

THE AMBOS OF THE CHRISTIAN BASILICAS WITHIN THE PROVINCE OF  
SCYTHIA

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**Keywords:** ambo, Scythia, Christian basilicas, Justinian, marble, Constantinople.

**Abstract:** *Considered an element of Oriental tradition, the ambo is a rare presence within the liturgical furniture in the Christian basilicas of this province situated between the Danube and the Black Sea. The archaeological discoveries have underlined the presence of this essential element within the Christian service, mostly in the centres situated along the western Black Sea coast, both Romanian and Bulgarian (Histria, Tomis, Bizone, Topola). Hence, traces of certain ambos in the paving of some Christian basilicas (Histria, Zaldapa) have been discovered, as well as a series of elements from balustrades, made of Proconnesus marble and decorated with Christian symbols (Tomis). This study underlines the presence of the axial, Constantinopolitan ambo, diffused mainly in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD.*

**Rezumat:** *Considerat un element de tradiție orientală, amvonul constituie o prezență rară în mobilierul liturgic al basilicilor creștine situate între Dunăre și Marea Neagră. Descoperirile arheologice au scos în evidență prezența acestui element esențial al serviciului creștin, mai cu seamă în centrele situate pe litoralul vestic al Mării negre, atât în România, cât și în Bulgaria (Histria, Tomis, Bizone, Topola. Au fost descoperite urme ale unor amvonuri din pavajul anumitor basilici creștine (Histria, Zaldapa), precum și o serie de elemente din balustrade, lucrate din marmură de Proconessos și decorate cu elemente creștine (Tomis). Acest studiu subliniază prezența unui amvon axial, de tip constantinopolitan, răspândit mai ales în secolul al VI-lea p. Chr.*

The ambos within the Christian basilicas in the province of Scythia have not yet made the object of an overall study, considering their weak presence in or even their absence from the Dobrudjan archaeological setting. The Romanian specialized literature only mentioned some decorative elements that were part of this type of construction, such as the three plates preserved in the crypt of the basilica discovered in the yard of the “Mihai Eminescu” High-school in Constanța, as well as the trace of the ambo within the central nave of the episcopal basilica in Histria. This

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study integrates both the discoveries within the episcopal centres and more (on the Romanian territory of Dobrudja), and those within the Bulgarian space.

Being part of the category of liturgical furniture, the ambo (Ἀμβων, *ambo*)<sup>2</sup> was situated centrally in the middle of the nave, closer or farther away from the sanctuary. Here, the priest or the deacon held various speeches or they read passages from the Gospel<sup>3</sup>, holidays were announced<sup>4</sup>, verses were chanted. In the words of St. John Chrysostom, “a certain place” (ἐν τῷ τεταγμένῳ τόπῳ), “where he mounted when he preached”<sup>5</sup>. One of the oldest mentions about the existence of this slightly raised platform belongs to Cyprian of Carthage (c. 200–258), who mentions lectors ascending a *pulpitum* to be seen and heard more distinctly<sup>6</sup>.

The 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of *Constitutio Apostolica* stated that, during the bishop’s consecration, the deacon summoned the people to prayer from an elevated place (ἐφ’ ὑψηλοῦ τινος ἀνελθών); in this case, it was a rudimentary ambo<sup>7</sup>. Besides the priests, in the ambo were also allowed, during certain moments of the service, the appointed singers, as stated in the 15<sup>th</sup> Canon of the Council of Laodicea (371)<sup>8</sup>. Hence, it is considered

<sup>2</sup> The term derives from the verb ἀναβαίνειν, which means “mounting”, cf. TESTINI 1980, 592-593. In the ancient literary sources, as well as in inscriptions, this liturgical furniture has the following names: πύργος, βῆμα, *pulpitum*, *suggestus*, *auditorium*, *tribunal*, *exedra*, *dicterium*, *pyrgus*, cf. LECLERCQ 1924, 1330; DELVOYE 1966, 126-127; BOURAS, TAFT 1991, 75.

<sup>3</sup> *Testam. Dom.*, 1, 19 (48-49): “*locus legenda lectiones extra altare parum ab ipso distet*”.

<sup>4</sup> *Itin. Eg.*, 29, 5 (SC 296, 270): “*subit presbyter in altiori loco*”; BRANIȘTE 1982, 362.

<sup>5</sup> *Socr., Hist. Eccles.*, 6, 5, 5 (287): John Chrysostom, “mounting the pulpit from which he was accustomed to address the people in order to be more distinctly heard”; Cassiod., *Hist. Eccles. Trip.*, X, 4 (PSB 75, 395); *Soz., Hist. Eccles.*, VIII, 5, 2 (SC 516, 260-261), characterizing the ambo as βῆμα τῶν ἀναγνώστων (“rostrums for readers”); JARRY 1963, 149.

<sup>6</sup> *Cypr., Epist.* 34, 4 (PL 4, 329): “*super pulpitem, id est super tribunal ecclesiae*”.

<sup>7</sup> *Const. Apostol.*, 2, 57, 5 (SC 320, 312-313): Μέσος δὲ ἀναγνώστης ἐφ’ ὑψηλοῦ τινος ἐστὼς ἀναγινωσκέτω τὰ Μωϋσέως ...” (“le lecteur, debout au milieu, en un lieu élevé, lira les écrits de Moïse ...”); JARRY 1963, 149.

<sup>8</sup> *Conc. Laodic.*, can. 15, in HEFELE 1896, 309: “Besides the appointed singers, who mount the ambo and sing from the book, other shall not sing in the church”.

that the ambo belongs to the Oriental tradition. From a typological perspective, four types of ambos are known: the first type – also the oldest – has an oval platform and it features only one access staircase<sup>9</sup>; the second type is “fan-shaped” with two curving staircases; the third type – the most diffused – has two staircases on its east-west axis. The Syrian ambo is different from the others, because it combines the functions of the ambo and of the *synthronon*<sup>10</sup>.

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### 1. Bizone, the “St. Kosmas and Damianos” basilica (fig. 2)

Placed centrally in the middle of the basilica’s nave dedicated to the two thaumaturgic saints, 9.30 m from the eastern apse, the stylobate of an ambo was discovered in the paving. The construction – 2.60 m long and 2.20 m wide – features a semicircular shape in the east part. The elevation may have been made of wood, and a single staircase may have provided the access to the upper part. The ambo probably corresponds to the second phase in the existence of this basilica<sup>11</sup>.

### 2. Callatis, the “Syrian” basilica (?) (fig. 9)

In the patrimony of the “Callatis” Archaeological Museum in Mangalia, there is a white-purplish marble plate – to which the inventory number 535 was ascribed<sup>12</sup> –, which could have been part of the Christian establishment “suspected” of belonging to the “Syrian type”. The item is 50.5 cm long and not thicker than 15 cm. Broken on all sides, it still preserves a floral decoration in the centerfield of the plate, surrounded on all sides by a sequence of mouldings and flutes; the other side is not decorated. This plate certainly belonged to the balustrade of an ambo,

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<sup>9</sup> TESTINI 1980, 593.

<sup>10</sup> BOURAS, TAFT 1991, 75.

<sup>11</sup> MIRCHEV, TONCHÉVA 1962, 30, 108, fig. 6-9; ATANASOV *et alii* 2009, 49; DOSSEVA 2011, 148, fig. 12.

<sup>12</sup> In the inventory register — at number 535 — it is recorded as a *cancelli* plate, without mentioning the establishment it had belonged to (information provided by Dr Robert Constantin, from the Callatis Museum of Archaeology, to whom I express my gratitude).

because it is significantly thicker than the *cancelli* plates (with a thickness ranging between 4 and 6 cm). In addition, the decoration in diagonal on the surface of this item indicates that it had a trapezoid shape and that it belonged to the balustrade that flanked one of the access staircases to the platform of the ambo.

Close analogies with this item are reported in Moesia Inferior, especially at Novae, where pilasters, plates and platform fragments belonging to the basilica's ambo were discovered. They were dated to the period of Justinian I, when this establishment was restored and embellished<sup>13</sup> (**fig. 16, 17**). As for the decorations, it is worth mentioning a trapezoid plate discovered in Cyprus, at Cape Drepano (A basilica), which was decorated with heart-shaped leaves<sup>14</sup>, as well as a marble item from the ambo of the Iassus basilica (Caria), with a rosette-like floral decoration<sup>15</sup>. However, the most similar decorations are the vegetal elements found on an ambo plate belonging to the cathedral dedicated to Saint Cyriacus of Ancona (**fig. 10**)<sup>16</sup>.

### 3. Histria, the episcopal basilica (fig. 3, 4, 5)

Though not one element of the elevation belonging to the ambo of the episcopal basilica at Histria was preserved, its shape was identified with precision because of the traces conserved in the limestone paving of the basilica. In the eastern part of the *naos*, there is the trace of an ambo, shaped as the Greek letter  $\varphi$ . Situated at 1.60 m from the western front of the transept, it measures 4 m in length (including the staircase). The eastern part of the ambo – consisting of the traces of the staircase substruction – was conserved as a print in the mortar, measuring 1.00×0.90 m. The western part is shaped as a right angle with the sizes 1.40×1.00 m. The central part of the ambo measures 1.65 m in diameter along the north-south axis, and 1.55 m along the east-west one. The flagstones around the

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<sup>13</sup> PARNICKI-PUDELKO 1983, 256-258; PARNICKI-PUDELKO 1990, 319-341.

<sup>14</sup> MICHAELIDES 2001, 48, fig. 5.3a.

<sup>15</sup> PEIRANO, GARBEROGLIO 2012, 344, fig. 3.

<sup>16</sup> MARANO 2008a, 166, fig. 4.

ambo are cut and combined with high precision. In the northwest angle, at the junction of two flagstones, a small opening (0.80 × 0.80 m) was noticed; it was made to help in erecting the vertical construction of the ambo<sup>17</sup>.

#### 4. Tomis, the basilica in the yard of the “Mihai Eminescu” High-school (fig. 11)

Within the crypt underneath the basilica in the yard of the “Mihai Eminescu” High-school, three white-purplish, fragmentary marble<sup>18</sup> pieces are conserved, which belonged to an ambo that decorated the inside of this basilica<sup>19</sup>. One of the plates – with a trapezoid shape – is 79.5 cm long, 31.3 cm wide and 5.7 cm thick. It served as a balustrade, by delimiting a lateral of the staircase, which ensured the access to the platform of the ambo. The middle of the plate features the artistic image of a bird, probably a pigeon. It is framed on all sides by flutes and mouldings disposed sequentially (fig. 12). An analogy for the representation of this bird is the ambo of the Archbishop Agnellus, in the *basilica Ursiana* (Ravenna)<sup>20</sup>, as well as in Khobi (Georgia) (fig. 15)<sup>21</sup>.

The second plate – broken on all sides – is 38 cm long, 25 cm wide and approximately 5 cm at its maximum width. On one of the sides, it is decorated with a cross with four equal arms of spreading form. The lower side of the cross features three mouldings and three flutes, disposed sequentially (fig. 13).

The last ambo element is a monolith item; both the pilaster and the plate were cut in the same marble block. The pilaster is 65 cm long, and the size of the pilaster in section is 18 x 18 cm. Its surface features a frame with

<sup>17</sup> SUCEVEANU 2007, 26, fig. 8; MILOŠEVIĆ 2007, 45-46, pl. XXV; BOUNEGRU 2009, 69; ACHIM 2012, 138, 160, fig. 14; BORN 2012, 96-97, Abb. 102.

<sup>18</sup> BORN 2012, 55, Abb. 55: “prokonnesischer Marmor”.

<sup>19</sup> BARNEA 1979, 132, pl. 48; MARANO 2008b, 144: “in Romania, l’unico ambone è quello della basilica in via del Liceo 2 a Tomi-Constanza, del quale restano solo un pannello rettangolare con la croce sulla croce (sic!) e un piccolo frammento di parapetto trapezoidale modanato e recante la raffigurazione di un piccolo volatile”.

<sup>20</sup> LECLERCQ 1924, 1341-1342, fig. 313; CAMPANATI 1991, 265-264, fig. 32.

<sup>21</sup> HRUSHKOVA 1979, fig. 1.

relief mouldings and flutes. The plate, which makes a single body with the pilaster, is 27 cm wide and 5 cm thick. Its surface is decorated with a cross on a globe, with only two of the cross' arms being preserved (**fig. 14**). A similar situation was identified at Cherson (Crimea)<sup>22</sup>, Khobi (Georgia)<sup>23</sup>, Ravenna (Basilica of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo<sup>24</sup> and the Arian cathedral<sup>25</sup>), where rectangular parapets with small rectangular attached pilasters are decorated with such an ornaments. The motif of the cross on a globe is encountered in the Constantinopolitan sculptures of the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially in the marble scraps of the church of St. Polyeuktos and Hagia Sophia<sup>26</sup>.

#### **5. Topola, the basilica (fig. 6)**

In the basilica near Topola (a commune in the region of Dobrici, in Bulgaria) – situated right on the Black Sea shore (on the territory of the Bizone city), with a surface of around 40 m<sup>2</sup> –, the stone ambo is the best-preserved liturgical element. It was placed a height of 1 m from the floor. In the eastern and western part of the ambo's basin, the passages used by the priest to go up and then down were conserved. These passages are also underlined by the presence of large steps which delimited the stone pedestal above which the ambo rose. Another element preserved is represented by two pairs of flutes for the fixation of the massive parapets. The walls of the ambo are decorated – on the southern and northern sides – with relief groups of three crosses each, disposed symmetrically and partially conserved<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> BIERNACKI 2002, 82, fig. 5

<sup>23</sup> HRUSHKOVA 1979, 132, fig. 15.b

<sup>24</sup> CAMPANATI 1991, 263, fig. 31.

<sup>25</sup> CAMPANATI 1991, 250-251, fig. 3a-b.

<sup>26</sup> MARANO 2008b, 126, note 79.

<sup>27</sup> ATANASOV et al. 2008, 50.

## 6. Tropaeum Traiani, “the marble basilica”

This alleged ambo within the “marble” or episcopal basilica in this city is referred to in a letter from 1906, addressed by Gr. Tocilescu to the architect Gustav von Cube, in which there is a mention of a stone base belonging to such a liturgical furniture. Based on a sketch elaborated by the German architect, Alexandru Barnea identifies it as an ambo base, which also probably featured a wooden superstructure<sup>28</sup>. The only element belonging to an ambo and identified within a clear archaeological context is a limestone slab, on which this construction was built and which was situated on the central axis of the basilica, 3.30 m from the altar balustrade<sup>29</sup>.

## 7. Zaldapa, basilica no. 1 (fig. 7, 8)

In the middle of the central nave, there is a massive ambo, with two opposite staircases, of which only the base was conserved in the initial position. The central part of the ambo measures 2.50 m, while the projection of the stairs is 1.62 x 0.94 m in size. The numerous fragments discovered on the surface of the basilica indicate that the ambo was made of marble<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> ACHIM 2007, 201, note 24; BARNEA 1970, 688-689, fig. 7/1: “We do not know the exact provenance of this base. We assume it served as a support for the, probably wooden, tribune of an ambo that would have belonged to one of the Christian basilicas from the city, possibly dating from the 4<sup>th</sup> century” (author's translation); in the monograph of Tropaeum Traiani, this base was not attributed to an ambo, cf. MĂRGINEANU-CÂRSTOIU, BARNEA 1979, 136, cat. 3.14, fig. 116/3.14.

<sup>29</sup> CĂTĂNICIU 1995, 583: “dans l’axe central de la basilique est conservée encore, mais très détruite par suite des intempéries, une base de pierre de calcaire – éventuellement d’un ambon.”; CĂTĂNICIU 2006, 244: “believe that the remains of a shell limestone slab discovered 3.3 m in front of the *cancelli*, on the central axis, can only be identified as the remains of an Ambon.”

<sup>30</sup> TORBATOV 2000, 54-55, 98, fig. 28, 29, 30; TORBATOV 2003, 109; DOSSEVA 2011, 143, fig. 3.

The importance of the presence of this liturgical element among the furnishings of a Christian establishment is described in a passage of *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*. It states that the bishop Cyprian of Thaenae (the province of Byzacena, in the north of Africa) – because he wanted to build a basilica in the honour of his saviour, St. Demetrius – purchased an ambo, a *ciborium* (*kiborion*) and small columns (κιδόνια)<sup>31</sup>, all made of Proconnesus marble, from a ship captain that was in the city's harbour<sup>32</sup>. The *Miracula* reads that these items were brought from the capital of the Empire, Constantinople (ἐν βασιλείᾳ). Given that the State had exclusive monopoly over white marble, the items were purchased from the State offices. The inscription on the ambo within the A basilica at Cape Drepanon (Cyprus) – where the sailors that crossed the Mediterranean and faced the dangers in order to bring this furniture from the Empire capital are mentioned – also confirms this aspect.<sup>33</sup> Another example is the shipwreck discovered on the Sicilian coasts, at Marzamemi, where – considering the size of the marble sample (200 – 400 tons)<sup>34</sup> – the ambo should be considered the most valuable item<sup>35</sup>, since it was made of *breccia* or *verde antico*, which was extracted from the quarries of Atrax, near Larissa (Thessaly)<sup>36</sup>. The importance of this type of liturgical furniture and the taste for expensive materials used for their embellishment during the reign of Justinian I are underlined in the famous description of St. Sophia's ambo (Ἐκφρασις τοῦ ἄμβωνος). This description belongs to Paulus Silentiarius, who underlines that it was made of polychrome Hierapolis marble and that it was gold-, silver-, -ivory and precious stone-plated<sup>37</sup>.

Based on the aforementioned aspects, we can admit that the ambos in the province of Scythia – researched archaeologically and whose traces

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<sup>31</sup> LEMERLE 1979, 235, 240.

<sup>32</sup> BAKIRTZIS 2000, 1451, note 6.

<sup>33</sup> MICHAELIDES 2001, 51, fig. 5.7.

<sup>34</sup> MORRISSON, SODINI 2002, 209.

<sup>35</sup> KAPITÄN 1969, 71; CASTAGNINO BERLINGHIERI, PARIBENI 2011, 68-69, fig. 5.

<sup>36</sup> SODINI 2002, 133; MARANO 2008b, 161.

<sup>37</sup> Paul. silent., *Ekphr.* 201 (55); LECLERCQ 1924, 1333; DIEHL 1901, 483-484; WHITBY 1985, 215-228; 169; PARIBENI 1990, 169, tab. II, fig. 10.



are conserved *in situ* or identified based on decorative elements – definitely belong to the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. It is worth stressing that, in this province, the frequent type of ambo is the one with a raised platform, supported by small columns, featuring symmetrical staircases placed on the axis of the central nave. This attests the direct influence of Constantinople, which means that the architectural canons imposed by the capital were followed to the letter. This aspect underlines that the Scythian basilicas belonged to a unitary architectural group, made of Greek, Ravenna and micro-Asiatic establishment; their main common element is the Constantinopolitan ambo<sup>38</sup>. This group includes the following geographical references: Constantinople (Sancta Sophia<sup>39</sup>, Sf. Euphemia, the Beyazit B basilica, Sts. Sergius and Bacchus, St. Polyeuktos)<sup>40</sup>, Asia Minor (Miletus, Priene, Ephesus, Sebasta), Cappadocia (Meriamlik), Crimea (the “western” basilica)<sup>41</sup>, the Balkan Peninsula (The B basilica of Philippi<sup>42</sup>, Pirdop<sup>43</sup>, Srma<sup>44</sup>, the cathedral in the city of Novae, the big basilica of Nicopolis ad Istrum<sup>45</sup>), Crete (Agios Titos of Gortyna)<sup>46</sup>, Cyprus (Peyia), Kos Island (Mastichari)<sup>47</sup>, Italy (Ravenna), Syria (Qal’at Sim’an, the B basilica of Resafah and Deir Solaib)<sup>48</sup>. From a stylistic perspective, the marble items discovered allow the inclusion of the ambos in the province of Scythia within a set of Circumpontic discoveries (Crimea, Georgia). It is easy to see that this set bears the mark of the Constantinopolitan School, characterized by Oriental decorative elements, specific to the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. Since it was included in *quaestura exercitus* (AD 536), this province

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<sup>38</sup> BERNACKI 1995, 329-331.

<sup>39</sup> LECLERCQ 1924, 1338-1339; XYDIS 1947, 23, fig. 32; MAJESKA 1978, 299-308.

<sup>40</sup> SODINI 1975, 587.

<sup>41</sup> KLENINA 2006, 88, fig. 8.

<sup>42</sup> LEMERLE 1945, pl. LXXVII.

<sup>43</sup> KRAUTHEIMER, 251-252, fig. 211.

<sup>44</sup> CHEVALIER 1995, 155-156, fig. 5-6.

<sup>45</sup> DOSSEVA 2011, fig. 7.

<sup>46</sup> KRAUTHEIMER 1986, 255, fig. 214.

<sup>47</sup> KRAUTHEIMER 1986, 108, fig. 60.

<sup>48</sup> SODINI 1975, 588.

situated between the Danube and Black Sea benefitted, just like Crimea or Moesia Secunda – considering their strategic and military role – from the *benevolentia* of the imperial court. This was reflected in the massive marble imports<sup>49</sup>, which came from the imperial quarries of Proconnesus, Aphrodisias, and Thasos.

Finally, it is worth underlining the identification of these ambos (either by the presence of marble or limestone elements, or by the identification of prints left in the paving of basilicas), especially in the settlements situated along the western Black Sea coast (Histria, Tomis, Callatis, Bizone, Topola). Only in two cases, were they identified within the province (Zaldapa and Tropaeum Traiani), which determined us to believe that the presence of these furnishings was sporadic or that a part of the Dobrudjan basilicas had wooden ambos.

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<sup>49</sup> MARANO 2008b, 145; BIERNACKI 2005, 58: in Novae, “there was an impressive ambo with two flights of stairs, made of Proconnesos marble in Constantinople in the early 6th cent., apparently at the emperor’s special order”.

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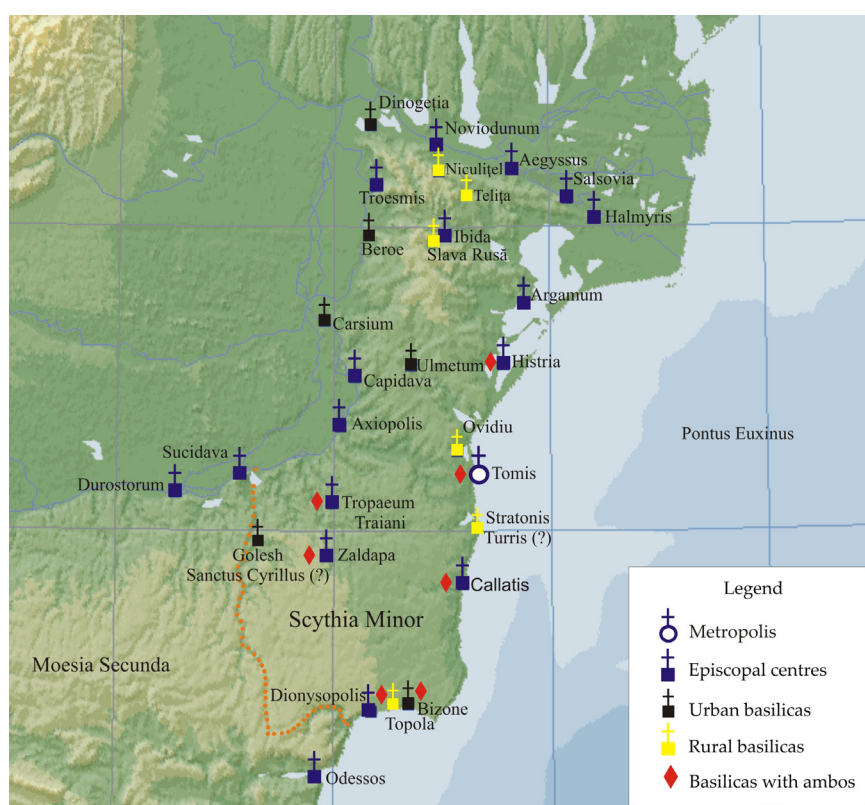


Fig. 1. Ecclesiastical centres in the province of Scythia (4<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD)

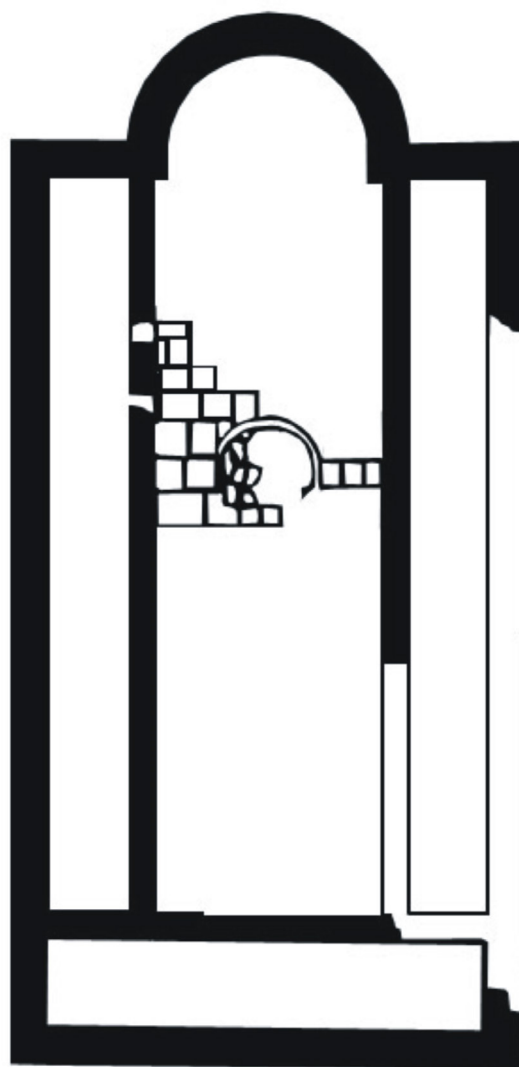


Fig. 2. Bizone. The “Sts Kosmas and Damianos” Basilica. Plan of the basilica, with the placement of the ambo (after ATANASOV *et alii* 2009, 49)



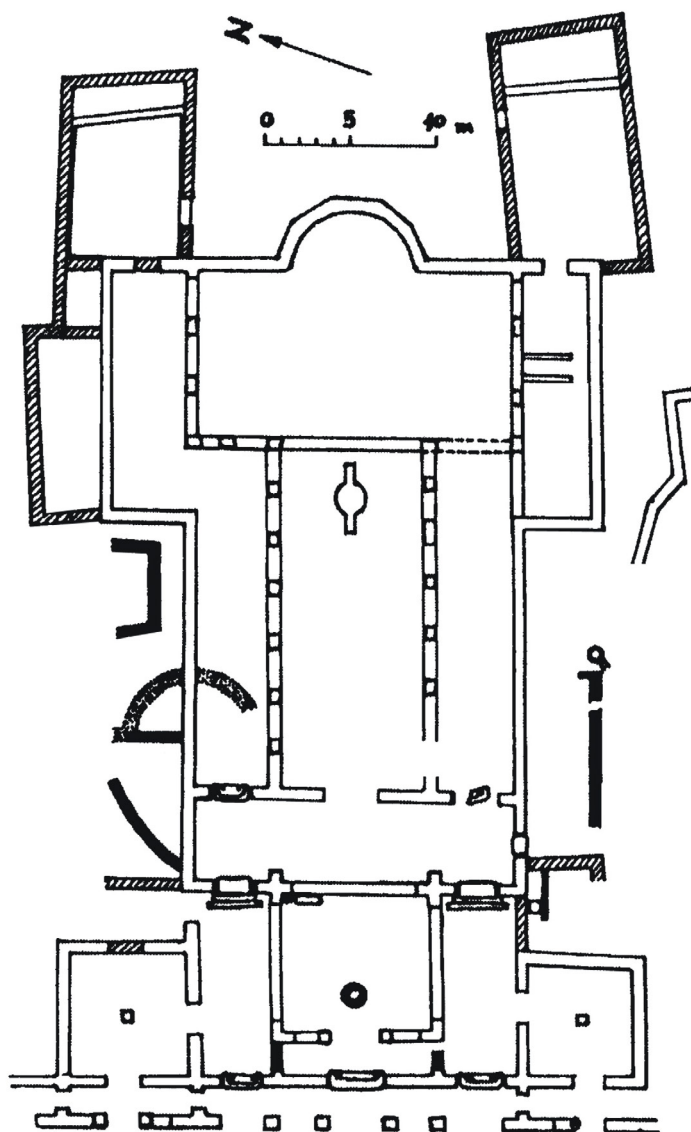


Fig. 3. Histria. The episcopal basilica. Plan of the basilica, with the placement of the ambo (after BĂJENARU, BĂLTĂC 2000-2001, fig. 1)



Fig. 4. Histria. The episcopal basilica. The print of the ambo in the paving of the central nave (after ACHIM 2012, fig. 14)



Fig. 5. Histria. The Episcopal basilica. The print of the ambo. View from the southern nave (after BORN 2012, Abb. 102)



Fig. 6. Topola. The basilica. The ambo's basin (after ATANASOV *et alii* 2009, 50)

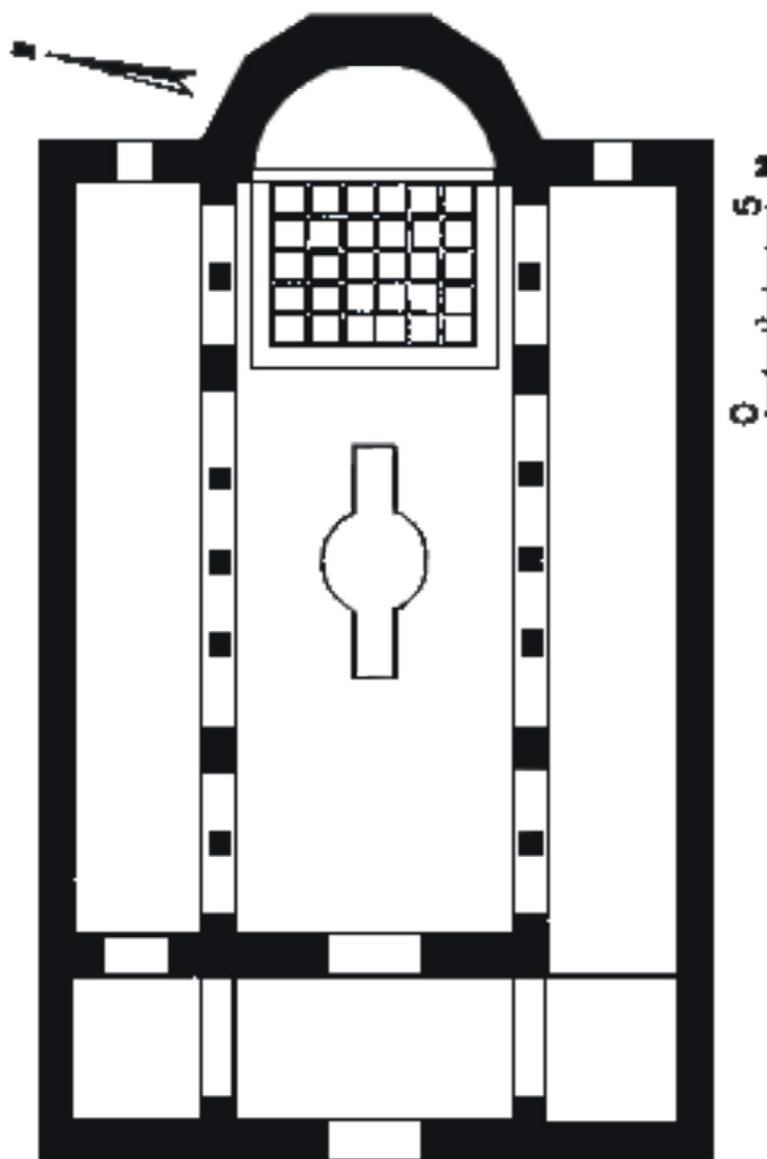


Fig. 7. Zaldapa, the No. 1 basilica (after TORBATOV 2000, fig. 23)

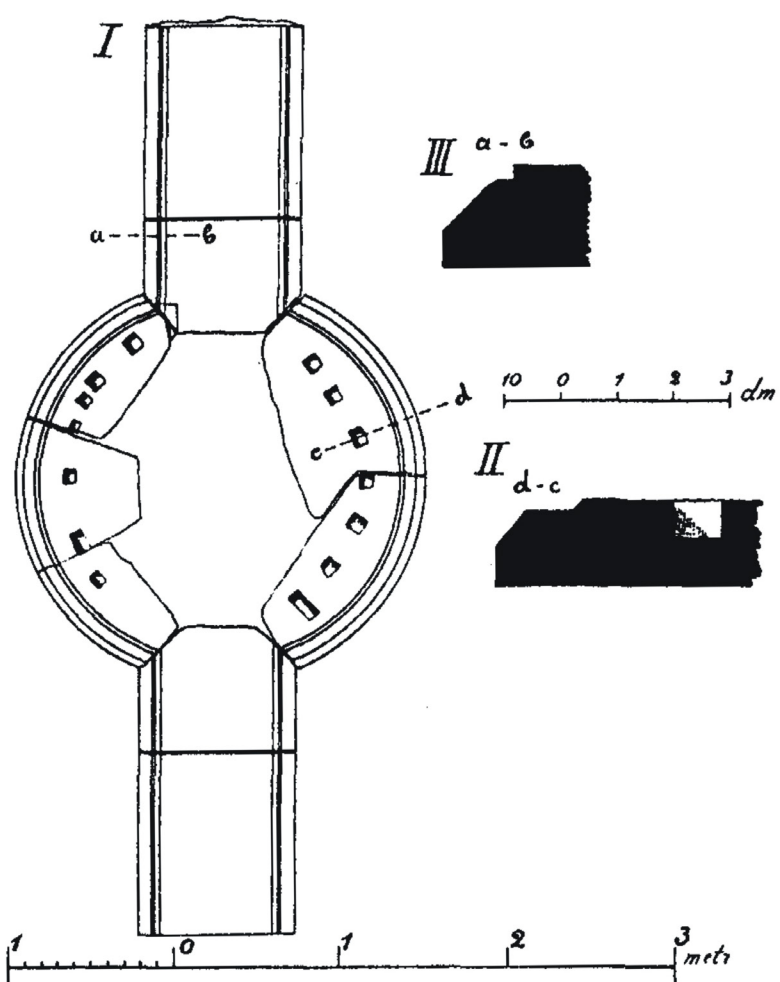


Fig. 8. Zaldapa, the No. 1 basilica. The ambo (after TORBATOV 2000, fig. 28)



Fig. 9. Callatis. The Syrian basilica (?). Plate belonging to an ambo (photo Ioan Iațcu)





Fig. 10. Ancona. Ambo plate belonging to the cathedral dedicated to Saint Cyriacus (after MARANO 2008, fig. 4)



Fig. 11. Tomis. Crypt of the basilica in the yard of the “Mihai Eminescu” High-school (photo Ioan Iațcu)





Fig. 12. Tomis. The basilica in the yard of the “Mihai Eminescu” High-school. Marble plate belonging to an ambo (photo Ioan Iațcu)



Fig. 13. Tomis. The basilica in the yard of the “Mihai Eminescu” High-school. Marble plate belonging to an ambo (photo Ioan Iațcu)



Fig. 14. Tomis. The basilica in the yard of the “Mihai Eminescu” High-school. Marble element belonging to an ambo (photo Ioan Iațcu)



Fig. 15. Khobi. Cathedral. Southern wall (after HRUSHKOVA 1979, fig. 1)

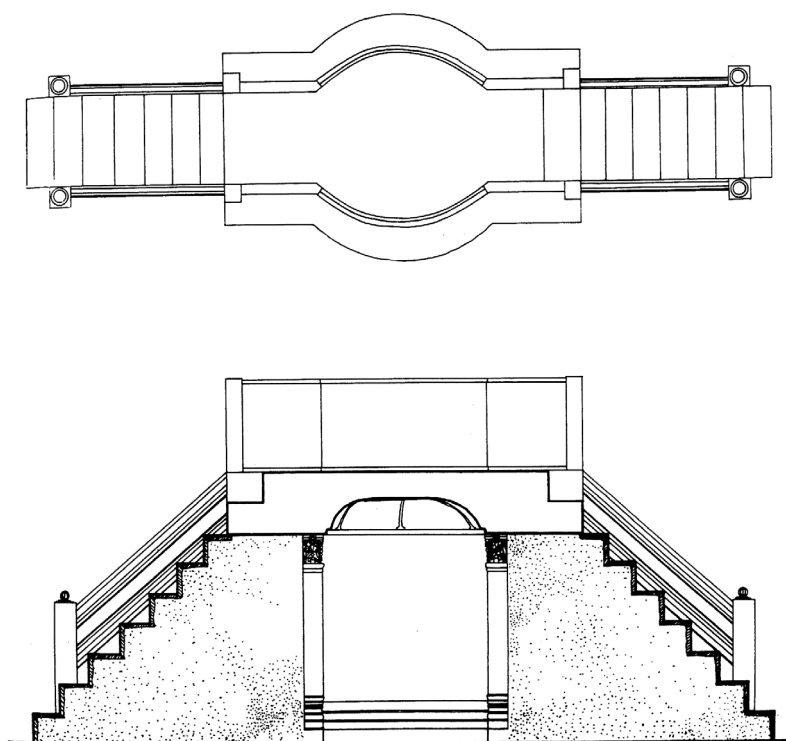


Fig. 16. Novae. The episcopal basilica. Reconstruction of the ambo. Bottom view and length section (after BIERNACKI 1995, fig. 7)

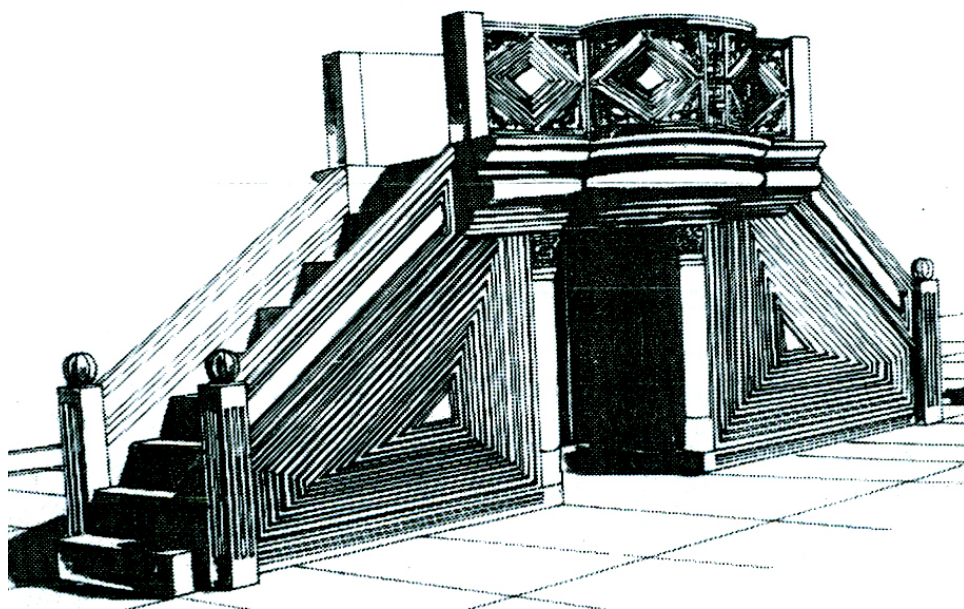


Fig. 17. Novae. The episcopal basilica. Reconstruction of the ambo (after BIERNACKI 1995, fig. 10)