THE ENIGMATIC DACIAN ARCHITECTURE AT SARMIZEGETUSA REGIA. PROFANE VS. SACRED PURPOSE

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Abstract. The author is opening the "classified" file of the so-called "temples" from the World Heritage site at Sarmizegetusa Regia (Hunedoara County/RO). He is challenging C. Daicoviciu’s old interpretation demonstrating its lack of any archaeological evidence. The same, old and new reconstructions as Greek type temples is rejected. The author's criticism is argued by the European archaeological methodology which used objective criteria to identify sacred buildings. None of these criteria are present in the cases from Sarmizegetusa Regia. That is why the author is supporting the profane purpose for all that buildings.

Keywords: architecture, archaeology, sacred, profane, scientific methodology, Sarmizegetusa

Sarmizegetusa Regia (today Grădiștea de Munte, Hunedoara County, RO) is one of the most famous archaeological sites in Romania and also very well-known abroad, being inscribed in the World Heritage list of monuments. Unfortunately, its history is not so very well-known. This is not only due to the heritage of the older generations of archaeologists, but the team of archaeologists currently researching Dacian civilization in the area of the Dacian citadels does not have a long-term research strategy and their excavations are not specifically directed to answering the main problems of the site. Sometimes, they also hesitate between supporting scientific truth, or the magical and initiate meaning of Sarmizegetusa propounded by “mystic” groups (as recent authorization of renewal the wooden posts of the “Great Round Temple”). Everett Wheeler² was right when he described the situation at Sarmizegetusa as an “archaeological nightmare”. This is the current state of art of the enigmatic architecture at Sarmizegetusa Regia. As it is poorly preserved, scientific interpretation is difficult and likewise the attempts at reconstruction. Only some stone bases consisting of round stone discs aligned in rows survived. Most of these structures were excavated in the 1950s without any archaeological scientific method and with no serious recording. The main finds consist of iron nails and fittings from the wooden beams of the roof, or lateral walls. In such circumstances the main question is which is the correct way to find out the ancient function of these buildings? Most importantly an historical interpretation was proposed for these structures in volume I of “The History of Romania” edited in 1960 by the Academy of the People’s Republic of Romania, under the authority of Constantin Daicoviciu³, at that time the scientist who was in charge of the excavations at Sarmizegetusa Regia and the other Dacian citadels in the area of the Orăștie Mountains. He declared the rows of round stone bases as remains of unroofed temples without adding

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² WHEELER 2010, 1187.
³ DAICOVICIU 1960.
any archaeological evidence for his interpretation, even though he had himself excavated them starting in 1950. In 1949, referring to similar structures known in the citadel at Costești, he thought they must have been bases of wooden granaries for stockpiling the harvest from the neighbouring Mureș River valley. But he soon changed his mind, adopting the sacred explanation. The result of his imagination was the hypothesis of open-air temples composed of rows of short columns having each on top stone vessels for burning offerings to the gods. This opinion was kept unaltered by his son Hadrian Daicoviciu, the next director of the site until his death in 1984. From that time onwards the site was for another two decades under the direction of Ioan Glodariu. He and his team dared to reject the open-air temples hypothesis, an unbelievable idea in a mountainous area with wet and cold weather for 6 months a year. But strangely and without any further explanation they maintained the religious purpose of the buildings, only their reconstruction being changed. Starting from the identified Greek influence recorded in the stone military architecture of the sites in the area he and others reconstructed a roofed forest of high wooden columns (Fig. 1) closed within exterior wooden walls, even if no scientific evidence was provided to support the new hypothesis. An old false reconstruction was replaced with another unreal one. The absence of the Greek model’s foundations and crepidoma, of the pronaos, of the naos (cella) and of all the other emblematic features of Greek temples, were not obstacles for the supporters of the influences of Greek religious architecture at Sarmizegetusa. Today a younger archaeological team under the direction of Gelu Florea is continuing the same research view of their predecessors, avoiding large scale excavations at key-points of the site and supporting the outdated and mythological image of the holy stone architecture at Sarmizegetusa, gibing with haughtiness at archaeologists with different opinions. If the reconstruction prepared in 1980 by the communist regime for Sarmizegetusa failed (even its traces are still visible in the site area), today, another reconstruction project named “Conservation, restoration and enhancement of the Sarmizegetusa Regia archaeological site” is planned by the National Institute of Heritage. One of the architects involved in this project was recently published some “indications on the architecture of Sarmizegetusa Regia”. Unfortunately, he started from the preconception of the holy character of the ruins. He was looking for traces of elements of temples of Greek style. He imagined for the “andesite temple” that initially were 40, or 60 columns of “Doric inspiration”, the only argument being the lack of any column base. He also thinks he identified one fragmentary capital “probably of Doric origin”. He was not at all concerned of the totally absence of traces of the stylobate and mainly of the massive elements of the entablature: no architraves, no frieze with metopes and triglyphs, no frontons, no cornices, to say nothing of pronaos and naos, the ration of the Greek temple. He is suggesting a wooden entablature, but in such a case why so many columns? They were not symbolic elements, but the purpose of the columns was to support the weight of the ceiling. A wooden entablature did not require a forest of stone (andesite (!) much difficult to be carved than limestone) columns. To the end of his paper the author is describing also some “prismatic socle” which he considered an inconclusive “flattened Ionic base”. Unfortunately, Mr. Apostol’s intimate sureness reckons on an insufficient bibliographical documentation, the two works on Greek architecture written in 1960-ies demonstrating the author has a poor and superficial knowledge of ancient Greek architecture. At the end, D. Antonescu’s wrong vision from 1980 and Glodariu/Strîmbu 1981 abberant reconstruction were both not much improved in Apostol 2019 variant. Their commune error was the false

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4 DAICOVICIU/FERENCZI 1951, 17–18.
6 MATEESCU 2012.
7 APOSTOL 2019.
8 APOSTOL 2019, 60.
9 APOSTOL 2019, 63.
The Enigmatic Dacian Architecture at Sarmizegetusa Regia. Profane vs. Sacred Purpose

starting point: they did not reconstruct a monument starting from its survived plan, but they reconstruct a temple, someone’s imaginary vision never scientifically proved.

From 1950 until today no serious discussion concerning the function of the enigmatic stone building bases has been opened by Romanian specialists in so-called "Dacian archaeology". The sacred function hypothesis of Constantin Daicoviciu is still acceptable to the majority, even if no scientific or logical evidence has ever been presented. In 2015 and 2016, I dared to write two articles challenging the holy hypothesis and proposing a mundane function for all these former buildings so poorly preserved today. Even earlier, Kris Lockyear pointed out the inconsequence of Constantin Daicoviciu’s opinion concerning the rows of stone bases from Costești and Grădiștea Muncelului. The British archaeologist considered their plan closer to former granaries, or dwellings, than temples: “…they are reminiscent of such structure (i.e. granaries) elsewhere” and “be they granaries or dwellings, the rectangular sanctuaries appear to be a reflection on them, if on a grander scale”. I conducted my research by checking the validity of the former sacred hypothesis using scientific deductive method.

We will try in the following pages to summarize the most relevant aspects of the discussion. When challenging the temples hypothesis proposed for the rows of round stone bases uncovered at Sarmizegetusa, we started from the principles of the archaeology of ritual. The main question is whether we can archaeologically recognize the religious expression of cult practice, compared with domestic activities? And how can we identify the religious ritual? When no written source is available a careful examination of the archaeological background is necessary to establish if the place under investigation was a sanctuary, or not. The beginnings of the site at Grădiștea Muncelului were dated not before the 1st century BC, later than the citadel at Costești in the neighbouring area. Recently, the director of the site at Sarmizegetusa has explained that the decision to transform this place into a proto-urban production centre was based on religious reasons: if not a theophany, then, the ”holy mountain” from the neighbourhood were both imagined as impulses for the Dacian elite hunting for legitimacy. But we must be aware that Herodotus’ story of Zalmoxe and his cave was 500 years earlier and imagined in another region! We do not have either any topographical trace for Strabo’s holy mountain “Kogaionon”, which must be even related to Zalmoxe’s story, or with an impressive peak and a cave. None of them fit with the natural landscape at Sarmizegetusa Regia. It is also hard to imagine a movement of the cult and the choosing of another “holy mountain” and cave, as it is known in antiquity the movement of the living place of divinities was considered dangerous for the human community.

Coming back to the archaeological recognition of the religious cult we have to take into consideration first of all if there is any evidence for expressive actions, like prayers, sacrifices, votive gifts. Then it is necessary to have indications that a transcendent being is involved, supported by symbolism, representations of the divinity, or votive gifts, or other features such as the standardization of objects, or their richness, if religious iconography is forbidden or not in

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10 OPREANU 2015.
11 OPREANU 2016.
12 LOCKYEAR 2004, 63.
14 GLODARIU 1995, 130; OLTEAN 2007, 111.
15 FLOREA 2011, 119.
16 FLOREA 2014, 68.
18 STRABO, Geographia VII, 3.5.
use. Collin Renfrew\textsuperscript{20} has emphasized an essential criterion, usually not stressed enough: only if the complex cannot be explained in secular terms in the light of our knowledge about human society, then we can find a sacred/holy explanation. That means the sacred is what is not profane and it is the responsibility of the archaeologist to make a distinction between the symbolic and the rational. Obvious Constantin Daicoviciu did not follow such a way of thinking when for the archaeological structures identified at Costești and Grădiștea Muncelului (Sarmizegetusa) he first of all proposed a logical secular use (granaries) having analogies of plans in the Roman world, but soon with no reason he radically changed his mind and declared them to be temples. The identification of the sacred rituals must not be based on “intuition”, or on “privileged knowledge”, but using definite criteria. Generally, archaeology tries to reconstruct the past taking notice of models and as a result it delineates repetitive actions. Ritual is often a repetitive activity which can generate patterns in archaeological record, being easier to be identified than other types of actions. Catherine Bell\textsuperscript{21} proposed 6 theoretical criteria which characterize rituals and ritual activities: the formalism of the rituals, the traditionalism, the invariability, the main rule, the sacred symbolism, the performance. When he published on the sanctuary from Phylakopi on the Greek island of Melos, Collin Renfrew\textsuperscript{22} proposed 18 material correspondences considered to be typical for sacred rituals. From that moment on many amplifications and nuances have been added, but Renfrew’s list continues to be used when identifying a cult complex, as for prehistoric cult places in Malta\textsuperscript{23}, for example. We have used it just for checking the reliability of the holy hypothesis for the buildings at Sarmizegetusa\textsuperscript{24} so fiercely defended by several generations of archaeologists who worked there. The first step necessary for this analysis was the examination of the archaeological finds recovered when these structures were excavated.

"Les restes cultuels sont le seul élément déterminant dans la reconnaissance du lieux de cult" was written a well-known French specialist\textsuperscript{25}. Only the inventory of finds of “sanctuary A” from the “9th terrace” is known. It consisted of 119 metallic objects\textsuperscript{26}, among them being an iron chisel and an iron axe. The rest are iron nails, iron fittings used in construction, and a few remarkable spikes ornamented with vegetal motifs (Fig. 2–4). This inventory was never discussed in the context of the interpretation of the building’s purpose. It is obvious that the components enumerated have very few connections with sacred rituals, being elements used for sticking together wooden beams from the roof, or from lateral wooden walls. The geometrical ornamented spikes are purely decorative, possible nailed on a wooden door. They have no religious symbolism. The presence of tools also has little relation to the sacred sphere. It is relevant to compare this situation with a recent, excellent excavation of a contemporary Celtic oppidum center at Corent in France. The authors\textsuperscript{27} analyzed and compared the displaying of several categories of objects in the cult area and in the profane zone of the settlement. Their conclusion was that in the sanctuary the most common items to be found are military equipment fittings and weapons, as well as coins and instruments for preparing food and drink. None of these categories were found in the “sanctuary A” from Sarmizegetusa. At Corent, the tools and elements relating to construction and generally objects from the handicraft sphere are plentiful in the habitat area but are poorly represented in the sanctuary being connected with profane activities. We cite this example to show that the inventory of “sanctuary A” from Sarmizegetusa has no relation to the

\textsuperscript{20} RENFREW 1985.
\textsuperscript{21} BELL 1997, 138–170.
\textsuperscript{22} RENFREW 1985.
\textsuperscript{23} BARROWCLOUGH 2007.
\textsuperscript{24} OPREANU 2016, 238–239.
\textsuperscript{25} BRUNEAUX 1989.
\textsuperscript{26} IAROSLVASCHI 1983, 373 – 374.
\textsuperscript{27} DEMIERRE/POUX 2012, 217–223.
sacred world, but a strong connection with the mundane world of the ordinary people living there. Another very relevant criterion to separate the holy from the profane is the scattering of animal bones. At Corent inside the temenos, goats' and pigs' bones are in the majority, while the cattle bones are only 15% compared with 70% in the habitat area. This situation was identified in other Celtic sites too, being a pattern for the difference between sacred and profane. At Sarmizegetusa there is no record of animal bones, an unusual situation for temples and holy areas. The habitat area of the site, spreading for approximately 6 hectares, was not explored at all. So, at Sarmizegetusa inside and around the so-called “temples” there is missing any trace of religious sacrifices, so frequent in all ancient religions from the Balkans. There are also no central architectural elements to focus the attention of the worshippers, no images associated with the divine power, no special facilities to perform the cult (altars, benches, hearths, pits for remains of libations), no traces of food and drink offerings for the gods brought in ceramic receptacles, no intact or ritually broken votive objects, no special mobile equipment for rituals (such as special vessels, or lamps), no traces of repetitive symbols or ritual actions, no symbols relating to divinities or their myths, no animal symbolism. In conclusion, in the absence of any expressive cult actions with prayers, sacrifices and offerings and without symbolic proofs (representation of the divinity, offerings) implying a transcendental entity, the sacred character of a building cannot be sustained and it is a methodological mistake to ignore this situation. On these lines, it is out of question that the rows of round stone bases at Sarmizegetusa Regia are not the remains of nine sacred constructions, but they belong to profane buildings whatever their function would be. It is the fault of all the archaeologists who have worked on this site because they proposed an incorrect interpretation of the archaeological situation recorded on the site, sacrificing scientific rationale for dilettante fantasy. “Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence” (ECREE), Carl Sagan's famous aphorism was unknown to them and so the scientific skepticism. Recently, two authors I have criticized in my paper from 2016 for their speculative opinions on the Dacian religion agree with some of my former conclusions, even they “forgot” to cite my paper: “However, both categories (i.e. of temples, in their view) show particular features that are so clear as to make them stand out quite visibly compared to the models of the time: a) none of these temples has a cella; b) no cult fireplaces were identified; c) there is no evidence of human sacrifices or animal inhumations in temples or around them; and d) no statues or other major art works were found. The archaeological material found in these buildings is extremely poor, making it impossible to determine what kind of rituals or practices took place in or around them.”

As no floor was identified inside these buildings it is very probable that a wooden floor was overbuilt, underpinned by short stone pillars or wooden posts. On the sides of the wooden floor were probably built wooden walls, ultimately resulting in a huge wooden barrack roofed with shingle. Contemporary early Roman military granaries (horrea) (Fig. 5) that have been reconstructed have similar aspects. These type of warehouses with overbuilt floors continue to be frequent throughout the Middle Ages up until the present day in different parts of Europe,
from Britain to Spain. Taking into account these analogies of plan, the climate at Sarmizegetusa with wet and cold weather six months a year and the necessity for this large human community to stockpile cereals brought from the lowlands of the Mureș River valley to survive over winter, we advance the hypothesis that the rows of round stones from Sarmizegetusa are the remains of some huge warehouses, having no connection with religious life. It is possible that other types of products, even crude iron lingots (impressive quantities were found on the site and surroundings), weapons and iron tools produced in the workshops of this huge metallurgical centre (one of the biggest known in Barbarian Europe) were stored inside. Obviously, the concept of setting up this settlement hidden in the mountains and producing iron and then manufacturing iron objects belonged to a political authority on the eve of developing into a “tribal state.” The impulse does not seem to have had religious motivation. The same guiding authority ordered the building programme, including the profane warehouses for the population of the settlement. Our interpretation does not reject the existence of the holy shrines of the Dacians. But in absence of inscriptions and religious iconography, archaeologists have to use scientific methodology to identify and separate the profane from the sacred material evidence available.

The best advice which can be addressed to archaeologists from Sarmizegetusa comes from a famous character: Sherlock Holmes. He remarked to Dr. Watson on the correct way of conducting an inquiry: “It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts” (A. Conan Doyle, A Scandal in Bohemia, 1891). I would only like to add that in the end we have to try to test our theories, if possible.

Everybody when faces two different explanations of the same archaeological features can ask himself which explanation is the best. In 1989, Marscha Hanen and Jane Kelley wrote that the best explanation in their view is determined by eliminating explanations that were “less well supported” by the material evidence. Common sense tells us that in these terms sacred theory of the purpose must be rejected as any material evidence is missing. The holy theory function of the rows of round stones at Sarmizegetusa not only lacks evidence, but, in my opinion, it fails the test of legitimacy and credibility. But further, even one explanation is shown to be the best (as in our case), there is no guarantee that the explanation is any good. It might simply be the best of a bad lot. Any application of inference to the best explanation in archaeology requires methods. Lars Fogelin proposed seven traits of highly successful explanation, even they are not absolute, being just guides to good reasoning. Using these criteria the conclusion is that the profane hypothesis has much empirical breadth having analogies in whole periods, has a larger generality, while the sacred theory considered the temples from Sarmizegetusa as unique, the profane one is refutable while the holy one is considered as irrefutable by its supporters (for this reason it resisted for 70 years untouched), profane is modest, not trying to explain too much and offers solution to more questions than the holy one. The more unsophisticated an explanation is, the more credible. Finally, the sacred hypothesis concerning the purpose of the enigmatic buildings from Sarmizegetusa is 100% speculative being assembled only from ideas and imagination, not extracted from objective reality of the archaeological finds. Speculation is not equal with science. Obvious the profane explanation is better, more plausible and based on scientific method of analogy, often used in archaeology.
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Fig. 1. The reconstruction of the sanctuary I from the terrace XI at Grădiștea Muncelului (after D. Antonescu)
Fig. 2. Inventory of the sanctuary I from the terrace XI at Grădiștea (after E. Iaroslavschi).
Fig. 3. Inventory of the sanctuary I from the terrace XI at Grădiștea (after E. Iaroslavschi).
Fig. 4. Inventory of the sanctuary I from the terrace XI at Grădiștea (after E. Iaroslavschi).
Fig. 5. 1. Plans of Roman wooden horrea; 2. Plans of Roman stone horrea.