**Romanian church architecture between East and West**

**Reflections on a manifold sphere**

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If you want to describe today’s Romania as one of Europe’s cultural spheres, that isn’t easy at all. Usually you would generally think of East Europe or perhaps as Southeast Europe (the Balkans). Thus Romania appears on most topical maps of Europe. If you, however, travel for example from Bucharest to Cluj (Kolozsvár, Klausenburg) or Timişoara (Temesvár, Temeswar), it becomes doubtlessly obvious that the architectural landscape changes after crossing the Carpathians. The towns and villages look different, and you rather get the impression of being in Central Europe. You likewise notice, when travelling from Bucharest to Iaşi or Suceava, that from a certain point on, which cannot as easily be determined as the passes of the Carpathians, the architectural landscape begins to change.

On the other hand Romania still considers herself – at least on an official level – as a country essentially uniform in culture. That image is mainly construed by means of history – whether political, cultural, or even art history. In most public manuals of history today’s Romanian area is presented in a uniform way, although the Romanians from the beginning of the Middle Ages till the middle of the 19th century lived in three different states, which often confronted one another politically as rivals and were subject to very diverse cultural influences. Nevertheless their history is described as a projection of today’s situation into the past: That Romanians always were the most important bearers of culture in these countries and knew all the time that they belonged to one nation. Romanian culture is presented at schools as very little influenced by its cultural environment and as mainly pure and genuine.

In this talk I would like to consider the architectural church monuments of Romanians in Romania (that precision has its meaning) and then suggest another model of teaching history. Seeing the Romanian culture as a result of diverse influences and a long living together with other cultures can make emerge a hopefully more apt image of its historical development.

The cultural journey starts in the South of Romania (Muntenia, Walachia). This province, which existed till the middle of the 19th century as the principality of **Walachia**, was since its foundation in the 14th century involved in the Byzantine sphere of influence. The first prelates of the Walachian church came from the Byzantine Empire and monastery life was imported by a Serbian hermit from Mount Athos. Moreover the Walachian princes and noblemen especially up to the 16th century were relatives and in-laws of the princely and noble families of Serbia and Bulgaria. All those relationships are also reflected in the church architecture of Walachia.

One of the oldest churches of the former Walachian principality is St. Nicolas in Curtea de Argeş. Built in the 14th century, very probably as a court chapel, it shows the typical features of a Byzantine cross dome church. The branches of the cross have the rounded ledges of the time of the Palaeologues, and also the structure of the walls made of successive layers of stone blocks and bricks can be put down to Byzantine and Balkan examples. As possible models there can be mentioned the Constantinople churches Myrelaion/Bodrum Camii (10th ct.), Hagios Theodoros/Vefa Kilisse Camii (10th to 11th ct.), and Pantokrator/Mola Zeyrek Camii (12th ct.), as well as the Athenian Kapnikareia (11th ct.) and Hagioi Theodoroi (11th ct.). Likewise in the 14th ct., this time, however, in the last decades, can be dated the church of the Monastery of Cozia, in the valley of Olt/Alt. It belongs to the earliest settlements of monasteries in Walachia. Monastery life was introduced in the South-Carpathian principality by a monk from the Serbian monastery of Hilandar on Mount Athos. That’s why the pattern of the three conches and the way of building of the church of the Monastery of Cozia show obvious influences from Mount Athos (Monastery Hilandar, 13th ct.), while the outside decoration (successive blind arches with glazed decorated panes; horizontally tripartite facades) finds very good parallels in the Serbian architecture of the Morava school (churches of Ravanica, Kruševac, Ljubostinja, Kalenić – end of the 14th, beginning of the 15th ct.). The same elements of building and decoration can be found in other well-known monastery churches of Walachia, e.g. Horezu (end of the 17th ct.) or Polovragi (16th – 17th ct.).

The other Romanian principality was **Moldova**, which like Walachia till the middle of the 19th ct. existed as an independent state or under Ottoman supremacy. Since its foundation in the 14th ct. the Moldavian principality maintained close relationships to the neighbouring kingdoms of Hungary and Poland. The Moldavian princes were vassals, sometimes of the Hungarian, sometimes of the Polish kings, and the nobility of the principality constantly established matrimonial relations to the Polish aristocracy. In addition to that some Moldavian noblemen were educated in Poland, and in the 16th and 17th centuries there were even princes who were inclined to Catholicism or Protestantism.

As the best-known churches of Moldova are monastery churches, almost all of them follow the pattern of the three conches, which very probably came through Walachia and the Balkans and at long last from Mount Athos. The outside appearance of these churches, however, is rather different from their South-Romanian parallels. The church of the Monastery of Neamţ (15th ct.), for example, shows the combination of stone and bricks usual in the Balkans; and also the blind arches which we observed in Walachia appear here, too, yet only in the three apses and, in miniature, in two rows one on top of the other in the upper part of the walls. The roof, however, is completely different and rather recalls the Gothic style than the Balkans. Likewise strange for an Orthodox church is the effect of the buttresses marking the inside structure on the outside. The Gothic appearance is supplemented not least by the window frames. Thus the whole building gives a more West European than East European impression. Only when you enter the inside of the church, you find the usual Byzantine tripartite division of the church (altar/apsis, naos, pronaos) and the typical painting. To that original basic plan two additional elements were added in the church of Neamţ: the originally Byzantine, but in the Romanian area further developed exo-narthex and the originally Balkan burial chamber.

The same pattern can also be observed in some other Moldavian monastery churches, such as – to name only the best-known ones – Voroneţ or Suceviţa (both from the 16th ct.). There you hit upon the same kind of roof as well as the same slender dome, as well as the Gothic window frames and the blind arches in the apses and as niches in the upper part of the walls. At both those churches, however, the outside got an additional Byzantine touch by means of the painting, which covers the whole space of the walls. Although these outside paintings are a unique and specific feature of the Moldavian church architecture of the (almost exclusively) 16th ct., their origin must be searched for somewhere else. We are confronted with scenes (the Last Judgement; the Root of Jesse; the hymn Akathistos; the All Saints’ Litany) which were originally painted in the narthex or exo-narthex of churches in the Balkans (e.g. Sopoćani (13th ct., Serbia), Gračanica. and Prizren (14th ct., Kosovo)). From there they arrived through Walachia (e.g. Brădet, beginning of the 15th ct.) in Moldova, where they were extended over the whole space of the outside walls. In the case of some compositions other influences could be proved as well: outside decorations of churches in the Orthodox-Byzantine sphere can also be found, yet not as paintings but as bas-reliefs, in Russian churches of the time of the principality of Wladimir-Susdal (12th – 14th ct.). The similarity of the row of knights of soldier saints at St. Demetrius in Wladimir (end of the 12th ct.) to that of the Moldavian churches of Pătrăuţi (1487) and Moldoviţa (1532) make us assume an influence from the north.

Among today’s Romanian areas **Siebenbürgen** (Ardeal, Transylvania/Erdély) is the one where the most diverse influences in church architecture can be found. The province existed since its foundation at the beginning of the 11th ct. and till after the First World War as a part of the Hungarian kingdom (11th – 16th ct.), as an autonomous principality under Ottoman supremacy (16th – 17th ct.) and as a province of the Danube Monarchy in its successive forms (18th – 20th ct.). Thus it basically belonged to West European culture for the greatest part of its history. The elites of Transylvania – the Hungarian and German-speaking aristocracy – first were Catholic, then they partly converted to Protestantism. Being thus they gave the Transylvanian culture a definitely western character. The church architecture of the elites, therefore, followed the developments in West respectively Central Europe and can be recognized as such: from the originally Romanesque cathedral of Alba Iulia/Gyulafehérvár/Karlsburg (13th – 14th – 16th ct.) to the Gothic churches of Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg (St. Michael: 14th – 15th ct.; the former church of the Franciscans, nowadays Protestant: 15th – 16th ct.) and to the Baroque cathedrals of Oradea/Nagyvárad/Grosswardein (2nd half of the 18th ct.) and Timişoara/Temesvár/Temeswar (middle of the 18th ct.).

Romanians lived in this West respectively Central European context as a minority belonging to some other culture, i.e. the Byzantine or East European one. Therefore, too, it’s sometimes difficult to classify the oldest Romanian churches in Transylvania. The most apt example is the church of Densuş/Demsus/Demsdorf (13th ct.): It was to a large part built with antique Roman spolia, doesn’t show a clear plan, and while you can see Romanesque double windows and ledges on the outside, the inside is typically Byzantine. The neighbouring church of Sântămărie Orlea/Őraljaboldogfalva (end of the 13th ct.) shows both Romanesque and Gothic elements and the inside paintings are partly of Western, partly of Eastern character, as well as the inscriptions (ecclesiastical Slav at the altar and Latin in the nave). Those churches were built by the members of the Romanian lower nobility from the South of Transylvania who lived in a primarily western environment, but at the same time maintained good contacts to the Byzantine cultural environment of Walachia.

Another type of churches was built in Transylvania by the princes of the trans-Carpathian Romanian states. They were mainly located on the feudal benefices the princes had received as vassals of the Hungarian kings. One of the best-known is the church (probably monastery church) of Vad/Révkolostor, near Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg. Erected by Moldavian princes in the 15th ct., the church has a plan which obviously goes back to Moldova, in the building however there are a lot of Gothic elements. The church of Prislop/Felsőszilvás shows a similar appearance, which was erected by a Romanian princess from Walachia in the second half of the 16th ct..[[1]](#footnote-1)

Most Romanian village churches were, however, not built of stone but of wood, and that’s why the oldest among them have not been preserved. But those which can still be seen show numerous similarities to the stone architecture of Transylvania. The wooden churches of Şurdeşti/Dióshalom (1766) or Rogoz/Rogoz (1663) e.g. show the already described tripartite structure of the Orthodox churches, which is very similar to the Moldavian monuments. The roof, however, and especially the church towers are quite obviously shaped by the western architecture of the Transylvanian elites. A comparison with the Protestant churches of Sibiu/Nagyszeben/Hermannstadt (from the 13th to the beginning of the 16th ct.) or Biertan/Berethalom/Birthälm (end 15th – beginning 16th ct.) suffices to demonstrate the origin of this wooden architecture. Those churches – the oldest examples preserved date from the 17th – 18th ct. – also indicate a period of adaptation of the church architecture of the Transylvanian Romanians to the architectural landscape in which they lived.

That adaptation by an East European minority to the dominant culture in the principality of Transylvania and within the Habsburg Empire can be observed better in the case of the monuments of the 18th and 19th centuries. Those examples can be seen almost everywhere in Transylvania. To name only some of them: the so-called Moon Church at Oradea/Nagyvárád (Orthodox, end of the 18th ct.), the old Orthodox cathedral at Arad/Arad/Arad (2nd half of the 19th ct.), the Orthodox cathedral of Lugoj/Lugos/Lugosch (2nd half of the 18th ct.), the Greek-Catholic cathedral of Blaj/Balázsfalva/Blasendorf (middle of the 18th ct.), or the Greek-Catholic Bob-Church of Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg (end of the 18th ct.). All show obvious features of Baroque architecture, which can be seen everywhere in Central Europe. Those influences cannot only be observed with the Romanians of Transylvania and the Banat, but also with Orthodox Serbs, as in the case of the churches of the Serbian-Orthodox vicarage (middle of the 18th ct.) or the Serbian-Orthodox St. Georges’ Church (middle of the 18th ct.)[[2]](#footnote-2) of Timişoara/Temesvár/Temeswar. That adaptation by the minorities of Byzantine tradition (whether Orthodox or Greek-Catholic) to the architecture of Central Europe can be observed in a rather wide area, from the former Serbian-Orthodox cathedral of Karlovac in Croatia (end of the 18th ct.) to the cathedral of Beograd (middle of the 19th ct.) and to the Greek-Catholic cathedral of L’viv/Lwów/Lemberg in West Ukraine (middle of the 18th ct.).

After those short descriptions of the church architectural landscapes of the three large regions of today’s Romania we turn back to geography. All those influences, which actually cannot only be observed in church architecture, can be understood and explained because of the **geographic position of the Romanian area** – it is the frontier area between the western and the eastern cultural sphere of Europe, as described by the British historian Arnold Toynbee.

The cultural geography of our continent, as it can be seen on the maps mentioned at the beginning of this talk, was unfortunately influenced by the recently passed period of the Cold War. For a rather long time span, almost 50 years, Europe was, as is generally known, split into two blocs and the geography of the continent was rethought accordingly. As a consequence, no more differences between East and Southeast Europe were noticed, and the concept of Central Europe had totally disappeared. If we, however, look at a cultural map of Europe, we can realize deeper realities. Let alone that Romania is located between the eastern and western cultural spheres, one can moreover distinguish between the eastern features of Moldova and the Balkan features of Walachia, as follows from a reflexion on church architecture.

The features of Romanian church architecture do not only reflect the geographical and cultural spheres in which the various Romanian provinces of today have developed, but also – as was demonstrated above – a long lasting living together within and beyond today’s frontiers. The various influences which we have just observed were realized in a sphere of public life that was one of the most important ones for the respective communities – religion. Their reception therefore means that those seemingly “foreign” elements were appreciated as favourable by their receivers and can doubtlessly be considered a consequence of a – though not always peaceful – living together.

Presenting Romanian church architecture as a result of various influences and local adaptation can also be extended to other aspects of Romanian history and thus constitute an alternative to official history teaching. Considering one’s own history as a product and reflection of a larger cultural and political sphere is to my mind much more useful than a cosmetically adapted presentation. Thus history can, instead as a basis for nationalism and intolerance, serve as a help for a better understanding of today’s circumstances and developments.

Translated from German by Wolfgang Rank

1. Zamfira, daughter of Prince Moise of Walachia (1529-1530); she was married in Transylvania first to a Hungarian, then to a Polish nobleman. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The church was restored in neo-classical style in the first half oft he 19th century. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)