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# THE STRUCTURE OF THE MONASTERY CHURCH FROM CURTEA DE ARGEȘ A THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

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## **Abstract**

The monastery church of Curtea de Argeș was not so far examined from the perspective of symbolic meanings of its architectural structure, on which the old descriptions drew attention particularly on several occasions. The present study examines these textual descriptions both of the architecture and of the iconographic program of the paintings and draws some conclusions on the general theological ideas that stood at the basis of this monument. The church is the place where Holy Trinity is dwelling and in which the twelve Apostles have a central place, as the columns which support the Church, symbols of an early Christian origin, also found at the basilicas built by Emperor Constantine in Jerusalem (*i.e.* Eleona and Holy Sepulchre) and conserved in the Armenian rite of consecrating church foundations. Saints and Holy Fathers also have a main place in the spiritual architecture of the Church, signified by the 318 lilly-shaped stone elements of the balustrade that existed around the catholicon. An interesting allusion to the Psalm 84 was found in the number of the stone discs on the façade, decorated with 84 gilded birds. In the 'house of Holy Trinity' at Argeș it is reiterated symbolically the apostolic confession of Faith. Within, among saints, the Wallachian Princes were portrayed in the votive paintings, as new keepers of the Orthodoxy.

*Keywords:* Curtea de Argeș monastery church, Saints Apostles, church plan, architecture, church consecration canon

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## **1. Introduction**

Curtea de Arges Monastery, due to its great artistic qualities, was transformed into a legend over the centuries and attracted the interest of art historians, both for its Oriental decoration, unique to Romania, and for its innovative architectonic plan. In general, the research analysis focused on the sources of inspiration that could generate such a church plan and especially on the possible functions of the large narthex and its particular design [1-4]. Another direction of analysis was a search for possible sources of inspiration for

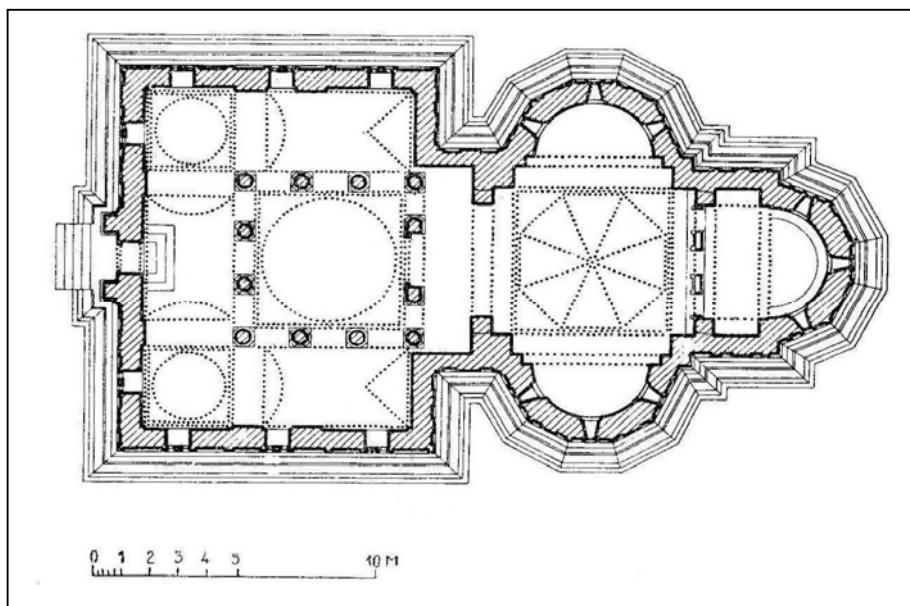
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the Oriental decoration, motivations for such an unusual choice and possible origin of craftsmen [5-7].

## 2. Text and iconography analyses

However, all these lines of research have not reached an important issue, namely the theological significations of the church architecture, although some symbolic meanings at the church of Curtea de Argeș have been reported in the textual descriptions of the time. In the *Life of Saint Niphon, Patriarch of Constantinople* (Romanian version, in which are described Neagoe Basarab's church foundations), the Protos of Mount Athos, Gabriel, noted that the church entrance "has twelve steps to imagine the twelve tribes of Israel", the 12 columns in the narthex symbolizes the twelve Apostles and the whole building is "the image of Holy Trinity" [8] (Figure 1). The symbol of the twelve columns of the narthex will be interpreted the same, independently of the Protos Gabriel's text, also by the Patriarchal deacon Paul of Aleppo, in 1654, at the Metropolitan church's narthex in Bucharest, where the recent built church imitated the plan of the monastery church in Argeș [9]. Same Paul of Aleppo, visiting the monastery in Argeș, supposed the twelve pillars of marble, profiled in angle, on the north and south exterior façades of narthex, as symbols of the twelve Apostles [10].



**Figure 1.** Monastery Church of Curtea de Argeș. Architectonic plan [11, 12].

Another issue discussed less by scholarship is the original painting of the church, but this is because the few fragments of mural painting preserved, as the few icons from the iconostasis and narthex, do not allow us to make detailed considerations on the iconography, compositions and style of this painting except in a general manner [13-15]. However, neither in this respect things have not been fully exploited, for the description of iconographic program noted by Louis Reissenberger in the mid-nineteenth century [11], *i.e.* before the restorations of André Lecomte du Noüy [16], when the most significant parts of the mural painting were removed to be preserved and the church was repainted [17], has not been systematically investigated by art historians - except the Princes' funeral portraits from narthex - [15, p. 10, 46], but shortly, just to identify the origin of the fragments of painting held today at the National Museum of Art of Romania [14].

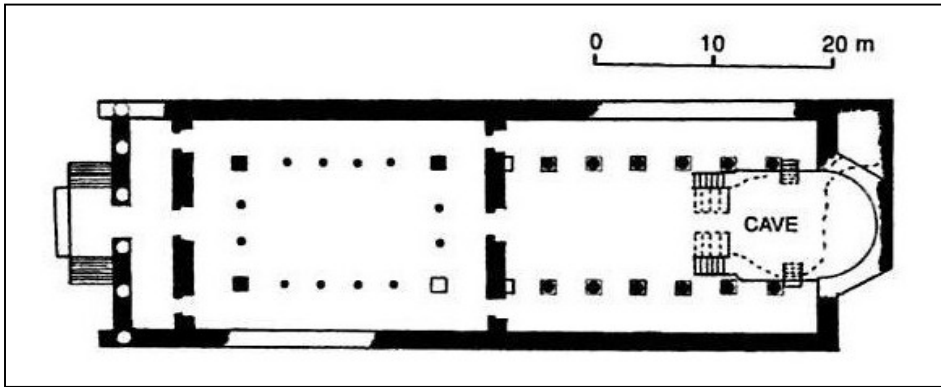
The analysis of these old texts reveals some important symbolic correspondences, both for the planimetric structure of the church and its relationship with the iconographic program of the paintings. Saints Apostles, reported by the Protos Gabriel as symbolized by the narthex columns, were present also in the paintings of the nave's dome. The iconographic program of the dome of Curtea de Argeș was presenting a particular program, not found in any other Wallachian church. Curiosity has been reported by Reissenberger also, who noted that the iconography of this painting does not meet the general requirements of *Hermeneia* [11, p. 12]. It was the presence, between the flat pendentives of the dome, of four groups of two apostles. Each group holds a symbol of Faith: Saints Peter and Paul bear the Church Ark, James and Bartholomew a Gospel on which sits the Dove of Holy Ghost, Thomas and Philip hold the Mandylion and Simon and Andrew 'la voile de saint reparaît' – *i.e.* the Keramion. In the pendentives, they are accompanied by the four Evangelists, a normal presence of these spaces. Together, they form the 'crown' of the twelve Apostles. In the dome, the Celestial Liturgy completes the general liturgical theme of dome's paintings. However, the presence of the Apostles is logically justified under the Pantokrator's dome. Often, they are present on the drum (in the high domes of Romanian churches, it is almost a rule), respecting the chronological order of the hierarchies: angels, prophets, apostles, in the medallions at the base of the dome the apostles' disciples (the 70 apostles), the Forty Martyrs of Sebasta or Hierarchs, and in pendentives the Evangelists [18]. The Apostles are 'the light of the world' as are described by Saint Gregory Palamas in the Homily of Sts Apostles' feast [19], and their presence in the dome underlines this. The concern of the Hesychastic milieu for the revival of the apostolic model was highlighted on other occasions [20]. It is to observe the emergence of the theme of Twelve Apostles or of the Apostles Peter and Paul embraced in the Byzantine icons of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. However, the composition of Argeș seems to address particularly a message to the believers, through its high visibility at the base of the dome. Paul of Aleppo noted that the 70 arcades on the outside base of the nave's dome are representing the Seventy Apostles named "small apostles" [10].

Also at the basis of narthex' dome, this time not represented but symbolized, are the Apostles as twelve columns. And, at the same narthex' dome, existed also a liturgical iconography: Christ Pantokrator is accompanied in the drum by angelic hierarchies and the symbols of Incarnation and Eucharist: the Mandylion, the Eucharistic chalice, Christ - the Vine and Emanuel. In the pendentives were the four Evangelists [11, p. 12].

We know, on the cult of saints Apostles in the times of Neagoe Basarab, that there was a church "for the burial of the dead" with the patrons Saints Apostles built by Neagoe before becoming the voivode of Walachia, which was destroyed by the voivode Mihnea together with Bistrița monastery [8]. Also, one of the two parecclesions of the monastery of Arges was dedicated to Saints Apostles (the chapel of the south-east, which was built by Radu of Afumați; on this place is today the chapel in which is buried King Carol II) [21, 22], and the other, to Saint Nicholas (also demolished), both these patrons representing the 'pillars of Faith'. The main church is consecrated to the Assumption of the Mother of God, dedication inherited from the old demolished church, which was on this place, as specify the inscriptions on the church's façade [23]. An icon dating to the 16<sup>th</sup> century (today disappeared), from the monastery of Ostrov, representing Saints Peter and Paul embraced, was believed to be brought from the chapel Saints Apostles of the monastery of Argeș [24]. A Transylvanian documentary source from the 17<sup>th</sup> century related about a manuscript belonging to the monastery of Argeș, which was supposed to be an original manuscript of Saint Paul [1, p. 10]. An impressive cult of Saints Apostles at Argeș seems to be, thus, testified by many vestiges.

But unexpected connections with the symbols of Argeș are revealed by some ancient and medieval churches from the Orient. Eusebius of Caesarea described the altar apse of the Constantinian basilica of Holy Sepulchre (today disappeared under the Crusaders' church) as being surrounded by twelve columns, symbolizing the twelve Apostles: "Opposite the gates the crowning part of the whole was the hemisphere, which rose to the very summit of the church. This was encircled by twelve columns according to the number of the apostles of our Saviour, having their capitals embellished with silver bowls of great size, which the emperor himself presented as a splendid offering to his God" [Eusebius Pamphilius, *Life of Constantine*, Book III, Chapter XXXVIII, the description of the basilica of Holy Sepulchre]. Basilica Eleona on the Mount of Olives was also a church built by Emperor Constantine and dedicated to Saints Apostles (Figure 2). Archaeological research of Louis-Hugues Vincent in the years 1910-1911 have revealed the ruins of Eleona, destroyed by Persians in 614 A.D: the entire basilica had a length of 30 meters and in front of the nave was a vast atrium, surrounded by twelve columns whose line ended with a massive column, which delimited four side porticoes. The nave was divided into three vessels by two arrays of six columns - twelve in total. Near it, there is a room underground, supported by 12 stone pillars. According to a tradition recorded in documents of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the Apostles were gathered together in

this cave to compose the Credo (the Symbol of Faith). The 12 Apostles are symbolized by the 12 stone columns supporting the vault [26, 27].



**Figure 2.** The Constantinian basilica of Eleona with cave [25].

The Armenian consecration canon of a church building also provided that 12 foundation stones shall be put in the four corners of the future church foundation, symbolizing the 12 Apostles on which the Church is built [28]. This information may count in finding the Argeş architect's origin, which is not excluded to be Armenian; the preeminence of Armenian elements at Argeş, both architectonic and decorative had been previously highlighted [12].

Although some authors who have analyzed the architecture of Argeş monastery church, argued that the model of the twelve 'symbolic' columns is not a *topos* of Byzantine architecture and was not used in naves or narthexes in the Byzantine tradition [29], should recognize, however, that this symbolism is found, even if it is much earlier than late Paleologan architecture that has influenced, mediated by Balkans, the Wallachian church architecture. It was not included, however, in the traditions of Byzantine architecture, but these structures of symbolic thinking entered the Theology, in the figures of speech and the style of theological literature. They were known and used even in the Western Europe, for they were part of the early traditions of the Church. The symbol is used by the French Abbot Suger at the Gothic abbey of Saint Denis (beginning of 12<sup>th</sup> cent.): the church altar was surrounded by two arrays of 12 columns, the central ones symbolizing the apostles and the ones on the side, the 12 prophets [30]. These symbols were probably known also by the former ecumenical patriarch Niphon, who taught Neagoe, his spiritual disciple. In the Greek *Life of Saint Niphon* is noted that the main concern of Niphon was to preach the fundamental apostolic faith to the Orthodox churches under pagan domination, especially because of the former Union in Florence. He is compared in several places with the Apostles [31].

The other significance of the church plan, showed in the text of Protos Gabriel, is related to the Holy Trinity. The triconch plan of the church nave may lead us to think of this symbolism, but the text comes further with a clarification: “the church, with the altar and narthex imagine the Holy and inseparable Trinity” [8], so the resemblance includes the narthex. We try to offer an interpretation of this formulation: the church may represent the Kingdom of Heaven [32] in the two stages of Parousia: the altar and nave represents the Celestial Church (the house of the Holy Trinity) and narthex the terrestrial Church - the *oikumene* [33], a large rectangular room (allusion to the four cardinal points of the earth) full of Saints’ icons, whose columns are the apostles on which seats Christ Pantokrator, and whose iconography illustrates its entire history: the Akathistos Hymn reveals the incarnation of the Saviour and the salvation prayers addressed to Him and His Mother (as also the iconography of the small domes, which present the Mother of God and Emanuel), the Menologue - exemplary life of the Saints who followed Church teachings, and the ecumenical councils - moments in which were set the main dogmas of faith. In the middle of this history are the Apostles, and on the edges, around, Martyrs and Saints. Devout among them, with the hope of salvation, are the Wallachian Princes buried here and represented in the votive and funeral paintings.

Paul of Aleppo also provided interesting information concerning the exterior decoration: the façades were decorated with 84 round stone discs, delicately sculpted, on which were assembled little gilded birds with their wings opened and bearing bells (when he saw them, there were only 2-3 birds left; they were lost or removed in time, and replaced with new ones at the restoration of Lecomte de Nouy, but without the bells) [10]. We think that their number may be an allusion to the Psalm 84, which has as subject the House of the Lord: “How lovely is your dwelling place, /o, Lord Almighty!/[...] Even the sparrow has found a home, /and the swallow a nest for herself, /where she may have her young,/ a place near your altar, /O, Lord Almighty, my King and my God” . The bells may be also an allusion to the music of the Psalms. We know the Psalm 84 was read at the foundation of a church in the Armenian Rite [28]. Again the reference to the Armenian rites may recommend the architect of the monastery of Curtea de Argeş to be an Armenian.

Another symbolic number from the foundation of Neagoe is revealed by the existence of 318 lilly-shaped balusters of stone that surrounded the church. (today disappeared). They were still there when Paul of Aleppo has visited the monastery (L. Reissenberger did not reported anything about them, so probably they no longer existed), and the deacon explained them as symbolizing the 318 people whom were charged with raising money for construction and with supervision work, information provided perhaps by local oral tradition [10]. But the symbol is referring, of course, to the 318 holy Fathers who attended the first Ecumenical Synod at Nicaea, so again we are dealing with a reference to the dogmatic foundations of the Church, set in a symbolic formula. The architect Lecomte du Noüy restored this balustrade at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but with some modifications, so today it has only 242 balusters left [16].

### 3. Conclusions

The preoccupations for symbolism and numerology that seem to characterize Prince Neagoe may be a sign of his time, come from the general taste of the Renaissance for hermeneutics and cryptology. But the basic source of inspiration for voivode Neagoe was the theological preoccupations of his time, which the Hesychastic milieu should have entertained with and where the former patriarch Niphon must have had a place of honour. Especially Hesychasm manifested such preoccupation for returning to the early Apostolic and Patristic sources of the Church and a particular interest in speculations about the deeper meanings of Church history and Theology. Not least, the possible Armenian origin of the architect may have had a role in using the numerical symbols at the church architecture and decorations.

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