
THE SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STRING-COURSE IN ORTHODOX SACRED ARCHITECTURE

Mihaela Palade*

*University Bucharest, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Department of Sacred Art,
Str. Sf. Ecaterina nr. 2, 040155 Bucharest IV, Romania*

(Received 7 May 2007)

Abstract

A brief analysis of the decorative system peculiar to Romanian sacred architecture leads to singling out an element that distinctly stands out, being present in the overwhelming majority of the respective worship places. It is the string-course, a protruding ornament that circumscribes the median part of the façade and is made of various materials: stone, brick, plaster. At first sight it appears to be an agreeable, ingenious aesthetic solution, since the horizontal line it emphasizes enters into a pleasant dialogue with the vertical arches, windows, pillars and other upright elements. The present essay points out that this element is not a mere aesthetic device, but has a deep symbolic significance related to that of the church it girdles.

Keywords: girding one's waist with the belt, the Church – Christ's mystical body, string-course, girding one with strength

*Motto: Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing;
Thou hast loosed my sackcloth,
And girded me with gladness.
(Psalm 29/30.10, 11)*

1. The presence of the string-course in the Orthodox sacred architecture; types and variations exemplified within the Romanian area

In the Byzantine architecture, one or several horizontal profiles mark the outside decoration, surrounding the façade either from end to end or only partially. In Constantinople, they appear at Myrelaion, Theotokos Pammakaristos (13th century), the churches of St. Theodore, Constantine Lips and Chora (1316 – 1321); also in the architecture of Mistra (the churches of saints Theodore, 1290-1295 and Pantanassa, early 15th century) as well as Thessaloniki (the Holy Apostles church, early 14th century). Serbian

* e-mail: palademih@yahoo.com

architecture, too, favoured the dialogue with the churches' verticality by emphasizing certain horizontal elements, especially with the churches erected during the 14th-15th centuries on Morava Valley, called *The Moravian school* [1] (Ravanica, 1381, Ljubostinja, 1402-1405, Krusevac, 14th century and Kalenic, 1407-1413).

In the Romanian Principalities, beginning with the church of Dealu Monastery (Wallachia, 1501, Figure. 1) a horizontal decorative element called *string-course* appeared in ecclesial architecture. It surrounds the façades and usually divides them in two equally high tiers, hence its name of *median string-course*. As far as the material is concerned, it is integrated into the façade it belongs to, being made of the same material. Thus, there are string-courses made of ashlar, brick or stucco, some of them plastered, and sometimes adorned with paintings.

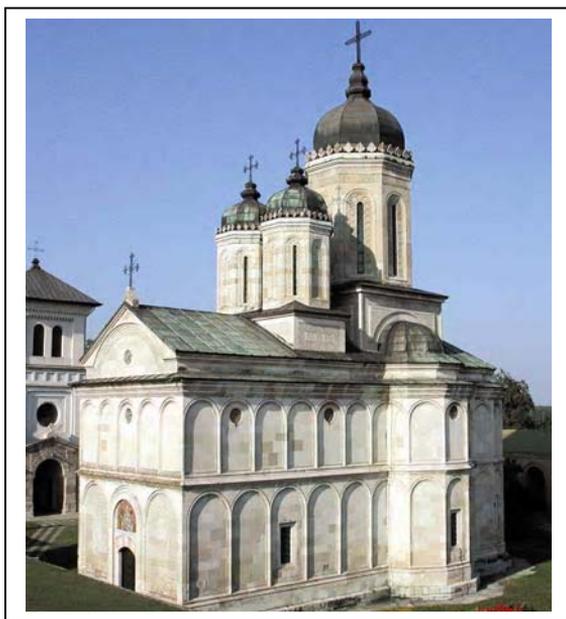


Figure 1. The church of Dealu Monastery (Dambovită, 1501) – general view.

The shapes it adopted have been most diverse. There can be a simple projecting ovolo, or torus on the façade, as is the case with Dealu, Radu-Vodă (1570-1614), Bucovăț (1572), Căluu (1588), or between rows of indented moulding (decorative motif, made up of a succession of triangles adjacent at the base) – the latter being the most frequent situation. The best known churches are Mihai Vodă (Bucharest), the princely church at Târgoviște (1583), Galata (Iași, 1584), Strehaia Mehedinți, 1645), Dintr-un Lemn (Vâlcea, 17th century), Hurezi (Vâlcea, 1690-1697, Figure 2a), Sâmbăta de Sus (Brașov, 1690). It also appears with modest churches such as St. Michael hermitage (Hurez 18th century, Figure 2b) or the Măldărești church (18th century).



(a)



(b)



(c)

Figure 2. General view of the church of: (a) Hurezi monastery (Vâlcea, 1690-1697);
(b) St. Michael hermitage (Hurez, 18th century);
(c) Dragomirna monastery (Suceava, 1609).

A motif related to the decoration characteristic to wooden churches architecture, where it is predominant, is the *twisted rope* – either simple (Curtea de Argeș bishopric church, (1517), Dragomirna (Suceava, 1609, Figure 2c), Trei Ierarhi (Iași, 1639), Putna (1622), Stelea (Târgoviște, 1645)) or framed by two rows of indented bricks - the Patriarchate church, Bucharest (1655). Early 18th century saw the appearance of a sumptuous, intricate, garland-patterned string-course - the churches Stavropoleos (Bucharest, 1724) and Kretzulescu (Bucharest, 1722). We herein indicate a brief bibliography containing data about the churches mentioned [2-8].

All these are variations of the same theme, that of a horizontal element, be it slightly marked or highly protruding, which stands out against the façade like a belt or girdle around a body's waist. The analogy is very obvious when considering the church as Christ's mystical body.

2. The Church's significance as a mystical body

The Jews were scandalized when referring to His own body, Jesus Christ told them: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." (John 2. 19). Neither they, nor His disciples understood then that "He spoke of the temple of His body. When therefore He was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that He had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken" (John 2.21, 22).

Biblical texts often draw the analogy between body, tabernacle, temple. The tabernacle whose pattern was revealed to Moses in Mount Sinai (Exodus 25. 40) is nothing other than the Word not yet incarnate (Hebrews 8.2), which comprises everything as a sanctuary of the entire created world, which is not separated from the Word through which everything came into being [9]. And the human body is often called a tent: "For while we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety..." (II Corinthians 5.4).

Referring to the church-building campaign initiated by the Holy Emperor Constantine, Eusebius of Caesarea termed it "a spiritual closeness of peoples, the union of the 'members of Christ's body' (Romans 12.5, I Corinthians 12.12) in perfect harmony" [10]. According to Saint Apostle Paul, "as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Romans 12.4, 5), and "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?" (I Corinthians 6.15) And the head of this ecclesial body within which we, the members, dwell is Christ Himself (Ephesians 4.15).

The one to best emphasize the church-body relationship was St. Maxim the Confessor, who teaches that the church is man's icon, for it symbolizes man but at the same time is symbolized by man. It is the man having the *hieration* for soul, the altar for mind and the nave for body. Thus, it is image and likeness of the man made in the image and likeness of God, while man in his turn is a mystical church [11].

3. The girdle in lay and liturgical attire

Originally of practical use, later become a decorative element, the girdle appears as an item of clothing with most peoples, especially those wearing long ample robes, that is the Oriental ones. God, for instance, addressed the Jews preparing to flee Egypt, instructing them to eat the lamb “in this manner: *your loins girded*, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand” (Exodus 12.11).

Jonathan is also mentioned to have “stripped himself of the robe that was upon him, and gave it to David, and his armour, and even his sword and his bow and *his girdle*” (I Samuel 18.4).

The prophet Elijah was renowned for his garb; the messengers sent by Ahaziah described him as “wearing a garment of haircloth, *with a girdle of leather about his loins*” [II Kings 1.8]. Of St. John the Baptist we know he “wore a garment of camel’s hair, and a *leather girdle around his waist...*” (Mathew 3.4, Mark 1.6).

Our Lord Himself, before washing his disciples’ feet for the Last Supper, “laid aside His garments and *girded Himself with a towel*” (John 13.4). We know that the Holy Virgin also wore a girdle, now kept by Vatoped monastery of Mount Athos and has a feast dedicated to the Setting of the Sacred Belt (or Holy Girdle) in the Reliquary, on the 31st of August.

The *Acts of the Apostles* book testifies that Saints Peter and Paul wore girdles (Acts 12.8 and 21.11), while Saint John Cassian refers to the same aspect when speaking of the vestments of the monk who, “as Christ’s soldier, must always wear a war attire, *his waist always girded* (emphasis mine). The divine Scriptures’ authority indeed acknowledges such was the attire of those who established this way of life, certainly Elijah and Elisha, and later the founders and writers of the New Testament: John, Peter and Paul...” [12].

The girdle is also an important element in liturgical vestments. The girdle, or belt, is a 50 cm long, 6-8 cm wide strip of cloth that the bishops or priests put on, over the stikharion, and tighten round their waist, so that they are not hindered during the holy service. It is mentioned in the Old Testament, where they made for Aaron, “the skillfully woven band upon it (the ephod) to gird it on, ... of gold, blue and purple and scarlet stuff, and fine twined linen, as the Lord had commanded Moses” (Exodus 39.5) as well as “the girdle of fine twined linen and of blue and purple and scarlet stuff, embroidered with needlework, as the Lord had commanded Moses” (Exodus 39.27-29). “And he put on him [Aaron] the coat, and *girded him with the girdle*, and clothed him with the robe, and put the ephod upon him, and girded him with the skillfully woven band of the ephod, binding it to him therewith.” (Leviticus 8.7)

The monk, Christ’s soldier, is himself “equipped with a tight belt, so that he can attend to the needs and chores of the monastery, not only with his mind always ready but also with his body unhindered by clothing” [12, p. 119].

All this leads to the conclusion that, since the times of yore, the girdle has constituted a basic item, strictly necessary for carrying on any activity.

4. The spiritual significance of the girdle

Its role, however, is not only a practical one, but a highly symbolic one as well. Speaking of Christ's soldier, who is girdled with a 'double belt', St. John Cassian refers both to an item of clothing and a spiritual symbol [12, p. 120].

Generally, girding one's waist with a view to travelling or any other action was, with the ancients, "a proof of energy and, as such, of disdain for any weakness; it was also the sign of a fair demeanour and of purity of heart... as well as, according to St. Gregorius, a symbol of chastity" [13]. The belt signifies "commitment, fidelity, power, audacity, prestige, the preparation for accomplishing an important mission or glorious deeds, as heroes do in stories before fighting the dragon; it is a sign of protection, safeguarding, defence, chastity, fecundity" [14].

The act of girding oneself symbolizes force, which can be either good or evil, benevolent or malevolent. The psalm, for instance, says: "He clothed himself with cursing as his coat, may it soak into his body like water, like oil into his bones! May it be like a garment which he wraps round him, *like a belt with which he daily girds himself!* May this be the reward of my accusers from the Lord, of those who speak evil against my life!" (Psalm 108/109.17-19). Most of the times, 'girding the belt' signifies preparation for an errand or journey and for preaching the Gospel [15].

Although in the Old Testament, the belt was an actual item of raiment, the prophet Isaiah gives it a symbolic connotation as well. Referring to Messiah, he says that "righteousness shall be *the girdle of His waist*, and faithfulness *the girdle of His loins*" (Isaiah 11.4, 5). The same in the prophecy concerning Jerusalem: "In that day I will call My servant Eliakim, the son of Hilkiyah, and I will clothe him with your robe, and will bind your girdle on him, and will commit your authority to his hand; and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah" (Isaiah 22.20, 21).

In Daniel's vision appears "a man clothed in linen, whose loins were *girded with gold*" (Daniel 10.5), while St. John the Theologian saw "seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and *with a golden girdle round his breast*" (Revelation 1.12, 13).

In the Old Testament, the girdle was 'the sign of the dignity and authority of priesthood'. It was made of linen, but in the colours of the veil of the Holy Place in the tabernacle. The priest's girdle "represents the propriety with which Christ, reigning, girded Himself with the great power of divinity" [16].

As explained by St. Simon, archbishop of Thessaloniki, the girdle shows both one's capacity as a servant and the power granted to him by God, as the celebrant himself confesses in the prayer he utters while girding himself. Taking the girdle, he blesses it, kisses the cross on it and puts it on, saying: "Blessed is God, Who girded me with strength, and made my way safe. He made my feet like hind's feet, and set me secure on the heights" (Psalm 17/18.35, 36) [17].

The celebrant's girding "shows his condition of a servant. It also shows the chastity of loins and groin" [18].

The girdle is a symbol of priest's self-effacement, his renouncing the world and his bond to the Church. It is also a warning for him to be always ready to preach the Gospel, which is to have "his waist girded" [15, p. 63]. As for the monk, the very girdle constitutes a major sign of the holiness that is expected from his part. Girding his waist and putting on a strap of dead leather means that he is endeavouring to kill those members that hold the seeds of passions, so that the commandment "Let your loins be girded" [Luke 12.35] is addressed to him [12, p.119].

5. The symbolic significance of the string-course in sacred architecture

The Old Testament description of the tabernacle mentions a *middle bar* extending from one end to the other of the tabernacle: "And he made bars of acacia wood, five for the frames of the one side of the tabernacle, and five bars for the frames of the other side [...] And he made the middle bar to pass through from end to end halfway up the frames" (Exodus 36.31-33 and 26.26-30).

Likewise, prophet Ezekiel's vision concerning the temple says that the base of the altar had "a rim around its edge" (Ezekiel 43.13) and the ledge of the altar also had "a rim around it half a cubit broad" (Ezekiel 43.17).

Again in the times of old, in order to express most suggestively His closeness to the house of Israel, God employed the comparison with the belt: "For as the waistcloth clings to the loins of a man, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to Me, says the Lord, that they might be for Me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory, but they would not listen" (Jeremiah 13.1-11).

In its capacity as Christ's body, the church displays a similar appearance as His, which is girded, surrounded by a girdle in the guise of the string-course. For the psalm says: "The Lord reins; He is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed, He is girded with strength. The world is established, it shall never be moved" (Psalm 92/93.1, 2). And he who obeys Lord's will and prays to Him is heard: "Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me! O Lord, be Thou my helper! Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing; Thou hast loosed my sackcloth and *girded me with gladness.*" (Psalm 29/30.10, 11) This girding by the Lord drives any evil away, acting as a shield against the world that has not known Him. Therefore, the belt (string-course) around the church symbolizes this very protection it enjoys, being shielded by God.

At the same time, the string-course surrounding the church signifies the gathering of members in a single body, like a bundle bound around its middle, in a visual rendering of our Saviour's sacrifice, for "Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but *to gather into one* the children of God who are scattered abroad" (John 11.51, 52) Again in the Creed, we confess our faith in "one holy..." Church. Hence the string-course emphasizes this notion, by unifying church's body and fulfilling our Saviour's wish, uttered during the Last

Supper: “Holy Father, keep them in Thy name, which Thou hast given me, *that they may be one*, even as we are one” (John 17.11).

The church is also holy, and the Scripture shows that “only those who had extinguished the fire of carnal passions... wore the girdle” [12, p. 119]. Saint Apostle Paul urged Christians to “put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace” (Ephesians 6.13-15). And St. Peter, after having referred to the prophets who announced the grace that was to descend unto us, advises the faithful Christians: “Therefore *gird up your minds*, be sober, set your hope fully upon the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” (I Peter 1.13)

Being holy, the church must always be girded and ready to fight sin; accordingly, its appearance must suggest this, fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy about the fruitless vineyard that would be laid waste and a nation from afar that would be summoned from the ends of the earth: “Lo, swiftly, speedily it comes! None is weary, none stumbles, none slumbers or sleeps, *not a waistcloth is loose*, not a sandal-thong broken.” (Isaiah 5.26, 27) Which means that the covenant is eternal.

Generally, whereas one’s girding means fulfilling a sacred commitment, ungirding denotes breaking it; for a soldier or a magistrate it meant renouncing their function, laying down their arms [13, p. 317]. This is why the church is at all times girded with the string-course, to testify to its incessant struggle to do God’s will, to which it is committed and it shall never renounce.

In scriptural texts, girding is often associated with power: “By dread deeds Thou dost answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation, who art the hope of all the ends of the earth, and of the farthest seas; who by Thy strength hast established the mountains, *being girded with might*.” (Psalm 64/65.6, 7) Consequently, an act of girding signifies precisely the power of fighting temptation and overcoming it: “For Thou didst *gird me with strength* for the battle; Thou didst make my assailants sink under me” (Psalm 17/18.39) – therefore the sign of bodily and spiritual purity.

The appearance of any worship place must proclaim that the Church is powerful, as it is established by Christ upon the rock of Peter’s confession that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God (Mathew 16.16) and “the powers of hell shall not prevail against it” (Mathew 16.18), since its foundation is Christ the Rock. For this reason, the string-course is also a symbol of power, consistency and triumph.

6. Final considerations

“... I look for the Resurrection of the dead, and the Life of the world to come.”

The church, a worship place, is the most telling image of the way in which we Christians ought to expect Christ's second coming. We must be prepared, as the commandment urges us: “Let *your loins be girded* and your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the marriage feast, so that they may open to Him at once when He comes and knocks” (Luke 12.35, 36).

A symbol of power, faith and truth, as well as of purity and holiness, the girdle is tightened - both literally and figuratively speaking - round the Master's body and soul, and so it should be for the servant as well: “Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when He comes; truly, I say to you, He *will gird himself* and have them sit at table, and He will come and serve them” (Luke 12.37).

Be it made of stone, brick or wood, a sumptuous cathedral or a modest chapel, a foundation of princes or a mere building by villagers, the church is always girded with the string-course towards a constant reminding of the fact that “The Lord reigns; He is robed in majesty, He is *girded* in strength” (Psalm 92/93.1, 2).

References

- [1] G. Millet, *L'ancien art serbe-Les églises*, Boccard, Paris, 1919, 152.
- [2] C. Diehl, *Manuel d'art byzantin*, Auguste Picard, Paris, 1925.
- [3] C. Mango, *Byzantine Architecture*, Faber and Faber/Electa, London, Milano, 1986.
- [4] G. Ionescu, *Architecture on Romania's Territory Throughout the Centuries*, Ed. Academiei, Bucharest, 1981.
- [5] V. Drăguț, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Romanian Medieval Art*, Ed. Științifică și Enciclopedică, Bucharest, 1976.
- [6] G. Curinschi Vorona, *The History of Romanian Architecture*, Ed. Tehnică, Bucharest, 1981.
- [7] G. Curinschi Vorona, *The Universal History of Architecture*, vol. III, Ed. Tehnică, Bucharest, 1986.
- [8] I. Godea, *Romanian Wooden Churches, North-Eastern Transylvania*, Meridiane, Bucharest, 1996.
- [9] I. Moldovan, *Ortodoxia*, 3 (1982) 428.
- [10] Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History*, in *Writings*, part I, Romanian translation by T. Bodogae, PSB no. 13, Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1987, 363.
- [11] St. Maxim the Confessor, *Mystagogy – Cosmos and soul, images of the church*, Romanian translation by D. Stăniloae, Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 2000, 18.
- [12] St. John Cassian, *Institutes* (De institutis coenobiorum) and *Conferences* (Collationes), Romanian translation by V. Cojocaru and D. Popescu, Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1990, 113.

- [13] J. Chevalier and A. Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, Romanian translation by D. Nicolescu, D. Uricariu, O. Zaicik, L. Zoicaș, I. Bojin and V.D.Vlădulescu, vol. I, Artemis, Bucharest, 1995, 316.
- [14] I. Evseev, *Encyclopedia of Cultural Signs and Symbols*, Amarcord, Timișoara, 1999, 67.
- [15] V. Aga, *Biblical and Christian Symbolism – Encyclopedic Dictionary*, Timișoara Archdiocese, Timișoara, 2005, 64.
- [16] St. Herman of Constantinople, *Church History and Mystical View by Herman, Patriarch of Constantinople or The Holy Liturgy Explained*, Romanian translation by N. Petrescu, The Metropolitan Revue of Oltenia, **9-10** (1974) 831.
- [17] ***, *Liturgy Book*, Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 2000, 105.
- [18] St. Simon Archbishop of Thessaloniki, *Treatise on All the Dogmas of Our Orthodox Faith According to the True Principles Set by Our Lord Jesus Christ and His Followers*, Romanian translation by T. Teodorescu, Arhchdiocese of Suceava and Rădăuți, Suceava, 2002, 134.