

Animal Symbolism of Northern Origin in the Lower Danube Region (10th–11th Centuries)

Old and New Approaches

BY ILEANA STĂNCULESCU

Abstract

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This article aims to bring to the attention of researchers, in particular those of Scandinavia, the unique presence of animal symbols in the limestone mountain chambers found in Basarabi-Murfatlar in Romania. The unusual iconographic layering of the underground chalk caverns in the Lower Danube area features an overlapping of pre-Christian animal depictions (horses, hunting scenes, etc.) with Christian-era animal symbols (the dove, the sign of the cross, the figures of saints, etc.). From the collection of wall decorations found in the chambers of the Basarabi-Murfatlar site, it is likely that certain depictions have strong ancestral links with Nordic cultural space: the spiral dragon, the labyrinth, the symbol of the sun, etc. The Basarabi-Murfatlar site, though studied in depth by archaeologists and historians under the Communist regime after its discovery in the 1960s, continues to give rise to many questions. The true nature of the spiral dragon, together with the runic inscriptions found on the walls, still awaits interpretation by Scandinavian researchers.

Ileana Stănculescu, Romanian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Political Science and International Relations, Blvd. Iuliu Maniu 1–3, Corp A, et. 7, Sector 6, Bucharest, Romania. stanculescuileana@yahoo.com.

Scandinavian culture in Romania oscillates between periods of neglect and reinterpretation. In Romania, Scandinavian prehistoric and medieval culture is a little-known subject that has remained primarily a specialist field. In 1969, the country's cultural institutions staged a large exhibition of Viking treasures in collaboration with various Scandinavian museums, with the aim of demonstrating the links between Scandinavia and the Black Sea. To my knowledge, no other such event to promote Viking figurative culture has been held in Romania. The exhibition contained various gold Viking objects, and the introductory studies in the accompanying catalogue

provided an analysis of the similarities of the zoomorphic motifs found on Scandinavian objects with those found in the Black Sea area. In his study, Wilhelm Holmquist emphasized the important role played by animal symbols in Nordic figurative culture of the first millennium AD (*Aurul vikingilor* 1969, pp. 31 f.).

Despite their geographical separation, in terms of Viking culture the two countries of Sweden and Romania enjoy a wide range of connections, in terms of both literary texts and figurative representations, as evidenced by archaeological findings. The origins of many of these connections lies somewhere between legend and myth. From a mythologi-

cal perspective, there are multiple similarities between the population of what is today Romania and that of Northern Europe. I will mention only the renowned study by Mircea Eliade, which investigated the relationship between the Geto-Dacian god of Zalmoxis and Freyr using ancient texts (Eliade 1980, pp. 61 f.).

Eliade suggests that Moldavia, one of the Romanian feudal states, was founded on the principle of Varangian confraternity and describes Viking influence on the state formation activity of Drago (14th century), also drawing on the comparative study of animal symbols found in the mythological narrative: the ox, dog, deer, horse, elk (Eliade 1980, pp. 38 f.). From his study of the Moldavian chroniclers (Grigore Ureche, Miron Costin), as well as the landmark works by ancient historians, Eugen Lozovan believes the founding of the Moldavian state under Drago would not have been possible without Rurik and his men from the North (Lozovan 1998, p. 215).

The historian Constantin Cantacuzino (17th century), in his work on the origins of the Romanians, repeats an old tradition when, citing Antonius Bonifinius, he writes that the Romanians not only come from the Romans (Eliade 1980, pp. 38 f.) but also from the Dacians, who are thought to have come from Scandinavia: "I believe the Dacians and Getae, whom we also call the Goths, came from Scandinavia" (Cantacuzino C. N. 1961, pp. 9, 67).

Studies also suggested the existence of Nordic elements in the various treasures found in Romania:

a. *The Treasure of Sânnicolau Mare* (discovered in Transylvania and today at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria). This contains an extremely interesting vessel featuring animal depictions (griffins and lions) and runic descriptions on the rear (Florescu & Miclea 1979).

b. *The Treasure of Pietroasele* (discov-

ered in the first half of the 19th century in the village of Pietroasele, at the foot of the Carpathians), which among other objects also contains a gold neck ring with the inscription: *gutaniowihailag* – "the Gothic temple treasure, holy".

The colour reproduction of the ring is provided by G. Stephens in the book *The Old-Northern Runic Monuments of Scandinavia and England* (<http://runeberg.org/nfbd/0291.html>, Bukarest-ringen, pp. 545–546). Odobescu, one of the pioneers of archaeological studies and the history of art in Romania, makes a detailed study of the inscription on the neck ring found in Pietroasele in his extensive work on the objects in this find, written at the close of the 19th century (Odobescu 1976, pp. 362–409). Parts of the neck ring, damaged by various brutal interventions, are on display today in the treasure room of the Museum of History in Bucharest (<http://www.mnir.ro>).

c. Traces discovered in the excavations at the fort on the island in the Danube – *Păcuiul lui Soare* (Yotov 2003, p. 15).

We may ask ourselves what population lived on the lower course of the Danube during this period? (Spinei 1973)

"Rodvisl and Rodälv had these stones raised in memory of their three sons. This stone was in memory of Rodfos. He was betrayed by the Wallachians whilst on an expedition. God help Rodfos's soul. May God betray those who betrayed him," reads a runic inscription on the Sjönhem Stone (G 134, Gotlands Fornsal, Visby, 11th century), is still to be read on a stone found in Sjönhem parish on Gotland. This stone was erected in remembrance of the murder of the Scandinavian traveller Rodfos by Blakumen (Wlachs) on his journey to the Black Sea and Constantinople. *Blakumannaland* is mentioned in the 12th century by the Icelandic author Snorri Sturluson (1179–1224). Wlachs would have been the name for the Romanic-speaking population of the

Balkan peninsula. It is not known where they lived during the period of the Viking migrations, but it appears the majority lived in the place known today as Romania. According to another theory, the Blakumen (Polvostians), were a Turkish nomadic population found from the steppes to the north of the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea (1000–1100).

Scandinavian mobility, the origins of which are insufficiently clear and which is far too varied to allow a synthetic interpretation, acted in the eastern end of Europe as a catalysing factor, as can be seen clearly in the foundation of Slavic states (Novgorod, Kiev) and the reinvigoration of trade, both with the Khazar kaganate and the Byzantine empire. Without this infusion of constructive energy there could be no explanation, neither for the Kievan success in wiping out the Khazar kaganate, a political structure which balanced relations between the North Pontic Steppe and Byzantium, nor for the intrepid attempt to wrest control of the Lower Danube region from the empire. Svyatoslav conquered the centre of the Bulgarian kaganate not only with Slavic troops, but also with Viking swords and sailing vessels from Birka! The historian Ion Spinei spent a long time studying the populations from the mouth of the Danube, especially the presence of the Varangians in the imperial Byzantine armies, basing his work on Nordic and eastern sources. He also looks at the presence of Varangians in Constantinople in their role as church founders (Spinei 1973, pp. 259–285).

The Basarabi-Murfatlar complex can be explained in terms of this dense historical context, a mixture of legend, myth and real historical testimony.

On 11 June 1957, 17 km west of Constanta, on the north-west slope of the limestone hill of Tibisir, the entrance to a small church was accidentally discovered; this became known as B1 (church number 1), because it was the first religious space to be discovered in

Murfatlar. In the period 1957–1962, the Institute of Archaeology of the Romanian Academy, represented by Ion Barnea, performed a number of different excavations. The archaeological research uncovered various chambers hewn out of the rock. Above B1 were found 3 overlying churches named B2, B3 and B4; annex rooms; burial chambers, C1 and C2; burial galleries, G1, G2, G3, G4 and G5; chambers with unknown use; and two chapel churches, E3 and E5. Though these sites were studied by Romanian researches together with foreign researchers, many issues remained unanswered. (For plans of all churches as well as a documentary film, see: www.patzinakia.ro/MonografiaBasarabi-Murfatlar/basalbunINTRO.htm.)

The caves were initially limestone quarries which provided the blocks of chalk used in the construction of the upper part of the Great Stone Wall of Dobrudja, reaching from Constanta to Cernavoda. It is assumed that extraction ended under John Tzimiskes (969–976). It was possibly during this period (the first millennium AD) that the purpose of the complex changed, forming a group of churches and burial chambers. Investigation of the Basarabi-Murfatlar complex (its dating is disputed, ranging between the 9th and the 11th centuries) thus began in the period 1957–58. In recent years, a series of archaeologists, restorers and young art historians have begun to study the monument for scientific reasons and, in particular, with the aim of preserving – through photography and the creation of an Internet database, as well as real restoration work – these most fragile of traces in limestone of elements existing at the border between pagan figurative culture and early Christianity. In respect of the iconography of the walls of the chalk caverns, researchers have identified two different layers:

a. An initial layer, considered to be the *pagan layer*, containing animal representations – horses, cows, hares, deer, etc. (Fig. 1, 1a)

– either on their own or in compositions that could represent nature or hunting scenes (this layer was dated pre-10th century).

b. The *Christian layer* containing animal depictions – dove, saints in orant position, crosses of diverse forms (Fig. 6), spiral dragons with and without a head, the symbol of a labyrinth, sun symbols or ships (believed to be of Viking origin) – beside inscriptions in Greek, Old Church Slavonic and the runic alphabet; this layer was dated to the 10th–11th centuries (Agrigoroaei 2007).



Fig. 1. Horses in C1 (Stănculescu 2008).



Fig. 1a. Horses in B2 (Stănculescu 2008).



Fig. 2. Christian representations in B1 (Stănculescu 2008).

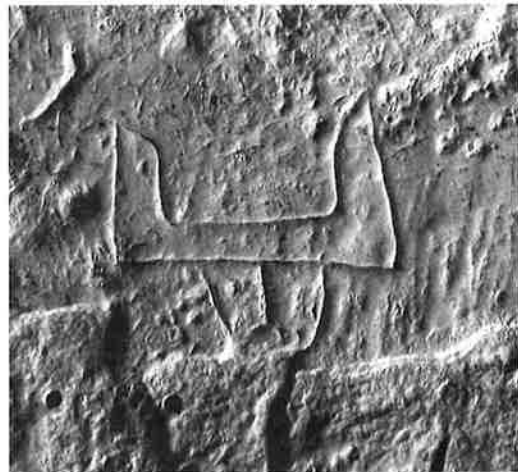


Fig. 3. Tamga in B3 (Stănculescu 2008).

Identifying the relationship between these layers raises many questions as to the interpretation of the symbols. The zoomorphic and aniconic iconography, presumed to be of Nordic origin, could be explained by the intense movement of Varangians in the region for either economic or military reasons: (a) Varangian merchants, as clearly attested by the stones on Gotland, as mentioned above; (b) Varangian mercenaries within the Byzantine



Fig. 4. Dragons in C1, South wall (Stănculescu 2008).

army explain the presence of certain objects (primarily weapons) found in the territories known today as Romania and Bulgaria.

The Tamga (Fig. 5) is a symbol present on the chalk walls of Murfatlar, having a direct connection with the army of Svyatoslav, present in the region, according to historical data, between 969 and 971 (Agrigoroaei 2005, pp. 45; Yotov 2003).

Certain representations on the walls of structures dug into stone thus share common origins in the interpretation they have been given (Iliescu 1986, p. 191). It is still not known today whether this layer, presumed to be of Nordic origin, was created in parallel, previously or subsequent to the Christian imagery. The depictions in Murfatlar look like modern graffiti, with thousands of intersecting lines and overlapping, a jigsaw puzzle whose structure is yet to be fully defined.

I will mention here a few depictions reminiscent of the far-off land of the Vikings. A categorization of the images still visible today, as well as those that have faded but are recorded in the specialist literature, should include the following (Grigore 2007):

1. *Figurative elements: Double spiral dragons* (Figs. 2, 2a, 2b) with and without head, in chambers C1, on the S and W walls, in C2, in B3, B4, E5 (Barnea 1962);

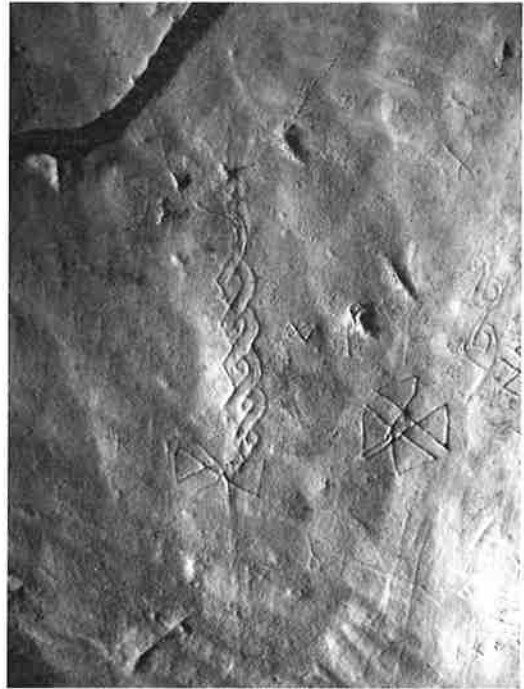


Fig. 4a. Dragons in C1, South wall, detail (Stănculescu 2008).



Fig. 4b. Dragons in C1, South wall, detail (Stănculescu 2008).



Fig. 5. Ship in B3 (Stănculescu 2008).

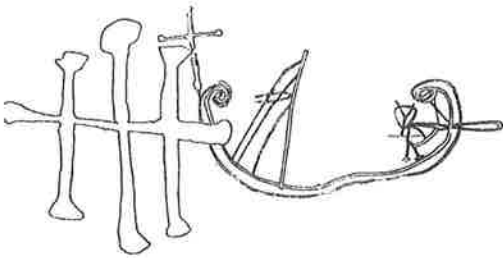


Fig. 5a. Ship in B3 (drawing, Barnea I. 1960).

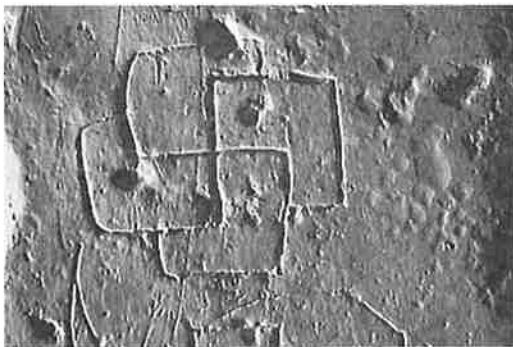


Fig. 6. Symbol of the Sun in B4 (www.patzinakia.ro).



Fig. 6a. Symbol of the Sun in B3 (Stănculescu 2008).

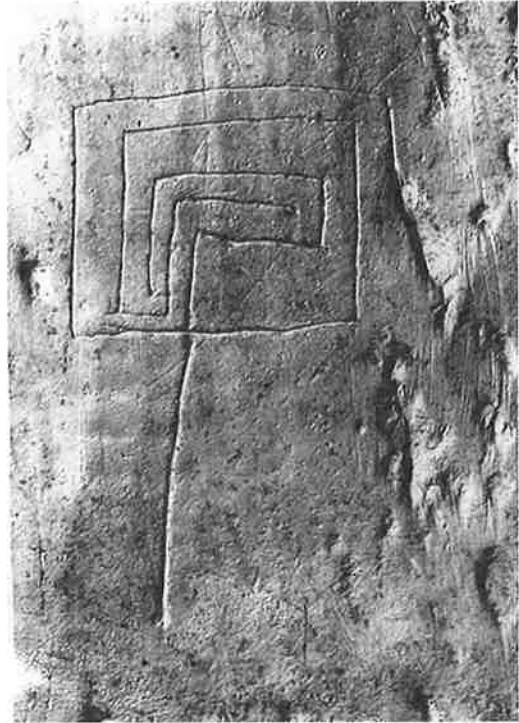


Fig. 7. Labyrinth (Barnea 1960).

Ship (Fig. 5, 5a) with man at helm, in church B2 (Barnea 1962, pp. 192–195; Barnea & Teftănescu 1978, p. 199).

The spiral dragons on the walls in Murfatlar are the work of a highly skilled hand, as can be seen from the drawing of a dragon on the southern wall of burial chamber C1.

2. *Aniconic elements: Symbol of the sun* (Figs. 4, 4a) – *Swastika* (in chamber B4 on the column to the left of the iconostasis, in church B3 on N wall); *Labyrinth* (Fig. 7) accompanied by a runic inscription (in chamber B4). Among researchers, the labyrinth motif has swung back and forth between Scandinavian and Greek interpretations (Barnea, 1963, pp. 1 f.).

In relation to these artistic and, possibly, epigraphic elements which we consider to be of Scandinavian, Viking origin, it should be noted that recently – based on an already known passage from the work of Walafrid Strabo, a German monk from Re-

ichenau, according to whom the Gothic language was still in use, for liturgical purposes, in the area around Tomis in the first half of the 9th century – two Romanian researchers have attempted to attribute to the late Goths the elements until now almost unanimously considered of North Germanic origin: runes, dragons, perhaps the labyrinth and the boat (Theodorescu 1974, p. 93).

Of all the existing spaces, that with the largest number of Nordic-origin representations is Church B3, which contains representations of the spiral dragon, a vessel considered to be Viking, as well as the tamga, the symbol of Prince Svyatoslav. Dragons are also to be found in significant numbers in C1 (on the southern and western walls) in similar depictions to those of B3, alongside crosses of various shapes (including the Maltese cross), human legs and inscriptions (Agrigoroaei 2005, p. 34).

The most beautiful representation of the dragon, artistically speaking, is found in C1 (Fig. 6b), in the same chamber in which the skeletons were discovered. This space was designated a *burial chamber* by the archaeologist I. Barnea, given that two human skeletons were found here whose extraordinary height (much greater than that of the local population) led the historian to consider them as being of Nordic provenance. There have also been opposing views as to the Nordic origins of the skeletons discovered in C1 (Agrigoroaei 2005). The historian Agrigoroaei showed, through relevant examples, that the Vikings were buried together with a rich collection of objects and that the tombs in Murfatlar in C1 did not contain such objects alongside the skeletons found (Barnea & Bilciulescu 1959; Agrigoroaei 2005, p. 38). Nonetheless, I consider the theory that all Viking tombs contained the same amount of objects to be rather weak. From this point of view, statements relating to this issue should be more nuanced. I wonder to what extent someone of

Nordic origin, lying dead between the limestone walls of Murfatlar, would have received the same burial ritual as his counterparts in Scandinavia?

It would be interesting if our partners, the Swedish researchers, were able to trace the boxes containing skeletal fragments, which I, personally, was unable to locate, and to study them using isotope analysis. This might shed light on some of the question marks still hovering over the Nordic origins of certain symbols in Murfatlar.

In respect of the Viking vessel on the wall of Church B3, V. Agrigoroaei cites the doctoral student Martin Lundkvist from Stockholm University, who in April 2003 analysed the difference between the schema of the drawings in Murfatlar and the Viking ships, expressing scepticism about the Viking provenance of the vessel.

The epigraphy itself brings some arguments in the favour of the presence of the Varangians in the Lower Danube region. Ion Barnea has identified some runic inscriptions in B1, B3, B4, as well as E3 and E5 (Fig. 8). Runic inscriptions are to be found in the funerary chamber C1, where the beautiful representations of the dragons are.

Runic characters were also found on the exterior walls of the monument and identified as being runes of diverse origins: Turkish, Mongolian, Russian and Hungarian. Some runes are mixed with Glagolitic (the first form of Old Slavic writing) and Cyrillic lettering.

In what language were the runic inscriptions written, and how can they be deciphered? The Romanian school of archaeology has established possible links between the symbolic imagery described above and the Nordic world. We are now looking for specialists in this field to address the issue of the inscriptions (runes, Nordic or Asian), on the one hand, and the meaning of the dragons, labyrinth and sun symbol imagery that ap-

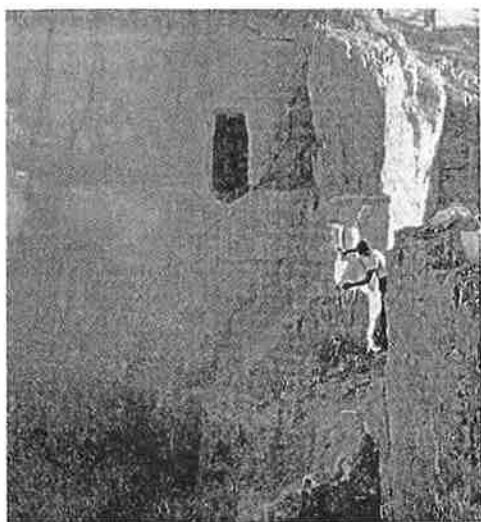


FIG. 1. — Entrée de la chapelle B 1.

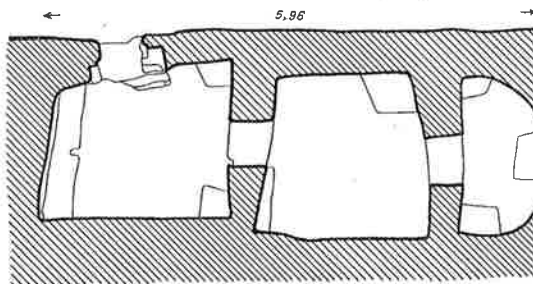


FIG. 2. — Plan de la chapelle B 1
(par l'architecte V. Bilciurescu et modifié par I. Barnea).

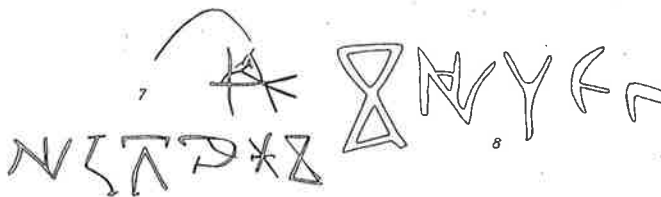
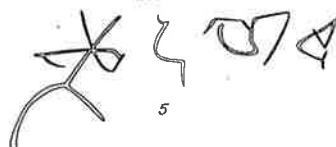
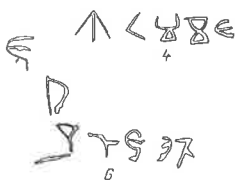
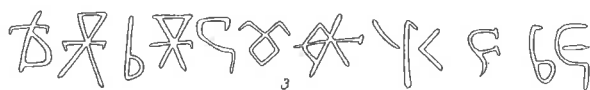
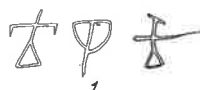


FIG. 3. — Graffiti à caractères divers figurant sur les parois des monuments rupestres de Basarabi : 1-3 : chapelle B 1 ; 4-7 : chambre funéraire C 1 ; 8 : paroi à gauche de l'entrée de la galerie C 4.

Fig. 8. Inscriptions (Barnea 1962).

pears in various chambers, on the other.

The images in the chalk caverns of Basarabi-Murfatlar still give rise to many questions today:

- What was the function of these images?
- What is the connection between mural imagery and the function of the space in which it is found?
- What is the dating of the wall imagery?
- Does all of this imagery stem from Nordic culture, or was some of it copied later?
- What relationship can we establish between the varied imagery of a chamber and the runic inscriptions?

These questions can only be answered by an interdisciplinary team of Romanian and Scandinavian researchers. I imagine none but the Swedes themselves would go to the trouble of discovering Nordic traces in the Lower Danube. Basarabi-Murfatlar was discovered in the 1960s, at a time when in Communist Romania research was supposed to demonstrate how everything originated from the Soviet Union. It would probably be worthwhile continuing the research carried out in this period. Contact with Western Europe was unimaginable at the time; now it is very possible. To carry on the work of those who discovered the chalk structures we today call on Swedish researchers.

Should we abandon the theory of Nordic origin, or is it still worth investigating the images and inscriptions (while we can still see them) in light of this theory? And if they are not of Nordic origin, where then should we seek their source?

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