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Author: Cristian Moisescu

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The Architecture of Matei Basarab's age

Cristian Moisescu

The Trinity Church in Herești (Fierăști, Hierăști), (Herești commune, County Giurgiu). The archaeological research conducted by Adrian and Lia Bătrâna at the end of 1987, related to the restoration of the religious edifice, contributed to highlighting the stages in the construction of four overlapped churches, succeeding one another on the same location of the present edifice.

The vestiges of the first religious edifice (pieces of burnt wood and adobe) were found within the nave and at the Eastern end of the present narthex. The inner level you could step on consisted of a 5 cm thick compact clay layer, which along with the buried wooden foundations allowed for the reconstruction of the plane made up of a wooden rectangular nave with the inner dimensions of 5.75x4.30 m, joined by a 3.20 m wide pentagonal altar, symmetrically unhooked at the level of the iconostasis. Moreover, according to the traces preserved, it was found that the building system used was that of beams laid out in horizontal girders. A powerful fire destroyed the wood of that church, which lasted about half a century.

The second stage was also represented by a wooden church replacing the former church on the same site in mid-16th century, after the ground had been cleared of the burnt building-material. The clearing of the second church was done by dismantling and systematically recovering the building material, which took place in the late 16th century, as shown by the ceramic material found at the level you could step on.

The third construction stage in Herești coincides with the raising of the first religious edifice by brickwork done in the late 16th century,

shortly after the dismantling of the wooden church. The church had a rectangular plane (hall), with a 5.76 m long nave that was 6.24 m wide inside, with two pilasters leaning against the Southern and Northern sides, supporting supplementary arches on the inner side of a longitudinal half-cylindrical vault. The narthex, which was also rectangular, probably vaulted with a semi cylinder all along its length, had the dimensions of 5.00x6.35 m inside; the total dimensions of the church measured outside were 17.50x8.30 m. The crypts of two formerly plundered tombs were discovered in the narthex, surely belonging to the founders, one of them being overlapped by another tomb belonging to the second brick church. At a time, shortly after the first brick church had been erected, a porch was added with stone substructions and brick elevation, in the North-Eastern corner of which a foundation block was discovered with the dimensions of 0.70x1.35 m, supporting the brickwork of a staircase to a steeple raised above the respective porch also at that time. The porch is supposed to have been added and the aforementioned steeple with the afferent staircase to have been built shortly after 1600, anyway before the quake of July 20th 1628, that being the fourth stage in the construction of the church.

That big tremor weakened the existing walls, requiring the complete reconstruction of the edifice in 1644 (according to the date in the inscription) by preserving previous foundations and therefore by sticking to the old plan. Changes were only made in the apse of the altar, the new church erected on the previous foundations having eight sides at the outer apse, therefore a border at the longitudinal axis. [...]



The new steeple above the porch together with the staircase was raised concurrently with the Western wall of the narthex, their brickwork being interwoven. In the beginning, the step of the staircase, laid out in the North-Eastern corner of the porch was accessed from that compartment, but later on, that entrance was abandoned and it was made from the narthex, with the adjacent wall being broken.

The oldest floor, belonging to the second brick church was made of bricks that were nearly square-shaped, 3.5 cm thick and whose average dimensions were 24x26 cm. A second floor belonging to the 1644 church was made of 4-5 cm thick rhomboidal bricks with a 30 cm side, with a 49 cm big diagonal and a 33 cm small diagonal, lying on a mortar bed.

Upon vaulting the latter church, semi cylinders were used at the porch (transversal) and the narthex (longitudinal) and a pendentive-based spherical calotte was used at the nave.

A characteristic feature that is worth mentioning is the broken shape of the arches of the four gaps bordering the porch (picture 13). A frame with a double flat accolade above which

there was the inscription was to be found at the entrance to the narthex, while the windows had simple stone frames.

The inscription above the door, most certainly written by Udriște Năsturel, given its masterly words, said: *„This...church was raised and built from its own foundation...with the spending of the all-glorious and blessed lady, lady Elena, ruling princess of Wallachia, wife of all-glorious and ruling prince, I, Matei Basarab, with pains also taken by father Iorest Năsturel...being ruler by God offered as the above-mentioned ruler, her husband, under archbishop Teofil and bishop of Râmnic, Ignatie, and bishop of Buzău, Stefan, in the year 7152 since the genesis of the world and the year 1644 since the salvation of the world. Mamant, son of Barbu of Netezești was overseer of the building works“*. After undergoing major changes in the first half of the 19th century, including the dismantling of the wall between the nave and the narthex, the monument was restored with the parish funds between 1987 and 1990, according to the design of architect Sandu Miculescu.