not unusual but it is rarely used. The eastern wall of the tomb 4 in the Serdica necropolis dated to the second half of the 4th century contains a similar representation with four concentric circles and the *chi rho* sign framed by the letters alpha and omega in the middle. The entire central motif is surrounded by a wreath of leaves. The wreath framing the cross is shown on a wall of the tomb 13 in the western cemetery at Veria, also datable in the first half of the 4th century¹⁸.

The wreath as a motif, although not largely spread seems to be a remarkable 4th century manifestation of a real artistic community showing structural composition, similar motifs and symbols: Rome, Sicily, Balkan provinces and even the Black Sea regions.

¹⁸ D. Gáspár, *Christianity in Roman Pannonia. An evaluation of Early Christian finds and sites from Hungary*, BAR International Series 1010, 2002, Oxford, p. 66-91.

There is a perfect framing of the colors between the circles 2 and. 5, and also the alternation of red and blue. This was possible because the artist firstly laid down the blue ground, the color of the sky, heaven and truth and in a wider sense the return of Jesus on Earth. The red, possibly roses is the symbol of the martyrdom.

The hacdera at the bottom of the circles is an element taken over by the early Christian art from the traditional Roman art, a motif widely spread in the province of Scythia, as a characteristic element on the 4th–5th century epigraphic monuments.

The two candelabras that frame both sides of the circles are well known symbols as representative for the transposition of Jesus' words (John 8.12: ἐγώ εἰμι τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου).

The concentric circles enclose a painted in black inscription in Greek language.

The preserved text reads (Fig. 19).

MAP[TY]C [XPICTOY]
 MAPT[YC] XP[ICTOY]
 [.....] AN [.....]
 BO[H ΘΙ ?.....]
 5. AIP [.....] ACTIO
 N OIC KO[.....]Ω
 YBPI[ZA?]NTIA



Fig. 19. Halmyris. The inscription framed by the concentric circles.

The lower register is a separate, rectangular panel evidenced by a black thin line of paint that takes over the tract of the upper representation descending along the two "counters" (Fig. 20).



Fig. 20. Halmyris. The lower register.

On the white plaster the *chi rho* sign was painted in red. Another red horizontal line is also fairly visible resulting in the well known cross-like and *chi-rho* common representations.

The archaeological inventory in R 2 is far from being rich but contains artifacts that stress its character of mortuary room: a fragment of an amphora bearing the pentagram sign incised in the raw paste before the burning; a hook from a votive light; a fragment of a vase bearing the stylized fish, also incised in the raw paste.

A first violent intervention at the crypt seems to have happened in an earlier period, possible even in the 4th century. The vault appears broken on its southern side. The damage was followed by a later improvised and rudimentary repair in clay. This first destruction of the crypt seems to coincide with another important instance observable at the painted fresco on the eastern wall. A careful cleaning of the painting disclosed that the inscription and circles were covered with a layer of fine white plaster, noticeable in different places (Fig. 21). It is certainly not accidental and it appears to have been a later intervention, very likely to drape the inscription and the symbolic representations. There has certainly been a non-Christian deed and it is highly suspected that it happened throughout the resurrection of the traditional Greek-Roman religion and even persecutions unleashed during the Julian Apostate's reign when many Christian places were closed. The Christian symbols therefore had to disappear and the alternative chosen by local authorities at Halmyris was to cover to painting with white plaster. After the Julian's death, when the painting was restored and the layer removed, the attempts ended up in a first deterioration of the painted fresco, if not heavily, at least in a certain perceptible measure.



Fig. 21. Halmyris. White plaster covers the initial fresco.

The second violent intervention at the crypt seems to have happened also from outside, both for looting and as an anti-Christian manifestation. This appears to have been the final destruction that was followed by its total ruin and its filling in with rubble from the collapsed walls (stones, mortar and dirt). It can not be excluded an organized intervention to level the entire area. This might be an explanation of the laying down of the clay bed over the *dromos* for the setting of the deceased female. The destruction heavily affected not only the structure of the monument but also the picture in its entirety. The signs of violent strikes inflicted with rigid objects (swords, axes) appear obvious in certain places and especially in the middle of the main painting.

Traces of violation of the interior are also obvious in the disposition of human bones. They were not found in an anatomical position, but scattered on a large surface in both rooms, suggesting that the initial two caskets containing the remains of the two individuals were purposely dispersed once the violators broke in. It is very likely however that even the initial burial into the crypt did not set the bones in an anatomical position given their first burial into a secret place until after 324, immediately after the execution.

This type of burial complex is known in some other areas, although the interior arrangement of the annexes and themes of the painted frescos are quite different. The so-called catacomb of Priscilla in Rome, dated by early 4th century, is one of the closest examples to our monument. Also some of the 4th century tombs in Pécs are also good instances to compare the architecture and display of early Christian themes in such particular complexes¹⁹.

The hypogeum type of the crypt and the subterranean access is not a novelty in the archaeological environment in the province of Scythia. The most explicit analogy is the big basilica from Tomis²⁰. The access to the large crypt under the presbyterium was made through three levels of steps with reposing intervals in between. The last interval offered an eight steps descendant line. Although the martyrs' crypt at Tomis is more elaborated there is no clear information as yet on the composition of the painting or the colors that have been used.

The basilicas with small crypts are known in several places in the province of Scythia (today Dobroudja): Tropaeum Traiani – the simple basilica, the basilica with transept, the cistern basilica, Beroe, Axiopolis²¹. Except the Tomis, Niculițel and Beroe crypts of significant size, there are no other large monuments of this type in the province, although small crypts survived in other churches. The generous space destined to lay down the remains of the martyrs in the area of presbyterium is a 4th century characteristic, and especially to Constantinian epoch. The small crypts from Tropaeum, Histria – the basilica on the west side of the defense wall, the Episcopal basilica – are specific to the 6th century when the space within the church was already occupied by previous structures and the churches were not erected specifically for the celebration of the cult of the martyrs' remains what would imply rearrangements of interior areas, but only to house them. The large sized crypts appear manifestly in the centers that had been previously declared bishoprics in the 6th century, a proof that to becoming a bishopric the town was required to have had previously at least one martyrs' crypt.

The three main elements that are fortunately plainly readable on the inscription: Μάρτυς Χριστοῦ in double version, the name of one of the martyrs recorded in the Acta Sanctorum Julii 8, Ἀστίον (ASTION) and in particular the verb ὑβρίζω = to treat spitefully, to outrage, to insult, to maltreat, show clearly that this *martyrium* was built for sheltering the bones of the two individuals who were tortured and executed at Halmyris, Epictetus and Astion.

The account, recorded in *Vita Sanctorum Epicteti presbyteri et Astioni monachi*, specifically mentions that they lived in the second half of the 3rd century. There are some hints in the text that indicate that Epictetus and Astion had their origin in Asia Minor, from a city that had access to the Black Sea, very likely from Bithynia which had long standing and traditional relations with Scythia²².

The story also relates that Astion's parents, Marcellina and Alexander, journeyed to Halmyris in search for their son. Upon arrival they were met by Vigilantius, the supreme judge of the town (*questionarius*) in the port and informed them that their son had been executed. The parents returned to their home country as believers in Jesus Christ²³.

The account seems to have been written immediately after the execution of the two Christians by somebody who was very well acquainted with the local topography and realities. Vigilantius, who, it is said in the account, converted himself to Christianity during the events, seems to be the most likely candidate.

The text of the martyrdom of the Christians Epictetus and Astion is known enough and we will not insist upon many of the details. Its veracity does not seem to have been doubted by most of exegetes of the text, who considered it as relating to a historical event. The archaeological, anthropological and epigraphic expertise arisen from the investigated monument support the real existence of the two Christians and the authenticity of the events that took place at Halmyris at the end of the 3rd century. It is particularly significant

¹⁹ I. Barnea, *Arta creștină în România. I. Secolele III-VI*, București, 1979, 132-133.

²⁰ For Tropaeum see Barnea, *op. cit.*, 156-157 (the simple basilica); 158-159 (basilica with transept); for Beroe see V.H. Baumann, *Sângele martirilor*, Constanța, 2004, p. 53-54 fig. 5; see in general: I Barnea, *Le cripte della basiliche paleocristiane della Scizia Minore*, RĖSEE 19, 1981, p. 489-491.

²¹ ASS Julii II. I 10: *ambo ab urbe egrediuntur et descendentes navim[...]*.

²² The account is given in the last chapter of the text: IV, 32-49.

²³ E.g. P.M. Fraser, E. Matthews, *A Lexicon of Greek Personal Names III*, Oxford, 1987, 76.

on the other hand that every single account in the text on Halmyris events that doesn't have a direct connection with religious affairs is archaeologically confirmed.

A philological, historical and literary gender on this account is soon forthcoming. Some remarks on less known historical, topographical and archaeological aspects as reflected in the information in *Vita Sanctorum Epicteti presbyteri et Astioni monachi* are in these circumstances essential.

The epigraphic inquiry on the two names Epictetus and Astion revealed the fact that if Epictetus, is a relatively largely spread name in the micro-Asiatic social environment in the 1st–4th centuries, Astion is much less known. The name has a certain frequency in the centuries before Jesus Christ in Thessaly, where it is particularly characteristic. Its presence in Asia Minor would have been the result of a perpetuation of the name in the social environment dominated by the descendants of the massive group of colonists settled in western Asia Minor, Bithynia and Phrygia, especially in the Hellenistic period²⁴.

The two Christians lived 17 years at Halmyris. Their arrival here would have happened previous to the first years of Diocletian's reign; regardless the skeptics who believe in the 303 as the year of their martyrdom, or 290 as a series of historical hints seem to demonstrate.

They seem to have suddenly left their province, very likely Bithynia, and journeyed by sea to the mouth of the Danube, to Halmyris (*Almyridensium civitas*) in the province of Scythia (*in Scytharum fines*)²⁵. During the seventeen years of residency at Halmyris, they allegedly converted small groups of people to Christianity. Conversion of the population in mass seems to have been less likely and a passage referring to the Christianization of more than 1000 people in a single day (*plus quam mille animae in illa die crediderunt in Dominum Salvatorem*)²⁶, must be rather taken as an important evidence of the demographic situation at that time around the Halmyris fort.

The text raises some interesting issues as far as the location of the events. The account seems to show clearly that Epictetus and Astion carried on their activity in the civil settlement, outside the fort, in the area which, by the end of the 4th century in the final redaction of the text was called *civitas Almyridensium*. The new late administrative unit included the 2nd–3rd century fort, canabae and the military *vicus* (*vicus classicorum*). The area outside the fort which is surrounded by two earthen walls to the west witnessed late 3rd and early 4th century a remarkable progress both urban and demographic, a fact that conferred it the status of a *civitas* by the end of the 4th century a status that was confirmed in the 6th century by the Hierocles' list for Scythia. On their arrival at Halmyris, Epictetus and Astion found initially a mansion (*mansio*) to live in, a location which they later changed it with a modest house, *habituaculum*²⁷.

From here, they "descend" to the Danube to take water out of the Danube, a fact which is twice recorded in the text²⁸. The harbor, *portus* of the town is recorded three times²⁹. The surveys, aerial photography and gradiometric investigations confirm entirely the existence of a large area of harbor activities and stone structures related to a river port. Eight 2nd century inscriptions, reused as reconstruction material at the northern gate in late 3rd century, record a *vicus classicorum* as part of the large civil settlement and as a clear evidence of the existence of a naval base (see note 3).

In 290 A.D. the duke (*dux*) of the province of Scythia, Latronianus, arrived at Halmyris in order to inspect the reconstruction activities at the fort. The purpose of the duke's visit was the inspection of the progress of the reconstruction works and reorganization of the administrative structures at Halmyris (*opera publica et imperialia ministeria, quae ibidem errant, pervidisset*)³⁰, definitely as part of the Tetrarchic program of the reassessment of the Danube frontier. A massive reconstruction phase was revealed at the northern and western gates by late 3rd – early 4th century. A Tetrarchic building inscription dated to 301-305 that marked the ending of the reconstruction works confirms the archaeological evidence (see note 3).

²⁴ 'Ἀστούν, Ἀστίων in Thessaly; SEG XLV 554 (Atrax); XXIII 437, 13 (Krannon); XXX 567 (Larissa); IG IX (2) 91, 70 (Narthakion, in Achaia Phthiotis).

²⁵ ASS Julii I 9.

²⁶ Idem, II 15.

²⁷ Idem, III 12; III 19; see also *domuncula* in IV 34 and *cella sanctorum* in IV 37.

²⁸ Idem, II 15; 17.

²⁹ Idem IV 33.

³⁰ Idem, III 19.

The *praetorium* in which the duke resided for some time (*Latronianus[...] primo dilulculo venit in praetorium*)³¹ was identified with Edifice 1 located roughly in the middle of the fort having a clear 4th century phase of reconstruction³².

Occasioned by the presence of the duke and the intense Christian propaganda of the two newcomers, some local people informed him that there were two individuals who did not abide by the traditional religion and led astray the people from the sacrifices due to the Roman deities (*quod malefici sunt et magi, multos per sua veneficia averterent iam a sacrificiis deorum*)³³. They were, therefore, condemned and decapitated as ordered by the duke³⁴.

A first draft of the account could have been written even during the events related to the trial of Epictetus and Astion as it is known that many of the official reports of the courts set for such trials were preserved and served as initial drafts for the future acts of the saints (martyrs). One can explain therefore why topographic details of a remarkable precision are confirmed almost entirely by the archaeological investigations.

In the account of the trial process a dignitary, *Vigilantius, quaestionarius*, suddenly appears and becomes gradually the key personage in the entire story. *Quaestionarii* were the inquirers in the army. *Praesides* were usually part of the headquarters of the civil governors of the province³⁵. Normally, therefore the trial had to be conducted by the *praeses*, as shown in quite a few cases. Thus, *Vigilantius* was either the representative of the civil governor at Halmyris and came to investigate the case, which would have been the normal procedure, or was part of the duke's staff in which case the military commander of the province (*dux*) assigned himself the role of the judge in an *ad hoc* court, a role that was allotted in fact to the civil governor (*praeses*). Would it be possible at this early date of provincial organization of Scythia that the military and civil functions to have been concentrated in the hands of a single high dignitary?

Vigilantius seems also responsible of the detailed description of the topography and the report about the two Christians during and after the trial and execution. That this was the situation, is proved by the passage in which *Vigilantius* informs the bishop of Tomis, *Evangelicus*, arrived a little later, about the events 'in an orderly manner everything that had happened' (*exponentesque illi per ordinem cuncta, quae acta fuissent*)³⁶. The drawing up of such reports was usually done by the service of a *libellis*, officers named in *Notitia Dignitatum*, that accompanied the courts during the trials of crime against the state³⁷ and they were written up at the order of the governor, if he was present or by the officer who conducted the trial, in that case *Vigilantius*.

Would have been possible that a later author of the martyrdom of Epictetus and Astion by late 4th century at the earliest to render topographical and architectonical details about places that witnessed the events, or could he have traveled especially to Halmyris to describe the places? We categorically believe that the answer is negative in both cases.

The torture and execution of Astion and then Epictetus, mirrored in the anthropological expertise as well as the presence of the verb ὑπρίζω in the inscription from the crypt seems not to have happened in the interior of the fort which, at the date of the event and along the 4th century still maintained the characteristics of a military base of a *castra* type, recorded in the legislation of the time. The setting of a trial tribunal in the middle of the town ordered by the duke (*iubet tribunal praeparari in media civitate*)³⁸ could not have taken place in a fort, an area exclusively limited to the military activities, but outside, in the civil settlement, where the Halmyris population could have been brought and gathered together to attend the trial: '*tam nefandum et horridum spectaculum multitudinem populi invitarent*'.

³¹ Idem, III 20.

³² Al. Suceveanu, M. Zahariade, F. Topoleanu, Gh. Poenaru Bordea, *Halmyris I. Monografie arheologică*, Cluj. Napoca, 2003, p. 65-78.

³³ ASS III 19.

³⁴ Idem, III 31.

³⁵ ISM II 382.

³⁶ ASS, IV 47.

³⁷ On a *libellis* see W. Ensslin, *Realencyclopädie* IV, 1932, p. 489-490.

³⁸ ASS III 20.

Is the anthropological expertise echoed in the literary evidence? A study in this journal answers this question specifically and on a larger scale.

Epigraphic evidence confirms also entirely the events related to the martyrdom of Epictetus and Astion. The inscription on the eastern wall of the crypt records two martyrs, through a double well-known formula Μάρτυς Χριστοῦ. It is true that the inscription preserves only the name of Astion, but the other name, Epictetus might have been wiped out once the text was badly damaged in ancient times. Even so, the appearance of the name of Astion is a decisive argument for framing the account among historical events and turning the legend into reality. Moreover, the verb ὑβρίζω = to treat spitefully, to outrage, to insult, to maltreat, on the last line of the inscription plainly expresses the tortures to which the two martyrs were subjected.

After the execution, according to the text, the two Christians were initially buried in a secret place. When the after 324, therefore after 35–40 years, Constantine ordered the collection of all the martyrs relics and their burying in the crypts and churches the Epictetus' and Astion's remnants were reburied, although not in an anatomical position, but in caskets containing only their bones.

That an important event took place at Halmyris, it results also from the arrival of Evangelicus, named *Christi pontifex* in the text, certainly as the bishop of Tomis and of the entire province³⁹.



The archaeological investigation of the basilica and the martyrs' crypt at Halmyris occasioned not less than four categories of sources (archaeological, epigraphic, anthropological and literary) to merge towards the completion and confirmation of an event during early Christian times at the Lower Danube. We are in a position to ascertain three undeniable realities in different but related domains: archaeology, epigraphy, and anthropology, all substantially supporting a literary source, which otherwise would have remained in the field of a simple theological or philological debate.

³⁹ Idem, III 26.