

# THE WOODEN CHURCH “SAINT HIERARCH NICHOLAS” – A HISTORICAL MONUMENT AND A SYMBOL OF SPIRITUAL CULTURE

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**Rezumat:** În această lucrare, autorii ilustrează situația actuală a bisericilor din lemn construite în secolul al XVIII-lea în Basarabia, referindu-se, în special, la locașul „Sfântul Ierarh Nicolae” din satul Musteața, raionul Fălești. Acesta reprezintă un monument de o importanță istorică inedită și un simbol al culturii spirituale românești. Biserica „Sfântul Ierarh Nicolae” se distinge prin arhitectura rustică complexă, de o bogată încărcătură simbolică. Face parte din categoria monumentelor de tip “casă țărănească”, fără cupolă. Este construită din lemn pe fundament de piatră. Potrivit documentelor de arhivă, a fost construită în 1757, pe când satul se numea Oișeni. La ora actuală, edificiul se află într-o stare gravă. Este necesară, de urgență, restaurarea și conservarea monumentului. Scopul nostru este de a reliefa importanța istorică și spirituală a acestui monument pentru cultura românilor de pretutindeni.

**Résumé:** Dans l'ouvrage ci-joint, les auteurs illustrent la situation actuelle des églises en bois construites au XVIII-ème siècle en Bessarabie, faisant référence surtout à l'édifice "Le Saint Hiérarque Nicolas" du village Musteața, le département Fălești. Celui-ci représente un monument d'une importance historique inédite et un symbole de la culture spirituelle roumaine. L'église "Le Saint Hiérarque Nicolas" se distingue par l'architecture rustique complexe, avec un riche bagage de symboles. Elle fait partie de la catégorie des monuments de type "maison paysanne", sans coupole. Elle est construite en bois sur fondement en pierre. Conformément aux documents d'archive, elle a été construite en 1757, à l'époque où le village se nommait Oișeni. De nos jours, l'édifice se trouve dans un état déplorable. La restauration et la conservation du monument s'imposent urgemment. Notre but est celui de mettre en relief l'importance historique et spirituelle de ce monument pour la culture des Roumains de partout.

**Abstract:** The present study is dedicated to the research of the wooden churches built in the XVIII-th century in Bessarabia. The authors refer, in particular, to the church „Saint Hierarch Nicholas” from Musteața village, Fălești district. This is one of the few monuments from Republic of Moldova of such historical importance and it is a relevant spiritual symbol of Romanian culture. The church „Saint Hierarch Nicholas” is distinguished by its complex rustic architecture with a reach symbolism load. It is a typical monument according to the “peasant house” category, with no cupola. It is built of wood on a stone foundation. According to archival documents, it was set in 1757, when the village was called Oișeni. Currently, the building is in a damaged condition. It is necessary emergency restoration and

*conservation of the monument. Our goal is to capitalize on historical and spiritual importance of this monument for the Romanian's culture from everywhere.*

**Keywords:** wooden church, Musteața, „Saint Hierarch Nicholas”, monument, culture

In the medieval times, the wooden churches architecture was very popular in the Romanian countries. Unlike stone, which is more difficult to obtain and process, for centuries the wood has been the main material for building rural churches. The archival documents speak about such worship places from Bessarabia, which had suffered because of the XIX-th century tendency to replace them with richer stone foundations, because of fire damage and neglect or ill will of the soviet authorities.

However, in the wooden churches from the XVIII-th century, were preserved the most interesting and authentic icons of Byzantine style or naive popular paintings, not affected by the academic spirit and naturalistically realism of the XIX-th – XX-th centuries. Through these architectures, we can also remark the parallelisms that exist between the development of our constructions and history<sup>1</sup>.



Photo 1. The demolished wooden church “Saint Archangel Michael”, Hiliuți, Râșcani

According to the Catalogue of monuments<sup>2</sup>, today, in the Republic of Moldova are approved only about 30 preserved wooden churches with such historical importance of the existing 700 in 1812. These churches are in danger, too. Only in the last year were demolished four wooden churches as: “Saint Archangel Michael” (built

<sup>1</sup> G. Balș, *Bisericile Moldovenești din veacurile al XVII-lea și al XVIII-lea*. [Moldovan churches of the XVII-th – XVIII-th centuries] in Fundațiunea „Regele Ferdinand I”, București, Institut de Arte Grafice „E. Mervan”, 1933, p. 594.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.monument.md/arhitectura\\_religioasa/biserici\\_lemn/](http://www.monument.md/arhitectura_religioasa/biserici_lemn/)

in 1808) from Hiliuți village, Râșcani district; “Saint Archangels Michael and Gabriel” (built in 1702), Petrușeni, Râșcani; “Saint Trifon” (1812), Cotul-Morii, Hâncești; “Saint Archangels Michael and Gabriel” (1904), Vorniceni, Strășeni<sup>3</sup> etc.

### **General information about the wooden church „Saint Hierarch Nicholas” and Musteața village**

In Fălești district there are 45 churches, but only five of them are of wood. The oldest church is “St. Hierarch Nicholas” from Musteața village, which was built in 1757 and is specified in a directory from 1922<sup>4</sup>. By the way, this church is one of the oldest from Bessarabia.

From geographical point of view, the village is located in a picturesque landscape with a population of about 650 houses, and it is at 13 km away from the district’s center and 136 km from the capital.

According to the archival documents, until 1859 this village was only a small land called Oișeni. The oldest document about this settlement was found by the researcher M. Costăchescu – a *uric* from Stephan the Great times, signed on 25 may 1502<sup>5</sup>, which confirm that Ioan Slugeru bought a part of manor from the Oieșen’s sons with 70 zlotys. Later, the village takes the name of Musteața, named after an owner who, maybe, had mustachios.

In the documents from the National Archives of Moldova (file nr. 463/1815) we find the wooden church “St. Hierarch Nichols” in hypostases of canonical dicastery. The priest has not only lack of the daily food, but even of cloths. The saint church was closed for months without Divine Liturgy<sup>6</sup>.

Another situation we discover when this land is bought by Ioan Balș in 1817. In the village there were only 93 Romanian households. The church was ministering by two priests, a sexton and a deacon. The church was repaired and, in 1835, was served by the priest Vasile Pântescu, who was 47 years old, widower, with a child. Nicolae Bălțatu, 41 years old, was as a deacon and Constantin Galiț (28 years old) – as a teacher (*dascăl*). In that times in Musteața were 456 inhabitants (only one family of foreigners, the rest – of Romanians)<sup>7</sup>. The natives speak about the cases when this monument was in danger. They remember with fear about soviet times when the

<sup>3</sup> *Bisericile de lemn pe cale de dispariție (partea I-a)* [Endangered Wooden Churches, part one], [http://www.mitropolia.md/main/show\\_article/4236](http://www.mitropolia.md/main/show_article/4236)

<sup>4</sup> „Anuarul Arhiepiscopiei Hotinului și Chișinăului” [The yearbook of the Archdiocese of Hotin and Chișinău], Chișinău, 1922, p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> *Localitățile Republicii Moldova. Itinerar documentar-publicistic ilustrat, Musteața* [Localities of the Republic of Moldova. Illustrated Journalistic Documentary Itinerary. Musteața], vol. VIII, Li – M, Chișinău, Fundația „Draghiștea”, 2008, p.631 - 633.

<sup>6</sup> *Catalogul documentelor moldovenești* [Catalogue of Moldavian Documents], vol. V, București, 1975, p. 39-40. In the original: ”...Ioan Galiță din satul Oișăanii, căruia nu numai că hrana ce de toate zilele îi lipsește din pricina beției, dar nici îmbrăcăminte nu are și sf. biserică șade închisă cu lunile fără slujirea dumnezeștii Liturghii”.

<sup>7</sup> „Anuarul...” p. 28.

leaders wanted to demolish it or to move into another place. The peasants were against and many of them were punished by law.

Despite the times' forecast, the adobe survived until today.

### **The architecture and historical importance**

The building architecture remind of the ordinary peasant house. The construction system is a traditional one; it size – 15 000 mm x 7 000 mm, height 2 500 mm. In the exterior, the walls are from wooden planks. The scheme design is rigid and the foundation is constructed of crushed stone on the ribbon of clay mortar pillars, in which are embedded housing hardwood planks of 250-300 mm. The poles are placed at the building's corners and in the center of the longitudinal bulkhead. Inner walls, including ceiling, are plastered with clay and whitewashed.



*Photo 2. The church and the bell in 1976*



*Photo 3. The Musteața's church in 1991*

The church has a simple, rectangular plan and is divided into altar, narthex, exonarthex and porch, in accordance with Eastern Christian tradition. The porch has a rectangular shape, with two symmetrically windows.

It is very important to mention that in the interior, the narthex and exonarthex are covered with a semi cylindrical vault. As the wooden churches from Hiliuți, Petrușeni (Râșcani district), Pererâta (Briceni district) the roof is divided into four parts, it was provided for all compartments.

The entry was stipulated in the South, and the bells had two levels. In the second half of the XIX-th century, according to the Russian Synod, it was decided that the porch, which enter was from the South, to be replaced to the West.

In the same period were added other two turrets. Before, the roof was from shingles. In ‘80<sup>th</sup> it was changed into industrial slates, not proper for such kinds of monuments. The crosses are installed on the crescent, sign of the triumph of Christianity over the Mohammedanism.

The church has been adorned, inside with al fresco paintings of a rare artistic and iconographic value. Of a great importance and value is the iconostas with its paints on canvas from the XIX-th century, representing a fragment of *The Last Supper*.



*Photo 4. The iconostas, a fragment from The Last Supper, was painted in the XIX-th century on canvas*

A great interest represents the other images from the iconostas, which reflect a various fragments from the *Old Testament*, which are less common in Orthodox Christian Churches. This fact points to the length of this works. The icons are painted with such a dye with chemical components, which don't let the dust to settle on them.

The saints' aura is realized from paint mixed with golden dust, that is why it shines and nowadays.

We must mention that the icons from the Deacons Doors and Royal Doors are arranged untraditionally. For example, on the Deacon's Door, from the right of the iconostas, is the icon of Saint Deacon Laurence. But on the left Deacon's Door is the icon of St. Archangel Michael (traditionally, it must be the icon of a Deacon or only the icons of Saints Archangels Michael and Gabriel).



*Photo 5. The iconostas*

Yet the inner wall painting retains, in many areas, both the colors freshness and the adherence to the wood wall, owing to a particular working technique. The resistance structure was strongly affected by weather conditions and especially by xylophages or micro- and macromycetes attack.

The main cause of deterioration of the church has been the improper maintenance in time. The accumulation of infiltration humidity, combined, in the lower part, with capillarity one, favored and maintained the biological attack.



*Photo 6. The wooden church nowadays and the bell.*



*Photo7. The destroyed foundation and wood of the church*

The wooden structure has been attacked and deteriorated, losing its resistance and severely affecting both the church structure and, inevitably, the painted decoration.

Other causes of the bad condition of the wooden church are:

- the deteriorated pitching around the church;
- the rotting and warping of the piles which supports the walls;
- the rotting and warping of the cases of housing;
- the rotting of the windows boxes;

- the deteriorated foundation;
- the rotting of a great part of the planks, etc.;

### **Conclusion**

As a conclusion we must mention that the church “Saint Hierarch Nicolas” is an historical monument and a symbol of spiritual culture. Unfortunately, this monument is in a damaged condition. The experts consider that if this edifice will be not urgently restored and conserved, Moldova will lose an important historical monument. The valorization of this church will have the next results:

- recovering the worship vestiges - the wooden church from Musteața village, which represents an inedited monuments of the national patrimony;
- preservation and exposing the national values for cultural education;
- supporting the cultural dynamics and raising the population’s civic, promoting the principle of unity by cultural diversity;
- highlighting the patrimonial value of worship monument, the “St. Nicholas' Church”;
- Including the “St. Nicholas” monument in the regional tourism circuit: landscapes „Caiuceni – Nagornoe” (Musteața village), „La Izvoare” (in the neighborhood villages Risipeni, Bocșa and Izvoare), „Pădurea Domnească” – a place with a worldwide and national importance (Moara Domnească village), the caves from Moara Domnească, Măgurele Mound (Măgurele village) etc.