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# CHRISTIAN MONASTERY GARDENS

## A SYMBOLISTIC INTERPRETATION BETWEEN

### PIETY AND AESTHETICS

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### **Abstract**

In the profane identification, the cult places are defined using words as ‘church’, ‘monastery’, ‘monks’, ‘priests’, etc. These are simplistic human and material expressions due to the implementation of Orthodox religion. The cult spaces, a material expression of rigorous canons that are founded on symbolic significations of Christian ideology, are ensembles consisting of various architectural objects and a garden. The garden is the inner bond of the ensemble, the ‘transition space’ between sacred and secularist world. The space around churches or monasteries, bordered by surroundings, reflects the dogmatic tradition, starting from the imposed ‘order’ up to the plants that are used. The landscape ensemble around the religious edifices needs an attentive and continuous care from the monks. The simplest and proper word for this is ‘work’, basic, simple work that ennobles. The stylistic approach is essential to perceive and understand the natural, mysterious atmosphere of the monastery gardens, that could be found in the ensemble of vegetal and built elements placed in a preset order. The aim of the present work is to identify and interpret the symbolic vegetal and mineral elements used following a line that is either dogmatic or imposed by tradition (expression of the Paradise Garden in the afterlife), and, on the other hand, the action of taking care of the land as a way to redemption through work (a Christian act imposed by the Benedictine Latin motto '*Ora et labora*' – ‘Pray and work’), between the liberation of the body, soul and mind and the penitence through labour. Between these two approaches – expressions of the monastery gardens – there is beauty and purity, feast and repentance materialized in a symbolic and physical form.

**Keywords:** monastic garden, vegetal, mineral, symbols, benefits

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### **1. Introduction**

The enhanced space of monasteries yards, often bordered by constructed enclosure and generically called *monastic garden*, expresses the identity impression of the establishment. It is a ‘corner of Heaven’, an established expression, little explained, but understood by all Christians, some of them

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living their daily life there, others, most of them, who, willing to be closer to Him, stop temporary in the blessed peace and harmony, in a oasis that exists through the hand of Man and Nature. The monastic gardens are places where man can be alone with himself and in the same time with dear peers, ‘alone with God’.

The Romanian monastic gardens present around the establishment, being the transition space between sacred and secularist world, are emblematic for the settlement, having particular identities: inherent lines and paths in the existent architectural site, plants (trees, shrubs and flowers) symbolically/traditionally consecrated species and discreet furniture, adapted for the meditative rest for repentance and humility.

On the other hand, one can observe the hand of man and the labour of those who take care of the gardens (‘a lesson of virtue, a heal for the wounds provoked by sin’, as Saint John Chrysostom says) for making them a stop site for peregrines.

This paper aims to synthetically analyse the inside garden of some ecclesiastic worship sites from Iassy: Bărboi Church, Galata Monastery, Cetățuia Monastery and Golia Monastery. We used different perspectives: architectural, landscape and horticultural in comparison with the monks, penchant for the labour in these gardens. “The substance of a diligent man is precious.” (Proverbs 12.27)

The analysed spaces lay both in the immediate urban space (Golia Monastery and Bărboi Church laying in the historical centre of Iassy), as well as in the peripheral urban area (Cetățuia Monastery and Galata Monastery).

The study is based on theoretical thorough research in Architectural History, Landscape History, Horticulture and Theology, photographic and documentary analysis *in situ*, but most of all on interviews with the monks – a close connection between a layman and a cleric carried in a Christian and also scientific spirit.

All studied ecclesiastical establishment are on the List of Historical Monuments, 2010: Bărboi Church - local interest (B), Galata Monastery, Cetățuia Monastery and Golia Monastery - national interest (A) [1].

## **2. God created the landscape and the garden - Man defined them**

“In the beginning God created the Heaven and the Earth” (Genesis 1.1). God created the landscape, primordial and vital, as a living place for all beings. Then, He entrusted it to the man.

Today, the definition of landscape raises controversies, mostly on terminology, less on conceptual understanding. Science seemed to be confused in details, opinions and, surprisingly, it defines landscape through emotional/physical states: “We feel well or bad in our frame landscape, we feel at home or like strangers, everybody bears an aesthetical judgement on landscape, we are influenced by changes, which induce us profound questions” [2].

On the other hand, “religious myths are associated with landscape” [2]. They generate harmony, aesthetics and mysticism and “in Christian tradition is considered a given separated by human, who uses and dominates them” [2].

“And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Genesis 2.7). “And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed.” (Genesis 2.8) God created the *primary landscape*, “world from nothing” [3], primal and sublime, called Eden. The detail that separates man from the other beings is that for him a *garden* was created. In terms of science, garden suggests a constructed frame: *a plan*. God had *a plan* for the man and the man was given a certain action: “to dress it and to keep it” (Genesis 2.15). The primordial garden, Eden, forged by Good God, through simple, but essential actions, was all the man needed to live.

On the eighth day, because until then “there was not a man to till the ground” (Genesis 2.5), “out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2.9), because the man had henceforth a sense, a responsibility.

The analysis of the expression “every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food” (Genesis 2.9) suggests that body nourishment follows soul nourishment [4]. The Genesis parables suggest that plants – esthetical and useful – were also tamed, creations of God. In academic terms, the trees were in fact varieties, fruit bearing cultivars, not spontaneous species and their quality suggested man in which direction to go, as a stimulant for a better and easier life.

“God said, Let there be light: and there was light” (Genesis 1.3) and He also said: “Let the waters under the Heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so” (Genesis 1.9). The light and water are essential elements in the life of plants; in scientific terms, they ensure the existence of the phenomenon called photosynthesis, the process of fixating the carbon dioxide from the atmosphere in the presence of solar radiations [5].

“And the Lord God planted a garden” (Genesis 2.8) in this order: firstly the Earth, light and darkness, the water, the plants, then the animals and in the last day the man. The chronology complies the viability stages, in scientific sense, as the latter creation relies on those forged before, without which the sustainability of life would not exist.

After being banished from the Garden into the wilderness “to till the ground from whence he was taken” (Genesis 3.23), with the lessons learned in the paradisiacal apprenticeship, the man searches and ceaselessly labours to rebuild his lost heavenly world. Another detail can be observed: such an Eden must be continuously worked, “in sorrow (...) all the days of thy life!” (Genesis 3.17), as a struggle for perfection, perpetual and involved, sometimes with surprisingly results. Starting then, man shapes and reinvents the surrounding environment and the search, the mastery, the discovery, ”creative and progressive human imagination”, mentioned by Father Stăniloae [3, p. 247] is, in an extended understanding, the basis of Science with unlimited possibilities

today. Man should guard the garden, a mission that transforms this creative activity into a great responsibility of protecting the Nature, as a Supreme Force.

Discovery and mastery are ‘religious commands’ and through creative labour, we submit the Earth ‘freely and consciously’ to mankind ration but proving respect to the Nature laws [3, p. 249]. As an ancestral reflex, the perfect garden image is still Eden, which man wants to see, to touch, to smell its clean scent, to feel safe and again so close to Lord God.

### **3. The yards of monastic ensembles - case studies**

Are the monasteries gardens replicas of Eden, created through the work and wisdom of monks? What matters most: the line, the style, the species or the feelings of laymen resting in it? How vernacular and how stereotyped is it?

The analysed yards of monastic ensembles revealed the existence of landscaped spaces for the body and soul of the monks, but equally of the pilgrims, as a place for spirit recovery in the faith in God.

Without exception, all studied ecclesiastical establishment have their own impress: historical, architectural and human - material expression of the Orthodox faith of the monks living here.

#### **3.1. History, architectural structure and symbol**

Cetățuia Monastery was established (1669-1672) by the Voivode Gheorghe Duca [6], laying on the Cetățuia Hill (near to Iassy), in a strategic position, with fortified yard. The church of Cetățuia, the Monastery, has a simple, austere scenery, “evincing a refined taste and a better understanding of beauty obtained through simplicity” [7].

The ensemble of Galata Monastery, foundation of the Ruler Peter the Lame in 1584, represents the monument that opens the horizons of a new current of Byzantine influence (Moldavian triconch plan [6, p. 134], vault and decoration elements), but the yard keeps the simple, modest and established style, with strengthened surroundings, fortified to shelter it [6, p. 131]. Its disposal is on the west side hills of Iassy within a dominant position [6, p. 130].

Golia Monastery (1652-1660) is the last establishment of the Ruler Vasile Lupu [8] and has a heterogeneous character, moving away from the old Moldavian style [9]. Golia Church, built according to the trefoil traditional plan [6, p. 209], is a combination of styles, mostly Gothic and Byzantine [9], being an “entirely new style of creation for Moldavia” at that time [8]. The fortified entrance (1667), with towers on each corner [6, p. 200], entirely surrounds the Iassy town’s central edifice [6, p. 198].

The yard enclosed with walls of Bărboi Church, establishment of the Governor Ursu Bărboi between the years 1613-1615 and rebuilt in 1841-1844 by Dimitrie Sturza [10], is an ecclesiastic ensemble restored in 1984-1986. The Bărboi monastic ensemble is present in the city records starting with the 17<sup>th</sup>

century, situated on Bărboi alleyway, having since then a central urban position [10, p. 677].

The plan of the analysed boundary usually has a relatively regular square shape (the yard of Cetăuia Monastery, the yard of Golia Monastery), circular shape (the yard of Galata Monastery) or polygonal shape (the yard of Bărboi Church), with spacious areas (0,78 ha.÷1,675 ha.). The church is a compositional centre of the ensemble (Cetăuia Monastery, Galata Monastery, Golia Monastery). Bărboi Church is an exception, having an eccentric emplacement.

The polygonal yards of the establishments present quadratic guard and defence towers (Cetăuia Monastery) or circular towers (Golia Monastery) located on the corners of the rampart. The main access in the monastery passes under the fortified bell tower, located on one of the yard sides, which is perpendicular (Cetăuia Monastery, Galata Monastery, Golia Monastery) or not (Bărboi Church) to the longitudinal axis of the church.

The main axis that makes the connection between the bell tower and the southern side of the church (Cetăuia Monastery, Galata Monastery, Golia Monastery), or the western one (Bărboi Church) is linear (in a composition that follows the classicist style – Bărboi Church, Galata Monastery, Golia Monastery) or curved (free landscape composition – Cetăuia Monastery).

At Bărboi Church and Galata Monastery, the vegetal alignment (trees) is respected, and the perspective is limited and conducted towards the edifice entrance, while the monasteries of Golia and Cetăuia have an open, large perspective.

The geometric forms and the lines have their own symbols, and transfer this badge to the built environment: walls, defence towers, axis, physical or visual limitations, decorative elements. Geometric pure figures (circles, squares, triangles) are the original model of the objects. The circle, a perfect shape, the intuitive symbol of the Sun, Moon and Earth (“the circle of the earth” - Isaiah 40,22), is a dynamic element looking for balance. The horizontal and vertical lines are fundamental elements of the balanced compositional structures [11] while the square is the modulated shape built with them. Considered to be a perfect element, the square expresses stability, equilibrium, firmness. The Cross, the image of the Saviour and of His passions, is the simplest horizontal-vertical composition. The Sky and the Earth meeting in it symbolise the orientation in time and space (cardinal points), retrieval, security [11, p. 21]. The equilateral triangle, expression of a profound relation between the horizontal with the symmetrical oblique lines, stands for the absolute stability, serenity [11, p. 32] and in Christian belief, the symbolism is supreme: The Holy Trinity.

The enclosed round line, materialised in the mighty, protective wall, has confined meanings, of possession that protects and forbids.

### **3.2. Vegetal elements**

The analysed monastic ensembles have yard gardens whose vegetal elements cover a short list of species but always the evergreen trees and shrubs.

The firs and spruces (“the trees of gifts” or “the comb of Saint Peter” [12]) and the pines (“blessed by Christ not to be ever burned” [12, p. 203]), which form the frame of the arrangement, are not native species typical to the hills of Iassy and their presence there as mature high trees of respectable ages indicates the fact that they have been planted there long ago. A thorough punctual analysis of the conifer specimens reveals that not all the trees have the same biological age, but have been planted in different periods of time in limited groups (approximately 3-5 specimens). Thereby, the re-plantation through out the years was done in order to rearrange when some of them, too old or due to a biological accident, entered a decline period. Despite this obviousness, the homogeneity of the trees (from the *Pinaceae* family) [5, p. 151] reveals that the replacement was made knowingly with same species trees. Another detail concerning the conifers is that they are *pure species* (*Abies alba* Mill. [5, p. 151], *Picea abies* L. [5, p. 152] and *Pinus nigra* Arn. [5, p. 152]), native from the mountains of Romania. The more or less *exotic cultivars* were avoided, because they would alter the historical and traditional character of the monastic ensembles.

As deciduous trees present in the monastic yards, we name the lindens (*Tilia sp.* L. [5, p. 262]), walnuts (*Juglans regia* L. [5, p. 196]), willows (*Salix sp.* L. [5, p. 278]), field ashes (*Sorbus aucuparia* L. [5, p. 208]) or birches (*Betula pendula* Roth. [5, p. 192]). The listed species are *traditionally Romanian* or *native to the ecosystem*. They are scientifically known to be part of the geographical scenery typical to the Iassy area, and well adapted to the environment. On the other hand, from the landscape point of view, these species are part from the aesthetically inferior class, with ephemeral and discrete decorative properties, but well anchored in the collective memory. The lindens bloom in May-June and the willow twigs, a symbol of life defeating death, are brought on Palm Sunday to be consecrated.

The presence of the silver linden in the yard of Galata Monastery is remarkable. Declared eco monument, it has a considerable age. In the yard are also other lindens, walnuts and a wild cherry tree (*Prunus avium* L. [5, p. 209]), all mature, ensuring a breezy shadow in the yard. In the yard of Golia Monastery, there are field ashes along with a solitary weeping willow.

The evergreen shrubs of common box (*Buxus sempervirens* L. [5, p. 239]) or white cedar (*Thuja occidentalis* L. [5, p. 150]), planted linearly, curved or straight, rigidly trimmed, parallelepiped (common box, white cedar) or as vertical specimens (white cedar) recall of the classic style, typical for the periods in which these ensembles were built.

Junipers (*Juniperus sp.* L. [5, p. 150]), located on the sides of the entrance pathway of the Bärboi Church, are the only almost exotic appearances, although in the last decades are a presence that draws attention no longer.

The colour is present in the yards thanks both to the flowering shrubs and roses (*Rosa sp.* L. [5, p. 203]), that Christ ‘blessed’ [12, p. 207] with rich flowers and *Spiraea vanhouttei* Zab. [5, p. 202]. These plants were found in all the cases. They have rich flowers, diaphanous and are well-known by the Romanians. Also, biologically speaking, they are shrubs that resist to drought and frost

(*Spiraea vanhouttei* Zab.) [13] and their phenophase, ensuring the scenery, lasts long (especially for roses) [13, p. 212].

The *pure species*, as the snowdrops (*Galanthus nivalis* L. [5, p. 334]), the wood violet (*Viola odorata* L. [5, p. 266]), the two-leaf squill (*Scilla bifolia* L. [5, p. 332]) and the bulbous less *wild* as the crocuses (*Crocus sp.* L. [5, p. 336]), tulips (*Tulipa sp.* L. [5, p. 331]), daffodils (*Narcissus sp.* L. [5, p. 334]) are typical for the rural households in Romania. The geranium (*Pelargonium sp.* L'Hér. [5, p. 230]), petunias (*Petunia sp.* Juss. [5, p. 290]) or the mums (*Chrysanthemum sp.* L. [5, p. 315]), flowers inlaid the Romanian tradition, often brought by parishioners in flower pots carefully places around the church, the sitting places or the verdant floor.

All these elements of vegetal structure, trees, shrubs or floral plants, which considerably characterize the monastic arrangements as species, have as background *the grass*, as a jacket of the soil. The herbage with wild flowers (spontaneous species) are preferred instead of precious species and varieties of ornamental grass. The grass is mowed periodically.

The image of the monastic yards arrangements, resembling to a picture with aesthetical and health valences, is the result of plant care in a continuously changing environment. Every analysed monastery has 'its own picture', impressed, similarly to the establishment, in the memory of the believers, but unlike the buildings, the vegetal matter is alive, having its sensitivities and requirements.

The climatic extremes in the latter years pose problems to the monks and the prolonged drought, as a more and more often phenomenon, result not only in the lack of water in the yard fountains, but also in the degradation of plants, sometimes irremediably. The grass floors are the first to suffer, especially because of the sun exposure. Roses and common boxes follow. The situation that seems to repeat in the latter years provoked the monks to resort to specialists in order to improve the features of the soil in the conditions of lack of water. Thus, the disestablishment of grass floors through the fall ploughing, the natural organic enrichment and the textural improvement, followed by the early seeding consist as a solution for the Cetățuia Monastery. Is a solution that seems extreme – the disestablishment – but it is the correct and sustainable one. A negative influence on vegetation is that of the urban location. The microclimate and the urban pollution have a significant influence concerning the vegetation conditions (Golia Monastery and Bărboi Church).

In the monasteries with more rustic yards, less precious (Galata Monastery), the scenery is simple and free, with dotted shrubs and benches laid in grass. In this case the little vegetal imperfections are part from the nature of the ensemble and its maintenance is far easier. The control of the scenery can be discreetly observed at the species level or at the topiary sustenance of the evergreen shrubs.

The green colour prevails in the monastic yards and the presence of the evergreen trees and shrubs tend to maintain this feature in winter too. In the Christian symbolism, green defines the colour of life, the renewal and the

appearance of the Holy Ghost ("in sight like unto an emerald" - Revelation 4.3). In the science of landscape, green is a leitmotiv, an essential element for the other colours materialized in vegetal and anthropogenic form.

### 3.3. '*Ora et labora*' - Pray and work.

No doubt, behind the landscape image of monastic yards and their maintenance, there is implication, skill and labour. The ineluctable and blunt question: who takes care of the arrangement? receives a simple answer: the monks that live here, the faithful layman close to the Church and sometimes the people who, in these days of tribulation are looking for a honest source of money. The neat aspect, the blooming flowers, the mowed grass, the mighty trees, the clipped shrubs and the exemplary cleanliness transposed in stages of horticultural technology stand for the current maintenance and skill, arising from the "continuous creative imagination in nature's arrangement" [3, p. 225].

The Holy Scripture promotes and praises labour, both spiritual and physical. Labour, as Father Stăniloae says [3, p. 223], is necessary for ensuring the daily, but in the case of monastic yards arrangements, the care giving labour ensures the nourishment for beauty and soul.

Those who - constantly or rarely - come in the yard, won't precisely observe the benefits of the harmonious and carefully driven scenery, but they will feel them.

The adage '*Ora et labora*' ('pray and work'), yet known in the Middle Ages by Christians, is probably the most suitable expression, simple and brief, of the work in arrangement of the 'Lord's Garden', the closest to His House. Father Stăniloae has said that work, through it's ascetic character, spiritualizes us and encourages our approaching to God [3, p. 223].

The monastic yards, described and analysed above, are the aesthetical expression of the fact that arranged nature is "also God" [14], a sacred buffer space between the world of layman and that of monks, objectified by the vegetal elements ensemble, stylistically arranged, complex or free landscape, with dominant vernacular origins.

## 4. Discussion and conclusions

The analysis of monastic yards was made using interdisciplinary complex aspects, from Theology and sciences (Architecture, Landscape, Horticulture). The results reveal a natural osmosis that takes place in people's life, laymen or clergy.

The monastic establishments studied were chosen tracking their mutual features: yards with fortified walls and church, built in the same historical period (16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> centuries). As a differentiation element was used their location, in the centre of the city or peripheral to the city of Iassy.

The chaining: *monastic establishments–arranged yards–natural and anthropogenic elements–the monk and/or laymen labour* is the mirror of the

Romanian Orthodox Belief, in its complex stylistic and behavioural, expression with vernacular accents.

Precisely, each monastic yard was analysed from an architectural and landscaped point of view. There were presented general aspects and particularities as exceptions. In each establishment, the meetings and discussions with the monks provided valuable information, thanks to the informal and close conduction of the interviews. The discussions also revealed that the monks responsible with the establishment encounter difficulties in maintaining the arrangement, in restorations of the buildings or in other activities mostly because of the more and more pronounced climatic/environmental changes (prolonged and frequent droughts, excessive sunstroke, degradation of soil, pollutants). These difficulties were exceeded thanks to some ancestral solutions that make part from the local traditions and less from new technologies.

The general conclusion is that the hospitable yards, open for the Christians meditative rest, repentance and humility prayers, are taken care of in the traditional Romanian spirit, through out the preservation of its landscaped and architectural original concept. If not always the monks are those engaged in the maintenance and beautification of the arrangement, then through out the parishioners and pilgrims contribution, ‘the little garden’ of Lord God has preserved for hundreds of years the beauty and purity in days of celebration or of sorrow, objectified symbolically and physically.

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