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THE PAINTING OF ROMAN DOBRUJA (5th-6th AD): A GENERAL VIEW

Ioan IAȚCU¹

Late Roman painting throughout province Scythia is generally known to a little extent. The few monuments partly and only rarely entirely recovered can provide an image of its existence and evolution in the region. We refer exclusively to the mural painting frequently used for decorative and figurative purposes in a series of public and private constructions, tombs, crypts and paleo-Christian basilicas². For the considered timespan, the presence of wall painting in the Christian edifices represents a rarity, due to its friability, so that the Christian hypogea, being closed compounds, allowed a better preservation of the frescoes.

The only basilicas in province Scythia, with interior mural painting, whose state of conservation allowed to offer a faithful image of the mural painting art during late antiquity are : the episcopal basilica of Histria, the basilica on the NE quay of the city of Tomis and the basilica of Beroc. The repertoire of the constructions with mural painting decoration is completed by the crypts of basilicas whose ornamentation program reaches the climax in the 5th century AD.

At the episcopal basilica of Histria, one of the best preserved cult edifices of Dobruja ever studied so far, there were identified in the south nave and the south transept remains of rendering painted with red, yellow ochre, blue. They result from the successive cassettes which were delimited through incisions drawn in the still wet rendering, which were then painted in red. In the upper part, these cassettes would end with friezes of

¹ Moldavia's History Museum – "Moldova" National Museum Complex, Iași.

² I. Barnea, *Considerații privind cele mai vechi monumente creștine de la Tomis*, in *Pontica*, XXIV, 1991, p. 282.

red or blue (*caeruleum*) painted stucco. Here and there, within this basilica, there were also found *in situ* traces of painting³ (Fig. 1). The entire wall painting ornamentation of the church was in line with the manner of decorating both basilicas and private chapels (*oratoria*) within the episcopal palaces (*episkopia*). Thus, inside the chapel of *domus* 3 within the episcopal residence of Histria, walls were covered with red, well and blue painted rendering⁴. According to us, it is possible that this painting would be executed in the manner of the parietal ornamentation of the episcopal basilica.

In the basilica on the northeast quay of the city of Tomis, in one of the three rooms of the construction abutted to the north wall of the apse, there were discovered fragments of rendering painted with vegetal motifs, made of among which mention should be of a scrub represented with green, as well as of garlands with blue and black leaves⁵.

At Dinogetia, among the pieces of rubbish in the apse of the basilica, there were found also several small fragments of rendering, with traces of red, dark blue and brown painting⁶. Also on the Danube bank, at Beroe, the walls of the basilica in its first phase of existence (4th - 5th centuries BC) were painted with dark red, with geometric and floral ornaments⁷ (Fig. 2).

³ O. Bounegru, I. Iațcu, *La basilique épiscopale. Éléments de décoration intérieure*, in Al. Suceveanu (ed.), *Histria, XIII, La basilique épiscopale*, București, 2007, p. 57-72, pl. XLIV-XLVII.

⁴ Em. Popescu, *Christianitas Daco-Romana. Florilegium studiorum*, Bucharest, 1994, p. 321-322.

⁵ Fl. Monier, *Basilique près de l'amphithéâtre de Tomis*, in A. Barbet (dir.), *Rapport Centre d'Etude des Peintures Murales Romaines C.N.R.S.*, Paris-Soissons, 1992 (inédit), p. 24, fig. 85.

⁶ I. Barnea, *Perioada Dominatului (sec. IV-VII)*, in R. Vulpe, I. Barnea, *Romanii la Dunărea de Jos*, București, 1968, p. 486.

⁷ V. H. Baumann, *À propos des premières basiliques chrétiennes découvertes aux embouchures du Danube*, in M. Iacob, E. Oberländer-Târnoveanu, F. Topoleanu (coord.), *Istro-Pontica. Muzeul tulcean la a 50-a aniversare. 1950-2000*, Tulcea, 2000, p. 54.

From the painting of the “marble” basilica of Tropaeum a fragment of rendering with red, yellow and white geometric ornaments, contained in a red frame, was preserved in the apse area⁸.

The crypt of the basilica in the yard of “Mihai Eminescu” High School in Constanța preserves on its walls up to a height of 2.32 m, a rendering painted with red, green and yellow, which imitates the *opus sectile* technique (Fig. 3). In the lower half of the walls there are painted large square cases, which imitate green and red marble. Between the cases represented on the southern wall of the crypt, pilasters with capitals are schematically represented, this being a decorative element also in the tomb with orant personages⁹. In a panel on the northern wall, as well as in a case on the southern wall, there are represented votive vessels (*plats votifs*) (Fig. 3.b). This motif is present also in the painted ornamentation of the *cenatorium* (dinner room) discovered at the Terrace House 1 of Ephesus¹⁰. In the upper part of the panels represented on the crypt walls, there are represented acanthus leaves forming friezes (Fig. 3.f), being an imitation of the sculptural ornaments. The vault was decorated with a network of squares delimited by branches composed of small green leaves forming garlands. Inside each field, there are represented bunches of flowers, pomegranates, fleurons and birds, among which a canary is pointed out. Based on the stylistic study, this compound is dated to the 4th century AD, but the manner of drawing the motifs, as well as the scheme used at ornamenting the vaults determine the dating of this crypt to the 5th century AD, moment when the basilica above it is also attested¹¹.

⁸ V. Pârvan, *Cetatea Tropaeum*, 1912, p. 181, note 164; I. Barnea, *op. cit.*, 1968, p. 486.

⁹ A. Barbet, M. Bucovală, *L'hypogée paléochrétien des orants à Constanța (Roumanie), l'ancienne Tomisi*, in *MEFRA*, 108, 1996, 1. 105-158.

¹⁰ N. Zimmermann, S. Ladstätter (eds.), *Wall Painting in Ephesos from the Hellenistic to the Byzantine Period*, Istanbul, 2011, p. 166, fig. 345.

¹¹ A. Barbet, *Crypte du Lycée M. Eminescu*, in A. Barbet (dir.), *Rapport Centre d'Etude des Peintures ree Murales Romaines C.N.R.S.*, Paris-Soissons, 1993 (inédit), p. 18-21; A. Barbet, Fl. Monier, *La crypte funéraire de la basilique sous le lycée M. Eminescu à Constanța (Roumanie)*, in Al. Barbet (dir.), *La peinture funéraire antique. IV^e siècle av. J.-C. -IV^e siècle ap. J.-C. Actes du VII^e Colloque de l'Association Internationale pour la*

Another crypt whose painting represents a reference in the study of the art of late antiquity is the one of the basilica discovered at Halmyris. The interior walls of the crypt are painted in two separate registers (Fig. 4). The upper register has the shape of a half-circle and is rendered with white *cocciopesto*, on top of which the painting was applied, this consisting in six black concentric circles delimited by a fine yellow stripe. Between the first three circles and the following three there is a circular register, with floral, animal or figurative representations, which are more difficult to identify due to the precarious state of conservation. The following three circles, concentric, have in the center the following text in Greek, which was written with black:

MA[PT]YC [XPICTOY] / MA[PT]YC [XPICTOY] /
 [...] AN [...] / BO[HΘI ?...] / AIP [...] ACTIO / N OIC
 KO[...]Ω / YBPI[ZA?]NTIA¹².

The six circles are contained in a rectangular linear frame, formed of a line drawn with black, delimited towards the inside by a yellow line. The entire register is contained in a semicircular frame, formed of a 0.05m wide red stripe. The lower register repeats the contour of the upper register, going along the two benches meant for laying the two martyrs, and then it frames a separate, rectangular, register pointed out through a black stripe. This independent register is connected to the red frame through two small oblique lines. The background of the register is formed of a white *cocciopesto* on which the red *chrysmos* was drawn. Therefore, both the walls of the *dromos*, and the walls of the burial chamber were decorated with polychrome paint layer¹³. The type of the wall decoration consisting in a

peinture murale antique (AIPMA), 6-10 octobre 1998, Saint-Romain-en-Gal – Vienne, Paris, 2001, p. 221-228.

¹⁰ M. Zahariade, *The Episcopal Basilica from Halmyris and the Crypt of Epictetus and Astion*, in *TD, S. N., I (XXIV)*, 2009, 1-2, p. 145, fig. 19.

¹³ M. Zahariade, M. K. Phelps, *Halmyris, a settlement and fort near the mouth of the Danube: interim report*, in *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 15, 2002, 1, p. 230-245; M. Zahariade, O. Bounegru, *Despre începuturile creștinismului la Dunărea de Jos: martirium-ul de la Halmyris*, in P. Diaconu (ed.), *Dobrogea 50 de ani de viață românească. Izvoarele creștinismului românesc*, Constanța, 2003, p. 157-159; Idem, *The basilica Episcopalis and Martyr's Tomb from Halmyris*, in C. C. Petolescu, T. Teoteoi, A. Gabor

red stripe was taken over until the 5th - 6th centuries AD from the classical style painting, fact attested at the hypogeal tomb of Tomis dated to the 2nd half of the 4th century AD, where figurative scenes are delimited through red and yellow ochre stripes¹⁴.

The presence of decorative stripes has also been attested in the case of the "Tudorka" sepulcher, which was discovered at 1.5 km of the fortress (L)Ibida (Slava Rusă, Tulcea county). Wall, covered with rendering and painted in the *a secco* technique, were divided in panels delimited by red and dark blue stripes. Among the decorative representations, mention should be made of a series of vegetal motifs and honeycombs. Apart from red and blue, the painting also contains black, ochre or yellow¹⁵.

The sepulcher of Axiopolis is remarked through the vegetal decorations, consisting in trees rendered in a schematic manner alternating with crosses, this composition illustrating the image of Paradise; the entire painting betrays a late manner of execution, specific to the 6th century AD¹⁶ (Fig. 7). The symbol of the cross is also encountered at Tomis, at the Basilica of the street *Revoluția din decembrie 1989* where, above the niche

(eds.), *Studia Historica et Theologica. Omagiu profesorului Emilian Popescu*, Iași, 2003, p. 158-159; M. Zahariade, *Murighiol, com. Murighiol, jud. Tulcea [Halmyris], Sector Basilica Episcopalis*, in *Cronica Cercetărilor Arheologice din România. Campania 2003. A XXXVIII-a Sesiune Națională de Rapoarte Arheologice. Cluj-Napoca, 26-29 mai 2004*, București, 2004, p. 212-213; V. H. Baumann, *Sângele martirilor*, Constanța, 2004, p. 56-58.

¹⁴ C. Chera, V. Lungu, *Römische Wandmalereien in neugefundenen Gräbern aus den Nekropolen der Dobrogea*, in R. Pillinger, A. Pülz, H. Vettters (Hrsg.), *Die Schwarzmeerküste in der Spätantike und im frühen Mittelalter. Referate des dritten, vom 16. Bis 19. Oktober 1990 durch die Antiquarische Abteilung der Balkan-Kommission der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften und das Bulgarische Forschungsinstitut in Österreich veranstalteten Symposions*, Wien, 1992, p. 93-96; V. Lungu, *Creștinismul în Scythia Minor în contextul vest-pontic*, Sibiu-Constanța, 2000, p. 51-52, fig. 14-18; I. Barnea, *op. cit.*, 1991, p. 272.

¹⁵ M. Iacob *et alii*, *Slava Rusă, com. Slava Cercheză, jud. Tulcea [Ibida]: III. Cavoul Tudorka*, in *Cronica Cercetărilor Arheologice din România. Campania 2001. A XXXVI-a Sesiune Națională de Rapoarte Arheologice. Buziaș, 28 mai - 1 iunie 2002*, București, 2002, p. 293.

¹⁶ V. Lungu, *op. cit.*, p. 48, fig. 20-24.

in the east wall, a *crux latina* was painted in red, with the arms of 0.30 m¹⁷ (Fig. 8). At Callatis, in a tomb of the *hypogeum* type, known under the name of the tomb “with psalms”, above the entrance in the burial chamber and on the lateral walls of the *dromos* there were drawn with red large crosses whose arm ends are widened. The cross drawn on western wall of the burial chamber is framed by quotations from the Psalms: “God, my Aid and Savior” and “I shall not fear any bed things, because You are with me, God!”¹⁸ (Fig. 6).

Thus, in certain martyrs’ crypts, as in fact in certain *hypogea* in the necropolises of certain fortresses, we remark the presence – apart a series of vegetal and geometric motifs – also of certain Christian epigraphs. Thus, in the *martyrium* of Niculițel, dated to the beginning of the 5th century AD, on both sides of the lateral walls, under a *monogrammatica* cross, there are inscriptions incised in the rendering and painted with red. Thus, on the north wall it is written *Μάρτυρες Χριστοῦ*, and on the south wall *Μάρτυρες Ζώτικος, Ἀτταλος, Καμάσις, Φίλιππος* (Fig. 5). In the same crypt, on a white marble block the following epigraphic note has been preserved: Ὡδὲ καὶ ὦδὲ ἰχώρ μαρτύρων = “Here and there martyrs’ blood”¹⁹. The presence of fragmentary texts is also confirmed at Tropaeum Traiani, in the basilica “A”. There, on a layer of pink rendering covering the walls of the crypt, on the east wall, upon discovery, one could see a rectangular frame, 0.79m long and 0.64m high, in which there were incised in the wet rendering six

¹⁷ A. Rădulescu, V. Lungu, *Le christianisme en Scythie Mineure à la lumière des dernières découvertes archéologiques*, in *Actes du XI^e Congrès international d’archéologie chrétienne. Lyon, Vienne, Grenoble, Genève et Aoste (21-28 septembre 1986)*, III, École française de Rome, Rome, 1989, p. 2573-2576; V. Lungu, *op. cit.*, p. 69-70.

¹⁸ R. Pillinger, *Ein Frühchristliches Grab Mit Psalmensziten in Mangalia/Kallatis (Rumänien)*, in R. Pillinger, A. Pülz, H. Vettters (Hrsg.), *op. cit.*, p. 97-102, fig. 14; V. Georgescu, M. Ionescu, *Mărturii creștine la Callatis*, in *Pontica*, XXVIII-XXIX/1995-1996, 1998, p. 198, fig. 3. a, b; G. Atanasov *et alii*, *Monumentele religioase ale Dobrogei/The Religious Temples of Dobroudja*, Constanța-Silistra, 2009, p. 13.

¹⁹ I. Barnea, *Le cripte delle basiliche paleocristiane della Scizia Minore*, in *Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes*, XIX, 1981, 3, p. 489-490.

narrow intervals, with the width of 4cm and six wider ones, of 7cm. In the wide intervals an inscription in Greek was painted with greenish yellow²⁰.

During the 5th - 6th centuries AD, the fortresses on the maritime limes, such as Tomis, Histria, Callatis, were places of synthesis of the painting motifs of Alexandrine and Asia origin, which penetrated in the space of province Scythia via Constantinopolis²¹. Regarding the technique and repertoire of the wall ornamentations, painters and stucco artists of the 6th century AD continued to comply with the Greek-Roman classical traditions, finding most of the times inspiration in the sculptural reliefs with decorative character (friezes with acanthus and ivy leaves, bas-reliefs etc.). This aspect is documented through Orest Tafrafi's discovery²², within the excavations undertaken at the so-called Syrian basilica at Callatis, of a marble plate with dimensions of 0.39x0.21 m, on which a series of sketches were drawn with ink. They represented a knight (probably a Thracian hero), an angel with a torch (Thanatos), a caryatid, capitals and different floral motifs²³ (Fig. 9). At present, this plate is considered to be disappeared.

The presence of a wide palette of decorative motifs, as well as of varied artistic techniques, attests the activity of *instructores parietum* (wall decorators), *gipsoplastes* (stucco artists)²⁴, as well as of artists specialized in the art of painting (*penicillum*)²⁵, who were known under the name of *pictores parietarii*. These traveling artists were organized in professional colleges, as those existing during the 3rd - 4th centuries AD, at Ostia and

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 182; I. Barnea, *Cetatea Tropaeum Traiani în lumina ultimelor săpături arheologice*, in *Pontica*, X, 1977, p. 266.

²¹ V. Lungu, *op. cit.*, p. 51-52, fig. 14- 18.

²² O. Tafrafi, *La cite pontique de Callatis*, in *AA*, I, 1927, 1, p. 54.

²³ I. Barnea, *op. cit.*, 1968, p. 486-487.

²⁴ Cassiodorus, *Variae*, V, 5, 5 (Cassiodori Senatoris, *Variae*, Th. Mommsen ed., Berlin, 1894); L. C. Ruggini, *Cassiodorus and Practical Sciences*, in S. Barnish et alii (eds.), *Vivarium in Context*, Vicenza, 2008, p. 46, note 25.

²⁵ Plinius, *Nat. His.*, XXXV, 60-61 (Plinius, *Naturalis Historia. Enciclopedia cunoștințelor din Antichitate*, VI, *Mineralogie și istoria artei*, translation from Latin, preface, notes and index by I. Costa, Iași, 2004, p. 127).

Lugdunum²⁶. The painting technique used on the rendering and stucco of Histria, as well in the basilica on the northeast quay of Tomis is similar to the one used in the Gallo-Roman paintings²⁷, as there were used pigments considered to be forgotten during the Late Antiquity, such as the Egyptian blue (*caeruleum*), an artificial pigment obtained by boiling a mixture of copper oxide (in the form of burnt copper or ignited copper alloys), smashed quartz, chalk powder and an alkaline (usually potassium-based) fusing agent (substance)²⁸. The Egyptian blue is not the only expensive pigment used in the painting of the religious edifices of province Scythia. For instance, the yellow ocher pigment used at the painting of the basilica of Beroe was made of jarosite, a mineral brought either from Laurion (Greece), or from the desert of Sahara²⁹.

Through the ornamental refinement and the inventive character, the ornamentation of the Christian basilicas in the province Scythia of the 6th century AD, corresponds to the aniconic art style specific to the Justinian period³⁰. Roman Dobruja together with the areas of Caucasus, Crimea and the Bulgarian Pontus were receptacles of the Cappadocian iconography. During the 4th – 5th centuries AD, the monks of Cappadocia manifested a

²⁶ N. Blanc, *Les stucateurs romains: témoignages littéraires, épigraphiques et juridiques*, in *MEFRA*, 95, 1983, 2, p. 859-907, see also other terms for the stucco artists, such as: tectores, albarii, gypsarii.

²⁷ B. Guineau, *Analyse de traces de couleurs observables sur des fragments de peintures murales des IV^e et VI^e siècles provenant d'Istria et de Tomis (Roumanie)*, in A. Barbet (dir.), *op. cit.*, 1993, p. 4.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ N. Buzgar et alii, *Raman study of the brownish-yellow pigment from a Roman Basilica (Dobrogea, Romania – 4th - 6th century A. D.)*, in *Analele Științifice ale Universității "Al. I. Cuza" din Iași. Seria Geologie*, 57, 2011, 2, p. 15-18, fig. 1.

³⁰ N. Thierry, *L'église peinte de Nicéas Stylite et d'Eustrate Clisurarque, ou fils de clisurarque. Cappadoce*, in M. Berza, E. Stănescu (coord.), *Actes du XIV^e Congrès International des Études Byzantines, Bucarest, 6-12 septembre, 1971*, III, București, 1974, p. 453; This iconoclast fervor has its roots in the council of Elvira (306 AD), so that, towards the end of the 6th century AD they know a strong effervescence, together with the actions of pope Gregorius Magnus and bishop Serenus of Marseille. The latter one went up to destroying all images decorating the churches in his eparchy, see Ch. Diehl, *Manuel d'art byzantin*, Paris, 1910, p. 334-335.

radical opposition compared to the representations of saints in churches, situation encountered in the artistic representations in the basilicas identified in Dobruja, where nonfigurative compositions are prevalent. In conclusion, it is worth pointing out the remark of Choricius of Ghaza, Greek sophist and orator of the 6th century AD, according to whom “the art of painting – as he put it in *Laudatio Marciani* – is more valuable than the other arts because it imitates nature and strives to produce creations that are animate (empsucha)”³¹.

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Translated by Coralia Costaş

PICTURA ÎN DOBROGEA ROMANĂ (SECOLELE V-VI p. Chr.):

PRIVIRE DE ANSAMBLU

(Rezumat)

În secolele V-VI p. Chr., prezența picturii paretale în edificiile creștine din provincia Scythia constituie o raritate, datorită friabilității acesteia, astfel că doar unele hypogea creștine au permis o mai bună conservare a frescelor.

Singurele basilici care au mai păstrat elemente de frescă sunt: bazilica episcopală de la Histria, bazilica de pe faleza de NE a peninsulei orașului Tomis și bazilica de la Beroe. Studiarea repertoriului picturii decorative din basilicile cu statut episcopal poate fi completată cu observațiile asupra frescelor din criptele destinate să adăpostească trupurile unor martiri dobrogeni, cum ar fi cea de la Tomis (bazilica din curtea Liceului „Mihai Eminescu”) și Halmyris (cripta martirilor Epictet și Astion). Programul iconografic din secolele V-VI p. Chr. se individualizează printr-o continuare a stilului clasic, reprezentat în Dobrogea romană de cele două camere funerare de tip hypogeu de la Tomis: mormântul „cu banchet” și mormântul „cu oranți”, ambele datate în secolul al IV-lea p. Chr. Arta picturală din perioada

³¹ C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453: sources and documents*, Washington, D. C., 2004, p. 64.

Antichității târzii se caracterizează ca fiind o pictură aniconică, specifică unei fervori iconoclaste, și care poate fi observată în cadrul programului decorativ implementat la bazilica episcopală de la Histria, precum și la oratorium-ul din ansamblul episcopium-ului histrian (Domus 3).

Lista ilustrațiilor:

- Fig. 1. Histria. Bazilica episcopală: a, b. stucatura pictată din nava de sud; c. tencuiala pictată din nava de sud; d, e. tencuiala pictată din transeptul de sud; stucatura pictată din transeptul de sud (foto autor).
- Fig. 2. Beroe. Bazilica paleocreștină: tencuiala pictată.
- Fig. 3. Tomis. Registre cu pictură din cripta bazilicii de sub Liceul „Mihai Eminescu”: a, b, f. peretele din stânga; c. peretele din dreapta; d, e. peretele cu ușa de acces în criptă (foto autor).
- Fig. 4. Halmyris. Bazilica episcopală: cripta (foto O. Bounegru).
- Fig. 5. Niculițel. Bazilica creștină: inscripțiile din cripta martirică (*apud* V. H. Baumann, *op. cit.*, 2004, fig. 22).
- Fig. 6. Callatis. Tomb with psalms (G. Atanasov *et alii*, *op. cit.*, 2009, p. 13).
- Fig. 7. Axiopolis. Cavoul cu pictură (*apud* <http://www.minac.ro/arheodrom/?p=photos&cid=0#foto>).
- Fig. 8. Tomis. Cripta bazilicii aflată pe strada Revoluției din decembrie 1989 (*apud* A. Rădulescu, V. Lungu, *op. cit.*, 1989, fig. 5).
- Fig. 9. Callatis. Bazilica „siriană”. Desen după schițele realizate pe o placă de marmură (*apud* Institutul de Arheologie Iași, *Fondul de fotografii al Muzeului de Antichități Iași*).



Fig. 1. Histria. Episcopal basilica: a, b. painted stucco in the southern nave; c. painted rendering in the southern nave; d, e. painted rendering in the southern transept; f. painted stucco in the southern transept (photo by the author)



Fig. 2. Beroe. Paleo-Christian basilica: painted rendering (photo by the author)



Fig. 3. Tomis. Painting registers in the crypt of the basilica under “Mihai Eminescu” High-School: a, b, f. left wall; c. right wall; d, e. wall with the access door to the crypt (photo by the author)



Fig. 4. Halmyris. Episcopal basilica: the crypt (photo by O. Bounegru)



Fig. 5. Niculițel. Christian basilica: inscriptions in the martyr's crypt
(*apud* V. H. Baumann, *op. cit.*, 2004, fig. 22)



Fig. 6. Callatis. Tomb with psalms (G. Atanasov *et alii*, *op. cit.*, 2009, p. 13)



Fig. 7. Axiopolis. Crypt with painting
(*apud* <http://www.minac.ro/arheodrom/?p=photos&id=0#foto>)



Fig. 8. Tomis. Crypt of the basilica on the Revoluției din decembrie 1989 Street
(*apud* A. Rădulescu, V. Lungu, *op. cit.*, 1989, fig. 5)



Fig. 9. Callatis. "Syrian" basilica. Drawing of the sketches made on a marble plate
(*apud* Institutul de Arheologie Iași, *Fondul de fotografie al Muzeului de Antichități Iași*)