

Ion Tița-NICOLESCU

Sacrum and Historicity in Argeș and Muscel



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Contents

Sânziene or Drăgaica (June 24): Etymology And Origins; Magical Chastity, the Girls' Oath, The Dance of the Virgins, Ritual Bathing, and Traditional Girls' Attire.....	11
Architectural Styles Specific to the Argeş and Muscel Regions (16th–18th Centuries): Religious and Secular Architecture.....	25
Traditions on the Verge of Extinction: The Ritual of the Twigs.....	39
Argeş Through the Eyes of Foreign Travelers at the Dawn of the Modern Era (1821–1831)	43
The Romanian Realm: Insights Through Myth, Custom and History	53
Saint George and the Pre-Christian Myths of the Warrior Rider	63
Areas of Foreign Civilization in the Culture of the Early Romanian Middle Ages	69
Woolen Textiles and Wallachian Shaggy Blankets (<i>Plocade</i>) – A Brief History	79
New Perspectives on the Feast of the Nativity: Dogmatic Theology and Folk Religion	87
The Theological and Folkloric Symbolism of the Head Covering	93
The Symbolism of May Flowers (Chamomile Or Romaine, Lily, Basil, Poppy).....	99
The Feast of the <i>Ascension</i> : Between Christian Dogma and Popular Tradition	111
The Summer Solstice, on the Nature Of Solstices, Solstitial Narratives, Christian Significance, the Symbolism of Light (June 21st).	119
Traditional Art and Religious Ethnology, Essential Elements of Romanian Identity.....	127
The Wicked Fairies` Day – April 16th. The Ropotin of the Baking Clay Covers	135

Ethnological Themes in the Religious Ornamentation of the Argeş Region - Theological Ethnology, a Research Discipline.....	141
Symbols of the Hereafter in Traditional Romanian Culture	153
Foreign Travelers Through the Romanian Lands in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries – History And Ethnology in Argeş and Muşcel.....	161
Distinctive Features of Christian Art in the Churches of Argeş	173
A Life, a Destiny, a Masterpiece Reflections on the Eminent Scholar Ovidiu Bîrlea	177
General Bibliography.....	187

FOREWORD

The volume *Sacrum and Historicity in Argeş and Muscel* represents a significant contribution to the study of princely residences in the Argeş and Muscel regions. It offers a synoptic analysis of ecclesiastical buildings that are of historical importance as well as intangible local heritage. The author employs an interdisciplinary approach - situated at the intersection of ethnology, history, and linguistics - highlighting elements of cultural continuity that transcend the pre-Christian North-Danubian era. This research methodology is further enhanced by a distinct stylistic expressiveness.

Through the studies of researcher Ion Țița-Nicolescu, this work explores the phenomenon of indigenous religious syncretism. Within this framework, Orthodox Christianity is analysed as a perfecting factor of archaic customs, in accordance with the philosophical paradigm of Ernest Bernea. In a contemporary context marked by secularizing trends, the volume proposes a recovery of the transcendent dimension, highlighting the way in which traditional rural society harmoniously integrated nature and divinity into the ontological fabric of daily life. The Romanian peasant, though lacking formal dogmatic instruction, manifested a profound phenomenological experience within the framework of Orthodoxy - a direct experience of the sacred that prevailed over any dogmatic conceptualization. This form of religiosity is defined by the concept of *cosmic Christianity* theorized by Mircea Eliade, in which ecclesiastical rites are grafted onto archaic sensibility, transforming nature into a receptacle of the divine presence. In contrast to the festive and often secularized character of modern celebrations, the Romanian peasant established an ontological relationship with the divine, integrating himself into what Lucian Blaga termed the *Mioritic space* - a spiritual horizon defined by the symbiosis between man, landscape, and transcendence.

The central argument of this analysis lies in Christianity's ability to assimilate and resemanticise a vast repertoire of pre-Christian symbols - both telluric and astral - integrating them into the corpus of Sacred Tradition. This form of religious acculturation did not involve a simple formal absorption, but rather a preservation of ancestral significances, thereby facilitating a decryption of the mechanisms through which traditional man interacted with the supernatural realm.

The hermeneutic interpretation of local symbolism—evident in the artistry of folk costumes, vernacular architecture (such as monumental gates), and the decoration of household objects—benefits significantly from the author's dual expertise. This combination of academic proficiency in Theology and Sacred Art, corroborated by exhaustive field research within the ethno-historical regions of Argeş and Muscel, lends the study indisputable scientific authority. From this perspective, the author emphasizes the organic correlation between occupational determinism and spiritual manifestations, arguing that the cultural act is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather the direct result of the community's interaction with its subsistence environment.

In this context, the folk calendar and rites of passage are structured around the biological and economic cycles specific to pastoralism and agriculture, transforming daily labour into a form of cosmic liturgy. Thus, the author's analysis transcends simple ethnographic description, proposing an anthropology of dwelling in which vernacular architecture and traditional dress are not merely aesthetic objects, but markers of identity that reflect the hierarchies and values of a cohesive, traditional society.

Several works within this volume capitalize on the accounts of foreign travellers, whose notes contribute to the reconstruction of the historical and administrative landscape of the Argeş and Muscel regions. These travelers bequeathed to posterity invaluable documentary references regarding political configurations, architecture, and traditional attire, as well as ethno-psychological observations concerning the customs and mores of Romanian society.

From a methodological perspective, the information is subjected to a rigorous critique of the sources, filtered through the hermeneutic grid of the historian, ethnologist, and theologian. This approach is imperative, given the heterogeneous intellectual backgrounds of the foreign authors and the high degree of subjectivity in their accounts. Thus, the author proposes a 'distillation' of factual data from perceptual distortions, ensuring the scientific accuracy necessary for understanding the realities of several centuries ago.

The rural universe of the Argeş and Muscel regions is defined by an ontology of the sacred, in which nature and divinity constitute the fundamental coordinates of daily existence. A remarkable exponent of this ethos is the women's traditional dress, whose aesthetic and symbolic value has been historically validated, not least by the fascination it held for Romania's queens. This identity marker transcends its utilitarian function, transfiguring the traditional chronotope and representing a spiritual infusion of superior axiological density within the broader framework of national culture.

In this context, the study dedicated to the theological and folkloric symbolism of the head covering constitutes a rigorous analysis of the Mușcel veil (*maramă*), viewed as a heritage object with profound metaphysical significance. The author demonstrates that this element of attire is not merely a piece of craftsmanship, but a conduit of communication between the immanent and the transcendent, confirming the intrinsic connection between the communities of the early Basarab dynasty, their natural environment, and the divine dimension.

This volume proposes an interdisciplinary synthesis in which history, theology, and ethnography converge to elucidate the mechanisms of cultural diachrony. The author's approach substantiates the premise that the intelligibility of the present is conditioned by an objective exegesis of the past, while any projection of the future requires a conscious relationship to identity landmarks and the 'mysterious face' of historical processuality.

In antithesis to the paradigm of liquid modernity, characterized by the volatility of axiological models and the rapid succession of cultural forms, this work offers a point of critical stability. In a context marked by unpredictable changes and a crisis of exemplary models, the study recovers the perennial values of tradition, proposing a reassessment of intangible heritage as a necessary foundation for the balance of contemporary society.

The author's approach constitutes an invitation to reconsider the fundamental values of the Romanian village, exploring the concept of 'eternity' as a form of archaic temporality, defined by an ethic of moderation and an organic connection with the divine. These studies propose a recovery of ontological time—characterized by that 'gentle' flow and the full harmony of being in relation to cosmic rhythms—in antithesis to the fragmentation and acceleration of modern historical time.

In the context of a contemporary society marked by a frantic pace and the mediatization of culture—where information is often received fragmentarily and without critical filtering—this volume offers a reflective alternative. The author highlights the contrast between the ephemeral transmission of knowledge through mass communication channels and the depth of direct, traditional experience, advocating for a return to the spiritual sources that have shaped Romanian identity.

This volume constitutes an imperative recourse to memory, inviting an incursion into a past governed by the sacredness of everyday experience and the peasant's unwavering faith in the divine. The author proposes an understanding of traditional society as an ontological structure in which human existence was 'a

mirror of the time originally granted to us,' as opposed to modern chronological fragmentation.

Although rigorously focused on the ethno-historical area of Argeş and Muscel, the work *Sacrum and Historicity in Argeş and Muscel* transcends the limits of a regional monograph. Through the depth of its analyses and the universality of the themes addressed, the volume is configured as a historiographical and phenomenological synthesis of the entire Romanian-inhabited space, offering fundamental landmarks for defining national identity in its diachronic evolution

Dr. Ligia Fulga
Senior Research Fellow I

SÂNZIENE OR DRĂGAICA (JUNE 24): ETYMOLOGY AND ORIGINS; MAGICAL CHASTITY, THE GIRLS' OATH, THE DANCE OF THE VIRGINS, RITUAL BATHING, AND TRADITIONAL GIRLS' ATTIRE

Before discussing the customs of Sânziene or Drăgaica, it is necessary to clarify the etymology of these two words and acknowledge that a pagan holiday, which still retains its ancestral name, is present in the Orthodox calendar. The names 'Sânziene' or 'Sâmziene' pose certain challenges to linguists, who have proposed several origins. The first, and most plausible, is that the holiday's name derives from an ancient cult of the Roman Goddess of Hunting, Diana - especially since the custom involves groups of virgin girls whose protector was Sancta Diana. Known as the Goddess of Endless Forests and Wild Animals, she was also associated with the moon, a feminine symbol with agrarian qualities. From *Sancta Diana* to *Sandiana*, and finally to *Sânziana/e*, there is but a single step.¹ The Romanian language contains such precedents, where the names of saints evolved by shortening the word 'Sfântul' (Saint) to 'Sân' and affixing a popular adaptation of the name: Sânnicoară (Saint Nicholas), Sângheorghe (Saint George), etc. This theory is also supported by historian Vasile Pârvan, who links Diana Sancta Potentissima with Bendis, the Thracian goddess who, according to Herodotus, was identical to Artemis-Diana. The name of the Roman deity survived the colonization of Dacia and, through association with the local goddess, became a central figure in Romanian folklore².

Another variant suggests that the name is a transformation of Saint John, which in Latin is *Sanctus Dies Johannis*. In popular language, this gave the feast its name: '(...) *Sanctus Dies Johannis*, just as the name of another feast has been preserved - *Sânjorz* from *Sanctus Georgius* - intended to replace the pagan feast of the Palils. *Sanctus Dies Johannis* became, without any phonetic difficulty, *sim(pt)-dzi-juane* > *sînziane* > *sânziene*'.³

¹ Ivan Evseev, *Enciclopedia semnelor și simbolurilor culturale*, Timișoara, Editura Amarcord, București, 1999, pp. 419-420; Romulus Vulcănescu, *Mitologie română*, Editura Academiei, București, 1983, p. 489.

² Mircea Eliade, *De la Zamolxis la Ghinghis-Han*, Studii comparative despre religiile și folclorul Daciei și Europei Orientale, București, 1995, p. 76.

³ Revista "Institutului de Filologie și Folklor", "Grai și Suflet", III, published by Ovid Densușianu, 1927, p. 428.

I.A. Candrea agrees with the etymology but considers such an approach doubtful, in the sense that *dies* has no place next to *Johannis*, just as *Sanctus dies Georgius* or *Sanctus dies Nicolaus* do not exist, but only *Sanctus Georgius* or *Sanctus Nicolaus*; therefore, the name *Sânziene* originates from *Sanctus Johannis*, and under the influence of feminine plurals, it transformed into *Sânziene*.⁴

Furthermore, a Dacian origin for the holiday and its central figure cannot be ignored; it is difficult to believe that our ancestors - well-known as farmers and viticulturists - would not have had their own solar cult centered around the Solstice⁵. In the Thracian Pantheon, there was a goddess named Bendis, a personification of the Moon and protector of women, whose cult overlapped with that of Diana. Historical sources regarding their faith and deities are scarce, with the exception of Zalmoxis, mentioned by Strabo and Herodotus. Therefore, while we must avoid speculative claims, it is certain that the Dacians had reached a high spiritual level compared to their neighbors, rooted in their belief in the immortality of the soul⁶.

Another proposed variant is linked to the omnipresent character in Romanian fairy tales, Ileana Cosânzeana - a name usually extended to identify princesses and sometimes used in the plural (*Ilene Cosânzene*). According to Aron Densușianu, as reported by Romulus Vulcănescu, both '*Ileana*' and '*Cosânzeana*' are similar, even pleonastic, as they both signify the Sun. '*Ileana*' has its roots in the Greek *Ilia*, the feminine form of *Ilios* or *Helios*, the Sun God in Greek mythology. Through linguistic transformation, Ileana becomes Iana - the Sun's sister, who is in fact the Moon—and thus identifies with *Iana Diana*, the personification of the night star and goddess of the hunt. As for '*Cosânzeana*,' her name is thought to derive from the Latin *Consens* (adviser). This title was bestowed upon the twelve great Olympian gods, including Diana, and through derivation, she became *Consentiana*. The final name thus becomes *Iana Consentiana*, or the Sun's sister, evolving in the Romanian language into *Ileana Cosânzeana*⁷. Given that the *Sânziene* were vestals (virgin priestesses), it is highly probable that both terms (*Cosânzeana* and *Sânziana*) share roots in the same cult of Diana. Another etymology, proposed by Atanasie Marian Marienescu, suggests that the golden-haired beauty of Romanian fairy tales originates from the cult of *Nehalennia*—a deity not clearly defined, but

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 433-434.

⁵ The solar discs at Sarmizegetusa prove a good knowledge of astrology. Regarding the civilization and religion of the Dacians, the following have written: Vasile Pârvan, *Getica. O protoistorie a dacilor*; Alexandru Popescu, *Cultura geto-dacă*; Alexandru Busuioceanu, *Zalmoxis sau Mitul dacic în istoria legendelor spaniole*; Hadrian Daicoviciu, *Dacii* ș.a.

⁶ Victor Kernbach, *Dicționar de mitologie generală*, București, 2004, p. 389.

⁷ Romulus Vulcănescu, *Mitologie română*, Editura Academiei, București, 1985, p. 396.

whose name translates to '*the beautiful goddess*'.⁸ Regarding '*Cosânzeana*,' Lazăr Șăineanu also notes a potential Slavic origin of the word. However, beyond these etymologies, oral tradition associates *Ileana* with *Sânziana*, either as a single name or separately, as sisters of the Sun, closely linked with mythical vegetative, agrarian, and silvan aspects.

Regarding the origin of the name *Drăgaică*, it is of Slavic origin and overlapped with *Sânziene* during the period of Slavic influence in Early Feudalism.⁹ The *Drăgaice* (as 'Sweethearts') and *Dragobete* share a common etymology and are personifications of deities of love. In the case of the *Drăgaice* as 'sweethearts,' we refer to female divinities celebrated from the Spring Equinox to the Autumn Equinox, known by different names depending on the season (*iele*, winds, hawks, *Sânziene*, or *Drăgaice*, etc.). The name *Sânziene* is primarily used in Oltenia, Banat, Transylvania, Maramureș, Bucovina, and Northern Moldova, while *Drăgaica* is used in Southern Moldova, Dobrogea, and Muntenia¹⁰.

The rituals performed by young women on June 24 are reminiscent of the April ceremonies dedicated to the goddess Ceres, which featured processions and rural celebrations. They also evoke an obscure holiday in August where women, in order to offer fruits to the goddess of the harvest, had to observe nine days of sexual abstinence - a clear manifestation of sacrificial myths. Additionally, there are elements drawn from ancient Roman holidays, such as *Fornacalia* in February, dedicated to the ovens where wheat was ripened, and *Quinquatrus Minusculae*, celebrated on June 13. The latter brought together practices associated with crops, the summer Sun, and the Moon - elements that are also found in the celebration of *Sânziene*¹¹.

Although there is a considerable span of time between these holidays, this was not an impediment in the Italian peninsula, where the same festival was celebrated in different seasons depending on the geographical region¹². It is an authentic example of religious syncretism when ritual elements of a winter holiday are found within summer ones.

It is with good reason that we can link *the mysteries of the goddess Demeter* to the processions, incantations, and dances of the *Sânziene*. In Greek mythology, Demeter -the deity of the fields, particularly those of wheat - wandered the world

⁸ Atanasie Marian Marienescu, *Cultul păgân și creștin*, vol. I, Editura: SAECULUM I.O., colecția Mythos, București, 2008, pp. 329-333

⁹ Romulus Vulcănescu, *Mitologie română*, Editura Academiei, București, 1985, p. 489

¹⁰ Ion Ghinoiu, *Hăbitouri populare de peste an*, Bucharest, pp. 178-179

¹¹ Tache Papahagi, *Mic dicționar folkloric*, București, 1979, p. 424)

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 431.

in search of her beautiful daughter, Persephone, who had been abducted by her uncle Hades, the God of the Underworld. Devastated by her daughter's disappearance, Demeter refused to ascend to heaven, abdicating her divine duties. As a result, the fields became barren and scorched, threatening the survival of the mortals whom the gods relied upon for worship. To restore balance to a world plagued by crop failure, Zeus, the supreme deity of Olympus, proposed a compromise: Persephone would spend half the year in the Underworld with her husband and the other half with her mother on Earth. Whenever the beautiful Persephone emerged from the darkness, her mother's joy was immense, and the Earth burst forth with fruit and bountiful harvests (from spring to autumn). When she returned to the Underworld, Demeter's maternal grief plunged the world into chaos, cold, and hunger - thus, winter arrived. In this context, the dance of the *Sânziene* at the Summer Solstice can be compared to that of the nymphs, Persephone's companions. They rejoiced in her presence while knowing that as the sun began to fade after the solstice, the girl's return to her husband in the dark realm approached, bringing with it the wintry scourges that her grieving mother would soon sweep across the earth.

It is easy to understand that the custom of the *Sânziene* originally possessed distinct regional characteristics depending on the ethnographic and historical areas of our country. The uniformity we see today - featuring barefoot girls in white dresses wearing floral crowns and heading to the river - is partly due to the commercialization of the holiday and the gradual loss of its defining sacred elements. Initially, the date of the celebration - the Summer Solstice - was deeply rooted in the community's daily life, as the custom was dedicated to protective deities with specific agrarian or pastoral roles. In mountainous regions, where shepherding was the primary occupation and wheat was scarce, mountain flowers became the '*raw material*' for wreaths. These were placed around the necks of sheep for an explicitly apotropaic purpose - to ward off evil.

In this regard, we reproduce the following custom from June 24, 1916, collected from the Vâlcea Mountains by Tache Papahagi: 'On the eve of June 24, all the girls and young wives go to the spring where they weave crowns from the flowers they have gathered. These crowns are placed around the neck of the first sheep that emerges before them. They also weave a floral wreath, beautifully decorated, which they place on the two pillars forming the second gate of the sheepfold through which the sheep pass to be milked; thus, every sheep passes under this wreath. Afterward, the same group of girls takes the floral arrangement back to the spring and hides it among boulders or tall grass, concealing it as best as possible so that the shepherds can never find it. If the shepherds do happen to find

it, they fill buckets with fresh water to drench the entire group of girls and wives; otherwise, they are left to regret their failure and are themselves sprinkled with water by the women. The next day, the *hora* begins.”¹³

The custom of the *Sânziene* hiding the floral wreath¹⁴ is found throughout the Balkans. Placing the wreath - a solar symbol - around a sheep's neck refers both to Christianity, where the white sheep is assimilated to the sacrificial lamb, and to paganism, where this domestic animal represents family abundance as well as the embodiment of forest and pastoral deities. As is traditional, young girls hold a central role in these customs; on *Sânziene* Day, they hike up to the sheepfolds to fulfill the ritual of gathering flowers.

Their ascent to the sheepfolds gave rise to the so-called 'girls' fairs' or local rural celebrations known as *nedeia*, where young people from villages scattered across the mountains could meet. In the lowland basins, where wheat cultivation held a central place as the primary occupation, *Sânziene* traditions are even more spectacular. They involve larger groups of girls, as the villages were closer together—and wherever there were girls of marriageable age, there were even more eligible young men. To truly grasp the scale of this pre-Christian holiday and its impact on these communities, one must emphasize that at no other time of the year did young women of marriageable age hold a more important or sacred role. The ritual was performed exclusively by these girls and, at most, the youngest wives; older women never participated, as on this day they became, symbolically, negative characters.

As an aside, on this day, the 'Old Men' turned into positive figures - an aspect reflected in fairy tales and stories where the Old Woman's daughter is consistently wicked, while the Old Man's daughter is always virtuous. The positive image of the 'Old Man' also refers to his patriarchal stature and his resemblance to the Sun as it begins its descent - symbolizing Time that declines only to be reborn. On no other day of the year was the honor bestowed upon a girl, and her future status as mother and wife, greater than on *Sânziene* Day

Through nocturnal and - more rarely - diurnal rituals, the almost obligatory nudity, spoken of only in whispers, and the ritual bathing in the morning light, the girls sent shivers through the boys. In their fiery minds, the young men could only imagine the virginal dances of those who, until then, had been mere village girls.

¹³ Take Papahagi, *Din folklorul romanic și cel latin*, studiu comparat, București, 1923, pp. 95-96.

¹⁴ In this context, the *mătăuz* is a bouquet of flowers and basil tied with a red thread and usually blessed in church. It serves as a substitute for a solar-vegetational deity; its concealment by girls and young women suggests the struggle between light and darkness. The men who search for the *mătăuz* embody the role of the fecundator, while the sprinkling with water belongs to initiatory rites similar to the sacrament of baptism.

In fact, the message conveyed to the young men by the *Sânziene* was one of profound erotic impact: they were no longer just the girls from the harvest, the weeding, or the hay-gathering; they had attained a different status. Now, they were *Sânziene* - benevolent fairies who enchanted and 'stole' men's minds

The strict fulfillment of these rituals was not merely about creating a mystical balance between *this world* and *the hereafter*, but also served a pragmatic and rational role by giving meaning to the community's existence. One can imagine the year's celebrations linked together like a spiritual path from which no one could deviate. While boys proved their diligence, strength, and wisdom through tasks like plowing and marking field boundaries, *Sânziene Day* belonged exclusively to the girls. On this day, they no longer had to prove their skills in spinning or sewing - as they did on *Joimari* - nor their industriousness, as seen during the '*Shouting over the village*' or the harvest on 'Elisha's Days.' Instead, their only concern was to embody beauty through purity. *Sânziene Day* was an initiation, much like a baptism, for those who '*rose to the hora*.' Their presence in the group proved they were '*ready for marriage*,' placing them at the center of attention for young men who, until that day, had not yet considered them as potential partners.

At the *hora* during the local *nedeia* celebrations that followed, the girls danced dressed in festive costumes, but this time with their heads adorned with wreaths made of yellow *Sânziene* flowers¹⁵ over white veils. Generally, girls attended the *hora* with their heads uncovered: their hair was tied in a single braid if they were 'in conversation' with a boy, or in two braids if they were single. Wearing the floral crown - a symbol usually reserved for married women - signified their future status as wives and mothers. Furthermore, wearing this crown over a white silk veil created a nimbus-like effect, symbolizing their state of spiritual and physical purity.

On the morning of June 24, shortly before sunrise, the girls would gather in a group they had formed long before, covering their heads with long white veils that they let fly in the wind. They placed upon their heads the floral crowns specific to *Sânziene Day* - which attested to their virginity - and wore their most beautiful traditional blouses and aprons, often woven and embroidered specifically for this day¹⁶. They held bouquets of flowers and ears of wheat in their hands, both elements - the crown and the bouquet - being considered a covenant with the worshipped deities. Thus, the deities became guarantors of their virginity, acting as an unspoken oath taken by the young women before the entire community.

¹⁵ Romulus Vulcănescu, *op. cit.* p. 489.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

Furthermore, it was considered a sacrilege - one that no young woman would dare risk - to wear the crown and bouquet on *Sânziene Day* if she was no longer a virgin.

Sometimes, the girls also fashioned belts from *Sânziene* flowers to wear around their waists. These symbolized both their chastity and the blessing granted by the Vegetation Deity, ensuring their bodies would be fertile and capable of giving birth to healthy, blemish-free children. This magical belt also served a protective role, shielding the girls from lower back pain during the harvest, thereby ensuring they could meet the village's expectations of hard work and endurance¹⁷. Along with their ritual bouquets, on *Sânziene Day*, the women carried sickles - either real or made of wood - which alluded to the crescent shape of the Moon and the fertility it represented. Furthermore, the sickles, carried alongside bouquets of wheat ears, symbolized the agricultural cycle of harvesting (birth, death, and rebirth), as the girls' path always culminated in a wheat field. If several groups of *Sânziene* girls met, they would simulate a ritual battle with their sickles. After dancing the *hora* in the middle of the field, they ran back to the village, where groups of young men awaited them with vessels full of water. The men would sprinkle them, simulating fertilization, much like Heaven-Father sends fertilizing rain to Mother Earth.

Another tradition was that of ritual bathing, when virgins went early in the morning to flowing water, wearing crowns on their heads, barefoot, and dressed only in long white chemises, carrying bouquets of flowers and ears of wheat. Walking barefoot through the dew was the first act of this ritual bathing, and sometimes young wives participated as well. The dew held rich symbolism, both pre-Christian and Christian: ranging from passionate and burning, yet fleeting love, to 'living water' that springs from the earth rather than falling from heaven, and even mysterious Christian meanings related to protecting the family. Furthermore, the dew was sipped from flower petals or leaves like a liquor that purified the body from within. This practice had the magical role of transforming a girl's youthful body into the fertile body of a woman¹⁸.

Once at the riverside, the girls chose a secluded spot where, undressed, they began their ritual bathing as a form of purification. This followed an ancient rite similar to the sacrament of baptism (the act of immersion), echoing the early centuries of Christianity when baptism was performed at adulthood. This gesture symbolized the transition from the status of a child to that of a young woman - an

¹⁷ Ion Ghinoiu, *Obiceiuri populare de peste an. Dicționar*, Editura Fundației culturale române, București, 1997, p. 179.

¹⁸ Sabina Ispas, *Meanings and Mores of the Past, Angelic Heroine of the Romanian Fairy Tale*, Bucharest, 2012, pp. 159-160).

essential stage in a girl's life when marriage became her primary concern. The ritual bathing took place under the full moon, after midnight, at the moment when the heavens were said to open. However, a superstition persisted in the region of Moldavia; as ethnologist Marcel Olinescu noted, it was forbidden to bathe in rivers or lakes on *Sânziene Day* due to the great danger of drowning¹⁹.

Bathing in lakes or flowing waters bears a striking resemblance to the baptism in the Jordan River performed by John the Baptist. It is highly probable that this Christian custom merged, within ancient communities, with a pagan rite of purification through ablution. In the context of the ritual bath—where the flowing water becomes one with, or at least in communion with, the worshipped deity—the crystalline waves serve a purifying role for both the girl's physical body and her fertile essence. The magical bathing on *Sânziene Day* does not limit the influence of the heavenly and earthly deities to the physical realm alone, but extends it to the girl's soul. She becomes a sanctified being, touched by the blessings of water, earth, and sky, as their germinal properties are transferred to her.

Their nudity suggests a renunciation of childhood; when they emerge, completely transformed, they put on the traditional blouse of a woman ready for marriage. The sacred water washes away their childhood but leaves their purity of soul intact. Thus, the child who had been consecrated to the gods and the woman she has become continue to exist under their protective wing. The water buries the past, removing any possibility of return, and pushes them inexorably toward an expected and desired future. Furthermore, their nakedness served as a visual confirmation to the entire group that their bodies had matured for marriage and childbirth, creating a powerful, covenant-like bond among them. They were all equal, just as they had come into the world; clothes and, by extension, social status ceased to exist. This same equality was expected to endure in the future when, as wives, they would provide balance not only to their own families but, through their mutual bond, to the entire community.

The dance performed by the *Sânziene* after their ritual bath transformed them into solar beings - pure brides of the sky - and rendered their presence apotropaic. Indeed, many households featured the motif known as '*the girls' hora*' as a decoration on the ridges of their roofs. The dance of these *Sânziene virgins* banished curses from the fields and warded off drought, hail, disease, and insects, bringing the blessing of abundance to both the village and the land. Their image is Edenic: they are beautiful, sensual, tender, and gentle - true consorts of the Sun. They embody what humanity has sought since the dawn of existence: deification

¹⁹ Marcel Olinescu, *Mitologie românească*, Editura Cetatea de Scaun, București, 2025, p. 290.

alongside benevolent deities who possess the power to transform imperfect man into something approaching perfection²⁰.

Through ritual bathing, the transition from child to young woman is sacralized; their chastity aligns them with the divine²¹.

A true communion is forged between the virgins and the worshipped deities through their honoring of the water - water which, only a few weeks later, will be defiled by the deer²². They offer themselves as a final tribute to the light and warmth of summer, striving through these rituals to embody the very radiance and abundance that, unknowingly, will soon fade into the depths of winter. The garments the girls wore on this special day had to define their status and align with magical practices; like priestesses, they became worthy servants of the female deities of fertility and the Sun. The white blouse worn during divinatory acts symbolized purity, but above all, a change of state. The aprons woven for the *nedeie* were intended to be part of the future wife's attire. She would eventually take off the long white chemise of a maiden and put on that of a mature woman—a ritual exchange of garments through which her thoughts, hopes, and aspirations also transformed. This celebration was one that no girl of marriageable age could afford to miss; her belonging to the sisterhood of *Sânziene* had to be visible, perhaps even ostentatious. These garments had to differ from those of children and younger girls, as they displayed before the entire village the symbol of chastity—the most precious gift a bride could offer her husband. The community was well aware of the gravity of sacrilege, and a lie in this regard was unthinkable.

The ritual was resumed every year by the girls who remained unmarried; the white blouse served as a reconfirmation of their virginity, as the same garment would eventually be worn by the bride on her wedding night. This item of clothing functioned much like a priestly vestment, with one key distinction: while a priest's attire is marked with numerous symbols of faith and divinity, the *Sânziene* blouse bore none. Its complete whiteness was its only symbol. This white was angelic, evocative of holiness, as the Gospel tells us: *'And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. His countenance was like lightning,*

²⁰ Mircea Vulcănescu, *Logos și eros*, Editura Paideia, București, 1991, pp. 94-96.

²¹ From here stems the ancient custom in which a maiden was deflowered before marriage through a ritualistic act, performed solely by the community's magus. The medieval abuses where the lord claimed the right of *primae noctis* originate in the belief that the nobleman, a ruler by divine grace, was the only one entitled to 'harvest' this sacred gift of the gods.

²² It is believed that bathing was permitted until *Pobrejenie* (the Transfiguration – August 6th) or August 15th (the Dormition of the Mother of God); after this period, the water grows cold and is 'defiled by the stag' (Tudor Pamfile, *Sărbătorile de toamnă și postul Crăciunului*, București, 1914, p. 4).

and his clothing as white as snow' (Matthew 28:2-3). A white *ia* (traditional blouse) without decorations was never worn by a married woman; doing so would have been a violation of all moral norms. Once the marriage was consummated, she no longer held the right to dress or act as a maiden.

Regarding the dance of the *Sânziene* virgins, it represents an intimate and magical form of celebration - an act of invoking fertility by those who, on that night, are blessed by the divine. This nuptial dance is slow, resembling a solemn prayer, in stark contrast to the fast and frenetic dances of the Serbians or the lively *hora* of the following day. Its deliberate pace mirrors the smooth flight of the fairies who, in popular tradition, glide over fields and households on this night, descending to earth to weave the destinies of young men and women, to heal the sick, or to banish poverty and bring forth abundance. The girls who danced undressed on this night formed a secret circle - a female sisterhood - and their chosen location, usually a secluded forest clearing or a distant meadow, was a closely guarded secret. It was the sacred dance of the world's beginning, a moment when primordial life began to cover the earth, brought from the cosmic depths by the Great *Fârtat*; it was the prayer that girls sent to the afterlife. The dance acted as an amulet against the demons of the gale and the spells of witches, spiritually adorning the girl in an invisible gown of eroticism. Those who participated in such a ritual emerged transformed - more self-assured and aware of their own sexuality - which made them exceptionally attractive in the eyes of the village youth.

Girls sought to marry men who had never been married before, driven by the superstition that 'a maiden avoids marrying a widower because they say that in the next world she will be a widow; the man will have his first woman as his wife, and vice versa'.²³

While a man past his prime could still find a consort - often with the help of an older woman - the same was not true for a girl. It was difficult, if not impossible, for a young woman to marry after a certain age. Girls usually '*rose to the hora*' around the age of fifteen, and by twenty or twenty-one at the latest, a girl was expected to be married, with her own household and children. After the age of twenty-five, she was already considered an 'old maid'.²⁴

This 'race against time' toward marriage helps us understand the behavior of the girls on *Sânziene* Day. Time was a limited resource for them; it was not enough simply to marry - they had to secure a 'good' husband, free of vices and troubles, of similar social status, and of a relatively equal age. This was a compelling reason not to miss the ritual bathing and dancing, nor the enchantments

²³ George S. Ioneanu, *Superstițiile poporului român*, Buzău, 1888, p. 70.

²⁴ Artur Gorovei, *Datinile noastre la nuntă*, București, 1910, p. 6.

and vows they made together. It was vital to become attractive, to remain virgins²⁵ and to embody the qualities of a 'good girl' as defined by the community: *industrious, skilled in housekeeping, and virtuous*.

Despite their diaphanous appearance, the *Sânziene* were not only seen as benevolent deities for women, but also as malicious ones; they took revenge on those who failed to respect their feast day. Thus, if 'Eve's daughters' worked on this day - or, as the saying goes, '*worked like a Drăgaică*' - they risked attracting the wrath of the fairies and '*having their mouths twisted*' (facial paralysis). This taboo extended until June 28th, a period when the power of these virgin deities remained equally potent, and *all young girls and wives* were strictly forbidden from performing any *household chores*²⁶. The punishment from the celebrated deities for women who did not '*keep*' a *female feast* was much harsher than for men, who were more easily '*forgiven*' by their saints: 'Major female feasts must be observed - even more strictly than those of men - because a woman is more temperamental. On a feminine celebration such as Chirca, Marina, Catrina, or the Pious Parascheva, if you dare to work, you shall suffer the consequences! But on men's holidays, such as St. George or St. Nicholas, to dare to work is of little consequence; for a man is more lenient, just as the Holy Sun is - he shines always. But a woman is like the Moon; she shines only for those few days when she is full - shining at night almost as brightly as the sun - and then she goes dark again!' Take a look at Dochia now, and see what she is plotting! It's raining, then it's warm, it's windy, then it's beautiful again²⁷; that is the nature of a woman."²⁸

As with many other holidays, on this day predictions were made about the weather that would follow until the end of the year. Depending on the dew, wind, sun, weather phenomena or bird song, the householders knew whether or not they could harvest their fields. If after this day the cuckoo could still be heard singing, it was a sign that the autumn would be long and dry.

We reproduce a superstition related to the Sânziene's Day: "When the apples are well ripe, the parents who have dead children should not eat until they give alms, because, if their children from the other world would eat, they are not be

²⁵ There was a superstition that boys used to consider when they wanted to find out if girls were still virgins. They looked at the corner of the girl's eye where there was a small membrane, if it was stuck together, the girl was a virgin and if it was loose, it meant exact the opposite. (I. Aurel Candrea, *Folclorul medical român. Privire generală, medicina magică*, București, 1999, p. 77; Elena Niculiță-Voronca, *Datinile și credințele poporului român*, vol. 2, București, 2008, p. 404.

²⁶ Dr. Ch. Laugier, *Contribuții la etnografia medicală a Olteniei*, Craiova, 1925, p. 70 și 160

²⁷ Referire la cele 9 babe de la începutul lunii martie.

²⁸ Elena Niculiță-Voronca, *Datinie și credințele poporului român*, vol. 2, Editura Saeculum Vizual, București, 2006, p. 22.

allowed to pick apples when shaken there, on the Simziene's and Peter's, because their parents ate first".²⁹

It should be noted that all these customs, predominantly pagan, were performed by girls with the firm conviction that they did not conflict with their faith in God. The villagers possessed a simple, pure faith and believed so strongly in the presence of the divine that there was no doubt their messages would reach their destination. This explains many aspects of the rural world and its way of living in perfect harmony with nature and respect for one's neighbor; for the God of the Romanian village was omnipresent - favorable to the righteous and hostile to the 'unworthy'. The Christian faith was not merely a religion, but a way of life in which popular wisdom became the philosophy for future generations. In the absence of doctors or even priests, the women of the household assumed these roles in a manner that brought them closer to these noble callings. These so-called 'old wives' remedies', accompanied by incantations and rituals worshipping nature, might seem to lead the profane reader into the mysterious and often misunderstood world of animism; yet, with every ritual, these simple people directed their prayers and hopes solely toward God. A clear example is the incantation spoken by the entire household for a woman facing a difficult labor: 'Behold, the Archangel Gabriel says that you should come forth, child, for you are called by Christ and the Holy Theotokos.' Then, they would place a coin, a bumblebee, and a peony in her bosom, and she would immediately give birth³⁰.

On the morning of *Sânziene Day*, festively dressed older women would go out to gather dew from the plants, as it was believed to cure eye pain, while the yellow flowers were added to the baths of frail children. They gathered various herbs, which they then dried, chopped, and crushed to be used in decoctions effective for treating wounds or even the common cold³¹. Another custom, documented in *Descriptio Moldaviae* by Prince Dimitrie Cantemir, tells of peasants who woke up early in the morning to watch the Sun 'dancing' or 'jumping' on St. John the Baptist's Day. They believed that witnessing this struggle - as it is no easy feat to look directly into the sun's disk even at sunrise - was necessary to secure the saint's protection and to ensure health, abundance, and prosperity within the home. Thus, the *Sânziene's Day* is not only a beautiful holiday, with barefoot girls dressed in white, and wreath of flowers crowned, but it is a day full of great spiritual feelings, hope, full of vitality and eroticism. It is the day of joy and overflowing sexuality enclosed in the dowry chest of perfect decency. It is a

²⁹ Arthur Gorovei, *Credinți și superstiții ale poporului român*, 2211, 1915, p. 190.

³⁰ Rev. "Sitting", Year XII, vol. IX, no.8-10, Fălticeni, Oct.-Decem, p. 124.

³¹ Valer Butură, *Enciclopedie de etnobotanică românească*, București, 1977, p. 2016

fascinating page of rural history, a page which thanks to its romanticism has been transmitted to us in many details to this day.

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ARCHITECTURAL STYLES SPECIFIC TO THE ARGEȘ AND MUSCEL REGIONS (16th–18th CENTURIES): RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR ARCHITECTURE

Victor Hugo once said that architecture is like a book of humanity. The art of building represents the soul of a people - the vital breath given to a civilization at the dawn of its emergence. It is the place where people's eyes meet, and architecture ultimately serves as the symbol of a nation's evolution and the chronicle of its life.

The Romanian people, situated in a geographical space of great strategic interest, have long been a nation for whom the term 'aggression' acquired, over centuries, the profound connotation of a permanent presence. All too often subjected to acts of violence and coercion, they withdrew into the eternal silence of time, strengthened their integrity, and built homes and churches for their children - living their lives with modesty and dignity.

Johann Friedel (1752 – 1789)³², a former soldier in the Austrian army and later a writer, speaks of Romanians as beings from a fairytale realm, where modesty and temperance are described as traits long lost to other nations but preserved among the Romanians: "Proof that this nation remains untouched by civilization is their complete ignorance of everything that does not concern the preservation of life. Religion, the future, the soul, God, and virtue are but empty words³³ to them, which they do not understand. I would pity them if missionaries were sent to teach them of these matters. Gratitude and innocence of morals would be quickly banished from the circle of these unfortunate ones, to whom the 'poison of the bonzes' has not yet found its way."³⁴

On another note, during the transition from the medieval to the modern era - around the mid-16th century³⁵, religious architecture in Wallachia began to show a consistent openness toward the Renaissance spirit and stylistic unity. When discussing this type of architecture in Wallachia, one's mind turns first to Argeș and the great foundation of Ruler Neagoe Basarab. This monument blends traditional Romanian architectural elements with styles from across the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Arab world.³⁶ In 1654, Paul of Aleppo considered it one of the wonders of the world, writing: 'As for the architecture, it is impossible for anyone to give a proper description, so

³² *Ibidem*, p. 30

³³ This assertion lacks factual basis and stems from the author's Rousseauist bias.

³⁴ *** *Călători străini despre Țările Române*, vol. X, partea I, p. 35.

³⁵ Vasile Florea, *Istoria Artei Românești*, Editura Litera Internațional, București, Chișinău, 2007, p. 9.

³⁶ Vasile Drăguț, *Arta Românească*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1982, p. 239

varied are the sculptures and richly decorated windows - some long and narrow, others round and bordered like shields'.³⁷

In the same admiring tone, the Englishman Robert Ainslie mentioned this architectural monument in 1794. Shortly thereafter, the French painters Bouquet and Lancelot furthered the monastery's fame beyond the country's borders through their travel accounts and prints. Moreover, this prestigious monument represents the maturation of the Romanian school of architecture, paving the way for the grandiose constructions of the Brâncovenesc style.

Rather than attempting a detailed analysis of the architectural elements defining ecclesiastical constructions in Argeș and Muscel, this chapter focuses specifically on the echoes that religious, civil, fortified, and traditional architecture produced in the writings of foreign travelers. A few representative constructions from the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries are discussed, given the scarcity of foreign reports and the lack of specific documentation for this period. An exception is the Monastery of Curtea de Argeș, founded in the first half of the 16th century, which was meticulously described by Paul of Aleppo, the Archdeacon of Antioch and companion to Patriarch Macarios during his travels through the Romanian lands.

Regarding this place of worship—faced with stone and decorated with geometric ornaments, vegetal motifs, and arches, which would become one of the most significant ecclesiastical buildings in 16th and 17th-century Wallachia³⁸, the Genoese Franco Sivori (1560 – after 1589) wrote toward the end of the 16th century. Having entered the service of Prince Petru Cercel (1583–1585), Sivori was deeply impressed by the grandiose construction: 'They have many beautiful monasteries of monks of the Order of St. Basil, with incomes from estates and mills. Among others, there is a monastery called Argeș, adorned with beautiful marble and of such proud architecture that it can be compared to the most beautiful monasteries in Italy'.³⁹

The architectural forms of this construction were awe-inspiring to those seeing it for the first time - primarily because Prince Neagoe Basarab intended to create a landmark place of worship that would also serve as a princely necropolis. The defining interior elements that grant this structure the grandeur of a cathedral are the twelve columns, a direct reference to the Twelve Apostles. These columns support the vaults that expand the narthex - the designated burial space - giving it an oversized width and a sense of monumental scale⁴⁰.

³⁷ *** *Călători străini despre Țările Române*, vol. VI, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

³⁸ Vasile Drăguț, *Dicționar Enciclopedic de Artă Medievală Românească*, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1976, p. 30.

³⁹ *** *Călători străini despre Țările Române*, vol. III, p. 18.

⁴⁰ Vasile Drăguț, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

The architectural elements, characterized by a distinct exoticism, are all the more prominent as the sumptuous ornamentation turned this structure into the most renowned and esteemed church - not only in Argeş, but throughout all of Wallachia and, subsequently, Romania.

A living testimony to the significance of this monastery and its architectural influence on Wallachia was left by Count Camillo Giacomazzi (1753–1834)⁴¹, during his travels through the region at the end of the 18th century. The Italian nobleman's description of the church in Argeş is so vivid that he manages, through both general observations and specific details, to capture an authentic image of the site:

'There are eight Orthodox churches in Curtea de Argeş, including one slightly apart from the city—a beautiful and solid structure built *alla Russa* 360 years ago. It elects its own archimandrite and is surrounded by a monastery of 40 monks. The church features twelve finely worked marble columns, in addition to two others that separate the narthex from the nave, all adorned with exquisite ornaments. It has four towers, two of which are lateral, located at the corners of the entrance; these are built obliquely, winding toward one another. There are four marble columns with an iron roof that serves as a shelter, situated behind the main entrance. The church itself is covered in lead. In the village, two towers have been demolished⁴² and many houses lie in ruin since the last war. It is the seat of the Argeş administration.⁴³

Giacomazzi's presentation of the monastery is not necessarily that of a connoisseur in architecture or ornamentation. This is evident in his use of the phrase *alla Russa*, which led him to associate the building with Russian churches, thereby overlooking the complex blend of architectural styles. Furthermore, he describes the *aghiasmatar*⁴⁴ (*the holy water font*) at the entrance - which possesses clear Muslim⁴⁵ - inspired influences - merely as a simple shelter supported by four columns. Despite these limitations, this foreign traveler's account, alongside that of Paul of Aleppo, remains one of the most significant references of the 18th century. From these descriptions, one can draw vital conclusions regarding the architecture of this place of worship, which remains unique within our country.

The architectural style of the Episcopal Church in Curtea de Argeş has been analyzed in detail in several reference works; however, it is equally important to emphasize how it was perceived by travelers passing through Argeş and the lasting impact it had on them. The fact remains that, despite the numerous reconstructions and

⁴¹ Ştefan Andreescu şi colab., *Călători străini despre Țările Române*, Supliment I, Editura Academiei Române, Bucureşti, 2011, p. 271.

⁴² Curtea de Arge;

⁴³ Ştefan Andreescu and colab., *op. cit.*, p. 277.

⁴⁴ phiale

⁴⁵ The architectural style is similar to the ritual ablution fountains found in Istanbul.

consolidation projects to which the church has been subjected over time, it continues to be one of the most representative religious structures in Eastern Europe.

Paul of Aleppo also wrote about this monastery in 1657, noting that 'it has no equal in the grandeur of its construction'.⁴⁶ His description is written in the most laudatory terms, providing several architectural details; he recalls, among other things, that the monks' cells formed a quadrilateral surrounding the monastery.⁴⁷

Paul of Aleppo also attempts to describe the church in detail, providing specific clues regarding its architectural elements, though some of his observations contradict the accounts found in the *Cantacuzino Chronicle* (*Letopiseșul Cantacuzinesc*).⁴⁸ Deeply impressed, Paul of Aleppo concludes his notes by stating: 'It is, as they say, a source of astonishment for me, and it is unparalleled among the monasteries of this country.'⁴⁹ His opinion aligns with native writings of the period, which similarly attest to the architectural grandeur of the Argeș Monastery.⁵⁰

The monument of Curtea de Argeș will endure forever, preserved in the accounts of foreign travelers and in our souls as long as it remains the spiritual quintessence of the Romanian people. After all, the Argeș Monastery - to quote G. Călinescu - is art that refuses to accept the limits of history; it is a world imbued with grace, where God's presence seems to dwell behind every stone and every line of its architecture.

I.3.1.2. The Holy Trinity Church in Golești (1646).

The church dedicated to the Holy Trinity in Golești was built 'at the expense of Lord Stroe Leurdeanu, the Grand Treasurer, and his wife, Vișa, in the days of Matei Basarab, in 1646,' as recorded in the stone inscription (*pisania*) above the entrance. The church edifice is situated in the immediate vicinity of the Golești boyars' manor in the former Mușcel county - a residence built six years prior to the church by the same boyar, Stroe Leurdeanu

The construction elements typical of the seventeenth century are harmoniously combined with older, traditional Wallachian forms and certain foreign influences. This allows us to state that the architectural style - similar, to some extent, to that found in the impressive edifices of Prince Constantin Brâncoveanu's reign - heralded the wave of construction that would forever transform the landscape of Wallachia.⁵¹

⁴⁶ *** *Călători străini despre Țările Române*, vol. VI, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 165.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 166 – 169. The description is all the more interesting as this structure underwent several architectural modifications during the restoration of 1875–1886, conducted by the French architect André Lecomte du Noüy.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ *Letopiseșul Cantacuzinesc* p. 35 – 36, Radu Popescu, *Istoriile*, p. 33.

⁵¹ Florentin Popescu, *Ctitorii Brâncovenesci*, Editura Sport-Turism, București, 1976, p. 45.

The companion of Patriarch Macarios of Antioch, Paul of Aleppo - who also documented the Curtea de Argeș Monastery - does not offer extensive details regarding the architectural lines here; however, he makes a point of mentioning this place of worship during his visit to Wallachia: '*...and in the evening, we arrived in a village belonging to the Great Logothete, called Golești, which has a large and beautiful church with a gable roof, which he had built and dedicated to the Holy Trinity. Above, there was a bell tower - a well-fortified and well-guarded structure.*'⁵²

The church follows a rectangular plan, its style being similar to the church in Gherghița (Prahova County), founded by Prince Matei Basarab in 1641. It is relatively large, measuring 23 meters in length and 10 meters in width on the exterior, with a height of over 8 meters. The walls are approximately 1.5 meters thick. Over time, the church suffered from various calamities, such as the earthquake of October 16, 1802, which destroyed the bell tower above the narthex and the tower over the nave. Internally, the church is divided into a narthex, nave, and altar, while the exterior lacks a porch. The altar is semicircular on the interior and polygonal on the exterior, incorporating the *proskomidia* and the *diaconicon* within the thickness of the walls.

At the time the Golești edifice was constructed, churches generally featured a narthex and nave separated by arches supported on pillars; however, this structure continues the tradition of previous centuries, where the narthex is separated from the nave by a wall and a doorway featuring a carved stone border.⁵³ The entrance door is adorned above with a stone sculpture where, influenced by the craftsmen sent by Prince Vasile Lupu to build the Stelea Church in Târgoviște, we find distinct Oriental motifs.⁵⁴ '*The vertical sections of the border are decorated with an interwoven pattern of lines and flowers in low relief, reminiscent of the techniques used in Armenian sculpture of previous centuries.*'⁵⁵ The door is framed within a rather high niche, ending at the top with a pointed arch - elements that evoke Islamic styles, more specifically, the entrances of Arab mosques.

One of the peculiarities of this structure is represented by the four buttresses: two on the sides and two placed diagonally at the corners of the western façade. It is interesting to note that they do not necessarily serve a structural purpose; rather, judging by their placement⁵⁶, their role is primarily decorative.

⁵² *** *Călători străini despre Țările Române*, vol. VI, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

⁵³ M. Popescu, C. Iliescu, *Golești*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1966, p. 31.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

⁵⁵ N. Ghika-Budești, *Evoluția arhitecturii în Muntenia și Oltenia*, partea a III-a, veacul al VII-lea, Editura Datina Românească, Vălenii de Munte, 1933, p. 43.

⁵⁶ M. Popescu, C. Iliescu, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

Similar to the Argeș Monastery, the narthex serves as a necropolis, where several members of the Golescu family are interred. The oldest tomb in the church dates back to the seventeenth century.

The architectural differences between the two churches are evident; however, we chose the church in Golești as representative of the Muscel region due to its diverse architectural influences, which echo those found at the Episcopal Church in Curtea de Argeș. Architectural and ornamental elements of Moldavian, Islamic, Georgian, and Armenian origin are found in abundance throughout its construction.⁵⁷

These structures, raised for the peace of both body and soul, are more than mere wonders of carved stone or skillfully crafted edifices that have withstood the ravages of time. They are not only sanctuaries of silence that invite contemplation, but also places where every individual becomes aware of the heritage of the people to whom they belong. They grant identity to a historical landscape; indeed, Argeș and Muscel are historical spaces that have made profound cultural contributions, imposing their artistic character upon both the past and the future of the nation to which they belong.

I.3.1.3. The Church of Jupânești, Argeș (1742).

Built in 1742 by Necula Jupân Râmleanu, Popa Mihăilă, and Necula Eneotu (Grecu)—as recorded in the inscription on the wooden wall separating the narthex from the nave—the church in Jupânești village (Coșești commune, Argeș county) represents a true masterpiece of traditional religious architecture. While the previous subchapters examined two ecclesiastical structures where architectural styles were rendered in stone by renowned craftsmen, wooden churches represent one of the most significant expressions of local identity for Argeș and Muscel. These structures reflect communities defined by their own distinct art, which grants them a unique character. This particular wooden church stands as a crowning achievement of the Mușcel and Argeș craftsmen, distinguished by its rich architectural decoration. Furthermore, field research has revealed that this holy site was built upon the foundations of an earlier church, mentioned in a charter issued by Matei Basarab in 1636.

The church in Jupânești, dedicated to the *'Ascension of the Lord,'* was built in two stages: first, the main structure (the nave) was assembled, followed a few years later by the bell tower and the porch. It is interesting to note that the church's polygonal porch, which closely resembles those of local peasant households, was added and oversized. This was done to create a space where villagers could discuss community matters after the service and to serve as a venue for feasts during holidays or religious events.⁵⁸ Another significant aspect of this enlarged porch is its educational role; it was here that

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

⁵⁸ Radu Crețeanu, *op. cit.*, București, 1968, p. 27.

priests taught the village children to read and write, making it the very first school in the village.⁵⁹

The church is constructed entirely of oak beams—some reaching 45–50 cm in width and up to 14 cm in thickness—joined, like most peasant houses, using *dovetail joints*. The roof is made of triple-layered shingles (*șiță*), while the floor is an exception to the wooden construction, being paved with stone slabs.

The difference in elevation between the main body of the church and the bell tower situated above the porch proves that the latter was added after the church was initially assembled. Having the bell tower positioned over the porch is a distinctive feature of this type of structure, as in stone or wooden churches, the tower is more commonly positioned directly over the nave.

The window frames are decorated with the *twisted rope motif* - an element that also encircles the nave of the church - while the fresco in the porch depicts a representation of Heaven and Hell. The iconostasis is original, although only some of its icons date back to the eighteenth century. Clearly, in many respects, this church remains within the stylistic framework characteristic of Wallachian churches. Its plan is simple, consisting of a rectangular nave, with the separation between the nave and the narthex formed by a wooden wall. As is common in other wooden churches, the western side is preceded by a porch.⁶⁰

The choice of a wooden church to define the religious architecture of Argeș and Muscel is justified by the focus of the following chapters, which will emphasize the traditional civil architecture of these two historic counties. Wooden churches almost always resemble traditional dwellings, demonstrating that just as the Romanian peasant was the architect of his own home, he was also the architect of his community's church.⁶¹

The presentation of this place of worship provides a fluid and natural transition from religious to vernacular architecture. It proves, once again, that great masterpieces - though often the work of anonymous creators - can mirror modesty and simple architectural lines, qualities that stand in contrast to the grandeur and elaborate ornamentation typical of specific cultural trends or waves.

"The aforementioned churches - the Episcopal Church of Curtea de Argeș and the Golești Church - as documented in the accounts of foreign travelers and the charters of the period, represent some of the most significant religious structures of their time. I have chosen to analyze religious architecture alongside traditional architecture because

⁵⁹ All this information regarding the church's construction methods, as well as the roles of certain atypical architectural features, was gathered through extensive field research conducted in Jupânești. This research involved in-depth discussions with the village elders and the local priest.

⁶⁰ Grigore Ionescu, *Arhitectura populară în România*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1971, p. 35.

⁶¹ *Idem*.

they serve, in effect, as authentic documents that provide direct insights into the Argeş and Muscel societies of the centuries under discussion. A simple inscription such as: *'By the will of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, this holy church was built in the days of the most enlightened Lord, Mihai Racoviţă Voivode, dedicated to the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ (Văzănisianie)*⁶² and this church is made by Necula Jupăn Romleanu and gives Popa Mihăilu and gives Nicula Gr, l[ea]t 7250'⁶³, is a record of immense importance. Like the wooden church in Jupâneşti, such inscriptions open the door to numerous historical truths and interpretations. Without delving into a detailed analysis of the text, one can say that the mere mention of the founders highlights the presence of individuals within these communities capable of understanding the needs of the Romanian village. Furthermore, it sheds light on the social organization and the ways in which locals or foreigners (such as Nicula, called 'the Greek') could engage in trade and accumulate wealth.

The church in Jupâneşti, like other wooden churches, evokes at first glance temperance, modesty, and impeccable taste. At the same time, it reflects the economic standing of the community; unlike the foundations of rulers or high-ranking boyars, these churches were clearly built with limited financial means. They remain, so to speak, grafted onto the rural landscape - the only ancient structures that still manage to emanate, to this day, the authentic atmosphere of the Argeş and Muscel villages of centuries past.

The Golescu Family Manor (1640)

Romanian architecture—specifically civil, religious, and vernacular—has been influenced throughout history by numerous factors. Regarding civil architecture, including both urban and rural boyar manors as well as folk dwellings, one of the primary influences was the constant pressure exerted on communities by the frequent raids of the Tatars and Turks. In this regard, the account of Franco Sivori during his journey through Argeş and Muscel at the end of the 16th century serves as a testimony. While describing the Argeş Monastery, he noted that Wallachian cities were poorly fortified due to their vassalage to the Ottoman Porte: *'All the cities are without walls, and there is no fortress, as they have all been demolished by the Turks, who do not allow any more to be built, so that the country cannot resist them...'*⁶⁴

Even if we are not specifically debating fortification techniques, the text above clearly demonstrates how Ottoman domination influenced civil, military, religious, and vernacular construction in Wallachia.

⁶² Ascension

⁶³ Ioana Cristache-Panait, *Bisericile de lemn din centrul Piemontului Getic: judeţele Olt, Vâlcea, Argeş*, în „Studii şi Cercetări de Istoria Artei”, Bucureşti, 1995, p. 29 – 62.

⁶⁴ *** *Călători străini despre Țările Române, op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 18.

These types of structures, with their well-defined architectural lines, primarily developed in the hilly and mountainous regions—sheltered areas that were less accessible to attackers. The distinction between civil and vernacular architecture lies in the fact that the former seeks to adhere to certain canons and decorative trends influenced by cultural movements; this occurred even though the medieval period, marked by harsh Ottoman exploitation, was not a favorable era for architectural development.⁶⁵

Regarding the civil architecture of the sixteenth century, we find an account by Franco Sivori from 1584 concerning the princely residence in Târgoviște - as there are no surviving descriptions of boyar manors or palaces in Argeș or Muscel from that period: *'The prince's palace, built by his ancestors, is of large proportions and elegant architecture; it was immediately expanded by His Highness, who added beautiful and stately rooms. He had a well constructed on the esplanade, with great effort and expense, bringing water from a spring no less than four miles away from the city (...). He also had incredibly large and beautiful aviaries made to keep wild animals, and exquisite Italian gardens were laid out right next to his palace (...). Following the Prince's example, all the great boyars then set out to construct their own buildings. Thus, the city, which is the capital of the whole country, grew rapidly'*.⁶⁶

Franco Sivori's description of the princely palace in Târgoviște toward the end of the sixteenth century allows for objective interpretations regarding the interest of the Romanian boyar class in art during this period. While it is true that the account focuses on the state capital rather than a civil site within the two counties in question, we can still relate these observations to Argeș and Muscel. After all, both Câmpulung and Argeș had served as princely residences and continued to hold significant resonance among the ruling class.

The manner in which the Italian writer speaks of the princely court - as being *'of large proportions and elegant architecture'*⁶⁷ proves his loyalty to Ruler Petru Cercel, in whose service he was. His account stands in a certain contradiction to that of the French scholar and diplomat Jacques Bongars (1554–1612), who, describing the palace in Târgoviște after Petru Cercel's flight, characterized it as: *'small, yet beautiful and imposing, as far as the standards of this country allow'*.⁶⁸

Explicit information regarding civil architecture in 16th-century Argeș and Muscel is scarce, primarily due to the destruction caused by military conflicts; consequently, the

⁶⁵ Grigore Ionescu, *Istoria arhitecturii în România*, vol. II, Editura Academiei R.S.R., București, 1965, p. 77.

⁶⁶ *** *Călători străini despre Țările Române*, vol. III, p. 13.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 162.

majority of surviving monuments from this period consist of religious edifices.⁶⁹ It must be noted, however, that the absence of extant civil structures from this era should not necessarily cast doubt on the region's architectural past, as religious constructions can sufficiently outline the artistic orientation and creative capacity of the time. This perspective is supported by historical documents and the testimonies of foreign travelers, which attest to the existence of numerous rural boyar courts and townhouses in Pitești, Curtea de Argeș, and Câmpulung⁷⁰. Had these been preserved, they would have reshaped our understanding of civil architecture both within these two historical provinces and throughout Wallachia.

Vernacular architecture is significantly simpler, primarily utilizing clay and wood as building materials, and less frequently, stone.⁷¹ Archaeological excavations have revealed that folk households relied almost exclusively on these materials until the 18th century, even in urban environments; consequently, it is difficult to establish the exact typology of folk constructions used in the villages of Argeș and Muscel during the 16th century.⁷²

Built in 1640 - according to the stone inscription on the cellar window - by the Grand Treasurer Stroe Leurdeanu and his wife, Vișa Goleescu, the Golești Manor, together with the church founded by the same boyar six years later, represents one of the most significant fortified secular structures in Wallachia from the first half of the 17th century. The imposing appearance of the Golești complex, as mentioned in the writings of Paul of Aleppo, is actually the one it acquired toward the end of the 18th century. At that time, Ban Radu Goleescu rebuilt the residence following the destruction caused in 1716 by the Turkish-Tatar guard led by Prince Nicolae Mavrocordat. As there are no documentary sources illustrating the manor's original appearance, only one room of the current building retains its original 1640 form.⁷³

Thus, it could be argued that although it was repaired by Radu Goleescu in the 18th century, the manor retains architectural lines specific to the pre-Brâncovenesc period⁷⁴.

At the time the manor was constructed, Wallachia enjoyed a period of relative political stability and economic prosperity. These factors explain why the Goleescu family residence was not situated on the steep, nearby hills, but rather in close proximity to the commercial route connecting Wallachia to Transylvania - a road that passed

⁶⁹ Vasile Drăguț, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁷⁰ We must not forget about the letter of the uncle from Câmpulung. In detail in: Doina Banciu, Mireille Rădoi, *500 de ani de la Scrisore lui Neacșu la comunicarea de astăzi*, Editura Academiei Oamenilor de Știință, București, 2024, passim

⁷¹ Vasile Drăguț, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 35.

⁷³ M. Popescu, C. Iliescu, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

through Câmpulung-Muscel⁷⁵ toward Braşov. Nevertheless, the defense system was not neglected, as the manor remained well-fortified.

The manor features a timber frame floor (added in the 18th century), with the living quarters situated on the first floor. These rooms are elevated approximately two meters above ground level, as the entire structure is built atop a vast cellar. The walls exceed 60 cm in thickness, granting the building a solid appearance and the structural mass of a very heavy edifice. To address this, the craftsman Stoica⁷⁶, who constructed the manor, designed the building with numerous circular arches to ensure the uniform distribution of the weight.

Access to the manor was provided via a staircase leading to a rectangular porch on the southeast side, while another entrance was located on the western side. The latter was removed during the reconstruction process initiated by Ban Radu Golescu, though its traces remain visible today on the wall separating two rooms to the left of the main hall, where pillars and arches undoubtedly once formed part of a porch⁷⁷. The boyar ensemble at Goleşti draws significantly from the vernacular architecture of Muscel, both in terms of its layout and appearance, confirming that local craftsmen participated in its construction⁷⁸. The building's exterior ornamentation has been lost over time; only the stone frames of the cellar windows have been preserved. The manor was fully restored between 1940 and 1942. As previously mentioned, Paul of Aleppo described the manor as a harmonious, grandiose, and well-fortified structure during the arrival of Patriarch Macarios of Antioch on January 12, 1657: *'The palace of the Logothete is a harmonious and grandiose building, defended by many towers. We stayed there, being received with great honor and feasted with a princely banquet.'*⁷⁹

Within the evolution of Romanian medieval architecture toward the end of the 17th century, the period is also attested by the inscription on the window frame, which records the year the manor was built: 7140 (1640). *The Goleşti Manor represents a pivotal stage in which new elements were integrated into traditional construction forms, foreshadowing the later Brâncovenesc palaces.*

When comparing this structure to similar 18th-century buildings, one can observe that the presence of numerous outbuildings (the servants' quarters) surrounding the manor lent it a note of originality. These structures were destroyed in 1716, when the manor was burned by the Turks, and were subsequently rebuilt by Ban Radu Golescu (who held the rank of *vornic* at the time) between 1784 and 1807.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

⁷⁹ ****Călători străini despre Țările Române*, vol. VI, p. 164.

The numerous architectural interventions performed during the 18th century place the manor, to a certain extent, within the stylistic sphere of that era. A conclusive example is the porch featuring a neoclassical pediment, erected on the site of an earlier one whose foundations remain visible in the cellar. Also dating from this period is the Turkish steam bath (*hamam*); its impressive dimensions (6.31 × 8 m) and typical 18th-century construction align its architecture with the Oriental trends introduced by the Phanariots. The development of architecture in the 18th century corresponds to a new historical stage: the establishment of the Phanariot regime in Wallachia following the removal of Prince Constantin Brâncoveanu by the Ottomans. The presence of Greeks from the Phanar district of Istanbul at the helm of the state facilitated the integration of architectural elements typical of the Oriental world into local constructions⁸⁰.

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⁸⁰ Grigore Ionescu, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

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TRADITIONS ON THE VERGE OF EXTINCTION: THE RITUAL OF THE TWIGS

In a study that seeks to establish traditional cultural landmarks essential for a proper understanding of social evolution, it is vital to highlight customs with origins so ancient that they can no longer be dated—even approximately. These traditions are often preserved only within specific ethnographic micro-zones. One such custom, now limited to just a few localities in present-day Argeş County and noted by folklore collectors as being on the verge of extinction, is the New Year's tradition known as '*The Twigs*' (*Nuieluşele*)⁸¹.

Similar to the '*Fir Tree*' (*Bradul*), the custom of the '*Twigs*' (*Nuieluşele*) belongs to that category of New Year's traditions where the carol centers on a vegetation symbol, alongside the ubiquitous *Pluguşor* (The Little Plough) or the lesser-known *Semănatul* (The Sowing)⁸². According to Mihai Robea, this ritual practice likely originates in the Thracian space, with some Slavic infiltrations, and is closely correlated with the ancient celebration of the New Year in spring, coinciding with the initiation of agrarian cycles.

The central role in this custom is held by girls; since the Neolithic - prior to the discovery of agriculture as a primary means of subsistence - a symbolic link has been drawn between female fertility and the fertility of the soil. The Earth, perceived as the source of life and likened to a mother, became known in primordial thought as 'Mother Earth' (*Terra Mater*). This concept has been extensively analyzed in folklore studies, where the Earth, like a mother, is said to give birth through parthenogenesis or hierogamy with a celestial divinity⁸³. Unlike other agrarian customs—such as *The Plough* or *The Sowing* - where the central characters are men, whose physical and moral strength is deemed necessary for tilling the land, this ritual is unique as it places women at the heart of the fertility-land relationship⁸⁴.

In the ethnographic space of Argeş and Muscel, beliefs persisted that young women were forbidden from looking at the full moon, lest they become pregnant. Such pregnancies were often attributed to demons or spirits, further illustrating the deep-seated cultural correlations with fertility⁸⁵.

⁸¹ Mihai Robea, *Obiceiurile de iarnă şi repertoriul lor folcloristic în Argeş*, în „*MUSEUM – Studii şi comunicări de istorie şi etnografie*”, Goleşti, Argeş, 1980, p. 542 – 543.

⁸² Mihai Robea, *op. cit.*, p. 542 – 543.

⁸³ Paul Sébillot, *Le folklore. Littérature orale et ethnographie traditionnelle*, Paris, 1913, 183 – 184.

⁸⁴ Dumitru Pop, *Obiceiuri agrare în tradiţia populară românească*, Editura Dacia, Cluj – Napoca, 1989, p. 14.

⁸⁵ In the lowland villages (Teiu, Gliganu, Mozacu, Leşile) and the hilly regions (Mălureni, Băiculeşti, Valea lui Enache) of Argeş, there is a deep-rooted belief that the moon is responsible for helping the wheat to

Carols in which women are the central figures are rare within the Romanian cultural space; however, myths presenting woman as a symbol of the earth's unfolding are prevalent in both our folklore⁸⁶ and that of Europe at large.⁸⁷

Over time, the introduction of the plough and other agricultural tools further emphasized the parallel between female fertility and the fertility of the land - to the extent that ploughing was, in some instances, assimilated into the sexual act⁸⁸. This aspect was also noted by the French folklorist **Arnold van Gennep**, who asserted that *'the bride and groom ploughing the day after the wedding represented a rite of fecundity'*.⁸⁹

All these customs, transmitted through generations, undoubtedly represent living, palpable documentary testimonies preserved by time and by the unique historical situation of the Romanian people at the crossroads of Europe. These are rituals through which they felt spiritually connected to their ancestors - customs and beliefs that prevented the Romanians from becoming inert or apathetic in the face of an invasion of foreign ideologies, particularly those arriving via the Asian corridor.

The custom of the *'Twigs'* (*Nuiehușele*) is a unique case: on one hand, it survives only in a restricted area - a few villages along the Vâlsan River Valley - thus attesting to Romanian behavior during periods that written history scarcely mentions. On the other hand, this custom represents isolated communities still connected to a primordial social psychology - a true *'archaic laboratory'* from which scientific research can extract the necessary data to rediscover the ancient experiences that define modern society, even after vast periods of time

The *'Twigs'* do not merely tell a *beautiful story* in which woman - specifically female fecundity - occupied a central place in the cycle of agrarian customs. These roles were later dominated by elements of masculinity and strength, where only men were permitted to pronounce ritual formulas addressed to the divine, to invoke abundance,⁹⁰ or to sprinkle the fields with water (often sanctified) to ensure a rich harvest⁹¹. These traditions remind us of ancient rites in which the community felt compelled to nurture the Earth's fruits just as a mother tends to her child.

According to ancient conception, the world struggled to survive in a space where evil forces were constantly lurking, ready to intervene and disrupt the established order

germinate. This belief directly correlates with the notion that young girls who gazed upon the full moon could find themselves facing an unexpected pregnancy.

⁸⁶ Gheorghe Pavelescu, *Cercetări asupra magiei la românii din Munții Apuseni*, Editura Minerva, București, 1998, p. 70 – 71; Ion Cuceu, *Obiceiuri și credințe în legătură cu ocupațiile tradiționale la Gârbou, județul Sălaj*, în *Anuarul Muzeului Etnografic al Transilvaniei pe anii 1971 – 1973*, Cluj, 1973, p. 445 – 446; Paul Sébillot, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

⁸⁷ Arnold van Gennep, *Manuel de folklore français contemporain*, Tome premier, II, Paris, 1946, p. 574.

⁸⁸ Mircea Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁸⁹ Arnold van Gennep, *op. cit.*, p. 579.

⁹⁰ Ion Cuceu, *op. cit.*, p. 452.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 453.

essential for survival⁹². Protecting crops from harmful supernatural forces - which were often unleashed with fury in the form of storms, hail, or locusts - was a major responsibility that fell solely to women. This role drew a parallel between the miracle of childbirth and a woman's innate instinct to protect her offspring, even at the cost of her life, linking her '*fruit of the womb*' with a superhuman ability to communicate with the divine. Furthermore, the moment of birth is likened to the vegetative plane: the germination and emergence of wheat or other crops, and the uniform appearance of seeds in the furrow, are mirrored in the arrival of a child into the world - ideally untouched by illness or any other affliction.⁹³ This rite, with its evident pagan roots, alongside other similar practices, constitutes an original form of *folk Christianity* typical of the Romanian spirit.⁹⁴ It serves as a testimony to a religious character with distinct particularities that not only underpinned the traditional village way of life but also led to the emergence of constitutive elements that would strengthen medieval, and later, modern Romanian society. Strictly from a methodological perspective, it is noteworthy how a custom lost in most studied ethnographic areas is nevertheless preserved within restricted enclaves, despite the pressures of social interaction.

This rite with obvious pagan roots, along with other similar practices, constitutes an original form of popular Christianity, typical of Romanianism⁹⁵, a testimony of the religious character with obvious hints of particularity that will not only substantiate the village way of life, but which will also lead to the appearance of constitutive elements, which will consolidate the medieval Romanian society and, later, the modern one. Strictly from a methodological point of view, it is worth noting how a custom lost in most of the ethnographic areas studied is preserved, however, in restricted areas, despite social interactions. It is fascinating how a custom, sublime in its simplicity, can transport one into the past - moving from the humble wheat seed cast into a freshly turned furrow to complex aspects of social psychology, philosophy, and concepts of survival. Ultimately, it reaches the ancient perception of divinity and its correlation with Christianity.

The existence of this carol, in which girls play the primary role, '*undoubtedly attests to the antiquity and persistence of this practice, within its deep structure, for the Muscel-Argeș ethnographic area*'.⁹⁶ '*The Twigs*' derives from the budding shoots of fruit trees that the girls carry while caroling. They gather at the householder's window and await permission to begin their greetings. Accompanied by the girls' song, a caroler rings a bell, symbolically imitating an agrarian scene⁹⁷. The custom shares many similarities

⁹² Dumitru Pop, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁹³ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

⁹⁴ Lucian Blaga, *Trilogia culturii*, Editura pentru Literatură Universală, București, 1969, p. 172.

⁹⁵ Lucian Blaga, *Trilogia culturii*, Editura pentru Literatură Universală, București, 1969, p. 172.

⁹⁶ Adriana Rujan, Costin Alexandrescu, *op. cit.*, p. XVIII.

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*.

with others performed during this period, such as *Sorcova*, *Bradul (The Fir Tree)*, and *Plugușorul (The Little Plough)*, with the green branch being a central element in each. Based on my personal observations, the custom is preserved today in a slightly modified form: boys now accompany the girls as they carol, ringing bells throughout the performance - reminiscent of the bells worn by livestock - and only rarely joining the girls in song. Alongside other ancient traditions limited to a few localities, such as the 'New Year's Tree,' the 'Twigs' stand out for their ability to descend deeply - not only into the shadows of history but also into the depths of the human psyche. These rituals reveal the adaptive capacity transmitted through generations, reflecting the character, strengths, and vulnerabilities of a society at various stages of its development and knowledge.

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ARGEŞ THROUGH THE EYES OF FOREIGN TRAVELERS AT THE DAWN OF THE MODERN ERA (1821–1831)

The present paper seeks to clearly nuance the role that these two historical counties played in the events marking the destiny of the two Romanian Principalities, Wallachia and Moldavia, during the period between the aftermath of the Revolution led by Tudor Vladimirescu and the Union of 1859. This monographic study aims to provide representative information across all social and academic spheres—incorporating culture, sociology, economics, linguistics, philosophy, politics, and diplomacy—to create a cohesive 'informational monolith' that outlines the Argeş and Muscel societies of the time.

Within this historical context, one could argue that these counties, through their succession of cultural and political figures, significantly steered the country onto an upward course. It was here that Tudor Vladimirescu's Revolution reached its conclusion, and here that Carol I, the future king, signed his first document as sovereign of the United Principalities. We have chosen the 1821–1831 timeframe to strictly delimit the research, avoiding ecclesiastical or feudal aspects that would shift the analysis prior to 1821, or institutional details beyond 1859. By framing this work within these specific limits, we aim to form a rational and objective image of the Argeş and Muscel communities in the first half of the 19th century, and by extension, of Romanian society as a whole.

This paper highlights the most revealing components of the analyzed territorial entities and focuses on foreign travelers whose accounts clarify uncertainties regarding daily life - both urban and rural - details that are often overlooked by official documents. The information provided by these individuals (whether objective or subjective), coming from various social and educational backgrounds, serves to fill a critical historiographical gap; it will be balanced, where necessary, with other documentary sources. These personal observations, made during the transition from the feudal to the modern period, do not necessarily serve as definitive argumentative benchmarks, yet they are vital in clarifying ambiguous historical situations.

Furthermore, the study examines the political context of Wallachia and its resulting economic implications. The communities of Argeş and Muscel endured the economic burden imposed by both the Ottomans and the Russians. However, this was also a period of profound economic transformation, marked by the emergence of craft guilds organized into small corporations, the expansion of commercial operations through monetary exchange, and the gradual elimination *of barter*. The seeds of

Romanian capitalism began to develop during these years, becoming the decisive factors that eventually underpinned the 1848 Revolution (*Pașoptist* movement).

The final section of this study provides an updated perspective on the culture of Argeș and Muscel, examining it through the lenses of architecture and literature, as well as its influence on urban society. Furthermore, rural traditions in construction and ornamentation play a pivotal role in this chapter.

The historical region of Argeș, corresponding to the former Argeș County, is bounded to the north by the ridge of the Făgăraș Mountains. It extends across a predominantly hilly and mountainous landscape, reaching the confluence of the Vâlsan and Argeș rivers to the south. To the east, the territory extends to the confluence of the Doamnei and Târgului rivers, while the western border is defined by the Olt River. Argeș is separated from Muscel by the range of hills situated between the Bratia and Doamnei rivers. From an ethnographic perspective, a distinct sub-zone can be identified within the Argeș area: the Topolog region. Located between the Topolog and Olt rivers, this sub-zone exhibits specific ethnographic characteristics influenced by the neighboring Vâlcea area.

The Muscel area - which, like Argeș, corresponds to the former county of the same name - stretches between the Vâlsan and Dâmbovița rivers and presents itself as a homogeneous ethnographic unit. As previously noted, these two regions share a series of commonalities as well as distinct features. Shared elements - such as pottery, domestic industry, and general crafts - originate from a heterogeneous developmental space. Regarding their differences, architecture serves as a defining aspect that distinguishes the two historical areas. Throughout this work, it will be demonstrated - through the accounts of foreign travelers and the charters issued by royal chancelleries - how these two territories are recorded as distinct geographical entities. They possessed unique social structures and their own cultural and religious influences, stemming from separate cultural foundations that nonetheless influenced one another over time.

At the beginning of the 19th century, Armand Charles - a French diplomat and the Count of Guilleminot - noted in his report on Wallachia that the country was divided into 17 counties⁹⁸: Râmnicu Sărat, Buzău, Ialomița, Prahova, Săcuieni, Ilfov, Teleorman, Olt, Argeș, Mușcel, Dâmbovița, Mehedinți, Romanai, Dolj, Gorj, Vâlcea and Râmnic.

In numerous travelogues, the Argeș and Muscel regions are depicted as primary destinations for many foreigners arriving in our lands. The legendary aura of the

⁹⁸ *Călători străini despre țările române în secolul al XIX-le*, Serie nouă, Vol. I (1801-1821), Volum îngrijit de: Georgeta Filitti, Beatrice Marinescu, Șerban Rădulescu-Zoner, Marian Stroia. Redactor responsabil: Paul Cernovodeanu, Editura Academiei Române, București, 2004, p.363, 705, 708. (în continuare ****Călători străini despre țările române*). La numărul județelor din Țara Românească (în aceeași ordine) fac referire mai mulți călători străini printre care și François Recordon (1795-1844). *Ibidem*. p.852.

territories ruled by the first Basarabs, combined with the fact that these counties were situated along the trade routes connecting Bucharest to Oltenia and Transylvania, led to the rediscovery by historians of several localities—some now nearly forgotten. Thus, modest settlements in Argeș, such as Mănicești, Tigveni, and Sălătruc, are frequently mentioned in foreign travelers' reports, testifying to a time when certain fairs, now obscure, flourished due to their strategic positioning on commercial roads. Travelers also noted towns and villages that were known by different names in the 19th century, such as Topoloveni, which was referred to as Cărcinov (Kersinova)⁹⁹ after the stream that flows through it.

In his *Letters about Wallachia 1815-1821*, François Recordon (1795-1844), a French architect and merchant, made reference to Argeș and Muscel within the context of the plague epidemics that struck Wallachia at the beginning of the 19th century. He claimed that the drinking water in these Romanian counties was the most harmful in the country, contributing to the prevalence of goiter and cretinism. These same ailments were also noted by the English traveler Robert Walsh¹⁰⁰.

On another note, in his eleventh letter, the Frenchman provides a territorial delimitation of the two counties, listing the villages within their jurisdiction¹⁰¹. The arrest of Tudor Vladimirescu on May 18, 1821, at the Golești Boyars' manor in Muscel County (now part of Argeș), represented - through its far-reaching consequences - one of the most pivotal events in 19th-century Romanian history. The revolutionary movement initiated by the Oltenian *pandur* offered, for the first time, a formal declaration of war against the feudal rule persisting in Wallachia and Moldavia. This defiance, articulated in the *Proclamation of Padeș*, targeted both ancient political customs and the more recent Phanariot regimes. Furthermore, the 1821 Revolution galvanized domestic and international public opinion, revitalizing the ideal of Romanian national identity and preparing the political ground for the Union of 1859.

The French publicist Jean Alexandre Vaillant (1804–1886) asserted that the abolition of the Phanariot reigns - a direct consequence of the 1821 movement - *brought not only prosperity and hope to the two Romanian Principalities but also a profound realization of brotherhood among Moldavians, Wallachians, and Transylvanians*¹⁰².

In the spring of 1824, a few years after Tudor Vladimirescu's Revolution, the Danish diplomat Clausewitz, while traveling to Istanbul, recorded several observations regarding the situation in Wallachia following the enthronement of Grigore IV Ghica,

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 603.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*, Serie nouă, Vol. II(1822-1830), p. 108.

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*, Serie nouă, Vol. I (1801-1821), p. 855.

¹⁰² Dan Berindei, *Mărturia lui J. A. Valliant despre societatea românească în preajma revoluției de la 1848*, in vol. *Cultura națională română modernă*, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 1986, p 445-446.

who replaced the Phanariot rulers. The route from Transylvania to Bucharest invariably passed through Argeș, where post stations (*poște*) served as essential stops for changing horses.

An interesting remark occurs during his break at Sălătruc, one of these post offices, where Clausewitz observed the construction of local carts; they were made entirely of wood, without the use of a single iron nail. Despite this, they traveled at a '*mad rush*'¹⁰³, a detail that highlights the remarkable craftsmanship and reliability of the local wheelwrights. Between Curtea de Argeș and Pitești, with a stop in Mănicești, the diplomat noted vast fields cultivated with maize. Upon reaching Pitești, he observed numerous stalls and booths - a clear sign of intense commercial activity¹⁰⁴.

In this regard, we can argue that the Argeș area - despite the persistent medieval influences that still reverberated through all social strata and structures of Romanian society - possessed strong economic potential of a bourgeois nature, sustained by both its fertile soil and active commercial exchanges. According to the 1831 census (*catagrafia*), which recorded the number of craftsmen and merchants in the towns and fairs of Argeș and Muscel, there were more than 100 distinct trades and categories of merchants, each being well-represented in both urban and rural areas.¹⁰⁵

In that same year, 1824, the Englishman **Robert Walsh (1772–1852)** described the city of Pitești and its surroundings with observations similar to those of other foreign travelers, noting, however, that the boyars' residences possessed an air of grandeur and elegance¹⁰⁶. A similar sentiment is found in the 1827 account of **Captain Charles Colville Frankland**, who wrote that Curtea de Argeș was a town featuring *many 'good-looking houses' belonging to the Romanian nobility*¹⁰⁷. Most striking, however, is Walsh's description of the locals he encountered on his way to Curtea de Argeș: he noted that even the peasantry had changed their appearance, exhibiting an air of '*European well-being and independence*'. The turbans and white flannel caps had vanished, replaced by brown robes and felt hats - attire that suggested both a colder climate and a 'free people'.¹⁰⁸

This benevolent and indeed laudatory account of the Romanian population is reinforced three years later by the aforementioned English captain, Charles Colville Frankland. During a pleasure trip to Turkey, he made objective assessments, unclouded by any official mission or political agenda. Traveling from Transylvania through the post

¹⁰³ ****Călători străini despre țările române*, Serie nouă, Vol. II (1822-1830), p. 96.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁵ Vladimir Diculescu, *Breslele de negustori și meseriași în Țara Românească (1830-1848)*, Editura Academiei Române, București, 1973, p. 99-107.

¹⁰⁶ ****Călători străini despre țările române*, Serie nouă, Vol. II (1822-1830), p. 105.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 279.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 105-106.

stations of Curtea de Argeș and onward to Pitești, he observed the behavior, attire, customs, economic standing, and temperament of the locals in the Argeș Valley. He considered the Romanians to be a 'distinguished, robust, active, and obliging people'; although very poor, they were well and warmly dressed in thick garments, most often wearing sheepskin coats. Their heads were covered with high hats similar to those of the Transylvanians, and they wore a type of leather or woolen coat, open at the chest, with the sleeves hanging loosely...¹⁰⁹

From the text above, which continues with a description of Romanian attire, one might conclude that the author shared a certain sympathy for the Romanian people, much like the French publicist Jean Alexandre Vaillant. Without attempting to lean into the idealized notion of a '*distinguished and robust*' nation, we aim to highlight the explicit and unbiased manner in which the English traveler describes the Argeș lands - descriptions that were not always laudatory. Upon his arrival in Curtea de Argeș, he described the station as a '*miserable post-house*'.¹¹⁰ While some historians view this as an exaggeration¹¹¹, it may well be an accurate assessment; Curtea de Argeș had long ceased to be the center of Romanian political life. Furthermore, the Englishman's harsh opinion might have been colored by the arduous and exhausting journey he had endured, leading to frustration when the stop failed to meet his expectations for rest. This supports the idea that Frankland described situations through his own lens, influenced by his state of mind rather than by any external subjective agenda. However, if we consider the writings of C.A. Kunch, a Prussian diplomat, the historians' doubts regarding Frankland's '*miserable post-house*' seem justified; the Prussian official asserted that the post stations in Wallachia were, in fact, 'far superior to our own'.¹¹²

Regarding his encounters in Curtea de Argeș, Frankland draws several intriguing comparisons between the local peasant huts and the dwellings of Paraguayan Indians suspended in trees. Furthermore, he places pagan South American beliefs and Romanian Orthodoxy on a similar plane, comparing the brightly colored roadside crosses (*troițe*) to Mexican and Peruvian idols. Frankland's observations regarding the *unconventional practice of Orthodoxy* among Romanians are echoed in the remarks of the Bishop of Argeș.¹¹³ In 1834, according to the French Baron Charles Joseph Edmond de Bois-le-Comte, who was then in Wallachia, the Bishop argued that '*multiplying religious holidays only served to multiply the days of drunkenness.*' Indeed, the Bishop of Argeș added, '*it is not the holidays that moralize a people, but rather labor.*'¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 278.

¹¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹¹ *Foreign Travelers... New Series, Vol. II*, p. 278.

¹¹² *** *Călători străini despre țările române*, Serie nouă, vol. IV (1841-1846), p. 225.

¹¹³ Ilarion (1820-1821, 1828-1845).

¹¹⁴ *** *Călători străini despre țările române*, Serie nouă, vol. III, (1831-1840), p. 176.

All these personal opinions - impartially exposed and at times characterized by the naivety of a traveler anchored in a different social and value system - demonstrate the fundamental objectivity of the accounts recorded in his travel diary.

Upon entering the territory of Argeș County, foreign travelers passed through five post stations (*poște*)¹¹⁵, likely the highest number within any single historical county in Wallachia. This was a particularly significant aspect, as it provided travelers with a wealth of information regarding the local settlements and their surroundings. Regarding the economic development of Argeș at the beginning of the 19th century, a few brief details were recorded by the English mineralogist D. Low¹¹⁶ who traveled through Pitești and Curtea de Argeș in August 1834 in search of mineral resources. In his diary, he mentions that his prospecting efforts in these two cities yielded nothing of interest; however, on Mount Albina, in the village of Căpățâneni (today part of Arefu commune, Argeș County), he discovered a high-quality stone suitable for *millstones*.¹¹⁷

Continuing his research, D. Low mentions the villages of Cepari and Măldărăști (today located in Vâlcea County). An intriguing perspective on the Argeș communities was left in 1835 by the German traveler Adolf Schmidl, in a travelogue covering both the territories under Austrian rule and the Romanian Principalities. His work is a synthesis of personal observations and information gleaned from other sources. He describes the road from Sibiu to Sălătruc, via the Olt Pass, as a nightmarish route - frightening and fraught with danger.

Arrival at Curtea de Argeș represented, for the foreign traveler, a return to the 'civilized world,' as he described the town and its surroundings as an open and inviting region. The journey to Pitești, through *a long and fertile valley*¹¹⁸ creates the image of a well-managed land inhabited by prosperous people, especially since he noted the absence of the beggars he had encountered in Transylvania. While the economic situation of the Romanian peasantry in the first half of the 19th century was certainly not ideal, these comparisons allow us to draw conclusions about how these communities managed their livelihoods.

Regarding Pitești, Schmidl's impression was positive, describing a vibrant and active town: *'This small, lively town provides a complete picture of Romanian morals and way of life. The streets are paved with wooden beams (poduri de lemn), and the covered lanes of the haberdashers (mămulari) resemble an Oriental bazaar. One can see boyar villas built in a semi-Oriental style, adorned with bells, windmills, and lanterns.*

¹¹⁵ Perișani (astăzi în județul Vâlcea), Sălătrucu, Curtea de Argeș, Mănicești, Pitești, Cărcinov din județul Muscel, (astăzi orașul Topoloveni, județul Argeș)

¹¹⁶ ****Călători străini despre țările române*, Serie nouă, vol. III, (1831-1840), p. 213.

¹¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 220.

¹¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 310.

Splendid but gaudy carriages, carrying boyars in rich Romanian attire, move noisily through the modest streets'.¹¹⁹

This text captures a fragment of daily life in Pitești as it was observed by the traveler in 1835. What emerges is the image of a vibrant locality—still anchored in an Oriental world, yet economically viable. It is worth emphasizing that this depiction of early 19th-century Pitești leaves a lasting impression on the reader through vivid, almost palpable descriptions that evoke the effervescence of its economic life. The Enlightenment-inspired reforms introduced in Wallachia and Moldavia, culminating in the *Organic Regulations (Regulamentul Organic)*, had already established a capitalist framework for development in this Argeș city, particularly given its strategic position along major trade routes.

Another intriguing statement that warrants comment refers to the '*splendid but gaudy carriages*' carrying boyars in rich Romanian attire, moving noisily through the modest streets. As in any Wallachian city, Europeanization was beginning to manifest as '*Frenchification*' within the fashionable world of the traditionalist boyars. The juxtaposition of the terms '*fashionable*' and '*traditionalist*' is intentional. The mixture of opulent Romanian elements (typical of the Oriental-style social climbing) superimposed upon borrowed Western trends likely created an image of superficial excess and a misunderstanding of the new era. Adolf Schmidl's critical attitude toward the carriages is somewhat balanced by his reference to the '*rich Romanian attire*', suggesting that Europeanization had not yet forced the Romanians to abandon their vibrant national traditions.¹²⁰ Indeed, the English clergyman Nathaniel Burton reinforced the German traveler's observations; upon arriving in Pitești two years later, he compared the Argeș city to a '*motley*' Bucharest - that is, a city half-European and half-Oriental.¹²¹

Many accounts by these travelers are often confusing and require a significant effort of imagination and correlation to faithfully reconstruct reality—that is, to link their descriptions with existing historical data regarding the Argeș region. In his work *Le Kéroutza*, the French writer and traveler Eugène Stanislas Bellanger (1814–1859) provides a wealth of data across various fields (agriculture, economy, resources, and demographics) concerning Wallachia and Moldavia during his 1846 journey. However, one particularly enigmatic piece of information regarding the Argeș and Muscel areas is his claim that, on the route between Sălătruc (Argeș) and Rucăr (Muscel), he observed two volcanoes which he compared, on a smaller scale, to Mount Vesuvius.¹²²

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 310.

¹²⁰ Paul Cornea, Mihai Zamfir, *Gândirea românească în epoca pașoptistă 1830-1860*, vol. I, Editura Pentru Literatură, București, 1969, p. 35.

¹²¹ *** Călători străini despre țările române, Serie nouă, vol. III, (1831-1840), p. 588.

¹²² Eugène Stanislas Bellanger, *Le Kéroutza, Voyage en Moldo-Valachie*, tome premier, Paris, 1846, p. 129. *Un jour-allant, plusieurs jeunes gens et moi, de Salatro à Rouhur, nous nous arrêtaimes,*

Furthermore, the French traveler provides extensive information regarding both the urban and rural populations of the first half of the 19th century. One of his descriptions of Bucharest recalls the packs of stray dogs that plagued the city and the administration's seemingly futile attempts to resolve the issue.¹²³ Undoubtedly, this was a common problem in many Wallachian and Moldavian towns, including Pitești. Bellanger's account also delves into other character traits, such as morals and superstitions - aspects that can equally be associated with the population of Argeș: *'...Perhaps more cheerful, more spiritual, and more hospitable than the Moldavians, the Wallachians are just as brave, sober, agile, and skilled. Sincere, devoted, enterprising, and daring - even intrepid - they have, however, partly lost these noble qualities within the upper classes. The Phanariot education has rendered the latter vain in their gestures, sometimes cowardly, and habitually suspicious.*¹²⁴

The final chapters of the travelogue focus on *Curtea de Argeș*. Bellanger devotes extensive passages to the city, the grandiose structure of the monastery, the legend of *Master Manole*, and the relics of *Saint Philothea*, which are enshrined within the walls of Neagoe Basarab's foundation.¹²⁵

Regarding the Argeș Monastery, the English clergyman Nathaniel Burton mentioned it in July 1837, comparing it to St. Paul's Cathedral in London and praising its harmonious design, especially when contrasted with the surrounding buildings. In the traveler's view, the city of Curtea de Argeș seemed insignificant; he described it vividly as a settlement that retained a medieval character rather than reflecting the dawn of the 19th century¹²⁶. It is certainly true that foreign domination in Wallachia hindered the visible development of infrastructure and the economy. However, Burton noted that the Romanians possessed great potential and that the country could flourish significantly if freed from its Russian and Ottoman shackles. Indeed, during the first half of the 19th century, a series of craft guilds were active in Pitești. A document from January 1840 records that the shoemakers and slipper-makers of Pitești petitioned for the right to elect their own elders (*stariți*)¹²⁷; this request was denied by the authorities on the grounds that two elders were already appointed—one representing the craftsmen and the other the merchants.

étonnés, devant un phénomène aussi curieux qu'imprévu: deux mamelons, dont le crâne chauve fumait en vomissant des cailloux, nous barraient le passage. C'étaient deux volcans, deux miniatures de Vésuve.

¹²³ *** *Călători străini despre țările române*, Serie nouă, vol. III, (1831-1840), p. 455.

¹²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 466.

¹²⁵ Eugène Stanislas Bellanger, *Le Kéroutza, Voyage en Moldo-Valachie*, tome deuxième, Paris, 1846, p. 429-462.

¹²⁶ *** *Călători străini despre țările române*, Serie nouă, vol. III, (1831-1840), p. 589.

¹²⁷ Vladimir Diculescu, *op. cit.*, p.66.

Regarding the Romanians and their system of beliefs and values, an intriguing observation was made in 1838 by the Russian Prince Anatoly Demidov in his travelogue covering Russia, Crimea, Hungary, Wallachia, and Moldavia.¹²⁸ He noted the remarkably large number of churches - no fewer than 3,753, of which 1,364 were built of stone¹²⁹, a fact that, in his view, underscored a profound religious devotion among the population. However, he also observed that while the people participated in religious services with great piety, the Church did not fully govern their inner lives; instead, the populace remained inclined toward superstitions, spells, and curses.¹³⁰ Édouard-Antoine Thouvenel, a French diplomat, echoed this sentiment in his 1840 writings, where he also noted that the bishops of Râmnic, Buzău, and Argeș stood at the forefront of the Romanian clergy.¹³¹

C.A. Kuch, the Prussian consul in Moldavia between 1836 and 1842, in a work describing the two Romanian Principalities, mirrors the total decay into which the religious institution had fallen during the Phanariot reigns. At that time, all ecclesiastical positions were established, granted, or abolished according to the ruler's will—a process often influenced by generous financial offerings. The consul also discusses the intolerance of Romanian priests toward denominations other than Orthodoxy. At the same time, he notes the four seminaries established in Wallachia, including the one in Curtea de Argeș, which commenced its courses on September 14, 1836.¹³²

Returning to the Russian traveler Anatoly Demidov, we can form a clear picture of the region's economic activity through his notes on goods, imports, exports, and manufactures. In this context, he mentions the gold-bearing sands found within Argeș, such as those in the villages of Oești and Jupânești, or at Cotul Malului on the Valea Caselor River. He also records the presence of *native mercury* in mines near Pitești, as well as garnets discovered on Mount Ciocan in Argeș.¹³³

Furthermore, C.A. Kuch provides statistical data regarding Wallachia's revenues, asserting that they amounted to 16.5 million piasters annually.¹³⁴ It should also be noted that the Prussian consul (often referred to in the context of Austrian diplomatic circles) describes the state of public education in Wallachia. While we shall not delve into the details of his many subjective remarks concerning education in the Principalities, it is worth mentioning the Central School in Craiova. In 1831, the presence of Professor Aron Florian was recorded there; he had been the first headmaster of the Luminous

¹²⁸ *** Călători străini despre țările române, Serie nouă, vol. III, (1831-1840), p. 600.

¹²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 636.

¹³⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹³¹ *Ibidem*. 821.

¹³² *** Călători străini despre țările române, Serie nouă, vol. IV (1841-1846), p. 231-232.

¹³³ *Ibidem*, Serie nouă, vol. III, (1831-1840), p. 641-642.

¹³⁴ *** Călători străini despre țările române, Serie nouă, vol. IV (1841-1846), p. 228.

School (*Școala de iluminare*), founded by Dinicu Golescu on his estate in Golești in 1826 and closed shortly after his death in 1830. Thus, as in the medieval past, in the modern period, the regions of Argeș are on their way to becoming new cultural centers and technology hubs¹³⁵.

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Published: Museum, Studies and Scientific Communications Conservation/Restoration, varia, XIV, Golești Museum – Argeș, Tiparg Publishing House 2015.

¹³⁵ Doina Banciu, „Istoria unui eveniment de cultură și tehnologie” în Doina Banciu (coordonator), *Slove muscelene*, ediție jubiliară – 15 ani, Editura Tehnică, București, 2023, p. 11.

THE ROMANIAN REALM: INSIGHTS THROUGH MYTH, CUSTOM AND HISTORY

TIȚA-NICOLESCU ION
ȘTEFĂNESCU DIANA

According to anthropogony, the human being is the supreme creation of the divine, endowed with the understanding of life and the world. Man represents the spirit that God transferred to Earth, anchoring it, spiritually, within a mythical and sacred space: the ancestral hearth. Since the pre-Christian era, the history of the Romanians has been steeped in sacred places, hallowed spaces, and mythical lands; yet, over time, nothing has equaled the significance of the ancestral estate (*moșia*) or the holy hearth of the village (*vatra satului*).

These concepts, with their profound social implications, have meant the difference between the life and death of a nation. They triggered broad popular movements that dismantled meticulous political scaffolds and overturned systems of both values and non-values—ultimately creating a spiritual microcosm so complex that it was capable of illuminating even the absolute darkness of oppression. In magical rituals, the 'estate' and the 'hearth' represented distinct mythical entities; however, within the rural consciousness, they evolved as a single body that indissolubly linked the family to the community.

These elements provided the essential foundations for survival and community life. Long before marriages were influenced by financial considerations, they were based on reason and the conviction that the entire village—bound together by such alliances—would rise as a single family to defend the ancestral hearth. It was within this context that ancient traditions, such as '*brotherhood of the cross*' (*frăția de cruce*) or the ritual *bonding of girls* (*însurățirea*), emerged.

Another crucial factor in selecting a village site was the '*purity of the place*'. Since antiquity, a belief has persisted (and survives in certain villages to this day) that the ground upon which a house, a church, or an entire village is built must be pure - free of malevolent deities and undefiled by human transgression. If a site was perceived as impure, no ritual practice could convince a villager to build there or even to till the soil; in their view, the land would remain '*unclean*' until the end of time. Consequently, the site chosen as the hearth and estate - where the council of elders would gather and the *village hora*

(*hora satului*) would take place - had to be sanctified and ritually cleansed from the outset. Once consecrated, the site became a '*pillar of heaven*' (*axis mundi*), serving as the vital connection between the community and the divine.¹³⁶

Thus, in close spiritual correlation with *the hearth of the village* was *the hearth of the house*. It was here that the first fire was lit—a fire which, according to tradition, should never be extinguished, but kept smoldering as embers until the very end of the household. Near this hearth, women gave birth and bathed their infants, and it was here that family members were released from spells and enchantments.

At the mouth of the stove, stories were told, and the deceased were ritually bathed before their funeral. It was the sacred center that held the family together; spitting into the fire was strictly forbidden, and nothing considered *filthy* or *defiled* was ever placed within it. It was also a space where the future opened its door to mystery: through grains thrown onto the hot stove by the elderly women of the house, young girls would seek to reveal the identity of their future husbands.

Most of the magical and religious aspects present within the village world initially emerged from a desire to grant meaning to the misunderstood - to that which drifted beyond the reach of human perception. Thus, obscure events, deemed inexplicable and lost in the mists of time, were amplified through successive retellings, often acquiring the weight of historical fact. In this context, time no longer flows in a single, natural direction; instead, it becomes reversible and favorable, offering mortals the possibility of transcending time itself. The sacred permanently accompanies the village world, imposing complex mechanisms of behavior, attitude, and thought upon the community.

The sacredness of places and customs imposes itself upon the collective consciousness with a force directly proportional to the faith of each individual and the community. This faith ensures a permanent connection with benevolent spirits - of the earth, air, and water - and with the Supreme Divinity, who offers protection against malevolent forces. The village world inhabited an earthly universe haunted by dragons (*zmei*), vampires (*moroi*), werewolves (*vârcolaci*), malevolent fairies (*iele*), and other hostile mythical entities. These beings could cause harm if the norms of sacralization were violated, and could only be repelled through the strict observance of tradition.

Customs and beliefs, transmitted through generations, are not only indelibly imprinted in the collective memory but also become mandatory norms of existence. The deliberate or unintentional violation of a custom, or the defiling

¹³⁶ Romulus Vulcănescu, *Mitologie română*, Editura Academiei Române, București, 1985, pp. 16-18.

of a sacred site, invariably invites communal opprobrium or, in extreme cases, even death. Thus, the sacred laws of nature - merged into a fabulous vision born of the relationship between man and the Divine - arise from the desire to acknowledge, understand, and contemplate the natural world. They become the purest, fairest, and wisest rules of communal living, validating Jordanes' assertions about the Dacians living according to the laws of nature.¹³⁷

Romanian folklore has managed to preserve numerous mythical strands from the pre-Christian era, even after centuries of Christianity¹³⁸, enriching religious holidays with ancient customs and beliefs. This layering of myths within religious dogma creates unique particularities for Romanian communities, distinguishing them from other geographical areas of Europe. We can argue that this ancient syncretism has propelled these old customs across the scales of time and into the present day, providing ethnographers with the opportunity to delimit and record them within the registers of Romanian history.

The Ordalia, or divine judgment, remained omnipresent in the Romanian village until at least the late 18th century¹³⁹, confirming the profound connection between the Romanian peasant and mythical deities throughout more than a millennium of North-Danubian Christianity. Under this practice, the alleged culprit was subjected to an ordeal such that only a miracle could ensure his survival; he might be tied up in the forest for several days or cast into treacherous whirlpools. If he survived, it was taken as divine proof of his innocence.¹⁴⁰

A week after the Easter holidays, beginning on either the first Sunday or Monday - depending on local traditions - the Orthodox celebrate *Low Sunday* (*Paștele Blajinilor*), also known as the '*Easter of the Meek*', the '*Blessed Ones*' or the '*Departed*'. This is one of the ancient Romanian holidays deeply rooted in the anthropogony of humanity. The *Meek Ones* (*Blajinii*) were the first people to whom the Divine entrusted the dominion of the Earth. They were so gentle and kind that the Master of the Universe kept them as a '*creation reserve*'.¹⁴¹ According to the ethnographer Romulus Vulcănescu, mythical time was divided into four eras, corresponding to four human races: *the ogres*, *the giants*, *humans*, and *the meek ones* (*urici*).¹⁴² The first two races rebelled, considering themselves equal to their Creator. The Divinity fought fierce battles against the giants,

¹³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 279.

¹³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 46.

¹³⁹ Ion Răușescu, *Câmpulung-Muscel – Monografie Istorică*, Câmpulung, 1943, p. 353.

¹⁴⁰ Romulus Vulcănescu, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

¹⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 260

¹⁴² *Ibidem*.

supported in war by men and assisted in repairing the damage by the 'Meek Ones.' The latter, also called '*Rohmans*', rebuilt the *Pillars of the Earth*, which had been destroyed during the conflict, supporting them on the backs of four giant fish swimming in the waters of the Cosmos.

Mythology suggests that if humans rebel - just as the ogres and giants did - the Supreme Creator will destroy them and return the Earth to the '*Meek Ones*' restoring the primordial order. Until then, they lead an existence of moderation and prayer at the edge of the Unknown World, on the '*White Isles*' (*Ostroavele Albe*) of the '*Saturday River*' (*Apa Sâmbetei*), near the Pillars of the Earth. *Low Sunday* is celebrated on the first Sunday or Monday after Easter (*Thomas Sunday*). Although not officially marked in the Orthodox calendar, priests hold services in cemeteries for the '*forgotten*' (*uitații*), the '*unknown*' (*neștiuții*), or the '*white dead*' (*albii*).

The two holidays described above demonstrate the profound depth of ancient Romanian beliefs, serving as a doorway to the distant past of human history - a world long lost, yet reborn through early Christianity, which assimilated and integrated numerous mythical elements into its dogma. A fascinating example of this enduring connection between ancient and Christian customs is the *troiță* (wayside cross), an element of significant spiritual impact. These structures served as constant reminders of the Divine and were found at nearly every crossroads or village entrance.

The name of this small structure derives from the term *troika*, signifying an icon arranged in *three registers*.¹⁴³ According to Romulus Vulcănescu, the giants - the second human race created by the Divine - attempted to tear down the sky to reach the Almighty. However, the heavens held firm because of the *Tree of Life*, which was deeply embedded in the earth, its trunk spanning the nine heavens (seven, according to some traditions), and its crown stabilized by the pressure of the starry vault. We find here a representation of three worlds - the subterranean, the terrestrial, and the celestial - spiritually embodied in the *troiță*. It serves to remind humanity not only of the primordial turmoil of ancestral deities but also of the loving presence of Christ.

Furthermore, Romanian customs and beliefs were so deeply imbued with sacredness that traditional communities viewed any violation or unfaithful representation of rituals as a cardinal sin. The winter holidays, which possessed an *augural character*, followed such rigorous procedures that householders would demand carolers repeat a wrongly recited wish or, in some cases, expel the

¹⁴³ Cristian Bădiliță, *Teme, personaje, sărbători creștine și tradiționale românești*, Editura Vremea, București, 2014, p. 156.

group from their courtyard, viewing any deviation from the ritual as an ill omen. These apocryphal rural legends are, in fact, elements of an uninterrupted Romanian succession; they are '*documents*' of intangible heritage that are far more difficult to decipher than written ones. Their accurate transmission across generations was made possible by the community's profound relationship with the sacred and the necessity of exact oral reproduction in the absence of written records. This strict adherence to tradition can also be analyzed through the lenses of social psychology and sociology, as Romanian customs appear - if not identical - remarkably similar across vast geographical areas. What stands out in the development of agrarian traditions is the complex communal mindset: villagers were aware that, beyond appeasing the divinities, they had to function as a *unitary system*. This meant that all members were required to sow and guard their crops simultaneously.

Moreover, during the winter caroling season - extending from *Christmas Eve* to *Epiphany* - groups of boys, girls, or men (depending on the specific holiday) visited every home. This provided a vital social function, allowing the community to monitor the well-being of each household during the hardships of winter. Ethnographic research has documented over 500 distinct winter customs alone, not to mention those occurring throughout the rest of the year¹⁴⁴.

The Romanian custom of aiding fellow human beings in times of hardship was noted by an American who traveled through Wallachia during the second half of the 19th century: '*These pure-hearted people are very good to each other, as is common among the humble everywhere. From time immemorial, there has been a custom in Moldo-Wallachia to assist the poor, newlyweds, priests, and any family that does not own livestock. On holidays, young people - boys and girls with their hair arranged in plaits down their backs - as well as men, women, and children, gather to work for those unable to do so themselves. This pious labor is called clacă. By this means, the helpless family is supported, even if they lack the resources to till or sow.*'¹⁴⁵ Indeed, this traveler, James Oscar Noyes, provided a series of intriguing insights into Romanian behavior in his work entitled *Roumania: The Border Land of the Christian and the Turk*. The *clacă* - which Noyes highlights in his accounts - is a practice that survives to this

¹⁴⁴ Dumitru Pop, *Obiceiuri agrare în tradiția populară românească*, Editura Dacia, Cluj – Napoca, 1989, p. 151.

¹⁴⁵ ****Călători străini despre Țările Române*, Serie nouă, vol. VI (1852 – 1856), Editura Academiei Române, București, p. 209.

day; originally, it served as the primary means through which community members provided mutual aid.¹⁴⁶

Another aspect related to the observance - or rather, the non-observance - of traditions is represented by the '*static carols*' found along the Topolog Valley in Argeş County.¹⁴⁷ In several localities within this ethnographic area, caroling from house to house has been reduced to a communal gathering at the church, where gifts are distributed to children. Jean-Pierre Deconchy, the renowned professor of psychology at the University of Paris, demonstrates in his work *Beliefs and Ideologies* how systems established by clear rules - such as the Orthodox religious system - are not eternally immutable. Instead, they undergo directed changes, controlled initiatives, and even perceptible limitations when circumstances demand it.¹⁴⁸ Thus, deviations from norms considered sacred can often be analyzed through the lens of social psychology. We argue that the alteration of customs occurs under systems of governance that impose social inequities and, by extension, poverty and hunger. In such cases, the instinct for self-preservation may prove stronger than the respect for deep-rooted traditions. The emergence of '*static carols*' can be seen as a form of energy conservation during winter, when cold and food scarcity are at their peak. When a tradition rooted in the behavior of a small population is modified, it is often because the *social, affective, and ethical risks* inherent in Christian precepts no longer align with the community's own logic of survival.

Essential aspects for understanding ancient Romanian customs and beliefs are found in both vernacular and ecclesiastical architecture. Until the second half of the 20th century, pre-Christian mythology was clearly embedded in nearly every element of rural construction - from the foundation of the house to the skylights of the attics and the ridges of the roofs, whether in humble households or churches. The Romanian peasant, though illiterate, was remarkably creative and intelligent, always knowing how to live in communion with nature while respecting norms established in immemorial times. Evidence that the laws of nature and humanity were strictly observed in the village world is provided by Johann Friedel (1752–1789), a writer and former soldier in the Austrian army. He speaks of Romanians as beings emerging from a fairytale-like realm, describing their morals, modesty, and temperance as traits long lost to other nations: '*Proof that this nation adheres to those who live far from civilization is*

¹⁴⁶ Paul H. Stahl, *Meşterii ţărani români şi creaţiile lor de artă*, Editura Enciclopedică Română, Bucureşti, 1969, p. 26

¹⁴⁷ Ion Tiţa Nicolescu, *Argeşul văzut de călători străini şi prin documente autohtone* (în manuscris), pp. 147-150.

¹⁴⁸ Jean – Pierre Deconchy, *Credinţe şi ideologii*, Editura Polirom, Iaşi, 2010, pp. 63 – 75.

their complete ignorance of everything that does not concern the preservation of life. Religion, the future, the soul, God, and virtue are but empty words to them, which they do not comprehend. I would pity them if missionaries were sent to instruct them on these points. Gratitude and innocence of morals would be swiftly banished from the circle of these unfortunate ones, to whom the poison of the clergy (bonzi) has not yet found its way'.¹⁴⁹

In the same context, Johann Friedel describes the remarkable skill of village dwellers, who were capable of constructing anything they required without needing the assistance of townspeople. The construction of these houses, interpreted through a symbolic lens, represents a treasure of inestimable value for those studying Romanian folklore. All these *unwritten documents* of our history - found on gates in the form of mythical ornamental symbols (*the sun, the moon, plants or human silhouettes*), on the roofs of houses as *stylized birds*, or on various structural elements *featuring 'wolf teeth,' floral motifs and geometric patterns* - collectively outline the spiritual life led by Romanian communities hundreds or even thousands of years ago.

Another essential element that contributes to the elucidation of lesser-known aspects of our history and culture, even from a scientific perspective, is the Romanian folk costume. The historian Nicolae Iorga used this segment of Romanian ethnography as a solid argument for Daco-Roman continuity within the Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic space, noting the striking similarities between the attire depicted on Trajan's Column and the clothing of Romanian peasants.¹⁵⁰ From the initial stages of its creation to the fine details of its ornamentation, the folk costume serves as an 'unwritten document' of history, providing vital information about ethnographic regions through regional motifs, influences, and beliefs. Certain customs and traditions thus stimulate creativity in a decisive way, leading to the addition of new ornamental fields on traditional shirts. A deep-rooted tradition in the Romanian village, which persisted until the first half of the 20th century, required girls to sew their holiday shirts in great secrecy. Their appearance at religious festivities and social gatherings, dressed in original creations defined by unique decor and artistic mastery, served as a testament to their personality and, ultimately, signaled their readiness and skill as future housewives.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ *** *Călători străini despre țările române*, vol. X, partea I, Editura Academiei Române, București, p. 35.

¹⁵⁰ Nicolae Iorga, *Portul popular românesc*, Editura Neamul Românesc, Vălenii de Munte, 1912, p. 32.

¹⁵¹ Ion Vlăduțiu, *Etnografia românească*, Editura Științifică, București, 1973, pp. 359-360.

A conclusive example of the unique beauty of Romanian attire is the traditional costume of the Argeş and Muscel regions, proudly worn by the Queens of Romania. The uniqueness of the costume in this specific ethnographic area stems from the fact that the cities of Câmpulung and Curtea de Argeş served as voivodal residences. Consequently, the local peasantry began to emulate on their own shirts - often using gold and silver thread - the rich, Byzantine-style ornamentation found on the rulers' ceremonial robes (*hlamids*). This further validates Mircea Eliade's assertion that '*we cannot measure culture today or tomorrow; culture is measured by decades or centuries*'.¹⁵²

By viewing the Romanian people through the filter of myths, ancestral beliefs, history, folk costumes, and architectural archetypes, one comes to realize the complexity and refinement of a nation that was too often assaulted throughout its history, yet remained capable of innovation and creating value. Such a study could not be conceived by taking into account only popular customs and traditional clothing; high culture (*cult work*) is equally a hallmark of this nation. It can be argued that the Romanian-Danubian region lacked formal schools for a long period, with the common folk, the boyars, and the clergy forming social strata that remained quasi-illiterate until the end of the 17th century, when the first academies began to emerge.¹⁵³

The emergence of the first European universities even preceded the formation of the Romanian feudal states; the universities of Bologna (1088) and Oxford (1096) were established long before 1330 - the year marking the foundation of the feudal state of Wallachia following the Battle of Posada. Despite this, a visionary work emerged within the Romanian high culture of the 16th century that diverged from the Church-dominated European trends of the time: *The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Theodosius*. Within a scientific context, this can be identified as the first known work in the history of Romanian culture to offer a profound lesson in patriotism, serving as a living testimony to the dawn of pedagogical philosophy. It is widely regarded as a work written in the spirit of the Renaissance, unparalleled in much of global pedagogical culture. It was extraordinary that this work introduced the concepts of '*people*' and '*country*' at a time when European Christianity was suppressing these ideas in favor of more universal notions of humanity. The Renaissance had yet to fully restore the significance of '*people*' and '*homeland*' elsewhere. The teachings of this erudite Wallachian ruler, though predominantly religious, are so

¹⁵² Mircea Eliade, *Profetism românesc, România în eternitate*, vol. II, Editura Roza Vânturilor, Bucureşti, 1990. p. 25.

¹⁵³ În anul 1694, Constantin Brâncoveanu înfiinţează Academia Domnească, cu predare în limba greacă.

philosophically and spiritually complex that they challenge even the ideas of Immanuel Kant, who later argued that science and faith are mutually exclusive fields.¹⁵⁴ In his work, Neagoe Basarab perceives the human being as God's creation but simultaneously as a generative power to whom the world entirely belongs - effectively granting man the status of a 'god' over his own world.¹⁵⁵

It is fascinating to observe how ancient customs can transport us into the past, moving from the simplicity of rural life toward complex layers of social psychology, philosophy, and strategies for survival. Ultimately, these traditions lead us to the enduring perception of ancient deities and their profound correlation with Christianity.

Following extensive ethnographic field research, archival study, and the analysis of specialized literature, we can affirm that all that has been written thus far regarding Romanian myths, beliefs, and customs is merely a small island lost in the boundless and unexplored ocean of Romanian folklore.

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¹⁵⁴ Imanuel Kant, *Critica facultății de judecare*, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1981, 371

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SAINT GEORGE AND THE PRE-CHRISTIAN MYTHS OF THE WARRIOR RIDER

While Christianity honors many military saints, Saint George and Saint Demetrius remain the most revered in the Orthodox calendar. Perceived as heroes, they are inextricably linked to the pastoral traditions of the Romanian people. Saint George is seen as the one who releases the warm season, which Saint Demetrius had kept 'locked' until April 23rd. These two Christian figures overlap with ancestral deities of vegetation and shepherding that governed the beginning and end of summer, as well as the seasonal migration (*transhumance*) of flocks to and from the mountains. Christian iconography typically depicts the Holy Great Martyr George mounted on a white horse while slaying the dragon. The act of killing the monster with a spear is part of a later iconographic tradition, unrelated to his early miracles; it identifies him with both a heroic deity and the Thracian Horseman, a myth omnipresent throughout the Balkan Peninsula.¹⁵⁶ It is evident that while the Church intransigently sought to purge this paganism, the rural world remained so deeply tied to its ancient beliefs that it eventually 'cloaked' the old deities in the attire of Christian saints.

The **warrior rider** of the spring rites, much like a mythical hero, is a mobilizing presence; his divinity renders him invincible in the administration of justice and the defeat of evil. He is a constant creator of moral values that inspire collective admiration.¹⁵⁷ The iconographic image of the saint slaying the dragon to save a virgin carries a profound meaning: it symbolizes Christianity crushing a pagan deity that demanded human sacrifice. In this context, the saint is not merely a graphic representation but is endowed with a '*mythical arsenal*' as both a builder and defender of early Christianity. His depiction mounted on a white horse, combined with a martial stance and a luminous countenance, elevates Saint George to a form of spiritual aristocracy. This persona allowed for his seamless 'assimilation' into the village world, where '*hero-emperors*' - who fought dragons (*zmei*) to rescue princesses or sacred treasures - were staples of Romanian fairy tales. A prime example is the tale collected by Petre Ispirescu, *George the Brave*, which the renowned ethnologist Arthur Gorovei cites as a foundation for studying

¹⁵⁶ Ion Ghinoiu, *Obiceiuri populare de peste an, Dicționar*, Editura Fundației Culturale Române, București București, 1997, pp 11-12.

¹⁵⁷ Romulus Vulcănescu, *Mitologie română*, Editura Academiei Române, București, 1985, p. 576.

the ancient elements of Romanian folklore.¹⁵⁸ This underscores that the legend of the dragon-slayer (the serpent being the embodiment of the devil) entered the ecclesiastical institution *volens nolens*, despite having no initial connection to the Christian faith. In fact, this specific legend originated in 13th-century Italy, where Bishop Jacobus de Varagine introduced it in his extensive hagiographical work, the *Golden Legend (Legenda Aurea)*¹⁵⁹.

The connection between Saint George and the cult of spring vegetation is evident from his very name, which the Genoese priest explains in the aforementioned work: '*Giorgio*' derives from '*geos*' (*earth*) and '*orge*' (*to cultivate*).¹⁶⁰ In this context, a connection with the Roman god of war is not excluded; during the spring, as troops prepared for military campaigns, Mars also served as a fierce protector of crops - possessing distinct agrarian qualities likely rooted in the peninsula's prehistory¹⁶¹. In the Romanian space, the Christian martyr is assimilated by popular belief into the category of 'savior heroes,' some of divine origin or possessing supernatural attributes. This is evident in an 18th-century Transylvanian manuscript, likely of German inspiration, in which the legend of the victorious battle against the dragon and the rescue of the virgin closely mirrors traditional folk tales.¹⁶² Notably, Byzantine hagiographies and the earliest Romanian religious publications on the lives of the saints - such as those published in Iași during the 17th century by Dosoftei or Varlaam - make no mention of this specific miracle.¹⁶³ Thus, the martial imagery of Saint George is much closer to the conception that the pagan world (*lat. paganus* = *villager*) held regarding spring deities capable of imposing order upon chaos (symbolized by the slaying of the beast). This parallels the feast of the Christian Easter: the *Resurrection of the Lord* creates a state of tranquility and order within the fatal disorder brought by the spirits of winter, who resisted being driven away and afflicted humanity with plagues such as famine, disease, and the attacks of wild beasts.

Returning to the pastoral traditions of the Romanians, it is no coincidence that Saint George became the spiritual patron of this occupation. Numerous spring carols, and even winter ones, evoke the figure of George, the 'naughty' shepherd -

¹⁵⁸ Artur Gorovei, *Literatura populară*, vol. I, Editura Minerva, București, 1976, pp. 153-154.

¹⁵⁹ Jacopo de Varenze, *Legenda Aurea*, Milano, 2007, pp. 440-449.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 441.

¹⁶¹ Pierre Grimal, *Dicționar de mitologie greacă și romană*, Editura SAECULUM I.O., București, 2018București, 2001, p. 315.

¹⁶² Florian Dudaș, *Romanian Manuscripts from the Churches of Bihor*, vol. II, Oradea, 1986, p. 66

¹⁶³ Andrei Oișteanu, *Motive și semnificații mito-simbolice în cultura tradițională românească*, Editura Minerva, București, 1989, p. 296.

a fighter against the beasts and demons of the mountains.¹⁶⁴ The shepherd, whose harsh lifestyle demanded martial and moral virtues, is often depicted as being of 'princely stock' (*os domnesc*). Here, we can observe a heroization of historical figures, such as Mircea the Shepherd (ruler of Wallachia between 1545 and 1559), portrayed as noble in both attire and conduct. Capable of navigating as both a rider and a pedestrian, he is a figure adept at adapting to dangerous situations. This motif is found in several ballads, such as *The Shepherd, His Sister, and the Dragons*, *The Shepherd and the Forest Fairy*, and *Miorița*.¹⁶⁵ It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that this belief in a 'warrior shepherd' descends through time from the Geto-Dacian roots of the Romanian people.

The historian Vasile Pârvan speaks of deities characteristic of the Dacian religion that were honored exclusively atop mountain peaks - locations nearly inaccessible to the common people - with high priests serving as their ministers. Pârvan excludes the possibility of a direct overlap between the Roman god of war, Mars (or the Greek Ares) and any Dacian deity, as the latter possessed their own ancient pantheon¹⁶⁶. The '*horse gods*' of Thracian mythology were celestial deities - knights of thunder and war - who fought under the standard of the Dacian Draco (the wolf-headed dragon). While such representations existed across various contemporary cultures, including the Iranian, Scythian, and Germanic ones, they centered on the archetype of a heroic knight-god known in mythology as the '*Thracian Horseman*', whose depictions bear a striking resemblance to Saint George. The myth of the divine horseman of celestial origin is also inextricably linked to the cult of the terrestrial Great Goddess of Vegetation - a cult so ancient on European territory that its age and origins are nearly impossible to determine.¹⁶⁷ In most iconographic representations, Saint George is mounted on a white horse - a symbol of both military and spiritual victory, representing the triumph of the Word of God that shall endure until the end of time. According to the Old Testament (Zechariah 1:8–17) and the New Testament (Revelation 6:1–8), the color of the horse carries multiple meanings, sometimes embodying the tribulations humanity will face at the end of days. The image of the saintly knight merges with the idealized perception of the ruling class, who traditionally fought on horseback, while the peasantry almost invariably marched into battle on foot.

A correlation with Western European traditions is also evident, particularly through the warrior monastic orders (Templars, Hospitallers, Teutons etc.), who

¹⁶⁴ Traian Herseni, *Forme străvechi de cultură poporană românească*, Editura Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1977, p. 252.

¹⁶⁵ Romulus Vulcănescu, *op.cit.* pp. 584-585.

¹⁶⁶ Vasile Pârvan, *Getica*, București, 1926, pp. 157-159.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 640.

were haloed by the mystical mandate of fighting in God's service against those often equated with the servants of the devil. Ultimately, the entire representation belongs to the realm of spiritual struggle for a greater cause; the rider bears the imprint of the valiant knight who triumphs for the common good. It should also be noted that Archangel Michael - the spiritual patron of martial and noble chivalry and the fierce combatant against fallen angels - idealized during the European Middle Ages the status of the 'fearless and blameless' knight (*le chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*).¹⁶⁸

The two warrior saints in the service of Almighty God - both of whom are depicted in combat with the dragon - became sublime models for rural communities. In this regard, the celebration of Saint George is grafted onto a set of pre-Christian ceremonies dedicated to the regeneration of vegetation, a cycle that began at the end of winter and concluded in late spring. These ritual scenarios of battle against the spirits of winter, associated with deities of death, culminated in early May, when Death itself was symbolically '*slain*'. The image of Saint George slaying the chimera served as the perfect representation of the entire spectrum of festivities and customs announcing the arrival of summer.¹⁶⁹ Symbolically, the death of the dragon - also associated with the Resurrection of the Lord - represented the hope that the new year had been purged of evil, ensuring that the people were protected and that pastoral activities could begin under a favorable omen. In popular tradition, Saint George was the one who liberated life from the captive grip of Sumedru (Saint Demetrius). Both, in turn, submitted to the will of God - the '*Great Fârtat*' - whose divine authority was absolute and whose decisions remained beyond question or appeal. This ritualistic battle between summer and winter - in which groups of youths¹⁷⁰ symbolizing '*Death-Winter*' fought those representing '*Life-Summer*' - is found across many European cultures, a concept later echoed in the chivalric tournaments of the Middle Ages. The clash

¹⁶⁸ Johan Huizinga, *Le déclin de Moyen Age*, Paris, 1932, p. 78.

¹⁶⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Tratat de istoria religiilor*, Editura Humanitas, București, 1999, pp. 312-313.

¹⁷⁰ A compelling example is the 'Malanca' custom in Ruginoasa, Iași. Here, groups of youths, clad in sheepskins and wearing thick helmets for protection, engage in a violent confrontation at the turn of the year, striking each other with maces. Originally, these ceremonial battles, prevalent in archaic societies, were intended to stimulate vegetal forces through ritualized brutality. Since ancient times, it was believed that the cosmic energy sustaining the flame of life and the movement of the universe required violent provocation—aggressive struggles and competitions. Similarly, folk dances characterized by a forceful stomping of the ground were, in fact, ritual commands for the earth to bear fruit and the sun to shine. Whether it be winter carols accompanied by the cracking of whips, or the various customs of the spring and summer solstices, these traditions were rooted in non-peaceful methods of stimulating cosmic energy. Such rituals, which formed the bedrock of primitive religions, can be encountered in various guises not only in Romania but throughout Europe (vezi: Mircea Eliade, *Tratat de istorie a religiilor*, cap. VII, *Vegetația, simboluri și rituri ale reînnoirii. Lupte rituale*, București, 1999).

between the Holy Great Martyr George and the dragon (the primordial struggle of Good versus Evil) concludes with the victory of the beneficent forces. Within the Christian faith, this triumph perfects ancient beliefs and existential turmoil, providing a definitive answer to the primordial questions of our ancestors regarding the nature of the Divine.

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AREAS OF FOREIGN CIVILIZATION IN THE CULTURE OF THE EARLY ROMANIAN MIDDLE AGES

An overview of the origins of Romanian culture during a period often considered 'obscure,' yet decisive for the genesis of its civilization, highlights the significance of this territory situated between the Danube and the Carpathians - a region positioned at the crossroads of several civilizational spheres. The evolution of vernacular culture, alongside foreign elements integrated into the state founded by the Basarabs, is evident in both ecclesiastical and secular structures across Wallachia. These influences are most prominent along the cultural demarcation line consolidated upon the backbone of the Wallachian feudal state, specifically following the course of the Argeş River. As the renowned historian Răzvan Theodorescu observed in his work *Byzantium, the Balkans, and the West*, the geographical unity of Wallachia constituted a crossroads for diverse cultural currents arriving from both the Balkans and the Pannonian Plain.¹⁷¹ It must be noted that until the 10th century, the vast migrations in Eastern Europe - and by extension, within the future Romanian feudal state - introduced complex ethnic, political, and diplomatic realities. This period was marked by the emergence and development of Byzantine cultural elements and, to a lesser extent, Western influences arriving via the Transylvanian corridor.

As a people emerging at the dawn of the Middle Ages, the Romanians successfully integrated into European civilization. The primary vector of influence originated from Byzantium and the Slavic states south of the Danube - regions for which the Eastern Empire, with its centuries-old cultural heritage, set the standard in both politics and culture. It is worth noting that this cultural framework established by Byzantium persists to this day, distinguishing Western Europe from Eastern Europe, at least conceptually. It brought the peoples within its sphere of influence to a shared stage of development, without neglecting the concrete foundation of their indigenous civilizations.

The historical realities of the lands north of the Danube - variable across the centuries - deeply influenced the perspectives of cultural figures, from master stone carvers to the art-loving ruling class. These influences were often ephemeral in their

¹⁷¹ Răzvan Theodorescu, *Bizant, Balcani, Occident, la începuturile culturii româneşti (secolele X-XIV)*, Editura Academiei Române, Bucureşti, 1974, pp. 13-14.

initial stages, yet they frequently became permanent, coalescing into a cultural ensemble that remains representative of the Romanian space.

Understanding the initial stages of the Early Middle Ages in Wallachia remains a laborious undertaking, necessitating the careful synthesis of archaeological, artistic, and folkloric evidence. In his seminal work, *The Critical History of the Romanians*, B. P. Hasdeu examined linguistic facts to establish the foundation of an authentic Romanian culture, within which the thesis of the Dacian substratum serves as a fundamental coordinate. The developments following the 10th and 11th centuries, as well as the predominantly chronological analysis of certain researched monuments, cannot be used decisively to establish a singular starting point for medieval art; rather, they provide hypothetical additions to existing discoveries on the subject. One of the most representative historians for whom the Middle Ages was a central preoccupation is A. D. Xenopol. He delved more deeply into the medieval past, maintaining with robust historical arguments that to truly understand Romanian culture in its early phases, one must examine the period spanning from the Roman withdrawal and the Migration Period to the emergence of the first state structures.

Drawing a parallel between his work *Les Roumains* and other historical studies, one notes a distinctly polemical yet profoundly scientific character. Through this lens, the ethnogenesis of the Romanian people is naturally correlated with the formation of the feudal states and, by extension, with early medieval popular culture. During this period, the expansionist tendencies of the Hungarian Kingdom over the voivodeships south of the Carpathians fueled a strong anti-Hungarian sentiment among the local princes; they refused to submit to the Hungarian Crown, seeking by every possible means to escape its domination. Under these conditions of armed resistance and near-constant conflict, Western cultural elements arriving via Hungary and the Transylvanian routes were likely of secondary importance during the initial stages of the Romanian state's formation. It is noteworthy that the Romanian soldiers who defended the mountain passes bore the title of '*iobagiones castrorum*'. This designation represented a significant honor at the time, as contemporary documents frequently referred to the '*honor of being a serf*' ('*honorem iobagionatus*')

Over time, the Romanians lost their status as defenders of the realm, transitioning into serfs tied to the land; consequently, the term 'serf' (*iobag*) lost its honorable connotation, acquiring instead a contemptuous meaning¹⁷². The points noted above demonstrate that the crystallization of early Romanian culture—in its intellectual, moral, and aesthetic traits—became remarkably sophisticated during the

¹⁷² A.D. Xenopol, *Les Roumains*, Editura Levé, Paris, 1885, pp. 47-48.

Middle Ages, shaped primarily by influences from the Balkan Peninsula and, to a lesser extent, from Western Europe. The close kinship ties between the first Basarabs and the Bulgarian and Serbian princes contributed decisively to the artistic creations and feudal ordinances of the 13th century, fostering a lasting political-ecclesiastical unity in South-Eastern Europe. However, time and history would prove that this unity did not function as a military monolith; feudal fragmentation and internal power struggles disintegrated the states south of the Danube, dramatically shifting the balance of power along the Lower Danube frontier. Nevertheless, we shall remain within the sphere of the Early Middle Ages and the Balkan Slavic states, however tempting it might be to discuss the later contributions of the Islamic world to the evolution of North-Danubian art.

During the first half of the 14th century, one can observe a significant collaboration between the Romanian and Bulgarian spheres. This is hardly surprising, given the close familial ties Basarab I maintained with the Bulgarian Tsars - connections that introduced new norms and architectural styles in the construction of religious monuments and feudal residences. These '*stylistic lines*' were further reinforced by the political prominence of Bulgaria until approximately 1330, when, following the Battle of Velbazhd, its dominant position in the Balkans was assumed by Serbia. All these factors ensured that, during the late 13th and early 14th centuries, the artistic, political, and ecclesiastical orientation north of the Danube was primarily directed toward Tarnovo. For a time, the 'Bulgarian fashion' was favored by local feudal lords, who constructed their first masonry churches along the Lower Danube according to the stylistic and liturgical standards prevalent within the sphere of authority of the Tsardom of Tarnovo.¹⁷³

The relations maintained by Romanian feudal lords with Bulgarian civilization around the year 1300 can also be established on the basis of archaeological investigations undertaken in Argeş in 1969. At that time, inside the 14th-century Princely Church of Saint Nicholas, an earlier structure dating to the 13th century was brought to light. This edifice reveals architectural features that clearly link it to the religious monuments of the Second Bulgarian Tsardom. Such findings allow us to outline more precisely the meaning and content of what appears to be the primary stage in the evolution of art north of the Danube during the 13th and 14th centuries.¹⁷⁴

In any case, within the scope of an in-depth historical study, one must not overlook the interference of Western - or rather, Central European - influence,

¹⁷³ Răzvan Theodorescu, *op. cit.*, pp. 268-270.

¹⁷⁴ Nicolae Constatinescu, *La résidence d'Argeş des voivodes roumains des XIIIe et XIVe siècles. Problèmes de chronologie à la lumière des recherches archéologiques*, Editura Academiei Române, Bucureşti, 1970, pp. 24-31.

regardless of the temptation to favor the Balkan sphere, so deeply imbued with the refined aesthetic of Byzantine art. The Western Catholic monuments in the Severin of the first Hungarian bans, or the Teutonic fortifications mentioned in the Diploma of the Knights Hospitaller, draw attention to the nature of the earliest Romanian fortifications in the extra-Carpathian region. These sites, dating to the early 13th century, provide evidence of the initial Western influences in the artistic and architectural fields.

However, establishing definitive conclusions remains difficult due to the scarcity of concrete evidence from this period. It is essential to strictly delineate the specific spheres of influence belonging to this era to avoid conflating them with those of subsequent centuries, which would lead to chronological inaccuracies and contradictory arguments. I wish to avoid making speculative assumptions - however pertinent - regarding a period that remains largely 'dark' in terms of archaeological findings. The general consensus suggests that most fortifications of the time were timber-and-earth constructions, offering little evidence of aesthetic intent and remaining stylistically similar to those of the pre-feudal period of the 10th to 12th centuries.¹⁷⁵

It is evident that both the West and the East played significant roles in the maturation of Romanian art during the Early Middle Ages. However, one cannot overlook the predominant influence of the Balkans, particularly as Hungary underwent a severe dynastic crisis during the first half of the 13th century, which marginalized any potential intervention - political or otherwise - south of the Carpathians. This context allows us to more clearly define the initial stage of Romanian art in the 13th century, likely linked to the rule of Tihomir over the political formation on the Argeș.

The ruins discovered at Curtea de Argeș during the 1969 excavations - as previously mentioned - represent the remains of a church likely destroyed during the events of 1330, when Charles Robert of Anjou occupied Basarab's residence. This structure, whose foundations were preserved beneath the pavement of the 14th-century nave, features walls constructed of local stone arranged in a 'Greek cross-in-square' plan. It possessed a polygonal altar with three exterior facets (appearing circular on the interior) and a narthex whose side walls seemingly extended from those of the nave. Aside from fragments of still-unpublished mural paintings - the study of which sheds significant light on 13th-century Romanian stylistic ties to the art of Balkan painters - little more can be definitively stated regarding its interior or exterior appearance.

¹⁷⁵ V. Vătășianu, *Istoria artei feudale în țările române*, Editura Academiei Române, București, 1959, pp. 130-150.

It is noteworthy that the architectural typology - the Greek cross-in-square - reflects the artistic preferences and orientation of local leaders, who sought to consolidate their status relative to the dominant political forces in the Lower Danube region. As previously mentioned, this earlier structure was discovered beneath the 14th-century Princely Church of Saint Nicholas¹⁷⁶; despite being separated by a century, the two edifices share a striking stylistic affinity with the basilicas of Nicopolis, which significantly influenced the later 14th-century construction. Detailed observations of the planimetric features suggest a logical alignment with the Bulgarian-Serbian architectural tradition prevalent in the Despotate of Vidin. Specifically, the structure belongs to the category of 'domed square churches without free-standing supports,' a type of clear Byzantine origin. The Church of the Assumption in Kamenica, Serbia - built in the second quarter of the 13th century and founded by Despot Michael, son of Tsar Michael Shishman (1323–1330) - provides further evidence of the pervasive influence of the Bulgarian and Serbian civilizational spheres. These Byzantine-rooted traditions eventually established the foundation upon which Romanian medieval art was cemented across the entire extra-Carpathian territory.

While the example of the church in Kamenica is eloquent, further instances abound, given that this type of construction - derived from the Byzantine provincial style - possesses a unique character. It is no coincidence that it aligns Romanian medieval architecture with the South-Danubian evolution of the cruciform plan. This development would decisively assert itself in both religious and, occasionally, secular constructions until the 14th century.

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One certainly cannot discuss the art of the Early Middle Ages in Wallachia, or the spheres of foreign civilization within the extra-Carpathian region, without

¹⁷⁶ N. Ghika-Budești, *Evoluția Arhitecturii în Muntenia, Originile și înrăuririle străine până la Neagoe Basarab*, Editura Academiei Române, București, 1927, p. 9.

addressing the 'Gothic echoes' in Wallachian architecture. These are primarily linked to the Catholic presence in Câmpulung Muscel, where, by the year 1300, a *comes* (count) still headed a Saxon community. These settlers had likely crossed the mountains following the Mongol devastations as representatives of the late Arpadian dynasty, in a center that had not yet been incorporated into the borders of Wallachia. According to historical accounts, there had been a Franciscan monastery in Câmpulung, allegedly built by Blessed John of Capistrano¹⁷⁷, during the time of Lady Catherine - the Catholic wife of the legendary Negru Vodă - and dedicated to Saint Elizabeth of Hungary. Miraculous events were said to have occurred there, as testified by the city's inhabitants. Both Catholics and 'schismatics' (Orthodox) condemned a certain abbot who had ruined the monastery and seized the land. However, in 1659, while in the service of Prince Constantin Șerban¹⁷⁸, the site was recovered with great effort. Through the generosity of both the local Catholic and Orthodox populations, a small chapel was rebuilt on the site, where the faithful continue to gather and light candles every evening and on feast days.¹⁷⁹

Evidently, these events took place during a period significantly removed from the Early Middle Ages; nevertheless, they emphasize that Gothic art, as a fundamental pillar of medieval culture, followed a historical trajectory originating in much earlier times, thereby consolidating the concept of the 'artistic.' Viewed from this perspective, one must concede that during the years these Catholic edifices were constructed in Câmpulung Muscel, the Transylvanian branch of Western and Central European civilization asserted its influence with authority. This was visibly shaped by the Saxon colonization, a movement that also carried Western architectural conceptions into Moldavia; for instance, the basilica in Rădăuți reflects Gothic features similar to those found in Câmpulung, at the foothills of the Făgăraș Mountains.

We shall remain, however, within the borders of Wallachia, as addressing this theme - even when limited to the extra-Carpathian territory - requires the study of historical evidence dispersed across a vast geographical area. Another significant factor regarding these cultural spheres is the network of connections established by both Romanian and foreign monks. These links naturally developed through the mobility of monastics attending to the needs of their communities,

¹⁷⁷ John of Capistrano, the papal legate to Hungary during the time of John Hunyadi, died at the Battle of Belgrade in 1456. Consequently, the attribution of these foundations to him is entirely unfounded.

¹⁷⁸ Constantin Șerban (1654-1658).

¹⁷⁹ Maria Holban, „*Călători străini despre Țările Române*”, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică București, 1980, vol. VII, p. 129.

which, by the 14th century, possessed lands and properties beyond the borders of the states to which they were subject. For instance, certain settlements on Mount Athos owned villages in Wallachia or lands in Serbia. This movement facilitated the adoption of monastic rules (*typika*) - which had previously been less clearly defined in our region - and introduced liturgical art as well as new architectural models, such as the monastic church of Vodița in Oltenia. These developments were catalyzed by the arrival, after 1370, of the 'brothers' led by Nicodim of Tismana¹⁸⁰ whom we can directly link to the Serbian regions. It was specifically the Serbian lands that, from the fourth decade of the 14th century, experienced a political and cultural flourishing that placed them at the forefront of Southeast European history - dominated first by the figure of Stefan Dušan (d. 1355) and later by Prince Lazar (d. 1389). From an ecclesiastical perspective, these regions maintained the closest possible ties with the center of Orthodox monasticism.¹⁸¹

While the Serbian monasteries - which maintained closer ties to Mount Athos during the 14th century than other regions in Southeast Europe - adopted the complex triconch plan of the Holy Mountain, the monastic sites in Bulgaria and Oltenia founded by Nicodim after 1370 favored the more modest simple triconch plan. This version was better suited for smaller communities with limited material means, while still adhering to a type of religious monument consecrated by the Byzantine-Balkan monastic world since the 10th and 11th centuries.

Although less elaborate in their artistic content, the early medieval churches of Wallachia are no less significant than those south of the Danube, particularly when considering their origins and, above all, their pronounced autochthonous character. This demonstrates a profound understanding of art, pertaining not only to architectural styles but also to pictorial creations. Indeed, it is essential to highlight the importance of ecclesiastical painting within the early Middle Ages. Medieval painting is governed by principles derived from its fundamental function: interpreting the liturgical and funerary rituals or the imagery of paradisiacal gardens through visual representation. The vibrant and colorful Byzantine iconography served a precise pedagogical purpose; while the artistic execution remained the responsibility of the painters, the chromatic charm was intended to help the illiterate better comprehend the meaning of the liturgy, sacred

¹⁸⁰ Nicodim s-a născut în Macedonia, la Prilep. Mama sa era una din fiicele domnitorului Basarab I, prin intermediul căruia Nicodim se înrudea cu cnejii sârbi și țarii bulgari. Nu se cunoaște exact anul nașterii, se presupune că s-ar fi născut în 1310, dar mai plauzibil este că s-a născut prin 1320, a fost călugăr și arhimandrit, întemeietorul mănăstirilor Vodița și Tismana din Oltenia și al mănăstirii Vișina pe valea Jiului. Pentru tot ce a făcut pentru ortodoxie și neamul românesc, este considerat ocrotitorul Olteniei, prăznuirea lui făcându-se la 26 decembrie.

¹⁸¹ Răzvan Theodorescu, *op. cit.*, pp. 290-293.

texts, and hagiographies. It is undeniable that Romanian medieval culture was organized and disseminated by religious centers. Cosmogony, the history of nature, and the history of humanity were rooted in traditions preserved or imposed by the Church, sowing - since periods shrouded in the mists of time - the seeds of architectural, pictorial, and sculptural creation.

Every element representing foreign cultural spheres during the medieval period often merged with local styles to produce artistic creations of profound value, with the Church playing a decisive role. To truly comprehend the art at the dawn of the Middle Ages, one must understand the underlying foundations of ecclesiastical art. It was Byzantium that carried the torch of knowledge, and when its light began to fade after centuries, the Church preserved and perpetuated its traditions. Consequently, only a thorough understanding of ecclesiastical art can lead us to rediscover, within historical ruins, the grandiose styles of long-lost worlds. It must be understood that the artistic wave originating in Constantinople did not merely encompass the Balkans and the Romanian Principalities; it spread indiscriminately across the Mediterranean regions, Italy, Egypt, North Africa, Asia Minor, Syria, Armenia, Georgia, and Russia - the Orient being the primary source of forms in Romanian medieval iconography. In turn, Byzantine painting experienced a renaissance based on a return to Antiquity - a brilliant era that long preceded the Italian Renaissance. Byzantium stood at the very origin of Christian art, from which both Hellenistic and Eastern traditions would ultimately spring.¹⁸²

While Eastern art, with its diverse influences, became omnipresent in Wallachia under the patronage of the local voivodes, one cannot discuss the civilizational spheres of the 14th century without addressing the Catholicism of the early Basarabs in relation to a population that had belonged to the Eastern Church for centuries. The Western influence recorded by archaeological discoveries in Curtea de Argeș reached the lands south of the Carpathians primarily via the Hungarian route, during an era of close feudal and political ties between the first Basarabs and three successive representatives of Western dynasties on the Hungarian throne: Charles Robert (1308–1342), Louis the Great (1342–1382), and Sigismund of Luxembourg.

Certainly, the artistic links between the Wallachian feudal state and the West during the 13th and 14th centuries extended beyond politics; the gold and silver jewelry discovered in the tombs of Orthodox nobles bore the unmistakable imprint of Transylvanian craftsmen and, through them, the Central European Gothic style. If we examine the tombs within the Church of Saint Nicholas in Curtea de Argeș,

¹⁸² I. D. Ștefănescu, *Iconografia artei bizantine și a picturii feudale românești*, Editura Meridiane, 1973, pp. 18-21.

we find funerary sculpture depicting - consistent with customs found in Câmpulung and Severin - a princely figure, likely Radu I (1377–1383), dressed in Western attire with clear Central European analogies. These Western, Roman-Gothic presences within Romanian art toward the end of the 14th century reflect specific, fleeting historical circumstances - influences that vanished almost entirely with the arrival of the Ottomans at the Lower Danube.

The distinction between the various cultural spheres of the Early Middle Ages, and their significance to the artistic spirit of a nation at the dawn of its history, allows us to comprehend our evolution as a people. It reveals that art is indeed eternal, provided there are those who preserve it and cherish its beauty.

The art of the Early Middle Ages has only increased in value with the passage of time. Notably, the historical tragedy experienced by the Balkan states upon the arrival of the Ottoman armies did not affect Wallachian art in a dramatic or destructive manner. Instead, Wallachia succeeded in preserving its national identity and, alongside it, a culture that maintained its upward trajectory toward new artistic horizons.

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WOOLEN TEXTILES AND WALLACHIAN SHAGGY BLANKETS (*PLOCADE*) – A BRIEF HISTORY

For the villages in northern Argeş and, by extension, the former Muscel County, wool was the primary raw material used for making clothing and heavy interior textiles that both decorated and insulated the home during the winter months. For the *mocani* (mountain shepherds), sheep breeding was the central economic activity, shaping nearly every facet of daily life—from sustenance and housing construction to customs, superstitions, and religious symbolism.

To this day, much of the Făgăraş Massif falling within Argeş County remains divided into grazing areas according to ancient, unwritten laws. Furthermore, a significant portion of the linguistic heritage of northern Argeş, as well as that of the broader Romanian-speaking space, is deeply rooted in the terminology of sheep breeding and pastoral life

Terms considered part of the Geto-Dacian linguistic substratum—such as *brânză* (cheese), *urdă* (whey cheese), *baci* (head shepherd), *bârsană* (long-wooled sheep), and *strungă* (sheepfold gate)¹⁸³ alongside those inherited from Latin—such as *berbece* (ram), *oaie* (sheep), and *pășune* (pasture)¹⁸⁴ attest to the antiquity and significance of this traditional occupation. Furthermore, an area stretching between the town of Curtea de Argeş and the villages along the Topolog River Valley is historically known as 'Plaiul Oii' (The Sheep's Path), which survives today as a hamlet within the village of Cepari.

The folklore of the Argeş and Muscel regions is remarkably rich in pastoral themes. In a folk song collected by the distinguished ethnologist **C. Rădulescu-Codin**, the brother of the legendary founder (*descălecător*) **Negru Vodă** is portrayed as the '**Little Shepherd**' (*Păcurărașul*). He is a heroic archetype, a defender of the land and an embodiment of the authentic, quintessential Romanian spirit (*românul neaoș*):

*'(...) And the Little Shepherd
Just like that, if he heard
The heart that he was saddled
To the pond he would lead me
With the horn (bucium) he would sound*

¹⁸³Vezi: B.P. Hasdeu, *Etymologicum Magnum, Romaniae*, tom II, I.V. Socec, București, 1886, passim.

¹⁸⁴Ioan Alexi, *Grammatica Daco-Romana sive Valachica*, în: ****Școala Ardeleană*, vol. II, *Scrieri lingvistice, Scrieri literare*, Academia Română, București, 2018, p. 921.

*All the shepherds he would gather
 The sheep he would assemble
 To the mountains he would drive them
 In the meadows of the Argeș
 Above the Muscel
 He would fill the valleys with them(...).¹⁸⁵*

The significance of shepherding within the rural economy is clearly evidenced by the numerous official records issued by both central and local authorities, as well as by the accounts of foreign travelers journeying through the Romanian Principalities. In one such note from 1775, the Venetian **Francesco Grisellini (1717–1783)**, writing about the Romanians of Banat, observed that they primarily wore woolen clothing. The attire of both women and men in Argeș was so remarkably similar to that found in Banat that they appeared to belong to the same geographical region:

"The attire of the Romanians consists of a shirt with short, wide sleeves that reaches just below the hips, paired with long trousers - made of linen in the summer and white *dimie* (homespun wool) in the winter. During the colder season, they wear a woolen waistcoat over the shirt, sometimes lined with lambskin and embroidered with black *arnici* (mercerized cotton thread). They wrap their feet in woolen cloths, often striped or patterned with black, red, or blue dots; instead of boots, they wear leather soles (*opinci*)¹⁸⁶ fastened with thin leather thongs - resembling those depicted on ancient Roman bas-reliefs. A wide leather belt secures the short shirts around the waist. Their heads are covered with hats made of thick black felt or white or black lambskin. In freezing temperatures, they also wear a long cloak made of the same *dimie* or fashioned from several ram skins sewn together. The women's clothing is equally simple. Over a long shirt reaching the ankles, they hang two woolen aprons (*catrințe*)—one in front and one in back. A wide, multi-colored woolen sash is wrapped around the waist. Additionally, they wear a short, sleeveless sheepskin vest (*pieptar*), and in winter, they layer it with a coat made of lamb or sheepskin".¹⁸⁷

Wool products, such as the Wallachian *plocade*, emerged from the necessities of daily life, within a context where household crafts were continually evolving. The entire family participated in these activities, with each member actively contributing to the augmentation of the household income. To fully

¹⁸⁵ C. Rădulescu-Codin, *Literatură populară*, vol. I, Editura Minerva, București, 1986, p. 454.

¹⁸⁶ *opinci*

¹⁸⁷ Maria Holban, Maria Matilda Alexandrescu-Desca Bulgaru, Paul Cernovodeanu Ion Totoiu, *Călători străini despre țările române*, vol. XX, Partea I, Editura Academiei Române, București, 1998, pp. 385-386 (în continuare: ****Călători străini despre țările române*).

understand the manufacturing of the Wallachian *plocadă* and its role within the home, one must consider two categories of objects: the functional and the decorative.

It is well established that, in the Romanian village until the mid-20th century, the peasant imbued objects with both utilitarian meaning and an aesthetic purpose, aimed at beautifying the living space.¹⁸⁸ The elements that 'wallpapered' the interior - namely wooden furniture and textile pieces - had to exist in chromatic and decorative harmony. The specific methods of arranging and processing woolen fabrics, rugs (*scoarțe*) and other similar textiles, dictated by their colors and ornamentation, have given rise to distinct regional peculiarities¹⁸⁹.

The *Wallachian plocad* served a dual purpose: a decorative one, by covering furniture during the day, and a utilitarian one, by providing insulation and warmth during the winter months. It was used to cover the floor or even the walls, following the tradition of kilims (*scoarțe*) and runners (*lăicere*)¹⁹⁰; however, it was most frequently used to cover the bed, alongside other textiles such as *velințe*, *cergi*, or *macate*.¹⁹¹

Due to its distinctive long-pile texture and exposed wool, a result of its unique technological process, the *plocad* tended to accumulate significant amounts of dust. Consequently, it was typically used only during specific seasons or reserved for special occasions, such as the arrival of distinguished guests.

In northern Argeș County, a predominantly mountainous region, the *plocadă* was produced on a large scale until the 1960s and 1970s, with numerous households actively involved in all stages of its manufacture. Its distribution spanned extensive areas where sheep breeding remained the traditional occupation, including settlements such as Arefu, Albeștii de Argeș, Dâmbovicioara, Rucăr, Dragoslavele, Lerești, Nucșoara, Corbi, Stoenеști, and Pietroșani. In these villages, the *plocadă* was not merely used but actively crafted. Technically, the *plocad* is a heavy, homespun blanket, typically made from undyed wool and characterized by its long-pile texture, with fibers reaching lengths of up to 30 cm. In its finished form, the textile generally measures 2 meters in width and 2.5 meters in length.

¹⁸⁸ Existau și gospodării temporare.

¹⁸⁹ Georgeta Stoica, *Arhitectura interiorului locuinței țărănești*. Editura Muzeului din Rm. Vâlcea, Rm. Vâlcea, 1974, p. 32.

¹⁹⁰ Paul Petrescu, Georgeta Stoica, *Arta populară românească*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1981, p. 54.

¹⁹¹ *Ibidem*.

Techniques for processing textiles improved in direct correlation with the increasing economic significance of these fabrics within mountain households. While wool production was dependent on the presence of livestock, peasant households primarily utilized fabrics made from vegetable fibers, such as hemp, linen, or *borangic* (raw silk). Sheep breeding required a higher degree of complexity and specialized skill, involving specific seasonal activities such as shearing, scouring, and carding, alongside the necessity of providing fodder and care throughout the winter.

In contrast, fiber-producing plants like hemp required only to be sown, although the subsequent extraction of textile fibers remained a demanding process. Furthermore, in the case of large flocks, the phenomenon of transhumance emerged, as livestock were moved from the mountains to the lowlands in search of grazing lands. Nevertheless, nearly every household—especially in mountain regions—maintained a small number of sheep locally during the winter to ensure self-sufficiency. In hilly or lowland areas lacking extensive, nutrient-rich pastures, goats were kept instead; these unpretentious animals provided a viable alternative, as they could subsist on a wide range of vegetation, including tree bark.

Returning to the decorative wool fabrics, we can say that there is a great unity characteristic of this art throughout the geographical space inhabited by Romanians, where the traditional occupation is shepherding. On the other hand, each community has developed specific techniques and decorations depending on the existence and folklore of the area.

Returning to decorative woollen textiles, one can observe a remarkable aesthetic unity throughout the geographical regions inhabited by Romanians where shepherding is the traditional occupation. Conversely, each community has developed unique techniques and ornamental styles shaped by local folklore and lifestyle.

Women were the primary guardians of these specific weaving techniques, and their mastery grew with age. Over time, weavers not only perfected their craft but also innovated, imbuing their fabrics with a touch of originality. As a rule, most technical, chromatic, and compositional aspects of a textile piece were resolved through direct consultation with the community's elder master-creators¹⁹². In this context, every textile artifact - from **kilims** (*scoarte*), blankets, and decorative towels to **long-pile plocade** and festive folk costumes - was composed of elements deeply rooted in local spirituality and, by extension, the continuity of the community. Through the 'soul bonds' forged during the

¹⁹² *Ibidem*, p. 55.

transmission of these crafts from the elderly to the young, a complex set of shared feelings and values emerged, rendering the community virtually indestructible¹⁹³.

The emergence of these specialized crafts naturally led to the development of specific tools and appropriate hydraulic installations. From the shearing of the sheep and the manufacturing of garments and woolen coats to the final cleaning process, the production cycle was both complex and meticulously coordinated.

Washing heavy woolen textiles, such as the *plocade*, was a necessity - not only to remove dirt after prolonged use but also to eliminate insects that found a suitable habitat within the dense fibers. Consequently, these fabrics required an extensive washing process, during which the wool had to remain submerged for a significant period under high-pressure, swirling conditions. Initially, deep sections of riverbeds - where the current naturally formed eddies and whirlpools - were utilized for this purpose. Later, specialized installations known as *vâltori* (*whirlpools*) were constructed, where the water was mechanically directed to rotate with great force.¹⁹⁴

More precisely, the *vâltoare* (whirlpool) consisted of a channel that directed a powerful stream of water into a conical vessel made of wooden staves, functioning much like a modern washing machine. This wooden structure was often partially buried in the ground to stabilize it and to maximize the water pressure required to generate the vortex. Within this vessel, the textiles were submerged and continuously rotated by the force of the current.

Specialized hydraulic installations known as **dârste** (fulling mills) were frequently found in the settlements of northern Argeș, at the foothills of the Carpathians, typically situated along fast-flowing watercourses. These were used to finish heavy fabrics such as sacks, blankets, and *plocade*.

Generally, these installations featured two whirlpools where the blankets were soaked and allowed to swell¹⁹⁵; subsequently, they were dried and pulled - much like a sleeve - onto a rotating cylinder that moved both vertically and horizontally. Beneath this cylinder, spiked branches (or, in later models, a board with wooden pins) would brush the blanket, pulling the fibers to the surface, scattering them, and finally combing them in a single direction. Due to the high temperature maintained within the room, this brushing system felted the wool on one side of the blanket while straightening the long fibers on the other, resulting in a remarkably uniform and elegant finish.

¹⁹³ Ernest Bernea, *Cadre fundamentale ale gândirii populare românești. Contribuții la reprezentarea spațiului, timpului și cauzalității*, Editura Predania, București, 2005, pp.193-198.

¹⁹⁴ Valer Butură, *Etnologia poporului român*, Editura Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1978, p. 392.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 399.

In the regions of Wallachia and Oltenia, white *dimie* (homespun wool) was highly favored. It was primarily produced in the mountainous villages within the historical counties of Argeș, Muscel, and Dâmbovița. These centers manufactured a variety of textiles, including white and black cloth, *sarici*, *zeghi*, *plocade*, *procovițe*, *macate*, and carpets. Specialized family workshops flourished in settlements such as Berevoiești, Cetățeni, Corbi, Corbșori, and Domnești.¹⁹⁶ For the production of the *plocade*, only the wool of the Țurcana sheep was utilized. The traditional scouring process took place in the river, using boiling water and homemade soap - the only cleaning agent available in Romanian peasant households until the early 20th century. Today, traditional hydraulic installations for finishing woolen fabrics, as well as the craft of making handmade garments, have nearly vanished, replaced by industrial clothing. We say 'nearly,' because these ancient installations still persist in the mountain regions of Argeș, serving as living relics of a once-dominant craft.

The manufacturing process of a Wallachian *plocad* comprises several distinct and complex stages: shearing the sheep, scouring (washing) the raw wool, drying, and sorting the fibers. This is followed by teasing and carding (combing) the wool to align the fibers. The preparation continues with spinning the yarn and creating the warp threads. The loom is then prepared through warping, beaming (loading the warp onto the roller), threading the heddles, and tying the warp ends.

The weaving process itself involves integrating the thick weft, followed by knotting the warp ends and joining the woven sheets (*foi*). The finishing stages are crucial for the *plocadă*'s texture: soaking and fulling (*piuare*) in the whirlpool to allow the wool to swell, followed by mechanical brushing (to raise the pile) and a final drying.

We reproduce below an interview with Mrs. Viorica Olivotto from Nucșoara, Argeș, recognized as a Living Human Treasure, and with her elder sister Ecaterina Jubleanu.

Viorica Olivotto: *'I began making plocade after I was married. It is a woman's craft, not a task for children; it is demanding work. I used to work with my sister, Lelea Tia (Filofteia Ghemerez). She was the most dedicated - it was her livelihood. Processing the wool is the most difficult stage, rather than the weaving itself. The weaving can be done quickly, but it requires two women. The reed - the loom component resembling a comb used to beat the weft threads - is two meters wide; a single person cannot reach far enough to push the shuttle to*

¹⁹⁶ P. D. Condurățeanu, *Dicționar geografic al județului Dâmbovița*, Stabilimentul grafic. I. V. Socecu, București, 1890, passim.

the opposite edge. My sister worked alone, but it was far more strenuous. Tincuța worked with her sister-in-law, Aurica Adămoiu. In the village, Fetița lu' Boacă also worked with a second person, her mother-in-law, or with Leana lu' Bădescu. Weaving a single plocad requires the wool of ten sheep, and every stage is performed by hand. Even the warp is spun manually. Those who did not own sheep or could not afford wool, as it was expensive, would create the warp using hemp. We also spun the wool for the threads by hand - spinning it very, very thin...'

Ecaterina Jubleanu: 'The warp threads must be made of wool; otherwise, it simply doesn't work because the threads will not slide against one another. If the fibers are not correctly pulled, thoroughly mixed, and combed, the plocadă will not turn out properly. My sister-in-law from Corbi once asked me to make one for her. I wasn't particularly inclined to do it at the time and the wool wasn't of the best quality either, but I finally decided to proceed as it was... and it didn't turn out well at all. I ended up with a 'bald patch' [an area where the pile failed to rise]'

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NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE FEAST OF THE NATIVITY: DOGMATIC THEOLOGY AND FOLK RELIGION

Christmas, currently one of the most significant Christian holidays, was almost entirely overlooked by communities of believers during the dawn of the faith. The canonical Gospels¹⁹⁷, while recounting the Nativity of the Child Jesus, offer rather vague references regarding the specific timing of this momentous event. The Gospel of Matthew describes the arrival of the Magi from the East - likely from Persia - who were guided by a star to worship the divine Child. Although this Gospel does not specify their number, ecclesiastical tradition maintains there were three Magi, a figure derived from the three gifts presented to Jesus: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The specific date of this episode is not only unmentioned, but there is not even a vague allusion to the season - be it spring, summer, or winter. The Gospel of Luke recounts the divine birth in Bethlehem within a manger, witnessed by several shepherds. The presence of these shepherds suggests a warmer season, likely between April and October or November, rather than the depths of winter¹⁹⁸. Christian iconography often depicts the Nativity occurring within a cave, a tradition derived from an apocryphal source, specifically the Protevangelium of James¹⁹⁹. This non-canonical text also serves as a source for iconographers by introducing a character not mentioned in the canonical Scriptures: the midwife Salome. According to the narrative, Salome doubted that a virgin could give birth, causing her hand to wither when she attempted to verify the miracle; her hand was healed only when she sincerely repented. As for the names of the Magi - Caspar, Balthazar, and Melchior²⁰⁰, they were first attested in a 6th-century apocryphal work known as the Armenian Infancy Gospel²⁰¹.

We must observe that there are no clear historical records attesting to the celebration of the Nativity of Christ on December 25th during the earliest centuries. It is noteworthy that until the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in

¹⁹⁷ *Matei 2, 1; Luca 2, 7.*

¹⁹⁸ Cristian Bădiliță, *Teme, personaje, sărbători creștine și tradiționale românești*, Editura Vremea, București, 2014, p. 218.

¹⁹⁹ *Idem, Evangheliile apocrife*, ediția a VI-a, Editura Vremea, București, 2016, pp. 65-80.

²⁰⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 95.

²⁰¹ Cristian Bădiliță, *Op. cit.*, p. 218.

325 AD, Christians often aligned their feasts with Jewish observances. This was the case for Easter (Pascha), the most significant Christian holiday, which was frequently celebrated alongside the Jewish Passover on the 14th of Nisan. This practice was fundamentally inconsistent with the belief in Christ's Resurrection, as Jesus died on the day of Passover; therefore, Christians celebrate the Resurrection that followed. Furthermore, while the Jewish Passover could fall on any day of the week, the Christian Pascha was strictly observed on a Sunday. Within this context of theological ambiguity, the Council of Nicaea resolved the issue by delimiting Christian holidays from their Jewish matrix. Consequently, the Holy Fathers also moved toward establishing a specific day for celebrating the Incarnation of the Savior.

Prior to this ecclesiastical forum, the early Christians—seeking a specific day to honor the Nativity of Jesus—proposed several different dates for the celebration. One of the earliest proposals was **March 28th**. This was based on the belief that after God created day and night and separated light from darkness (as recounted in **Genesis**)—an event associated with the vernal equinox on March 25th—the sun was created on the fourth day. Since Jesus was identified by Malachi's prophecy as the '*Sun of Righteousness*', this theological reasoning led some to set the Nativity on March 28th²⁰². Various calculations based on mathematical symbolism led to other proposed dates, such as April 2nd or May 20th, yet none gained enough consensus to be universally adopted. Furthermore, ambiguity persisted due to certain Christian currents that conflated the Incarnation with the Theophany (Epiphany) on January 6th, identifying Christ's deification with His Baptism in the Jordan. Because the theological significance of the *physical birth* and the *divine manifestation* were so distinct, the Council Fathers separated the two feasts to eliminate confusion. Ultimately, the date of the Savior's birth was set for December 25th, coinciding with the winter solstice. The establishment of this date was largely influenced by the Christological disputes regarding the divinity and humanity of Jesus, sparked by the Alexandrian presbyter Arius²⁰³.

Returning to the timing of the Nativity, the choice of the winter solstice was driven by both political and theological imperatives²⁰⁴ as it overlapped with the feast of the *Invincible Sun (Sol Invictus)*, celebrated with great pomp in Rome. This holiday, of Persian origin, represented the birth of the god

²⁰² *Ibidem*, p. 219.

²⁰³ Sfântul Iustin Popovici, *Dogmatica Bisericii Ortodoxe*, vol. I, traducere din sârbă de diac. Zarko Markovski, Editura Doxologia, București, 2017, p. 257.

²⁰⁴ Cristian Bădiliță, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

*Mithras*²⁰⁵ and entered the Roman Empire via troops deployed in the East or through soldiers of Semitic descent. As previously noted, the political motivations for this decision were evident: the populace already celebrated the rebirth of the sun from its 'ashes' with great joy and carnival-like festivities. Consequently, the birth of the sun was transformed into the Christian observance of the *Nativity of Jesus Christ*.

This overlap was not difficult to achieve because the Savior had been prophetically titled the '*Sun of Righteousness*'²⁰⁶ in the Old Testament (Malachi 4:2). Consequently, on December 25th, it was no longer the '*Invincible Sun*' (*Mithras*) being born for the pagans, but the '*Sun of Justice*' (*Jesus Christ*) for the Christians. Naturally, this synthesis sparked disputes and raised questions among believers less familiar with ecclesiastical dogma, who perceived the overlap as merely a strategic tool for the Church to promote itself within a pagan world.

A profound answer to these concerns is offered by the renowned theologian **Father Dumitru Stăniloae** in his seminal work, **Orthodox Dogmatic Theology**. He explains that while God revealed Himself exclusively to the Jewish people, the promise made to Adam in Paradise remained latent within the collective consciousness of many Gentiles (Gentiles). To further clarify this, we may look to various pagan deities regarded as messianic figures or progeny of supreme gods—such as **Mithras**—who were purportedly born of virgins and destined to battle supreme evil at the end of time. The primordial promise made by the Creator to send a Savior had never been truly forgotten by humanity; however, it was interpreted differently because God's direct revelation had been granted only to the Jews.

The first recorded mention of the Christmas celebration in Rome dates back to 336 AD²⁰⁷, a date (December 25th) that served to clearly delineate the Epiphany - representing Christ's deification or manifestation - from the Nativity, which signifies His Incarnation.

In the Romanian space of folk religion, that is, of Christianity adapted to the spiritual structure of each rural-archaic community, Christmas is considered, in accordance with the Nativity, one of the key moments of the regeneration of time and the restoration of the reign of good. In this context, we reproduce the following text:

²⁰⁵ Jean Vertemont, *Dicționar al mitologiilor indo-europene*, Editura Amarcord, Timișoara 2000, p. 227.

²⁰⁶ *Malahia* 3, 20.

²⁰⁷ Cristian Bădiliță, *Op. cit.*, p. 220.

"The earth is set on two pillars... The devil gnaws at them eternally, and when he sees the Christmas carollers, before he can look at them, God throws iron into the pillar's rotation. The devil gnaws again until Easter, when he sees red eggs; before he can look at them, God throws iron again where he had gnawed before. Thus, he postpones it, because the devil never finishes gnawing. That is why the earth does not sink. The devil stops gnawing the pillars of the earth when he hears the poker, the rinsing of the wooden water pails at the river or well, the shaving of the kneading trough etc., and then the pillars grow back. According to other legends, the pillars would sit sometimes on the caudal fin of four fish, in other variants even sit on the backs of fish or on the horns of an ox, rarely on an elephant that sits in turn on a turtle: when they move, the earth shakes. Other legends attribute the earthquake to the devil himself, when he gnaws at the pitchforks on which the earth rests, or when the devil who rests the earth on his horns turns from one side to the other."²⁰⁸

As far as Christmas carols are concerned, we note that out of their multitude, only the star songs retain the character of the Christian carol, the others, such as *Turca*, *Capra*, *Brezaia*, carols with masks, come from the pre-Christian spectrum of Romanian history. Today, the uninitiated currently consider caroling as a practice related only to Christmas. This was in fact the great ambition of the church to integrate the ancient tradition, long before Christianity, regarding the welcome of the New Year, into the Christian framework of the celebration of the birth of Jesus²⁰⁹. In the Transylvanian space, Christmas and New Year were a single holiday. In fact, the very Transylvanian name *Crăciunul Mic*, or in Banat *Brother of Christmas* allocated to New Year's Day, shows how, in the Romanian village, the two holidays formed one. In the Romanian village, it was believed that in the temporal space between Christmas and New Year, those who passed into the world of the righteous known as *Moși* or *Wandering Dalbi* came unseen to earth to enjoy the birth of the Son of God with the living.

The holiday was therefore also an opportunity for "meeting" between those who went to heaven (the family heirs) and those who remained on earth, which underlined an interesting aspect related to the cult of ancestors in Romanians. The dead, in the conception of communities, participated not only spiritually, but tasted the festive offerings, most often from vessels placed especially for them. Traces of this ancient conception can also be captured in a

²⁰⁸ Ovidiu Bîrlea, *Folclorul românesc*, vol. I, Editura Minerva, București, 1983, p. 83.

²⁰⁹ *Ibidem*, 267.

number of practices, related to the *Christmas Santas*, as well as in some details of caroling, persisting more weakly in the so-called mourning carols²¹⁰.

One of the Romanian traditions related to Christmas was that on December 25, a wood considered sacred was set on fire and which had the role of helping the sun to be reborn from the darkness in which evil spirits had plunged it. The sacred wood, called Christmas, was the substitute for the old god who had to sacrifice himself by burning to allow the new one to be reborn. Such customs are frequently found in rural areas, the best known custom being that of *the Fire of Sumedru* on the night of October 25 to 26 when the Winter Pastoral New Year began. The pyre lit on the occasion of this nocturnal festivity had the same meaning as that of the sacred wood (Christmas) on December 25.

Like the wood that burned on *Sumedru*, the Christmas wood was also carefully chosen from the forest, cut by people who were pure in soul and body, after having asked for forgiveness beforehand because they had to sacrifice themselves to allow the eternal cycle of death and rebirth. The noisy carols that took place between Christmas and New Year had the role of scaring away the evil spirits that entered the world of the living through the gates of *the Afterlife* that opened during this period.

The association of light with the birth of the Savior on the winter solstice is reflected in the church calendar by the fact that near the summer solstice St. John the Baptist (June 24) is born. The forerunner of the Son of God shines, at the beginning of his preaching when he announced the coming of the Messiah, like the dazzling light of summer. He dies slowly, like the sun that goes down and, like the god of old, he wishes for death, after he has fulfilled his sacred mission, to allow the new god to be reborn and shine in exactly six months, at the winter solstice.

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²¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 270.

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THE THEOLOGICAL AND FOLKLORIC SYMBOLISM OF THE HEAD COVERING

Summary

The head covering has a much higher symbolic value than other garments, being found in a wide variety of shapes. The head covering makes the wearer look taller and that's because it's at eye level and is immediately noticeable. In most cases, *the marama* represents belonging to a particular social rank or status. The first people associated white with obedience and availability, so those who were baptized or those who received communion were dressed in white; The bride dressed in white as a sign of purity, of the change of condition but also of submission to her husband, so that after marriage the garment returned to red, but not the virginal, aggressive one, but dark red, of a married woman, but just as vital. In conclusion, the woman's head covering was a mysterious, mystical and at the same time intimate covenant that the wife, under the holy mystery of marriage, had with God.

Beyond the clothing object, *the marama* is an artifact with a complex theology. This includes the entire symbolism of the married woman's hair, the way she kept it combed throughout her life and her head. *The borangic marama*, of a vaporous white, woven at the two ends with gold thread, positioned the bearer in the space of the aristocracy. The concept is taken from the Byzantine erminia of the icons representing the saints, especially the military haloed ones and riding white horses, a symbol of purity, spiritual cleanliness, but also of the superior state²¹¹. Marama represented the essence of femininity, of rural aristocracy, of fidelity to faith, tradition, and the community to which she belonged.

Keywords: *covering, christianity, woman, women, tradition,*

The head covering has a much higher symbolic value than other garments, being found in a wide variety of shapes. The head covering makes the wearer look taller and that's because it's at eye level and is immediately noticeable. In most cases, the marama represents belonging to a particular social rank or status.

In the covering or comb is found the entire symbolism of the hair. Both men and women used the way of covering their heads to dominate and convey a message²¹². In the case of women, by covering their heads with a diaphanous veil, they transmitted, during the ceremonies, the vital force that they could transmit to the children. Women's long hair was a symbol of life and extreme eroticism and for this reason it had to be covered in certain circumstances. *Marama* sanctified the married woman, placed her beyond the eroticism of the girls in the hora who kept their heads uncovered. It becomes a distinctive sign of the dignity of a mother,

²¹¹ Dionisie din Furna, *Erminia picturii bizantine*, Editura Sofia, București, 2000, pp. 176-178.

²¹² Așa erau, de pildă, perucile lorzilor englezi.

implicitly, of holiness. She conveyed, this way, the marital status, and the fact that she was on the same divine step as the virgin. In popular tradition, it was believed that both girls and married women wore *a crown*, and the man who *dishonored* them took their crown and sent them straight to hell. The girl was born with the divine gift of virginity, and the woman through marriage came under the protection of the holy mystery of marriage, and the crown was not taken from her even if she was no longer a virgin.

Through the long (sometimes 4 m) and diaphanous covering, the married woman symbolically approached the center of life and the earth, the marama imitating a ray of sunlight, and by its widening it resembled the solar disk²¹³. The head covering gives the young woman a magical power, namely that of being the only and credible connection of heaven and earth²¹⁴. Marama was in close spiritual connection with the young woman's hairstyle.

The married woman never cut her hair after marriage and she kept it braided like a disc-shaped bun (remember the custom of Catholic monks to shave the crown of their head in the form of a disc). Hair in the form of a disc was the gateway to heavenly benefits (because woman was the first Church), and this mystery, this mystery, was kept by the woman under the veil. Putting the marama over the braided hair was like a mysterious, mystical, at the same time intimate covenant that the wife had with God and with the heavenly benefits that He poured out on her. In this situation, the covering becomes a mitre or a diadem.

If we go further on the thread of the ancient religions, we also recognize the marama in the covering of the priestesses, an imitation of the female deities who are almost always represented with a spindle and a spindle fork in one hand, and the head covered or the hair tied with a diaphanous cloth or braided like a fortress.²¹⁵

The very fine fabric belongs to a universal symbol of the creation of the universe, to its very fine structure and movement, because the entire cosmos is linked with fine and invisible threads that hold creation together. When finished the marama weaving, the weaver ritually cut the thread that tied it to the weaving loom. Through this gesture, the marama itself took its own life in the universe, just as the baby's umbilical cord is cut at birth or its *moț* is cut. The cut hair of the child (the one that came from pre-existence) was removed and with it the demons that indissolubly linked him to another life. It was also considered the head covering for women, it had to be molded on the female personality, to be part of it, and to bind it

²¹³ Jean Chevalier, Alain Gherbrant, *Dicționar de simboluri*, vol. III, Editura Artemis, București, 2002, pp. 91-92.

²¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

²¹⁵ Pierre Grimal, *Dicționar de mitologie greacă și romană*, Editura Saeculum I. O., București, 2001, p. 111.

in the most intimate way possible to the beneficial deities of the world. Not everyone wove such a thing, there were only certain persons, considered pure, who could impregnate this fine covering for the head with divine blessings.

The Mother of God was the best weaver, according to popular legends, and she cursed the spider for weaving a finer thread than herself, hence the belief that if you kill a spider you are forgiven seven sins. The covered head was also a sign of independence, of freedom. The woman tried to cover her hair with the finest fabric because it gave her the aristocratic and royal aura of the Byzantine empresses. The theological symbolism of the head covering is related, in this case, to *the New Testament*.

In the *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (11:10-16) the Apostle Paul, in a verse that is a little controversial for us, and which somewhat gives a headache to biblical scholars and historians specialized in Christianity, says that the woman had to cover her head because of the angels:

"10. For this reason, a woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. 11. Nevertheless, in the Lord, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. 12. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God. 13. Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? 14. Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him? 15. But that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. 16. If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God."

The covering of the head during prayer was a custom in Eastern Europe for both men and women, borrowed, in all likelihood, from the Jewish tradition²¹⁶. The covered head was the symbol of humility and awareness of ancestral sin. Man was not worthy to look at the holy. Returning to the writings of the Apostle Paul, we record the fact that women covered their heads during their presence in the church so as not to distract the attention of the men.

On the other hand, the verse explicitly says that *for angels* the woman must cover her head. Angels are beneficial entities, but not unshakable for the better²¹⁷. The proof of this is the fallen angels. Angels are not physically seduced by women, because they do not have a body, but they can be envious of God's gift to women – that of giving life. The woman's head is holy, and what is holy in the Church is covered with holy cloth made of linen or silk²¹⁸. The cloth on women's heads

²¹⁶ Victor Aga, *Simbolica biblică și creștină*, Editura Învierea, Timișoara, p. 19.

²¹⁷ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologie dogmatică ortodoxă*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 2010, pp. 437.

²¹⁸ Victor Aga, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

represents God's blessing. The silk/ borangic that marama was made of had an equally great significance, because it was a covering cloth. The covering of women's heads during religious services was also a sign of propriety and morality. The four-meter-long marama, very fine, almost covers the woman's body like a halo, like the mandorla around the Savior's body. The Mother of God has around her a mandorla like rays called *glory* ²¹⁹ to imagine her greatness. When we speak of theology we refer to the science of God, but who in this world has discerned the Trinitarian Being in its great splendor? People tried through simple things to connect to Him. They sewed their festive costumes like a prayer that would help them commune with Him.

The diaphanous white of the marama, in the Romanian tradition, refers not only to the idea of purity but also to the idea of changing the social condition. For example, the traditional wedding costume is sewn from white homemade cloth, embroidered with silk and woven with silver metal thread. White has always been compared to light, but the meaning of this color, at the end of the chromatic range, like black, had much more complex meanings that led back to the dawn of human civilization.

White symbolized both the sum of all colors and their absence, being associated with what represented the beginning and the end, dawn and sunset, life and death or the perfect balance. It was considered, as we noted above, the color of the one who changes his condition (candidus-candidate), in the Romanian village it was the color of the child's immaculate shirt but also the color of the elderly who have reached the verge of death, they being at the extremities of existence.

Teenagers, adults and the elderly wore decorations on folk costumes, depending on their social, marital status or age. Bright white was for humans the color of dawn, of the hope that the light would be reborn after it had gone through an imaginary death in dark chaos. Matte white was associated with sunset, it represented death, messianic mourning filled with the hope of returning to life. It was purity and the color of complete silence, even funeral, but full of noise in that it abounded in living possibilities. Seen in its negative aspect, white was the opposite of red, because the livid of death needed the diurnal red to fulfill the condition of life.

The first people associated white with obedience and availability, so those who were baptized or those who received communion were dressed; The bride dressed in white as a sign of purity, of the change of condition but also of submission to her husband, so that after marriage the garment returned to red, but not the virginal, aggressive one, but dark red, of a married woman, but just as vital. White is triumphant and divine, it is the color of the Savior's clothes in the

²¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 230

Transfiguration,... His garments become white as snow..." (Mark 9:2-4), the divine white symbolizing here the dawn or the beginnings of humanity that would know the Son of God. The white colour has often been associated with both the moon (female and nocturnal lunar silver) and the sun (male and diurnal gold); Two ancient deities, totally different, but associated with the same color. For the man, ignorant of books, who only related to nature and divinity, white was hope, wisdom gained in the cold and hardships of winter, life that was reborn, but which needed, in a ritual symbiosis, the vital, aggressive and passionate red to wake him up from his numbness and push him towards survival.

In conclusion, the woman's head covering was a mysterious, mystical and at the same time intimate covenant that the wife, under the holy mystery of marriage, had with God.

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THE SYMBOLISM OF MAY FLOWERS (CHAMOMILE OR ROMAINE, LILY, BASIL, POPPY)

The month of May, which marked the final victory of the summer against the spirits of winter, had a strong erotic charge in the Romanian village. This aspect *worked* in parallel with the old ceremonies and agrarian customs, in which the vegetation, in particular the crops, now enjoyed the protection *of the holy sun* against the deities of death. Since the dawn of civilization and until two centuries ago, agriculture was more than a ritual, it was almost a religion in itself, and the central earthly element of supplication of divinity was woman. It becomes the most important piece in a complex set of rituals that could enhance the almighty (usually male) vegetational deities to send favorable weather and rains on the earth represented in beliefs by the maternal presence of the mother goddess.

In the dark period of the Western Middle Ages, women were seen by religious fanaticism as a tool of the devil, through which evil had entered the world, the priests considering their sexuality (by which most of them were enslaved) an impediment to achieving salvation. The eroticism exuded by Eva's daughters was a reason for death sentences, many of them ending up burned at the stake on charges of witchcraft.

Eastern Europe, strongly anchored in immemorial pre-Christian customs of patriarchal origin, was not kinder to women, who were most of the time mere tools of work and childbirth. A family in which there were only girls was considered unfulfilled, and the head of the family, when asked if he had children, answered: *No! Only girls!* However, young and beautiful women, married or not, played, due to their released sexuality, a more than important, almost vital role in the improvement of the protective male deities of vegetation. In this sense, the ancient beliefs that forbade an unmarried girl to go out of the house at night, on a full moon, and to sow, so that the spirits of the night would not possess her. In other situations (especially in northern Europe, cf. M. Eliade) naked women would go out at night and sow wheat so that their fertility would be transferred to the earth. Old women, due to multiple births, also had their role, exclusively, in incantations and spells, due to the protection they enjoyed from good spirits. Thus, the flowers that beautified the fields were likened to girls, women, mothers and grandmothers: bright colors loaded with messages of love, but also healing plants for the suffering.

The Chamomile or Romanița has a fairly large spreading area, and its appearance at the end of April and the beginning of May turns into an occasion of great joy and creates a state of tranquility and good mood. The young people, especially the boys, were happy with the flowering of the *Romanița*, its presence in the glades and orchards driving out of the houses the girls sent by their mothers to pick it for the preparation of teas to lower the fever. In order for this plant to have a cure, it had to be picked by girls or children, but the boys always made their way through the places where the young women gathered *Romanița* flowers and braided wreaths of flowers. Their gathering had, as can be seen, an erotic charge, an aspect that emerges from the folk songs:

"I went to the meadow
To gather some chamomile;
I didn't find any chamomile,
But I found a little girl.
The girl was asleep
Under a wicker bush.
I would have kissed her
While she was sleeping,
But she stayed curled up.
I would have kissed her
When she woke up,
And she would have grown
To trust me.
If only she would wake up somehow,
To see if she is a wife or a maiden.
'I am neither a maiden,
Nor a wife..."

"I went to the grove,
Looking for a sprig of chamomile;
I didn't find any,
But I found a little girl.
And it seemed to me that she was too small -
'Let the little one grow,
To help her parents,' I said.
When I went a second time,
I found a young girl;
When I went a third time,
I found the girl married,
With a little son in her arms..."²²⁰.

²²⁰ Marian, *Botanica poporană*, vol. III, p. 177.

Chamomile (or Romanița), along with jasmine and ox-eye daisies (roman, dog chamomile etc.), were the main flowers woven into the crowns of girls of marriageable age. The wreath held a special meaning and the skill of the braiding spoke volumes about the girl who wore it. The symbolism of this wreath culminates on June 24th with the Sânziene Wreath.

As a medicinal plant, it was one of the most important to grow upon the earth. God had given it to people out of His great love for them, to protect them from diseases and other evils. The fact that they considered the *Romănița* blessed - a gift from the Lord to shield them from injuries and blemishes - emerges from the songs that the elders would hear in the dead of night in untrodden glades, spoken in charming voices by the Merciless Ones:

If it weren't for Avrămeasă,
Chamomile and Empress,
Valerian and lovage,
And wild garlic,
Everyone would be ours.²²¹

We reproduce another story of Chamomile:

"When God had finished creating all that is seen and all that is unseen, He took care of their order. He took the greatest care with the flowers; for He had created them more tender and weaker than all other creation. God sought to choose the right places for them, where they would be the happiest... And all the flowers were content with the dwelling that the Creator had given them, except for the chamomile. It did not like it inside the house, nor outside, nor in the field, nor in the forest.

- Grow in the forests! said the Creator.
- I don't like growing in forests! Chamomile answered, because I'm too lonely there and no one in the world will notice me...
- Then grow spread across the earth! God commanded.

And across the whole earth, Chamomile has been growing since then."²²²

To be more effective in treating diseases, chamomile flowers were taken to church on *Pentecost* or on *Saint Marina's Day* (July 17) to be blessed by the priest. Chamomile tea treats coughs, fears and chest pain if drunk early in the morning on empty stomach. The tea is also good for: infant ailments, colic, earaches, chills or blisters.

²²¹ C. Rădulescu-Codin, D. Mihalache, *Sărbătorile poporului român cu obiceiurile, credințele și unele tradiții legate de ele, culegere din părțile Muscelului*, București, 1909, p. 75; Candrea, *op.cit.*, p. 184.

²²² Marian, *Botanica populară*, vol. III, p. 174.

The Lily. Because it bloomed in May, the flower was used by girls and women in love charms, but also for washing the face to be just as beautiful. In popular belief she was the only one who did not go to the judgment of God, but stood at the gate of heaven: "and then the pearl leaf/how many flowers are on the earth/all go to the oath/only the flower of the lily/sits at the gate of heaven/all of them knock it down to the ground/that it has no oath/that it is a flower left like this/lives without judgment".²²³

Through its pure white color, a symbol of purity and virginity, Lily was considered the flower of the Mother of God. In a beautiful folk tale, collected and retold by Simion Florea Marian, Lily sprang from the heart of a monk who, throughout his life, spoke only these words: 'Rejoice, O Most Pure Virgin Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee!'²²⁴

In the *Annunciation*, a painting by Leonardo da Vinci, the Archangel Gabriel holds a lily in his hand, presenting it as he addresses the Virgin Mary. The image of the angel with a lily - which symbolizes humility, chastity, and faith - is less common in Orthodox iconography and is borrowed from Catholic representations²²⁵. The beauty of this flower is attached to the values of divinity as it emerges *from the Gospel of Matthew* 6:28: "(...) And why do you care about clothing? Pay attention to the lilies of the field how they grow: they do not toil, nor purr."

The flower also appears in the Old Testament (*Song of Songs* 2:1, 2:16) as the '*lily of the valleys*'. This gave rise to commentaries and interpretations by the ecclesiastical writer Origen. Drawing upon traditions of early Christianity, he considered the lily grown in the wilderness of the valleys to be the true Tree of Life, representing Jesus Christ. The sublime hymn of praise to love, attributed to King Solomon and revered by both Jews and Christians, represents for the latter the most profound expression of Jesus' love for mankind.

The flower is also associated with the Mother of God in popular tradition; its cup-shaped petals, which collect the night dew, evoke lunar feminine symbols related to love, prosperity, and regeneration,²²⁶ In other cases, the lily - due to its prominent stamen - carried masculine valences, which is why it is the symbol of French royalty. A beautiful Romanian folk story tells of an empress who could only get pregnant if she drank dew from lily cups mixed with wormwood dew. Once she had sipped the magic liquor, she gave birth to a girl who, after

²²³ Marian, *Botanica...*, vol. I., p. 534.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

²²⁵ Constantin Cavarinos, *Guide to Byzantine Iconography*, Bucharest 2015, p. 70.

²²⁶ I. Evseev, *Dictionary of Cultural Symbols and Archetypes*, Timișoara, 1994, p. 48.

becoming a woman and enduring an unhappy marriage, transformed, in her turn, into the *Romanița* or *Chamomile*²²⁷

Decoctions made from the petals helped heal cuts, abscesses, or eye pain, while ointments made from the bulbs were used to promote eyebrow and hair growth. An interesting observation is made by Gubernatis in his work *Mythologie des Plantes*, quoting an Oriental novel: in the garden where the Tree of Life grew, there were only lilies and tulips, symbolizing sunrise and sunset.²²⁸ Regarding the tulip, folk craftsmen used it as a symbolic model for the pillars on the porches of wooden and stone houses and churches. The delicate cup formed by the petals drew a parallel between perfect beauty and the sublime harmony of God's love—the vessel through which people received divine grace. This architectural model was likely inspired by Oriental designs, given the well-known veneration the Turks had for this flower.

The Basil was a staple in households in every season, even if its peak period is at the end of June. Summer or winter, in the garden or in a pot, there is no house where this plant, blessed by God, does not bloom. The name 'basil' has its origin in the Latin *basilicum*, a word from which the Romanian term for church (*biserică* - *basilică*) is derived. Of overwhelming erotic importance in the Romanian village, basil was worn throughout the year by both boys and girls. At *horae* (traditional dances), parties, or in church, girls would tuck basil into their hair or place a sprig in their bodices, while young men of marriageable age wore it in their hats, so that the love of their desired one might be bestowed upon them. It had to be carried with faith and sincerity, without lustful thoughts that could nullify its beneficial effect; if the lover could restrain himself from such impure thoughts, then his beloved would return his love. Spiritual and bodily purity was mandatory when invoking the beneficial power of basil, which descended directly from on The High.

There was a belief that this plant linked the world of benevolent spirits to the earthly one in a lasting way, and the love charms in which it was invoked were performed on great and holy feast days. These spells were cast by girls, especially during St. George's Day (*Sângeorz* - the best time to sow basil) or Arminden (May Day), so the plant could witness the pure thoughts in the marriage petitions they addressed to the Divinity. Naturally, ancestral traditions from time immemorial are mixed with Christian ones in a fascinating way. Pure love spells were cast on Tuesdays or Thursdays, and sometimes on Saturdays,

²²⁷ ****Legende populare românești, Povestea României*, Bucharest, Chișinău, 2002, p. 193.

²²⁸ Paris, 1878, p. 120.

during the waning moon (as good spells were made only when the moon was old), never during the New King or the new moon. The girl would go at night to a spring (see: *The Sacredness of Springs*), where she filled a jug and placed three sprigs of basil - which had been blessed at church - into it, before tying them in her hair. On the way home, she would recite an incantation, and upon arriving, before entering, she would drink three sips of water from the vessel²²⁹ and say:

"Just as the priest cannot consecrate the water
Without basil,
So may the maidens not begin
Any dance without me."²³⁰

The incantation would continue in the yard or garden, with eyes fixed upon the stars:

"One star,
Morning Star (*Logostea*),
Bring my beloved to me
Three times
Before the dawn,
To this jug of flowers;
From ninety-nine cows with calves,
From ninety-nine sheep with lambs,
From ninety-nine sows with piglets,
From ninety-nine maiden bells,
From ninety-nine maidenly adornments (*ostrele*),
Two stars,
Morning Stars (*Logostele*),
Bring my darlings to me
Three times
Before the dawn,
To this jug of flowers."²³¹

In other cases, a peacock feather - the active solar symbol of the young man going out to the dance - and a silver coin - a passive lunar and feminine symbol associated with the night star - were also placed within the basil bunch (*ostreț*) intended for spells. The silver present in the basil sprig did not serve to ward off evil spirits, as basil - especially when blessed in church - could not be associated with anything evil; rather, it played a purely feminine role. On the other hand, in Christianity, silver, due to its color, represented the Wisdom of God, just as gold symbolized His Love for mankind: 'I counsel thee,' said Saint John, 'to buy of me gold tried in

²²⁹ A reference to the Holy Water of Epiphany, of which three sips are taken every morning.

²³⁰ Marian, *Sărbătorile*, vol. I, p. 328.

²³¹ *Ibidem*.

the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed'- meaning, to receive the love and wisdom of God."²³²

On Epiphany (January 6th) or the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (September 14th), when the priest went through the village, it was customary to give boys and girls of marriageable age a sprig from the bundle used to sanctify the waters or to sprinkle the faithful. This was placed under the pillow so they would dream of their future spouse.²³³ Also, the basil from the tie on the church flag was braided by the girls in their hair, so that the boys would look at them as if they were a flag or they would catch it on the edges of the well so that the boys would come after them as they come after water.²³⁴ The holiness of this plant stems from the belief that it grew on the spot where the Savior was crucified; whereas only weeds sprouted where the thieves were killed, helping Empress Helena to find the Holy Cross. In other instances, it was believed that only a stolen sprig from the priest's bundle could reveal, in the world of dreams, one's future husband.

The Basil was also used to heal newly married girls or women suffering from the *Zburător* - a restless spirit of unrequited and passionate love that sought to torment young women. She would be taken to a spring during a waning moon, where an old woman would perform an incantation so that this evil and insatiable spirit of love would not possess her. The young woman was seated on a boulder with her feet in the water, facing east. The enchantress would wash her from behind with water and basil from a jug, starting from her head and ending at her feet, while reciting the charm. Once the ritual ended, the woman possessed by the *Zburător* would break the jug against a stone and head home with the old woman, without looking back and without uttering a single word.²³⁵

We hereby reproduce the custom and the incantation for the dance (*joc*), as collected by E. Hodoș:

"Sarah, before a feast day, the girl splits the fire in two, and between two fires she puts a pot of unstarted water, a white penny and basil. The pot remains there until the next morning, at Matins. Then it is taken from there and placed on a clean plate in the window. When he rings the bell for the first time at Mass, he pronounces three times: ... In the Jordan River/ He throws me/ In sweet milk he bathes me/ With a red belt/ He girded me/ With a basil pole/ He rubbed me/ On my head/. On the back of my head/ To fall on everyone's head with love/ On the old people/

²³² Frédéric Portal, *Des couleurs symboliques dans l'Antiquité, le Moyen-Age et les temps modernes*, Paris, 1857, pp. 57-58.

²³³ Aurel Candrea, *op.cit.*, p. 262.

²³⁴ A. Gorovei, Ghe. F. Căușanu, *Credințe și superstiții la români*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2012, p 57.

²³⁵ Marian, *Botanica...*, vol. I, p. 340.

With honor and humanity/ And on the young people with great love/ And he put a poppy on my head/ On my sleeves/ The little stars/ Let everyone look at them/ The world!"²³⁶

From birth, through the first bath and baptism, to marriage and death, this miraculous plant has always accompanied man, staying by his side during life's decisive moments. Girls would pledge sisterhood by exchanging flowering stems of basil, and at weddings, the *bride's chest* was adorned with bouquets of *love basil* tied with red thread. With these, the bride would sprinkle the unmarried girls in the procession that accompanied her. In Sălciua, Alba County, it was customary for the bride to hold a bouquet of basil tied with a beautifully embroidered scarf, which she spun three times above her head when she left for her husband's house, so that the other girls would also find a loving husband. In Moldavia, the bride girded herself three times around the waist with basil before the wedding, while in Wallachia, she sprinkled the groom and his companions three times with a bouquet taken from the *bride's cauldron*. Popular legend says that the plant sprang from the hot tears shed by a young man upon the grave of his beloved.²³⁷ In the Romanian *hora* - which is an ancestral prayer to the sun - the exhortation frequently resounds: "Step the *hora* on the spot, let the basil sprout!"

As a medicinal plant, basil leaves were placed on open wounds to close the wound and hasten healing, and for coughs they were placed on hot coals so that the smoke could be inhaled. In combination with other plants, tea was used for diseases of the stomach, kidneys, headaches and eyes.²³⁸

According to popular legends, the Poppy appeared on earth from the bloodied soles of a grieving mother searching for her missing child²³⁹. In another story, it is an enchanted plant that Sfarmă-Piatră (Stone-Crusher) gave to Ileana Cosânzeana to save Prince Charming (*Făt-Frumos*), using it to put the guards to sleep.²⁴⁰

Its bright red color refers to the blood shed by heroes in wars or by Christian martyrs during persecutions. Furthermore, the poppy symbolizes the earth and the deep sleep that man enters after death until his rebirth.²⁴¹ This belief stems from Greek mythology, where Demeter, the goddess of the earth's

²³⁶ E. Hodoș, *Descânțece*, Sibiu, 1912, p. 11.

²³⁷ Valer Butură, *Enciclopedie de etnobotanică românească*, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1979, pp. 55-56.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

²³⁹ ***Romanian Folk Legends*, pp. 187-188.

²⁴⁰ Marian, *Botanica...*, vol. II, p. 295.

²⁴¹ V. Magnien, *Les mysteres d'Éleusis. Leurs origines. Le rituel de leurs initiations*, Paris, 1950, p. 136: *Le pavot que l'on offre À Demeter symbolise la terre, mais représente aussi la force de sommeil et d'oubli qui s'empare des hommes après la mort et avant la renaissance.*

fertility, had the poppy²⁴² as a symbol alongside ears of wheat and the narcissus. Devastated by the loss of her daughter, Persephone, the goddess was urged to drink a potion of boiled poppy seeds, so that its narcotic effect might help her forget or alleviate her pain.²⁴³

At St. George's Day (*Sângeorz*) or on Saint Andrew's Night, householders sought to protect their cattle from strigoi (the undead) by placing poppy seeds—blessed since Christmas—around the animals. This was done so that the spirits would stop to collect them, forgetting why they had come. Along the furrows at the gates or by the stable doors, where green branches were placed, poppy seeds were scattered so that evil spirits would have no power. At the funeral of someone known to have practiced sorcery, poppy seeds were thrown behind the hearse; the deceased was told that if he intended to return from the dead to take someone, he must first finish collecting the poppy or eat only one grain per year. A woman who did not wish to have children immediately after marriage would place a few poppy seeds in her shoe. Newborns were bathed in water containing poppy seeds so they would sleep through the night. In love songs, the poppy is mentioned in extreme, hopeless situations—when a young man leaves a girl and never returns, or when a girl marries another, leaving her lover with a broken heart:

"If you do not love me,
If you love me not,
Fence in your yard
With poppy flowers,
To make me dearer to you,
And with a blue flower,
To make me your wife."²⁴⁴

In Bukovina, the plant is believed to stand at the gates of hell to entice souls, leading them away from the path to heaven:

"Behold the poppy flower,
It sits at the gates of hell;
It keeps growing and blooming,
And many a soul it deceives".²⁴⁵

²⁴² Pierre Grimal, *Dicționar de mitologie greacă și romană*, Editura Saeculum, București, 2001, p. 139.

²⁴³ V. Magnien, *op. cit.* pp. 86-88).

²⁴⁴ Voronca, *Datinile...*, vol.I, p. 427.

²⁴⁵ Marian, *Botanica...*, vol. II, p. 301.

In traditional Romanian medicine, poppy seeds were used to treat fevers, stomach pain, toothaches, coughs, sharp side pains (*stabbing*), and hernias (*surfacing*). Also, mixed with honey and spiderwebs, they were used by housewives to prepare an ointment applied to wounds or boils²⁴⁶.

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²⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 298.

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THE FEAST OF THE *ASCENSION*: BETWEEN CHRISTIAN DOGMA AND POPULAR TRADITION

The ascent to heaven symbolizes, above all, the absolute spiritualization of the human being and their desire to enter into communion with God for eternity. There are numerous Christian iconographic representations of man's ascent to heaven after passing, and the depiction of saints on church walls suggests this very truth.

The *hermeneia* (manual) of Byzantine painting represents saints with elongated silhouettes, detached from the earthly world: their feet rest on the ground, their bodies dwell within the vegetable world, and their heads are haloed by the starry sky²⁴⁷.

A Christian's prayer - whether standing or kneeling, with hands clasped or raised toward heaven - represents not only an invocation of the Divine, but also a desire to detach from the earthly realm and enter into communion with the Creator.

The most famous Ascension into heaven is that of our Savior, Jesus Christ. As the disciples gazed toward heaven, the angels who witnessed this unique event alongside the people²⁴⁸ told those who could hear them that, just as Jesus had ascended into heaven, so He would descend again (Acts 1:11).

The image of the Savior's Ascension is majestic for both the Apostles and those present - full of awe and fear, but also of boundless joy. This is because the One whom they had doubted for a time after the Crucifixion was now revealing His divinity, ascending to where He belonged: at the right hand of the Father. A key aspect of the Ascension is that as Jesus ascended to heaven, He blessed His disciples, signaling that He would remain with humanity until the end of time (Matthew 28:20).

The bodily Ascension of Jesus is particularly significant for Christians as it demonstrates the extent to which a human being can be deified. The same truth is evident when the Savior passes through the locked doors to reach the disciples, who were hiding for fear of the Jewish and Roman authorities, and says to them: *Peace be with you!* (John 20:26). The message is clear: humanity can achieve a high level of deification, and this fulfillment depends entirely on communion with the Creator.

In the Romanian folk tradition, the idea of Ascension to the Kingdom of God is omnipresent in numerous elements of decoration and ornamentation, both in vernacular architecture and in textile pieces such as carpets, barks or folk costumes.

²⁴⁷ Dionisie de Furna, *Erminia picturii bizantine*, Editura Sofia, București, 2000, p. 147.

²⁴⁸ Arhim. Hierotheos Vlachos, *Predici la marile sărbători*, Editura Cartea Ortodoxă, Galați, 2004, p. 266.

The best known elements are the vertical spirals (ascending) usually present on the pillars of church porches, or peasant houses. This spiral that suggests the idea of ascending to Heaven is also present in the bell towers of the churches, the best known being those of the Episcopal Church of Argeş, known as the Monastery of Argeş and are twisted *in a mirror* in front of each other. Returning to the Romanian folk wooden architecture, we will notice, especially in the Oltenian one, predominantly in Gorj, that the pillars of the porch are carved in the shape of an ascending spiral. The decorative model, like other elements in the ornamental composition of the house, has an apotropaic and *Christian confession* meaning .

In fact, the entire ornamental spectrum of the home and the folk costume possesses an overwhelming theological component; the motifs and chromatics refer to Divine favor. The architecture of the peasant house, much like that of wooden and stone churches, incorporates symbolic elements that represent the prototype of an invisible staircase to the sky. The stairs are the first step of this journey toward heaven, marking the transition from the profane to the sacred, or from the Old Law to the New. In many Orthodox churches, such as the Cathedral of Curtea de Argeş, the entrance is gained via twelve stone steps representing the twelve tribes of Israel; thus, the believer begins in the Old Law, within the profane and a partial truth. Upon stepping inside the church, they are greeted by twelve beautifully ornamented pillars symbolizing the Twelve Apostles and the New Law of Jesus Christ. At this point, the believer has already climbed another step toward their Creator. The ascent does not stop here; the paradox of the Christian faith is that it is the only one in which man's path to heaven - his path to salvation - begins on earth itself, during his lifetime. In vernacular architecture, things follow a similar pattern, as the peasant sought to bring into his home not only the architectural idea of the church but the very essence of the sacred, desiring to partake in *Divine goodwill*.

In households across southern Romania, particularly in the Argeş and Muscel regions, low-set houses often feature three steps leading up to the porch. The porch's central arch is trilobed, symbolizing the Holy Trinity. These steps represent the transition from the profane to the sacred, much like the steps in a church serve as a link between the Old and New Testaments. While in most cases the number of steps - be it three, four, or more - did not necessarily imply sacred numerology but served as a simple transition from the outside world to the interior, they held a deeper meaning. In Romanian villages until the beginning of the 20th century, people lived in a world perceived to be filled with demons, spirits, and deities of the forests or fields that often influenced them negatively²⁴⁹. When the head of the family set foot

²⁴⁹ Daily worries, sorrows, malicious thoughts, and the inner turmoils of the simple folk were seen as the 'handiwork' of these ever-present spirits.

on the first step of the house, he knew he was entering a sacred space - the family universe - where these spirits could no longer follow him.

The house porch shares the same symbolic meaning as the church narthex, serving as a space for purification from worldly anxieties. Following the mystagogy of Maximus the Confessor, external spaces are associated with the Old Testament and are viewed as a '*shadow*' (*umbra*); the interior spaces belong to the New Testament, functioning as an '*icon*' (*image*), whereas the '*truth*' is reserved solely for the future state of being²⁵⁰. To ascend toward the 'icon of life,' one must purify one's thoughts—not all of them, but specifically the malevolent ones nestled in the soul (*logismoi*), as opposed to the logical and rational ones of the mind (*logiki*). Only through this purification could a person enter the 'chamber of their icon'²⁵¹. For the peasant, the living space was a sacred domain - not identical to a church nave, but similar in nature. The wealthy man often had a 'clean room' (*odaia bună*), typically without a stove, which only the head of the family would enter and which children regarded with a sense of veneration. The house serves as a symbol of heavenly mansions, as Scripture states: '*In My Father's house are many mansions*' (John 14:2). Furthermore, just like a church building, the house signifies the human body²⁵²: '*Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?*' (1 Corinthians 6:19). Within his home, as in a church, man ascends the first step of the ladder to the Kingdom of God. Paradoxically, in order for man to climb, Someone had to descend to assist him. This '*Someone*' is none other than the Holy Spirit, one of the Divine Persons of the Holy Trinity.

In the works of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, we find that through revelation, he perceives angels ascending toward the Throne of God, drawn into this movement by divine power itself²⁵³. This power is a guiding force, as those who gaze upon the divine light become partakers of it. We observe, therefore, that both men and angels share a desire to ascend toward the Truth. However, while angels—as purely spiritual beings—are attracted by the uncreated light of the Supreme Being, man, in his materiality, requires the grace of the Holy Spirit to climb this ladder.

²⁵⁰ Sf. Maxim Mărturisitorul, *Învățăături la Ierarhia bisericească a lui Pseudo – Dionisie Areopagitul*, 3,3,2, PG 4, 137 D

²⁵¹ In popular tradition, the 'Icon Room' (*Camera Icoanei*) carried a literal meaning, referring specifically to the place where icons were kept. It is important to note that icons were not found throughout the entire house. There was a central icon, usually of the Mother of God, and the 'hearth icon' (*icoana de vatră*). In ecclesiastical tradition (cf. Maximus the Confessor), the 'icon room' corresponded to the nave and the altar—the very space that brought man closer to God through prayer.

²⁵² Sf. Nicolae Velimirovici, *Simboluri și semne*, Editura Sofia, București, 1995, p. 60.

²⁵³ Sf. Dionisie Areopagitul, *Opere Complete, Ierarhia cerească*, cap. III, Editura Paideia, București, 1996, p. 19.

Naturally, popular tradition did not concern itself with the intricacies of Christian dogma or synodal decrees regarding the nature of God or the inner workings of the Holy Trinity²⁵⁴. Nonetheless, the idea of ascension was a universal concept, reinforced by the pervasive presence of Heaven and Hell; the common man sought to ascend and, by all means, to avoid descent. The peasant's desire to preserve the sanctity of the home—and by extension, its inhabitants—was rooted in a profound faith in *elevation* and, consequently, salvation.

To draw closer to this ideal, the peasant expanded the liturgical space of the church into the household to exclude forces that might jeopardize his path to God—specifically, demons and other 'unclean' spirits. Starting from the gate, *apotropaic symbols* designed to repel evil are omnipresent. These symbols of ascension, closely linked to the angelic realm and the Divine, kept 'enemies' at bay. In many peasant households, the carvings on gates, porch pillars, and doors are so intricate that they seem to mirror the entrance to an altar. Some wealthier households even featured *votive inscriptions*²⁵⁵ (*pisanii*) above the entrance, similar to those found in churches, transforming the home into a sanctuary where the 'Unclean One' had no power. To this day, a rural belief persists that the devil cannot enter a house unless invited or summoned; he is otherwise barred by the symbols carved in wood or embroidered on traditional costumes. In this context, swearing was considered the most potent way of inadvertently summoning the devil.

Another traditional Romanian element suggesting the idea of celestial ascension is the pillar, associated both with the calendar cycle and the thresholds of life, such as funerary rites. The first category includes pillars such as those of Arminden, Sâmedru, and Plugușor, while the second comprises the pillars of Birth, Wedding, and Death (including the Pillar of Judgment). Each of these pillars carries a profound spiritual charge. For instance, *the Sâmedru pillar* represents the symbolic death of a deity, allowing for the rebirth of a new one. As a symbol of '*youth without age and life without death*', it was natural for the evergreen fir branch (*cetina*) to acquire magical properties in popular belief. The pillars of Arminden and Sâmedru were typically crafted from fir wood - the same material used for churches, shrines, and other structures dedicated to the Divine. Churches erected on hilltops or in the heart of a village aim to bring the community as close as possible to God. To this list of mythical pillars, one can add 'Sacred Columns' or 'Sky Columns,' often manifested as stone or wooden crosses. These columns possess their own distinct architecture and can be categorized as discophores, commissary, or supplicatory²⁵⁶.

²⁵⁴ The theological term that defines and explains this phenomenon is *perichoresis*.

²⁵⁵ The traditional household within the Curtișoara Open-Air Museum (Gorj) serves as a primary reference for understanding how the sacred space was structured in the Romanian rural context.

²⁵⁶ Romulus Vulcănescu, *Coloana cerului*, Editura Academiei Române, București, 1972, pp. 86-102

Simple discophore columns feature a disc at the top—a solar symbol - and are found throughout the Romanian territory²⁵⁷. Commissary columns take the shape of the letter 'T,' while supplicatory ones are shaped like a 'Y'²⁵⁸. Without delving into a detailed mythological analysis of each, we can conclude that their essential role is twofold: to bring man closer to the celestial divinities and to act as a propitiatory link. Funerary pillars, found across Romanian cemeteries, differ from the 'funeral tree.' They serve as substitutes for the deceased, whereas the pillar placed at the head of the grave acts as a path to heaven for the departed soul. The superimposed rhomboids in the 'Endless Column' - as Brâncuși titled his funerary pillar - function as steps for the spirit's ascent. Each rhombus encloses a symbolic 'cross of faith' upon which the soul walks toward Heaven. Carrying its own cross, the soul thus approaches the Particular Judgment of God.

As observed in the preceding lines, funerary pillars in cemeteries do not carry a negative or overwhelming connotation of mourning; instead, they are imbued with hope, as anything related to ascension is inherently positive. The soul that follows the path of the funerary pillar knows it is journeying toward true life with its Creator. Indeed, according to Christian teaching, the very purpose of human life is salvation—the ascent toward the Father. We note, therefore, that the ultimate goal of the Savior's teachings was not merely to impose a set of moral norms, but to offer salvation—to reveal to man the Truth that enables his ascent to the Creator. In Romanian folk tales, the Tree of Life is a symbolic element that man can climb. Within the anthropogonic myth of creation, the 'Big Brother' (*Fărtatul*) resides on the ninth and final level of heaven, which in turn rests upon the uppermost branches of this tree²⁵⁹. Similarly, in the Christian tradition, the Holy Apostle Paul was caught up to the third heaven, where he beheld wonders and heard *'inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter'* (2 Corinthians 12:2-4). In the Christian tradition, the Holy Apostle Paul was raised to the third level of heaven where he saw beauties *and heard unspeakable words, which it is not proper for man to speak.* (2 Corinthians 12:2-4).

The primordial sacred tree, a presence in the mythology of many cultures, stands at the very origin of life; beneath its crown dwell various human races, as seen in the accounts of the Blajini²⁶⁰. Sacred trees serve as the pillars that support the universe—the path upon which souls ascend to heaven, the threshold where God

²⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 100-101.

²⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 100.

²⁵⁹ Romulus Vulcănescu. *Mitologia română*, Editura Academiei Române, București, 1985, pp. 254-265.

²⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

communicates with mortals, and the sanctuary for both the visible and the unseen. In most religions and folk traditions, the cosmos itself was perceived as a tree²⁶¹.

The tree embodies both the most constructive and destructive forces of the universe. As a pillar of the earth, a stairway to heaven, a dwelling for celestial beings (both good and evil), and a witness to divine manifestations, the tree became a fundamental element of existence for the Romanian village, in both its pre-Christian and Christian contexts. The first act of the villagers when selecting a site for a new settlement was to plant a wooden pillar - a symbol of the sacred tree - at what was intended to be the center of the village. This pillar often became a 'judgment tree' (*copacul de judecată*). Around it were placed the 'elders' stumps' (*butucii bătrânilor*), where the sages, under the watchful guidance of the Great Fârtat, would deliberate on the matters of their daily lives.

In both pre-Christian necropolises and Christian cemeteries, sacred fir trees were omnipresent, rooted in the ancestral belief that souls could only ascend to heaven via the trunk of a fir. In this context, the tree served as a simulacrum of the funerary pillar, just as the pillar itself was a simulacrum of the fir tree. These traditional beliefs of the Romanian village regarding the sacred tree reached a fascinating synthesis with Christianity: the instrument of the Savior's Passion - the Cross - is transformed into the Tree of Life, of Wisdom, of Salvation, and of the New Covenant. It becomes the Pillar of Heaven and Earth in essence, the very *dwelling place* of the Divine²⁶².

Throughout his life, man desperately strives to ensure that, after death, his soul will ascend to Heaven - a feat possible only by avoiding tempters and corrupters while maintaining a moral life. The apotropaic elements found on architectural structures and textiles represent a silent prayer to the Creator to be spared from overwhelming trials and granted a 'normal' life. Symbols on gates were intended to bar unclean spirits - manifested as disease, discord, or poverty - while those on the doors of young women's rooms, for example, served as prayers for vitality, fertility, a worthy husband, and a happy marriage. The hardships of life harden some and humble others. Those who became hardened often abandoned moral norms and love, falling into grave sin, their souls descending into the depths of hell. Yet, a question arises: is there still a chance for ascension from hell, or is the soul condemned forever? According to Orthodox dogmatic theology, the soul - even in hell - has the possibility of release and ascent to the Kingdom of God before the Final Judgment²⁶³. In this sense, the presence in hell is, in certain cases, temporary - akin

²⁶¹ Mircea Eliade, *Tratat de istorie a religiilor*, Editura Humanitas, București, 1999, p. 214.

²⁶² M. Eliade, *op.cit.*, p. 219-220.

²⁶³ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, volumul III, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Română, București, 2010, p. 275.

to what Catholicism defines as Purgatory. Within these spiritual codes, the common man knew that all was not lost, even if he had sinned during his life. The alms and prayers of the living could deliver him from the place of condemnation, allowing him to enter Paradise. Thus, Ascension has become a true religious leitmotif; the entire spectrum of Christian faith and Romanian folk thought employs a metaphorical arsenal of mythical, decorative, and chromatic elements to describe this journey.

The theology of Romanian folk art is laden with messages that we might call 'encrypted' for God; only He can truly understand them, for only He can penetrate the depths of the human soul and thought. Over time, these messages have become integral to the identity of rural communities. At first glance, one might say that ancient pre-Christian customs and myths have reached the present day 'grafted' onto Christian dogma, having been progressively 'Christianized' by the Church. It must be remembered that the primordial Church, or the Christianity of the first centuries, was deeply Hellenized²⁶⁴. Moreover, the Apostle Paul, who detached Christianity from its Jewish matrix²⁶⁵, preached extensively within the sphere of Greek cultural influence. It was, therefore, natural for many elements of the rich Greek mythology to 'adhere' to Christianity. This early permissiveness of the Church created a fertile ground that allowed the local faiths of various peoples to endure alongside Christianity through the ages. This fascinating interweaving of ancient beliefs and Christian faith is not a form of blasphemy; rather, it is a testament to the fact that every 'nation' preserved a fragment of the Truth - an ancient, albeit distorted, memory of God's promise made in Paradise to our first parents, Adam and Eve

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²⁶⁴ Stilianou G. Papadopoulou, *Teologie și limbă, teologie experimentală, limbă convențională*, Editura Mitropolia Oltenie, Craiova, 2007, p.

²⁶⁵ Claudio Moreschini, Enrico Norelli, *Istoria literaturii creștine vechi grecești și latine*, tom I, *De la Apostolul Pavel la Constantin cel Mare*, Editura Polirom, București, 2013, p. 26.

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THE SUMMER SOLSTICE, ON THE NATURE OF SOLSTICES, SOLSTITIAL NARRATIVES, CHRISTIAN SIGNIFICANCE, THE SYMBOLISM OF LIGHT (JUNE 21ST).

The term 'solstice' originates from the Latin *solstitium* (meaning 'the sun stands still') and represents the time of year when the day is longest and the night is shortest. It is an astronomical turning point, after which the diurnal period continuously decreases—passing through the autumnal equinox (when day and night are equal)—until the winter solstice, when daylight reaches its minimum and begins to increase once more. The two solstices are six months apart, punctuated every three months by the spring and autumn equinoxes. In beliefs and traditions, the spring equinox suggests the rebirth of nature, a process that culminates in the explosion of 'solstitial happiness' at the end of June. At this time, the virginal and graceful apparition of the *Sânziene* is imbued with eroticism, hope, and optimism.

The autumnal equinox marks the beginning of the 'degeneration of time,' as a series of 'old men' figures emerge within the Romanian pantheon, flaunting their senescence until mid-winter. At that point, they either die or are 'helped' to die through ritual sacrifices, making way for the seeds of new life to be reborn. This permanent cycle of the sun's apparent movement, combined with the precise intervals of these astronomical events, led to the grouping of ancient festivals - and, through syncretism, Christian holidays- according to the solstices and equinoxes.

In popular tradition, the summer solstice represents a vital threshold of time, often envisioned as a gate whose opening requires the magic word: maturity. In contrast, for the winter solstitial gate, the magic formula is hope. Maturity is personified by the young *Sânziene* virgins, who have reached the age of marriage and family. They represent a brilliant light that begins to fade only after the consummation of the nuptial act and the birth of children. Although this summer astral event did not mark a formal beginning of the year - unlike the pastoral New Years of spring and autumn, the agricultural year starting in March, or the Dacian New Year - it remained a period of paramount importance for those living in harmony with nature, as it was synonymous with ripe wheat, abundant light, and the sun's peak.

The summer solstice marked the beginning of astronomical summer. It is important to note that ancient Indo-European peoples perceived the year as consisting of two equal halves: the warm period, associated with light, and the cold period, associated with darkness. The year was often personified by a diurnal

goddess, later assimilated in Balkan mythologies to Hera, the protector of married women and the family²⁶⁶. In various ways, both Hera and Athena are associated with the symbol of the cow - representing abundance and fecundity - even though Athena is characterized by her perpetual virginity (Parthenos)²⁶⁷. In Romanian myths, the symbol of this new year was the cow, regarded as 'white cattle' (*vite albe*), a diurnal creature said to possess the power of speech once a year.

The custom known as the 'Ostrich Ox' (*Boul Înstruțat*)²⁶⁸ or the 'Sânziene Ox' was observed around the summer solstice. During this ritual, a strong and docile animal was adorned with flowers, green branches, colorful ribbons, and other ornaments, then paraded through the village streets accompanied by a group of young men²⁶⁹. This ceremony evoked the mystical nuptial rite of the solstice - or the *Night of Sânziene* - a time when the light of the coming day reached its peak brilliance. Having fulfilled its vital and fertilizing role at this zenith, the light would then begin its inevitable journey toward death and eventual rebirth.

The 'adorned ox' (*boul înstruțat*) served as a substitute for the deity at its peak maturity - a being brimming with the unbridled vigor of youth and overflowing with vital energy. It joyfully embraced life, only to sacrifice itself to ensure nature's perpetual cycle of rebirth. On the eve of the solstice, the ox or cow²⁷⁰ chosen for this rite was grazed in secluded forest clearings under the watchful eye of young men and the glow of torches, a practice meant to isolate the 'animal-god' from the profane world. Following this nocturnal vigil, the youths were transformed into sacred figures, worthy of being in the presence of the divinity²⁷¹.

The mythical attributes of cattle emerge clearly in folk tales and legends where the Sun, personified as an old man, is almost always depicted guarding a herd known as 'the flocks of heaven.' These are, in essence, the rain-laden clouds which the Lord of the Heavens pours over the earth - celestial flocks that bring abundance.

²⁶⁶ Jean Vertemont, *Dicționar al mitologiilor indo-europene*, Editura Amarcord, Timișoara, 2000, p. 45.

²⁶⁷ Mihai Coman, *Mitologie populară românească, viețuitoarele pământului și ale apei*, vol. I, Editura Minerva, București, 1986, p. 2.

²⁶⁸ Împodobit/

²⁶⁹ Ion Ghinoiu, *Sărbători și obiceiuri românești*, Editura Elion, București, 2002, pp. 319-323/

²⁷⁰ The cow supplanted the ox in this custom once the latter disappeared from rural households, as agricultural labor became mechanized through the use of modern machinery.

²⁷¹ Bull masks are also present in winter solstice customs, such as the *Turca* or *Borița*. Mithras was represented either as a sun or as a bull; generally, bovines serve as representations of celestial deities. In Greek mythology, Zeus transforms into a bull to seduce the goddess Europa. In the Christian tradition, the 'fatted calf' is the symbol of the Gospel according to Luke, as it was sacrificed when the Prodigal Son 'returned' home. Thus, the bull becomes a binary coupling of joy and sacrifice. Furthermore, there is a psychoanalytic explanation by C.G. Jung, according to which animals symbolize various facets of the libido.

This connection is deeply rooted in traditional life, where a family's wealth and well-being were most often measured by the size of their herds²⁷².

Romanian tales featuring 'Handsome Faces' (*Chipuri Frumoase*), princes with golden hair, and brave heroes are earthly embodiments of the Day Star. Their adventures merely retrace the sun's journey between the solstices. In these fairy tales, Prince Charming (the Sun) is aided by four enchanted dogs (the four winds) and battles the Zmeu (symbolizing darkness or storm clouds bearing hail), who is often supported by a witch or a malevolent woman (representing capricious and volatile weather).

As the solar hero loses his loyal helpers - those who drive away the celestial mists - he grows increasingly drained of power until the *Zmeu* finally strikes him down. His death seems to plunge the kingdom into chaos; however, a fairy, a magical creature, a pigeon, or a turtledove appears to intervene. By sprinkling the hero with 'Living Water'²⁷³ (or pouring it down his throat), these benevolent entities miraculously resurrect him, his strength returning with every drop²⁷⁴. These stories, though products of an extraordinary imagination, merely draped a beautiful garment over natural phenomena that people otherwise had no means of explaining.

In the fairy tale of *Harap-Alb*, the Emperor (symbolizing the mature sun at the summer solstice) warns his son (the sun destined to be born at the winter solstice): 'beware of the Red Man and especially the Bald Man.' In this context, the Red Man signifies the scorching heat of summer, while the 'Bald' or 'Cold' Man represents winter, with all the hardships it brings. Similarly, in *Prâslea the Mighty and the Golden Apples*, we witness another solstitial narrative intertwined with the solar cult - two inseparable aspects of sun and light. Many characters in these stories, originating from the depths of Daco-Roman history, serve as 'updates' to ancient pagan rituals dedicated to celestial deities.

The weak and 'mangy' horse, chosen by Făt-Frumos (the Emperor's son, Greuceanu, Iorgovan, Costea etc.) from among a herd of fiery beasts, is a personification of light and the sun. This is evidenced by its transformation from a 'stumbling jade' full of 'sharp pains' into a proud, multi-winged stallion after consuming buckets of live embers. In this context, the embers represent the daylight

²⁷² George Coșbuc, *Vorba de acasă, eseuri, povestiri și schițe filozofice*, ediție îngrijită de Cristian Bădiliță în colaborare cu Mihael Balint, pe baza textului stabilit de Gavril Scridon și revizuit de Gheorghe Chivu, vol. II, *Mica Romă XXI*, Editura Vreamea, București, 2020, p. 310.

²⁷³ *Living Water; Dead Water* - '(...) it is the primordial, pre-existential element, as in the beginning of the world, there was only water everywhere (...) ' (Ovidiu Birlea, *Mică Enciclopedie a Poveștilor Românești*, București, 1976, p. 8).

²⁷⁴ George Coșbuc, *Vorba de acasă, eseuri, povestiri și schițe filozofice*, ediție îngrijită de Cristian Bădiliță în colaborare cu Mihael Balint, pe baza textului stabilit de Gavril Scridon și revizuit de Gheorghe Chivu, vol. II, *Mica Romă XXI*, Editura Vreamea, București, 2020, p. 310).

that begins to increase at the winter solstice; the power of the magical horse (the sun) grows as the quantity increases, reaching its peak strength at the summer solstice. Once the animal becomes mature and powerful, it is struck by the ogre's (*Zmeu*) arrow or poisoned by a witch and begins to 'waste away' (as the light fades) until it dies, only for the cycle of death and rebirth to begin anew.

In winter carols (*colinde*), the horse remains a personification of the sun: '*starlight horse with a golden saddle / where its hoof fell, the puddles dried*,' clearly referencing the solstitial power²⁷⁵. Furthermore, later folk ballads and outlaw songs - such as *Toma Alimoș*, *Gruia lui Novac*, or *Siminic* - follow the same narrative arc as the fairy tales²⁷⁶, centered on light, darkness, sacrifice, and rebirth. This is also evident in foundational masterpieces like *The Ballad of Master Manole* or *Miorița*. Ultimately, the fantastic heroes of Romanian folklore are personifications of the sun, sharing a common lineage with global mythical figures. Prince Charming in Romanian stories can be found in myths all over the world, obviously under another name, such as: Heracles, Theseus, Siegfried such as *Heracles*, *Theseus*, or *Siegfried*.

While the winter solstice marks the Great Hope of Life - the birth of the Savior - the summer solstice celebrates the birth of the one who bears witness to the Truth: John the Baptist. The six-month age²⁷⁷ difference between John the Baptist and Jesus Christ corresponds exactly to the interval between the two solstices. Symbolically, the period of the sun's gradual descent coincides with the Christian moment in which the last prophet of the Old Testament begins to 'decrease' in importance to make room for the Hope to be born: '*He must increase, but I must decrease*' (John 3:30).

According to popular tradition, the elderly hoped to pass away as Christians during two specific times of the year: *Bright Week* (the first week after Easter) or during the summer solstice, when sunlight lingers longest upon the earth. Light is fundamentally associated with the principle of Good, in contrast to the evil represented by darkness. God Himself is Light ('...*Light from Light, true God from true God*...'), and in the Jewish tradition, the presence of God (the *Shekhinah*) is perceived palpably through light²⁷⁸.

Beyond physical sunlight, there exists the True Light - uncreated and inaccessible to mortals. This is the primordial light, of which a mere spark was taken

²⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 305.

²⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 309.

²⁷⁷ „Cum a auzit Elisabeta, urarea Mariei i-a săltat pruncul în pânțele, și Elisabeta s-a umplut de Duhul Sfânt” (Luca 1, 41).

²⁷⁸ Ivan Evseev, *Enciclopedia semnelor și simbolurilor culturale*, Editura Amarcord, Timișoara, 1999.

to make God's work, life itself, possible. This is the light for which philosophers and sages have long yearned; it is synonymous with Glory, the Word, and the Logos in the works of the Evangelists. Thus, 'enlightenment' becomes synonymous with 'knowledge.' The enlightened man, typically an elder, was regarded as a guiding beacon for the entire community. Furthermore, there is a direct etymological and conceptual link between 'the world' (*lumea*) and 'light' (*lumina*); humanity could not exist without light, which is inextricably linked to warmth, the rebirth of nature, and life itself. Finally, in His Harrowing of Hell, Jesus brought light to a place that, until then, had known only eternal darkness and hopelessness.

The lamp that burns in a Christian's home represents the 'light of life,' while the candle lit at the bedside of the deceased serves the same purpose as the light brought during the Harrowing of Hell: to guide the soul toward the True Life found only with God. Traditionally, the embers in a household hearth had to burn continuously for as long as the house stood; if the last coal were extinguished, the household would fall under the dominion of spirits of darkness, whom nothing could drive away. The hearth fire—or later, with the advent of Christianity, the vigil lamp (*candela*)—was the thin thread separating this world from the hereafter.

Light symbolized cosmic order, allowing every living being, man or animal alike, to occupy a place 'under the sun,' whereas darkness represented disorder and primordial chaos. Most benevolent deities were solar, shrouded in brilliance when descending to earth upon a ray of light, in contrast to demons, who manifested only through black storm clouds or the deep shadows of the night. Ritual spells were believed to take hold only between midnight and the first light of dawn; thus, *practitioners* hurried to complete them before the sun appeared. From the complex symbolism of the moon (whose flickering light is borrowed from the sun) and the stars, there emerged a sense of order amidst disorder - of life where once there was only death. This belief remains omnipresent among Indo-European peoples, as evidenced by historical studies on ancient religions²⁷⁹.

The Christian significance of light is most profoundly expressed during the night of the Resurrection, when the priest - lit candle in hand - makes the sign of the Cross and issues the well-known exhortation: 'Come and receive the Light!' Jesus, as the 'Light of the World'²⁸⁰, is carried by every believer as a testament to the living God and His boundless love for humanity. This light of the Resurrection night marks the Christian's passage from spiritual death to eternal life; it is the sign that one shall walk in the Light until the 'fullness of time' - the 'Omega' moment.

²⁷⁹ G. Durand, *Structurile antropologice ale imaginarului*, București, 2000, p. 287; Mircea Eliade, *Tratat de istorie a religiilor*, București, ediția a III-a, București, 1999, p. 132.

²⁸⁰ „Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (Ioan 8, 12).

Stylized roosters atop bell towers or integrated into the decoration of houses and churches are not merely solar personifications; they embody the idea of the soul on watch, vigilant to announce the arrival of the Lord, the True Light. In the first Christian centuries, catechumens baptized on Resurrection night were called 'enlightened' (*photizomenoi*), as this Mystery brought them into communion with the superluminous God. As the theological tradition suggests, God is 'above knowledge' in His essence, for He transcends caused, limited, and containable existence as we know it. Yet, we know He exists because the dependent nature of the world points to an independent, unlimited Cause. His existence is therefore beyond doubt - it is superluminous - though His inner essence remains 'shrouded in darkness' for our finite human understanding²⁸¹.

The *Parable of the Wheat and the Tares*²⁸² serves as an eloquent example of the symbolic association between wheat and light. In this context, the wheat represents faith (light), while the tares signify sin (darkness). This parable represents a profound extrapolation of ancient pre-Christian beliefs, which suggest that one cannot perceive the True Light without having experienced darkness—implying that light cannot exist without its opposite. However, theology clarifies that this is not the case: 'night possesses an autonomous symbolic existence'²⁸³.

In the Gospel of John, the 'Word' (*Logos*) is the Light that the darkness cannot overcome; it is life, hope, and the 'light of men.' Most religions associate the celestial realm with luminosity. In ancient Mesopotamia, for instance, the name for a celestial deity (*dinġir*) is synonymous with 'shining,' just as in Sanskrit, the root *div* means 'to shine' - a term later adopted by the Latins to designate their deities (*divus*, *deus*).²⁸⁴

²⁸¹ Sfântul Dionisie Areopagitul, *Opere Complete și Școlile Sfântului Maxim Mărturisitorul*, traducere, introducere și note de Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, ediție îngrijită de Constanța Costea, Note la *Teologie Mistică*, cap. I, 264, București, 1996, p. 255).

²⁸² „Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares? He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn” (Matei 8, 24-30).

²⁸³ Gilbert Durand, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

²⁸⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Tratat de istorie a religiilor*, ediția a III-a, Editura Humanitas, București, 1999, p. 65.

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TRADITIONAL ART AND RELIGIOUS ETHNOLOGY, ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF ROMANIAN IDENTITY

Romanian folk tradition is, above all, a vital factor in understanding ancient rural communities, while ethnology serves as a discipline that can often provide a clear picture of a past otherwise inaccessible through other scientific research methods. This study proposes an analysis of certain aspects regarding the symbolism of vernacular architecture and folk ornamentation in the Argeş region, exploring how this art form identifies with the concepts of community, traditional occupations, and Orthodoxy.

Until at least a century ago, the rural landscape was so deeply interconnected that any disagreement between its members had to be swiftly settled and brought to the attention of the entire village. The well-known custom of 'Shouting over the Village' (*Strigare peste sat*), typically practiced at the beginning of Lent or during *Lăsatul Secului* across various ethnographic regions of Romania, served to publicize disputes between neighbors, cases of unrequited love where parents opposed marriage and instances where individuals, through negligence, endangered collective harvests or were frequently absent from church²⁸⁵.

This rural interconnectivity was part of a unique form of collective lucidity, in which the entire village reacted to needs as a single entity. It represented an extraordinary capacity for 'on-the-ground' understanding - aimed at resolving misunderstandings between neighbors and, crucially, awakening each villager from any potential 'spiritual numbness,' which was essential for upholding the values that governed the community. Romanian customs and traditions - and here we refer specifically to caroling - did more than just convey wishes for health and abundance in the coming year; they fostered a deep sense of unity. Carolers, whether children or adults, entered every household, observing the health of the family, the state of the homestead, and the presence of marriageable youth. These visits were vital for maintaining a mutual understanding among all who lived within the community, ensuring that the social and moral fabric remained intact.

All these customs, despite their ancient origins, were consistently 'connected' to Orthodox Christianity, as it was the only institution capable of ensuring the unity and identity of the community through what was known as 'the Romanian Law' (*Legea Românească*)²⁸⁶. To further clarify this connection to Christianity, we may look to rituals such as those for banishing drought (*Paparuda*), which almost always featured Orthodox priests leading the ceremonies. Historically, Romanian Orthodoxy remained deeply

²⁸⁵ Ion Ghinoiu, *op. cit.* pp.192-193.

²⁸⁶ Dumitru Stăniloae, *op. cit.* p. 241.

connected to the common man, in contrast to Catholicism, which - in certain regional contexts - was often perceived as being aligned with the ruling or exploiting classes.

In this manner, Romanian folk art is also 'positioned,' as the Romanian act of creating and building has always related to the sacred and to nature. Within this context, theological or religious ethnology, as a research discipline, can elucidate many aspects of Romanian customs, as well as the way in which the Romanian peasant constructed both his house and his village.

We note that an overwhelming proportion of Romanian customs and traditions remain 'grafted' onto Christian dogma; examples include *Sângeorz* (Saint George) and *Sumedru* (Saint Demetrius), which serve as mythical representations of the beginning and end of the pastoral year. These customs of pre-Christian origin have endured through the centuries not merely via collective memory, as it might first appear, but through the Church itself, being perpetuated and adapted to Christianity by Holy Tradition.

Folklore is omnipresent at canonical levels, ranging from the iconographic programs promoted by Sacred Art to the subtle intonations present in psaltic music. Naturally, these influences in no way diminish the artistic standards or the sacred character of the icons and liturgical chants

The construction of wooden and masonry churches in the Argeş ethnographic region - and indeed throughout most of the Romanian territory - profoundly influenced the way peasants built their households. The porch of the house, much like the narthex or porch of a church, served a purifying role; it made the head of the family aware that before entering the sacred universe of the home, he had to cleanse himself of evil thoughts. The house was partitioned in such a way that the rooms carried the significance of the nave and, in certain instances, even the altar. To illustrate this, we highlight the 'clean room' (*odaia bună*), a space entered only by the head of the family. This room typically lacked a stove, as it was never intended for daily living, and was regarded by the children with a sense of profound veneration²⁸⁷.

The trilobed arch of the house porch, still a common feature today, signifies the Holy Trinity, while the steps leading up to it - typically three, five, or more - suggest man's inherent need for ascension, serving as an allegorical staircase between heaven and earth²⁸⁸. To further elucidate this semiotic dimension, we may look at the Episcopal Cathedral of Curtea de Argeş, also known as the Argeş Monastery - the necropolis of the early Basarab dynasty and the Kings of Romania. Access to the cathedral's narthex is gained via twelve steps, symbolizing the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Metaphorically, the believer who ascends this ladder remains within the realm of the Old Testament - the Old

²⁸⁷ Ion Tița-Nicolescu, *op. cit.*, p. 161

²⁸⁸ Ivan Evseev, *op. cit.*, 542

Law. Upon entering the expanded narthex, the individual is then placed within the sphere of the New Law, the New Testament, and thus, in the grace of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

The biblical and Christian symbolism is further reinforced by the church's interior, which is supported by twelve beautifully decorated stone pillars representing the Twelve Apostles. This architectural feature echoes the words of the Savior: *'I did not come to destroy the Law, but to fulfill it'* (Matthew 5:17-18)²⁸⁹. The construction of these grand places of worship gave rise to such religious symbolism, as well as to folkloric texts concerning human sacrifice - themes that emerge when something of profound spiritual consistency is to be erected. More precisely, the belief is that nothing is enduring unless it is rooted in sacrifice, as depicted in The Ballad of Master Manole. In this narrative, the hero's death leaves behind a monument that lasts forever, paralleling the Savior's sacrifice on the Cross. This form of religious syncretism created a 'folkloric Christianity' within the Balkan and Romanian spheres, adapted to the understanding of the common person. The immolation of Ana, within the context of this folkloric tradition, relates to the concept of the 'foundational sacrifice' (*sacrificiul de întemeiere*). Just as a shadow was allegorically 'built in' to ensure a structure's endurance, the death of the craftsman (Manole – Emanuel) represents the sacrifice that sustains all creation. Christianity tacitly adopted these folkloric categories, integrating them into the local canon. We further note that this assimilation of ancient telluric and astral symbols by Christianity has existed since its inception, primarily because the common people held a simpler, more pragmatic perspective regarding their relationship with the supernatural²⁹⁰.

Returning to the sphere of traditional Romanian art and its symbolism, we find numerous parallels with Christian iconography. If the steps represented the first stride toward heaven - since access to a sacred space was perceived as an ascent to divine realms - the porch pillars, carved in twists, reinforced the idea of climbing toward the eternal Kingdom of God²⁹¹. In popular tradition, the concept of ascending to the deity's dwelling is omnipresent across various decorative and ornamental elements. This spiral, which suggests a journey to Heaven, is also a feature of church bell towers.

In Romanian wooden architecture - particularly in the Oltenia region, and predominantly in Gorj - porch pillars are frequently carved into ascending spirals. This decorative motif, like other elements in the home's ornamentation, carries both an apotropaic function and the weight of a Christian confession. From a psychological, moral, and religious perspective, the twisted rope (*frânghia răsucită*) positioned vertically in wood or stone places man on a path toward an absolute reality²⁹² (Fig. 2). The notion of human's communion with God during his lifetime is embedded in these ornamental

²⁸⁹ Ion Țița-Nicolescu, *op. cit.* 201.

²⁹⁰ Rober Knapp, *op. cit.*, p. 2024

²⁹¹ Gabriela Păsărin & Ion Țița-Nicolescu coordonatori, *op. cit.*, pp. 199-208

²⁹² Victor Aga, *op. cit.*, p. 542.

models, which may be physical (pillars, stairs, bell towers, spires) or immaterial, as seen in agrarian, wedding, or funeral rituals. Funerary pillars, still prevalent in Romanian cemeteries, are perhaps the most conclusive examples of a bridge between pagan and Christian symbolism. The piece of wood, carved into a chain of overlapping rhomboids, served as the path the soul would take to heaven. The most famous iteration of this funerary pillar is Constantin Brâncuși's 'Endless Column.' The sculpture itself is profound in its representation: the soul's arduous but infinite journey toward God.

Numerous geometric shapes with symbolic value are integrated - often subtly - into both vernacular and ecclesiastical architecture. While we have previously mentioned the vertical twisted ropes (*torsades*) found on the pillars of church and house porches, the horizontal *torsade* is equally significant. This element is perhaps best known for encircling the naves of ancient wooden and stone churches (Fig. 3). It is worth noting that, until less than a century ago, it was considered a grave impiety to construct a church without this twisted 'belt' surrounding the nave. The presence of this rope, whether crafted from wood or stone, is linked to the Synoptic Gospels (*Matthew 8:23–27*); at this point, the small, struggling ship enters the vast Christian repository of metaphors, representing the Church as a vessel of salvation²⁹³.

The ship became one of the earliest Christian symbols, representing the Church, while the storm that tossed it upon merciless waves signified the world in opposition to the Savior and faith in Him. This small vessel, seemingly at the mercy of unleashed chaos, does not sink for two fundamental reasons. First, God Himself—Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity—is on board. Second, the Savior's infinite love for humanity keeps the ship anchored; in this metaphorical context, His love acts as the mooring lines that prevent the vessel from being torn asunder by the waves. These waves, in turn, depict the hardships of life in a world as turbulent and 'agitated' as a storm.

In conclusion, the horizontal twisted rope found on churches suggests God's eternal love, which binds the Church, the individual, and the community together. This symbolic-ornamental element is also present on certain peasant houses - though often in a more stylized form than its ecclesiastical counterparts - carrying a potent apotropaic significance. It functioned as a 'magic circle' that protected the family from the malevolent influence of evil spirits, effectively transforming the household into a liturgical space akin to a church or a shrine²⁹⁴.

Obviously, the multitude of sacred signs present in both secular and ecclesiastical spaces does not end here; it continues with mythical representations (avimorphic, zoomorphic, anthropomorphic) and geometric shapes (triangles, circles, rectangles, squares, rosettes), all suggesting the idea of divine protection. Among the

²⁹³ Cristian Bădiliță, *op. cit.* p. 147

²⁹⁴ Elena Iagăr, *op. cit.*, pp. 125-127

avimorphic forms, the most common is the rooster. As an image of the sun and an allegorical representation of Jesus Christ, it was omnipresent - until at least half a century ago - on the roofs of both houses and churches. A symbol of vigilance, penance, and true repentance (recalling Saint Peter's rooster), this apotropaic and psychopomp bird (believed to accompany the soul to the *Afterlife*) announced the sunrise and, by extension, the expulsion of the darkness and chaos that had overtaken the world in the absence of light.

The rooster, crafted from ceramic, wood, or metal on church spires, serves a dual purpose: it reminds us that the Church watches over its 'flock' and signals to the faithful the necessity of a life of vigilance and prayer²⁹⁵. Regarding the Holy Tradition of the Church, we recall that in Sacred Art, each Evangelist (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) is often depicted alongside Christ Pantocrator on the central dome. Each is associated with a specific anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, or avimorphic symbol: Matthew is represented by a man or angel, Mark by a lion, Luke by an ox, and John by an eagle. While we will not delve into the complex religious symbolism of these figures, it is important to note that they profoundly inspired secular ornamentation.

Religious and folkloric syncretism is not limited to decoration and ornamentation; it extends to agricultural, pomicultural, and viticultural rituals across the seasons, as well as to solstitial and equinoctial rites, even influencing local gastronomy. A notable example is the spring custom of March 9th (the equinox according to the Old Style calendar), dedicated to the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste - soldiers in Emperor Licinius's army who, according to Christian tradition, were martyred in Sebaste, Armenia. The commemoration of their martyrdom overlaps with pre-Christian equinoctial festivals and ancestral customs related to the cult of the dead, which are prevalent in Romanian popular culture. On this day, people prepare sweet ritual breads in various shapes (braided wreaths or anthropomorphic figures) known, depending on the ethnographic region, as *bradoși*, *bragoveți*, or *măcinici*²⁹⁶.

Returning to the realm of religious and apotropaic symbols, we shall highlight a few geometric figures that are omnipresent in both vernacular and ecclesiastical architecture: the triangle, the circle, and the square.

The triangle is one of the universal symbols of perfection, closely linked to the biblical and Christian mystical meanings of the number three - specifically, the Divine Being manifest in three sacred Persons: God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit (Fig. 1). Typically, in Christian ornamentation, the triangle represents God the Father, who is often depicted as a vigorous elder with long white hair, his head framed by a triangular nimbus (halo) inscribed with the Greek letters 'ω, ο, υ'—meaning 'I Am Who I

²⁹⁵ Victor Aga, *op. cit.*, p. 91

²⁹⁶ Ofelia Văduva, *op. cit.* 90

Am' (Fig. 4). It should be noted that this graphic representation of the Father is not strictly canonical, but rather stems from a primordial human desire to anthropomorphize the Divine. According to Christian dogma, the invisible Principle of Life is uncircumscribable and cannot be depicted in images. Nevertheless, this iconography is tacitly accepted in older Orthodox wall paintings. The only representation that holds true canonicity, however, is the Holy Trinity by Rublev, depicting three identical angels seated at a table (symbolizing equality within the Trinity). Each angel is accompanied by an emblematic background: a temple for the Father (the Creator), a tree for the Son (the Wood of the Cross), and a rock for the Holy Spirit (asceticism and spiritual strength). In secular ornamentation, the triangle is primarily found on gates—the first defense against malevolent spirits—as well as on doors, pillars, and household objects. A triangle with its apex pointing upward is a potent masculine signifier, while one with its apex pointing downward is profoundly feminine; when adjacent, these shapes suggest the harmony of opposites²⁹⁷.

In cosmic religions, the symbolism of the circle refers to the concept of divinity, as it represents continuous and eternal movement, thus becoming an image of homogeneity, perfection, and eternity (Fig. 5). In popular tradition, the circle was not only a part of the household's apotropaic ornamentation but was also credited with 'therapeutic magic'²⁹⁸ - a power beyond human understanding that served as an insurmountable spiritual boundary for evil spirits.

For this reason, peasant structures were often circular in shape, and even entire villages were built in a circular layout; this is why, during the medieval period, they were referred to as 'hore'. Similarly, livestock were protected within spherical enclosures known as 'ocoale'²⁹⁹. The magic of the circle extends to the very structure of the ecclesiastical Holy Mysteries - such as the nuptial crowns of the bride and groom - and even reaches the ritual depth of sacred foods, including colaci, round breads, and pretzels.

In a similar vein, we may approach the significance of the square in both secular and religious structures. As a geometric figure that represents perishable matter - and, by extension, humanity - through its broken lines, the square refers to God's creation in opposition to the circle and triangle, which represent the celestial realm. There are four Gospels just as there are four cardinal points, making an obvious reference to concepts such as stability. Popular tradition regarded the square or the rectangle, which formed the basis of structures (the house foundations), as primordial forms connecting heaven and earth. Through the foundation of the house, the square becomes the Earth, while the circle - manifested in the rounded dome of a church - represents the Sky.

²⁹⁷ Ivan Evseev, *op. cit.* pp. 614

²⁹⁸ Camelia Burghel, *op. cit.* p. 211

²⁹⁹ Traian Herseni, *op. cit.*, pp. 256-257

The fact remains that common people infused their manner of building homes and churches - and indeed, the way they guided their lives - with a profound spiritual essence that inextricably linked them to the Divine Creator. Today, however, the individual deeply anchored in the moral values of Christianity has nearly vanished. His place has been taken by an individual raised in a society in constant flux - a society that is, if not overtly atheistic, then often 'religious' in a superficial sense, devoid of substance, having effectively removed God from the equation of existence.



Fig.1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

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THE WICKED FAIRIES' DAY – APRIL 16th. THE ROPOTIN OF THE BAKING CLAY COVERS

According to popular belief, on April 16th, the *iele* gather to dance the *hora*. Ancient female deities of the forests and waters - and most often malevolent—they are known by various names depending on the ethnographic region: *Iele*, *Dînsele*, *Șoimanele*, *Tăsalii*, *Frumoasele* (The Beautiful Ones), *Milostivele* (The Merciful Ones), *Miluite*, *Jupânesele*, *Vântoasele* (The Wind Spirits), *Nemaipomenitele* (The Unmentionables), *Jude*, *Drăgaice*, *Hărnicele* (The Industrious Ones), *Mândrele* (The Proud Ones), or *Stăpânele* (The Mistresses).

These spirits manifest as young women of incomparable beauty, with tousled hair and heads adorned with flowers. They wear bells upon their feet, and their unspeakably tender voices - which defy any human comparison - deceive weary travelers, leading them to their perdition³⁰⁰. They dance upon the water's edge or in lush, green clearings; yet, wherever they tread, the earth withers, and whatever grows in their wake will be shunned by any animal. Belief holds that whoever beholds them is struck mute or left stunned.

Furthermore, if one is called out to at night from the shadows, it is unwise to answer, for it is likely the *Iele* calling, and responding may leave one paralyzed or crippled. If you happen to cross a river on a Tuesday or a Saturday, you must blow three times over the water and make the sign of the cross to avoid falling ill, in case *the iele* have bathed there³⁰¹. They feed on flowers and possess the power to drain the potency from healing plants and herbs, leaving people defenseless against disease.

Should anyone have the misfortune of encountering them or hearing their melodious song, they would fall gravely ill or lose their mind. In such cases, a ritual known as 'Grabbed from the Meeting' (*Luat de la Întâlnire*) was performed, in which the wise women of the village attempted to rescue the unfortunate victim from the '*Masters*' of the dance. Animals could also be afflicted by the curse of these spirits if they stepped upon the ground where the *iele* had danced or drank from the water in which they had bathed. Livestock

³⁰⁰ I. Aurel Candrea, *Folclorul medical comparat*, Editura Polirom, București, 1999, p. 183.

³⁰¹ Artur Gorovei, *Credințe și superstiții ale poporului român*, Librăria Otto Harrassowitz, Viena, 1915, p. 149.

would be suddenly struck by paralysis (*dambila*), wasting away and refusing to eat until they eventually died.

To counter this, healers gathered medicinal plants according to a strict ritual and prepared a decoction that they applied to the afflicted limb of the person or animal while reciting the following incantation: "*Ye Iele, ye Mistresses; Ye Masters of the Wind; Ye Lordships of the Earth; Who drift through the air; Above the waves of trampled seas; Depart to distant realms; To the ponds, the reeds, the desert wastes; Where the priest does not chant; Where the maiden does not dance; Go to the rabid winds; Where the woodpecker turns upside down; To the mouth of the wind; To the very edge of the earth. Get out from his hand, his body, his nose, and his leg; Rise and walk gently; Restore this man's health; Lest Michael with his fiery sword strike you down!*"³⁰².

"To avoid encountering these fearsome virgin spirits - who brought only illness and pain - travelers carried with them three cloves of garlic, and the roots of lovage, valerian (*odolean*), and mugwort (*drăgaică* or *avrameasă*) - healing plants blessed by God. They would drink water from unknown springs only through a hollowed lovage stem³⁰³. To prevent illness, mothers would anoint their children's soles with garlic if they suspected the children had accidentally stepped on a place haunted by the 'Merciless Ones' (*Milostivele*). If magic spells and ointments proved ineffective, those afflicted by the *Iele* had to submit themselves to being trampled by the Călușari horsemen during their ritual dance. Villagers whose homes were situated on the outskirts of the settlement would mount the skulls of horses or cattle upon their walls or fences to scare the spirits away. Frequently, these entities were likened to deities of death - a concept also found in Slavic beliefs, where similar beings (often referred to as 'shadows') were supernatural spirits that tormented pregnant women, postpartum mothers (*lehuze*), and newborn infants.³⁰⁴

Romanian lore and superstitions suggest that these are the rebellious spirits of the dead who, having arrived in our world on Holy Thursday, failed to return to the hereafter on Pentecost Sunday. Instead, they remained to haunt the fields and forests, harming people or depriving them of their sanity. They were also known as '*Vântoase*' (Wind-Spirits), believed to whisper to small children and cause them to shake their heads; such madness could only be cured with the 'grass of the wind' (*iarba vântului*)³⁰⁵.

³⁰² *Ibidem*, p. 385.

³⁰³ *Ibidem*, 387.

³⁰⁴ I. Aurel Candrea, *op.cit.*, p. 188.

³⁰⁵ Tudor Pamfile, *Mitologie poporului roman*, Editura Saeculum, I. O., București, 2018, p. 659.

In certain incantations, 'Trif the Mad' (Saint Tryphon) is invoked—celebrated in early February during the *Arezanul Viilor* ritual—as he was believed to protect people from losing their minds if they were brushed by the 'evil wing' of these Mistresses. The Mother of God and Sân-Toader (Saint Theodore) were also called upon as defenders of women. The 'Ruthless Ones' were notoriously jealous of women more beautiful than themselves; if they encountered them on secluded paths, they would transform into old or young women to entice them into a touch or a kiss. Those touched would break out in sores or suffer hair loss.

To treat these ailments, healers sought the aid of the *Mother of God*, and specifically of *Sân-Toader* to counter the loss of hair. These spirits were so powerful that, often, a single healer was insufficient.

In the Banat region, it required one old woman and eight young girls to save someone 'touched by the *iele*.' "They would go together with the sick person to a river, each carrying a bouquet of various flowers. The old woman would soak her coat in the water, strike the patient on the head with it, and chant: '*Return to your senses; let the strength return to where it was; let it be as it once was.*' The eight girls would repeat these words, circling the sick man three times."³⁰⁶

In popular belief, the harm they inflicted was likened to that of much darker apparitions, such as the *Strigoi* (the undead), the *Moroi*, or the Devil himself. Elena Niculiță-Voronca records such folklore collected from the villages of northern Moldova, where these demons could cripple, strike mute, or cause people to lose their minds, much like the *iele*. They travel only in bands, similar to other sylvatic deities such as the 'Filipii' or the 'Circovii'. Their disturbing beauty bewitched the minds of young men and travelers, who followed them – enchanted – into the endless forests, only to fall prey to wild beasts or be lost forever. While they typically harmed women depending on the season, during the Summer Solstice (June 21st), these spirits transformed into favorable deities – the *Sânziene* (Holy Maidens).

In this form, they became protectors of young women of marriageable age, helping them to find their destined partner (*ursitul*), who was invoked through love charms and incantations.

In the Banat region, each of these spirits had a name; they were generally odd in number (3, 5, 7, 9) and less frequently even³⁰⁷. The numerous

³⁰⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 332.

³⁰⁷ Ion Ghinoiu, *Obiceiuri populare de peste an*, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1997, p. 87.

names attributed to them stem from the popular belief that the true name of evil should never be uttered, lest the spirit thinks it is being summoned. This is similar to how the Devil is often referred to by euphemisms (such as *Aghiuță*, 'The One who dwells in the deserts,' or 'The One killed by the Cross') or how wild animals like the wolf (*Găvat*, *Gadin*, *Gădinet*) and the bear (*Moș Martin*, 'He', 'The Old Man') are addressed. The *iele* were called by their proper names (*Ruja*, *Ruxandra*, *Păscuța*, *Cosânzeana*, *Sânziana*, *Ana*) only when they ceased to be malevolent, transforming into *Sânziene* or 'Good Fairies' who helped young women find their partners.

In Romanian mythology, the *Iele* were often identified with other malevolent female spirits of the forests or rivers, such as *hale*, *boglodate*, *lohoane*, *vile*, or *vârtejuri* (whirlwinds)³⁰⁸. While there are similarities between the *Iele*, the spirits of Pentecost (*Rusalii*), the *Sânziene*, and the *Drăgaice*, there are also significant differences, with villagers identifying each specifically on certain days of the year. In the Orthodox Christian calendar, this day coincides with the commemoration of the Holy Virgins Agapia, Chionia, and Irene.

The Ropotin of the Baking Clay Covers (*Răpotinul Țestelor*) is a movable feast, generally observed on the third Tuesday after Easter. It is a day dedicated to women, who were traditionally tasked with crafting the clay covers (*țeste*) used for baking bread. They would gather in a courtyard to collectively fashion a bell-shaped lid from a mixture of earth and straw, typically no more than one meter in diameter. This 'bell' was then smoothed with clay and left to dry in the sun.

Throughout the year, it was used to bake bread or corn cakes (*mălai*). The dough was placed on the hot hearth - sometimes atop vine leaves - and covered with the *țest* as if with a lid, around which embers were gathered to intensify the heat. At the top, a hole was fitted with a rounded wooden handle used to lift the cover.

This custom has its origins in the Neolithic beginnings of clay processing, a craft traditionally reserved exclusively for women³⁰⁹. There is a logical explanation for this: since antiquity, the earth has been identified with the Mother Goddess, an all-encompassing, life-giving female presence to whom only women had access through ritual adoration³¹⁰.

The etymology of Ropotin or Răpotinul remains uncertain, though it likely derives from the Slavic verb *a roboti* (to work), which is still used in

³⁰⁸ Tudor Pamfile, *Op.cit.*, pp., 664-665.

³⁰⁹ Ion Ghinoiu, *Op.cit.*, p. 165.

³¹⁰ James George Frazer, *Worship of Nature*, vol. I, London, 1926, pp. 344-440.

Romanian. On this day, wives were permitted to behave harshly toward their husbands - an act accepted by men without offense. Because the custom fell on one of the 'Forbidden Tuesdays,' the ceremony carried a distinctly malevolent aura.

Ropotin on 'Angry Tuesday' was believed to be a day of intense demonic activity; thus, women fashioned as many *țeste* as possible, believing that with each one made, a devil perished. In this context, the 'devil' represented an ancient telluric deity who was symbolically tormented - trampled, burned, and molded - through the various phases of clay processing until, upon the completion of the *țest*, the deity finally died.

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ETHNOLOGICAL THEMES IN THE RELIGIOUS ORNAMENTATION OF THE ARGEȘ REGION - THEOLOGICAL ETHNOLOGY, A RESEARCH DISCIPLINE

Abstract:

The aesthetic program promoted by sacred art is an attempt to portray the values and principles of Christianity in as real and tangible a form as possible. Within biblical and Christian symbolism, there are decorative elements with profound meanings that originate in the pre-Christian period of the Romanian population. Spirals, twisted ropes (*torsades*), geometric figures, and both telluric and astral symbols were adopted by Christianity and integrated into the ecclesiastical canon. A significant portion of these decorative and ornamental elements tells the story of small rural communities from more than a century and a half ago. While the local meanings of these symbols were largely lost as those communities dissolved into industrial society, theological ethnology - supported by Christian dogma - allows us to reconstruct how the deeply religious Romanian villages in northern Argeș County thought and acted.

Keywords:

Theological ethnology, as a research concept, was proposed by scholars such as James George Frazer as a means through which ethnology can be understood through the lens of theology and vice versa. In the present study, we employ this discipline to address the contribution of Orthodox theology to the study of rural civilization and culture. We observe that in the construction of wooden and masonry churches erected until the first half of the 20th century, there are decorative elements that inextricably link ecclesiastical tradition to popular tradition. Often, the itinerant craftsmen who painted biblical and New Testament scenes inside wooden wayside crosses (*troițe*) or peasant churches were not fully versed in the strict canons of the Byzantine hermeneia (*erminia*). Consequently, they infused religious representations with a strong folk influence - specifically reflected in the saints' clothing, gestures, facial expressions, and their positioning within the pictorial space. The situation of masonry churches, particularly those founded by boyar families, differs; their painters were typically trained in monasteries. Nevertheless, even in these structures, we find many decorative elements rooted in rural customs, such as circular dances (*hore*)³¹¹ or scenes from daily village life.

³¹¹ Constantin Bobulescu, *Lăutari și hori în pictura bisericilor noastre*, în „Balcania”, nr. VII, tomul I, Editura: Monitorul Oficial și Imprimeriile Statului. Imprimeria Națională, București, 1940, p. 237. Textul în limba franceză este preluat în: *Maria c. Goleșcu, Scrieri*, editată de Muzeul Viticulturii și Pomiculturii Golești, Golești, 2012, p. 170. This scene can be found in the church of Valea Popii, located near the town of Câmpulung Muscel, in Argeș County..

The presence of these elements - originally external to the biblical and Christian tradition - upon the exterior walls of churches is not an anomaly in ecclesiastical painting. Indeed, many places of worship feature the likenesses of **ancient Greek scholars**, such as Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch, or Pythagoras, and even the **Sibylline prophetesses** from Greek mythology³¹². These representations depict individuals who exist outside the traditional 'matrix' of the Christian saint (Photo 6). Naturally, these figures are not placed 'centrally' within the viewer's gaze; they are situated in less prominent areas to clearly differentiate them from the canonized saints. A similar distinction applies to the fallen angels (demons), who in Byzantine art are also depicted on the exterior walls, within the porch, or the narthex. They are rendered in dark hues - typically black or deep blue - with faded, blurred features, deliberately designed to avoid being highlighted. In contrast, in Roman Catholic painting, the devil is often depicted in a more terrifying and explicit manner; his grotesque face, with sharply defined features, is intended to evoke a profound sense of disturbance and dread within the viewer's soul³¹³.

"Orthodox iconography, particularly of the Byzantine style, maintains an intentionally blurred representation of the devil's features. In Romanian churches, demons are depicted with ill-defined faces—a visual approach that aligns with popular beliefs, where the devil, frequently called 'Aghiuță' ('the little saint') in folk tales and common speech, possesses an ambivalent value³¹⁴. In this folk perspective, the devil is not depicted as purely malevolent; on the contrary, he can sometimes assist people in discovering hidden abilities³¹⁵. Furthermore, the iconography of wayside crosses (*troițe*) often reflects folk narratives in which the Mother of God or Saint Parascheva are transformed, in the community's consciousness³¹⁶, into figures such as Holy Sunday (*Sfânta Duminică*) or Holy Friday (*Sfânta Vineri*), typically depicted in traditional folk costumes. While the craftsmen of these crosses may not have possessed a thorough knowledge of Sacred Art, it is certain that their paintings preserved the unique imprint of the artisan and the community, without undue concern for deviating from the strict iconographic canon Man has always sought to anthropomorphize the Divine; consequently, representations of the Holy Trinity - where God the Father is depicted as a vigorous elder with long white hair and a

³¹² Dionisie de Furna, *Erminia picturii bizantine*, Editura Sofia, București, 2000, pp. 98-99.

³¹³ Constantine Cavaros, *Ghid de iconografie bizantină*, Editura Sofia, București, 2005, p. 201.

³¹⁴ On the Ambivalence of the Sacred in: Mircea Eliade, *Tratat de istorie a religiilor*, Editura Humanitas, ediția a III-a, București, 1999, p. 27.

³¹⁵ Ion Creangă's 'Dănilă Prepeleac' serves as a seminal tale regarding the perception of the Devil, as a negative entity, within the Romanian village community.

³¹⁶ Elena Iagăr, *Troița românească, artefact ritual, decorativ*, (în manuscris), Craiova, 2023, p. 44.

triangular nimbus, seated alongside the Son and the Holy Spirit - remain deeply resonant and well-received by the faithful.

In traditional Orthodox iconography, there are only two canonical ways to represent the Holy Trinity: first, through the person of Jesus Christ ('*He who has seen Me has seen the Father*')³¹⁷ and second, through Andrei Rublev's Trinity, based on the scene of the 'Hospitality of Abraham'³¹⁸. The representation of the Holy Trinity where the Father appears as an old man is found not only on altars but also on the central part of the iconostasis. This is likely due to a confusion with the 'Ancient of Days' (*Cel Vechi de Zile*) icon—which, according to *The Book of Daniel*, is actually a representation of the Savior³¹⁹. To clarify this, we must recall the period leading up to the Seventh Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 787 (nu 1787), when Pope Gregory II urged the iconoclastic Emperor Leo the Isaurian to restore the veneration of icons. The Pope explicitly stated that the person of the Father—as the principle of life and the divine essence - cannot be graphically depicted because no one has ever seen Him.³²⁰ Conversely, the representation of the Son and the Holy Spirit is mandatory, as they manifested through theophanic circumstances, revealing themselves to humanity.

Since the medieval period, iconographic representations of the person of the Father across Catholic and Orthodox traditions have provided a greater sense of clarity to the layperson lacking formal theological training, who otherwise found it difficult to grasp the 'workings' of the Divine Being. According to Orthodox dogmatic theology³²¹, God is a Rational Being - in whose image humanity was created - subsisting as three distinct Persons of the same Essence (*Ousia*). These Persons exist without merging or confusion, dwelling in a perfect harmony of perichoresis³²² (mutual indwelling).

The Christian canonical teaching on antinomies remains largely unknown to the average believer, falling primarily within the prerogative of dogmatists and theologians; naturally, it was even less understood by the common, unlettered person. Indeed, describing and comprehending God in His entirety has always been an 'impossible mission' for theologians - an idea often underscored by antinomies that were difficult to accept and digest, even among the learned clergy. The Synod Fathers had to contend with sophisticated philosophical arguments, such as those of

³¹⁷ *Ioan* 14, 9.

³¹⁸ Constantine Cavarnos, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

³¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 173.

³²⁰ Lucian Dincă, *Conciliile ecumenice. Constantinopol II (553) și III (680-681) & Niceea (787)*, Editura Galaxia Gutenberg, Tg. Lăpuș, 2018, p. 213.

³²¹ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. I, ediția a IV-a, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă (în continuare: I.B.M.O.), București, 2010, pp. 293-312.

³²² Termen care explică teologic existența Treimii (Tatăl, Fiul și Sfântul Duh) într-o singură Ființă.

the Arians, who could easily argue for a singular, unitarian God by drawing on Jewish tradition, Greek philosophy, and even ancient myths. For these heretics, the concept of tri-unity (*Deo-existence*) was as difficult to accept as the notion of a Christ created in time and space was for the Holy Fathers. In this context, the Church of the first centuries superimposed its feasts upon pre-Christian ones, specifically to make them more easily understood and accepted. Following the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, the Church succeeded in attracting cultured and influential individuals to its ranks; this, in turn, fostered a new political vision and a new social reality, such as the emergence of the ecclesiastical career. The prominent figures of early Christianity were erudite theologians who possessed the intellectual breadth to synthesize Christian theology with pagan philosophy, alongside political acumen and unwavering faith. These included, among others, Saints Basil the Great, Athanasius of Alexandria, Ambrose of Milan, and Augustine of Hippo. We have analyzed these developments to emphasize the significance of pagan culture within Christian teaching, and to highlight the vital role this heritage played in the formation of Christian dogma.

Paganism, as a philosophical framework, often serves to complement Christological philosophy; thus, religious syncretism is not a novelty within the spectrum of the Christian faith. In this context, we must recall the two great ecclesiastical centers - Alexandria and Antioch - which, during the Patristic period, gave the world the Great Exegetes and Apologists known as the Holy Fathers of the Church. These figures played a defining role in the sedimentation of Christian dogma. The two schools rooted their teachings in distinct philosophical traditions: Alexandria drew upon Plato, favoring a more allegorical interpretation, while Antioch relied on Aristotle, adopting a more rational and critical approach³²³. Furthermore, the earliest Christian preachers in Greece - the civilized world of that era - often spoke of Jesus as a 'Great Philosopher,' akin to Plato or Pythagoras, for whom philosophy was not merely a science but a way of life. This was necessary because the ancient Greek mind found it difficult to conceive that a man in direct communion with the Supreme Divinity could be anything other than a philosopher, yet still merely human, lacking divine essence³²⁴. Ultimately, it was the Apostle Paul who would detach Christianity from its Jewish matrix, proclaiming the true Jesus: *the Crucified One (1 Corinthians 1:23)*.

All the aspects presented above were necessary to highlight the presence of the pagan philosophical spectrum—itsself influenced by polytheistic beliefs—within

³²³ Ion Tița-Nicolescu, *Tradiții populare și dogmă creștină. Scurtă incursiune în sincretismul religios românesc – lunile mai și iunie*, Editura Etnologică, București, 2024, p. 218.

³²⁴ Claudio Moreschini, Enrico Noreli, *Isoria literaturii creștine vechi grecești și latine, De la Apostolul Pavel la Constantin cel Mare*, vol. I, tom I, Editura Polirom, București, 2013, p. 26.

the context of the first Christian centuries. While an ethnologist does not necessarily have to be a theologian to complete their research, we believe it is essential to understand the fundamental elements that led to the formation of dogma. A prime example is the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, which established, through its canons, the defining aspects of the Church's future historical journey. It was here that the Nicene Creed, the date of Easter, the celebration of Christmas, as well as various linguistic conventions³²⁵ and ecclesiastical norms not explicitly found in Sacred Scripture, were established. These elements constitute the foundation of Dogma and, by extension, of Holy Tradition. Therefore, we observe that an overwhelming proportion of Romanian customs and traditions remain 'grafted' onto Christian dogma to this day. This continuity is not solely a result of collective memory, as one might first assume, but is perpetuated and adapted through the Holy Tradition of the Church. Folklore is present at all canonical levels, ranging from the iconographic programs of Sacred Art to the subtle melodic intonations of psaltic music.

Naturally, these folkloric presences within the traditionalist framework of the Church do not compromise artistic standards or sacred character. Adherence to the hermeneia (*erminia*) remains mandatory for the interior painting of places of worship³²⁶; thus, folk elements typically appear in the exterior ornamentation rather than within the sanctuary itself. However, in many churches - especially wooden ones from the early 19th century - we find that craftsmen often used local village women as models for the likeness of the Mother of God³²⁷. Furthermore, folkloric elements frequently appear in the porch (*pridvor*), an architectural feature that is not strictly mandatory in the standard church plan of narthex, nave, and altar. In many cases, porches were enlarged to fulfill the community's need for a space where villagers could discuss social issues after the service or gather for communal feasts (*praznice*)³²⁸. These porches also served as the first village schools, where teachers taught children to read³²⁹ and write (Photo 1). A remarkable example of this cultural synthesis is found at the Aninoasa Monastery in Argeş (founded by the boyar

³²⁵ The primary term adopted at Nicaea – *homoousion*, of one essence (consubstantial) – was used to demonstrate the consubstantiality of the Father with the Son. It is certain that not all those present at the proceedings accepted its use, as they believed it referred to a philosophical system reminiscent of nature or substance.

³²⁶ I.D. Ștefănescu, *Pictura religioasă*, în Revista „Glasul Bisericii”, an XIX, nr. 1-2, ianuarie, februarie, 1960, pp. 48-57.

³²⁷ The Church of 'Saint Demetrius the New' from Cotmeana, Argeş, built in 1814. Today, it is exhibited in the open-air museum within the Golești Museum, Argeş. Cod LMI: AG-II-m-A-13697.

³²⁸ Radu Crețeanu, *Bisericile de lemn din Muntenia*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1969, p. 27.

³²⁹ Ion Tița-Nicolescu, *Argeşul și Mușcelul văzute de călători străini și prin documente autohtone (secolele XVI-XVIII) – istorie și folclor*, Editura Lumen, Iași, 2023, p. 94.

Tudoran Vlădescu in 1685), where a complete horoscope is painted upon the porch ceiling.

Sacred art depicts the values of Christianity in the most tangible and profound way possible. Within biblical and Christian symbolism, there are decorative elements with deep-seated meanings that originate in the pre-Christian period of the Romanian people. Spirals, twisted ropes (*torsades*), geometric figures, and both telluric and astral symbols were adopted by Christianity and integrated into the ecclesiastical canon. A significant portion of these decorative and ornamental elements tells the story of small rural communities from more than a century and a half ago. While the local meanings of these symbols were largely lost as those communities dissolved into industrial society, theological ethnology - supported by Christian dogma - allows us to reconstruct the worldview and spiritual life of the deeply religious Romanian villages in northern Argeş County. In the churches of Argeş, several such symbols clearly link the Holy Tradition of the Church to local beliefs. A notable example is the old masonry church of Sălătrucu-Poştea, mentioned in the 1808 census (Priest: Chiriţă; Deacon: Petre). The 1824 catagraphy (land and property register) records it as: *'The Church of Saint John the Baptist, built of stone on the estate of the Holy Metropolis, founded by Captain Ioan'*.³³⁰

The irregular concentric circles on the church's exterior are positioned at the top of the nave, an area typically reserved for the representation of various Christian saints and other sacred figures. Although Christianity has adopted many symbols from diverse traditions, these particular circles may seem, at first glance, to lack a direct dogmatic meaning; instead, they appear to be decorative or to reflect the specific manner in which the community perceived Christian art. However, the irregularity of these circles is so pronounced that it leaves little doubt as to the craftsman's deliberate intent. When it came to the ornamentation of a church - an act that almost always referred to the sacred - the craftsmen not only employed the finest materials but also demonstrated their highest level of skill as a mark of profound honor dedicated to God (Photo 2).

Thus, the presence of irregular circles on the exterior walls carries a religious, albeit local, significance. Exterior murals typically require a wide roof—not necessarily of the Moldavian type, but large enough to offer protection. In cases where the roof is smaller, the use of stucco ornamentation to convey the same sacred message is a welcome alternative. As previously mentioned, the characters depicted in exterior murals, in accordance with ecclesiastical canons, may include Christian

³³⁰ Doru Căpătaru, *Mănăstiri, schituri și biserici din Arhiepiscopia Argeşului și Muşcelului în mileniul al III-lea*, Micromonografie, Editura Arhiepiscopiei Argeşului și Muscelului, Curtea de Argeş, 2015, p. 408.

saints, Greek philosophers, the Magi, the Sibylline prophetesses (Photo 6), prophets, or votive portraits. Additionally, various secular scenes, such as village dances (*hore*) or hunting expeditions, are often represented.³³¹ In conclusion, these images serve as a prototype of man's desire for perfection - that is, for entering into communion with God through the cultivation of moral virtues. A saint, a philosopher, or a prophet is, above all, a mortal being who has discovered the Truth and strives toward its morality. The circle, a symbol of divinity and perfection in all cosmic religions³³², takes on a profound meaning when rendered in an irregular shape on the church wall: it represents the desire of imperfect, sinful man for deification (*theosis*). In the vision of the craftsman and the rural community, every Christian is an 'irregular circle' that possesses the potential to become perfect, much like the nimbus (halo) above the Savior's head. Similarly, a village *hora* is a circle that, through the dancers' shared intent, strives to be so perfectly round that it demonstrates the community's skill and their ability to synchronize in a collective message addressed to both themselves and to God. Symbols of this kind are omnipresent in church ornamentation. Notable examples include the horizontal twisted ropes (*torsades*) (Photo 4), which suggest the idea of a covenant between man and God - as reflected in the Synoptic Gospels³³³, and which, in the rural consciousness, served as a reminder of the bonds between people. There are also triangles (photo 3), phallic symbols³³⁴, solar rhombuses and spirals. Additionally, vertical twists evoke the ascent of angels within the celestial hierarchies and, by extension, the journey of humanity toward the Kingdom of God³³⁵, in the Romanian village, however, these vertical elements were more often likened to the Tree of Life³³⁶.

As noted in the preceding lines, astral and telluric symbols were adopted by Christianity from the Jewish world and various pagan traditions, manifesting in both the architecture and ornamentation of churches. What is most striking about these elements are their meanings. For the most part, the Church has preserved these ancient significances within the canon promoted through Holy Tradition. For this

³³¹ Andrei Paleolog, *Pictura exterioară din Țara Românească: secolele XVIII-XIX*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1984, p. 50.

³³² Ivan Evseev, *Enciclopedia semnelor și arhetipurilor culturale*, Editura Învierii, Timișoara, 1999, p. 36.

³³³ It refers to the Christian symbolism of the ship. The ropes (the *torsades*) are what hold the entire vessel together and prevent it from breaking apart in the midst of storms.

³³⁴ In non-canonical representations of the Holy Trinity, God the Father has His head within a triangle-shaped halo, a symbol of masculine power, but also of perfection.

³³⁵ Pseudo Dionisie Areopagitul, *Ierarhiile cerești*, traducere de Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Paideia, București, 1996, pp. 18-25.

³³⁶ Ion Țița-Nicolescu, *Tradiții populare și dogmă creștină. Scurtă incursiune în sincretismul religios românesc, lunile mai și iunie*, Editura Etnologică, București, 2024, pp. 13-33.

reason, a mastery of hermeneutics, semiotics, and, where appropriate, biblical exegesis, provides the ethnological researcher with a significant advantage in the pertinent interpretation of ornamental symbols. In fact, certain representations of the Mother of God are as deeply rooted in the rural world as the decorative elements originating from the pre-Christian era. The image of the Virgin Mary is precisely defined by Sacred Art: from her facial features and vestments to her gestures and the presence of the Christ Child in her arms³³⁷. Nevertheless, in old rural churches built before the early 20th century, craftsmen often used models of elderly women from their own villages to paint the likeness of the Holy Mother.

Frescoes, such as those found at the Brătășești Monastery (in the commune of Albeștii de Argeș) depicting the Winged Mother of God (Photo 5), or the one at the Princely Church of Curtea de Argeș representing the pregnant Virgin, serve as profound references to Romanian mythical representations found, for instance, in the ornamentation of wayside crosses (*troițe*). Without delving into the intricate details of these depictions, it can be argued that there exists an extensive ethnography of life and death within the Romanian village—one masterfully intertwined with the Christian canon, awaiting further discovery and analysis through the lens of religious ethnology.



Photo 1: The church in Jupânești, Argeș (1742) with the oversized porch.

³³⁷ Constantine Cavarinos, *op. cit.*, p. 185.



Photo 2: The church in Sălătruc, Argeș (1808)



Photo 3: The church in the Golești Museum, (1814).
Triangles on a porch pole



Photo 4. Horizontal spiral on
the nave of the church



Photo 5: Brătășești Monastery (1735), fresco



Photo 6: "The Holy Apostles" Church, Tg Jiu (1937),
Sibyl Prophets on the outer wall of the church.

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SYMBOLS OF THE HEREAFTER IN TRADITIONAL ROMANIAN CULTURE

Abstract:

Elements of popular symbolism with funerary significance are omnipresent and vital to Romanian folklore, as man has always communicated with God through gestures and symbols. Death has consistently been one of the greatest **existential anxieties**, a burden that persists throughout one's entire existence. Rhetorical questions regarding what lies 'beyond' have given rise to numerous **speculations**, as well as to personal, collective, and religious beliefs. The common man possessed a very practical faith; he knew that if he observed certain rituals with steadfast devotion, God would grant his petitions - be it rain, an abundance of fruit, or healthy children. Above all, he believed that through these acts, his soul would undoubtedly reach the Divine Kingdom.

Keywords: *Ritual foods, Christianity, death, symbols, tradition*

Death has always been one of the greatest sources of **existential anguish** for humanity; its burden persists throughout life, and rhetorical questions regarding what lies 'beyond' have given rise to numerous speculations, as well as personal, collective, and religious beliefs. The journey toward Heaven or Hell inspired a rich tapestry of rituals and popular traditions, through which individuals sought to earn the favor of the Divinity who decided their destiny in both earthly and eternal life. Christianity profoundly transformed the concept of 'passing away' by imbuing these two eternal destinations with rigorous theological meaning. The **Holy Fathers of the Church** provided philosophical and theological arguments for the existence of these realms of either boundless happiness or eternal torment³³⁸. The Romanian peasant was often caught between Orthodox Christian teaching - which he embraced with total conviction - and ancient pre-Christian practices that persisted in the Romanian space, sometimes to the dissatisfaction of the Church. Fears concerning the afterlife fostered traditions and ceremonies rooted in ancestral experiences, transmitted orally through generations. These became so closely intertwined with Christian dogma that it is often difficult to distinguish where popular tradition ends and dogma begins. For the common man, death was so significant that - possessing a deep faith if not a formal theology - he was unwilling to take any risks. He dared not

³³⁸ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. I, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Română, București, 2010, pp. 437-485.

neglect the ancient funerary customs intended to appease old deities, nor would he ever disregard the Christian rites of passage.

One such custom, for instance, is that of the *Moși* or the Wandering *Dalbi* (*Moșii de Vară*), a practice present across nearly the entire Romanian geographical landscape, with variations specific to each ethnographic region. Traditions such as the Summer *Moși*, Autumn *Moși* or Winter *Moși*, the '*Moșii de piftii*' in the Cloșani region of Mehedinți County and the clusters of wayside crosses along the roads of Argeș and Oltenia are, in essence, ritual gestures intended to appease and show gratitude toward those who have departed for the '*World of the Righteous*'³³⁹. Ritual foods, such as *coliva*, *colaci*, and braided breads, represent symbolic sacrifices offered on behalf of the deceased. The shaping of dough into anthropomorphic forms - such as the '*Bragoveți*' from southern Argeș, distributed as alms on the day of the *Măcinici* - refers to the ancestral '*saints*' of the family (*moși*), intended to intercede and pray to God for the living. The overlap between the day dedicated to the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste and the ancient Romanian spring customs of purification and the appeasement of ancestral deities (akin to the *Lares* of Greek and Roman mythologies) is undeniable³⁴⁰.

In the following lines, we shall decipher several elements of popular symbolism with profound funerary significance, as humanity has always communicated with the Divine through gestures and symbols. The most important ritual food in popular funerary rites was *coliva*³⁴¹. It was prepared at the time of death, for all subsequent memorial services (*pomeni*) held over the course of seven years, and whenever an offering was made in someone's memory. Another food inextricably linked to funerary rites was the *colac* (votive bread). The popular Romanian expression '*colac peste pupăză*' originates from the strong funerary connotation of the *colac*; the *pupăză*³⁴² was a specific ritual bread given to a young woman at her wedding as a symbol of her fertility. Therefore, to place the funerary *colac* (associated with death) over the 'bread of life' - the *pupăză* (associated with marriage and birth) - was considered entirely unnatural and deeply incongruous.

³³⁹ Elena Iagăr, *Troița în spațiul comunitar. Artefact ritul, decorativ*, Editura Pro Universitaria, București, 2023, p. 113.

³⁴⁰ Ion Ghinoiu, *Sărbători și obiceiuri românești*, Editura Elion, București, 2002, p. 236.

³⁴¹ Ion Ghinoiu, *Cartea românească a morților. De la veacul de om la veacul vecilor*, Editura Univers Enciclopedic Gold, București, 2019, p. 161.

³⁴² "*Pupăză*" vs. "*Hoopoe*": The original text uses the word 'hoopoe' (*pupăză*), but given the focus on ritual gastronomy, I chose to retain the Romanian term *pupăză* to denote a 'ritual bread' rather than the bird itself.

Returning to the ritual food known as *coliva*, we can observe that its funerary significance is closely tied to the symbolism of the grain of wheat and what it represents in both popular and Christian traditions. The grain of wheat was perceived as a living entity, possessed of a soul; consequently, the mills where it was ground were often viewed as haunted or diabolical places, and the miller as a figure who had 'sold his soul to the *Unclean One*'. Wheat - both the grain and the ear - held the power to bind the spirit of man to the spirit of God, serving as a bridge that facilitated communication between mortal and eternal beings. The Savior refers to the grain of wheat and its germinative power in the Gospel of John (12:24-25): *'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.'*

The Arminden pillar, for instance—adorned with flowers or ears of wheat—remained fixed in the ground until the new harvest was ground or the first bread was baked. At that point, the wood was cut into pieces and used to light the oven, ensuring the household would enjoy abundance.³⁴³ In Greek and Roman mythology, Demeter, the goddess of vegetation, was symbolized not only by the narcissus and the poppy but also by the ear of wheat.³⁴⁴ On the occasion of the *Sânziene* festival, young women wove wreaths of wheat ears and flowers, anticipating the great celebration of the summer solstice. Similarly, the white vestments worn by Orthodox clergy during the Holy Pascha are embroidered with patterns of grapevines or roses - referencing the Savior's blood - alongside ears of wheat, which signify life and the hope of salvation.

There was also a wheat festival associated with an Apostle of the Savior - known as 'Bartholomew of the Wheat' (*Vartolomeul Grâului*). This celebration is correlated, on one hand, with the commemoration of the Holy Apostle Bartholomew in the Orthodox calendar on June 11th and, on the other, with the Summer Solstice according to the Old Style (Julian) calendar on June 8th - the period when the wheat harvest began. This day was regarded as a pivotal milestone of time, marking the point when the grain of wheat reached maturity. Romanian tradition assigns this period a special significance, akin to the major Christian feasts, due to the presence of ripened wheat. Wheat was considered not only a sacred gift from God but also the very plant through which He established a covenant with mortals, manifesting His divine love for humanity.

³⁴³ S. F. Marian, *Sărbătorile la români*, vol. II, Editura Fundației Culturale Române, București, 1994, p. 315.

³⁴⁴ Pierre Grimal, *Dicționar de mitologie greacă și romană*, Editura SAECULLUM I.O., București, 2001, p. 139.

All the aspects presented above highlight the profound spiritual significance of this cereal, which imbues every wheat-based dish with a sacred connotation. At first glance, one might assume that coliva is exclusively linked to funerary rites; however, it also possesses an apotropaic role and acts as a fertilizing stimulus. On the feast of Saint Haralambos (February 10th), villages in northern Argeş practice a ceremony known as the 'Custom of the Unfruitful Tree.' In this ritual, the master of the house, armed with an axe, threatens each barren fruit tree, saying: *'Bear fruit or I shall cut you down!'* His wife accompanies him through the orchard, carrying a basket of coliva. Each time the man threatens a tree, the woman intercedes: *'Do not cut it, for it shall surely bear fruit!'* As she speaks, she takes a handful of coliva and carefully anoints the tree trunk. This gesture mirrors a ritual anointing, akin to the chrismation of believers during the *Sacrament of Holy Unction*; however, here the 'holy oil' is represented by the coliva, which is believed to offer divine protection against pests and ensure a bountiful harvest. Human and tree - two living entities - are thus bound within God's love through the ritual use of wheat. This tradition was a widespread practice in southern Romania until the mid-20th century. Following the Palm Sunday service, during Holy Week, housewives would place coliva on the trunks of young fruit trees to protect the blossoms from late frosts. The combination of boiled wheat and honey transformed the coliva into a spiritual shield against malevolent winter spirits³⁴⁵. Furthermore, coliva was regarded as an obligatory sacrifice; at every memorial service (*pomană*), regardless of what other food was served, participants had to consume at least one spoonful of coliva. Over time, it became the quintessential offering of hope and resurrection, a bridge connecting *This World* and *The Beyond*. In the Oltenia region, coliva placed atop a slice of bread, accompanied by a *colac*, was given to child carolers on Christmas Eve.³⁴⁶ In this context, both the *colac* and the coliva served as offerings celebrating the rebirth of nature and the abundance of the coming agricultural year. Indeed, the fertilizing power of coliva was so revered in the Romanian village that peasants would even prepare it for their livestock and poultry to ensure their vitality³⁴⁷.

In the mid-18th century, the ritual significance of *coliva* even led to profound dogmatic disputes. Due to the high number of memorial services, the monks of Saint Anne's Skete on Mount Athos decided to commemorate the deceased on Sundays as well. This practice was vehemently opposed by other

³⁴⁵ Artur Gorovei, *Credinţi şi superstiţii ale poporului român*, Bucureşti, 1915, p. 72.

³⁴⁶ Georgeta Niţu, *Valenţe etnologice ale anului în zona Olteniei*, în „Oltenia-studii şi comunicări”, Muzeul Olteniei, secţia de etnologie „Casa Băniei”, VIII, Etnografie, Craiova, 1997, p. 76.

³⁴⁷ Cercetare de teren pe Valea Topologului, judeţul Argeş, în anul 1994.

prelates, who argued that the paschal joy of the Divine Liturgy should not be overshadowed by the mourning and sorrow associated with the dead. This sparked a fierce controversy, with both sides accusing each other of heresy. Those who insisted that the commemoration of the dead should take place strictly on Saturdays were mockingly labeled '*Colivari*' by their opponents. However, this term was later embraced with pride by those who upheld ancient ecclesiastical customs. Over time, the name became associated with the defenders of the traditional canons and the hesychastic way of life practiced by the Fathers of Mount Athos. Today, the Romanian Orthodox Church continues to uphold these same Christian norms regarding the remembrance of the dead, as established by the '*Colivari*' movement".

In the following lines, we reproduce the method of preparing *coliva*, as recorded in the Oltenia region by the Romanian physician of French origin, Charles Laugier, at the beginning of the 20th century:

Coliva is a stew of pure wheat, selected grain by grain, which is gently crushed in a wooden mortar (*piuă*) and moistened with a little water to dehusk it. The wheat, thus crushed but without breaking the grains, is passed through a sieve to remove the bran. Once hulled, it is washed in several changes of water and then boiled with water and salt. When the grains have boiled until they begin to burst, a little flour is added to thicken the mixture, which is left to simmer over low heat until it reaches the desired consistency. The wealthy add sugar and crushed walnuts to the cooled *coliva*. Once prepared, it is placed on a plate or tray and decorated with borders of sugar flowers and ground nuts. The wealthy bring their offerings to church accompanied by a steward; the middle class by the head of the family, and the poor by the priest alone. Along with the *coliva*, a *prescură* (liturgical bread) and a '*colac of the soul*' are regularly brought in memory of the deceased. In all churches during these days, these offerings are so abundant that they occupy nearly half of the nave. The priest reads endless lists of commemorations (*pomelnice*) for the living and the dead, a process followed with keen interest by the elderly women. Not infrequently, they might remind the priest of a 'Marie' or 'Luxița' whom he may have skipped in his haste - perhaps unintentionally, as these commemorations often span three or four generations³⁴⁸.

Similarly, on their name day, the celebrant would bring to the church a plate of *coliva* prepared on the eve of the feast, in which a candle³⁴⁹ was placed. Beside it, they would place the memorial lists (*pomelnice*) containing the names of the deceased, along with a few coins for the church. Once the *coliva* had been 'blessed' through the priest's prayers, half was distributed among neighbors and the other half among guests. This offering was dedicated to the patron saint

³⁴⁸ Ch. Laugier, *Contribuțiuni la etnografia medicală a Olteniei*, Editura Scrisul Românesc, Craiova, 1925, p. 61.

³⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 74.

whose name the person bore, in the belief that the saint would protect both the celebrant and their family's estate. Thus, the 'celebratory cake' of yesteryear was, in fact, a plate of coliva.

In most cases, coliva was shaped into an oval or round form, imitating a giant grain of wheat offered as a sacrifice for the departed in the World of the Righteous; the gesture itself could be described as an offering of 'a soul for a soul.' Since the Neolithic period, wheat has remained a symbol of man's immortality within God's world. The immortal man - having departed from the earthly realm - remains inextricably bound to the eternal God through simple yet graceful acts performed with love and faith. Christianity teaches that the path to salvation begins here on earth, and this first step is embodied by the grain of wheat and, ultimately, by the ritual manner in which it is prepared³⁵⁰.

Alongside the ritual importance of the wheat offering analyzed above, we find another equally significant element in funerary, nuptial, and even birth ceremonies: the colac (ritual bread). There is a '*Fate-bringers' colac*' (*colacul ursitoarelor*), a '*bride's colac*' (a symbol of fertility and virginity) placed atop the '*wedding tree*' (a virile symbol of the groom), and a '*deceased's colac*' given as alms, which also adorned the '*tree of the dead*'. This funerary tree was typically made from apple branches or a young fir tree. The presence of the *colac* upon the '*tree of the dead*' carries, like *coliva*, the dual significance of sacrifice and fertility, as well as a potent apotropaic role.

The *colaci* (ritual breads) were placed upon the horns of the oxen during the ceremonial first plowing or given as gifts during Christmas and New Year's Eve caroling. The very act of kneading and shaping the dough referred to the Divine Power—the only force capable of molding human life and destiny. As an exceptional ritual food, colaci were prepared in large quantities primarily for funerary events; conversely, at weddings or other joyous occasions, they appeared only singly or in very small numbers, precisely due to their deeper mortuary connotations. The apotropaic symbolism of the colac is most evident during Christmas and New Year, when carolers receive these breads - varying in size and ornamentation depending on their age - from the householders. In this context, the colac is likened, through its circular shape, to the Sun and, by extension, to the fertility of the earth. Indeed, the carolers' wishes, beyond health, focus largely on agricultural and pomicultural abundance. The appeasement of vegetation deities through carols and offerings represented, until at least half a century ago, the very foundation of the Romanian village, as it was one of the

³⁵⁰ Ion Țița-Nicolescu, *Tradiții populare și dogmă creștină, Scurtă incursiune în sincretismul religios românesc, lunile mai și iunie*, Editura Etnologică, București, 2024, p. 117.

few moments in the year when groups of carolers - children, youths, and adults - entered every single household.

In conclusion, it can be argued that the anguish of our ancestors regarding death was not as pronounced as it is today, in an era where humanity has become deeply tethered to material concerns. The common man possessed a remarkably practical faith; he understood that by observing certain rituals with steadfast devotion, God would grant his petitions - be it rain, an abundance of fruit, or healthy children. More importantly, he held the unwavering belief that through these acts, his soul would surely reach the Divine Kingdom.

The act of forgiveness for the deceased was a primary element of funerary rituals, as it determined not only the soul's journey to the Afterworld but also the earthly journey of those left behind who might otherwise withhold forgiveness. The custom of seeking forgiveness for the departed serves as a testament to the faith in the afterlife and in the Divine Judgment - both the Particular Judgment and the Universal or Final Judgment at the Fullness of Time.

These symbols of forgiveness and love - coliva and the colac - remain perhaps the most profound offerings or sacrifices for the departed soul. In essence, they represent a significant portion of the Romanian peasant's Christian existence. For him, these two ritual foods embodied an entire theology of life and death.

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FOREIGN TRAVELERS THROUGH THE ROMANIAN LANDS IN THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES – HISTORY AND ETHNOLOGY IN ARGEȘ AND MUȘCEL

Argeș County is the territorial entity that served as the backbone of what would later become the medieval state of Wallachia. Its first capitals were the cities of Curtea de Argeș³⁵¹ and Câmpulung Muscel—the latter being a prominent trading hub (*târg*) upon which the rulers bestowed numerous and diverse privileges³⁵².

The historical region of Argeș, corresponding to the former Argeș County, is bounded to the north by the ridge of the Făgăraș Mountains. It spans a predominantly hilly and mountainous terrain, extending southward to the confluence of the Vâlsan and Argeș rivers. To the east, the territory reaches the confluence of the Doamnei and Târgului rivers, while its western border is defined by the Olt River; the Argeș region is separated from Muscel by the hills situated between the Bratia and Doamnei rivers³⁵³. The Muscel area, also assimilated to the former county of the same name, stretches between the Vâlsan and Dâmbovița rivers, presenting itself as a homogeneous ethnographic unit. As previously mentioned, these two regions share both common and distinct elements. Shared characteristics, such as pottery and domestic industries - particularly traditional crafts - originate from a heterogeneous developmental space. Regarding their differences, architecture serves as a defining aspect of each historical area. Accounts from foreign travelers, as well as charters issued by princely chancelleries, record these two territories as distinct geographical entities with often differing social structures. Each possessed its own cultural and religious influences and separate backgrounds, which nevertheless influenced one another over time³⁵⁴.

Romanian folk traditions, frequently documented by foreign travelers passing through Romanian lands, remain essential elements in defining the rural communities of past centuries, their daily way of life, and, importantly, their perception of Orthodox Christianity. Customs, rituals, and superstitions have raised

³⁵¹ Nicolae Constantinescu, *Curtea de Argeș (1200-1400). Aupra începuturilor Țării Românești*, Editura Academiei Române, București, 1984, p. 11.

³⁵² Ștefan Trâmbaciu, Gheorghe Pârnuță, *Documente și inscripții privind istoria orașului Câmpulung – Mușcel*, Editura Semne, București, 1999, vol. I, p. 7-8

³⁵³ Florea Bobu Florescu, Paul Stahl, Paul Petrescu, *Arta Populară din zonele Argeș și Mușcel*, Editura Academiei Române, București, 1967, p. 5.

³⁵⁴ Ion Tița-Nicolescu, *Argeșul și Mușcelul văzute de călători străini și prin documente autohtone (secolele XVI-XVIII) – istorie și folclor*, Editura Lumen, Iași, 2023, pp. 9-10.

questions both for those who recorded them in the 18th and 19th centuries and for many of today's ethnologists. In modern rural communities, these traditions have often been perpetuated by virtue of the well-known adage 'it is good to do so,' yet frequently without their original purpose or meaning being fully understood. In these lines, we shall attempt to decipher these seemingly mysterious messages, through which the common man sought to communicate with God without violating Orthodox ecclesiastical norms - or rather, without deviating from the dogma of Holy Tradition and, by extension, Holy Scripture. This desire gave rise to a unique and remarkably beautiful religious syncretism that would define the Romanian people for centuries, particularly the rural communities of the former historical county of Argeş.

In 1779, the Italian archaeologist and numismatist Domenico Sestini (1750-1832)³⁵⁵ recorded a wealth of information regarding the inhabitants of Wallachia and Transylvania, focusing on their traditional costumes, customs, language, and way of life. His accounts are notably critical of both the people and the country, largely due to a personal conflict with the ruler Alexandru Ipsilanti (who reigned 1774–1782 and 1796–1797). Ipsilanti had promised Sestini a position as secretary, but after an eight-month wait in Bucharest, the scholar was unable to secure the post and was ultimately forced to leave the country. On his journey toward Hungary, Sestini stopped in Piteşti, where he left an intriguing record concerning a local custom observed on the Feast of Saint George, which we reproduce here: *'During this walk, I noticed that at the gates of every house, two beech branches had been planted on the feast day of Saint George, as a wish for prosperity throughout the year - a tradition observed by all Romanians'*.³⁵⁶

Although the aforementioned text is quite **laconic**, it makes an obvious reference to a custom widely encountered today in Argeş County: the attachment of 'Sângeorz'—small beech branches—to gate pillars. On the Feast of the Holy Great Martyr George (April 23rd), green beech branches are placed at the gates in all Argeş villages as a distinct sign of the religious holiday. The custom itself holds much deeper connotations, rooted in pre-Christian rituals celebrating the rebirth of nature and the beginning of the agricultural and pastoral year³⁵⁷. Originally, beech branches were stuck into small clods of earth placed near the gate, whereas today they are often kept in water so that the new leaves last as long as possible. As noted

³⁵⁵ Maria Holban, Maria Matilda Alexandrescu-Dersca Bulgaru, Paul Cernovodeanu, *Călători străini despre ţările române*, vol. X, Partea I, Editura Academiei Române, Bucureşti, 2000, p. 334. (în continuare: ****Călători străini despre ţările române*).

³⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 344

³⁵⁷ Ivan Evseev, *Enciclopedia simbolurilor religioase şi arhetipurilor culturale*, Editura Învierea, Timişoara, 2007, p. 545.

by the foreign traveler, the branches were historically 'stuck' rather than merely attached, implying they were planted in furrows brought specifically for this purpose. The apotropaic significance of this gesture is evident: the small green branches become a substitute for the vegetative deity and the equinoctial light, emerging victorious over the malevolent forces of winter. In Christian iconography, Saint George is depicted as an equestrian figure on a white horse, piercing a dragon with his spear. The dragon serves as a mythical representation of paganism and sin, while in popular belief, it suggested the cleansing of the new year's evils under the protection of the Christian Saint³⁵⁸.

Without delving into the intricate details of popular and Christian symbolism regarding the rebirth of nature—namely the Resurrection of the Savior—it is certain that this feast had profound resonances in popular culture. The Romanian fairy tale 'George the Brave' (*Gheorghe cel Viteaz*), collected by Petre Ispirescu, serves as a solid bridge between ancient Romanian customs and the Christian faith. It illustrates how religious syncretism evolved over time, giving rise to an Orthodox Christianity with folkloric resonances, much closer to the understanding of the common man³⁵⁹. It is highly likely that the feast of the Holy Martyr George was superimposed upon a much older celebration, the original name of which has been lost to time. The legend of the Saint slaying the dragon originated in 13th-century Italy, where Bishop Jacobus de Voragine introduced it in his extensive work on the lives of the saints (*Legenda Aurea*), undoubtedly inspired by local spring traditions.³⁶⁰ Based on field research conducted along the upper course of the Topolog River in Argeș County - specifically in the localities of Poienarii de Argeș, Tigveni, Șuici, and Sălătrucu - we observed a persistent attachment among the inhabitants to the custom of placing beech branches at their gates. However, none could provide a clear explanation of its meaning. The ubiquitous responses, '*it is good to do so*' or '*this is how it has been since my grandparents' time*' remain the most frequent justifications for the continuation of this ritual.

What we wish to emphasize is that this contemporary custom has deep roots in Romanian tradition; its origins can be traced back to ancient practices documented long before the first systematic folklore collections were established. In this context, we must also mention the lighting of equinoctial and solstitial fires - a practice that survives only sporadically today. We refer specifically to the sacred fires traditionally lit during the feast of Sânziene, which coincides with the Christian

³⁵⁸ Ion Țița-Nicolescu, *Sfântul Gheorghe și miturile precreștine ale cavalerului războinic*, în: *Museum*, studii și comunicări seria Istorie, Istoria culturii, etnografie, muzeologie, nr. XVII, ISSN 1842-4694, Golești, 2018, p. 110-112.

³⁵⁹ Artur Gorovei, *Literatura populară*, vol. I, Editura Minerva, București, 1976, pp. 153-154.

³⁶⁰ Iacopo de Varenze, *Legenda Aurea*, Milano, 2007, pp. 440-449.

feast of the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist. As a rule, mentions of these traditional Romanian customs by *foreign travelers* typically occur within the context of Christian celebrations. However, the lighting of these sacred fires is more closely related to the summer solstice and the popular holiday than to the ecclesiastical one. Nevertheless, as is evident, these three dimensions - astronomical, popular, and Christian - merge within the rural collective mentality. These solstitial Sânzienne fires were frequently recorded by foreign travelers passing through Wallachia.

Julius Heinrich Petermann (1801–1876), a German scholar and Orientalist with a profound knowledge of the Old Testament and Hebrew literature, embarked on a scientific journey during which he focused his attention on the religious manifestations of the peoples he encountered in the countries he transited³⁶¹. Regarding the Christian customs observed on the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist, he left a record concerning the lighting of the sacred solstitial fires:

"(...) This is why we did not arrive in Vidin until late, around 9 o'clock in the evening, passing by it only to see countless minarets, each illuminated with three rows of lanterns - a sign that we had arrived in this land during Ramadan, the month of fasting for the Muslims. Furthermore, in the Christian villages, we noticed the lighting of fires on the eve of the Feast of Saint John, an act that somewhat alleviated the sense of uniformity (...)"³⁶²

The aforementioned text is significant as it highlights a custom that is no longer practiced in most Romanian ethnological regions: the lighting of sacred solstitial fires on the night of Sânzienne. Indeed, the accounts of foreign travelers serve as invaluable sources for ethnological research into historical rituals. Romanian religious syncretism is perhaps most evident on June 24th, a day that honors both the *Sânzienne* - mythical popular figures, likely sylvatic deities of fertility and youthful love leading to marriage—and the major Christian feast celebrating the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist, the Forerunner of our Lord.

The positioning of these holidays around the summer solstice is intrinsically linked to the symbolic representation of light. In a seminal work, ethnologist Ion Ghinoiu describes the custom of youths lighting torches soaked in resin, which they would frantically rotate in a clockwise (solar) motion³⁶³. In today's society, many of these customs have vanished, surviving only in the memory of the elderly who pass them on to folklore collectors.

Interestingly, the ritual of lighting fires on the night of *Sânzienne* closely mirrors a tradition that remains vibrant and is observed with profound devotion in

³⁶¹ ****Călători străini despre țările române în secolul al XIX-lea (1852-1856)*, Serie nouă, vol. VI, Editura Academiei Române, București, 2010, p. 49.

³⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 54.

³⁶³ Ion Ghinoiu, *Vârstele timpului*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1988, p. 267.

the villages of Argeş that formerly belonged to Muşcel County: the Fire of Sumedru (*Focul lui Sumedru*) on October 26th, coinciding with the feast of the Holy Great Martyr Demetrius. Notably, this tradition has been preserved exclusively in localities of the former Muşcel County, while it is absent in those that belonged to the historical Argeş County, even when the distance between these villages is merely a few kilometers.

Returning to the traveler's accounts regarding the fires lit on the night celebrating the birth of the Christian saint, we can firmly assert that this ritual scenario belongs to both the Christian and pre-Christian traditions. More precisely, the birth of Saint John represents the light that reaches its zenith at the summer solstice; from this peak, it begins to fade steadily until the winter solstice, when, after reaching its lowest intensity, it begins to increase once more. In symbolic terms, John the Baptist is born with the light, which then begins to diminish, allowing the birth of our Savior - the 'Sun of Righteousness' (according to the prophecy of Malachi) - to serve as a guiding beacon. We recognize here the ancient ritual scenario of death and rebirth, akin to that of *Sumedru*, where the old deity must perish to allow the new one to be reborn from the ashes³⁶⁴. Naturally, the concept of religious syncretism between Christian and pagan holidays extends even to the name of the day. It is highly probable that the name 'Sânziene' is a popular linguistic variant of 'Saint John.' Specifically, the popular name represents a transformation of the Latin *Sanctus Dies Johannis*, which evolved through vernacular language into the name of the feast: '(...) *Sanctus Dies Johannis*, much like other feast days of Christian saints - such as *Sânjorz* from *Sanctus Georgius*, meant to replace the pagan festival of the *Parilia*. *Sanctus Dies Johannis* became, without significant phonetic difficulty, *sim(pt)-dzi-juane* > *sînziane* > *sânziene*".³⁶⁵ There are, of course, other proposed etymological variants for the origin of the name 'Sânziene'.³⁶⁶

The custom of lighting fires mentioned by the German scholar Julius Heinrich Petermann serves as a vital starting point for researching ancient rituals; more importantly, it opens new avenues for understanding the essential elements of Romanian ethnology. Furthermore, Petermann provides a relatively detailed description of the Romanian folk costume, from which we can draw relevant conclusions regarding the socio-economic status of the Romanian peasant in the

³⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, 175.

³⁶⁵ Revista „Institutului de Filologie şi Folklor”, „Grai şi Suflet”, vol. III, publicată de Ovid Densușianu, 1927, p. 428.

³⁶⁶ Ion Țița-Nicolescu, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

mid-19th century³⁶⁷. It is equally true, however, that the accounts of foreign travelers - who possessed varying levels of education and cultural background - must be analyzed with caution, maintaining a strict analytical objectivity regarding the reliability of their information about the Romanian people.

Another significant reference to Romanian folk traditions within a Christian religious context is the Arminden festival - a day celebrated in the Romanian village on May 1st, or during the first days of that month. This tradition was documented by the Frenchman Jean-Henri-Abdolonyme Ubicini (1818–1884), who was present in Wallachia during the Revolution of 1848. Ubicini maintained close friendships with the revolutionary leaders, including the prominent politicians of the Golescu family³⁶⁸.

Regarding '*Arminden*' - a significant festival celebrating vegetation and the rebirth of nature, frequently cited in ethnological studies - the French traveler provides the following account:

"(...) On the first Sunday of May, the Romanian peasants continue to observe the traditional celebration of flowers. They venture into the meadows and neighboring forests, adorning themselves with flowers and foliage before returning to the hamlet to dance. Furthermore, before the onset of summer, they erect a pillar in front of their houses, topped with greenery and hay, which they call Arminden. It is said that this is a Roman custom; military colonies allegedly signaled the opening of the campaign season by raising at their gates what they termed the *Arma Dei* or *Arma Martis* (the weapon of God or of Mars).³⁶⁹

The Arminden is a well-known and cherished holiday in the Romanian village, extensively documented in specialized ethnological works³⁷⁰. Physically, the *Arminden* consists of a tall pole or pillar topped with green branches; it is positioned within the village or at its outskirts, serving a role similar to a protective cross. Depending on the ethnographic region, it may bear various names. In some instances, it consisted of a young tree stripped of its bark and lower branches, leaving only a few green tufts at the very top.³⁷¹ This 'May Tree,' as it was also called, was traditionally honored in Argeș County on the feast day of Saint Jeremiah (May 1st), from whose name the term 'Arminden' is thought to have phonetically evolved (*Jeremia* > *Eremiinden* > *Arminden*). Today, the practice has diminished,

³⁶⁷ ****Călători străini despre țările române în secolul al XIX-lea (1852-1856)*, Serie nouă, vol. VI, Editura Academiei Române, București, 2010, pp. 51-52.

³⁶⁸ ****Călători străini despre țările române în secolul al XIX-lea (1852-1856)*, Serie nouă, vol. V, Editura Academiei Române, București, 2010, p. 248.

³⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 279.

³⁷⁰ Ion Ghinoiu, *Sărbători și obiceiuri românești*, Editura Elion, București, 2002, p. 289.

³⁷¹ Romulus Vulcănescu, *Coloana cerului*, Editura Academiei Române, București, 1972, p. 105 (cu fotografia aferentă).

being largely limited to placing a single green branch upon gates and stables as a protective gesture.

Much like the *Sângeorz* (Saint George's Day) traditions, the green branch represented the same substituted vegetative deity, whose role was to ward off malevolent spirits - specifically the diseases and plagues that could decimate both livestock and the community. For this reason, on that day, men, women, and children wore wormwood (*pelin*) leaves - a plant renowned for its *apotropaic* virtues - tucked into their belts. In this regard, we may recall a folk song about the ritual use of wormwood on the day of Arminden:

*'Green leaves of wormwood leaf
Here we are at Armindeni
The guests, they drink and feast
And of the plague, they have no fear".*³⁷²

Naturally, this holiday is imbued with a Christian connotation, inspired by a tradition rooted in the New Testament - specifically, the Massacre of the Innocents ordered by Herod. According to the Gospel narrative, the King of Judea acted after learning from the Magi about the birth of a 'King of the Jews.' A popular legend elaborates on this event, suggesting that after a child was killed in a particular house, Herod's soldiers would place a green branch at the entrance to mark it, ensuring they would not enter again. To deceive the persecutors, the people placed similar branches at every house; thus, through this collective ruse, many children were saved. This legendary overlay provides a Christian justification for the ancient practice of placing greenery at the gates, effectively 'baptizing' a pre-Christian ritual.³⁷³

The account of the foreign traveler brings to light a practice often overlooked by ethnologists: the ritual where individuals went into the forest to adorn themselves with flowers and leaves before returning to the village to celebrate. This gesture, though seemingly simple, held a profound initiatory meaning within the Romanian village - akin to a Christian baptism - through which the youth or the adult absorbed the vital force of nature. Even when these customs were framed within a Christian context, they remained clearly rooted in ancient beliefs regarding the deities of the earth, forests, and air. The people perceived these deities through the lens of human emotion and behavioral matrices, treating them as personal entities. Specifically, by erecting the Arminden pillar, the community expected the divinity to respond with prosperity: bountiful years, rich harvests, and health.

³⁷² Ion Ghinoiu, *Op. cit.*, p. 291

³⁷³ *Ibidem*.

Furthermore, the adherence to these ancestral traditions - often passed down as a '*dying wish*' - was intrinsically linked to both communal and individual identity. The *Arminden* had to be honored in such a way that it served as a pillar of community stability; any neglect would have sparked collective anxiety, stemming from the fear of divine wrath. Respecting these customs was of paramount importance, as they sustained daily life and familial well-being, while also securing one's fate in the *Afterworld*. Proper access to the hereafter depended largely on how faithfully these traditions were observed during one's lifetime. In many cases, these 'Christianized' customs conflicted with official Church stances, as religious leaders often viewed such festivities - even those with Christian names - as potential diversions from strict moral and canonical norms.

In this regard, the French traveler and diplomat, Baron Charles de Bois Le Comte (1796–1863), provided significant technical data concerning Wallachia and Moldavia during the first half of the 19th century - a period marked by the implementation of the Organic Regulations (*Regulamentul Organic*)³⁷⁴. His accounts cover geography, administrative organization, economic characteristics, and military status. Notably, he described the clergy in Wallachia as 'ignorant,' suggesting that the rural population, being largely illiterate and guided by these village priests, often neglected - whether intentionally or not - the most fundamental tenets of the Christian faith.³⁷⁵ These observations were part of an official dispatch to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Count of Rigny, implying a high degree of required accuracy. The persistent state of conflict within the two Principalities—shaped by the Phanariote era and numerous Russo-Austro-Turkish wars fought on Moldavian and Wallachian soil—inevitably led to a cultural stagnation. Consequently, the impoverished population often limited their daily concerns to mere subsistence. In this context, the Frenchman recounts the words of the Metropolitan of Argeș, whom he met in Bucharest:

"(...)During a visit paid to me by Metropolitan Grigore (author's note) and the Bishop of Argeș, I was astonished to hear the leaders of a church - where religion often seems to consist only of external practices - speak out against the excessive number of feast days. 'To multiply the feasts,' the Metropolitan stated, 'is to multiply the days of drunkenness.' 'Indeed,' the Bishop of Argeș added, 'it is not the holidays that moralize the people, but their labor'.³⁷⁶

I have reproduced the above text to emphasize a particularly important aspect regarding Romanian tradition. We can say, to some extent, that the French

³⁷⁴ ****Călători străini despre țările române*, Serie nouă (1831-1840), vol. III p. 96.

³⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 123.

³⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 176.

baron's references are not entirely untrue, given the political situation of the Principalities around the 1830s, but they are far from faithfully rendering the Romanian spirituality of that period. As for the remark made by the Bishop of Argeș, it is part of a series of actions aimed at 'detaching' the population from the old pre-Christian beliefs that still persisted in the nineteenth century. However, in another account from the beginning of the nineteenth century, the English mineralogist Edward Daniel Clarke (1769–1822)³⁷⁷ describes the city of Pitești as a prosperous one, where the people appear wealthy and benevolent:

"(...) Four hours' distance from Topoloveni, we arrived in Pitești, after a whole day's journey across the plains. (...) Thus, upon our arrival in Pitești, we were visited by five or six of the most prominent inhabitants. We were surprised by this and even more so when they asked us to state our wishes, mentioning they had received orders from the Prince to provide us with everything we might require. Pitești consists of a hundred houses. Judging by appearances, the inhabitants are wealthy. The surrounding land is well cultivated, and the wine of this place is excellent".³⁷⁸

The description of the city of Pitești in 1802, as provided by the English researcher, evokes a Western town rather than one in Wallachia under Phanariot rule at that time. As he continued his journey, he passed through Curtea de Argeș, where he noticed the wooden peasant houses - remarkably clean inside - insisting that, from a distance, the town resembled one in Switzerland. This '*air of cleanliness*'³⁷⁹ within the boyar houses of Pitești is also mentioned in 1805 by the French traveler Louis Allier de Hauteroche (1766–1827).³⁸⁰ Clearly, the economic state of the Romanian Principalities was not as miserable as some foreign travelers portrayed it, nor was the situation entirely disastrous, despite Ottoman suzerainty".

The Romanian traditions mentioned in the records of these travelers are not described in detail; nevertheless, when corroborated with folklore collections, they provide us the opportunity to outline Romanian society - not just the rural one - of past centuries. A text such as this, which describes a wedding within a Romanian boyar family, can serve as a starting point for research into the Romanian wedding tradition:

"(...) On the eve of the wedding, the fiancée welcomes all her friends to a ball, usually attended only by unmarried youths, from which the future groom is excluded. (...) Another ceremony taking place on the same day - one that seemed most singular - consists of unbinding the young bride's hair in front of the entire assembly and combing it anew. Meanwhile, the fiddlers (*lăutari*)

³⁷⁷ ****Călători străini despre țările române*, Serie nouă (1801-1821), vol. I, p. 66

³⁷⁸ *Ibidem* p. 67.

³⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, 195.

³⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, 190

play Romanian songs explaining that the purpose of this rite is to show that the bride is leaving the maidens' ranks and, by adopting the headdress of married women, is now numbered among them (...).³⁸¹

Surely many will recognize in the text above the moment of the bride's 'veiling' (*învelitul miresei*), when she symbolically becomes a married woman - a custom still found in Romanian weddings today. The tradition was recorded by the Swiss writer François Recordon (1795–1844), the French-speaking secretary to the Phanariot Prince Ion Gheorghe Caragea (1812–1818). In 1821, he published in Paris a series of 'Letters on Wallachia...', in which he documented his observations regarding the country where he had resided for several years.

The passage regarding the '*unveiling*' can be analyzed through the symbolism of the bride's wrapping ceremony, just as the Romanian village practiced, in a similar vein, the custom of '*shaving the groom*'. These two wedding traditions carry a deep meaning, being related to what was once considered a *nuptial initiation*³⁸² or, in some cases, a ritual of death and resurrection - a transition from an inferior status (maiden or youth) to a superior one (wife or married man). Furthermore, the aforementioned text highlights a gesture that would be almost unforgivable in Catholic or Protestant traditions: the public unbinding and combing of the future wife. In the Romanian village, hair was one of the most potent erotic elements a girl could display. Once married, a woman never uncovered her hair again, nor did she ever cut it. She would show her loosened hair only to her husband, in a gesture suggesting submission. Thus, combing the young woman in public is primarily a message of strength, vitality, and fertility. A girl's braided hair during the *hora* was a symbol of her virginity and a sign that she remained under her father's authority. By having her beautiful and neat hair unbraided during the *wrapping* ceremony, she demonstrated to the community that her husband had found the best wife - one who would become the mother of his children. In the Romanian village, as well as in the society of two centuries ago, a woman's dignity was defined, above all, by her status as a mother³⁸³.

The present paper confirms that the accounts of foreign travelers regarding the Romanian Principalities provide significant clues as to the nature of Romanian society - specifically in Argeș and Muscel - more than two centuries ago. The customs and traditions they noted, even when recorded superficially, serve as solid

³⁸¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 682-683.

³⁸² Ion Ghinoiu, *Mică Enciclopedie de tradiții românești*, Editura Agora, București, 2008, pp. 146-147.

³⁸³ Ion Tița-Nicolescu, *Simbolica teologică și folclorică a acoperământului de cap*, în „Salvgardarea elementelor de patrimoniu cultural imaterial în context activ și în context pasiv”, coordonatori Gabriela Păsărin și Ion Tița-Nicolescu, Editura Pro Universitaria, Craiova, 2024, p. 323.

starting points for ethnological research, especially as they often specify the geographical or ethnographic area where these observations were made.

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DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF CHRISTIAN ART IN THE CHURCHES OF ARGEȘ

Sacred art represents an attempt to portray the values and principles of Christianity in the most tangible and profound form possible. Before exploring these themes, we must address the presence of the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle on the exterior walls of certain churches, such as the one in Ștefănești, Argeș. The depiction of these two Greek philosophers on the walls of sacred edifices is linked to the Ecumenical Council of 431 AD, which was convened by the Emperors Theodosius II and Valentinian III. In an open letter addressed to the bishops, the Council was scheduled for June 7th, 431, during Pentecost, in Ephesus. This forum was intended to decide categorically not only the debated issues regarding Marian theology but also the conflict between two major theological currents: the Antiochian School and the Alexandrian School. The former, rooted in the apostolic tradition of Saint Peter—regarded as the first bishop of that Church—promoted a rigorous study of Sacred Scripture based on rational and analytical exegesis, inspired by Aristotelian philosophy and a more literal interpretation of the texts. In terms of Christology, its theologians emphasized the humanity of Jesus Christ; however, they sometimes did so in a manner that risked losing sight of the fact that the Savior is the Incarnate Word (*Logos*), as clearly stated in the Gospel of John 1:1.³⁸⁴ This deliberate 'oversight' led to a theological current that proved extremely dangerous³⁸⁵ for the early Church, as it questioned not only the Divine Motherhood of the Virgin but also the very nature of the coexistence between the human and the divine within a single body. Nestorius was a follower of this school; indeed, it must be emphasized that the Bishop of Constantinople did not simply awaken one morning with a radical idea. Rather, his convictions were the fruit of Christian teachings promoted by a theological school of recognized authority - one that had provided Christianity with true '*saint-scholars*' such as Diodore, Bishop of Tarsus, Theodore, Bishop of Mopsuestia, and even John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople.

The second school, *the Alexandrian*, rooted in the apostolic tradition of Saint Mark the Evangelist - regarded as its first bishop³⁸⁶, emerged, as the name suggests, in Hellenistic Egypt. It was distinguished by a vibrant intellectual life, bolstered by the city's renowned Great Library. It was also here that the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew into Greek by seventy Jewish scholars, giving rise to *the Septuagint*. The school followed a Christian exegetical line based on mysticism and allegory, grafted onto Platonic philosophy. For the Alexandrians, antinomies were perhaps the most effective

³⁸⁴ „Întru început era Cuvântul și Cuvântul era la Dumnezeu și Dumnezeu era Cuvântul”

³⁸⁵ Curent periculos din punctul de vedere al Școlii Alexandrine.

³⁸⁶ Eusebiu de Cezareea, *Istorie Bisericească*, II, XXIV.

means of perceiving the Divine Energies and philosophically explaining the Trinitarian dogma. To those influenced by this school, the existence of the Savior was not a matter of being merely human or only divine, but of a perfect duality: both Man and God. This intellectual cradle produced great Christian philosopher-writers such as Origen and Clement of Alexandria, as well as Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria during the Decian persecutions, and Didymus the Blind - figures who held the status of saints in the early Church. For the Alexandrians, the assertions of the Antiochians, voiced by Nestorius, were perceived as grave blasphemies that had to be anathematized swiftly to prevent their spread throughout the Christian world. Thus, the council was destined to be an open conflict between the Antiochian bishops - led by the Patriarch of Constantinople himself, which gave them a significant advantage - and the Alexandrians, whose leader was the great scholar Cyril, Bishop of Alexandria. The latter also enjoyed the formidable support of a recognized theological authority, Pope Celestine I. Nestorius was so convinced that the assembled council would ratify his own anathemas³⁸⁷, against his opponents that he not only urged its swift convocation but personally suggested that the Emperor of Constantinople initiate it. The outcome of the Council is well established: without delving into exhaustive detail, the Virgin Mary was officially accorded the title of Mother of God (*Theotokos*). In this context, while many depictions of the Virgin align with standard Byzantine iconography³⁸⁸, others - though remaining within the bounds of the iconographic canon - are far less common. These rare portrayals are often associated with the specific spiritual experiences of the founding community or serve as echoes of ancient Byzantine traditions. Among the most unusual representations are the *'Winged Mother of God'* (Photo 1) and the *'Pregnant Mother of God'* (Photo 2). The former can be found in the nave of the Brătășești Monastery (Albeștii de Argeș commune, Brătășești village), while the latter is depicted in the nave of the Prince's Church of Saint Nicholas in Curtea de Argeș, a foundational monument established by Basarab I.

The Old Church of Sălătrucu-Poștea is first documented in 1808 as a masonry church located at the Sălătruc post office, served at the time by Priest: Chiriță and Deacon: Petre. The 1824 catagraphy (ecclesiastical census) records it *"under the patronage of Saint John the Baptist, noting it as a stone structure built upon the estate of the Holy Metropolis and founded by 'Captain Ioan'"*. Although local tradition suggests the 16th

³⁸⁷ Nestorius elaborated a set of twelve anathemas intended to demonstrate—should they have become canon after the council—that the Virgin gave birth to a man, who was later deified; in other words, he excluded the possibility of a human body containing the divine essence. For a clearer elucidation, I present the first anathema: 'If anyone says that Emmanuel is God the Word, instead of saying that He is God-with-us, meaning that He dwelt in a nature similar to ours which He took from the Virgin Mary, due to the fact that He united Himself to our humanity; and if anyone calls Mary the Mother of God the Word and does not rather call her the Mother of Him who is Emmanuel; and if anyone says that the Logos of God was transformed into the flesh He assumed in order to make His divinity visible and to appear like a man, let him be anathema' (All the Anathemas in: *Lucian Dâncă, Op. cit.* pp. 48-50).

³⁸⁸ Constantin Cavaros, *Ghid de iconografie bizantină*, Editura Sofia, București, 2005, p. 185.

century as the period of its origin, official documents identify the year 1747. Between 1809 and 1811, the church was rebuilt by the village community with the significant support of Captain Ion Popovici, the head of the Sălătruc post office, and his wife, Ioana; it was during this period that the narthex (*tinda*) was added to the structure. The votive portraits of the founders - Petre Ancuța, Ion, Ioana, and their son, Ghiță - are preserved in the narthex. The fresco, painted in 1811 by an unknown artist, remains in relatively good condition. The 1833 catagraphy lists the church in Sălătrucu (de Jos) under the dual patronage of Saint George and Saint John the Baptist. During the battles of World War I, the church suffered 'radical damage,' and many liturgical objects were lost. Through the efforts and contributions of neighboring parishes, the church was eventually refurnished with icons and the necessary liturgical inventory. Subsequent repairs were carried out in 1921 and 1951.

The irregular concentric circles on the church's exterior are positioned at the upper part of the nave, an area typically reserved for the representation of various Christian saints and other sacred figures. Although Christianity has adopted many telluric and astral symbols, these particular circles appear, at first glance, to lack a direct dogmatic meaning, serving instead a primarily decorative purpose. A disc may also be interpreted as a representation of the Sun and, by extension, of Jesus Christ, who is heralded in Malachi's prophecy as the 'Sun of Righteousness.' In this specific instance, the circles are not identical; each possesses a distinct, irregular form, which suggests the imperfection of the created world. The irregular shape of the circle represents the very state in which God has placed humanity, granting man free will to actively seek communion with Him. The double line does not signify, as it might appear at first glance, the dual nature of the Savior. Instead, it symbolizes the two worlds to which man belongs: the material world of the flesh and the spiritual world of the soul. The aspiration of the holy man is to detach himself from earthly concerns and to achieve perfection in the heavenly realm, much like the angels who exist in a continuous spiral ascent toward God. In biblical and Christian hermeneutics, such a specific symbol does not officially exist. These irregular circles are the exclusive creation of the craftsman who, likely with the community's consent, decided to place these forms upon the nave's exterior walls in lieu of the traditional depictions of saints.

The reasoning is simple: the saints were not enlightened, spiritual beings from the very beginning. Many were once great sinners who, through faith and divine grace, eventually achieved communion with God. The two lines we observe can be deciphered through the lens of iconography, where saints depicted in the **nave** and **narthex** are represented with elongated silhouettes. In Christian art, this unnatural elongation suggests a detachment from earthly concerns. In this sense, the earth is typically depicted reaching only to the saint's knees, while the upper torso and head are set against a starry sky, signifying a superior spiritual level that brings them closer to the Divine. Thus, the inner circle represents the 'prison of the flesh' - the material realm in which the soul is captive - while the second circle symbolizes absolute freedom within the love of the Creator. The interior of the circle is a limited, distorted, and unjust space from which every human

being must strive to escape. Furthermore, while one could argue that the two outer circles symbolize the **dual nature of the Savior**, we believe that representations of Jesus Christ are always imbued with a **mystical aura**, which the craftsman would have attempted to render in an impeccable, flawless form.

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A LIFE, A DESTINY, A MASTERPIECE REFLECTIONS ON THE EMINENT SCHOLAR OVIDIU BÎRLEA

Through this work, Ovidiu Bîrlea³⁸⁹, offers folklore enthusiasts and scholars alike a restorative and enlightening sanctuary - one that the modern, cultivated individual, pressured by time and the rapid pace of life, so richly deserves. Ethnology, ethnography, linguistics, history, and ancient traditions of pre-Christian origin, along with customs and superstitions, are masterfully brought to light by this tireless ethnologist. His scientific endeavor is marked by a profound intellectual curiosity and personal inquiries into the Romanian folkloric phenomenon - qualities that transform his entire body of work into a vital cornerstone of Romanian identity.

Ovidiu Bîrlea (whose brother, Octavian, spelled his surname 'Bârlea') was born in the village of Bârlești, Mogoș commune, Alba County, on August 13, 1917. He was the third son of Ioan and Maria Bîrlea. Four years younger than his brother Octavian - the future Greek-Catholic Monsignor - Ovidiu attended primary school in his native village and in the town of Baia de Arieș. In 1937, he graduated from the military high school in Târgu Mureș. He continued his academic journey by studying literature and philology in Cluj, before attending the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy at the University of Bucharest.

The years between 1944 and 1948 were marked by the tragic experience of being a prisoner of war in the Soviet Union, during which time he lost all contact with his scientific activities. Ovidiu Bîrlea intended to dedicate a volume of memoirs to this profoundly transformative period of his life, though unfortunately, it was never completed. Throughout his life, he remained vocal and optimistic that the Romanian provinces annexed by the Soviets would one day return to Romania, firmly believing - two decades before the events of 1989 - that the USSR, like all empires, would eventually collapse³⁹⁰. This courageous act of political dissidence brought him numerous hardships, especially since his older brother, Octavian - with whom he corresponded frequently - had fled to Germany following the establishment of the communist regime. In 1949, after a brief tenure as a clerk in the Department of Nationalities, he became a researcher at the Institute of Folklore in Bucharest. At this newly founded institute, established through the efforts of

³⁸⁹ Ovidiu Bîrlea maintained this specific spelling of his name, in contrast to his elder brother, Monsignor Octavian Bârlea, who opted for the modern orthography.

³⁹⁰ Virgiliu Florea, *Amintiri despre Ovidiu Bârlea*, în *Discobolul*, Anul XI, nr. 121-122-123 (126-127-128), ian.-feb.-mar.- 2008, p. 152.

ethnomusicologists Constantin Brăiloiu and Harry Brauner, Bîrlea served as the Head of the Literary Section, a position he held until his resignation in 1969.

His departure was largely forced by a conflict with Mihai Pop, a professor at the Faculty of Romanian Language and Literature at the University of Bucharest, who also coordinated the Institute's scientific activities. It is highly probable that this conflict stemmed from diverging research methodologies; Ovidiu Bîrlea was a proponent of a thorough, classical approach to studying folk culture as a phenomenon. Crucially, he prioritized the aesthetic factor - an aspect often neglected by specialized studies - viewing it as an essential element of folklore.

He did not fully subscribe to structuralist research as a methodology - which had already come to dominate the field of folkloric investigations - and, following the publication of his monumental work, *Folclorul românesc*, in 1981, he maintained with great aplomb: *'You see, one can penetrate the structure of folkloric creation using the classical method as well - perhaps even more effectively than the structuralists do'*³⁹¹.

His departure from the prestigious institution - by then renamed the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore - under circumstances that remain unclear, did not halt his research. On the contrary, he dedicated his life entirely to writing, which became his sole means of subsistence. His critical stance toward the political establishment, the presence of his brother - a Greek-Catholic prelate in Germany - and his well-known 'obstinacy' in refusing to accept the abuse and mediocrity of the communist regime made him a *persona non grata* within the system.

He was denied membership as a corresponding member of the Romanian Academy, despite having published several seminal folklore collections by 1969 (*Snoave și ghicitori* – 1957; *Proverbe și zicători românești* – 1966; *Antologie de proză populară epică* – 1966; *Petrea Făt-Frumos, Povești populare românești* – 1967), alongside numerous studies and scientific research volumes. Furthermore, the Writers' Union rejected his membership application, and doctoral students were subtly discouraged from citing his work. Left without a pension or employment at the age of fifty-two, he lived in a modest room in Bucharest, located at 10 Sfinții Apostoli Street.

With his sleeves rolled up³⁹², hunched over books by the light of a kerosene lamp, dining on a mere 'crust of bread' and living in extreme modesty and sobriety, Ovidiu Bîrlea embodied - in the opinion of Professor Virgiliu Florea³⁹³, the

³⁹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 155.

³⁹² Mihaela Hură, *Ovidiu Bîrlea folcloristul romancier*, prefață la romanul lui Ovidiu Bîrlea *Se face ziua. Romanul anului 1848*, colecția Mica Romă XXI, Editura Vremea, București, 2023, p. 9.

³⁹³ Virgiliu Florea, *Amintiri despre Ovidiu Bîrlea*, în *Discobolul*, Anul XI, nr. 121-122-123 (126-127-128), ian.-feb.-mar.- 2008, p. 151.

quintessential Transylvanian peasant, specifically the one from the village of Bucium. Located less than 15 kilometers from Mogoș, the village of Bucium-Poieni would play a pivotal role in his career as a folklorist, researcher, and novelist. Bound to this village by every spiritual fiber of his being (his mother was a native of the area), the locality became the epicenter of events in his lesser-known novel, *Se face ziuă. Romanul anului 1848*. His attachment to his native region and to the decorum and piety of the Transylvanian peasant is evident in the account given by ethnologist Ion Cuceu regarding a visit to Bocșa Română, to the grave of Simion Bărnuțiu. Before the casket containing the remains of the great Romanian leader, Bîrlea knelt and prayed with such fervor that those present wondered if he had been secretly ordained as a priest.³⁹⁴ The Transylvanian village lived in his soul even during breaks from his rigorous work schedule; at those times, he would play Transylvanian folk music on the accordion like a true virtuoso, keeping alive the memory of Bucium, to which he dedicated a monograph that, unfortunately, remains in manuscript form. His spiritual connection to the folkloric hearth of his birth is also revealed in a unique memory shared by the Greek-Catholic priest Adrian Todericiu - a former colleague of Octavian Bîrlea at the Theological Institute in Blaj - who recalled that at his wedding, 'Oviduț' performed traditional dances with such vigor 'that the floorboards creaked'³⁹⁵.

With a rich historical past, the name of this small village is linked to the educational efforts of Gheorghe Șincai, who established a school there for Romanian children, where the great folklorist Ion Pop Reteganul would later teach. Furthermore, between 1906 and 1910, the Greek-Catholic parish of Bucium was served by none other than the writer-priest Ion Agârbiceanu³⁹⁶, thus, this small village of *moși* left an indelible mark on the consciousness of the scholar Ovidiu Bîrlea.

His love for reading, rooted in the cultural heritage of his native region, was observed as early as primary school by his Romanian language teacher, who granted him access to his private library. This proved invaluable for the entrance examination he later took at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy in Bucharest, where he became a student under the mentorship of the most prominent figures in Romanian culture. Among them were literary historians and folklorists such as Dumitru Caracostea, Eugen Lovinescu, and George Călinescu, as well as renowned

³⁹⁴ Ion Cuceu, *Amintiri cu Ovidiu Bîrlea, în Discobolul*, Anul XI, nr. 121-122-123 (126-127-128), ian.-feb.-mar.- 2008, p. 173.

³⁹⁵ Virgiliu Florea, *Amintiri despre Ovidiu Bîrlea, în Discobolul*, Anul XI, nr. 121-122-123 (126-127-128), ian.-feb.-mar.- 2008, pp. 158-159

³⁹⁶ Cristian Bădiliță, „Frații Octavian și Ovidiu Bîrlea: teologul și etnologul” în *Geniul greco-catolic românesc* (coautor: Laura Stanciu), Editura vremea, București, 2020, p. 335.

linguists, historians, and ethnologists like Iorgu Iordan, Dimitrie Gusti, Constantin Giurescu, and Nicolae Iorga.

His personal library, which occupied much of the modest space where he lived, was one of the most comprehensive specialized collections in the country, a testament to his frequent visits to antiquarian bookstores. On his desk, he always kept a bibliophile edition of Cervantes and his older brother's Latin work on the Transylvanian School (*Monseniorul Octavian Bârlea*). For more than two decades, he lived solely on the royalties from his published works. Like Petru Caraman - another victim of the bolshevization of higher education - Bârlea dedicated his life to the betterment of his field, without ever seeking recognition.

As Professor Ion Taloş notes, Bârlea's scholarship stands alongside the great European works dedicated to folklore. For his intellectually expansive work, *The History of Romanian Folkloristics (Istoria folcloristicii româneşti)*, published in 1974, the Romanian Academy awarded him the 'Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu' Prize. He refused it with his characteristic obstinacy—a silent outcry against the injustice of his constant marginalization, particularly since, following his resignation from the Institute, he had been barred from the Academy's library. His oeuvre dedicated to folk creation, most notably the *Small Encyclopedia of Romanian Tales (Mica enciclopedie a poveştilor româneşti)*, is regarded as a folkloric extension of the great Göttingen Encyclopedia. His other major works include: *Typology of Folklore from the Responses to B.P. Hasdeu's Questionnaires* (1971); *Horea and Iancu in Folk Tradition and Songs* (1972); *Romanian Folklore* (two volumes, 1981 and 1983); *Essay on Romanian Folk Dance* (1982); and *Effigies* (1987). These monumental studies constitute the foundation of Romanian folkloristics and remain indispensable to any specialist.

Bârlea distinguished himself as early as his student years, participating in the research team led by Mihai Pop and Anton Golopenţia during their ethnographic expeditions in the Dâmbovnic Valley of Argeş County. As a master collector, Bârlea went beyond simple transcription, capturing in his work - including the present volume - unique elements of Romanian dialects, the non-verbal language of informants, and crucial data regarding the context and memorization of storytelling. He emphasized that tales, which served as a compendium of morality and behavioral dogma within the liturgical space of the village, possess an oral essence; they are 'created to be heard, not read, and lose much of their power when transcribed into written form.' In this context, he remarked: 'Stories constitute first-hand documents regarding the life of the common people, fully reflecting their spiritual horizon'.

Similarly, in 1906, Ovid Densusianu highlighted this documentary value: 'These texts are confessions of the peasants about their lives, opinions on matters

that concern them, historical memories, and more... such texts will serve those who wish to know more intimately the life, thought, and feeling of the peasant, not just as reflected- often too vaguely and from too great a distance - by conventional folklore collections. Many of the texts in this volume can be regarded as spiritual, cultural, and, in part, historical documents”³⁹⁷.

In this context, he remarked: 'Stories constitute first-hand documents regarding the lives of the common people, fully reflecting their spiritual horizon.' In 1906, Ovid Densusianu highlighted this very documentary value of such 'confessional texts': *'Peasants' accounts of their daily lives, their opinions on matters that concern them, historical memories, and so forth... texts of this kind will serve those who wish to closely understand the life, thought, and feeling of the peasant—not merely as they are reflected, often too vaguely and from too great a distance, by conventional folklore collections. Many of the texts presented in this volume can be regarded as spiritual, cultural, and, in part, historical documents*”³⁹⁸.

Beyond being a master of the methodology developed by the Gusti School, Ovidiu Bîrlea possessed a profound and total understanding of the folkloric phenomenon. He was folklore personified - 'from head to toe'³⁹⁹ and few shared his talent for grasping the essence of village life and the way the common, unlettered man related exclusively to two things: nature and the Divine. He defined the bond between the peasant and God (and His priests) in a concise manner, linking the etymology of the Romanian word *popor* (people) to *popă* (priest), thereby highlighting the priest as the central figure of authority upon whom a large group of people depended and to whom they listened. He possessed a keen intuition born of a true vocation for folklore, yet he also remained constantly informed about the latest European research in the field. He read in several languages, but had a particular predilection for German, which he considered indispensable for any researcher who truly wished to understand the phenomenon. The question 'How is your German?' was ever-present whenever he addressed fellow scholars.

Despite his reputation for being morose and stern - traits noted by Ion Cuceu during his internship at the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore in the winter of 1968 - Bîrlea was always eager for intellectual company. Whenever he visited Cluj, he never missed the opportunity to call upon Ion Muşlea, Valer Butură, Father Todericiu, Ion Taloş, Ion Cuceu, Nicolae Bot, Virgiliu Florea, or his sister, Sabina Vlad. Together with Ion Taloş, he compiled the edition *Tales from*

³⁹⁷ Ovidiu Bîrlea, *Antologie de proză populară epică*, vol. I, Editura pentru Literatură, Bucureşti, 1966, p. 6.

³⁹⁸ Idem, *Folclorul românesc*, vol. I, Editura Minerva, Bucureşti, pp. 258-259.

³⁹⁹ Ion Taloş, *O operă impresionantă. Ovidiu Bîrlea despre Constantin Brăiloiu*, în *Discobolul*, Anul XI, nr. 121-122-123 (126-127-128), ian.-feb.-mar.- 2008, p. 185

Transylvania (1975), and he authored the preface for Nicolae Bot's volume, *B. P. Hasdeu: Folklore Studies* (1979).

He harbored certain reservations regarding the folklorists of the Banat region - likely a consequence of his tenure as a substitute professor at the University of Timișoara. Nevertheless, he maintained a profound respect for Simion Manguica and Atanasie Marian Marienescu, to whom he dedicated an extensive study. Ovidiu Bîrlea leaves behind more than just a vast and overwhelmingly important body of work; his memory remains vibrant through those he mentored and who now carry his mission forward. In his 1968 visit, Ion Cuceu noted prominent researchers such as Alexandru Amzulescu, Cornelia Bărbulescu, Tony Brill, and Romulus Vulcănescu, as well as the newcomers to the Institute at that time: Sabina Ispas - currently a member of the Romanian Academy and director of the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore - and Stanca Fotino.

The constraints of a publication are insufficient to fully capture the life and work of this scholar. Today, his studies have a major impact on field research and are highly valued by specialists. Although he never occupied the positions he truly deserved - due to a lack of diplomacy born from a profoundly developed sense of justice⁴⁰⁰ - he remains in the memory of those who knew him as a beacon of modesty and professional integrity. He always returned with joy to Mogoș and Bucium to speak with the villagers. Ovidiu Bîrlea died as he lived: with the dignity of a highlander from the Apuseni Mountains, always digging—much like the *băieși* (miners) who tunneled into the mountains—toward the boundless depths of folklore. On January 7, 1990, shortly after the collapse of the communist regime and following a life dedicated to science, Ovidiu Bîrlea passed away in Cluj after suffering a heart attack.

As Ion Cuceu remarks, it is difficult to say which of his works is the most significant; however, his monumental synthesis, *Romanian Folklore (Folclorul românesc)*, deserves to be translated into every major language of international circulation.

The first volume of *Romanian Folklore (Folclorul românesc)*, published in 1981, is the fruit of his profound scientific research and reflects an exhaustive understanding of the phenomenon. Folkloristics, as the author observes, is a field fraught with questions, resembling 'untilled land' with many areas still insufficiently explored. In this work, the boundaries of folkloric disciplines are precisely drawn, resolving the controversy between *ethnology* and *ethnography* by providing a clear demarcation of the two. The former addresses primarily oral literature, beliefs,

⁴⁰⁰ Helga Stein, *Ovidiu Bîrlea – cercetător de bază al folclorului românesc, în Discobolul*, Anul XI, nr. 121-122-123 (126-127-128), ian.-feb.-mar.- 2008, p. 213.

rituals, superstitions, and customs - what we generically term *spiritual culture* - while the latter focuses on the *material culture* within the folk tradition, specifically traditional settlements, occupations, and architecture. This study represents an extensive synthesis in which the functional role of folkloric genres is highlighted alongside their compositional structures and poetic forms. Furthermore, the work establishes - within the approximations permitted by the field - stylistic demarcations, the antiquity of various genres, and their respective thematic categories.

The epic prose examined in the first part of this synthesis encompasses Romanian folkloric genres that have been either overlooked, such as the folk tale (*basmul*), or insufficiently studied, as in the case of the legend. The animal folk tale, often relegated to a minor appendix in collections, is rightfully classified here as a distinct genre within popular literature. Ovidiu Bîrlea not only defines this creative form but also identifies the mechanisms that distinguish it from the animal fable.

The Aarne-Thompson typology, which indexes folk tales internationally, organizes these stories into several groups based on the nature of the protagonists. The first group includes wild animals, followed by wild and domestic animals, man and wild animals, domestic animals, and finally, birds, other animals, and objects. What differentiates the animal folk tale from the folk tale proper is its archaic character; the 'humanization' of animals is rooted in a primitive, even animistic vision through which early humans perceived the world.

Notably, such animistic experiences persisted until the beginning of the 20th century, as seen in rituals where individuals would kneel and ask forgiveness from a tree before felling it for ceremonial purposes. Although Professor Ovidiu Bîrlea consistently identified himself as a folklorist, his analysis of the Romanian folk tale reveals a masterful intertwining of textual analysis with an anthropological perspective of the society in which these stories were created and disseminated⁴⁰¹.

Romanian Folklore efficiently synthesizes the local specificities of these genres, establishing - as far as possible - which elements can be considered the fruit of indigenous Romanian invention and which belong to other national repertoires.

Reading the first volume of *Romanian Folklore* will help readers unfamiliar with the subject, yet particularly interested in it, to eliminate the confusion between genres by identifying their specific compositional profiles. Within the Romanian village, local community members proved exceptionally sensitive to any act or trait that deviated from established customs - deviations they did not hesitate to satirize.

⁴⁰¹ Ioana Repciuc, *Ovidiu Bîrlea și cercetarea poveștilor populare*, în *Anuarul Muzeului Etnografic al Moldovei*, nr. XVII, Editura Palatul Culturii, Iași, 2017, p. 344.

All folk creations represent fundamental frameworks of thought and are connected to nature and the Divine in a perfect, one might even say metaphysical order.

From the analysis of these folkloric genres emerges a rural world that - where untouched by urban influence - is perfectly ordered, yet far from static. For the common man, the unseen world or the 'hereafter' is not an unknown chaos, but a realm as real as the one perceived through the senses. In the popular conception, God employs animals as auxiliaries to His initiatives and intervenes directly in human life. This is evidenced by texts of unparalleled beauty, which capture not only local dialects but also the profound manner in which the simple man related to the Supreme Divinity. We reproduce below the following text, taken by the author from his own *Anthology of Folk Epic Prose*, published in 1966:

„Și cîndu-i la tri zile, vede'-on uom șezîn la tri uoi, um bătrîn, p-o prăpastă di coastă urîță, pă, ști, stanu de pketri. Zice: «Ce Dumnézo i-ala, uomu ala, stă pă stanu ăla de pketri, șezîn la tri uoi: nu are mai mult'e, numa alea tri uai? C-alte nu să văd, numa-alea tri uoi, cu o bitușă-n spaț'e.» Zice, sămălește el: «Pîm pustie tri zile-am viîit da io uom n-am găsit, di fel, nimic, nimic, nimic!! Ăl nu-i uom!» Vine pruncu pîn la el și zî: - Bună zua, Doamne! - Să fii sănătos... - Doamne - zice - nu cumva ai văzut p-aci trecîn un cumvoi de an'imale?»⁴⁰²

Evil is a satirized character, often identified with those who disrupt the established *order* of the village. Jokes, anecdotes, folk tales, fairy tales, and legends are demarcated by the folklorist Bîrlea in a conventional manner and 'inventoried' with the meticulousness (*acribia*) that characterized his entire body of work. He defines the specific nature of Romanian folklore - a feat made possible only by his mastery of a vast body of foreign specialized literature; for this reason, his work serves as an essential research tool for specialists and enthusiasts alike.

The folklore of calendar customs occupies a generous portion of the study, as it analyzes those genres that often create confusion among the uninitiated—such as the carol (*colindul*), frequently regarded as a practice linked exclusively to Christmas. The custom of caroling with animal or allegorical masks - such as the Bear, the Stag, the Goat or the *Turca* - is chronologically positioned within prehistoric times, belonging to the earliest human communities that saw animals as divine substitutes long before fashioning anthropomorphic gods. Since ancestral times, humanity has been driven toward survival by the irrepressible joy of faith in rebirth, rising from the *membra disjecta* of sacrificed deities. Ovidiu Bîrlea retrieves ancient ritual scenarios of death and rebirth from the shadows of folkloric time, interpreting them with pertinence and the full responsibility of his scholarship.

⁴⁰² *Antologie...*, vol. II, p. 23. Archaic dialect, untranslatable in this context; due to its archaic structure and era-specific connotations, it does not allow for a faithful translation and has been preserved as such to maintain its philological value.

Throughout the study, annual customs are analyzed and placed in antithesis; furthermore, Bîrlea establishes the line of religious syncretism, showing how ancient festivals became the solid foundation of the 'folk religion' that would eventually shape Romanian Christianity.

The folklore of life-cycle customs concludes this first volume of *Romanian Folklore*. The most significant thresholds of existence - birth, marriage, and death - have given rise to countless practices and beliefs. Engaging with the work of Ovidiu Bîrlea is not merely a mandatory stage in the training of any future researcher; it represents, above all, an act of piety dedicated to a people whose folk creations enrich the universal cultural heritage. To these gems of Romanian folk wisdom and philosophy, the great folklorist - born in the village of Mogoș in the heart of Transylvania - dedicated his entire life. This work serves equally as a manual of rural philosophy - a philosophy rooted in Revelation, received by the common man, that steadfast traveler between the paths of transhumance and the wooden church on the hilltop where he was baptized. This 'dialogue with God' gave birth to a Romanian way of life that formed the basis of a vast traditional wisdom. Ovidiu Bîrlea transposed this wisdom into an immense treasury of living language, moral norms, and values that remain essential and cherished in today's society.

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