

Pilgrims from the Province of Scythia

Les pélerins de la province de Scythie

Dan Aparaschivei



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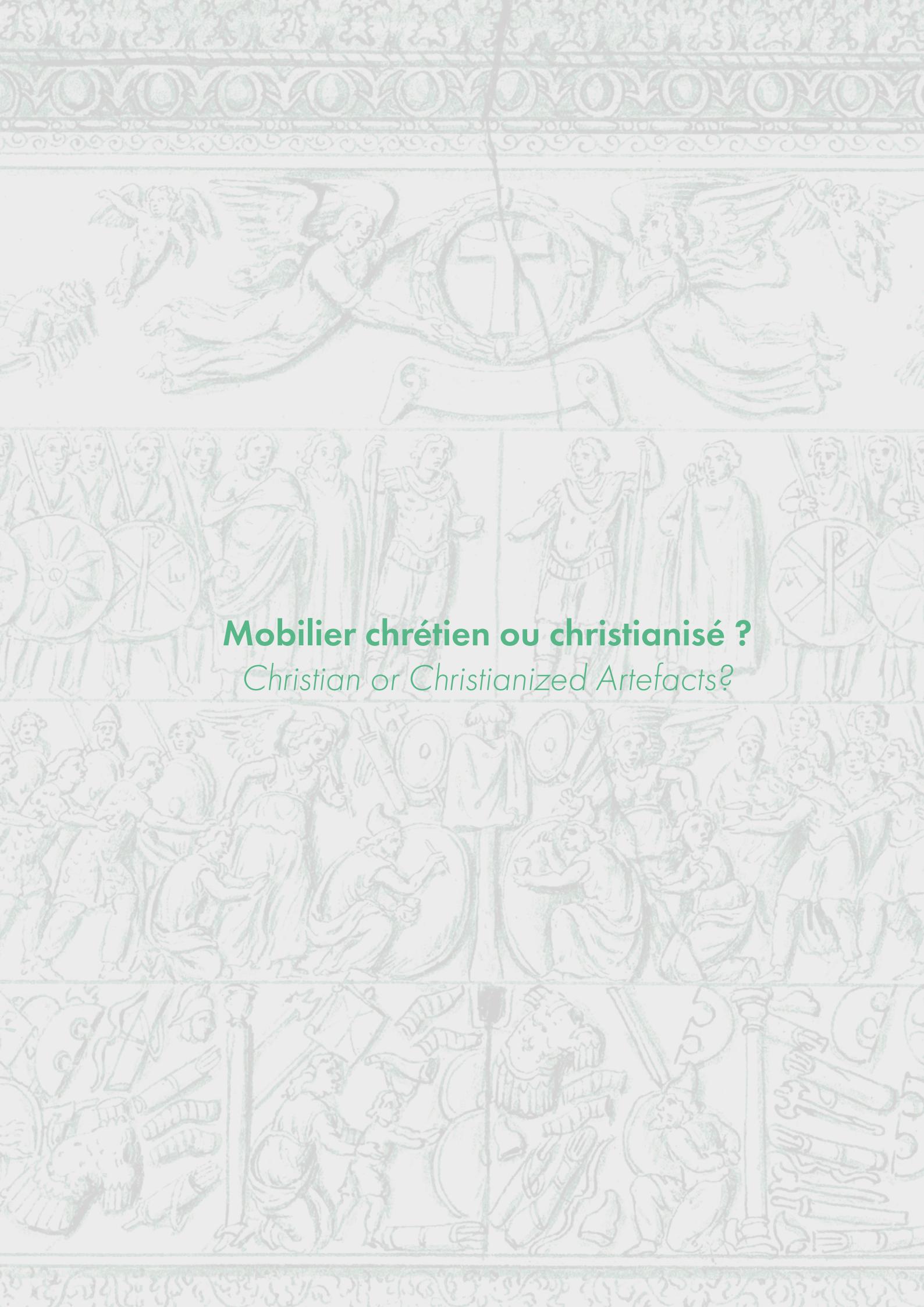
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Mobilier chrétien ou christianisé ?

Christian or Christianized Artefacts?

Pilgrims from the Province of Scythia

The ampullae are the most representative artefacts that confirm the phenomenon of pilgrimage, as practised in the early Byzantine period by the inhabitants of the province of Scythia. The scope of the present material is the research carried out on the eight ampullae that have been discovered so far in the region between the Lower Danube and the Black Sea. These small ceramic containers were used to bring holy water, oil, or blessed soil from the famous Christian pilgrimage centre of Abu Mena, in Egypt, as well as from the Anatolian area of Asia Minor. The finds from Scythia originate in five urban centres spread across the Lower Danube limes (Capidava),

on the western coast of the Black Sea (Istria, Tomis, Callatis), or even in the middle of the province (Ibida). The artefacts are datable to the second half of the 6th century and the first decades of the 7th century, which suggests intense spiritual activity in this space, which was experiencing political and military instability during this period, as confirmed by written sources. Despite these realities, it seems that the phenomenon of pilgrimage, a feature of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire starting with the 4th century, continued to manifest intensely in Scythia, despite the numerous obstacles that would ultimately cause the fall of the Danubian limes.

Les pèlerins de la province de Scythie

Les ampoules sont les artefacts les plus représentatifs du phénomène du pèlerinage, tel qu'il était pratiqué au début de la période byzantine par les habitants de la province de Scythie. Le présent article porte sur les recherches menées sur les huit ampoules découvertes à ce jour dans la région située entre le Danube inférieur et la mer Noire. Ces petits récipients en céramique étaient utilisés pour rapporter de l'eau bénite, de l'huile ou de la terre bénite depuis le célèbre centre de pèlerinage chrétien d'Abu Mina, en Égypte, ainsi que depuis la région anatolienne de l'Asie Mineure. Les objets trouvés en Scythie proviennent de cinq centres urbains répartis dans le limes du Bas-Danube

(Capidava), sur la côte occidentale de la mer Noire (Istria, Tomis, Callatis) ou même au centre de la province (Ibida). Ces objets sont datés de la seconde moitié du VI^e siècle et des premières décennies du VII^e siècle, ce qui suggère une activité spirituelle intense dans cet espace, qui connaissait à la même époque des instabilités politiques et militaires confirmées par les sources écrites. Malgré ces réalités, il semble que le phénomène de pèlerinage, caractéristique du christianisme dans tout l'Empire romain à partir du IV^e siècle, ait continué à se manifester intensément en Scythie, en dépit des nombreux obstacles qui allaient finalement provoquer la chute du limes danubien.

Dan Aparaschivei
Institute of Archaeology Iași,
Romanian Academy

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As early as the first centuries after the ascendance of the Christian religion, the development of the cult of the saints was an essential component among the manifestations of its practitioners. There was intense activity building a network of churches and other places of religious significance connected with representative figures for the new religion. Believers from all corners of the Byzantine world chose to leave the daily routine of their settlement and embark on true initiatory journeys, some of them extremely long and arduous, to the holy places located in the Syro-Palestinian area, Egypt, or in the Christian centres of Asia Minor.¹ These pilgrimages² became transformative journeys, that marked the pilgrim, possibly for life. In a minimalist form, Alan Morinis defined the pilgrimage as 'a journey undertaken by a person in quest of a place or state that he or she believes embodies a sacred ideal'.³ Indeed, these were travels intended to lead to spiritual fulfilment, with profound consequences. Most likely, as in the case of contemporary pilgrimages, whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish, or of any other religion, such a journey becomes a major objective in the spiritual manifestation of the individual even if it occurs only once in a lifetime.

The same must have happened to the inhabitants of the province of Scythia, part of the diocese of Thrace, the prefecture of the East. After the official recognition of Christianity, the Lower Danube region witnessed an explosion and variety of testimonies that fundamentally shifted the spiritual balance in favour of the new religion. From the point of view of ecclesiastical organization, Scythia was a unitary diocese since the end of the 4th century, with the episcopal see in Tomis, which later could become an autocephalous archbishopric subordinate to the patriarchate of Constantinople.⁴ The literature presents several theories regarding the changes in the provincial governance structures of the Christian Church during the following centuries, mainly due to gaps in the historical sources. On the one hand, on the basis of several rather late and uncertain literary sources, as well as on the significant increase in the number of Christian basilicas in various settlements that acquired the status of *civitas/πόλις*,⁵ some scholars support the development of a network of new suffragan sees that would have been hierarchically placed in obedience to the metropolitan see of Tomis.⁶

On the other hand, there is the emerging hypothesis claiming that, despite significant changes in the ecclesiastical organization in the Lower Danube in the 5th and 6th centuries, there are no credible historical sources for Scythia that would confirm the elevation of any centre other than Tomis to bishopric status.⁷ Nor would the argument for the appearance of new large basilicas, confirmed by archaeology for several fortresses in the province, be convincing in the absence of information from other credible sources.⁸

1. Starting with 4th century CE there are some written sources that mention the pilgrimage routes and the sites that attracted believers from all the Empire's corners: see *Itinerarium Burdigalense; Ad Silviam peregrinationem in Itinera Hierosolymitana saeculi IIII-VIII*; Theodosius, *De situ terrae sanctae; Itinerarium Egeriae; Itinerarium Antonini Placentini*, Petrus Diaconus, *De locis sanctis*, etc. For the pilgrimage routes to these centres of 4th-7th century Christianity, see: Hunt 1982, pp. 50-82; Maraval 1985, p. 251; Vikan 1991; Maraval 1995; Vikan 1995; Frankfurter 2006; Riba 2016; Withing 2020.
2. On the concept of pilgrimage in Elsner and Rutherford 2007.
3. Morinis 1992, p. 4.
4. Sozomenos, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 6.21 (Mihăescu et al. 1970, p. 225); Theodoret of Cyr, *The Ecclesiastical history*, 4.35 (Mihăescu et al. 1970, p. 235), and *Codex Justiniani*, 1.3.35 (Mihăescu et al. 1970, p. 373). Also Zugravu 1997, pp. 364-365.
5. About the administrative-territorial, military, economic, and financial reorganization carried out by Justinian, in Ioannes Lydos, *De magistratibus populi Romani*, 3.2.29. See also Torbatov 1997.
6. In the first phase, there would have been 14 such centres, according to *Notitia Episcopatum Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae*: De Boor 1891a and 1891b; Popescu 1994, pp. 124-138 and 200-213; Zugravu 1997, pp. 365-366 and n. 32; recently, Holubeau 2019. These 14 suffragan sees would have been Dionysopolis, Akres, Callatis, Histria, Constantiana, Zaldapa, Tropaeum Traiani, Axiopolis, Capidava, Carsium, Troesmis, Noviodunum, Aegyssus and Halmyris. After the mid-6th century, other dioceses would have been founded in Beroe, Salsovia, Ibida and Argamum: Holubeau 2020 and 2024, pp. 92-99; Atanasov 2012, pp. 360-361.
7. Moreau et al. 2021, p. 72, where the *Notitia Episcopatum Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae*, the main source on which the promoters of the idea of the development of a true network of episcopal sees in Scythia rely, is seen as utopian and unreliable.
8. Moreau 2018, p. 960 and 2022, p. 117. Dominic Moreau extensively demonstrates that baptism, could be performed not only by bishops in the episcopal cathedrals, but by a variety of clerics and monks present throughout the province. Thus, the appearance of a large number of basilicas in the 6th century did not necessarily transform those localities into episcopal sees. Rather, according to Moreau, the answers should be sought in the expansion of monasticism in the province of Scythia during the same period.

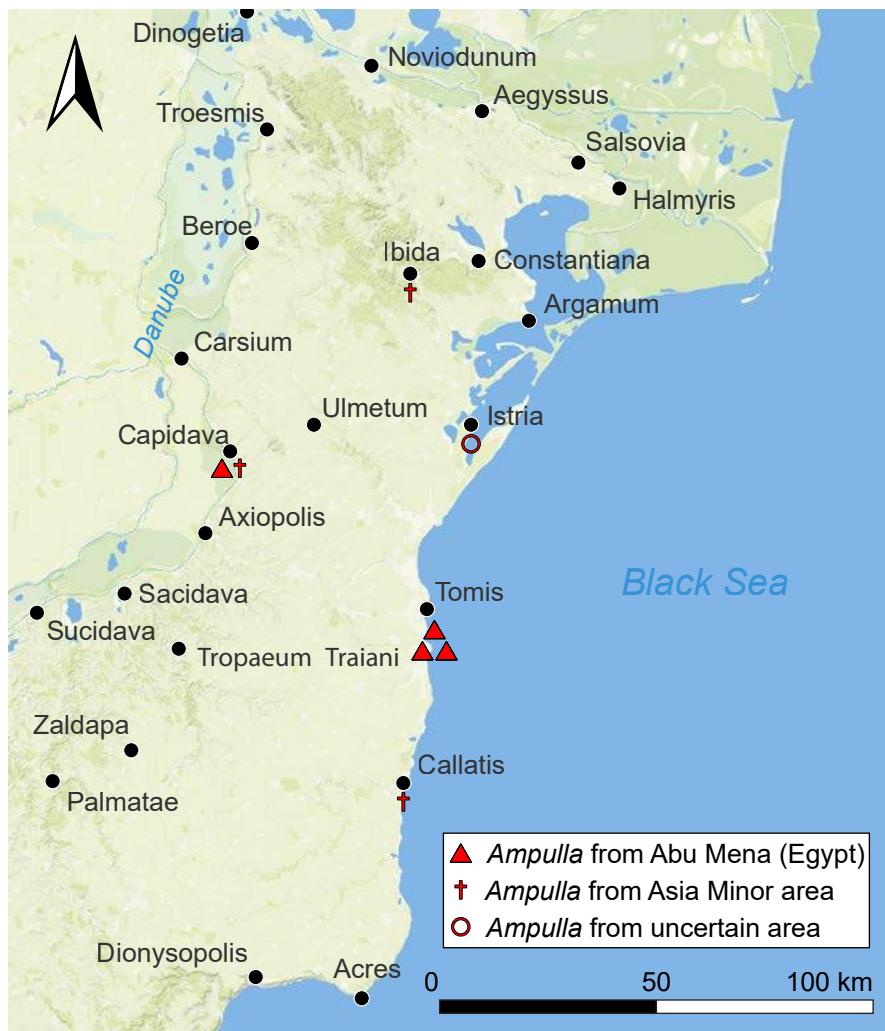


Figure 1. Map of Scythia, with urban centers where ampullae were discovered

Background map: Consortium of Ancient World Mappers, CC BY 4.0

Regardless of the ecclesiastical organizational structure at the provincial level, we should point out that, based on the realities that emerge from almost all areas of life, the Christian religion was now the dominant agency in spiritual life in the province of Scythia. This fact can be seen in civic attitudes, in the urbanism, in the symbolism used in different levels of art, but also in everyday life. Thus, the province of Scythia can be considered a landmark of Danubian-Pontic Christianity, with communities strongly indoctrinated with Christian precepts at least since the 6th century, if not earlier.⁹

Against this background, the practice of pilgrimage by Scythian believers to holy places in the East appears as a natural activity, stemming from the deep convictions of the pilgrims and the favourable environment in which they manifested themselves spiritually within their communities.

For our area of interest, there are no relevant written sources concerning the phenomenon of pilgrimage from the late Roman period.¹⁰ Therefore, the most useful means to trace the favourite directions of the pilgrims of Scythia, the transport routes, the relations between the communities of this province and the religious settlements to which they travelled, are the specific artefacts discovered in archaeological excavations. *Eulogiai* (Greek: εὐλογίαι, Latin: *benedictiones*), or blessings, were religious objects brought from holy places, valuable either in themselves, through their direct sanctification, or as containers that stored various miraculous substances (holy oil, holy water, sanctified soil).¹¹ Apotropaic items, whether medallions, containers – such

9. See, among other authors reaching the same conclusion, Zeiller 1918, pp. 172-173; Vulpe and Barnea 1968, pp. 456-502; Popescu 1994; Zugravu 1997, p. 364 and bibliography.

10. The information about the journey to perfect the ascetic life of John Cassian (360/5-433/5) to Bethlehem (380-386), and then to Egypt (386-399/400) is laconic: Cassian, *Collationes*, 17; Zugravu 2007, p. 27; Jakab 2003; Gaspar 2003, pp. 15-33.

11. Regarding the hypothesis that the *eulogiai* designated the content and not the packaging in which the holy substances were carried, see Ritter 2020, p. 260.

as *ampullae* –, plaques with images of saints or biblical scenes,¹² statuettes,¹³ crosses, jewellery, lamps,¹⁴ or other such objects made of clay, glass, wood, textiles, metals, were also testimonies of those who undertook the pilgrimage.

Among these, the *ampullae* are the most representative category, and this paper will assemble pieces of this type discovered in the province of Scythia and discuss the possible relationships that the Christian centres in Scythia had with the Christian holy sites (fig. 1).

Pilgrims' Ampullae of Scythia

The *ampullae* were objects that expressed the pride of being a pilgrim to the holy places, a kind of sign of the pilgrim identity.¹⁵ Such souvenirs certainly had a psychological influence on believers, as they were able to reproduce the blessedness and atmosphere of the holy places where they were purchased, even from a great distance.¹⁶

With various shapes but similar functions,¹⁷ *ampullae* were bought or offered by the clergy and could be made of ceramics, metals, stone or glass.¹⁸ With regard to their dissemination, we assume that they were controlled by local or regional clerical structures.¹⁹

Various types of *ampullae* were distinguished according to their place of origin: from the Syro-Palestinian area, from northern Egypt, and from the Christian centres of Asia Minor. The Christian holy places of Palestine, with the Holy Sepulchre, were the main pilgrimage destinations.²⁰ The so-called Monza flasks, made of silver, were produced here during the 6th century.²¹ Moreover, the same origin can be attributed to the finds of St Columbanus in Bobbio.²² Other finds of this specific type of vessel are also documented in the Palestine-Israel area, brought by pilgrims with various miraculous substances.²³

Ampullae From Egypt Found in Scythia

Egypt was one of the territories associated with the 'biblical holy lands'. The documents of the time record famous pilgrimage centres, such as the sanctuary of Abu Mena, the monastery of St Catherine, the healing shrine of St Cyrus and St John in Menouthis,²⁴ as well as the possible shrine of St Thecla.²⁵ In terms of popularity in the ancient world, however, the cult of St Menas stands out.²⁶ The place of his burial was associated with miraculous healings in various Coptic, Arabic and Ethiopian writings. From the reign of Emperor Constantine I, a sanctuary was constructed around the tomb of this sanctified martyr for his veneration. Emperor Arcadius initiated the building of a grand basilica and arranged the access points to the miraculous waters used by pilgrims for the healing they prayed for.²⁷ Justinian rebuilt the martyr's church and enlarged the baptistery and the annexes.²⁸ This later period can be regarded as the peak of the saint's popularity, which lasted until the Arab invasion.²⁹

12. Sodini 1989.

13. Klausen-Nottmeyer 1995, pl. 126.

14. Sodini 2011, p. 130.

15. Brazinski 2014, p. 55.

16. Hahn 1990, pp. 85-86, with eloquent examples from contemporary sources.
See also Elsner 1997.

17. Vikan 1995, p. 381 identified three meanings for artefacts of this type: votive, devotional, and amuletic.

18. Metzger 1981, p. 5.

19. Ritter 2020, p. 260.

20. Hunt 1982.

21. According to tradition, there are 16 *ampullae* from the holy places that Pope Gregory I sent to the Lombard queen Teodolinda, on the occasion of her foundation of the church of St John in Monza, at the beginning of the 7th century: Grabar 1958, pp. 15-31; Metzger 1981, p. 5.

22. Grabar 1958, pp. 32-44.

23. Anderson 2004, p. 81; Arad 2007, pp. 59-74, figs 1a-b. Here we mention the 13 pottery flasks from Odessus, in Moesia Secunda, which would have been used to transport holy water from Jordan or sanctified oil from the Holy Land: Минчев 1992; Hayes 1971.

24. Blanke 2017, pp. 205-206, fig. 12.1.

25. Hayne 1994. See Davis 1998, p. 316, for the hypothetical existence of a shrine of St Thecla near the one of St Menas; see also Kaufmann 1910, p. 96; Ritter 2020, pp. 364-365.

26. Regarding the life and miracles of St Menas, see Wallis Budge 1909; Kaufman 1910; Drescher 1946; Grossmann 1998. Carl Maria Kaufmann led a prolific archaeological expedition to the site of Abu Mena, during which he identified about 200 *ampullae* with the image of St Menas. For the final phases of the site: Kościuk 1995.

27. The church was inaugurated in 412 by Emperor Theodosius II: Kiss 1989, pp. 9-10.

28. Sodini 2011, pp. 86-87.

29. The sanctuary was abandoned around 641, and after successive restorations and destructions it was completely destroyed and abandoned in 849: Kaufmann 1910, p. 15; Kiss 1989, p. 10. Regarding the extension of the period of operation until the 11th century, see Kościuk 1995, p. 944.

From the 5th century onwards, pilgrimages to Karm Abu Mena, located 45 km south-west of Alexandria, had reached impressive numbers. The *ampullae* with the image of St Menas are the most numerous artefacts documenting pilgrimage activity in the late Roman and early Byzantine periods.³⁰ They are characterized by their handles, which span the body and neck, and by a specific iconography. They were produced using moulds into which the halves of the piece were pressed, which were then assembled into the final shape. Most of the *eulogiai* from the sanctuary of St Menas in Egypt, particularly those from the last stage of production, display several typical elements: St Menas, wearing military dress, with specific accessories, with his arms outstretched in an orans position, often with a nimbus above, is placed between two dromedaries kneeling in a position of adoration.³¹ The whole scene was surrounded by a row or rows of dots.³² In different variations, other elements often appear to complete the landscape: crosses, candelabra, censers, amphorae or other vessels, palm branches, etc.

From the province of Scythia, where trade relations with Egypt are documented, we have discovered *ampullae* coming from the centre of Abu Mena.³³

Ampullae with the Image of St Menas Found in Tomis

Three of these artefacts were discovered in Tomis, on the Black Sea coast, the provincial capital and the Christian spiritual centre of Scythia. With at least seven archaeologically attested basilicas dating back to the 4th century,³⁴ some confirmed by literary sources,³⁵ the Tomitan believers had all the conditions for the manifestation of their faith. Monuments such as the great basilica of Tomis, built in the western sector of the city,³⁶ another smaller basilica, north-east of the great basilica,³⁷ the basilica in the area of the modern port,³⁸ the basilica with a vaulted crypt and niches,³⁹ the three-nave construction on the Tomis Peninsula,⁴⁰ as well as the earliest such construction, located in the city centre,⁴¹ are representative buildings of Christian Tomis.

The first two *eulogiai* were published several decades ago and were part of a private collection.⁴² The first piece (fig. 2), about 9 cm high and 7 cm in maximum diameter of the body, is missing part of the neck, the mouth of the vessel, and the handles. Both sides are decorated with the image of St Menas wearing a classical soldier's uniform in the orator's posture. At the top, on either side of his head, there is a cross with arms of equal length. At his feet are the two dromedaries and the whole scene is framed by a row of beads in relief, arranged in a circle, between two concentric circles.⁴³

The second piece (fig. 3) is almost identical to the first artefact in terms of decoration, with slight variations in the row of beads framing the scene, but the neck and handles of the flask are completely missing.⁴⁴ It also measures 9 cm in height, not including any part of the neck, which means that the whole

30. To date, about 800 such artefacts have been recorded: Gilli 2002, p. 10; Ritter 2020, p. 264. See also Sodini 2011, pp. 91-92. Such artefacts were found in Britannia, more than 3,500 km from St Menas's shrine in Alexandria: Thompson 1956, pp. 48-49; Anderson 2007, p. 235. A graffito discovered in the sanctuary proper mentions the healing properties of holy water. Opinions have also been expressed about the beneficial role of the clay from which the artefacts were made: Witt 2000, pp. 67-70; Sodini 2011, p. 87.
31. The presence of the two animals may suggest that the relics were transported from the place of his martyrdom, in Phrygia, to Egypt, where he was taken for burial and where the complex dedicated to him was built: Tănase 2018, p. 66; Bumbalova 2008, p. 567.
32. Metzger 1981; Anderson 2007, p. 225; Sodini 2011, pp. 87-88.
33. A Christian funerary inscription that mentions a wine merchant from Alexandria was uncovered in Tomis: Barnea 1972, pp. 261-262; Popescu 1976, no 28. See also Barnea 1998.
34. Buzoianu and Bărbulescu 2012, pp. 93-95; see also Ruscu 2020, pp. 243-253; Lungu 2000.
35. Sozomenos, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 6.21.4 (Mihăescu et al. 1970, p. 225); Zugravu 1997, p. 243, n. 146.
36. Vulpe and Barnea 1968, pp. 466-467; Barnea 1979, pl. 46 and 47; Rădulescu 1987, pp. 20-21; Zugravu 1997, p. 369.
37. Vulpe and Barnea 1968, p. 467; Barnea 1979, p. 128; Rădulescu 1987, p. 21; Zugravu 1997, p. 369.
38. Barnea 1979, p. 128; Rădulescu 1987, p. 22; Zugravu 1997, p. 369.
39. Rădulescu 1987, pp. 22-23, fig. 21; Rădulescu and Lungu 1989, pp. 2573-2576, figs. 5-7; Zugravu 1997, p. 369; add Barbet and Monier 2002, for details regarding the iconography of the monument.
40. Rădulescu 1991, pp. 29-34, figs. 4-7.
41. Vulpe and Barnea 1968, p. 467; Barnea 1979, pp. 132-133, pl. 48; Rădulescu 1987, p. 22; Rădulescu and Lungu 1989, p. 2573.
42. Barnea 1943, pp. 38-41, figs. 4a-b and 5a-b.
43. Barnea 1943, pp. 38-40, fig. 4.a-b. Interestingly, in later publications by the same author, the first piece appears as part of the National Museum of Antiquities, and the other two pieces are said to be part of the Slobozianu collection: Barnea 1995, p. 509, pl. 61a.
44. Barnea 1943, p. 41, fig. 5.a-b.

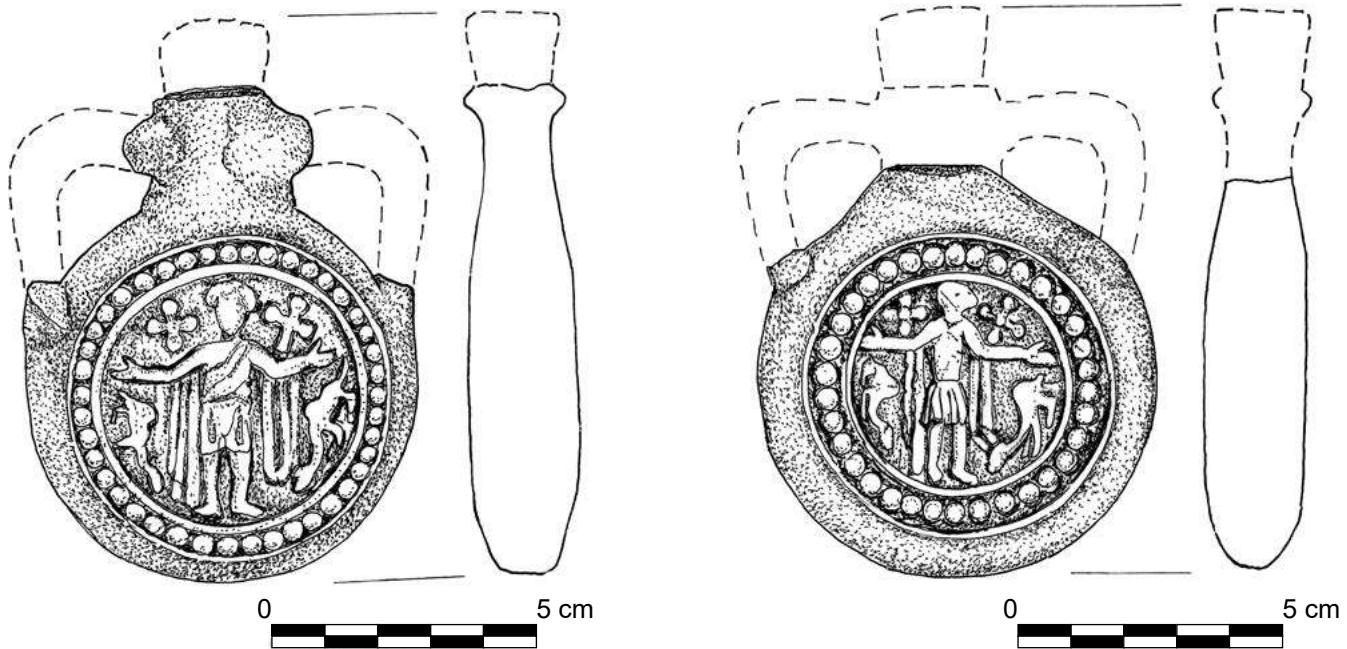


Figure 2. Ampulla with the representation of St Menas from Tomis

Credit: R. Ionescu (after photo)

Figure 3. Ampulla with the representation of St Menas from Tomis

Credit: R. Ionescu (after photo)

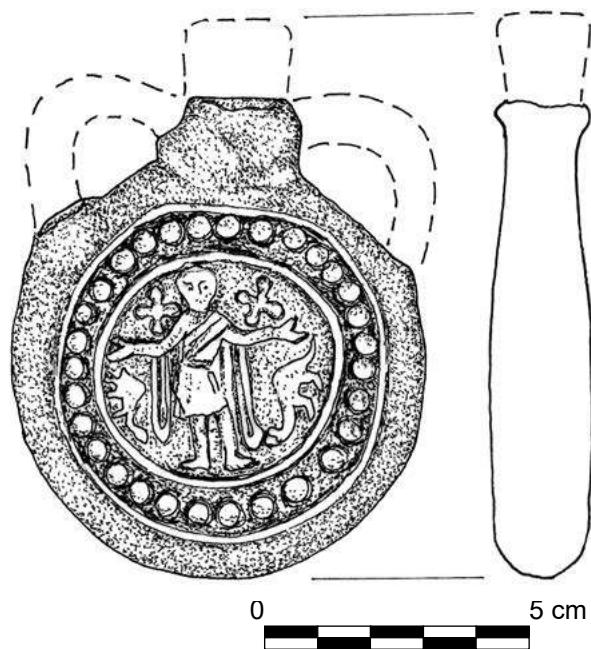
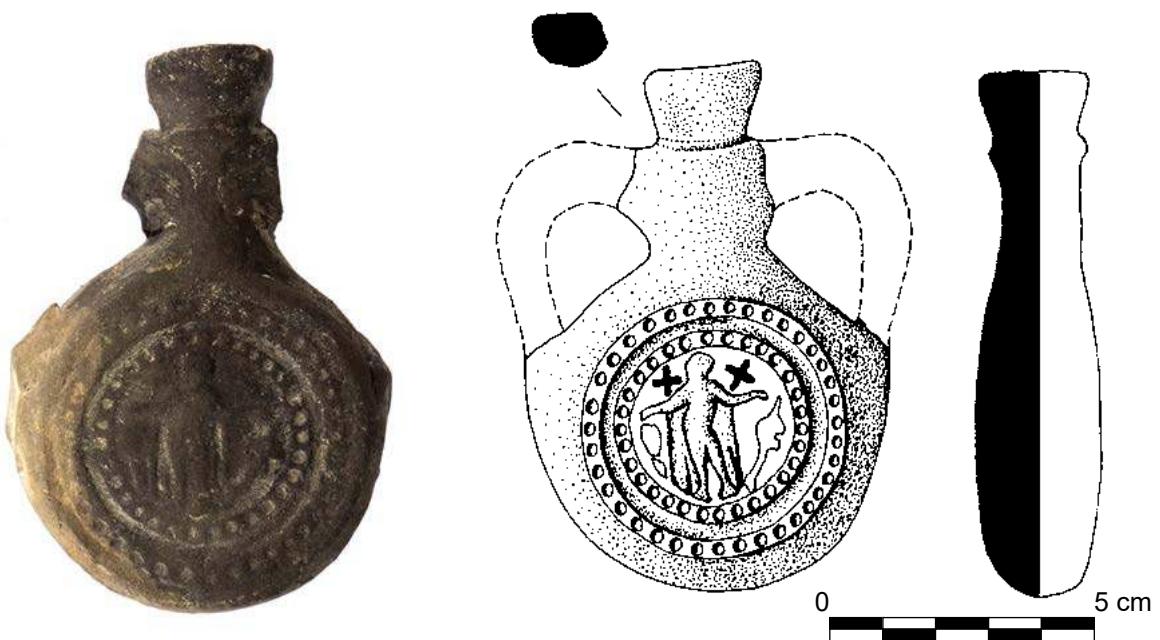


Figure 4. Ampulla with the representation of St Menas from Tomis

Credit: R. Ionescu (after photo)



piece may have been slightly larger, a fact confirmed by the maximum diameter of the body, which is 8 cm.

The third piece from Tomis (fig. 4) is similarly decorated to the other two artefacts, also without handles, but with a substantial part of the neck preserved. The dimensions also appear to be the same, namely 9 cm high, a maximum diameter 8 cm, and 2 cm thick.⁴⁵

Beyond the indisputable documentary value of these three artefacts from Tomis, the missing archaeological context or other information about the finding sites leads to uncertainty about their precise position in the West Pontic area.

The St Menas Ampulla of Capidava

The fourth piece in this category of *devotionalia* originating from the pilgrimage centre of Abu Mena was found in the area of the Danubian *limes*, in the late Roman fortification of Capidava,⁴⁶ a heavily militarized 6th-century stronghold. The small Palaeo-Christian church of Capidava is the only Christian monument in this fortress.⁴⁷ In addition, a *loculus* has been identified in the structure of this church, under the altar stone, for the keeping of holy relics.⁴⁸ It is the only archaeologically documented example in Scythia where this *reliquarium* is directly connected to the main altar of the church.

The *ampulla* discovered in Capidava (fig. 5)⁴⁹ was found in a relevant archaeological context, together with other archaeological finds (*unguentaria*, lamps) and another *ampulla* of Asia Minor origin, which we will analyse below. They were excavated in the area of the Guard-Unit building, where the last occupation layer of the building was documented.⁵⁰ The entire body of the St Menas *ampulla* is preserved, only the handles are missing. It measures 10.2 cm high, 7.9 cm in maximum body diameter, and 2.4 cm thick. The decoration on both sides shows the image of St Menas in the orant posture, dressed in a tunic and *paludamentum*, with two crosses with arms of equal length on either side of his head, and two kneeling dromedaries at his feet. The scene is framed by two rows of indented dots, circular and concentric.⁵¹ It is very similar to the three Tomis finds, both in terms of decoration and in terms of size

Figure 5. Ampulla with the representation of St Menas from Capidava

Credit: National History Museum of Romania (MNIR)(photo); I. Opris (drawing)

45. Barnea 1943, p. 38, n. 3; Vulpe and Barnea 1968, p. 494, fig. 52.1. Barnea 1979, pp. 238-239, pl. 101.

46. Opris 2004, pp. 255-256, figs. 13-14.

47. The church has modest dimensions: 21.05 × 8.20 m (outside): Achim and Opris 2010. According to *Notitiae episcopatum*, Capidava is among the 14 bishoprics of Scythia: De Boor 1891b, p. 532, no 682 (Καπιδαβα); see also Holubeau 2024, p. 89.

48. Barnea 1981, p. 502, with analogies in the Balkan Peninsula, as well as in Asia Minor, Crimea, and Greece; Achim and Opris 2010, pp. 527-528.

49. Opris 2004, p. 255-256, figs. 13-14.

50. Opris 2003, p. 239, pl. 16.

51. Opris 2004, p. 266.

and capacity. Moreover, according to the typology developed by Jean-Pierre Sodini,⁵² all four pieces from Scythia seem to belong to the first category, with a height of about 10 cm and a volume of about 50 cm³.

In terms of chronology, a division into three distinct phases, with an intermediate stage, has also been made on the basis of the depictions on the faces of the flasks.⁵³ According to this typology, all the pieces discovered in Scythia can be placed in the last phase of the circulation of these artefacts, namely in the first decades of the 7th century (610-650 CE). Features such as the *orator* posture of St Menas, with the two crosses with equal sides, the one on the left being slightly oblique, the two kneeling animals, all surrounded by a string of pearls, have many analogies in the area of the saint's sanctuary near Alexandria,⁵⁴ but also throughout the Byzantine world.⁵⁵ However, we have not found a satisfactory analogy for the Capidava piece, with two rows of dots, which could lead us to think of a variant from the third production phase of the studied artefacts.

Since such pieces are recorded as having been brought to settlements in Scythia sometime in the early 7th century, it can be concluded that, in these politically and militarily unstable times, the spiritual side of society was still vibrant, and people thought about spiritual advancement by undertaking such pilgrimages, which apparently provided them with a certain comfort.

Therefore, 'the number of pieces found in the province of Scythia from the centre of Abu Mena is small, compared to the number of finds in the whole empire, but these four pieces come from both the Pontic Coast and the Danubian *limes*. Moreover, it is also worth mentioning the three pieces found near the province of Scythia, outside the Empire, north of the Danube, in the former province of Dacia. In these cases, apart from one piece that seems to have been found in the area of the former Roman city of Dierna, in the Danube Gorges, the claimed origin of the other two finds in Porolissum and Apulum, respectively, is highly suspect.'⁵⁶

In our view, the spread of the cult on such a wide scale, both within the Empire and among the populations outside it, was also a consequence of Justinian's actions to recover and repopulate territories previously lost by the Byzantine Empire. This led to an expansion of trade areas and an intensification of the exchange of products and ideas in the Mediterranean-Black Sea basin, including commercial flows from North Africa through Asia Minor in the second half of the 6th century and the first decades of the following century.⁵⁷

Ampullae from Asia Minor in Scythia

In addition to the *ampullae* from northern Egypt, the archaeological excavations have also brought to light *eulogiai* from pilgrimage centres in Asia Minor.⁵⁸ Trade relations between Scythia and the cities of Asia Minor have been well established since the Classical Greek and Hellenistic periods,

52. Sodini 2011, p. 87 identifies three types, depending on the size of the artefacts: 1. 10 cm high and capacity of 30-50 cm³; 2. 15 cm high and 100-120 cm³; 3. 20-25 cm and 250-500 cm³.

53. These are distributed between the years 480-560 (stage I), 560-610 (stage II), 610-650 (stage III), with the intermediate phase 600-620. See Kiss 1989, pp. 16-18; Lambert and Pedemonte Demeglio 1994, p. 214; Tănase 2018, p. 70.

54. Kiss 1989, nos. 59-125 and many fragmentary items.

55. Metzger 1981, figs. 15-30.

56. Barnea 1995, pp. 511-514, pl. 61b-c; Tănase 2018, p. 69. It has been hypothesized that the pieces from the barbarian territories were, in fact, gifts sent by the Christian communities of the Middle Danube to the elites in the north: Tănase 2018, pp. 72-73; Curta 2017, p. 177; see also Anderson 2007, p. 231.

57. Anderson 2007, pp. 229-230. On the intensification of imports of North African amphorae into the Pontic Basin after the mid-6th century and in the first decades of the 7th century, see Sazanov 1999; Opař 2004.

58. In centres such as Ephesus, Sardis, Caesarea in Cappadocia, Chalcedon, as well as in settlements in the provinces of Paphlagonia and Galatia, contemporary sources mention pilgrimages undertaken to the tombs of Christian martyrs or saints: Koroğlu 2015, p. 156; Maraval 1995, pp. 298-300.

and appear to have been more productive and intense in the period under study.⁵⁹

The placing of the dioceses of Scythia and Moesia Secunda under the jurisdictional control of the archbishopric of Constantinople from the end of the 4th century allowed the consolidation of the pre-existing links of the western Pontic area with the city on the banks of the Bosphorus. In addition, there is sufficient epigraphic evidence to confirm the circulation of certain individuals of Christian persuasion from the cities of Asia Minor to Scythia, particularly for missionary purposes.⁶⁰ It is also worth noting several anthroponyms which were certainly 'imported' via Asia Minor, and which had a direct link with the pilgrimage centres (Focas,⁶¹ Thecla,⁶² Euphemia⁶³). It is in this context that we have documented 'Microasiatic' *ampullae* in the Lower Danube area, at Caričin Grad, in Serbia,⁶⁴ at Sliven⁶⁵ and Voyvoda,⁶⁶ both in Bulgaria, as well as in the province of Scythia, where three such pieces have been documented to date, to which we will refer in detail below.

The artefacts of the Microasiatic type are also made of clay, pressed in moulds, they are oval, with two symmetrical applied holes instead of handles, so that they could be worn or hung. These vials have a much wider range of decorative motifs, consisting of saints or evangelists bearing a book on one or both sides, soldiers, crosses, arches or other architectural elements, animal, vegetal or geometric motifs.

The Microasiatic *Ampulla* of Callatis

The earliest find of a Microasiatic *ampulla* is in Callatis, another city on the Pontic Coast. The most remarkable Christian monument here is the Syrian-type basilica, an architectural rarity for the province of Scythia and for the entire Balkan region as well.⁶⁷ There is also some archaeological evidence of other Christian places of worship, as well as *spolia* that testify to a vibrant spiritual life, as early as the end of the 4th century.⁶⁸

The piece presented here was discovered during the archaeological research of the pavement of a dwelling, dated to the end of the 6th century CE.⁶⁹ The artefact is 7.5 cm high and 4.8 cm wide. The *ampulla* of Callatis has relatively simple decoration (fig. 6). Within a frame made up of a border that follows the shape of the vessel, there is a Maltese cross with longer vertical arms, containing several concentric circles of various sizes, as well as bird's eye-type decorations. From the four arms, four elements in the shape of petals extend diagonally, covering the registers delimited by the arms of the cross, with the lower ones being wider.⁷⁰ *Ampullae* with a cross on both sides appear in Smyrna, in Anatolia,⁷¹ where the closest analogies to the decoration of the Callatis artefact can be found.⁷² Therefore, we cannot exclude the possibility that our artefact originated from a workshop in the Anatolian coastal area of Asia Minor (Smyrna-Ephesus-Sardis-Pergamum).

59. Commercial seals from cities such as Ephesus, Smyrna, Laodicea, Metropolis, Pamphylia, Pergamum, etc. are prevalent, although an influx of products made of ceramic, glass and other materials is also attested: Barnea 1972, p. 253; Zugravu 2001, pp. 456-466.

60. At the end of the 3rd century Epictetus and Astion having arrived at Halmyris: Barnea 1972, p. 251; Zugravu 2001, pp. 473-474 and n. 271 with bibliography. See also about the discovery of the crypt of the two Phrygian martyrs, in Zahariade 2009, pp. 141-150; Atanasov 2012, pp. 329-330. Macrobius from Cappadocia and Gordianus from Paphlagonia can be added: Barnea 1972, p. 252; Zugravu 2001, pp. 474-476.

61. The pilgrimage centre of St Phocas in Sinope: Zugravu 1997, p. 376, n. 220.

62. The pilgrimage centre of St Thecla in Isauria, Seleucia: Zugravu 1997, p. 376, n. 221. For its Asia Minor origin and the history of her relics' arrival in Egypt, see Davis 1998.

63. St Euphemia initially buried in Chalcedon, then brought to Constantinople: Zugravu 1997, p. 377, n. 226.

64. Metzger 1984, fig. 169 and 171; Ilić 2006, p. 131, fig. 4a-b; Sodini 2011, pp. 114 and 122.

65. Shtereva 1999, figs. 1.1-2, 2.1-2 and 3-4.

66. Дамянов 1976, p. 24, fig. VI.7.

67. Preda et al. 1962, pp. 442-445; Theodorescu 1963; Barnea 1979, pp. 134-143, pls 49-53; Suceveanu and Bamea 1991, p. 278.

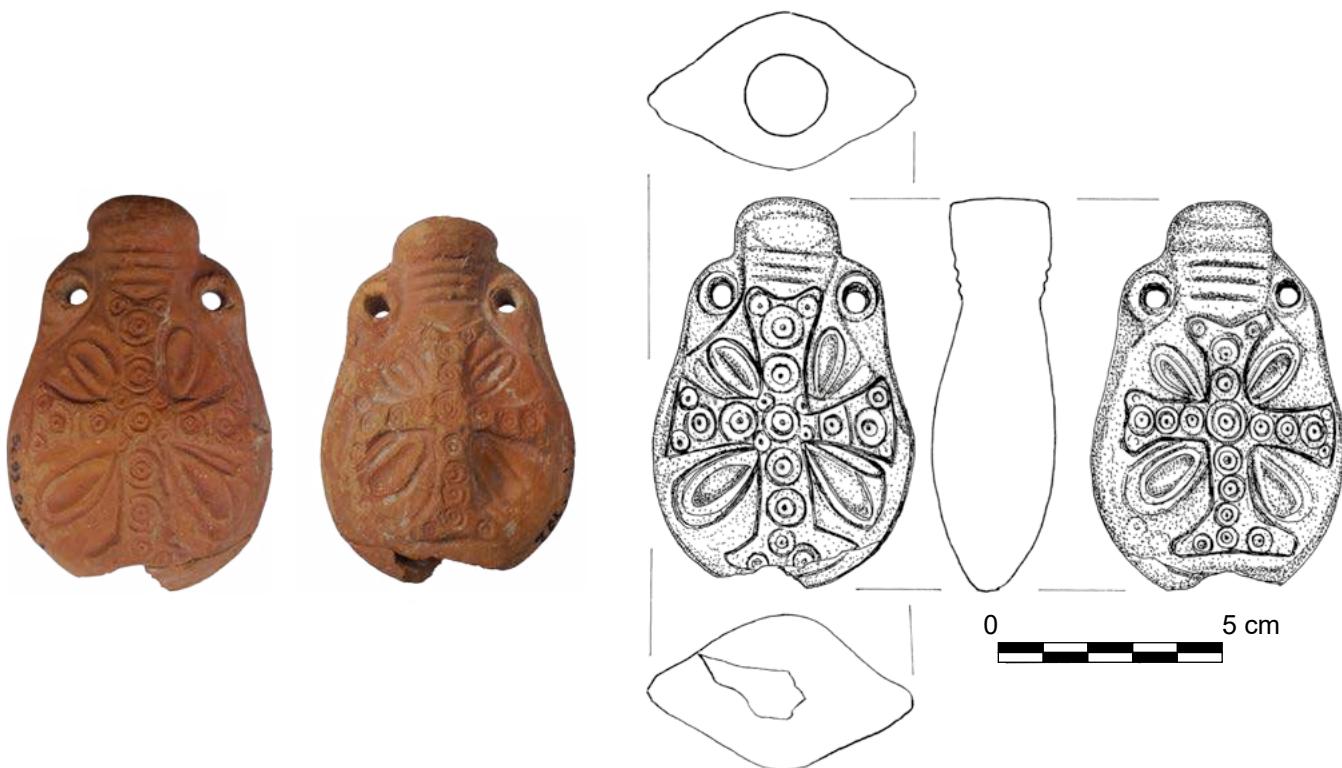
68. Georgescu and Ionescu 1995-1996.

69. Ionescu and Opris 1998, p. 167.

70. Ionescu and Opris 1998, p. 167, fig. 1.a-b.

71. Metzger 1981, p. 51, cat. no. 130, fig. 110. This is Type 4 following Körögölü 2015, pp. 162-164; cat. nos. 7-11.

72. Aydin 2015, especially fig. 6, cat. no. 6, p. 499, but add figs. 7-8.



The Microasiatic Ampulla of Capidava

A devotional artefact originating in Asia Minor was also identified in Capidava (fig. 7). It was found in the same room as the *ampulla* with St Menas, along with various *unguentaria* and lamps dating from the second half of the 6th century CE to the beginning of the 7th century.⁷³ The piece has identical decoration on both sides, with a Greek cross with flared extremities. The four registers that the arms of the cross divide the face into are decorated with four diagonally arranged petals.⁷⁴ The artefact is only 4.8 cm high, 3.3 cm wide and 2.5 cm thick. Its features are very similar to an artefact from the area of Smyrna, both in terms of decoration and size,⁷⁵ which indicates that it most probably originates from a centre in the same region.

The Microasiatic Ampulla of Ibida

The systematic archaeological research carried out at the site of Ibida has uncovered perhaps the most spectacular piece brought by pilgrims from the region of Asia Minor. The ancient city of Ibida has revealed, in recent decades, several Christian archaeological features, some of them unique in the region. The Palaeo-Christian monastery discovered 2.5 km from the town is one of the first pieces of archaeological evidences of the monastic tradition in Scythia.⁷⁶ At least as spectacular is the three-aisled basilica with apses, marble columns and polychrome floor mosaics dating from the second half of the 6th century.⁷⁷ This basilica proves that Ibida became an important ecclesiastical

Figure 6. The Asia Minor ampulla from Callatis

Credit: L. Radu (photo); R. Ionescu (drawing)

73. Opriș 2003, pl. 16.

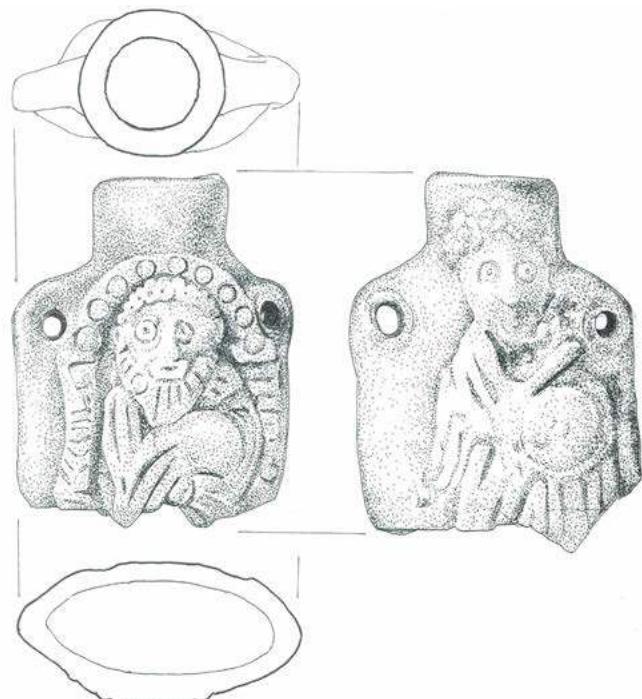
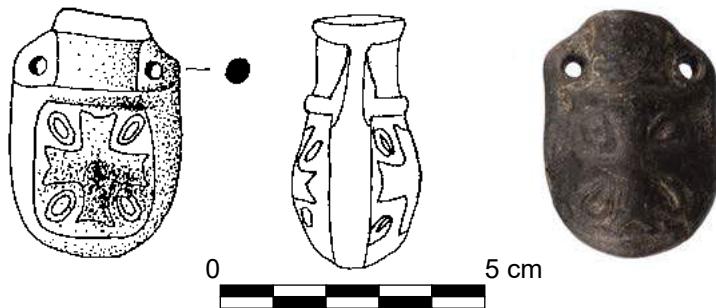
74. Opriș 2003, p. 162, pl. 58, no. 391 and 2004, p. 266, figs. 15-16.

75. Aydin 2015, cat. no. 7, fig. 7, p. 499.

76. The monastery, which functioned starting from the end of the 4th century was restored and extended after the invasion of 586, and survived until the final destruction of the city, sometime in the first decades of the 7th century: Opaiț et al. 1990 and 1992; Holubeau 2024, pp. 337-343.
 77. Netzhammer 1918, pp. 154-156; Barnea 1945-1947, pp. 227 and 233; Vulpe and Barnea 1968, p. 476; Barnea 1977, p. 178, fig. 61.1; Iațcu 2012, pp. 72-73; Paraschiv and Iațcu 2013; Paraschiv and Iacob 2014, pp. 358-360; Teatini 2021, pp. 347-362.

Figure 7. The Asia Minor ampulla from Capidava

Credit: National History Museum of Romania (MNIR)(photo); I. Opris (drawing)



centre of Scythia.⁷⁸ The recent excavations at Ibida have also revealed another *extra muros* basilica, in the northern part of the city.⁷⁹

The terracotta *ampulla* of Ibida was found in the south-eastern part of the walled city, in the Curtain X sector, in a layer of demolition rubble covering the occupation level of the end of the 6th century.⁸⁰ The piece lacks the bottom of the vessel, but, fortunately, the iconographic representations of two characters are quite well preserved. It is made of reddish, fine clay, with fine micaceous sand in the fabric.⁸¹ The artefact was produced, as documented for other similar *ampullae*, by pressing each half into the same single-leaf mould and joining the halves together. In fact, there are two fingerprints on the inside of one of the two halves.⁸² The dimensions of the find are 5.85 cm high – approximately 7.3 cm for the whole reconstructed piece –, maximum 4.65 cm wide, the neck is 1.84 cm high with a maximum diameter of 2 cm, the lip is 36 mm thick and the hanger holes are 5 mm in diameter.

As can be seen from the decoration of the piece found in Ibida (fig. 8), it is an *ampulla* of the Asia Minor type with a

Figure 8. The Asia Minor ampulla from Ibida

Credit: D. Aparaschivei, [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

78. It is generally accepted that Ibida is included among the bishoprics established in Scythia in the 6th century. Cf. Condurachi 1971, p. 182; Suceveanu and Barnea 1991, p. 204; Lungu 2006, p. 207; Madgearu 2010, p. 146; for a later date, see Holubeau 2020, pp. 46-47, with extensive bibliography.

79. This concerns two successive phases of the *extra muros* basilica: see in Teatini et al. 2024, pp. 348-351 and pls 7-12.

80. Regarding the finding context of this piece see Aparaschivei 2017, p. 134.

Relevant to the accuracy of the chronological classification of this piece is the identification of an almost complete amphora of the type Kuzmanov 15 and a *tremissis* from Justinian: Aparaschivei 2023, fig. 3a-b.

81. Fabric colour Munsell -10 R 5/8: see Körögöl 2015, p. 159.

82. Aparaschivei 2023, fig. 5.

83. The arch is often used in late antiquity, even as late as the 4th century, and symbolizes the importance and dignity of the depicted personage: Metzger 1981, p. 19.

84. See other hypotheses in Grabar 1958, p. 47.

85. Metzger 1981, p. 19, nos. 104-112.

86. Brazinski 2014, p. 30.

87. Körögülu 2015, p. 159.

88. Metzger 1981, p. 19, cat. nos. 104-112, with several variations in the representation on face B; Zimmermann and Ladstätter 2010, fig. 395; Aydin 2013, pp. 497-498, cat. no. 2, fig. 2; Körögülu 2015, p. 159, cat. no. 1.

89. Ladstätter 2010, p. 507; Pülz 2012, p. 233.

90. The nun Egeria provides the earliest evidence for a pilgrimage shrine dedicated to St John in Ephesus, at the end of the 4th century: *Itinerarium Egeriae*, 23.7-10. For other famous pilgrims in Ephesus, see Duncan Flowers 1990, p. 127.

91. St John the Evangelist led the church in Ephesus after the year 70. According to the apocryphal *Acta Ioanni*, John did not die, but was only asleep in his grave, and his breath raised the holy dust, which was then collected by the faithful. Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria martyrum*, 1.30 affirms that this *manna* had medical powers. He had a *martyrium* erected over his tomb immediately after the time of his death in the 2nd century. Around 300 CE, a small memorial in the form of a *tetrapylon* was erected on his tomb, which was much enlarged in the 5th century: Duncan-Flowers 1990, pp. 125-127; Pülz 2012, pp. 230-231 with bibliography.

92. Pülz 2012, pp. 237-238 is more restrained in providing such attributions.

93. On the other side, there is a group formed of a female character holding a child, Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus. This side also bears an inscription, BOEIΩE T(O)YC ΞEN(O)YC ('have mercy on the foreigners'): Greenewalt and Rautman 1998, p. 486, fig. 13. For other Sardis *ampullae*, with various representations, see Hanfmann 1985, figs. 1-4.

94. He died, according to Christian tradition, as a martyr at the end of the 1st century CE. For the hypothesis of depicting Prochorus on the *ampullae* together with St John, see Залесская 1986, p. 184. For details on other depictions of St Prochorus see Duncan Flowers 1990, p. 134.

double representation of Christian characters. On one side there is a bearded man wearing a cloak, holding a slightly round object with both hands in a natural position, on his left side. His features are quite regular, with an elongated face, perfectly round and oversized eyes. The head is bare, while the hair is suggested by a row of loops. He seems to be a rather elderly figure. On the neck of the vessel there are two rows of zigzag lines forming angles, exactly in the middle. In comparison with other similar pieces, this is the depiction of an evangelist standing beneath an arch, or a generic architectural element that includes two supporting columns and a decoration of several horizontally arranged lines supporting an arch decorated with an array of nine or ten circles.⁸³

On the other side of the vessel, we can see the second character. He is beardless and wears a cloak, characteristic of both saints and pilgrims. To his left, he is holding a rectangular object – probably a book – with rounded corners, decorated with dotted circles, only two of which are clearly visible. This seems to be a younger man, whose hair is also represented by loops arranged in rows, and whose face is triangular.

Comparing the complexity of depictions, it should be considered that one side of the vessel, with this glorified figure, old and wise, was the main one. The other side was the secondary one, with the representation of another saint, certainly related to the one on the main side, but hierarchically inferior. In fact, this part with the younger character seems to be more eroded, perhaps because the piece was mainly worn with the main face visible, and this secondary face was subjected to more intense friction from the wearer's clothing. The images were most likely copied representations from church wall paintings, mosaics, or sculptures.⁸⁴

As a general typology, based on iconography, this *ampulla* from Ibida can be classified as type 2b of the typology of Catherine Metzger,⁸⁵ the 2nd group, 'Early Ampulla 2', of the typology of Paul Brazinski,⁸⁶ as well as in type 1A, 'St John the Evangelist of Ephesus', of Gülgün Körögülu's classification.⁸⁷

With regard to this particular piece, it is possible to establish links with certain pilgrimage centres on the basis of analogies with iconographic representations on similar objects. Thus, the bearded character under the arch is an image that appears very often on other *ampullae* from the Smyrna-Ephesus-Sardis region.⁸⁸ Moreover, some fabric analyses have shown that this type of *ampulla* originated in this area, i.e. in Ephesus, as do certain decorative elements that also appear on local lamps dated to the 5th-7th centuries CE.⁸⁹

However, in the case of the *ampulla* of Ibida, it could have been manufactured in Ephesus or for Ephesus, since this Christian centre was very active between the 5th and 7th centuries.⁹⁰ In this context, the Basilica of St John is the most likely place from which this piece could have travelled to Scythia. St John was said to have performed miracles, especially by touching and using the *manna* (sanctified dust) produced at his grave and which pilgrims collected and used as *sacramenta*.⁹¹ However, the location of the production site in the area of Ephesus makes the hypothesis of the identification of the figure under the arch with St John the Evangelist more and more likely.⁹²

Alternatively, on a Sardis *ampulla*, a bearded male figure appears under an arch, holding a book or a rectangular object on his left side. On the edge appears the inscription ΑΓHIE IOANNH BA(ΙΙTICTA) (St John the Baptist). This analogy does not exclude the hypothesis of the representation of St John the Baptist, even though the group represented on the other side quite iconographically separates the Sardis find from our artefact.⁹³

Logically, the figure on the other side of the *ampulla* of Ibida is connected to the first one in some way, perhaps a spiritual or even hierarchical relationship. This could be the scribe Prochorus, who served and accompanied St John.⁹⁴

Without being certain of a definitive interpretation of the iconography on the *ampulla*, in the absence of an inscription, the discovery of such an artefact in the

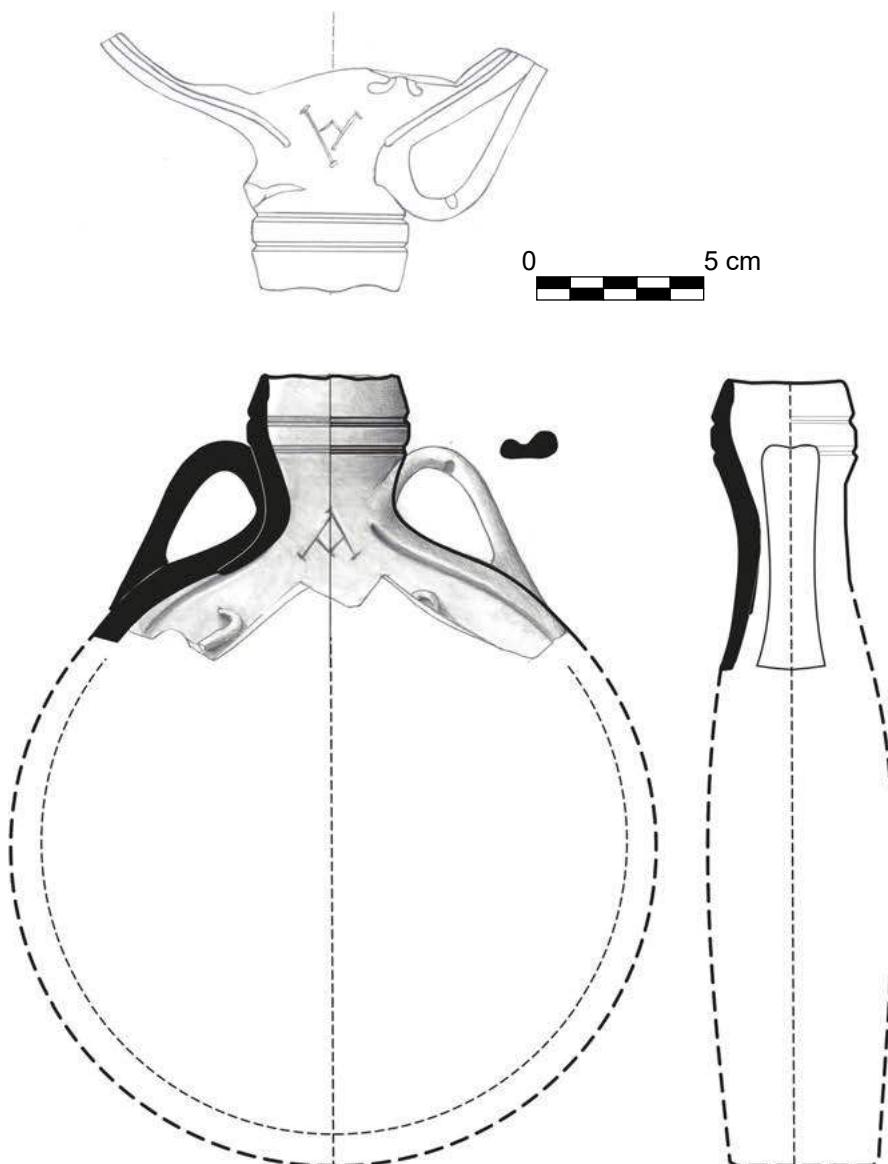


Figure 9. Ampulla of uncertain provenance from Istria

Credit: C. Georgescu

province of Scythia is indeed remarkable. This is a unique find in the Scythian area, in terms of its iconography, and provides a useful addition to a wider framework of Christian activity in this centre in the middle of the province.

All three artefacts found in the province of Scythia and analysed above therefore most probably originate from the Anatolian area, i.e. from the Ephesus-Smyrna-Sardis triangle, which provides a solid argument for confirming the intense pilgrim traffic from the western Pontic province to the aforementioned area of Asia Minor.

Other Possible Eulogia Found in Scythia

In addition to the pieces presented above, which can be included in a relatively clear typology, another piece should be mentioned that could be included in this category (fig. 9), although its origin cannot be determined. It is a possible *ampulla* found in Istria, also on the Black Sea coast, in a less relevant archaeological context. This piece has larger dimensions than the other artefacts discussed above.⁹⁵ Only a fragment 8.7 cm in height has been preserved, with a maximum diameter of 13.4 cm.

95. Achim and Dabica 2018, pp. 321-323.

96. It is precisely their rather large dimensions in comparison to the pieces in the *eulogia* category analysed above that have led the finders of similar pieces, but without obvious Christian symbols, and with a lower quality of clay, to regard such items as water bottles. See, in this respect, the artefacts from Argamum, Halmyris, but also another one from Istria. See details in Topoleanu 2016.

97. However, two analogies are identified, based mainly on the dimensions and the production manner. This concerns a specimen in the British Museum collections, and another from Sardis: Achim and Dabica 2018, p. 325. See Sodini 2011, figs. 42 and 43. Both of the pieces referred to by the authors preserve the decoration that almost certainly confirms the usage of the pieces.

98. Episcopal basilica: Suceveanu 2007; south-western basilica ('Pirvan'): Pârvan 1923-1924, p. 9; Florescu 1954, pp. 154-162; Angelescu and Bottez 2009; extra muros basilica: Popescu 1994, pp. 306-312; Nubar in Condurachi 1970, pp. 193-201; Rusu-Bolindeț et al. 2014; the basilica with crypt: Achim 2014; 'C' basilica: Băjenaru 2003-2005.

99. There is also the opinion that such objects could have arrived in the Empire as containers of consecrated substances, as gifts to local ecclesiastical authorities from famous church centres of the time: Zugravu 2001, p. 484.

100. The assertion that 'by sea one sailed with Christ, by land one rode with Christ' is quite revealing: Vikan 1991, pp. 84-85. On the routes taken by pilgrims to the Christian holy places in the East, see Vikan 1995; Lambert and Pedemonte Demeglio 1994, figs 1-4.

101. Panaite 2023, pp. 78-79.

102. Panaite 2023, p. 79.

103. Torbatov 2000, p. 70. According to the monetary circulation, the road would have been functional even at the end of the 6th century.

104. Maraval 1995, pp. 293-300.

105. Panaite 2015, p. 596, fig. 3; Panaite 2023, pp. 72-81 and fig. 2.

The discoverers estimate, however, that the dimensions of the whole piece would have been 24.5 cm high, with a maximum diameter of the body of 19.8 cm.⁹⁶ Only a fragment of the upper part has survived, with the handles, the mouth of the vessel and a part of the body, on both sides of which can be seen a capital Greek letter alpha and a small part of the decoration that probably went all the way around the body of the artefact. The fragmentary state and the lack of close analogies lead to uncertainty regarding the use, provenance, and chronological framework of the piece.⁹⁷ However, coming from a centre like Istria, where several Christian basilicas are documented from the 5th to the 7th centuries,⁹⁸ it is very likely that there was also intense activity in terms of pilgrimage and, implicitly, bringing home *devotionalia*.

*

We have therefore documented eight *ampullae* of North African, Asiatic and one of uncertain provenance, all found within the province of Scythia. This is, of course, an assessment at this stage of the research; other pieces may be identified at any time throughout the province. The distribution of these finds shows a balanced spread throughout the province: both in the cities on the Pontic Coast (Tomis, Callatis, Istria) and on the Danubian *limes* (Capidava), as well as in the centre of the province (Ibida). The archaeological context in which the pieces were found is lacking for the pieces from Tomis. On the other hand, the archaeological levels in which these finds appear in Capidava, Callatis, Ibida and Istria are known, and they seem to be associated with urban buildings and structures, some even in connection with the presence of the army, as in the case of Capidava and Ibida. Moreover, two *ampullae* from the same walled city, one from Egypt and the other from Asia Minor, are found in the same room, a unique situation in the region.

These pieces could have arrived in the province of Scythia in various ways. The most plausible hypothesis, however, is that such objects were acquired by pilgrims visiting one of the holy places of Christianity.⁹⁹ Whether such a pilgrim travelled by land, south on the ancient road to Constantinople, or they sailed the Black Sea, he/she brought home these objects of holy content as precious souvenirs.¹⁰⁰

The road network in Scythia inherited, in fact, the infrastructure built by the Romans starting from the very end of the 1st century CE in the province of Moesia Inferior. From Capidava, for example, it was possible to travel along the Danubian *limes* road, which would have met the road coming from the west, from Singidunum-Viminacium-Ratiaria-Oescus-Novae-Durostorum and led towards Asia Minor.¹⁰¹ Through the centre of Scythia ran the central Dobrudjan road, which came from Noviodunum and passed through Ibida, Ulmetum, Troapeum Traiani, Zaldapa and reached Durostorum.¹⁰² There was a crossroads here, and to go further, one would probably follow the Durostorum-Marcianopolis road, functional even in the 6th century.¹⁰³ As for the Pontic cities, they had either the sea route or the road that descended along the coast and led to Constantinople, from where devotees followed the 'pilgrims' road through Asia Minor' and finally descended to Syria, Palestine and northern Egypt.¹⁰⁴ These main roads were also linked to each other by a network of intra-provincial connecting roads, which facilitated circulation from the Danubian *limes* to the Black Sea and back.¹⁰⁵

With regard to the chronology of the finds of *ampullae* with the representation of St Menas, we have come to the conclusion that they must have arrived in the area from the end of the 6th century to the first decades of the 7th century, which may argue for a change in perspective regarding religious manifestations between the Danube and the Black Sea in this very unstable period. The contemporary literary sources, as well as the archaeological excavations in the Scythian fortified places, provide evidence of the military and political upheavals in the area at this particular time. However, for many of the centres in the sector of the Danube, which, according to the scholarly literature, ceased to exist right at the end of the 6th century,

there are enough elements to support a certain continued spiritual effervescence. Moreover, if one analyses only the case of Ibida, with a basilica that was rebuilt and used in the second half of the 6th century and with the monastic centre that functioned until the first decades of the 7th century,¹⁰⁶ one notices that there are no compelling reasons to believe that, despite the vagaries of the period, religious manifestations, including pilgrimages to holy places, seem to have continued quite intensely. Moreover, if we consider the archaeological contexts of the pieces identified and analysed in this work, both from Abu Mena and from Asia Minor, we find that they all date from this period of political instability, the end of the 6th and the beginning of the 7th centuries. It is therefore necessary to reassess some of the characteristics of daily life in Scythia during this period, especially its spiritual component, at the end of Roman-Byzantine rule.

106. Opaiț et al. 1990 and 1992.

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