

CHRISTIAN SYMBOLS AND PLACES OF WORSHIP

Ștefan Lifa
Lecturer, PhD., West University of Timișoara

*Abstract:*The study presents a series of Christian symbols to which much reference has not been made in historiography. Also it presents some less well-known places of worship including the rock ones. These determined a specific spirituality in the first millennium and in the medieval period, an important spirituality for preserving the identity of the population from the north of the lower Danube.

Keywords: History of Romanians, the Middle Ages, spirituality, Christian symbols, worship lacs.

The beginnings of Christianity in the north of the Danube are relatively difficult to detect after the archaeological discoveries. Cross-like symbols have been discovered since ancient times, some of them even attributed to prehistoric artists. But these are solar symbols. For a more correct treatment of the subject we consider various comparisons with other discoveries or sources from other places.

Various solar symbols, Greek crosses framed in rhombuses etc. have been discovered in several places in Europe (M. Carciumaru described, for example, those in the cave Grand Pere-Ariege, France)¹. *Crux decussata* (the cross of St. Andrew) or Plato's monogram, as he describes it in Tiamaios, is found in the north of the Danube on the walls of the Oteleț gorge, in Polovragi (Gorj county), next to clearly solar symbols, and the examples are not unique. Particular attention should be paid to the cave Gaura Chindei, 4 km from Pescari commune Caraș-Severin county.

It is actually two caves called Chindei Holes; but we are interested in the smallest of them, whose walls are painted. The clay being easy to find around, the representations are in different shades of red. They have been divided into several categories and belong to different historical periods. Of this first category the birds belong, and for the vegetal reasons the author mentions them rendered singly or in pairs.

A second category, the signs and symbols, include, besides the collar circles, etc. and over 50 cruciform elements: the Greek cross, *crux potenziata* or the cross of Malta then impressions of hands. Given the complexity of these analyzes, we do not dare to try any strict interpretation in this regard.

The last category of signs belongs to the Slavonic, Cyrillic and Latin alphabets.

The schematized naturalistic motifs, as well as the signs and symbols discovered here are included in the prehistoric rock art, but we believe that this can be discussed further².

I paid more attention to this discovery, given the primitive Christian symbolism. In his work on this topic, Jean Danielou³ presents some of these symbols: the iotachi monogram or the star, the living water, the fish of Elijah's cart, etc. It starts with the palm branch and the crown related to the old Judeo-Christian beliefs .

¹ M. Cârciumaru, *Mărturii ale artei rupestre peristorice în România*, București, 1987, p. 182.

² We had the opportunity to visit this cave a few times and only after this we thought about other interpretations

³ J. Danielou, *Simbolurile creștine primitive*, Timișoara, 1998, passim

The palm branches are a sign of victory, as well as a sign of the Resurrection related to the eschatological hope in the later world, found in the hands of the victorious martyrs of death⁴.

The palm branches are frequently represented on the monuments and are identical to the paintings from Gaura Chindei. There is no difference, for example between the latter and the Judeo-Christian palm branches represented in Hebron. There are also similarities between the trees of life in Jerusalem and other places and similar symbols⁵.

There are, of course, various cruciform representations that are just solar symbols and that is why we have only limited ourselves to drawing more attention to this issue for now. Solar crosses are also found from the Iron Age period of the Dacian state⁶. They have nothing to do with Christian symbolism. There were discovered more symbols in circles or representing the sun and even a solar car in Orăștie⁷.

At the beginning of the millennium the first Christians used different representations, many having their origin in Judaism in the Old Testament writings. The palm branch was a symbol of victory, the crown was of eschatological significance and was related to the Jewish feast of tents.

Other symbolic representations are the vine that finds its explanation in the "planting" of the new teaching, it follows the "tree of life" "the living water" and the fish because, as Tertulian said, "we, small fish, are born in the water".

The church ship, the chariot of Elijah, the plow and the ax, the fourteen Apostles and the Zodiac or the star of Jacob are other paleo-Christian signs⁸.

The cross of the supplication did not look as we imagine it today, it was not of Greek or Latin cheese, but a cross with a small support on the vertical bar, which the condemned man still rested with his feet. When her legs were crushed, she died faster by suffocation. The earliest representation of the crucifixion is even of Gnostic inspiration, from the third century. It then appears on the door of the church of Saint Sabina in Rome in the 4th century⁹.

Regarding the northern Danube territory, we have also discussed the discoveries from Barboși and Aurelius Balbus's saccophagus. Similar crosses were discovered in Dobrudja, where, for the 7th-10th centuries, the Bishopric of Tomis reached the rank of Metropolitan.

A similar monogrammatic crux is found in Ulmetum, others in Fântâna Mare dating from the 5th and 6th centuries. Mostly in Dobrogea: Tomis, Ulmetum, Callatis, Dinogecia¹⁰, but also in other places such as: Biertan, Porolissum¹¹, we find the Constantinian monogram and chi-ro, which designates the name of Jesus Christ, or iotachi monograms, such as that of Ulpia Traiana.

Swastika or crux grammata has also been used, from the third century until the end of the first millennium¹².

Since the 5th - 6th centuries, Christian objects have multiplied, the cross has become widespread. The catalogs of these objects were prepared by D.Gh.Teodor¹³, N.Gudea and I.Ghiurco¹⁴.

⁴ Ibidem, p.15-16

⁵ N.Gudea, *Vasul inscripție si nismului în Dacia după retragerea aureliană*. Reinterpretarea simbolului denumit copacul vieții ; etc

⁶ I.H.Crișan, *Spiritualitatea daco-geților*, București, 1986, p.24-25 etc

⁷ Ibidem

⁸ J.Danilou, *op.cit.*, passim

⁹ M.Simion, *Primii creștini*, București, 1993, p.114-117.

¹⁰ R. Vulpe, I.Barnea, *Din istoria Dobrogei. Români la Dunărea de Jos*, București, 1968, fig.20,54,493 etc

¹¹ Ligia Bârzu, S.Breazeanu, *Originea și continuitatea românilor. Arheologie și tradiție istorică*, București, 1991, p.201-204

¹² You see this in a much broader sense in *Petit Larousse illustre*, Paris, 1975, p.274

In general we must admit the existence of meeting places from the earliest Christians, as, for example, during the time of Jesus' journey on earth, meetings with his disciples were held in the "upper room" or, later, in the so-called "houses of the Lord".

Notitia Episcopatum¹⁵ presents in Scythia Minor bishops' seats in Axiopolis, Capidava, Carsium etc. We are aware, in Dobrogea of today, and of a number of bishops, such as Evangelicus, probably the first known bishop of Tomis, Ephraim sent by Bishop Ermon of Jerusalem to preach here, Marcus¹⁶, Britannios¹⁷, Gherontie, Teotim it is possible the one who sent it to Vasile, Ioan, Alexandru, Teotim al II-lea și Paternus¹⁸.

We are also aware of the Romanian space and of the bishop Ursus, who probably participated in the VII ecumenical synod¹⁹.

In the north of the Danube, in the post-Aurelian period, at least two are known at Porolissum. At Slăveni²⁰, on the site of the former Roman fort was built a church with a simple plan, a 16 x 7m joint hall and a semicircular apse of 5 m in the western part.

A monogrammatic crux is found on a chisel of limestone and there is also a tomb in the treasure room of a martyr or clergyman. It is not certain whether this place dates from the beginning or the end of the fourth century.

Porolissum Basilica has the same plan as the one from Slăveni, a larger extension - 22,6x 13.50 m and is raised or, better said, it is the work of transforming the temple of the god Baal, whose worship no longer needs²¹. At the beginning of the 5th century or the end of the 4th century, Christian places of worship began to be erected throughout Europe, in fact, on the ancient pagan monuments, we have in this sense examples at Eleusis, Delphi, Epidaurus, Olympia, Delos²², so the Porolissum's place is no exception.

In connection with the existence of places of worship to the east of the Carpathians, it would not be excluded the A1 dwelling, discovered in the IV-V centuries settlement of Iași Nicolina to be a basilica, considering the special shape and the large dimensions: length 13, 5m, the width of 5.5 m made up of two rooms, one larger to the east and the other smaller to the west²³. D.Gh. Teodor considers, quite rightly, that many places of worship were built of wood, which made their traces not withstanding in time²⁴.

Another church, also uni-nave, dating from the 5th century, with tombs inside and outside is at Sucidava and has a semicircular apse to the east side, the pulpit to the southwest²⁵.

An import amphora found here mentions the priest Lokonokos, the son of Lykatiros, which shows that the priest who served here may not have been local.

We must also remember the places of worship from Drobeta and Dierna²⁶, and for the later period and the baptisterium roundabout discovered in Alba Iulia, built or remade during Gyula's time, during Hierotheus's mission here²⁷.

¹³ D.Gh. Teodor, *Creștinismul la est de Carpați de la origini și până în secolul al XIV-lea*, Iași, 1991, passim

¹⁴ N. Gudea, I. Ghiurco, *Din istoria creștinismului la români Mărturiile arheologice*, Oradea, 1988, p. 17 și urm

¹⁵ M. Păcurariu, *O istorie a Bisericii Ortodoxe Române*, vol. I, București, 1991, p. 150 și urm

¹⁶ *ibidem*

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, vezi și T. Diaconescu, *Personalitatea și opera Sfantului Bratanion, episcopul Tomisului*, în *Noua Revistă Romană*, 1977, 2, nr 1-2, p. 192-195

¹⁸ M. Păcurariu, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 162

¹⁹ E. Popescu, *A fost reprezentat teritoriul românesc la sinodul al VII-lea ecumenic de la Niceea (787) de către episcopul Ursus din Istoria Europei romane*, Oradea, 1995, p. 271-273

²⁰ D. Teodor, *Basilica paleocreștină de la Slăveni-Olt în SCIIVA*, 30, 1979, 3, p. 353-458, N. Gudea, I. Ghiurco, *op. cit.*, p. 200

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 199-200, N. Gudea, Porolissum, p. 159-160

²² N. Zugravu, *Geneza creștinismului popular al romanilor*, București, 1997, p. 311

²³ D. Gh. Teodor, *Creștinismul la est de Carpați...*, p. 123

²⁴ *Ibidem*

²⁵ D. Teodor, *Sucidava*, București, 1976, p. 90

In connection with the places of worship, the legend of St. Gerald mentions three bishops in Transylvania, whose residences correspond to the headquarters of the three political bodies that existed in Cenad and Alba Iulia.

The north of the Danube can be an eloquent example from the earliest Christian times. The tradition in Capadocia involves the deployment of paintings from sunset to sunrise in the ship and has other references to topics such as: face change, Ascension, Well-being, themes that have been preserved to this day.²⁸ Also, the shrine is in agreement with the Eastern monarchism to a greater degree than the western one.

On the territory of today's Romania, a very beautiful rock church, largely dug by the human hand, stands at the Corbii de Piedra, near Pitesti. The walls of the rocks were here covered with a layer of lime and then colored, there are themes such as the Virgin Mary with baby Jesus, Avram's sacrifice. The ship is painted with themes such as the Christmas celebration, the Lord's greeting, the change of face, the resurrection of Lazarus, all of which are of Cappadocian inspiration. Other themes of the same inspiration are the Good News and Jesus in the Temple²⁹.

Other rock worship sites are located in the Buzau mountains. They are mentioned too little and, according to our faith, those from Căndești, Nucu or Aluniș are among the most important³⁰. Other rocky places can be found in the many places in Buzau County. Inside are painted or engraved crosses of various kinds, inscriptions, Christian signs, etc.

The mouth of the Cave in the village of Nucu is well preserved and has an area of about 4 square meters. In the same village there is also the cave called Vizuina Liliacilor, also of about 4 square meters, but which, due to the humidity, is in a state of continuous degradation. Climbing a few crashed rocks, near the village of Ruginoasa, we reach the Stony Stone, whose inscriptions are difficult to see. In addition to the village of Ruginoasa, we reach the Stoned Stone, whose dividing wall is damaged due to classic serums, but whose dividing wall is damaged due to seepage. Also here Chilia Mare and Chilia Mică, the first with two rooms and two windows the second room in which there are many inscriptions. In Poiana Cozneața there is also a cave with two small windows, one serving as a chimney.

Another cave, the church, in the village of Nucu, is made up of a rectangular room and keeps vague traces of plaster. Two other rooms are also dug in the rock. There are also places of worship such as Piatra Crucii and Fundătura. The churches Agathonul Vechi and Agathonu Nou are both medieval, but there are still places we mention on the Cross of the Back, such as the Cave of Dionysius the Torch, another one on the way to Poiana Cozneața, then near the village of Ruginoasa two more³¹.

In general, all of these have some common elements. Whether they are natural or dug by the human hand, they have been inhabited, of course, have entrances, and some have windows and a chimney. Entries usually have stepped steps, some even have exterior decorations, and the windows are very small. The chimneys are even smaller, and sometimes their role is taken over by the windows. What is worth mentioning about these are the statements. We refer especially to the crosses of Malta or those specific to the V-VII centuries with slightly widened ends. Right here we find something similar to the crux of the

²⁶ N. Zugravu, *op.cit*, p.495

²⁷ Șt. Olteanu *Societatea carpato-danubiano-pontică în secolele IV-XI: structuri demo-economice și social-politice*, p.298-299

²⁸ I.D. Ștefănescu, *Artă feudală în Țările Române. Poctura murală și icoanele de la origine până în secolul al XIX/lea* Timisoara, 1981, p.99-101

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p.101

³⁰ H. Constantinescu, *Schituri sau sihăstria rupestre buzoiene. Mărturii ale vechimii creștinismului și continuității noastre pe aceste meleaguri*, în *Spiritualitate și istorie la întorsura Carpaților*, vol.I, Buzău, 1985, p.321-340

³¹ P. Chihaia, *Date noi despre bisericuțele rupestre din munții Buzăului*, în *Glaușul Bisericii*, 1974, p.507-517.

buckwheat. There are also Slavic and Greek inscriptions that are more similar to the types of crosses of Malta and the two crusades of the Sarciata found in the rock complex at Basarabi.

In the latter, however, there are also Greek and Latin crosses. The rock monuments from Basarabi-Murfatlar³² were researched between 1957-1962 and date back to the 10th century.

This dating was made on the basis of an inscription referring to the year 6500. The Basarabi complex is located in a limestone quarry where, in certain portions, there were four churches carved together through the galleries. There are also nine tombs, Dridu invoice ceramics. All four churches are rectangular and a semicircular apse. There were also discovered galleries that served as burial place and rooms that continued with the galleries, the cells.

In the North-Danube area, we could also mention the cave dwellings from Orheiul Vechi³³.

Some specialists refer to the above mentioned microzone, we consider that, in relation to the audience, according to the early Christian tradition, these monasteries could not be other than the rock ones, and then that this isolated region favored "primary monarchism and Shiastria"³⁴.

Since the fourth centuries, regions and the basin of the Middle Dniester have been inhabited by Christians who have dug houses of worship here in the rock. As for Orheiul Vechi, unfortunately here dozens of monastic cells collapsed in the waters of the Răutului, and those that remained were finalized in their current form through the XV-XVII centuries. Thus, several complexes were identified, which we enumerate the names of Bosie Monastery, Cave Monastery, Corbului Rock, show archaic (Gh.postică) sacral signs. Among the traces of archaic sacral signs, which justifies us to believe that they have been inhabited since the first millennium.

The written sources, but especially the archaeological discoveries, have highlighted throughout the Romanian ethnogenesis space a specific mood with common Romani ethnolinguistic and cultural bases.

The specific spiritual values, to which the indigenous population was referred during the first millennium AD. and not only then, they were determined to preserve the identity of these populations, for its uninterrupted continuity on these lands.

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³² I.Barnea ,*Monumente de artă creștină descoperite pe teritoriul României, în Studii teologice , an XII, 1960, nr 3-4 ,p.160-172*

³³ I Gh. Postică,*Mănăstirile rupestre de la Orheiul Vechi, în Orheiul Vechi .Buletin istorico-arheologic , 1998, Chișinău , 1999, p.20-23*

³⁴ *Ibidem*

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