
ORIGINAL STRUCTURES OF THE LIGHT-SPACE RELATION AND THE PRESENCE OF GOTHIC ELEMENTS IN MOLDAVIAN MEDIEVAL ARCHITECTURE[†]

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Abstract

Moldavia is an area where the synthesis or the juxtaposition of different types of cultural elements leads to original visual solutions. The importance of the Moldavian style, both in a local and in an European context, resides in the assimilation of one solution, such as the adoption and frequent use of the triconchial plan and the slanting arches, the vertical back-sight of the churches or the use of gothic elements, subtly integrated in the shape of stone ornaments or the strengthening of the walls by buttresses. The integration of Gothic elements in the Moldavian buildings occurred naturally, completing structures typical of the Orthodox cult. This article focuses on the importance of Gothic elements in Moldavian architecture, of which the use of light remains an essential element in the delineation of one type of sacred space specific to the Orthodox cult.

Keywords: architecture, medieval art, light, space, gothic

1. Introduction

The medieval architecture of Moldavia, along with other expressions of visual art - mural painting, religious objects, religious books or decorative sculpture - offers a variety and richness that continues to generate questions about the context in which they were created and the influences they suffered.

Romanian medieval art of the 14th-16th centuries was developed at a time when Eastern supremacy of Byzantium was already surpassed by the Ottoman conquest and the Western Gothic had already reached maturity. This context did not lead to the appearance of a diluted medieval visual language, Eastern or Western, but rather favoured the original synthesis of architectural and decorative structures already well established in European Christian consciousness.

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It discussed more about the artistic influence on the Romanian Principalities in various stages of development, especially focused on the Middle Ages. Historians or artists have often used the metaphor of a bridge linking East and West, between the Eastern or Balkan culture and the Western, Central and North European culture. Certainly, this is a clear and unequivocally demonstrated fact of the early stage of the Romanian states' existence. But more important it is to bring out the original note that arises from this intersection of influences. The background of visual creation was determined by the diplomatic, political, religious and cultural relations with the neighbours. This was a fact that always renews the visual arts background. This happened both through the princes and noblemen, who were able to receive and accumulate information from various surrounding areas and through the movement of artisans. As the Gothic was not unfamiliar to them through Catholic Church, the Moldavians were able to assimilate the ornamental elements as could see at the doors and the windows frames of the churches Pătrăuți, Arbore or Humor, providing already the monumentality to a space designed in accordance with Byzantine style. Relatively high towers from Popăuți or Moldovița and Sucevița also provide an experience of high space that leads to an image full of the greatness of divine power. Search of the monumental through the spatial dimensions and the light effects is similar to the understanding and recognition of God's absolute power. This fact is one taken off, to a certain extent, from the Byzantine Orthodox tradition that seeks for God's greatness in the intimacy of soul experiences outside from the reality of the material surrounding, reported as a specific feature of Orthodox spiritual experience, for example, by Lucian Blaga [1]. Therefore, the small and half-obscure space remains typical for the Byzantine churches [2], in that the only images are provided by the altar iconostasis and the half-abstract murals of the surrounding walls.

Moldavia remains predominantly the area where the mixture or juxtaposition of the elements from different cultures led to the birth of original forms of visual expression. The importance of medieval Moldavian style must be understood in view, firstly, of the fact that the natives assimilated various forms, and they have perpetuated not necessarily the ones they had at hand, but those they considered as belonging to their own spirit. Also not coincidental is the adoption of the triconchial plan that, although used throughout the South-East area, is commonly used in Serbia, on Mount Athos and Meteora [3]. Is also to note the use of slanting arches, about which some researchers argue that they are an invention of Moldovan workers (V. Vătășianu), but the others (G. Balș, Al. Busuioceanu) support the hypothesis of the Iranian influences transmitted by Armenians on this formula [4]. Finally, the vertical accent of the churches or the use of Gothic elements, subtly integrated in the stone decoration of the frames or the buttresses supporting the walls, is notable.

2. The Gothic elements and the use of light

The discovery of Gothic elements is therefore not surprising in the medieval Moldavian architecture. Their integration occurs naturally in the whole building, complementing the typical structures of the Orthodox cult. The craftsmen who worked in Moldavia brought with them from either Transylvania or the north, the Polish pathway, and locals have not rejected this view. They consider that a slight note of monumental portal or an above average elevation of the church is not opposed to the Orthodox spirit. We can thus talk of a moderate monumental character of Moldavian medieval architecture. If in Stephen's the Great time, during the building of Moldavian style, it was only a secondary feature, in times of Petru Rares, when the rhythm of style development continued, we can even speak of a sought monumentality.

From the civil architecture to the religious one, the Gothic elements are a constant. Resting on the Moldavian religious architecture it should be noted that they are an evident manifestation from the earliest forms known and kept, but primarily from the foundations laid by Stephen the Great.

In this context it is interesting to observe the relationship between daylight and interior space. The amount of light allowed to enter the space of the church is well calculated and determined by the intention of creating an atmosphere conducive to a state of prayer. The light always enters through the windows placed above the average human height (usually over two meters) and the amount decreases gradually from exonarthex to the nave and the altar where the intensity is extremely small. The opening of the towers with vertical shaped windows give to the interior space flashes that create at high altitude a need of deciphering light for the painted images. The relationship with the outside world diminishes gradually with decreasing of the window area and the intimacy of the space created by poor lighting can enhance for the Christians the focus on prayer. The only light present is that from the towers or that provided by the candles from the nave. The time of day at which the religious services are celebrated can create interesting transformations. As the Orthodox Liturgy could be held only in the morning, the morning rays of light illuminated the altar area from the prothesis to the altar table. The circuit map of the light subtly provides the essential moments of emphasis of the Eucharist.

The Moldavian architecture offers at this level an interesting structured relationship between interior space and daylight that can be pursued alongside the gothic elements, in an interesting succession during the 14th-16th centuries.

3. Crystallization of the style before Stefan's the Great period

One of the first monuments to be noted is the church of Saint Nicolas in Rădăuți (built in the second half of 14th century, during the reign of Petru I the Mușatin), the oldest wall monument kept in Moldavia. The church is considered the first princely necropolis. Inside, the place looks like a Romanesque three aisled basilica with a central nave and two lateral ones, adapted for the Orthodox

cult. We can note a significant number of Gothic elements such as the arches between the naves and those of the barrel vaults, the buttresses, the portals or the space of the sanctuary apse [5].

The Trinity Church in Siret, probably founded by Petru I the Mușatin, is the first manifestation of the triconchial plan in Moldavia, in the second half of 14th century. It is also one of the models for the development of the Moldavian style during Stephan's the Great age. The stone manufacture of the Saxon craftsmen from Siret and Baia were those that provided to the architecture a certain source of import of the gothic elements.

4. Stefan's the Great foundations and the originality of the use of Gothic elements

Although it is the first of Stefan's foundations and the most important one taking into account its original purpose as princely necropolis, the church of Putna is not preserved today in its original form. The problem of the original form of Stefan's church at Putna and of its old spatial and plan structure has been heavily discussed. Documents previous to the 17th and 18th century changes do not tell anything about this fact. The lack of information, as well as the series of changes sequentially undergone determined some of the researchers to say that present-day church has nothing in common with the original foundation led by Stefan. From a notice found in the Putna II Chronicles, in which it is said that Bogdan the Third „died in 7025 (=1517), April 22 – and was buried in Putna Monastery, in the great narthex, on the right side”, one could conclude that the initial building, constructed by Stefan the Great, had the same interior spaces as the actual church, that is, the one completely rebuilt by Vasile Lupu, Gheorghe Ștefan and Eustratie Dabija between 1653-1662. The church was then successively renovated, with minor alterations, by the metropolitan Iacov Putneanul, in the second half of the 18th century and by the Austrian architect Karl Romstorfer, in first years of the past century and finally in the '60 by state authorities. The news that the rulers buried in the great narthex gives us the opportunity to find out that there was also a room that was called the 'small narthex', and this could not be anything else but the burial chamber. The existence of the burial chamber and of an exonarthex was confirmed by archaeological excavations. They are at the origin of further great monastic churches in Moldavia.

Moreover, the Treasury Tower of Putna monastery, preserved in its original version, offers positive information about the particular manner of conceiving an element of civil architecture which maintains obvious Gothic elements. The two floors above the ground floor, constructed upon a square plan, are of octagonal shape, vaulted in slices along the ribs [5, p. 157]. In civil architecture, especially the defensive structures borrow Gothic elements. But this observation supports the hypothesis that the artisans were working simultaneously at the two types of edifices, offering to the ecclesiastic space

both purely decorative solutions and structural ones inspired by civil architecture.

Besides Saint Procopius church from Milișăuți, the Holy Cross Church from Pătrăuți opens up a new age for Moldavian architecture during Stefan's the Great reign, which proved to be the richest in local artistic creations. While we can speak about the first only by referring to the documentation and the writings about it before the first world war, when it was demolished by the Austrians, the latter preserved not only its entire architectural structure, but also, partially, its external and internal painting.

Built according to the triconchial plan, which we may notice will be preferred by Stephanian architecture [6] and which certifies the strong Byzantine influences and also the spiritual and artistic relations with Serbia and Mount Athos, the Pătrăuți church is similar to the Holy Trinity Church on Siret or Saint Ilie near Suceava [3]. Although typical for the Byzantine influence, the plan and, the entire architectural ensemble present subtle Gothic solutions in its constructive system. The unloading on mantelpieces of rock embedded in the wall, according to the Gothic principle, of both the hemispheric calotte of the narthex and of the arches of the nave, constitutes a proof for the assimilation of engineering schemes applied most probably by architects well acquainted with Gothic architectural solutions.

We enter the church through the porch on the western facade. The successive retired mouldings, finished with a broken arch, will become the preferred and constant solution from the first Stephen's the Great churches on. The lunette realization is not carried out by stone-carving scenes, typical for Western architecture since the early Romanesque period, but by painting. The topics vary from one church to another, and where the Virgin and Child are not present, there are clearly dedications to the scene with reference to the church. Here at Pătrăuți, the lunette surface is painted with figures of Saint Constantine and his mother, Elena, among who are The Holy Cross, as an allusion to the dedication of the church.

We see here that the painting is in any case the preferred solution. The decorative sculpture, which also plays a key role in the Gothic style, is just used for any capitals of the little columns or balustrades, where they are present. Moreover, V. Drăguț shows even the absence of the capitals from the intersection point of the broken arch with the vertical mouldings as they continue until the top of intersection [5, p. 159].

The windows from the Pătrăuți Holy Cross church are another factor mentioned in discussions about the presence of the Gothic in Moldavian architecture. The light penetration, both in the narthex, in the nave and in the altar, is favoured by a small area, located about midway from the ground up to the roof, or, respectively, at the interior pendant. As in other cases we mentioned, this is a natural consequence of the requirements of cult. On the other hand, however, we find a nearby to the Gothic style in terms of the rectangular stone frames resulting by crossing rods. Although there isn't a typical for Western religious architecture, but only for civilian, this type of

frame demonstrates the adaptation by the craftsmen who worked in Moldavia of one form that matches with the functional requirements of the construction and which, aesthetically, provides a solution of the rhythmic variation of the window frame.

The interior of the Pătrăuți church preserves the frescoes, providing information on the iconography of the period. However, concerning the use of Gothic architectural style it is important to note the frame decorating the space between narthex and nave. Here we encounter a structure of crossed sticks, in retreat, reminiscent of one of the windows but much better developed, which proves the craftsman's skill in finishing these elements.

One year after laying the Pătrăuți and Milișăuți foundations, in 1488 two other churches were built, which already start consolidating the principles of the so-called Moldavian style. Both Saint Ilie church, from the Saint Ilie village near Suceava, and Saint George church of Voroneț monastery, repeat the architectural structure of the former churches.

An interesting case is that of the church of Voroneț Monastery which, in 1547, received an exonarthex as a complement prolonging the narthex, according to the will of the metropolitan bishop Grigore Roșca. While the painting of the nave had been realized most probably in 1496, the outside walls were painted after the addition of the exonarthex. Among the elements of gothic inspiration we should mention, in a first phase, the sculptural frames decorating the entrance in the narthex, which initially were situated outside the church, but also the size and the decoration of the windows of the exonarthex, belonging to a later period. There certainly is a difference between the small surface of the windows in the narthex and the nave and the importance given to the windows several decades later. The Gothic decorative fretwork elements as well as the presence of the mullion and of the retreat mouldings for the frame offer solutions that both the masters and the believers were accustomed to.

From the Saint George Church in Hârlău, the Princely Court chapel, founded in 1492, we can observe the increase in the size of the windows of the narthex. With this widening of the window area, the typical Gothic decoration solutions mentioned above are adopted. Here, in most cases we are dealing with the typical elements of rayonnant Gothic. This will be perpetuated to other Stefan's major foundations such as that in Neamț (1497).

Resuming in large the necropolis structure from Putna, the Neamț monastery church is dedicated to the Lord's Ascension and it certainly presents some typical Gothic elements. Besides the windows with decorations with mullions, outside we can easily see the stone pedestal with two high profiles. The sensation of an excessive elongation of the church is stopped by the presence of strong buttresses [5, p. 167]. If the other churches have the western facade dedicated to the entrance portal (Pătrăuți, Saint Ilie) here exonarthex entries are in the south and north sides. The west facade remains reserved for a group of three Gothic windows, surrounded by the interesting glazed ceramic discs. Meeting in the same plane the decorative elements of Gothic and the ceramic enamelled pieces, brings up again into the discussion the idea of the

complementarity of these elements in all the decorative composition of the Moldavian medieval monuments from 15th century. Also noted in Neamț church remains the narthex portal, with mouldings finished in the top in broken arch, and the little columns with a highly refined carved base at the bottom. At the bottom we can find also a socket with two rows of stone decorations, in the form of combined circles, with lilies flowers at the top, a decorative motif encountered only in a few gothic churches in Transylvania (Cluj, Bistrița, Brașov) [3]. As a continuation of the rich sculptural details, we show the church of Saint John in Piatra Neamț (1497-1498), which seems to have been built by the same team of masons from Neamț. The large portal, framed by arch mouldings, presents an exception. The lunette does not have any painting, just a circle relief intersected with other two circles.

Another important example is the church dedicated to Saint Nicholas from Popăuți monastery in Botoșani, dating from 1496. Although the church underwent changes in the 18th century, it was submitted to a radical outside restoration in the early 20th century. It keeps the specific features of the Moldavian style from Stefan's the Great period. The defence structure is noteworthy. Situated in a strategic position, due to impending invasion to the fair, the church was surrounded by a defence wall. A lookout tower was also built. The tower has many details that certify the presence of the best stone craftsmen in the area. This is an evident fact demonstrated by the heads of imaginary animals, like those of the Gothic churches.

Surely other foundations of Stefan the Great should be noted that continue to develop features similar to those mentioned above: the church of Assumption Church in Borzești (1493-1494), Saint Michael Church in Războieni (1496), Elevation of the Holy Cross Church in Volovăț Village (1502), or the latest Dobrovăț monastery, dedicated to the Church Descent of the Holy Ghost (1503-1504).

5. Nobleman and post-Stefan's the Great foundations. [The use of] light and space

From Stefan's the Great period, date two other churches that need to be noted in connection with the subject at hand. Even if they are not princely foundations, but the foundation of leading nobleman's of the time, they present important features for understanding the entire Moldavian architecture of the second half of the 15th century. The churches in question are those from Arbore and Bălinești.

The church in Arbore has the same name as the village and is dedicated to the Beheading of Saint John the Baptist. It was founded in 1503 by the chief of the army Luca Arbore, on the Solca river. Unfortunately, from the entire complex only the church exists today, the nobleman house being destroyed by a fire in the 19th century.

The church is a nobleman foundation, which is reflected by the absence of the tower and by the fact that it is designed and constructed in a simple form based on the idea of longitudinal type. The construction is enlarged by extending the outer west, of the side walls (with approx. 2.5 m) connected by a semicircular arch and their union with the upper arch, thereby achieving a semi-open space that appears for the first time in Moldavian architecture.

The entrance is located on the southern side of the building.

Situated in the narthex, the tomb of the founder of the church, the chief of the army Luca Arbore, who was killed on Stefan's the Younger orders in 1523, is considered the most valuable element of Gothic funeral art in Moldavia.

The Bălinești Church is located in the village with the same name in the meadow of the Siret river. The Bălinești village is known from the 15th century when it belonged to Ioan Tautu chancellor, diplomat of Stefan the Great and of his son Bogdan, as is noted by the chroniclers. The architecture of this church built between 1494 and 1499 is unique in its age.

Like many churches built in the nobleman courtyard, Saint Nicolas church was built as a rectangular single nave structure divided into naos and the narthex, with polygonal apse at the east and ending in a polygonal shape and in western extreme side. The church is completed by a bell tower. It is squat, located on the south side, right to the entrance. It has two levels: a porch and the bell chamber. The nave and the narthex, which are divided into three equal bays by arches descending on stone pillars of stone decorated with capitals and pedestals. The porch beneath the bell tower has a vault with carved stone stars arch ribs, decorated with stone rosettes, the only truly gothic vault kept in Moldavia [5, p. 172]. Elements of architectural decoration from the door and window frames have features which can be described as late Gothic.

The rail with Gothic motifs, lobed mouldings, and strongly shaped pedestal surrounding the whole church must also be emphasized. Inside, in addition to the portal of the narthex, the little columns with sharp ends integrated into the wall structure that reinforce the architectural structure in the nave are interesting to note. The age of Stefanian foundations remains the classic period for the Moldavian style. Another important period is the post-Stefanian one, around the middle of the 16th century. Now, another set of key architectural monuments are built which define the Moldavian style.

Petru Rareș continued the tradition inherited from his father, Stefan the Great, at the religious and artistic level. Aided by his wife, Elena, he raised and repaired many churches including the church of the Probota monastery (1530), Humor church (1535) or Moldovița church(1537), The Assumption church from Baia, Saint George and Uspenia (Assumption) of Botoșani and the could list go on.

The church dedicated to Saint Nicolas from Probota monastery was built by Petru Rareș with a clear purpose, namely to serve as princely necropolis, and its construction was supervised by his cousin the metropolitan Grigore Roșca, superior of the monastery. The precinct wall lasted from 1530 until 1550. The church was painted inside and outside between 1532-1534/1535. Paintings are of

a high quality. They were restored and are well preserved. So far it has been considered the most important monument of the reign of Rareș.

However, like the church of the Ascension at Neamț Monastery, the Probota church suggests some new design solutions, and as well as capitalizing on the Gothic elements. Noteworthy on the outside are the strong socket, in the tradition of previous churches, the buttresses and, especially, the stone frames with Gothic mullions. The exonarthex with a Gothic architectural solution is in a definite contrast to any monument from Stephen's the Great time [5, p. 328]. Windows get an unprecedented scale, seeking to achieve a strong illumination of the interior space, reducing nearly all of the walls. The dominance of the opening on the fullness was not a common thing for the Orthodox churches. By contrast, the preferred space was enclosed by the exterior openings and a little light penetration, especially in the nave or the altar. The option for a small space, illuminated only by the mesh windows or by the few small openings in the tower, aimed at looking for and concentrating on a relationship viewed as secret, not distracting you from any attention to the surrounding details. For example, discreet floodlight from the tower windows at different times of day, depending on the position of the sun, on the image of the Christ Pantocrator. This happens here at Probota, but extends to all Moldavian church spaces with evident origin in the Byzantine forms. It is also evidence of the union of the type of approach to the use of light in Western (in this case the Gothic one) architecture, and the Eastern (Byzantine); an unusual combination that enables an interesting shift from the bright space, which combines the inside and the outside naturally, to an illuminated space powerful enough. This space of the narthex has still the high windows, with the Gothic decorations and mullions. It is continued by the burial chamber area, with intermediate and low light windows, to the nave where the midday light only manages the details of the mural paintings. The switching from one area to another is done gradually, with a rhythm that offer the possibility the Christians who enter the church to pass through different stages of separation of the material light and transposition in the world in which the things become visible by the spiritual light.

The exonarthex windows were completely eliminated in other churches before that founded by Petru Rareș, among which the churches of the monasteries Humor and Moldovița.

Although we can find evidence that announces the Moldavian Renaissance, the most obvious being the inside portal, the gothic decoration does not disappear but rather remain a constant of the architecture. From this monument, the Moldovița church, we mention the buttresses which are arranged like those at Probota, a right and a left pair, and right to the altar another small support, lacking only the 45-degree ones from the corners of the exonarthex [7].

The frame of the windows must also be discussed – those from the narthex, bigger, that present a larger arch, the mullion and in the top a typical rayonnant Gothic moulding, and the frames from the windows from the burial chamber and apses, small ones, made of cross sticks. The door also preserves the

gothic atmosphere by withdrawing broken arches and stone decoration from the base of the mouldings.

The church of the Humor monastery has similar features. The Gothic profile is present at the entrance to the narthex and to the burial chamber, but the one of the nave has a Renaissance profile, just the crossing lines at the corner are reminiscent of the Gothic [7].

From the late stage of Mușat foundations we have as example the Resurrection church belonging to Sucevița monastery started in 1582 and finished around 1584 [7]. The plan is similar to the Probota or Bistrița churches, new items that appear are the presence of several windows in the nave apses (instead of one, there are three) and the precincts opened on the north and south of the exonarthex. Their presence seems to be further to the exterior painting of the church, although they appear in the Votive scene. The Gothic elements that remain at Sucevița are the buttresses, the window frames of the burial chamber and the apses, the large windows of the narthex and also the narthex portal. Here the mouldings are more flat, demonstrating that the craftsmen forgot the good Gothic tradition [7].

6. Conclusions

As we have seen in the examples above the original way of combining the Gothic elements with the typical Byzantine space is done in medieval Moldavia could be observed through the functionality of the sacred environment in relation to the person who enters that space.

There is thus a permanent exchange between the environment and the Christians. The atmosphere from the church of the Neamț monastery or, latest, from Probota, actually create a perpetual transfer between the perceived size and shape of space, how light fills that space and the state of contemplation or prayer of the Christians present in that place.

Unlike classical Byzantine structures, the decreasing graduation of the light intensity to the altar emphasizes the feeling of the individual in an environment that separates him from outside reality.

This gradual distinction of the successive spaces, obvious in most churches built during and after the Stephan's the Great period, as already indicated Neamț, Probota or Humor churches, remain important. The space is not homogeneous, but treated differently depending on where believers are sitting. We cannot speak only about the windows and doors, but mostly about the relations with the outside who actually determine the sensitivity of spiritual experience of the space.

The review of some important examples of the Moldavian style can be enlightening to some extent for the understanding of its role in the European culture, particularly the influence of the Gothic on medieval Moldavia. The free movement of artisans, the political and diplomatic relations between the Principality of Moldavia and its neighbours to the East or North clearly enriched the local population culturally and spiritually. The capacity to assimilate the elements coming from different cultures has demonstrated over time an open

structure of the native spirit. Thus, in the historical-cultural context of medieval Moldavia the originality emerges as we note, reporting to the Byzantine reference. Bringing into question the gothic is essential when talking about the monumental and the changes in spiritual-spatial perception, by dosing differential light intensity in different areas and points of the building.

Perhaps a sensitive imagination exercise should be interesting and would at least clarify on what ordinary believers felt when they participated to the dedication of a new foundation. If for someone the entrance to Chartres cathedral or other example of a Gothic cathedral was a mystical experience arising from a feeling of ecstasy before the greatness, understood primarily as monumentality of the sacred space, what did one experience when stood in front of the Moldovița church for the first time, for example? Certainly, from the little church from Pătrăuți to the church of Probota monastery things change. The mystery of the obscure space tradition is perpetuated in Orthodox Church, but the way this type of the sacred space is obtained is transformed. The Moldavian churches rise, they also receive westward spaces, thus becoming more enlightened, but all these trends remain complementary in the Moldavian synthesis of space and sacred shapes.

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