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**PALEOCHRISTIAN CHURCHES IN ROMAN RURAL
ENVIRONMENT**

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Key words: paleochristian church, Roman Dobrudja, Late Antiquity, rural environment.

Abstract. This article presents the earliest finds of paleochristian churches (4th-7th c. AD) from Roman Dobrudja. The excavations revealed 35 settlements, erected during the 4th c. AD, as a result of a deep ascension process of Christianity and of its institutional structures' organisation. Three of these basilicas are presented in detail: the basilica from Niculitel, erected at the end of 4th c. AD, in order to keep safe the remains of some Christian martyrs in a monumental cypta, bulit in the style of heroic mausoleums; the basilica from Telița-Amza, dating from the beginning of 4th c. AD; the monastic complex from Slava Rusă – the oldest from Lower Danube – consisting from two mono-nave basilicas, a chappel and some annexes, surrounded by a stone wall. The rural parishes were Presbyterian communities directly subordinated to the Bishop of Tomis.

Résumé. L'article présente les plus récentes trouvailles concernant les basiliques paléochrétiennes (IV^e-VII^e s. ap. J.-C.) de la Dobroudja romaine. Les fouilles archéologiques ont mis au jour 35 établissements, élevés au long du IV^e s. ap. J.-C., comme résultat d'un profond procès d'ascension du christianisme et d'organisation de ses structures institutionnelles. L'auteur présente en détail trois de ces basiliques: la basilique de Niculitel, élevée à la fin du IV^e s. ap. J.-C., afin d'abriter les ossements de certains martyrs dans une crypte monumentale, construite dans le style des mausolées héroïques; la basilique de Telița-Amza, datant du début du IV^e s. ap. J.-C.; le complexe monastique de Slava Rusă – le plus ancien du Bas-Danube, qui consiste en deux basiliques à une nef, une chapelle et quelques annexes, entourées par un mur en pierre. Les paroisses rurales étaient subordonnées à l'évêque de Tomi.

Rezumat. Articolul prezintă cele mai timpurii descoperiri de bazișcă paleocreștine (secolele IV-VII d. Hr.) din Dobrogea română. Săpăturile arheologice au scos la lumină 35 de așezăminte, ridicate pe parcursul secolului al IV-lea d.Hr., ca rezultat al unui profund proces de ascensiune a creștinismului și de organizare a structurilor sale instituționale. Sunt prezentate pe larg trei dintre acestea: biserică de la Niculitel, ridicată la sfârșitul secolului al IV-lea, pentru a adăposti rămășițele câtorva martiri creștini într-o criptă monumentală, construită în stilul mausoleelor eroice; bazișca de la Telița-Amza, datând de la începutul secolului al IV-lea;

complexul monastic de la Slava Rusă - cel mai vechi de la Dunărea de Jos, constând din două bazilici mononavă, o capelă și câteva anexe, înconjurate de un zid de piatră. Parohiile rurale din Dobrogea erau subordonate episcopiei Tomisului.

Martyrium locus martyrum Graeca derivationae, eo quod in memoria martyris sit constructum, vel quod sepulchrum sanctorum ibi sint martyrum

Isidorus of Seville

The cult of martyrs was a real catalyst, concentrating forces and energies around the holy tombs. These tombs and their relicts emerge in privileged places (ELIADE 1988, 58). The appearance of these “divine filled” places reflect the Christian idea of transcending into the *Divine City* (CÂTEIA 2001, 534). Beginning with the second half of the IVth century AD Christians started to move the relicts of the martyrs from the *extramuros* cemeteries inside the cities (LUNGU 2003, 146).

Archaeological excavations from Dobrudja brought up to light thirty five IVth – VIIth centuries AD paleochristian buildings (LUNGU 2003, 138) erected during the IVth century AD, as follows: “the small basilica” and the basilica from “Mihai Eminescu” High School courtyard – in Tomis; the second half of the IVth century AD “extramuros” basilica, from the Western plateau at Histria; the “cistern” basilica, built during the second half of the IVth century AD, and the “marble” basilica, built around 350 AD at Tropaeum Traiani; the basilica dating from the second half of the IVth century AD at Dinogetia; the basilica built during the first half of the IVth century AD in the rural environment at Telița-Amza; two IVth century AD *extramuros* basilicas at Axiopolis and Berœ; the basilica from the monastery complex at Slava Rusă built at the end of the same century; the basilica from Niculițel, which we shall discuss furthermore.

The archaeological excavations from the Lower Danube area show that at the beginning of the IVth century AD the paleo-Christian basilical plan was already drawn (SÂMPETRU 1994, 80-196). All the IVth century AD paleochristian constructions

unearthed in Dobrogea have either a single rectangular nave plan, either a rectangular three nave plan, without a *narthex*, the naves being separated by two rows of pillars. Paolo Testini considers, referring mostly to the large cemeteries from Dalmatia and south Danubian regions, that the single nave plan is specific to funerary buildings, as chapels, *martyria* and mausoleums that preceded the big basilicas, relatively widespread in the Roman world during the IVth century AD (TESTINI 1958, 313-316). On the three nave plan basilicas we can assert that the Christians adopted for the religious cult the Roman civilian three nave basilica (*forensis* or private), whereas the *narthex* and the *atrium triporticus* are Vth century AD Greek creations. There are churches that, initially, had a simple plan, without the *narthex* - which was added to the constructions later, during the Roman-Byzantine period (SÂMPETRU 1994, 87). The presence of the continuous footwalls separating the naves and of the *narthex* are Greek characteristics; by combining the distinctive elements of the two, the basilical three nave plan will have become a Greek-Roman one, during the Vth and VIth centuries AD.

The construction of Christian basilicas during the IVth century AD in the Lower Danube region is the result of a profound process of ascension of Christianity and of organization of its institutional structures. The discovery of paleo-christian vestiges, especially basilicas, in the rural environment surrounding Noviodunum at Telița and Niculitel, as well as in the southwestern corner of the rural territory of Ibida (Slava Rusă), reflects the growth of organized Christianity in the Roman villages from this region.

The basilica from Niculitel (BAUMANN 2004) was constructed at the end of the IVth century AD to shelter the remains of several Christian martyrs in a monumental crypt built in the style of the heroic mausoleums. The site of the construction was decided by the existence in that same spot of a *martyrion* built at the beginning of the century on a *villa rustica* rural property that contained the relicts of two locals martyred during the IIIrd century AD by burning at the stake. The construction of the monumental crypt and the construction of the basilica were accomplished in very close moments in time, as the first martyric monument was included into the *presbyterium* of the basilica and determined the orientation of the whole complex.

Earlier constructions had to be demolished in orders to build the new church. The basilica was meant to be, from the very beginning, an imposing three naves edifice, which covered an area of roughly 387 m². The existence of the built in pillars in the southern most tip of the side naves suggests wooden roofing and a large entrance on the main axis of the basilica flanked by two slightly higher turrets; during this phase the roof was supported by self standing columns.

During the first half of the Vth century AD the basilica suffers important horizontal modifications – a corridor (*narthex*), probably with a portico, and a courtyard (*atrium*), continuing it, were added. The interior was partitioned by two rows of pillars erected on footwalls and the *presbyterium* (the sanctuary destined to the cult beneath which the two *martyrion* were situated) was separated from the rest of the nave by a transversal wall; vertically, the central two slope roofed nave emerged and the *in cathedra* roof appeared, covering the side naves. The building reaches thus 40 m in length, roughly 588 m², close to the large Bishopric churches that appeared in *Schythia Minor* during the Vth century AD (fig. 1).

The basilica from Niculițel was constructed at the end of the IVth century A D on an ex *villa rustica* type propriety; the excavations revealed that habitation had ceased prior to the second half of the century, as the foundations of the basilica overlapped at the entrance the remains of the Roman rural farm¹.

The basilical complex from Niculițel reveals great skills in making construction materials – bricks and, especially, lime mortar - according to Vitruvius's prescriptions. The manner in which the dome of the *martyrion* was constructed, the use of the brick layers as resistance and elasticity elements, but also in a decorative way, the use of colored plaster, show superior knowledge of the constructions domain and the mastery of some quite sophisticated techniques, common in the Greek and Roman cities.

¹ The existence of such proprieties close to the place of the basilica was archaeologically demonstrated during the excavations performed in 1972, 1983 and 2005 - see BAUMANN 1983, 73 and BAUMANN 1991, 122 and BAUMANN 1995, 310-312. The results of the 2005 excavations, that brought up to light the vestiges of a IInd-IIIrd centuries AD Roman farm some 50 m west of the basilica, were not published yet.

The *martyrion* from Niculițel is unique in Europe; it is also the oldest construction of the kind from Romania and the first example in which the architectural concepts used in Greek and Roman mausoleums were applied in Christian buildings (BAUMANN 2004, 140). The presence of the first martyric tomb nearby is an excellent demonstration of the evolution of this type of funerary monuments, from a simple *hypogeum*-tomb to a multilevel domed monument inspired by the ancient heroic tombs. For the first time in the history of Christianity the word *ἰχώρ-ωρος* appeared in one of the inscriptions found in the crypt (the word was first met at Homer (*Iliad* V, 40) with the meaning “blood if gods”) designating the blood of the martyrs and saints called “the pillars that lift the Christian community to heavens” (MORETTA 1994, 90; CÂTEIA 2000-2001, 529).

At the beginning of the IVth century AD a Christian community already existed in the autochthon settlement of Telița-Amza (BAUMANN 2001a, 169-183). This is proved by a Christian lamp decorated with a cross on its handle, a “local product” imitating a Corinthic prototype that circulated in some IVth century AD Greek settlements from Argos (BOVON 1966, 480, plate 12). Obviously, the object was in circulation at the Danube mouths, as the communities needed such an item. The fact is also certified by the paleo-Christian vestiges found in the *villae rusticae* situated in the proximity, i.e. Christian amphorae decorated with *dippinti* and *graffiti* drawings (BAUMANN 2003a, 173-174) and especially by the paleo-Christian basilica dated in the early 4th century, discovered in the late Roman settlement found in Telita/Amza (BAUMANN 1995, 31-33), having an outstanding scientific value.

The walls of this Christian building have been constructed using stones cemented with earth through the re-arrangement of a rectangular apse that had functioned during the 2nd-3rd centuries as a craftsmen workshop. This explains both the southwestern orientation, and the original architecture of the complex, which has been re-adapted for the new liturgical needs of the cult (ALEXANDROV 1980, 39-42).

A rectangular building has subsequently been annexed on the southern side of the basilica. The new building contained a number of rooms and the main entrance, representing the passage to the narthex connected at its turn to the areas reserved to the clergy (situated westwards) and the believers (situated

northwards). From the western extremity one could reach the area of the altar, which was situated on the axis of the apse. The two rooms placed on the southern side of the whole area of the *presbyterium* probably were used as *prothesis* and *diaconicon*. The main body of the basilica was divided through transversal walls into three rooms of which the apse was dedicated to the clergy and was almost half of the inner area. The basis of the *prestol* (altar) has been preserved on the baseline of the apse, built of stones cemented with earth. The overall surface covered by the basilica was 220 sq.m. (23 m length of the longitudinal axis by 9.70 m wide).

In the northeastern corner of the eastern room there was an amphora buried in the earth. In front of the side entrance, inside the central room of the basilica, a fragment of an amphora has also been found, with a cross incised after burning, proving the Christian origin of the recipient, and with the monogram chi-rho (analogies were found in Tirighina-Barbosi – an amphora with *dippinti* dated in the early 4th century)(NESTORI 1972, 228-229, 110-111 a and b; BARNEA 1979, 46-47, pl. 5). In addition to the finding there are other simple or mono-Grammatik crosses discovered in Telita area, placed on common-use pottery, which reveal the popularity of the Holy Cross amongst the Christians in the area of Danube's mouths. The Cross is the most important Christian symbol of the victorious resurrection against the death as supreme evidence of the faith (CÂTEIA 2001, 533) and is quite common in rural areas (Telita village) beginning with the early 3rd century AD. The presence of the Cross certifies the early large extent of the Christian ideas about life and death abreast of the Romanised population in the northern areas of the Pontic Dacia (LUNGU 2001, 32; BAUMANN 2003, 175).

The basilica found in Telita/Amza belongs to the original creations of the autochthonous Roman environment in the area of the North-Scythian limes. In terms of typology the building is similar to the simple "Syrian" basilicas, having one nave with a side porch entrance (TCHALENKO 1955, pl. 13/1,6,7). An interesting partition of the inner space is found in Telita/Amza, used for liturgical purposes. The side porch entrance was replaced by a narthex with a veranda; such elements have been taken from the local popular architecture. The narthex and the veranda are derived from Dacian architectural elements (ANTONESCU 1984, 20-

23), promoted by the local population during the Roman time (BAUMANN 1995, 30-31), with echoes in the Romanian popular architecture (VLĂDUȚIU 1973, 159-169) (fig. 2).

The adjustment of the old building dated in the 2nd-3rd centuries to the needs of the Christian cult required the massive levelling of the apse in order to obtain a large space for the *presbyterium*. The level of this room became 0,4 m higher than the rest of the building. We consider that the workers that adjusted the old building in Telita/Amza rural settlement were not aware about the fact that the altar floor of the Greek design churches situated in the Eastern Roman Empire was higher than the nave (SÂMPETRU 1994, 88). As this space (10.40 by 5.40 m) was only linked to the other two rooms of the central building through two doorways it is more plausible considering that the Holy Liturgy was performed in this very room, in front of the initiated baptized persons, called *christianoi* (gr.) (SUCEVEANU, BARNEA 1991, 288). We suppose that the central room was used as narthex, and the last one (in our case situated in the eastern edge) was an atrium for the non-baptized persons – *audientes* and *catecumens*. The building had no martyr crypt; it was above all a cult place dedicated to large spreading of the Christian ideas amongst the rural population living along of the valley of Telita River. The presence of Telita/Amza basilica in a rural settlement inhabited by Romanised Getic population during the 4th century AD emphasizes the development of the rural parishes beginning with the first half of the same century within an area where the Christianity was quickly advancing (ZUGRAVU 1997, 244). In this case we face the earliest Christian cult place organised as a parish throughout the Romanian area (LUNGU 2003, 141). This archaeological finding is so much the more important as it was placed in a Romanised area where the inhabitants still maintained during the 4th century a pagan sanctuary dedicated to the cult of the Heroes: Knight-Hero and Hercules-Hero (BAUMANN 1990, 9). This matter of fact points out that there was a large Christian community and the surprising tolerance expressed by such “pagans”, that solely during the 4th century could be maintained.

In 1987 an exceptional finding has been brought to light three kilometres west from Slava Rusa locality, Tulcea County. It is about the oldest monastic complex throughout Scythia Minor (OPAIȚ et alii 1990, 18-28). The complex consists in two mono-nave

basilicas, an apse chapel and a number of annexes surrounded by a stone enclosure (fig. 3). The corroboration of the stratigraphy with the complex planning revealed a number of phases have been established. The first phase was during the second half of the 4th century and consists in building the great church with single nave and large prominent apse oriented eastwards (*Basilica A*). The nave is 10.40 m long and 6.65 m wide; the ratio between the elements of the inner space is almost 3:2 = 2.5. The apse is 5 m wide and 2.5 m long; such dimensions are almost identical to those found in Telita/Amza, where the inner space of the *presbyterium* is 10.40 bx 5.40, the last corresponds to the breadth of the apse situated in the prolongation of the side walls. The inner space of the nave was paved with square bricks cemented with lime-mortar. During this phase a rectangular building has been annexed almost on the same basis as the apse, on the southern side. This building has thinner walls than the great one, and perhaps was linked to the nave (OPAIT et alii 1990, 18). The scientist asserted that "such a building was used as a *pastophoria*", i.e. a room where "the bread and the wines selected by the deacon were put on special tables, together with the written names of the persons that gave the offerings and special prayers were read" (LECLERCQ 1921,1733; LECLERCQ 1938,2390-2391; LUNGU 2000, 65). The transformation of this rural church into a monastery occurred in the 6th century, as certified by the coins issued by Justinian the 1st and Justin the 2nd (OPAIT et alii 1990, 22). During this phase important restorations took place and new buildings were erected. The Basilica A is extended through a new larger apse and a chapel annexed on the northern side. Northwards the Basilica B has been built, which had one nave. Between the two basilicas occurred an inner courtyard. In the south-eastern corner of the complex the fragment of an enclosure wall have been discovered, probably representing „la limite matérielle et le symbole morale du monastère" (LECLERCQ 1934, 1812).

The presence of lay church in a village situated in the proximity of the important locality Ibida during the second half of the 4th century brings about the question: who were the beneficiaries and the parishioners of such a cult place? Obviously, it is hard to answer. A tomb vault has also been discovered, which was contemporary to the rest of the vestiges. The vault sheltered

a number of generations of inhabitants living in the surrounding area (MIRIȚOIU, SOFICARU 2003, 511-530). Therefore, we consider that since the second half of the 4th century and throughout the 5th one AD the religious service was performed in the church for the community of the farmers living in the rural territory situated south-westwards from Ibida. The archaeologist that found the church (OPAȚ et alii 1990, 25) considered (and we agree with his point of view) that the transformation into a monastic complex according to *laura* system of organizing the monastic life (the system is wide-spread in Palestine Christian communities) reveal the presence of Saint Ioan Cassian. The Saint was born in Scythia Minor around 360 AD and left for Palestine together with his spiritual brother Gherman around 380 AD. He settled down in this area and left a period of time in a monastery in the proximity of Bethlehem (COMAN 1977, 65). Taking into consideration that Audios (the founder of Audian sect) was banished for a number of years in Scythia Minor (fact that seems to be real), some of the Church historians consider that the dawn of the monasticism in the Lower Danube area can be connected with such persons (RĂMUREANU 1988, 1053-1060; COMAN 1979, 264-265; ZUGRAVU 1997, 269). We mentioned this fact because during the late 3rd century and throughout the 4th one (beginning with Evangelicus Bishop of Tomis until Theootim the 1st) the Church of Scythia Minor was strongly attached to the Orthodoxy.

The ancient historian Sozomenos mentioned that during the 4th-5th centuries in the Pontic Dacia "this nation has many towns, villages and fortresses. The main fortress is named Tomis, large and wealthy city, situated on the left shore for the person that sails by ship in the Pont named Euxine. And the old custom is maintained until the present day that the churches of the whole nation must have a sole bishop" (SOZOMENOS, 6, 21, 2).

According to the provisions of the councils during the 4th century AD in the rural settlement (*vici, pagi, locis*), on properties (*fundī*) or in cities (*castra*) the religious service was performed by priests (*presbyteri*), *chorepiscopoi* = *vicorum episcopi* or *periodentás*, subordinated to the Bishop of Tomis (ZUGRAVU 1997, 244).

Thus, the rural parishes were Presbyterian communities directly subordinated to the Bishop of Tomis, and this status would last until the 4th century. We should keep in mind that

during the 5th century the Bishopric of Tomis has become an Autonomous Archbishopric and during the 5th century it has been transformed into Metropolitan Church with 14 subordinated chairs, mainly established along the Danube in order to ensure (as Em. Popescu asserted in 1989) "the spiritual guidance not only for the believers inside, but also for those beyond the Danube River, both autochthonous and migratory persons" (POPESCU 1989, 195).

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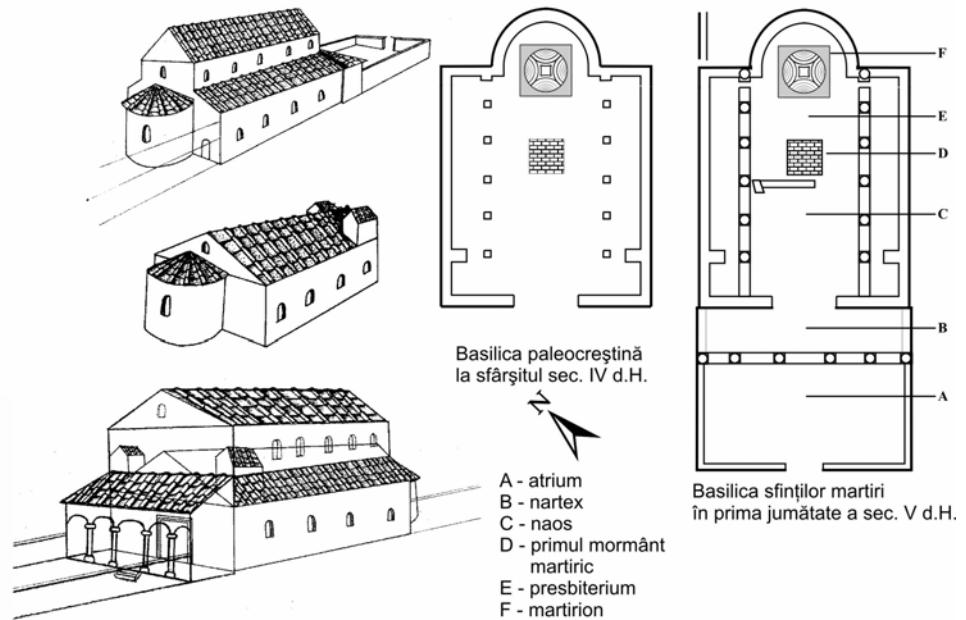


Fig. 1. The martyrical basilica from Niculițel, 4th century AD

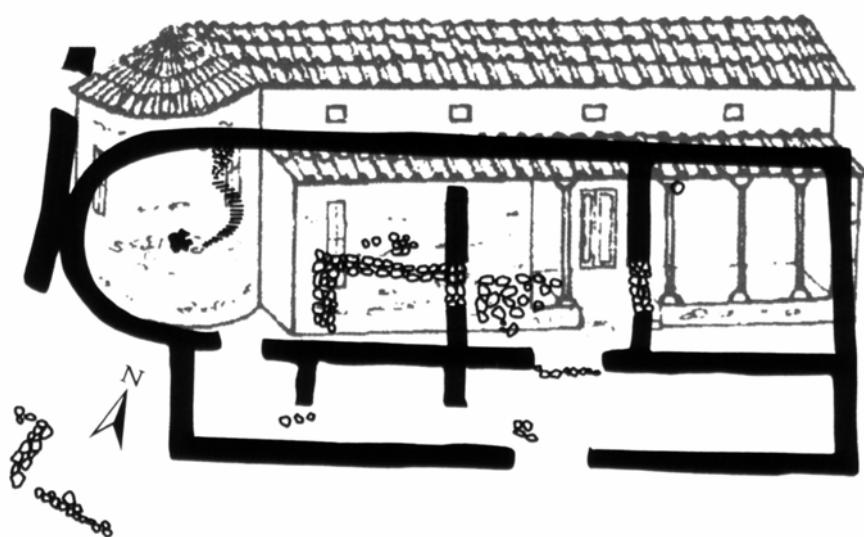


Fig. 2. The basilica from Telița-Amza, 4th century AD.

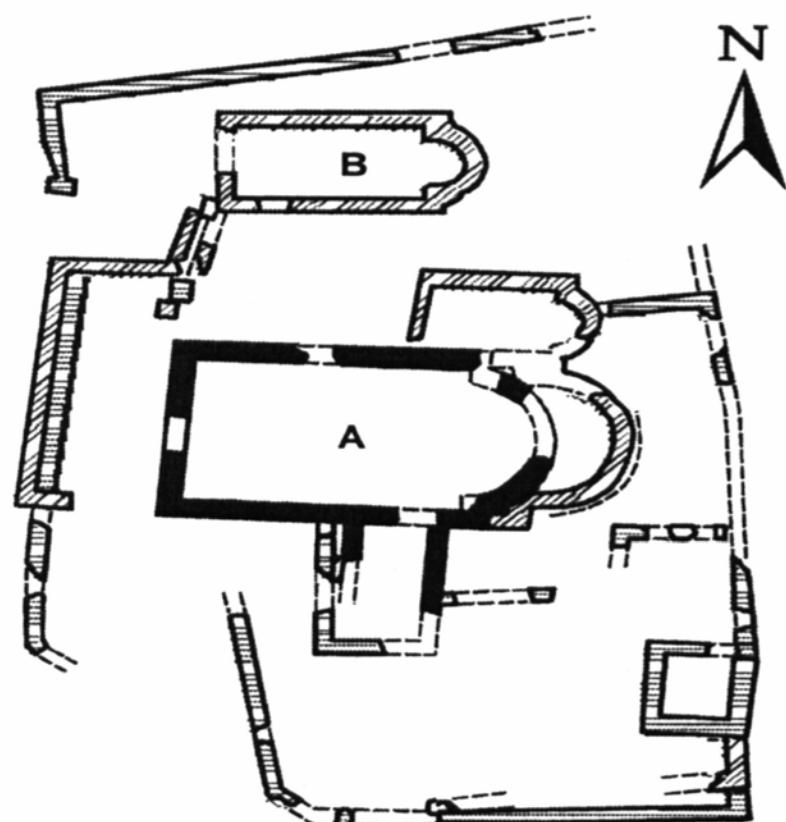


Fig. 3. The Monastery complex from *Ibida* (Slava Rusă)

