

HISTRIA AFTER 100 YEARS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

The centennial of the archaeological research at Histria is a moment of profound significance for both the past and the future of Romanian cultural heritage. In the spring of 1914 when Vasile Pârvan was passionately and enthusiastically uncovering the ruins of the city of Istropolis in the backwaters of Caranasuf (Babadag region, Tulcea county) a multi-centennial history written in stone was ready to be unveiled. And how, if not by interpreting the whitish stones of Histria, could the written and re-written history of this colony of Miletus from the banks of the Sinoe Lake have been revealed?

The results of the very early excavations were fully consistent with the historical information of the written sources, especially as no modern constructions had overlapped the ancient city, making it an ideal subject for the scientific archaeological research of the time. Little by little, the archaeological remains revealed the ancient city-colony of Miletus, which in time developed into a Roman and later a Roman-Byzantine city. The over 1300 years of existence of the Histrian city represented a true masterpiece ready to be explored and to reveal new information on the history of civilization along the western shores of the Black Sea.

Vasile Pârvan's dream to set up a specialized service for the study of Greek and Roman antiquities – and prehistoric and proto-historic artefacts – was to be realized through his followers. He had stated explicitly in his monumental work *Getica. O protoistorie a Daciei (Getica. A Proto-History of Dacia)*, Bucharest, 1926, p. 647: "... the archaeological finds, especially those resulting from excavations, are invaluable. In the way that the Minoan and Mycenaean periods of the Mediterranean culture became integral parts not only of archaeology, but of world history, the Carpathian-Danubian regions would become in future a great chapter in the ancient history of Europe after 3000 BC, and that would be mainly owing to the archaeological finds...". He continued: "... as soon as the ongoing excavations planned throughout the country, covering all pre- and proto-historic ages, have uncovered enough new materials – we shall rewrite the present volume...". This is how Histria developed into the major classical site in Romania, with excavations continuing – with short gaps – almost every year until the present day.

The tempo of the research was imposed by the political events of the 20th century. Thus, after organizing excavations in three successive years (1914 to 1916), with Romania's entry into the First World War and the occupation of Dobrudja by German-Bulgarian troops, Pârvan had to stop digging until 1921, after the conflict was over. From that year, research continued at a constant pace until the period preceding WWII. With the premature death of Pârvan in 1927, it was his former student, Scarlat Lambrino, who took the lead in the excavations. Following the pioneering age and the important organizational efforts initiated by Pârvan, after WWII (from 1949 on) and with Emil Condurachi as the research director, excavations became more and more extensive, benefiting from the considerable financial support of the competent authorities.

The increasingly spectacular results of the archaeological research had a larger and larger echo within the historical and archaeological community of Romania and beyond. This also reflected in the immense scientific literature generated by this archaeological site. The importance of the excavations at Histria caught the attention of several scholars who became part of the research during the post-war period. From among them arose the new generation of researchers in the fields of classical archaeology and Roman and Greek epigraphy. More recently, the excavations at Histria have been directed by researchers who trained and became specialists as a result of their involvement in the excavations at the site. To their pious memory I mention here only two who left us most recently: Petre Alexandrescu – the eminent specialist in ancient Greek pottery, and the historian Alexandru Suceveanu, the late scientific director of the site.

A century of archaeological excavations in the city bearing the Ancient Greek name of the Danube – Ἰστῆρος – a river that facilitated connections with the Geto-Dacian inland, contributed essentially not only to the historical understanding of Moesia and Scythia, but the whole of Dacia, and also to the perception of the relations between the Greeks, the Romans and the local population. In time Histria yielded an impressive number of Greek and Latin inscriptions, together with Greek, Roman and Roman-Byzantine monuments of incontestable value such as the city walls from various historical stages, the Greek sacred area with its sanctuaries and cult-related infrastructure, the Roman monuments (two thermae and civilian basilicae) and, last but not least, important Palaeo-Christian remains (six basilicae – among which the recently published Episcopal basilica). The cultural wealth of the ancient colony of Miletus is fully reflected in the impressive number of scientific contributions (papers, shorter or longer studies, fifteen volumes in the homonymous Histria series) that have been published so far.

1300 years of habitation in this colony of Miletus from the banks of the Sinoe Lake confer on the place a special historical substance, standing permanently in need of decipherment. Past, present and future generations will record for posterity the history of Histria as it was.

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