

ON THE CONSERVATION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE: THE CASE OF THE MURAL PAINTINGS IN THE CELLARS OF ȘERBAN VODĂ INN

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Abstract: Following the discovery of mural paintings in Șerban Vodă Han cellars, it seems that we can refer to a new kind of medieval images meant to protect and decorate the place: *cellar icons*.

Given the way they were presented to the public by the authors of the archaeological explorations in 2007-2009, the three fragments of mural painting miraculously surviving in the ruins of the southern side of the Royal Han included two representations of Saint Nicholas and one *Dormition of the Mother of God*. The three icons disappeared from their initial place before being adequately researched. If the *in situ* study can be replaced by the photo evidence, if the lab survey can still use some small fragments recovered after the destruction of the *Dormition of the Mother of God* icon, other details which could have supported the date of the mural paintings are lost for ever. They include graphites, often ignored, even if it refers to the conservation and restoration of a historical monument. In our case, we would have lost any information about the existence of graphites unless a closer examination of the photographic records to re-compose the extracted fragments of Saint Nicholas icon would have allowed the discovery of a graphite including the year 7264 (1756).

Rezumat: Odată cu descoperirea picturilor murale din ruinele Hanului Șerban Vodă s-ar părea că putem vorbi de o nouă categorie de imagini medievale menite a ocroti și înfrumuseța locul: *icoanele de pivniță*.

Așa cum au fost deja prezentate publicului de autorii săpăturilor arheologice din intervalul 2007-2009, cele trei fragmente de pictură murală ce supraviețuiseră miraculos în ruinele de pe latura sudică a Hanului Domnesc cuprindeau două reprezentări ale Sf. Ierarh Nicolae și o icoană a Adormirii Maicii Domnului.

Aflate în zona propusă spre conservare din ansamblul ruinelor Hanului Șerban Vodă, cele trei icoane de pivniță urmau să fie supuse unor operațiuni de protecție și conservare *in situ*. La începutul lunii iulie 2008 descoperirea primelor două icoane murale – Sf. Nicolae de pe peretele estic și Adormirea Maicii Domnului – în zona săpăturilor de pe latura sudică a Băncii Naționale, ne-a îndemnat să propunem o intervenție de consolidare urgentă urmată de o protecție temporară până la încheierea cercetării arheologice și includerea zonei într-un proces de conservare și punere în valoare. A existat chiar speranța unui mic spațiu muzeistic dedicat vechiului Han Domnesc. Protecția sitului arheologic avea însă de înfruntat cel puțin doi factori de degradare redutabili: omul, cu posibilitățile sale de distrugere prin vandalizare sau neglijență și umiditatea cu toate consecințele, de la migrarea și recristalizarea sărurilor solubile, decoeziunea produsă prin fenomenul de îngheț-dezghet și atacul biologic.

Extrase din spațiul său de origine, lipsite de relația evocatoare cu arhitectura pivnițelor medievale cantacuzine, fragmentele substanțial diminuate din icoana Sf. Nicolae de pe peretele estic al ansamblului celor șase pivnițe propuse spre conservare reprezintă astăzi singura mărturie vie a ceea ce a însemnat, mai mult decât o simplă decorație, iconografia unei părți din Hanul Șerban Vodă. Cele trei icoane au dispărut din locul lor de origine înainte de a fi fost cercetate cum se cuvine. Dacă analiza stilistică *in situ* mai poate fi suplinită de existența documentației fotografice, dacă analizele de laborator mai pot utiliza mici fragmente recuperate după distrugerea icoanei Adormirii Maicii Domnului, alte detalii care ar fi putut veni în sprijinul datării picturilor murale sunt definitiv pierdute. În categoria acestora se află grafitale, ignorate adesea chiar atunci când este vorba de operațiunile de conservare și restaurare a unui monument istoric.

Au existat, prin urmare, grafitale în ruinele Hanului Șerban Vodă? Întrebarea ar fi trebuit să privească, în primul rând cele trei icoane al căror suport de var permite cu ușurință incizarea unor semne sau inscripții. Suportul picturii murale este utilizat adeseori în spațiile bisericilor noastre pentru a cumula, de la semne la explicate inscripții, veritabile cronici abreviate ale locului. În cazul nostru am fi pierdut orice informație despre existența unor grafitale dacă examinarea atentă a documentației fotografice în scopul recompunerii fragmentelor extrase ale icoanei Sf. Nicolae nu ar fi permis descoperirea unui grafit ce conține fie anul 7207 (1699) fie 1764 (1756). Alte mici grafitale însoțesc data precum și o serie de linii verticale tăiate de o linie orizontală semnificând poate realizarea în acel loc a unor slujbe de pomenire.

Decizia conservării sub actuala protecție de sticlă a complexului celor șase pivnițe de pe latura sudică a Hanului Domnesc a intervenit după dispariția celor trei icoane pictate în frescă. Evenimentul pune încă odată în discuție, în condițiile „Bucureștilor ce se duc”, modul defectuos în care este pusă în practică con-lucrarea autorităților publice – tutela – a specialiștilor din diferite domenii ale cercetării patrimoniului arheologic și a edililor. Amestecul nociv de indolență, ignoranță și cinism fac din tutelă un factor de degradare redutabil pe care în acești ultimi ani Vechiul București l-a resimțit din plin. Absența, în cazul cercetărilor arheologice, a unor echipe pluridisciplinare coezive și stabile face ca argumentele pentru salvarea vestigiilor trecutului să rămână lăncede și neconvingătoare, în vreme ce edilii privesc recuperarea trecutului ca pe un inconfort ce trebuie tratat printr-un abil glissando de la rigorile și subtilitățile conservării și restaurării patrimoniului construit la „reabilitarea” și „adaptarea” lui brutală.

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The recent discovery,¹ in the ruins of the cellars of Șerban Vodă Han, of three icons painted in fresco, provides a new image on the way the painting craftsmanship was used outside the ecclesial space. The traces of medieval painters' activity outside the iconographic programme of churches, in princely houses or those of the boyars, are quite rare. The mural decorations which could have been preserved, such as those in Brancovan or post-Brancovan² palaces disappeared or, in the most fortunate case, survived as fragments only, *in situ* or in private collections.

Following the discovery of mural paintings in the ruins of Șerban Vodă Han, it might seem that we could speak of a new category of medieval images meant to protect and decorate a place: *cellar icons*.

According to the way they were presented to the public by the authors of the archaeological research of 2007-2009, the three fragments of mural painting which had miraculously survived in the ruins of the southern side of the Princely Han comprised two representations of *Holy Hierarch Nicholas* and one *Dormition of the Mother of God*. In locating the three fragments, we will consider the results of the archaeological research and the architectural surveys offering an overview on how the historical centre of Bucharest was structured.³

The three icons in fresco occupied the central area of an ensemble of cellars, marked by the presence of two massive pillars and engaged piers on the east and west walls.⁴ Naturally, the icons were located on the eastern surface of the brick masonry – impeccably done in this case – and at accessible height.

The first icon, from east to west, was painted on the eastern wall of cellar 4, in close vicinity to the median pier of the east wall. The image, of about 130 x 150 cm, held the representation of the Holy Hierarch Nicholas (Fig. 1). Traces of the eroded and exfoliated inscription on the right side of the upper section of the icon, on the black background – the “ink” or “background”⁵ (charcoal black with a bit of lime white) allow us to catch a glimpse of the name of the Holy Hierarch. The visage is preserved fragmentarily: most of the ochre aura, and fragments allowing one to read the polilobed beard of the bishop and the shape of his hair. Traces of the greenish *proplasma* (ochre, charcoal black) and the red ochre allow us to reconstruct the drawing of the visage in the technique of Byzantine tradition. The fragments of vestment were part of a red phelonion, with embroidery on an ochre background around the neck, and a pink omophorion, in lime shades. On the black background, on each side of the Holy Hierarch, over the shoulders, on the red (red ochre) clouds, at a smaller scale, are depicted, following intensely used iconographic patterns, Mother of God to the left, and Jesus Christ, to his right.⁶ The icon is surrounded by an ornament outlined by red stripes (red ochre, perhaps cinnabar) following the good tradition of 17th-18th centuries art: vegetal stalks in red ochre and charcoal black alternate on the white lime background (Fig. 2a-b). At the hem of the icon, fragments can be read of a drapery executed alertly, whose pattern continues on the northern face of the pier (Fig. 3).

Painted on the traditional lime-rich support,⁷ made of a single layer with the role of *intonaco*, of variable thickness (0.8 - 3 cm), reinforced with straw and hemp fibre, the icon bears within its fragments certain signs specific to a *fresco* mural painting: traces of the trowel during the scouring process or the incisions of the drawing in the moist ground coat.

¹ Mănucu-Adameșteanu *et alii*. 2010, pp. 109-117.

² An icon painted in fresco used to be in the princely house part of the Văcărești Monastery. Surprisingly, the demolition in 1985 of the monastic ensemble did not involve the disappearance of the mural painting. Extracted in an improvised manner, with several fractures, the icon survived in a private collection. The Brancovan Princely Palace at Mogoșoaia would have had much more mural decoration than the fine combination of painting and stucco in the eastern loggia.

³ Apostol, Bălici 2010, pp. 119-177.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p.161.

⁵ Dionisies din Furna, pp. 56, 248.

⁶ Efremov 2002, p. 191 (Ill. 80), description of the icon of Saint Nicholas in Wallachia, in the last quarter of the 17th century.

⁷ Dionisie din Furna, p. 54.



Fig. 1. Icon of St. Nicholas, discovered in the east wall of cellar 4.



Fig. 2a-b. Overall view and detail of the visage of St. Nicholas, preserved fragmentarily on the east wall of cellar 4.



Fig. 3. Detail image with the representation of the draping at the hem of the icon of St. Nicholas painted in cellar 4.



Fig. 4a-b. Images of the icon of the *Dormition of the Mother of God*, taken immediately after the disinterment from the mix of earth and rubble (a) and after the clearing of the biofilm developed as a result of biological attack (b).

Starting with the first reading and attempt to reconstruct the image, it seems that we find ourselves in the good tradition of the Brancovan art, as we can see it in the exterior painting at Stavropoleos, for instance.⁸ The hand of the painter is that of a muralist, skilled in swiftly attaining surfaces meant to be contemplated from a distance.

The second fresco icon, on the East pillar of the arch at the passage from cellars 2 to 5, was about 120 x 110 cm (Fig. 4a-b). Preserved as fragments, as well, it had suffered also extensive losses of the painting layer. Numerous lacunae of the support, from the extended ones which had destroyed the outer area of the painting, to the small ones scattered about on the icon itself and the decorative frame around it, were causing an irreversible discontinuity of the image. The precarious state of the painting support, with lacunae and lack of adhesion to the brick masonry, the discoloration of the entire image by flaking and erosion of the paint layer disclosed action of degradation factors, starting with the implacable human action which had destroyed and buried, finally and aggressively the ruins of the old medieval han, up to the converging action of humidity and biodeterogene factors (Fig. 5a-b). Close in size to a wooden icon, the image in fresco was dedicated to



Fig. 5a-b. The icon of the *Dormition of the Mother of God*, after the biological attack (a) and during the biocide operations (b).

the representation the *Dormition of the Mother of God*. The selected iconographic alternative included the scene of the *Dormition* together with the *Ascent* of Mary's soul into the Kingdom of God (Fig. 6). The icon was surrounded by a generous ornament where the painting and stucco flat relief merged in a fine expression, established in the mural decoration of the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th. Of the precious icon frame only a few hints had survived: the red stripes, indefinite traces of the ornament, apparently with stalks, along the delicate stucco mould which, together, separated the icon from the mural surface.

As bad as it was preserved, reduced to the broad surfaces and composition lines, to the relations between some of the base tones, to the ochre wash of the preparatory drawing, the icon still expressed its initial image: a miniature vision, similar to a sumptuous manuscript page, mastering at the same time the balance of the broad shapes of the composition with the craftsmanship of an experienced muralist. In a clean technique,

⁸ The original exterior painting of the church of Stavropoleos Monastery, from 1724, was replaced by an edulcorate replica, in the neo-Byzantine and neo-Romanian taste of Father Professor Demian, and in support of the restoration conducted by architect Ion Mincu. Nevertheless, fragments of the original painting survived in the church attic, allowing a reconstruction of how the exterior painting of the foundation of Bishop Ioanichie looked like.



Fig. 6. The icon of the *Dormition of the Mother of God* painted on the east pillar of the arch at the passage from cellars 2 to 5.



Fig. 7. The second icon of St. Nicholas, painted in fresco on the pillar at the east extremity of the arch at the passage from cellars 3 to 6.

of a talented fresco- and icon painter, the representation of the *Dormition of the Mother of God* had been completed on the fresh lime ground, strengthened with hemp fibre, in a relatively homogenous layer, more consistent (0,8 - 1 cm thickness) inside the stucco frame. A network of contraction splits mostly present in the exterior rendering of the icon, indicated the high humidity of the support-masonry affected by infiltrations and ultimately buried in the mix of earth and debris.

The third icon, on the pillar to the East of the arch connecting cellar 3 to cellar 6 was assigned once again to the representation of the Holy Great Hierarch Nicholas (Fig. 7). Larger in size than the other icons – 135 x 232 cm – the image was framed by the well-known Byzantine type of ornament, zigzag-like structure inside which palmettes alternate, painted with charcoal black and red ochre. Two red stripes outlined the ornament. Despite the fact that most of the ground plaster had survived the aggression of degradation factors, a strong process of flaking and abrasion of the colour layer had turned the icon into an image similar to a negative or the back side of a mural painting extracted by pulling up the paint layer (*strappo*).

The iconographic version used in the second representation of Saint Nicholas was similar to the one used for the first icon, preserved fragmentarily onto the east wall of the six cellars ensemble. The Holy Hierarch Nicholas appeared vested in a red oxide phelonion with an omophorion, whose tonality and ornaments had completely vanished. Next to his visage, of which mere traces of the preparatory drawing with yellow ochre were still perceptible (Fig. 8), the scene included Jesus Christ to the left (Fig. 9) and the Mother of God to the right, standing on clouds rendered on red oxide base. On the black background, one could read quite easily the traces of the saint's inscription, initially written in lime white. At the base of the icon, fragments of a curtain suggested the way the decoration of the pillar ended, in the spirit of religious mural painting. The colour range,



Fig. 8. Detail with the visage of the second representation of St. Nicholas. The preparation drawing is visible, made with yellow ochre.



Fig. 9. Similar to the iconographic version in the first icon of St. Nicholas, the Great Hierarch is flanked in the area of the visage by Jesus (in the photograph) and The Mother of God.

restrained, kept similar marks to the first icon of Saint Nicholas: the charcoal black background, the yellow ochre, the red oxide, the cinnabar red (traces still visible on the vestment of the Mother of God), and lime white. The layout of the phelonion folds, of the clouds holding Jesus and Mother of God, the style of writing, lead to the dating of the icon in the second half of the 18th century.

Located in the area within the ruins of Șerban Vodă Han, proposed for conservation,⁹ the three cellar icons were to undergo certain procedures for the protection and conservation *in situ*. In July 2008, the discovery of the first two mural icons – Saint Nicholas on the east wall and the Dormition of the Mother of God in the archaeological excavations on the southern side of the National Bank – encouraged us to propose¹⁰ an emergency consolidation intervention followed by a temporary shelter to stand until the end of the archaeological investigation and the inclusion of the area in a conservation and enhancement process (Fig.10a-b). There was even hope for a small museum space dedicated to the old Princely Han. The protection of the archaeological site had to withstand at least two redoubtable degradation factors: man and his destructive potential through vandalism or neglect and humidity with all its consequences, from the migration and recrystallization of soluble salts, to a dislocation produced by the frost-defrost phenomenon and the biological attack. Although

⁹ Apostol, Bălici 2010, p. 161.

¹⁰ This refers to the information note, following the request from 12.06.2008 addressed to the Conservation-Restoration Department by the Museum of History of the City of Bucharest, where we suggested “a temporary securing for the protection of the painted surface” as well as “both an emergency intervention, and technical assistance during the archaeological works.”

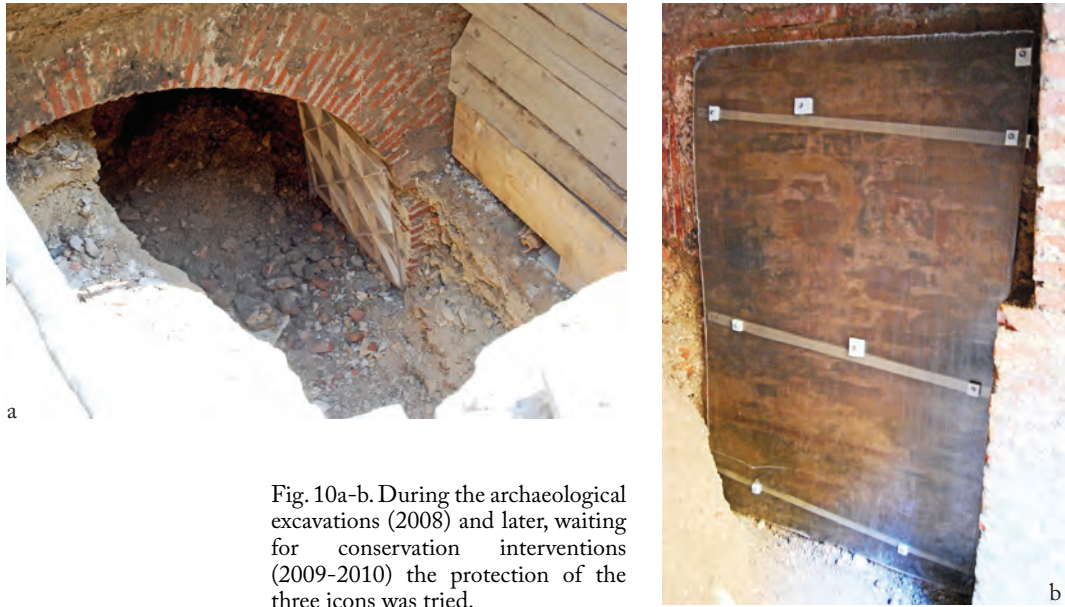


Fig. 10a-b. During the archaeological excavations (2008) and later, waiting for conservation interventions (2009-2010) the protection of the three icons was tried.

the vicinity of the National Bank seemed a further reassurance for the protection and enhancement of the site, events pointed out that the most illustrious of vicinities is not a guarantee of an unaltered survival of the heritage. Left under a precarious protection, fully exposed to degradation factors, the ruins of princely cellars underwent a massive biological attack, especially in the area exposed to light and humidity. The most precious, by the clean technique, the richness and finesse of details, the icon of the Dormition of the Mother of God turned unrecognizable under the attack of the “green illness”. Excessive humidity in autumn, winter and spring made impossible any proposal of conservation, as well as any attempt to extract it in acceptable technical conditions. Those conditions, swiftly leading to the conclusion of suppressing any claim of *in situ* conservation of the mural paintings, was complemented, as a supreme reason, the collapse of the mass of debris waiting to be evacuated from cellars 4-6 over the fragments of mural painting. Pulled from the wall and turned into rubble or irrecoverable fragments, the precious icon of the *Dormition of the Mother of God* was finally destroyed (in 2009) (Fig. 11a-b). The same happened to the second icon of Saint Nicholas. The decision to extract what was left of the first icon of Saint Nicholas was taken in completely unfavourable conditions to an extraction. The entire succession of events concluded with a rapid extraction, in ultimative conditions, unprofessional and with improvised materials.

At the arrival in the mural painting workshop (currently study programme) of the Conservation-Restoration Department of the National University of Arts, the fragments of the first icon of Saint Nicholas made the subject of a recovery intervention close to the impossible.¹¹ Extracted by fragments, with no reassemblage scheme, the icon of Saint Nicholas would have been condemned to the impossibility of its recomposition outside a photographic documentation previous to the extraction completed by the team of restorers of the Conservation-Restoration Department, based on the occasion of the investigation *in situ* and the intervention of temporary protection of the mural paintings. Extracted by the application of a coloured cloth, inappropriate for this operation, the fragments had been insufficiently rigidized by means of an improvised framework of fragile fir battens. Further mention should be made about the microclimate conditions, unsuitable to extraction, with excessive humidity, a neglected architectural space where operations took place, mostly invaded by debris

¹¹ The recovery of extracted fragments was the subject of the graduation project by Violeta Părvu, under the coordination of Prof. Dan Mohanu and Lecturer Romeo Gheorghiu.



Fig. 11a-b. In absence of an appropriate protection of the ensemble of ruins led to the infiltration of rain water, installing and extending of biological attack, vandalizing of the area with the three mural paintings and, lastly, the disappearance of the icon of the Dormition of the Mother of God and of the second representation of St. Nicholas.

and, most of all, a biological attack extended on the masonry surface. Out of such a conservative environment, what would reach the restoration workshop were fragments of mural painting with dislocations of their support, covered by impurities, and with morphologies typical to fungal attack. Fragments, therefore, not accessible prior to their biocide treatment. Once this action completed, it was possible to clean the back of the fragments, to consolidate them by injecting the cracks and by anchoring separated fragments, removing, as much as possible, the excess of mortar from masonry joints, and the application of a first layer of gauze, part of the backing stratigraphy. Thus consolidated and rigidized, the fragments could be freed of the improvised facing of coloured cloth and wooden battens. Out at light, surviving fragments were reassembled based on the photographic records, in the attempt to reconstruct the icon of Saint Nicholas, to the greatest extent possible, as it was *in situ*. To benefit the reading of fragments, they were planted into a coat of *arriccio*, based on lime mortar, where the outlines for the ornamental frame of the icon and the Holy Hierarch's halo were incised. The transposition of recovered fragments was completed in reversible conditions on a multilayer support (Fig. 12a-b), made of textile layers in contact with the mural painting fragments and their *arriccio*, followed by an easily reversible polystyrene layer and the rigid polycarbonate structure.

Extracted from their original space, deprived of the evocative relationship with the architecture of Cantacuzene medieval cellars, the substantially reduced fragments of Saint Nicholas icon on the east wall of the six cellars ensemble proposed for conservation are today the only living testimony of what used to be more than simple decoration, the iconography of Șerban Vodă Han. The three icons disappeared from their place of origin before they were properly researched. If an *in situ* stylistic analysis could be replaced by the existence of the photographic documentation, if lab analyses can still use small fragments recovered after the destruction of the *Dormition of the Mother of God* icon, other details which could have supported the dating of those mural paintings are lost for ever. Among them there are graffiti, often ignored, even when dealing with the conservation and restoration of a historic monument.

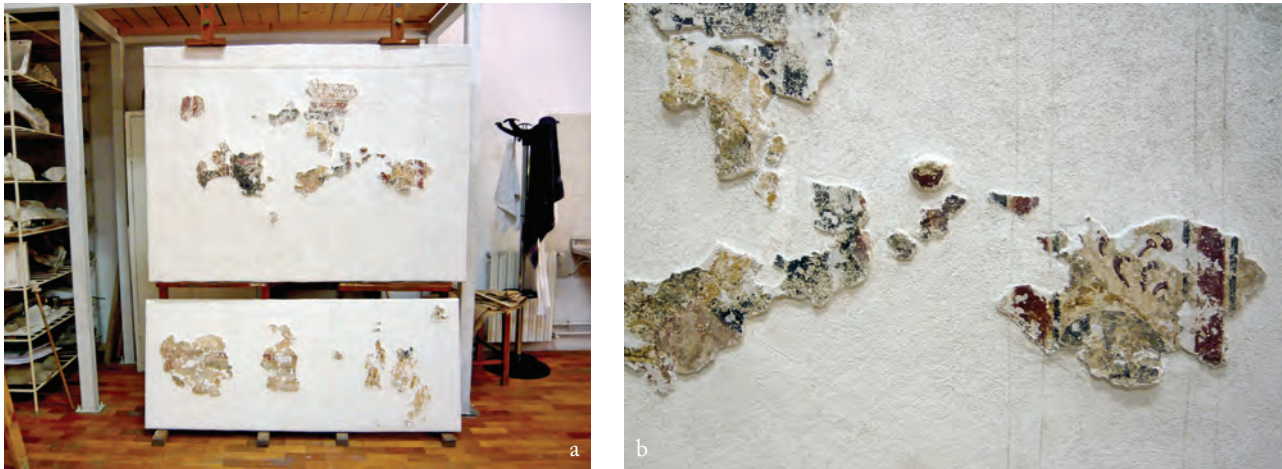


Fig. 12a-b. The transposition on a new support of fragments which have survived an unprofessional extraction, in precarious conditions, sought to achieve as much as possible a reconstruction of the icon of St. Nicholas from cellar 4, as it had been preserved *in situ*.

Fig. 13. The graffito at the hem of the first icon of St. Nicholas (cellar 4), reading the year 7264 (1756) or 7260 (1752).



Were there any graffiti in the ruins of Șerban Vodă Han, after all? The question should have concerned, first of all, the three icons whose lime ground easily allows the incision of signs or inscriptions. The ground of the mural paintings is often used in the space of our churches to cumulate, from simple signs to explicit inscriptions, genuine abbreviated chronicles of a place. In our case, we would have lost any kind of information about the existence of graffiti unless the careful examination of the photographic documentation, in order to reassemble the extracted fragments of Saint Nicholas icon had allowed the discovery of a graffito recording the year 7264 (1754).¹² Other small illegible graffiti are associated with this date (Fig. 13).

¹² The confirmation of the reading comes from Mrs Ruxandra Lambru whom I thank now too. The comment she made available also includes the option of year 7260 (1752), number 4 could have been an incomplete attempt to date the month and day.

The decision to conserve the six cellars ensemble on the southern side of the Princely Han under the present glass protection took place after the disappearance of the three fresco icons. The event questions again, in the circumstances of a “Bucharest to vanish”,¹³ the inappropriate manner in which the *co-operation* takes place between public authorities – the custody – specialists in various fields of archaeological heritage research, and the city officials. The harmful combination of indolence, ignorance and cynicism turn the custody into a formidable degradation factor fully experienced by Old Bucharest in these last years. The absence, in the case of archaeological research, of cohesive and stable pluridisciplinary teams makes the reasons to save the vestiges of the past remain unconvincing, while city officials look at the recovery of the past as a discomfort which needs to be treated with a cunning *glissando* from the rigour and subtlety of conservation and restoration of built heritage to its “rehabilitation” and brutal “conversion”.

Bibliographical abbreviations:

- Apostol, Bălici 2010 – V. Apostol, Șt. Bălici, *Structuri arheologice din Centrul Istoric București*, Caiete ARA, 1, 2010, pp. 119-177.
 Dionisie din Furna – Dionisie din Furna, *Erminia picturii bizantine*, București, 2000.
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¹³ The title of Henri Stahl's volume (*Bucureștii ce se duc*, 2002, p. 7.) deploring the disparition of the old Bucharest with its “austere and harmonious beauty” of Hans or Romanian houses.