

# ARCHAEOLOGICAL REPORT ON THE EXHUMATION OF THE GREEK CATHOLIC BISHOP VASILE AFTENIE (1899-1950), BELLU CATHOLIC CEMETERY, BUCHAREST<sup>1</sup>

Radu-Alexandru Dragoman, Alexandra Ion, Sorin Oanță-Marghitu, Nona Palincaș, Andrei Soficaru, Tiberiu Vasilescu\*

**Keywords:** the archaeology of communist repression, memory, Romanian Greek Catholic Church, Bellu Cemetery.

**Abstract:** This article presents the results of an archaeological intervention carried out in 2010 involving the exhumation of the remains of Bishop Vasile Aftenie (1899-1950). The intervention took place as part of the efforts of the Greek Catholic Church of Romania to beatify said bishop, who, from a Christian perspective, died a martyr's death: he was arrested in 1948 by the *Securitate* (the Romanian secret police under communism), tortured and pressured into renouncing his faith. The inventory items discovered (fragments of clothing, a collar), the stature of the deceased as computed using anthropological analysis (and in keeping with witness statements), as well as circumstantial evidence confirms the oral testimony relating to the site of the bishop's burial. Among the material used to fill the grave we found many coins as well as a glass phial with a metal lid containing some strands of hair and a slip of paper containing a prayer for the lifting of curses. The coins and phial, together with the candles from the grave, represent the material expression of the homage and prayers offered up by the faithful to the bishop. The results of our archaeological research rendered material expression to the relationship existing between the bishop's remains and the faithful, confirming the fact that, long before the Romanian Greek Catholic Church began considering the bishop for beatification, some people had already begun honouring him as a saint of their own accord.

**Rezumat:** Articolul prezintă rezultatele intervenției arheologice din anul 2010 prilejuită de exhumarea osemintelor Episcopului Vasile Aftenie (1899-1950). Intervenția s-a desfășurat ca parte a demersurilor efectuate de Biserica Greco-Catolică din România în vederea beatificării episcopului care, din perspectivă creștină, a avut o moarte martirică: acesta a fost arestat în anul 1948 de Securitate, torturat și supus presiunilor pentru a se dezice de credința sa. Elementele de inventar descoperite (fragmente din veșminte, un colar), statura decedatului stabilită de expertiza antropologică (conforme cu informațiile martorilor), cât și datele generale confirmă mărturiile orale legate de locul de înmormântare al episcopului. În umplutura gropii funerare am descoperit mai multe monede, dar și un flacon de sticlă cu capac metalic având în interior fire de păr și un bilet ce conținea o rugăciune pentru dezlegarea blestemelor. Monedele și flaconul, împreună cu lumânările de pe mormânt, constituie împreună materialitatea cinstirii și rugilor pe care credincioșii le-au adus episcopului Vasile Aftenie. Rezultatele cercetării arheologice oferă materialitate relației stabilite între corpul episcopului și credincioși, confirmând faptul că mult înainte ca Biserica Greco-Catolică din România să-și fi propus a-l beatifica, unii oameni l-au cinstit în mod spontan ca pe un sfânt.

## Introduction, the context of the grave and the excavation approach adopted

At the start of May 2010, the Greek Catholic Vicariate in Bucharest asked the Vasile Pârvan Institute of Archaeology and the Francisc Rainer Institute of Anthropology (both in Bucharest) to take part in the exhumation of the Greek Catholic bishop Vasile Aftenie (1899-1950). To this end a team was formed made up of the authors of this article. The resulting archaeological intervention formed part of the efforts of the Greek Catholic Church of Romania to beatify the bishop, who, from a Christian perspective, died a martyr's death: he was arrested in 1948 by the *Securitate* (the Romanian secret police under communism), tortured and pressured into renouncing his faith, but did not give in. Following his torture, he died in the Văcărești prison hospital and was buried by the *Securitate* in Bellu Catholic Cemetery in Bucharest. On 11 May, R.-Al. D., S.O.M. and T.V. visited Bellu Cemetery in order to identify the grave, evaluate the available working space and decide on the most appropriate excavation method to use.

Judging by its exterior features – a white marble cross supported by two pedestals, one on top of the other, and resting on a marble-clad concrete base demarcating the funerary site – the grave of Bishop Vasile Aftenie was similar to those around it. In time, it had apparently become just another grave among the many

\* R.-Al. Dragoman, email: al\_dragoman@yahoo.com; Alexandra Ion, email: alexandraion\_archae@gmail.com; S. Oanță-Marghitu, email: sorinoanta@yahoo.com; N. Palincaș, email: palincas@gmail.com; A. Soficaru, email: anthropodorian@gmail.com; T. Vasilescu, email: tiberiu.vasilescu@gmail.com.

<sup>1</sup> This is the English version of the research reports on the exhumation in 2010 of the remains of Bishop Vasile Aftenie: Dragoman *et al.* 2012; Soficaru, Ion 2012. The archaeological component of this article was written by R.-Al. D., S.O.-M., N. P. and T.V.; the anthropological analysis was provided by A.D.S. and A.I. For further reference to this archaeological context, see: Dragoman, Oanță-Marghitu 2014; Dragoman 2015, pp.84-85, 177-178; Ion 2016.