

# THE TECHNIQUE OF THE MURAL PAINTINGS OF CORBII DE PIATRĂ

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**Keywords:** Corbi sandstone, Byzantine fresco, giornata, arriccio, intonaco, lime, polishing, proplasma, plasma.

**Abstract:** The church carved in the spectacular sandstone slope of Corbii de Piatră is without any doubt an atypical monument, that, according to the latest research, can be dated between the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. A new project has brought back into focus the necessity of an analysis of the execution technique of the mural paintings from within the rock carved church. This represents an answer both to the efforts of stylistic analysis and dating of one of the most controversial Medieval monuments in Wallachia and to the preoccupation to find adequate preservation methods. Executed mainly *al fresco*, in difficult microclimatic conditions, the iconographic ensemble from within the rock church at Corbii de Piatră presents the technological characteristics of a mural painting made in the fine tradition of Byzantine murals.

**Rezumat:** Biserica săpată în spectaculosul versant al stâncii din gresie de la Corbii de Piatră este fără îndoială un monument atipic, care, conform ultimelor cercetări este databilă între sfârșitul secolului al XIII-lea și prima jumătate a veacului al XIV-lea. Un nou proiect a readus în actualitate necesitatea unei analize a tehnicii de execuție a picturilor murale din interiorul bisericii săpate în stâncă. Faptul răspunde atât eforturilor de încadrare stilistică și de datare a unuia dintre cele mai controversate monumente medievale din Țara Românească cât și preocupărilor de a găsi soluții de conservare adecvate. Executat în cea mai mare parte *al fresco*, în condiții de microclimat dificile, ansamblul iconografic din interiorul bisericii rupestre de la Corbii de Piatră prezintă caracteristicile tehnologice ale unei picturi murale realizate în buna tradiție a picturii murale bizantine.

The re-examination within a new project,<sup>1</sup> more than a decade after the initiation of interdisciplinary research of the Corbii de Piatră site,<sup>2</sup> has brought back into focus the necessity of a thorough analysis of the execution technique of the mural paintings from within the rock carved church. This represents an answer both to the efforts of stylistic analysis and dating of one of the most controversial medieval monuments of Wallachia and to the preoccupation to find adequate preservation methods. The evaluation, made a decade after the *in situ* testing of the materials in order to attempt a possible consolidation intervention of the mural painting support, has once again offered the opportunity of an analysis of the mural painting of Corbii de Piatră as a possible argument in favour of the application of a long term conservation strategy. Placed in the hilly area between the two capital cities of the early Romanian medieval states, Curtea de Argeș and Câmpulung, the monastic settlement of Corbii de Piatră represents through the very nature of its architecture a particular phenomenon, which is a link in the austere tradition of monastic cave settlements.

Initially placed further away from the rural settlements, the monastery arranged its church and cells on the eastern bank of the Doamnei River (*the Lady's River*), in the geological site of the *Corbi sandstone*, which is of equal value to that of the medieval building which we are referencing (Fig. 1). The specialists in geology have characterised the "Corbi formation" as "a formation of great scientific interest".<sup>3</sup> Carved in this "stratiform lithotype"<sup>4</sup> formed mainly of sandstones, the church is determined, in that which regards its conservation state, by the evolution of the site, traversed by tectonic fissures, subjected to microclimate variations, to a complex bio-deterioration phenomenon, the migration of salts (carbonates, sulphates), in the conditions of fluctuations of humidity and the nearby presence of the Cascadei Stream.

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<sup>3</sup> Șeclăman *et alii*, 2010, p. 58.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.