

A type of urban genesis in the Romanian outer-Carpathian area: the Byzantine fortified cities

DENIS CĂPRĂROIU, GICA PEHOIU

Department of History and Letters

Valahia University of Targoviste, Faculty of Humanities

Str. Lt. Stancu Ion, Nr. 34-36A, Târgoviște,

ROMANIA

deniscapraroIU@yahoo.com, gpehoiu@yahoo.com, www.fsu.valahia.ro

Abstract: - The fall of the Danubian *limes* during the first decennia of the seventh century, under the Slav-Avar pressure and the further constitution of the Bulgarian tzardom suppressed the Byzantine-Roman urban civilization along the line of the Lower Danube. After nearly four centuries, under the emperors John Tzimiskes and Basil II, the Byzantine administration recovered these territories and built a number of fortified cities that would shelter thriving human settlements. Soon, their definitely favorable environment assured a positive evolution for these cities to the status of urban centers, among the most representative of them being Dinogetia, Capidava and Păcuil lui Soare. They have played an extremely important role in strengthening Roman element in the border areas, and the durable implementation of the Orthodox Christianity in these regions.

Key-Words: - John Tzimiskes, Danube, Byzantines, fortified cities, towns, commerce.

1 Introduction

After the Emperor Aurelian (270-275) withdrew the Roman army and administration from Dacia, the imperial rule was maintained without interruption along the natural border of Danube and in undetermined land areas just north of the river, until the beginning of the VIIth century. The formerly Roman province continued to stay under the supervision and influence of the Empire by means of several "bridgeheads", fortified centers on the left side of the Danube, which, like antennas, were scattered here and there.

If, for the moment, Drobeta and Sucidava are the only conclusive examples concerning the urban life continuity north of the Danube in the post-Aurelian period, on the right shore of the river old Roman fortifications, rebuilt by Constantine the Great and Justinian, succeeded each other to the confluence between the arm Sf. Gheorghe and the Black Sea.

All bridgeheads on the north bank of the Danube, as the chain of settlements situated along the lower course of the river constituted centers from where the Roman-Byzantine culture exerted its influence, maintaining the link between the Roman population of Dacia and the lands south of the Danube. Joined together by a really historical mission, namely the perpetuation of the Roman civilization in the Lower Danube area, these settlements went through moments of continuity and discontinuity, having a

common evolution that ended with a tragic destiny.

The unfortunate outcome was determined by the fall of Danubian *limes*, under the Slav-Avarian pressure, between 602 and 614, its main effect being the disappearance of the urban Roman-Byzantine civilization of this area.

2 The return of the Byzantine rule and the construction of new settlements along the Lower Danube

Without minimizing the historical drama of the events outlined above, it should be noted, however, that they did not equate with an overall suppression of the Byzantine presence along the Danube in Dobrogea, which represented, for the defensive calculations of the Empire, a vital sector. This opinion seems to be confirmed by several sources of data and information both from literary sources and from the field of archeology.

However, beyond the intrinsic importance of this issue, what we would really like to highlight is the fundamental significance played by the return of the Danubian territories under the Byzantine administrative structure during the reigns of John Tzimiskes (969-976) and Basil II (976-1025) concerning the reactivation of the urban life in this area.

2.1 Context of the return of the Byzantine rule along the Lower Danube

The taking of the Byzantine throne by Nikephor II (963-969) amounted to a return to the Constantinople's warlike traditions. Therefore, in parallel with his successes in the East, the emperor decided to restore his imperial authority in the relation to the Bulgarians, led at that time by the *Tsar* Peter.

In order to avoid a war on two fronts – in the East and in the Balkans –, Nikephor did not take personally any ample actions against the rebels from the north, using the old methods of the Byzantine diplomacy. As a result, he asked the great Prince Svyatoslav of Kiev for an alliance, aiming to trigger an attack from the back against the Bulgarians. Intuiting the opportunity for this invitation to meet his own interests, Svyatoslav immediately accepted this proposal. In the summer of 968, he came down along the Dnieper with his troupes, and went towards the mouths of the Danube, taking Bulgaria by surprise. Under these circumstances, the end was predictable: the Bulgarians were crushed.

But the fact that Svyatoslav remained in the occupied lands to exercise his authority also over the "Greeks" from whom he claimed tribute, forced the Byzantines to react. Therefore, after thoroughly preparing his future campaign, the new Emperor, John Tzimiskes, attacked Svyatoslav in force. The consequences were dramatic for the Russians, who were forced to admit defeat and retreat. On the way back, however, the Petchenegs organized an ambush against Svyatoslav near the Dnieper cataracts, as a result of which he was killed (972).

Before starting his military actions against the Russians, the emperor had assured the Bulgarians that he only intended to restore their rights in the territories occupied by Svyatoslav. In fact, previous guarantees were mere diplomatic statements; Tzimiskes' true intentions being revealed soon after the victory: the emperor decided the annexation of Bulgaria and the abolition of its Patriarchate, setting up Byzantine garrisons everywhere in the territory.

However, westwards, in the isolated valleys of Macedonia, the imperial rule continued to remain largely formal, here enduring also the political traditions of the ex-Bulgarian tsardom. It is from this area, after the death of John Tzimiskes (976), that the Bulgarians initiated, under the leadership of Samuel, their attempt to restore their State.

After a series of defeats, the Emperor Basil II, known as the Bulgarocton ("killer of the Bulgarians"), will concentrate all his available forces to counteract the Bulgarian uprising. Moreover, the

total and permanent conquest of Bulgaria had become for Basil II the main mission of his reign. Therefore, he took systematic military actions against Samuel, and finally crushed the latter's army, in 1014. After four more years, Basil II defeated the last remnants of resistance, annexing the entire Bulgaria (1018).

This is the context of the return of the Byzantine rule in the Lower Danube area, whose impact on the revival of the urban life along the river in Dobrogea is essential as argument in support of our thesis.

2.2 Revitalization of urban life

Even since 971, in the context of the battle against the army of Svyatoslav at Dristra, the Byzantine sources of information provide very interesting data on the existence of certain fortified settlements situated in the vicinity of this fortress, on both sides of the Danube. However, the real prerequisites for such settlements to develop so as to acquire specific urban characteristics will be created by the new military and administrative Byzantine structure of the period 971-1018.

For instance, in the new Byzantine provinces, the ecclesiastic organization provides important clues on the evolution and status of the settlements from the Lower Danube region. Thus, if during the first decennia of the XIth century we have no data attesting any other diocese in Dobrogea except for Dristra, it seems that, a little later, the diocese of **Axiopolis**/Cernavodă was created, suggesting a clear progress in the sense of urbanization in the *Paradunavon* province. Actually, this reality is confirmed by the promotion of the bishopric of Dristra to the rank of Metropolitan bishopric, by the mid-eleventh century.

The first step in stimulating these developments had been made, as previously mentioned, by Tzimiskes, after the defeat of Svyatoslav. Thus, the measures taken for political, administrative and military reorganization of the territories limited by the Danube necessarily regarded the strongholds mentioned by the Byzantine sources as well. In fact, in the case of these fortresses we are talking about repairing the damaged ones, refurbishing the old ones or building some new fortresses. All the fortifications along the Danube were defended by troops specifically charged with this task, led by local chiefs, subordinated to the strategist of Dristra.

The archaeological researches have confirmed, to some extent, the facts recorded in the Byzantine chronicles. Unfortunately, factors beyond the control of specialists made it impossible to carry out a thorough investigation in many of the sites concerned. In some cases, the old structures lay

underneath certain contemporary settlements, which created enormous difficulties for the careful examination of some settlements like from **Preslavița/Nufăru** or **Aegyssus/Tulcea**. In other cases (**Rasova, Dervent, Troesmis/Turcoaia, Arrubium/Măcin**), only surface research and surveys have been carried out, and for **Carsium/Hârșova, Noviodunum/Isaccea** and **Beroe/Ostrov**, systematic ongoing research programs were initiated in the 90s. A more extensive research was undertaken in settlements like **Dinogetia/Garvăn, Capidava** and **Păciul lui Soare**.

As a part of the Byzantine defense system, most of these settlements (Fig. 1) developed on the site of former Roman-Byzantine fortresses, restructured and transformed into new garrison headquarters located on the new border, through a minimal restoration of the fortification (Dinogetia) and by adding new, medieval walls over the old ones (Capidava, Noviodunum). But there are also fortified cities build *a fundamentis* (Păciul lui Soare, Dervent, Carsium or Preslavița).

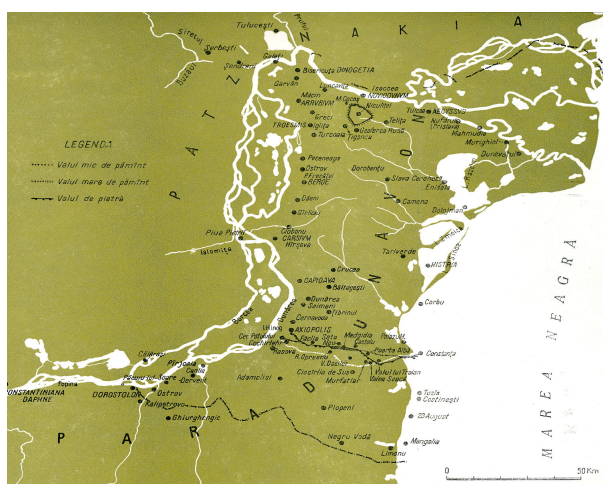


Fig. 1 Dobrogea in Xth-XIIth centuries (after I. Barnea and Șt. Ștefănescu)

Although they owed their beginnings to Byzantium, their evolution, sometimes with tragic ending, is linked to a significant extent to the political situation in the region, namely to the aggressive presence of the nomadic warlike populations. Thus, invasions of the Pechenegs, the Tatars or the Cumans decisively influenced the fate of these settlements, leading to long periods of habitat discontinuity or, even worse, to an irreversible termination of their urban life.

However, at the beginning of the XIth century, a period delimited by the Byzantine return (971) and

the great invasion of the Pechenegs (1036), the main sites along the Danube in Dobrogea evolved from mere port cities, garrison and fleet headquarters, to the status of urban settlements with a marked urban character, genuine civil, trade and artisan centers.

2.3 The main features of the Byzantine fortified cities along the Lower Danube

These settlements were distinguished by their appearance and their quality as human agglomerations, without analogies in the settlements investigated north of the Danube, with a composite ethnic profile, that we do not need to analyze in detail. However, beside the native element, whose presence is undeniable, we have to admit the existence of a foreign segment, represented by Byzantine civil clerks and military officials, but also of merchants and craftsmen who had come from different regions of the empire to prospect and conquer these new markets.

Regarding trades, they were practiced by a large part of the urban population. We should highlight especially the impetus of the trades of the so-called luxury items, which clearly has to be considered as being the work of the foreign craftsmen.

From an ampler perspective, even though crafts played an important role in the overall development of the area of Dobrogea, they do not represent, however, the main component of the process. Actually, judging by the archaeological discoveries that have been made so far, the artisans' production during the XIth-XIIth centuries could not have been the determining feature of the economy of the settlements along the Danube.

In its turn, agriculture does not seem to have constituted the prevailing economic branch in these settlements, as none of them revealed a proportion of agricultural tools significant enough to confirm its extensive practice. Instead, an important occupation, well represented archaeologically is fishing, in most of the sites along the Danube being discovered hundreds of iron hooks and stone or brick loads for the fishing net.

The real catalyst for the ascending structural developments specific for the history of the settlements situated along the Danube at the end of the Xth century and the beginning of the XIth century, proved to be trading. The discovery of numerous objects coming from the farthest corners of Europe and Asia, along with the thousands of coins that ensured the exchange of these goods shows an intense commercial activity and a wide currency circulation. For this reason, it was possible to state that the development of some of these settlements

during the XIth century was due to their role of transit trading centers, a role they were assigned because of their favorable geographical position. Furthermore, being situated on the great artery that was the Danube and at the same time on the empire's border, these settlements probably played the role of mediator in the trade between these regions and the major Byzantine centers. Taking into account the military and administrative functions these settlements accomplished in the *limes* as well, we could easily find the explanation for their **urban** level of development, which they had reached during that period.

But it is equally true that the current state of our knowledge does not allow for a precise determination of the character of each settlement. Thus, about some of them, such as Aegyssus, Arrubium, Axiopolis, Rasova, Derwent, it has been stated that they were mere forts, while others (Beștepe, Mahmudia, Dunavăț), in the absence of detailed information, have been declared just modest settlements. Beroe represents a special case as, although a consistent medieval settlement was proved to have existed there, no adjacent fortified precincts have been discovered so far.

Specific urban characteristics seem to have been the feature of Preslavița, Isaccea, Dinogetia, Troesmis, Carsium, Capidava and Păcuiul lui Soare. Even among them, only at Dinogetia, Capidava and Păcuiul lui Soare was it possible for the character of the urban settlements to be certified archaeologically. For the other settlements, for various reasons, this character can only be guessed, with less, but compelling evidence.

3 Representative fortified cities

Dinogetia developed on a rocky island in the vicinity of the current village Garvăn, situated about 9 km away from Galați and 12 km away from Măcin, being favored by its location at the crossroads of important commercial roads. Initially, however, what attracted the Byzantines, as it did the Romans a few centuries earlier, was the strategic position of the site, dominating the big turn of the Danube and permitting the surveillance of the region from its left bank. At the same time, the island was naturally defended by the river waters, which provided effective support to the imperial fleet.

We would record in this case the undeniable restoration of the Roman-Byzantine fortifications by the imperials after Tzimiskes' return. It seems that, around this event, the former city walls were in a state good enough to allow their rearrangement by the Byzantines.

Protected by fortifications, the settlement rapidly evolved towards attaining quasi-urban features, as those highlighted by the archaeological research. It is true, however, that the place of the former Roman monumental buildings was taken here, as in the other sites, by modest private dwellings. They are grouped both inside the fortified enclosure, i.e. in the *settlement above* (*castrum, gorod*), and on the land outside it, giving birth to the *settlement below* (*suburbium, prigorod*).

Although there was no radical difference between the dwellings situated in the two parts of the settlements, the archaeological finds show a concentration of the wealthier and certainly more influential elements in the settlement above, under the protection of the fortifications. So, it was only here that the archeologists found treasures of golden coins, ornaments made of precious metals, Byzantine lead seals, a golden Episcopal cross, ceramics and other luxury items in large quantity.

Even though most of the dwellings were huts, the settlement of Dinogetia stands out for its unique situation, significant and well represented from an archaeological viewpoint: it is their arrangement in rows somewhat parallel to the enclosure walls at approximately regular distances from one another. Moreover, 3-4 successive levels of dwellings were identified, in which the new huts usually reuse the earlier pits. However, the size, the shape and the inventory of these huts, belonging to successive levels are largely similar, which demonstrates the continuity of life of the respective population.

Regarding the occupations of the people of Dinogetia, they generally belong to the previously outlined framework, except for the creation of some areas specialized in artisan production, mainly located in the suburbs. Among the best represented activities we should mention the commercial exchanges, confirmed by important finds. Thus, in addition to the objects coming from Constantinople and from other Byzantine centers, in a completely natural relationship, were discovered pieces of evidence attesting connections with Bohemia, Slovakia, the Kiev regions and Central Asia. The large number of Byzantine coins found within the settlement also confirms the abundant trade relations.

One aspect of prime importance for a more accurate profiling of the nature of this settlement is the discovery of the church located on the city's plateau. Reduced in size (6 x 6 m), the monument probably served as a modest chapel for the Byzantine garrison here, being built with stone taken from the ruins of the Roman-Byzantine constructions.

The urban lifestyle went through an important moment of discontinuity in Dinogetia, marked by

invasions of the Petchenegs in 1036, and archaeologically attested by the discovery of a hut where seven people died either burned or crushed under its remains. Indeed, beginning with the second half of the XIth century, in relation to the same violent Turanic intrusions, the city seems to have dwindled in size, hiding in the shelter provided by its walls. Moreover, the last level of the huts disappeared by fire from the *castrum*, too, by the middle of the XIth century, probably on the occasion of the Cuman intrusions.

Unlike Dinogetia, the medieval **Capidava** is part of a category of settlements with walls added over or overlapping the old ones, and so integrated into new precincts. Furthermore, in Capidava the archeologists reported a occupation previous to the Tzimiskes episode, marked by improvised dwellings built between the walls of the former Roman-Byzantine buildings; yet, here, the leveling layer noted in Dinogetia as a consequence of the rearrangement of the precincts by the Byzantine authorities does not exist. Despite these differences, we can not speak, however, about the crystallization of an urban-style structure in Capidava before the return of the imperial domination in Dobrogea, the city's evolution being marked by its consequences, just as in the case of the other sites.

Regarding the arrangement of the dwellings, Capidava is somehow similar to Dinogetia. After the period of confusion that preceded the reconquest of Tzimiskes, for which the archaeological research attested somewhat paradoxically the existence of some surface dwellings, beginning with the last quarter of the XIth century, their place was taken by huts, arranged, however, according to a true "urban design", which sequenced them in such a way as to favor the formation of some oblique roads in relation to the sides of the precincts. Moreover, these roads headed towards a central area, where the two main city roads crossed each other. On the same imitative note, the dwelling had expanded at Capidava outside the fortifications, too, a fact confirmed by the presence of a necropolis with about 400 graves.

Interesting discussions have been generated by the discovery of a Byzantine seal of the IXth century, in the berth of the former Roman port; this seal could be an indication concerning the use of its afferent facilities during the Middle Ages as well.

The end of this settlement has to be clearly connected to the invasion of the Pechenegs in 1036, which, along with the other violent intrusions of the Barbarian populations in the southern area of the Danube, led to major disruptions in the urban life of most of the cities of Dobrogea.

A very different situation offers the emergence

and development of the settlement **Păciul lui Soare**. Immediately after his victory over Svyatoslav, John Tzimiskes ordered the *a fundamentis* construction of a strong fortress, on Păciul lui Soare Island, 18 km downstream of Dristra, with the role of a naval base. Its location and the moment of its construction were not chosen by chance.

The fortress was quickly built, in one or maximum two years, and had the function to strictly control the river to protect the new capital of the *theme* of the Lower Danube, located nearby. The aim was first of all to annihilate an eventual intrusion of the fierce Russian-Vareg fleet, recently withdrawn from Dristra, and whose return was possible at any moment.

Furthermore, placing the city in the northeastern corner of the island, opposing Derwent hill on which not incidentally the Byzantines will build, a little later, a second city, was motivated by the need to watch over the ancient river crossing of the Danube, located there.

The fortress initially spread over an area of about five hectares, of which only a small part has remained, the rest being swallowed up by the Danube waters. Even under these conditions, unfavorable for the archaeological research, it was possible to identify the port facility, comprising a monumental stairway, descending to the water in steps, and flanked by two rectangular impressive towers. Also in the part of the city preserved until today on the island, were discovered the ruins of a large building, which is not considered to belong, however, to the category of religious monuments, but rather to that of the constructions required by the port.

Beginning with the return of the Byzantine rule under the Emperor Basil II, after the liquidation of Bulgarian uprising, one can notice, first of all, the fact that the city loses its mainly military function, as a naval base, and also the fact that it acquires the features characteristic for the other contemporary settlements located along the Danube. Thus, the monumental buildings disappeared, their place being taken by huts and surface dwellings, for whose construction the builders sometimes used materials obtained by dismantling the first ones.

By compensation, however, with the assuming of this more modest character of the buildings, there was an unprecedented increase in the number of dwellings, understandable, perhaps, through the attraction of the well-known peasant - border guards named *stratiotai*, the backbone of the Byzantine defense system. The measure is part of the broader context of the disappearance of the Russian-Vareg danger, supported by a large fleet, and its

replacement by a new force, essentially terrestrial, arrived at the mouths of the Danube: *the Petchenegs*. It is not by chance that, for this very reason, the city on the Dervent hill, located in the close proximity, was also built, doubling this way the new responsibilities of the Păcuiu settlement.

Anyway, the brilliant policy of the Emperor Basil II, highlighted also by the diplomacy with which he was able to keep away, for almost three decennia, from the Petcheneg danger, provided a considerable period of peace and prosperity for the settlements along the Danube. Obviously, Păcuiu lui Soare makes no exception to this regional development, recording an obvious progress during this period.

Subsequently, the invasion of the Pechenegs (1036) resulted in the destruction of many settlements, such as Dervent, and in the massacre of some entire communities. However, in the case analyzed here, the end of the dwelling of Dervent triggered the runaway of the city population to Păcuiu, which recorded, just then, a real demographic explosion. Moreover, the fact that, for a decade, no other Petchenegs invasion occurred in the empire assured for the Byzantine fortress of Păcuiu a period of maximum development. The same circumstances explain, in fact, the flourishing of new settlements on the right bank of the Danube, as many as had escaped Barbarian rage. Thus, the archeological research has confirmed the increase in regional and international trade, as well as the development of artisan's production, which offer, along with the concentration of the dwellings, precious pieces of evidence for a different lifestyle than the rural one in these areas.

The interruption of life in the Byzantine fortress of Păcuiu lui Soare occurred only in the late XIth century, following the attack of the Cumans in 1094; yet life recommenced here during the XIIIth century under the form of a definitely urban-type settlement. Without going into further details, we would record the fact that Petre Diaconu, the most important author of the excavations, identified the respective settlement as being the famous **Vicina** settlement mentioned later on in the medieval documents.

4 Conclusions

After almost four centuries (614-971), during which the Slav-Avarian attacks and the constitution of the Bulgarian Tsardom determined the fall of the former Roman *limes* and the suppression of the Byzantine domination along the Lower Danube, the return of the Empire under John Tzimiskes and Basil II created the premises of the revitalization of the urban life in this region.

As a natural consequence of these historical circumstances, the Byzantine administration undertook an ample action of restoration of the former Roman-Byzantine fortifications, and also of construction of new ones, which soon acquired specifically urban features. Their main characteristics have been admirably summarized in an explicit manner as follows:

1. They were all located on the Danube and none was situated on the Black Sea coast, which means that the Black Sea had not yet become the turning point of the international trade;

2. All were fortified, which highlights their military function. The presence of strategists, even in peacetime, supports this conclusion;

3. Each city had its *suburbs* outside the walls, where the people practiced certain crafts. However, the fact that the monetary circulation was weaker here confirms the existence of a settlement center, located within the fortifications, with the role of "market place";

4. All the cities were ports as well, revealing thereby their quality of "market towns", located at the crossroads of "water roads";

5. Trade was prevalent in relation to the production of goods [9].

Finally, we consider it important to highlight the crucial role these settlements played in strengthening the Roman element in the border areas, and in the durable implementation of the Orthodox Christianity in these regions. Not incidentally, this is the time of the completion of the Romanian people's ethnogenesis, with its two fundamental characteristics: Latinity and Orthodoxy.

References:

- [1] S. Baraschi, On the urban civilization in Dobrogea between the 11th and the 14th centuries, *Studii și cercetări de istorie veche și arheologie*, Vol. 42, No. 3-4, 1991, pp. 133-152.
- [2] I. Barnea, *From the Danube to the Black Sea. Historical evidence and monuments of Christian art*, Galați, 1977.
- [3] I. Barnea, Dobrogea between the 7th and the 10th centuries, *Peuce*, Vol. 2, 1971, pp. 205-219
- [4] I. Barnea. and Șt. Ștefănescu, *From the history of Dobrogea. Byzantines, Romanians and Bulgarians at the lower Danube*, București, 1971.
- [5] Leon Diaconul, "The History", *Fontes Historiae Daco-Romanae*, Vol. II, București, 1970, pp. 677-697.
- [6] O. Damian, On the Byzantine political presence on the lower Danube during the 7th-10th

- centuries, in vol. *Închinare lui Petre Ș. Năsturel la 80 de ani*, Brăila, 2003, pp. 283-318.
- [7] O. Damian, Archeological landmarks concerning the medieval towns in different areas. The Lower Danube, *Historia Urbana*, Vol. XIII, No. 1-2, 2005, pp. 141-183.
- [8] S. B. Dașkov, *Byzantine emperors*, București, 1999.
- [9] P. Diaconu, General considerations on the urban settlements from the Lower Danube – 10th-11th centuries, *Cultură și civilizație la Dunărea de Jos*, Vol. II, 1986, pp. 223-226.
- [10] P. Diaconu, *Les Petchénègues au Bas-Danube*, București, 1970.
- [11] P. Diaconu and D. Vîlceanu, *Păcuiul lui Soare, the Byzantine city*, București, 1972.
- [12] R. Florescu, The Danubian Byzantine limes during the Isaurian and Macedonian dynasties, *Pontica*, Vol. 19, 1986, pp. 171-177.
- [13] Al. Madgearu, *Cultural continuity and discontinuity on the Lower Danube during the 7th-8th centuries*, București, 1997.
- [14] Gh. Mănucu-Adameșteanu, *The History of Dobrogea between 969-1204. Archeological and numismatic contributions*, București, 2001.
- [15] D. Obolensky, *A medieval commonwealth — Byzantium*, București, 2002.
- [16] G. Popa-Lisseanu, *Sources of the Romanians' history: Nestor's chronicle*, București, 1935.
- [17] Em. Popescu, News about the history of Dobrogea during the 11th century. The episcopate of Axiopolis, in vol. *Monumente istorice și izvoare creștine*, Galați, 1987, pp. 127-147.
- [18] R. Theodorescu, *Byzantium, Balkans, Occident, at the beginnings of the medieval Romanian culture – 10th-14th centuries*, București, 1974.