

The Church of the Former Monastery at Curtea de Argeş

A Place of Art, Legend, and National Memory*

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Received 18 November 2025 | Accepted 11 December 2025 | Published online 22 December 2025

Abstract. This article analyses the church of Curtea de Argeş, a unique architectural monument in former Wallachia, which is a symbol of historical heritage in the entire state of Romania. It is partly an art historical analysis, and partly an intellectual history of the studies, preservation and promotion of the monument in the period of nation-state formation in the late nineteenth century. The monument was at the centre of significant historical events, legends, beliefs; together with its unique architecture, they were recounted and used for the promotion of national art and culture. Indeed, modern state-builders have paid careful attention to the historical complexity of the monument, including its legends, in defining the idea of Romanian art. Therefore, the article argues more broadly that national symbols are successful if they are based on both historical facts and legends from the past. Furthermore, the modern transformation of the monument into a national symbol was not solely a Romanian affair. Its discovery and promotion happened through a complex transnational exchange between various architects and scholars based in Romania, France and the Habsburg Empire. Therefore, the article provides further proofs for the transnational nature of the national heritage formation in Eastern Europe and beyond.

Keywords: Romanian art, national style, architectural monuments, national heritage, national symbols, Wallachia, Curtea de Argeş

Introduction

On a cold cloudy December morning in 2017, the Romanian Honour Guard were waiting in front of the military plane that had just landed at Otopeni International Airport in Bucharest. Accompanied by the sombre music of the ceremonial

* This study has been funded by the Czech Science Foundation (GAČR) as part of the project The First Histories of Architecture and the Creation of National Heritage in South-Eastern Europe (1860–1930). A Transnational Approach, project number 22-19492I.

orchestra, they were preparing to receive the body of King Michael of Romania, the country's last reigning monarch and the final surviving head of state in Europe from World War II era. As the orchestra continued its funeral march, the soldiers lifted the coffin and slowly advanced across the cold grey tarmac. The whole nation was watching the lonely wooden casket making its way on home soil. It felt surreal. The long-exiled king was home again, but this time alone, as a mere mortal, succumbing to his inevitable destiny.

The funeral of King Michael lasted four days, accompanied by the usual pomp and symbolism befitting such an exceptional occasion. The burial service did not take place in Bucharest, but naturally at the sixteenth-century church of Curtea de Argeş (Argyasudvarhely), where all Romanian kings are interred and where a new Episcopal Cathedral had just been completed. The church was turned into the Royal Mausoleum by Romania's first king, Carol I (r. 1867–1914), founder of the dynasty that ended with King Michael's death. The historical monument was once again at the centre of a royal funeral in 2017, as it had been in 1914, for King Carol, in 1927 for King Ferdinand and in 1938 for Queen Marie.

The church of Curtea de Argeş has been promoted over the last two centuries as the most significant historical monument of the country. Renowned for its distinctive architecture, it is also a site of legends, popular beliefs, and special liturgical ceremonies—a place that has long provoked debates among architects, historians, and art historians concerning the nature and sources of its decoration and architecture, as well as the origins of its designer or designers (Figure 1).

This article argues that the architecture of Curtea de Argeş, the historical sources, and the legends surrounding it are all connected to its modern history as a national symbol. It connects historical facts, liturgical practices and its legend with its modern role as a centrepiece of national heritage formation. In doing so, it complements and extends studies that have either focused on the monument's nineteenth-century reception¹ or on its early modern history.² The research uses sources that have never been analysed together to offer a more comprehensive account of the building's possible architectural sources and the multiple meanings it has held until today.

The construction was one of the major undertakings during the reign of Voivode Neagoe Basarab (around 1482–1521), who envisaged the monument as a princely necropolis for his family and successors. Started in 1512, the very year Neagoe in

1 Minea, "The Monastery of Curtea de Argeş," 181; Zach, "Der Fürstenhof in Argeş," 105; Popescu, "André Lecomte Du Nouÿ," 302; Noica, *Istoria restaurării*, 45.

2 Payne, "Renaissance in the Balkans?," 5; Negrău, "The Structure of the Monastery Church," 62; Cernea, "André Lecomte du Nouÿ and the frescoes," 70.



Figure 1 The Church of Curtea de Argeş. a) around 1880 (after restoration); b) contemporary image
 Source: *Médiathèque de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine*, Paris, Viollet-le-Duc Fonds, Box Roumanie, no. 36, 2320-2330

front of Basarab ascended the throne of Wallachia, the church was completed relatively quickly, in 1517. During the reign of Radu of Afumați (1522–1529), it was decorated and painted on the interior. Initially a monastery, it became an Episcopal Church in 1793 when the Episcopacy was founded. It has double walls: an inner layer of brick, and a thicker outer layer of carved stone brought from a nearby quarry at Albești. The monument was raised on an earthen platform about two meters high. It has a trefoil plan, with an enlarged narthex—much larger than the naos—an unusual feature for an Orthodox church, but one that can be explained by its function as a princely necropolis. This narthex is surmounted by three of the church's four domes.

These dry facts conceal a spectacular architecture—unique in the world—that has fascinated chroniclers, travellers, artists, historians, and military leaders alike. It arose in a politically unstable environment that had not produced a monument of such renown before, nor would it ever produce one. This earlier history proved highly relevant for modern architects, historians, and politicians, who connected the church to the very foundations of the Romanian state—chiefly its newly established monarchy.

This article therefore proposes a *longue-durée* analysis of the church of Curtea de Argeș, linking its historical development, associated legends, and devotional practices with its modern role as a centrepiece of national heritage formation. It complements studies of nation-building through architecture in Romania,³ as well as research on the monument's early modern history.⁴

Although the Curtea de Argeș Monastery enjoyed undeniable fame from the moment of its consecration, serving as a source of pride for local rulers and inspiring glowing descriptions from foreign visitors, it is the monument's modern history that has largely defined its present image and that of its founder. With the establishment of the Romanian nation-state in 1859, through the union of the former Ottoman provinces of Wallachia and Moldavia, what had by then become the Episcopal Church of Curtea de Argeș was the first monument studied by contemporary intellectuals, the first to be restored, the country's principal exhibit (as scale models or fragments of architecture) at universal expositions, and the site chosen by King Carol as the royal necropolis. It was without doubt the most important historical monument for Romania's artistic heritage in the nineteenth century.

The architecture of the monument, the theories about its origins and, above all, the way it came to embody the ideal of a national cultural heritage from the

3 Minea, "The Monastery of Curtea de Argeș," 181; Zach, "Der Fürstenhof in Argeș," 105; Popescu, "André Lecomte Du Nouÿ," 302; Noica, *Istoria restaurării*, 45.

4 Payne, "Renaissance in the Balkans?," 5; Negrău, "The Structure of the Monastery Church," 62; Cernea, "André Lecomte du Nouÿ and the frescoes," 70.

mid-nineteenth century onward are nevertheless only a part of the story. This article will further also reveal the intricate transnational dialogues and relations that made the monument a national one, as well as the various forms of continuity between its premodern and modern fame.

Creating the legend. The story of Meșterul Manole, the mason who built the Curtea de Argeș Monastery

A group of masons was once commissioned to build a monumental structure, only to discover—through repeated failures and prophetic visions—that a dramatic human sacrifice was required for the building to endure: the immurement of one of the masons' wives. The bravest among them accepts this immense sacrifice, and the monument is ultimately completed, enclosing within its walls the dark tale of a human life taken. The folktale of the “Walled-up Wife” was the narrative that first endowed the Curtea de Argeș Monastery with a prominent role in shaping Romanian cultural identity.

The tale is specific to a wide geographical area, especially to Southeastern Europe (From Transylvania to Greece), although it has variants in other places, the Caucasus or India.⁵ It was first published in Serbian by the famous linguist and folklorist Vuk Karadžić in 1815, and subsequently Jacob Grimm translated it into German in 1824. The Romanian version was first published in 1842, followed by another version in 1847, and popularised by the major Romanian folklorist and poet Vasile Alecsandri (1821–1890) in 1853 under the title *The Monastery of Argeș (Monastirea Argeșului)*, the first version that places the legend at Curtea de Argeș.⁶ Alecsandri later used his personal and political connections to publish his version of the legend internationally: in 1855, he translated it into French as part of a volume of folk tales, and he also gave it to the Lutheran priest from Hermannstadt (Sibiu [Nagyszeben]), Johann Karl Schuller (1794–1865), who translated it into German in 1857.⁷

Despite its wide geographical spread, in Serbia and Romania, the legend quickly developed into an element of national self-identification. Using several folk stories, Alecsandri composed the ballad in a creative and free manner that included several of his additions, especially the idea that the monument to be constructed was the Curtea de Argeș Monastery. As a counter example, in the Kogălniceanu version of the story, the monument was another church in the former Moldavian capital

5 Campbell and Bompas, “Three Santal Tales.”

6 Alecsandri, *Poezii populare*, 1–16; Kogălniceanu, “Cercări făcute de om;” Bolliac, “Meșterul Manole.”

7 Alexandri (sic!), *Ballades et Chants populaires*; Schuller, *Kloster Argisch*.

Iași, the Trei Ierarhi (Three Hierarchs) Church. Documenting various versions of the story in Romania, subsequent researchers also noted how the Curtea de Argeș Monastery was almost never the monument to be constructed, and even churches and monasteries in general are rare as a subject.⁸

Alecsandri goes even further, connecting with and connects through the legend the Curtea de Argeș Monastery with the moment of Wallachia's foundation. In his ballad, the patron of the masons and the one who orders the building of the monastery is no other than Negru-Vodă, a voivode that for many historians is the founder of Wallachia, even though he is essentially no more than a legend, since no concrete proof of his existence has ever been discovered.⁹ Moreover, it seems likely that Alecsandri made a double confusion: he first transcribed the name Neagu-Vodă (that might refer to Neagoe Basarab) as Negru-Vodă, and he confused the Princely Church of Curtea de Argeș, a much older church, from the mid-fourteenth century, with the former monastery and current episcopal church.¹⁰

Yet scholarly rigour mattered far less than the historical symbolism and dramatic force of the story that had made the monastery at Curtea de Argeș a site of national identity for the intellectual elite, already before the formation of modern Romania. A legend with multiple variants, it quickly achieved national prominence and, by the late nineteenth century, had become a familiar and emotional tale even among children.¹¹

Major studies and monographs on the monument often include the legend alongside architectural and historical analysis.¹² Some even suggest that it may contain some truth, noting a votive inscription that refers to a ruined church once standing on the site of the later monastery.¹³ Accordingly, the earlier church was the structure attributed to Negru-Vodă, the founder of Wallachia, and the ballad alludes to that building. Through this narrative, Curtea de Argeș was once again tied to the nation's history, celebrated as "the tragic and legendary construction of Curtea de Argeș, the best-known, beloved, and often-recounted historical episode of our country."¹⁴

8 Taloș, "Balada meșterului Manole," 42.

9 Chihaia, *De la "Negru Vodă;"* Djuvara, *Thocomerius – Negru Vodă*.

10 Papadima, "Neagoe Basarab," 74.

11 Papadima, "Neagoe Basarab," 73.

12 Tocilescu and Lecomte du Noüy, *Biserica Episcopală a Mănăstirii*; Jaffé, *Die Bischöfliche Klosterkirche*.

13 Moldovan, "Arhitectura Bisericii Lui Neagoe Basarab," 20; Payne, "Renaissance in the Balkans?," 28, note 5.

14 Delavrancea, *Despre literatură și artă*.

Building the legend. A church “in beauty surpassing all the others”

Gavriil Protu (Gabriel Protos), head of the monastic community at Mount Athos in the early sixteenth century, witnessed and recorded the consecration of the church at Curtea de Argeș in 1517. He described the event as an exceptionally lavish celebration, attended by leading Orthodox dignitaries, including the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Theoleptus I (patriarchate 1513–1522).¹⁵ Yet the highest praise was reserved for the church itself, which he regarded as “not as large and illustrious as the Temple on Mount Zion built by Solomon nor as Saint Sophia, raised by the great Emperor Justinian, but in beauty surpassing all the others.”¹⁶

Naturally, the chronicle was far from objective. It was commissioned by Neagoe Basarab, the church’s founder, and written as a *Vita* of Saint Niphon, the former Patriarch of Constantinople and head of the Wallachian Orthodox Church, whose relics had been taken by the voivode to Curtea de Argeș Monastery. Nevertheless, this extraordinary praise sheds light on the monument’s significance at the time, its reception, and the founder’s ambition to assert himself as one of the foremost rulers of the Orthodox world. In fact, the monument was long known—and is still often referred to today—as “Neagoe’s Church,”¹⁷ a clear indication that the voivode successfully inscribed his reign and legacy onto the monument.

But what makes the church appearance so remarkable? Its most striking architectural features are found on the exterior. The entire facade is divided into two registers—lower and upper—by a richly sculpted twisted cord, a decorative element unique at the time to Wallachian monuments (it first appeared at the nearby Dealu Monastery, built between 1499 and 1501, and later spread also in Moldavia, first at Dragomirna Monastery) (Figure 2).

The lower register is punctuated by narrow windows framed in elaborately carved surrounds, alternating with plain or sculpted rectangular stone panels. The abundance of sculpted detail continues in the upper register, where blind arcades enclose luxuriously decorated stone discs. At the intersections of the arcades, there are smaller discs to which bronze sculptures in the form of birds are affixed (Figure 3). These were not mere ornaments. According to the seventeenth-century chronicler Paul of Aleppo, who described the monument more than a century after its consecration, the birds emitted a distinctive whistling sound when the wind blew, while

15 The chronicle, written by the monk Gavriil Protu, survives in Greek, Slavonic, and Romanian manuscripts. The first edition was published as Simeone, *Viața și traiul sfântului Nifon*. For a recent study on the life and culture during the reign of Neagoe Basarab, see Grigore, *Neagoe Basarab-Princeps Christianus*.

16 Gavriil Protu, *Viața și traiul Sfînteniei Sale*, 19.

17 See for example Moldovan, “Arhitectura Bisericii lui Neagoe Basarab;” Andronescu, *Biserica lui Neagoe*.



Figure 2 Dealu Monastery (late fifteenth century)

small bells hanging beneath their necks chimed as well, creating a unique atmosphere.¹⁸ An equally remarkable scenography, as will be shown, characterised the church's interior.

Beneath the cornice runs another band of rich decoration in the form of *muqarnas*, marking only the beginning of an even more elaborate decorative program that extends across the upper portions of the church, including the roof and all four towers. They feature the same narrow windows framed by sculpted rectangular borders as those on the facade, and the viewer's gaze is inevitably drawn to the two small front cupolas, twisted in a spiral of about thirty degrees—an ornamental feature unique in the entire world (Figure 4).

18 A medieval chronicle written by Paul of Aleppo in the mid-seventeenth century to describe the journeys of his father, Patriarch Macarius of Antioch, through Constantinople, Wallachia, Moldavia, and Russia between 1652 and 1659, and again from 1666 to 1669. For the descriptions of the church and the birds, see *Călători străini*, vol. 6, 166.



Figure 3 The Church of Curtea de Argeș,
detail with bronze birds



Figure 4 The Church of Curtea de Argeș,
detail of the south facade

The interior of the church, though less lavishly decorated, was likewise the setting for a scenography unparalleled in ecclesiastical architecture. The enlarged narthex hosts twelve columns forming a central square. Around this square were arranged the tombs of Neagoe Basarab, his family, and his successors. Between the columns, there were tall choir stalls surmounted by double-faced icons—four of which still survive—while curtains were hung between the western pair of columns marking the entrance to the narthex square and the eastern pair leading into the naos (Figure 5).¹⁹ The ensemble must have provided the stage for unique rituals, perhaps related to the church's function as a princely necropolis. Though the details of these ceremonies are lost to us, their existence once again underscores the exceptional religious significance of the monument and the importance Neagoe Basarab accorded to it.

Explaining the legend. Sources and theories about the monument's architecture

What then were the sources of this unique architecture, and who were the architects or builders of the monument? The two medieval chronicles that describe the church—one written in the sixteenth century, and the other in the seventeenth

19 The arrangement of the icons and choir stalls is mentioned by both of the aforementioned chroniclers. See Lăzărescu, "O icoană puțin cunoscută;" Lăzărescu, *Biserica Mănăstirii Argeșului*. For more on the religious symbolism of the church's architecture, see Negrău, "The Structure of the Monastery Church."

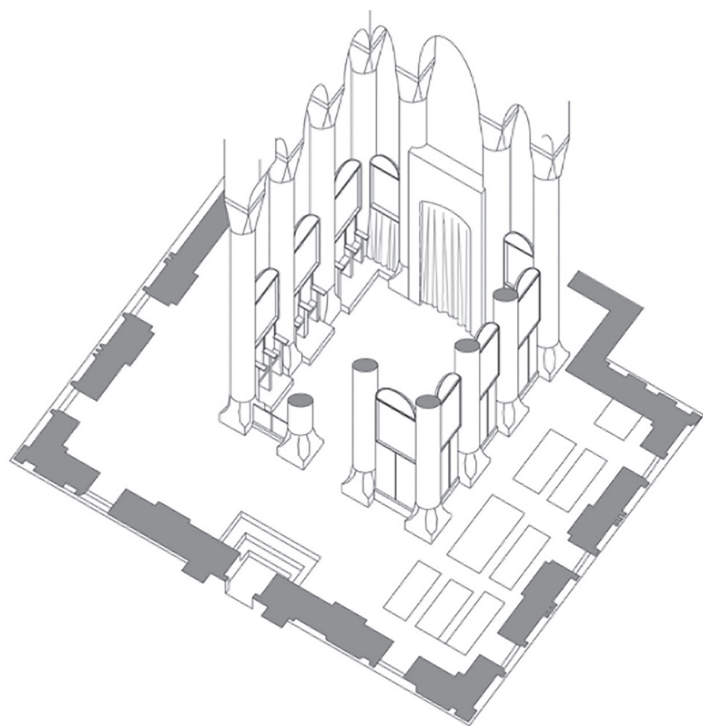


Figure 5 Hypothetical reconstruction of the narthex of the Church at Curtea de Argeș with choir stalls, icons, and curtains between the columns

Source: Alexandrov Yuriy Source: Emil Lăzărescu, *Biserica Mănăstirii Argeșului*, (Bucharest, 1967)

century—do not answer these questions. I have already mentioned both, the *Life of Saint Niphon* (c. 1440–1508) by Gavriil Protu and the travel journal of the seventeenth-century Patriarch Macarius of Antioch, written by his son Paul of Aleppo. The latter offers a detailed description of the church and is still the principal source for reconstructing its architectural and liturgical aspects.²⁰

Paul of Aleppo was the first to advance a hypothesis regarding the origins of the builders of Curtea de Argeș. He reports that Neagoe Basarab had been in contact with architects and masons from Istanbul and brought them to Wallachia under the pretext of constructing a mosque—thus managing to secure the services of some of the most highly skilled craftsmen of the time.²¹ Accordingly, the builders of Curtea de Argeș may in fact have been mosque architects or masons, a theory supported by the discovery of a brick in one of the towers inscribed with the Arabic word “Allah.”²²

20 See the citations in Odobescu and Aurelian, *Notice sur la Roumanie*, 408–12; Tocilescu and Lecomte du Noüy, *Biserica Episcopală a Mănăstirii*.

21 *Călători străini*, 165.

22 Tocilescu and Lecomte du Noüy, *Biserica Episcopală a Mănăstirii*, 37.

This “mosque-architect” theory, however, was largely ignored in the nineteenth century, as any direct association with the Ottoman cultural sphere was politically undesirable in modern Romania—a state intent on defining a national identity distinct from that of its former suzerain and resistant to notions of transconfessional artistic practices, such as artists working across Orthodox and Muslim contexts. Only recently has Horia Moldovan highlighted the striking parallels between Curtea de Argeș and contemporary mosques in Istanbul: the pyramidal arrangement of the towers, the fountain in front of the church reminiscent of Ottoman ablution fountains, and decorative elements such as the muqarnas beneath the cornice.²³ The historical overlooking of the Ottoman context as a potential source for the church’s builders and architectural style illustrates the strength of a nationalist ideology premised on an impenetrable boundary between the Romanian principalities and Ottoman cultural influences.

The hypothesis of an Ottoman origin for the architecture of Curtea de Argeș gains further credibility when we consider the social and political context of Wallachia at the time—a region under Istanbul’s military, political, and economic control, but also within its cultural and social orbit. Voivode Neagoe Basarab himself was raised and educated in Istanbul, as was customary for future rulers of the Romanian principalities. Thus, Paul of Aleppo’s account that Neagoe brought his craftsmen from Istanbul, after all the most accessible source of highly skilled artisans, appears entirely plausible.

In the most recent large study on Curtea de Argeș church, Alina Payne advances new arguments for the hypothesis of the Ottoman influence by noting that Neagoe was probably inspired by the white-stone mosques of Istanbul, Bursa or Edirne (such as Bayezid II’s mosque in Istanbul), and concluding that the architects probably originated from these regions.²⁴ Of these cities, Edirne, today located on the Turkish–Bulgarian border, was also geographically the closest to Wallachia, lying less than four hundred kilometres to the south. Neagoe’s commission of a richly decorated monument may also have had a pragmatic dimension: according to Payne ornamentation was less likely to arouse Ottoman suspicion, as it carried no overt ethnic or political symbolism.²⁵

Naturally, this hypothesis does not directly explain the similarities between Curtea de Argeș and other Wallachian churches—most notably the Dealu Monastery—or the parallels with the decoration of tenth-century Armenian and Georgian churches, as will be discussed below. It is nevertheless plausible that the team of builders and architects included both Istanbul-based craftsmen and local or

23 Moldovan, “Arhitectura Bisercii Lui Neagoe Basarab,” 27–29.

24 Payne, “Renaissance in the Balkans?,” 17.

25 Payne, “Renaissance in the Balkans?,” 21.

regional artists—some experienced in constructing Orthodox churches, others in building Ottoman mosques.

By ignoring the Ottoman connection, nineteenth- and twentieth-century art historians and architects sought instead to emphasise links between Curtea de Argeş and the broader Orthodox world. One early hypothesis, more legend than scholarship, was first mentioned in 1859 in the travel notes of the Habsburg military doctor Wilhelm Derblich and repeated often thereafter: that the architect of Curtea de Argeş was none other than Prince Neagoe Basarab himself.²⁶ This notion conveniently accounted for the mosque-like influences, as Neagoe was said to have learned the art of architecture in his youth, in the company of mosque builders in Istanbul.

The most frequently cited theory in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, was that the church's builders were of Armenian or Georgian origin. The first to propose this was the architect-restorer André Lecomte du Noüy (whose work will be discussed in the final section), who in 1879 argued that, both in its proportions and in its decoration, the monument was “of Armenian-Georgian origin and not at all Arabic.”²⁷ Indeed, Lecomte du Noüy had good reason to think so. Comparing Curtea de Argeş with monuments such as the Akhtala Monastery in Armenia, the Sapara Monastery and the Manglisi Cathedral in Georgia, we find the same narrow windows, intricately carved stone frames with similar motifs, and even sculpted discs reminiscent of those at Curtea de Argeş (Figure 6).

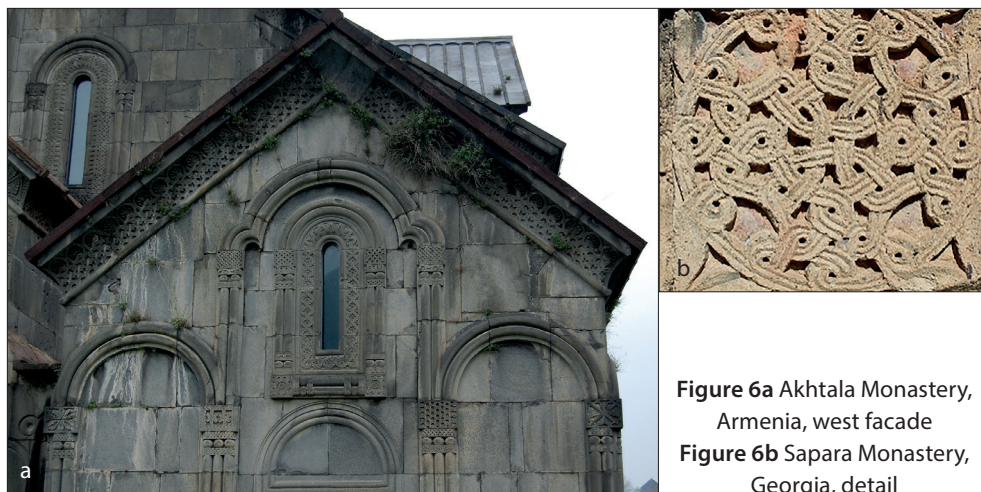


Figure 6a Akhtala Monastery, Armenia, west facade

Figure 6b Sapara Monastery, Georgia, detail

26 Derblich, *Land und Leute*, 13 cited in Moldovan, “Note Despre Arhitectura Bisericii,” 3.

27 “Report,” 10 December 1879, in *Restaurarea Monumentelor Istorice 1865–1890*, 91.

It is also likely that Lecomte du Noüy drew inspiration from his mentor Viollet-le-Duc's 1877 *L'Art russe*, published shortly before in which Viollet-le-Duc argued that the rich stone decoration of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Russian churches derived from earlier Armenian and Georgian models.²⁸ One of his examples was the Cathedral of Saint Demetrius in Vladimir, whose late twelfth-century decorative motifs he considered akin to those of eleventh-century Armenian monuments (Figure 7).²⁹ Indeed, the elaborate stone carving on the facade of the Vladimir Cathedral together with its general appearance closely resemble both Armenian monuments and Neagoe's church at Curtea de Argeş.



Figure 7 Cathedral of St. Demetrius, Vladimir, Russia (late twelfth century)

Source: <https://pixabay.com>

28 O'Connell, "A Rational, National Architecture," 443.

29 Viollet-le-Duc, *L'art russe*, 63–69.

The temporal and geographic distance between the tenth-century monuments east of the Black Sea and the sixteenth-century Wallachian church is considerable, and there is little evidence—aside from Vladimir Cathedral—of any continuous decorative tradition or of Caucasian artisans working in Wallachia. Yet, such considerations did little to deter the enthusiasm of nineteenth-century scholars for the Armenian-Georgian hypothesis, particularly since it anchored Neagoe's church firmly within the Christian-Orthodox world. Grigore Tocilescu (1850–1909), the leading archaeologists in nineteenth-century Romania, was a firm supporter of the theory, noting that in certain Caucasian monuments “one finds the same system of arcades often employed on the facades of the churches mentioned above, the same sculpted cornices or cords, the same interlacing ornaments and rosettes, and, what is most significant, the same vertical proportions, the same spirit, the same style.”³⁰

Others, such as the historian and novelist Bogdan Petriceicu Hașdeu (1838–1907), came up with highly speculative models to bridge the chronological gap between medieval Caucasus and early modern Wallachia. He proposed that the town of Curtea de Argeș had originally been an Armenian colony, based on a supposed phonetic resemblance to an Armenian city named Argis.³¹ His far-fetched theory of distant origins, for both the monument and the town, prompted a sharp rebuttal from the fellow historian Alexandru D. Xenopol (1847–1920), who observed ironically that “the name Baku of a city in Georgia has nothing to do with Bacău in Romania, just as Alexandria in Egypt bears no relation to the small town of Alexandria in the county of Teleorman.”³²

The hypothesis of Armenian builders was nonetheless regarded as the most credible also later, in the major interwar histories of art and architecture by Nicolae Ghika-Budești and Gheorghe Balș, as well as in numerous later studies.³³ To explain the significant chronological gap, scholars increasingly pointed to the enduring tradition of Armenian architects who preserved and transmitted their artistic knowledge within the Ottoman Empire, where many court architects were of Armenian descent. Indeed, the most famous Ottoman architect, Mimar Sinan (who served Sultans Suleiman the Magnificent, Selim II, and Murad III in the sixteenth century) was of Armenian origin, as was the Balian family, which produced some of the Empire's most prominent modern architects. The hypothesis of Armenian architects active in Istanbul would also conveniently account for the church's evident Ottoman stylistic features.

30 Tocilescu, in Hașdeu, *Etymologicum Magnum Romaniae*, 335.

31 Hașdeu, *Etymologicum Magnum Romaniae*, 335–36.

32 Xenopol, “Originea Argeșului,” 64–71.

33 Ghika-Budești, “Înrăurirea armenească,” 140–43; Balș, *Influences arméniennes*; Ionescu, “Empreintes armeniennes.”

As for the interior frescoes (today exhibited at the National Art Museum in Bucharest), their sources appear somewhat clearer, as the entire pictorial program is firmly anchored in the Byzantine tradition. Even so, the painters' identity is largely unknown, apart from one name—Dobromir. Emanuela Cernea, however, has noted similarities between these frescoes and those from the artistic milieu of Mount Athos, as well as with the Cretan school of painting, as she draws comparisons with the works of Theophanes the Cretan and his son Simeon.³⁴

Using the legend. Curtea de Argeș and the Romanian nation state

In 1860, it was published the first historical and architectural study of the former monastery at Curtea de Argeș. The analysis was published by the Habsburg meteorologist and teacher from Hermannstadt Ludwig Reissenberger (1819–1895) in the annuary of the Imperial Commission for the Research and Preservation of Monuments and as a stand-alone publication.³⁵ For the 1860s, the study was of exceptional quality. Its fifty pages included detailed descriptions of the architecture and decorations, the plan and history of the monument and of the Orthodox faith, along with twenty-five wood engravings and four metal plates.

But why would a writer from the Habsburg Empire venture into a largely unknown territory south of the Carpathians to study an Orthodox church? And, more importantly, why would the Austrian Commission for Historic Monuments be interested in a monastery in Romania? The answer lies in the unique nature of the architecture at Curtea de Argeș and in the particular interest of the Habsburg Empire in the Romanian Principalities in the mid-nineteenth century. Toward the end of the Crimean War, following Russia's defeat in the Balkans, the Principalities came under Habsburg occupation for a year and a half, from June 1854 to December 1856. The Habsburgs recognised both the scientific and symbolic value of the monument and the potential importance of a study devoted to it, and they promptly commissioned one.

Reissenberger's study can be considered the true beginning of the historical and architectural interest in the monument. It is generally descriptive, showing meticulously architectural details as well as the ground floor plan of the church, but it also places the monument in the post-Byzantine artistic tradition. Reissenberger claimed that the church testifies to the stagnation and "oppressive" nature of Byzantine culture, but at the same time gives "a new direction" to Byzantine art through its innovative architecture.³⁶

34 Cernea, "André Lecomte du Noüy and the frescoes," 73–74.

35 Reissenberger, *Die Bischöfliche Klosterkirche*; Reissenberger, "Die Bischöfliche Klosterkirche."

36 Minea, "The Monastery of Curtea de Argeș," 187–88.

In 1862, it was partially translated into Romanian by Dimitrie Berindei, accompanied by an introduction that represents the first attempt to write a history of architecture in Romania.³⁷ In 1867, it was also translated into French for the Paris Universal Exhibition; on this occasion, the former monastery served as a model for the national pavilion³⁸ (Figure 8).

The Universal Exhibition offered Romania a unique opportunity to present itself as a modern national state, despite its complex political situation: officially, still under Ottoman suzerainty, yet with self-governance and, from 1866, a foreign ruler, the German Prince Carol I. It was at this time that the name “Romania” was first used in an international context replacing the earlier “United Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia.” It was also then that Neagoe’s church was definitively consecrated as the most important historical monument in the country. It was presented as Romania’s chief artistic achievement

in three ways: as the inspiration for the Romanian pavilion (designed by the French architect Ambroise Baudry) and for the Romanian section of the main gallery; as a two-and-a-half-meter-high replica of the church sculpted by Karl Stork; and as the subject of three separate publications.³⁹

The organiser of the Romanian exhibition in Paris, historian and archaeologist Alexandru Odobescu, presented the Argeş monument as proof of the undeniable artistic value of Romanian culture at the European level:

“At a time when all nations showcase the wealth and products of their imagination and taste, one might fear the poverty of our own artistic achievements. Yet Romania possesses its own treasures: our people wear some of the most graceful traditional costumes, the art of painting is



Figure 8 Ambroise Baudry, Romania’s Pavilion at the Paris Universal Exhibition, 1867

Source: Musée d’Orsay, *Documentation* section, Paris, Box 48: Ambroise Baudry’

37 Berindei, “Răpide ochire asupra Arhitecturii Bizantine.” See also Minea, “From Byzantine to Brâncovenesc.”

38 Reissenberger, *L’église Du Monastère Épiscopal*.

39 Details in Reissenberger, *L’église Du Monastère Épiscopal*; Odobescu and Aurelian, *Notice sur la Roumanie*; Odobescu, *Notice sur les antiquités*, 55–68.

starting to flourish, and, most notably, the country boasts an architectural monument worthy of the world's admiration. The faithful reproduction of the episcopal church at Curtea de Argeș is certain to make a sensation in the artistic world, especially now, as civilised Europe, tired of overused styles, turns once more to Byzantine architecture as a source of inspiration."⁴⁰

Reissenberger's study and the ensuing promotion of the church played a decisive role in its designation as the first monument to undergo restoration in modern Romania. As early as 1863, the Romanian government commissioned the architect Gaetano Burelly (1820–1896) to undertake a "complete restoration" of the church.⁴¹ Due to a lack of funds, work advanced slowly, and only in 1874 did the Ministry of Religion convene a special committee to draft the restoration project, composed of the country's leading architects and archaeologists—among them Alexandru Orăscu, Dimitrie Berindei, Alexandru Odobescu, Alfred Berthon, and Paul Gottereau.⁴² To coordinate the work, they turned to none other than Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814–1879), probably the most famous restorer in the world at the time. Viollet-le-Duc accepted the proposal and subsequently entrusted the restoration to one of his students, the young architect André Lecomte du Noüy (1844–1914).⁴³

Lecomte du Noüy arrived in Romania in the spring of 1875 on an initial two-year contract but ended up working at Curtea de Argeș for eleven years. He restored four other monuments and stayed in the country until his death; he was buried at Curtea de Argeș, near the church he had restored. The exterior restoration did not bring any major changes beyond the addition of a new crown to the domes, rainwater pipes, gargoyles, and a decorative fence around the monument. The architect, however, demolished the monastic buildings and rebuilt the Ottoman-inspired fountain in front of the church (Figure 9).

On the interior, Lecomte du Noüy radically transformed the monument according to the decision of the Ministry of Religion, which also stipulated in the 1881 contract that the restorer must undertake study trips to Romania, Constantinople, Venice, and Mount Athos to research comparable frescoes and church furnishings.⁴⁴ All the frescoes were removed, and the most important compositions and figures were transferred to the Museum of Antiquities in Bucharest, the only public

40 Odobescu, *Scieri Literare și Istorice*, 86.

41 *Restaurarea Monumentelor Istorice 1865–1890*, 2.

42 "Decizia Ministrului Cultelor B. Boerescu," 30 January 1874, in *Restaurarea Monumentelor Istorice 1865–1890*, 14.

43 "Scrisoare către Ministerul Cultelor și Instrucțiunii Publice," 20 August 1874. Fond Ministerul Religiei și Instrucțiunii Publice, ANR, dossier no. 127, leaf 173.

44 "Contract," 7 February 1881. *Restaurarea Monumentelor Istorice*, 114–16.



Figure 9 Baptismal font, Church of Curtea de Argeș. Before and after restoration

Source: Carol Popp de Szathmáry. *Episcopie de Curtea de Argeș*. Bucharest, 1866; *Médiathèque de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine*, Paris, Viollet-le-Duc Fonds, Box Roumanie, no. 36, 2320–30

museum in the country, which exhibited at the time artefacts taken from the monasteries and churches across Romania.⁴⁵ The new frescoes, executed by a team of French artists, freely replicated the principal figures of the original paintings but with markedly different colouring (brighter hues, stronger contrasts) and with a much larger portion of the surface devoted to a luminous gold background.

The frescoes at Curtea de Argeș were the result of a French–Romanian collaboration, testifying to the close artistic relations between the two countries. The Parisian painter Luc-Olivier Merson (1846–1920), who painted the main figures, first studied the costumes of former Wallachian rulers to depict the church founder Neagoe Basarab and his family.⁴⁶ Once the preparatory drawing was completed, it was transferred to the walls by Romanian artists, including Eduard Grant and N. Constantinescu (full name unknown).

The interior restoration also brought new figures onto the walls, the most prominent being the royal couple—King Carol and Queen Elisabeth—and the current and former bishops of Argeș. They demonstrate the Catholic monarchs' attempt to forge connections with the Orthodox faith and with Romanian history, being

45 A total of seven historical figures were preserved (including the portraits of the founders, Neagoe Basarab, his family and successors), twenty-seven religious scenes or figures and one inscription, mostly from the lower part of the church. See Cernea and Pătrășcanu, *Mărturii*, exhibits 1–35, 68–145.

46 Popescu, “André Lecomte Du Nouÿ,” 300.

depicted next to Neagoe Basarab and his family as new founders of the church. King Carol, in full ceremonial attire, points toward the church plans, while Queen Elisabeth holds the Book of the Gospels, which she decorated herself and which was displayed in a special case inside the church (Figure 10).



Figure 10 Luc-Olivier Merson, Royal portraits, Church of Curtea de Argeș, around 1885

Source: <https://melidoniumm.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/regele-carol-i-manastirea-curtea-de-arges.jpg>

The surroundings of the monument were recreated with equal ambition. In 1881, the Minister of Religion, Vasile Alexandrescu Urechia, entrusted the French architect with an ambitious architectural program to replace the former monastic buildings with an imposing Episcopal Palace, a theological seminary, a royal residence, auxiliary buildings, a monumental gate, and a landscaped park.⁴⁷ Only the Episcopal Palace and part of the landscape design were completed, yet the overall project illustrates the will of Romania and its royal family to modernise the country—including its historical monuments.

Perhaps the best illustration of the significance of these restorations was the 1886 rededication ceremony, when the town of Curtea de Argeș witnessed probably the greatest celebration in its history. According to contemporary newspapers, some twenty-five thousand people from all over Romania gathered in the small town to

47 "Scrisoare a lui Al. Săvulescu," 22 September 1881. *Restaurarea Monumentelor Istorice 1865–1890*, 119–20. See also "Raport," 1 November 1884. *Restaurarea Monumentelor Istorice 1865–1890*, 155–60.

attend the ceremonies and listen to speeches by the nation's leading statesmen, who praised the king, his patronage of the nation's cultural heritage, and the importance of its historical monuments⁴⁸ (Figure 11). King Carol himself declared—words that would often be repeated thereafter—that “nations that care for their monuments rise above their condition. Everywhere, monuments are the storytellers of history, the mirrors of the past, shining signs for future generations.”⁴⁹ He later laid down in his testament that his own royal tomb should be placed at Curtea de Argeș, thus permanently linking his name with the historic monument.⁵⁰



Figure 11 Reconsecration of the Metropolitan Church of Curtea de Argeș, October 1886
 Source: Grigore Tocilescu and André Lecomte du Noüy, *Biserica Episcopală a Mănăstirii Curtea de Argeș restaurată în zilele M.S. Regelui Carol I și sfințită din nou în ziua de 12 septembrie 1886*. Bucharest, 1886

48 “Serbarea de la Curtea de Argeș,” *Voința Națională*, no. 656, 6. Tocilescu and Lecomte du Noüy, *Biserica Episcopală a Mănăstirii*, 67–92.

49 Tocilescu and Lecomte du Noüy, *Biserica Episcopală a Mănăstirii*, 80.

50 See “Testamentul Regelui Carol I,” *Viitorul*; Scurtu, *Istoria Românilor*, 656–57.

Conclusion

The architecture of Curtea de Argeș is still largely viewed through the paradigm of “in-betweenness”—perhaps the most popular way to describe Romanian culture since the founding of the state in the nineteenth century. At the border between empires, as a “bridge” between East and West, Romanian culture is accordingly a mixture of various styles and influences. These ideas are still influential even if they have long been deconstructed and exposed as a way of thinking stemming from the tradition of the Enlightenment that reinforces a Western narrative of superiority.⁵¹ Indeed, to be in-between might mean being original and interesting, but implicitly it also means being outside the canon, less than being incomplete or strange. It is something to be appreciated but from a distance because it remains foreign and mysterious.

As an alternative, I would like to advance a simple, perhaps logical statement about the church at Curtea de Argeș. Rather than a monument situated at the cross-roads of empires with various styles, motifs, influences in an original yet eclectic architecture, I propose that it is a single, exceptional architectural work, incorporating many traditions, styles and cultures but transforming them into an original artwork. Its decorations, plan, towers, and apses are all new in architectural history and we should appreciate their originality. Perhaps we should even marvel at the fact that the church is not hybrid or eclectic. It is new and original. It is indeed not ground-breaking since the Curtea de Argeș church did not create a style or an artistic movement of any kind. It was hard to do this, particularly in Wallachia, since more than a century of great political instability followed the rule of Neagoe Basarab. But, as the chronicler Gavril Protu noted in the sixteenth century, it surpasses in beauty many of the most famous religious sites in the world.

The article has focused on both the premodern and modern historiography of the monument to show various forms of continuity and offer a more complete explanation for how the church was turned from a princely foundation into a national monument. It has highlighted the obsession with authorship, which has to an extent diverted attention from the actual novelty of the architecture, but that has been a mark of art historical research since at least Vasari, who saw the authors as the central figures of the history of art. In the case of Curtea de Argeș, the search for its architects and sources in the nineteenth century became a means of asserting the monument as a product of local “genius” and therefore part of the Romanian heritage. At the same time, the focus on the unknown or legendary masons reinforced the idea that the monument is mysterious and hybrid.

Instead, a focus on the building’s aesthetic appeal, together with its construction techniques and functionality, in line with the Vitruvian triad (firm-utility-beauty),

51 Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*; Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*.

is perhaps more appropriate.⁵² In this way, the monument appears as embedded in the wider Ottoman context but adapted to the tastes and expectations of various, heterogeneous and conflicting actors: local Christian voivodes, Muslim rulers, local parishioners, Balkan and Ottoman painters and masons.

This research has also shown that the nineteenth-century history of Curtea de Argeș demonstrates the transnational formation of national heritage. The monument's architecture was first analysed by the Habsburg scholar Reissenberger and later reinterpreted by the Romanian architect Berindei. Reissenberger's study, accompanied by a scale model of the church, was exhibited by the Romanian delegation at the 1867 Paris Universal Exhibition in line with the expectations of the French organisers. Ultimately, the monument was restored according to the Romanian government's directives but executed by a team of French architects and artists. These successive collaborations produced what became Romania's first national architectural monument. The Episcopal Church of Curtea de Argeș was shaped once again through transnational exchanges—much like its original creation, at a time before modern nations existed but when its architects navigated multiple religions, languages, and competing political interests.

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