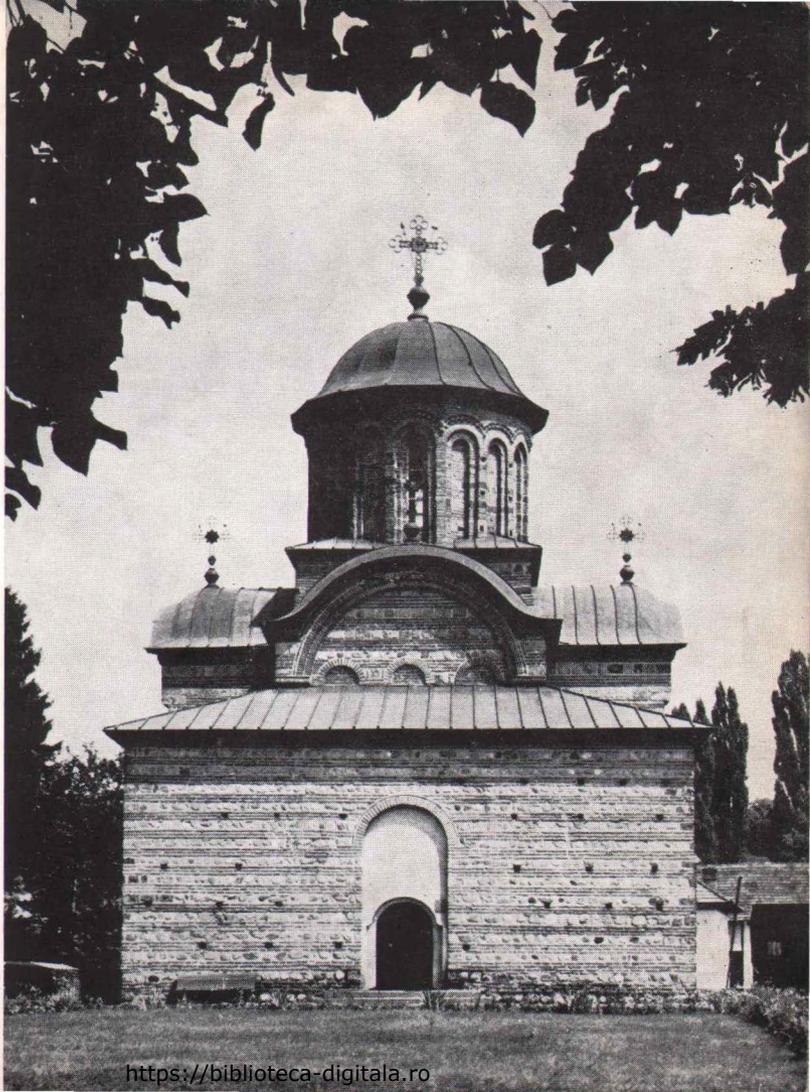


THE PRINCELY CHURCH
OF CURTEA DE ARGES

MERIDIANE
PUBLISHING
HOUSE



HISTORICAL MONUMENTS
A POCKET GUIDE



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OF CURTEA DE ARGEȘ

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PRINCIPAL CHURCH
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On the cover: St. Nicholas' Princely Church. View from the south-west

On pages 2-3: St. Nicholas' Princely Church and the curator's cottage

Seldom has a monument of such beauty and interest as the Curtea de Argeș Princely Church been denied its value for such a long time. Historical sources invariably mention it in the second place after the splendid church of the Argeș monastery, the foundation of Neagoie Basarab. Foreign travellers — Paul of Aleppo and others — mention but casually the old church significant to them only inasmuch as it had long sheltered the relics of St. Filofteia. As for the Romanian researchers they considered it the earliest princely foundation in the whole Wallachia, ascribed to the legendary "Black Prince" who was known to have lived at his Argeș Court and who had been buried there. That is as much as one can learn from the two main chronicles of Wallachia, the one ascribed to Radu Popescu and the Cantacuzino Chronicle.

The first to attach the church greater importance was Neofit the Cretan, former tutor to the sons of Prince Constantin Mavrocordat, who was promoted by the latter to the office of metropolitan of Wallachia in 1738. In his travel diary, rich in valuable information on our early monuments that he examined with interest and as far as it was possible at that time with competence, Neofit dwells at some length on the Curtea de Argeș Princely Church. However, for Neofit too, the importance of the edifice lay mainly in that it housed the relics of St. Filofteia rather than in its historical and artistic interest. He made careful notes of the painted scenes illustrating the life of this saint which he later used in one of his works.

Greater attention was attached to the monument by the historians, archaeologists and lovers of antiquities in the latter half of the 19th century: Alexandru Odobescu, Cezar Bolliac, A. Pelimon, D. Papazoglu and the painter H. Trenk. However these pioneer researchers of early Romanian art considered Curtea de Argeș Princely Church not so much as an art monument as mainly a valuable historical document, the earliest ecclesiastical structure known at the time in the whole of Wallachia.

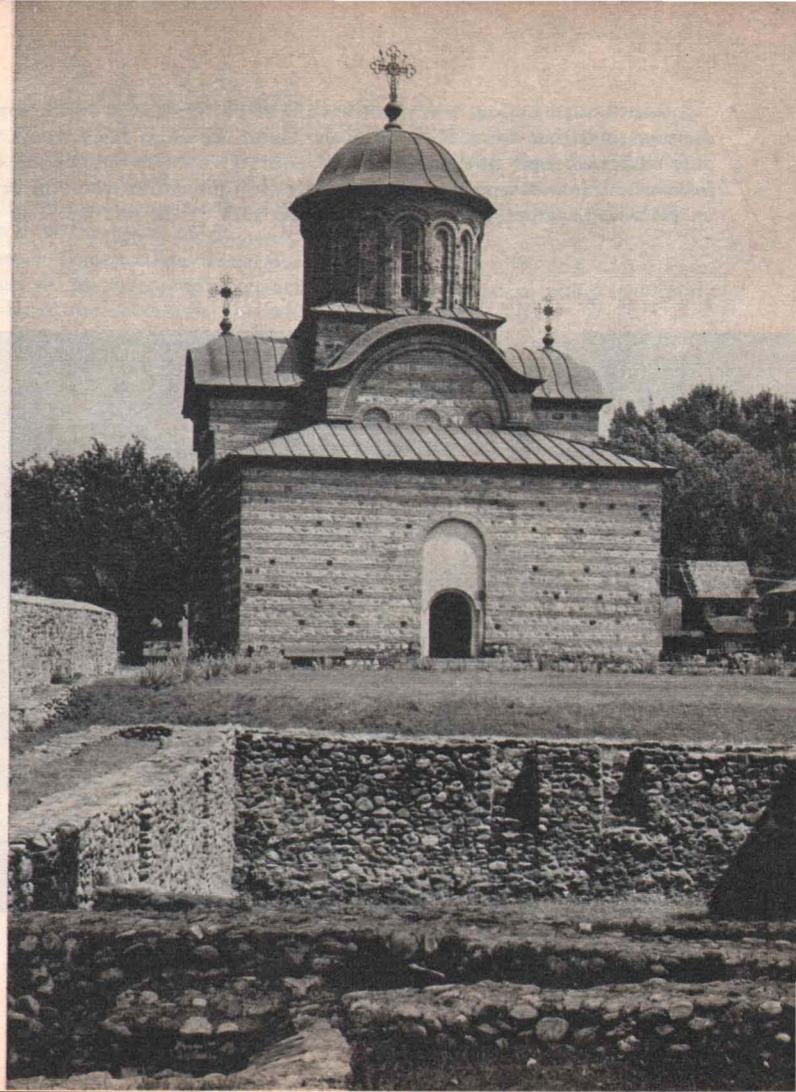
This underestimation of the artistic value of the monument even by such men of culture and art as Alexandru Odobescu for instance is not accidental. After centuries that had left their imprint on it, having been distorted by the raising of two small towers of wood and sheet iron above the ante-nave (1827) and by the addition of an unsightly porch (1875), with the façades worn out and bungled, the original painting covered by

paintings of no value (done in the 18th and 19th cent.) with the princely graves that were still known rummaged, damaged by earthquakes, abandoned, "solitary and quiet", as Nicolae Iorga described it, the church was on the verge of collapsing and was lingering in history and the memory of a few local inhabitants.

At the beginning of the 20th century, on the initiative of architect Lecomte de Noüy (who was responsible for the restoration of the church of Argeş Monastery), it was decided that the monument should be pulled down to be subsequently "restored" from its very foundations. Following the Argeş track "of princes" and guided by the "memory of the heroic times of our origin", Nicolae Iorga stopped at the former princely residence in front of "the old church" leaning "on the crutches of our mending" and examining it with love, warmth and deep understanding, deemed it worthy of careful preservation. In 1911 when the authorities had ordered that the church which was on the point of collapsing should be pulled down after all, each and every one of the town's inhabitants contributed towards the raising of 56,000 lei, a huge amount at that time, and appealed to the Commission of Historical Monuments insisting that the church should be repaired at their own expense. The architect Grigore Cerchez must take the credit for having "ventured" — as he himself put it — to attempt to save the monument. Restoration work which began in the same year went on for a decade and a half and the result was surprising even for the historians and art lovers who had rightly assessed the value of the time-honoured monument. Owing to this careful restoration, the first of its kind ever to have been carried out in this country, the princely church regained its original appearance both inside and outside and revealed to the full its genuine splendour as one of the most harmoniously conceived historical and artistic monuments in Romania whose fame has long surpassed the boundaries of our country.

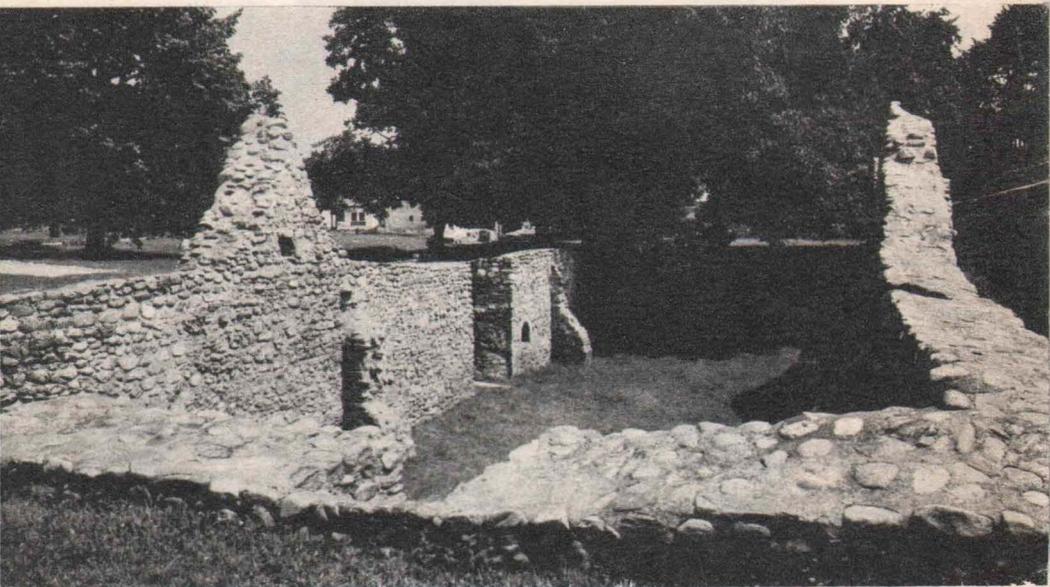
St. Nicholas' Church and the remnants of the Princely Court lie in the middle of the town of Curtea de Argeş to the left-hand side of the road leading to Argeş Monastery, the celebrated foundation of Neagoie Basarab, and farther up to the mountain and the stronghold of Poienari near which the "Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej" Hydropower Plant has been built.

1. St. Nicholas' Princely Church and ruins of the princely residence. View from the west



Surrounded by low walls that have been partly rebuilt on the former foundations, the structures that formed the Princely Court are today mere ruins. The church, the only edifice to come down to us in its entirety, used to lie outside the Court proper from which it was separated by a wall whose foundations can still be seen. A gate cut in this wall provided a direct link with the yard of the church. The curved wall sur-

2. Ruins of the Princely Court



rounding the yard off the street and the bell-tower under whose vault one passes to enter the precinct are of later date, going back in all probability to the 18th century.

The entrance to the former precinct of the Princely Court was provided by a fortified gate on the east side, to the left of the present bell-tower. Part of the foundations of this gate lies at present under the picturesque cottage in typical local Muscel style of the curator of the town monuments.

Within the former comparatively small precinct (103 by 79 m.) beyond whose walls the magnificent sight of the Argeş valley greets the eye, there used to stand two buildings, one on the edge of the north side, the other along the south wall.

Judging from its position within the court the north house whose main façade with a wide verandah faced south may have been the residence of the prince. This unassuming house, rectangular on the outside and measuring 27 by 23 m, of which only the cellars and the foundation walls of the verandah (that was wide in front and narrowing in the rest to surround all the other sides) are left, consisted of an elevated ground floor with several rooms and the offices.

The other house, on the opposite side was not much bigger, 31.50 by 21 m. Likewise, only its cellar has come down to us: a very long rectangular room divided into three sections by means of two wide archways which in all likelihood supported a semicylindrical vault. Its main façade also exhibited a wide verandah with a balcony in the middle. Beneath the balcony was the opening of the cellar. The upper storey, probably the living quarters, was reached by a straight outer staircase that ran near the wall of the verandah and was leading to the balcony. The house may have consisted of four or five rooms.

Both these residences were essentially patterned on traditional peasant houses. The pattern of the north one recurs in the architecture of the Muscel cottage whose verandah and whole storey stand on a high brickwork base. The features displayed by the other house are characteristic of nearly all peasant cottages in the hilly districts of Romania.

The prince who founded the Argeş Princely Court and the date of its foundation are not known for certain. Most historians agree that the founder or founders of St. Nicholas' Church that served both as chapel and princely burial place are the same as the founders of the Court.

However, a close examination of the ruins of the Court, of the finds of the archaeological excavations carried out when the church was restored as well as of the architecture of the monument reveals at least two distinct stages between the structures within the precincts of the Princely Court and the erection of St. Nicholas' Church that was due to Basarab I (approx. 1310—1352) and his son Nicolae Alexandru (1352—1364).

Indeed, the present princely church that was raised and decorated in keeping with designs and techniques uncommon with the local master builders in the first half of the 14th century is of a later date, at least by a few decades, than the remains of the structures within the precincts of the former Princely Court. The foundations of a chapel that was also standing at that time and formed the set-up of the first Princely Court together with the rest have been unearthed by archaeological excavations beneath the floor of the present church.

The probable permanent residence of the voivodes Seneslau and Tihomir who ruled in the district to the left of the Olt in the second half of the 13th century, the Argeş Court could naturally become the residence of their successor Basarab I during whose reign the creation of the independent feudal state of Wallachia was completed. This was a process whose final stage was marked by the so-called "battle of Posada" of 1330.

It is through this place that the Hungarian army of Charles Robert must have passed in 1330, when it entered the country via Severin and sallied forth to storm "Castrum Argis", the small stronghold later called Poienari, lying 30 km. north of Curtea de Argeş, the refuge and fortified place of Basarab I.

It is not known when and why the original church was abandoned and what caused the ruin of the princely residence. It can safely be assumed, however, that this was brought about by the aforementioned war of 1330.

The Vienna Painted Chronicle of Hungary which relates at length the battles of 1330 when the Romanian voivode won his independence from the Hungarian feudal kingdom makes no mention whatsoever of the siege or destruction of Argeş. However, there is reason to suppose that after the Romanians withdrew to the mountains and the Hungarian army marched through Argeş, the town and the Princely Court were seriously damaged. The fact is that after 1330 Basarab I is recorded as residing constantly at the

Cimpulung Court near "Negru Vodă" (Black Prince) Monastery and next to the church where he and some of his successors were to be buried.

Curtea de Argeş, however, was not abandoned for good. Shortly after the mishaps that caused Basarab I to settle at Cimpulung, his son Nicolae Alexandru, whom he had made joint ruling prince as early as 1340, proceeded to restore the former Princely Court at Argeş and continued the erection of the new church started by Basarab I. Work proceeded very slowly and it could only be completed under Nicolae Alexandru's son and successor to the throne, Vladislav Vlaicu (1364—aprox. 1377). After having restored the neighbouring houses as well, the latter moved his residence to Argeş. One of his charters dated 1372 was granted in this market town which he calls "nostra residentia".

Conceived as a place for worship and princely burial, the new church was designed to be a monumental structure meeting all the artistic and technical requirements that would answer the wishes of assertion of an independent reign as was that of Basarab I after 1330. However, given the traditions of building and the stage of the development of architecture in Wallachia, local masters would have found the task of designing and raising such a monument very difficult. That is why the founders called in a team of master builders from the area of ancient Byzantine tradition near Constantinople who were commissioned to build a church that would match the newly prosperous situation of Wallachia.

Work on the new structure which later came to be called "the princely church" began in the last years of the reign of Basarab I. In addition to its structural pattern, its architecture and painting (closely related to what was being done in the field of religious art in the countries dominated by Byzantium or in countries influenced by Byzantine art and culture in South-East Europe throughout the 14th cent.) a Slavonic inscription (discovered in 1920 when the painting was restored, under the plaster of the lower section of the north wall of the nave) provides a valuable *ante quem* term of reference for dating the construction. The inscription written with a nail in fresh mortar runs as follows: "in the year 6860 (1351 or 1352) the great voivode Basarab died at Cimpulung". It can be inferred from this inscription that in 1352 the church was under construction or possibly completed and was being plastered. Work probably lasted throughout the reign of Prince Nicolae Alexandru (1352—1364), for the church was completed and painted during the reign of his son Vladislav Vlaicu.

The history of the construction of St. Nicholas' Princely Church, one of the most valuable specimens of Romanian mediaeval architecture and painting, mingles with the history of the early decades of existence of the independent principality of Wallachia. The period at the end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th century which preceded the formation of the feudal state was also marked by intense constructive activity whose modest results have come down to us in the archaeological remains of the small churches of Turnu Severin and particularly in the ruins of St. Nicoară's Church at Curtea de Argeș situated on the hill east of the Princely Church. In the period after 1330, following the consolidation of the independent feudal state of Wallachia, the church also acquired an independent organization and a suitable hierarchy. The construction of the Curtea de Argeș Princely Church goes back to this period of careful managing of the country's political and religious life, a fact which made for the consolidation of the church as well as of the Romanian feudal state.

For a long time it had been assumed that the foundation of the first Basarab princes was designed to serve as the metropolitan church of the country. After the discoveries made during the restoration it has been generally admitted that it used to be a Court church as well as a burial place for the princes. Prior to 1359, the year when the Constantinople patriarchate recognized the metropolitan church of Wallachia and the metropolitan Iachint of Vicina, St. Nicholas' Princely Church, when finished, may well have fulfilled this function, too, for some time.

A reliable historical source (*The Life and Deeds of St. Nifon* written by Gavril Protul, who attended the dedication ceremony of the church of Argeș Monastery) mentions, however, that Neagoie Basarab "pulled down the Argeș Metropolitan Church" in order to make room for his new foundation (lying two km. away). The former structure that stood "ruinous and unconsolidated" on the site of the present Argeș bishopric was the church of the metropolitan seat of Ungro-Vlachia. Whether this church was built about 1359 when the Constantinople patriarchate recognized the metropolitan church of Wallachia or whether this occurred some time later (anyway before 1425 when the metropolitan seat was to be moved to the princely residence of Tirgoviște), the fact is not of vital importance. The hardly surprising fact is, however, worth noting that before the princely residence was moved to Tirgoviște, the capital city of Argeș had at least two big monuments of architectural value and

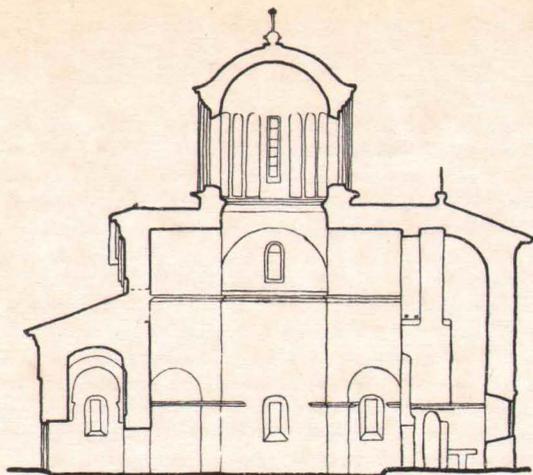
that, fortunately, one of them has come down to us unspoiled by the wear and tear of time.

Leaving it to the future to solve the difficult problem of the date of erection of the Argeș Metropolitan Church mentioned by Gavril Protul and Neagoie Basarab (in an inscription placed on the façade of his foundation), one has to consider St. Nicholas' Princely Church as an undeniable proof of the power and prestige enjoyed at the time not only by the princely founders of Argeș but also by the Wallachian independent state.

As it became a symbol of this state, the monument, whose size and importance was paralleled by nothing that had been built in this area until that time, testifies to the fact that the early days of the Wallachian state were far from being characterized by the modesty that was so much emphasized formerly. Not only this impressive structure with its highly skilful painting but also the adornments and jewels found in the graves within the church, the tombstones of these graves and all the information available with regard to the economic and cultural life of Wallachia in the 14th century go to prove that the living standards at the Court, reflecting the aspirations of the newly created state, must have been such as to place the crown and the country on an equal footing with the older states south of the Danube.

Viewed in this light and compared with previous far less impressive structures, the Princely Church appears as a monument initiating a new stage of development of architecture in Wallachia. The perfect balance, the harmonious, sober proportions and the monumental character of the edifice are in full concordance with the ever growing power of the throne of Wallachia expressed by means that had been tested and enriched in the century-old tradition of the Byzantine master builders and painters.

The Princely Church exhibits a clear-cut design and is modelled on the classical "inscribed Greek cross" type created by the masters of Byzantine architecture at the time of the Comneni emperors. By comparison with other structures influenced by the Byzantine tradition which it resembles, the Curtea de Argeș foundation of the Basarab



3. St. Nicholas' Princely Church of Curtea de Argeş. Longitudinal section

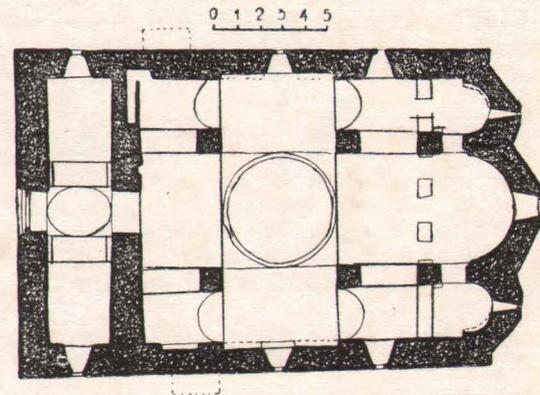
princes is much larger: the rectangle in which the outline of its plan is inscribed is 14.55 m. by 23.50 m. and it is 23 m. high as measured to the top of the steeple. The balanced inside volume contains three well-defined rooms: a narrow ante-nave (2.80 m.), a spacious nave (11.80 m. by 12.40 m.) and the sanctuary consisting of a large central apse flanked by two small apsidioles: the prothesis and the diaconicon.

The ante-nave is covered by a long semicylindrical vault interrupted in the middle above the entrance by an ellipsoidal cupola. High above, between the roof of the ante-nave (whose slope was steeper in the early days) and the extrados of the vault there used to be a low hiding place. The 60 cm. wide and some 1.70 m. high staircase leading to this hiding place cut in the wall between the ante-nave and the nave and the first step (which could be reached by means of a wood ladder) stands 3 m. above the nave floor.

The nave, the main and most typical room of the church, contains four pillars in the middle, which are laid out in a square plan. The pillars divide the interior into three long sections, that is three naves, a wide median one and two lateral ones which are narrower. The three sections are extended to the east by an apse each. However, because of the vaulting, this division into long naves is not noticed by the visitor and the naves take on a peculiar form of "inscribed Greek cross". This can be easily seen

if we section horizontally the four central pillars and project the vaults of the room as seen from beneath; consequently we obtain the form of a cross with even arms (a Greek cross) inscribed in the square of the four walls of the room. The cross exists in actual fact, its arms being formed by the four semicylindrical vaults standing above the main pillars and turned each towards the surrounding walls in the direction of one of the four cardinal points. In the corners between the arms of the cross and the square plan four rectangular sections can be seen, that are much lower than the central semicylinders and are covered also by semicylindrical vaults placed parallel to the main axis of the edifice. A close examination of the interior structure reveals the fact that the roofs of these sections continuing in the east above the apsidioles and joined in the west by the top of the ante-nave are lower than the semicylindrical vaults of the central section; this sets off both the highly suggestive cross-shaped structure of the nave and the steeple standing on a low prismatic base in the middle which dominates the whole structure.

A typical specimen of the "inscribed Greek cross" type of Byzantine origin, St. Nicholas' Princely Church at Curtea de Argeş exhibits many peculiar features among which first mention should be made of the startling monumentality of the nave obtained by means of simple combinations of smooth surfaces and especially by the well-marked successive archways and the vaults forming the sophisticated supporting fabric of the



4. St. Nicholas' Princely Church. Plan

smart yet massive steeple raised on the intersection of the arms of the cross. In addition and related to this main characteristic feature one has to note the adaptation, effected with consummate craftsmanship and great simplicity, of the external architectural pattern to the inside of the edifice as well as the ingenuous and harmonious treatment of the façades which exhibit no relief or adornment except for the cornices formed by superposed rows of bricks laid dent-wise. The decoration of the façades relies for effect on the rhythmical alternation of materials of diverse colours: bands of grey rough or quarry stone, slightly chiselled, and bands of three rows of red ashlar brick.

Throughout its existence of over six centuries the princely church has been subjected to alterations and additions. On the occasion of the judicious restoration carried out by the architect Grigore Cerchez between 1911 and 1920, all the incongruous additions were removed, sparing however such additions that were valuable in themselves and were not detrimental to the monumental and decorative plasticity of the original structure. Consequently there have been retained the sculptured frames placed round the windows about 1750; and, in order to consolidate the edifice, the two buttresses built in 1850, one in the south wall in front of a door which formerly gave access to the nave from the yard and was then blocked and the other placed symmetrically at the north side. Finally, the main entrance with a new iron door and a stone frame made of an old tombstone is still in good repair after the restoration of 1850.

While Basarab I and his son Nicolae Alexandru founded the church, the painting must have been finished during the reign of Vladislav Vlaicu (1364—1377). This assumption is also borne out by the two votive portraits, one in the ante-nave, the other in the nave. Above the entrance door of the nave there is a painting *Deesis* in which the usual figure of St. John is replaced by that of St. Nicholas, the patron saint of prince Nicolae Alexandru. The character bearing a wreath of lily flowers can be no other than prince

5. *Deesis*. Detail: Prince Nicolae Alexandru



Nicolae Alexandru himself (whose catholic wife could not be featured in an orthodox church). Furthermore, the prince pictured by the side of his lady and carrying a model of the church in its later form with the steeples above the ante-nave, on the west wall of the nave (the portrait was repainted in a later period) can only be Vladislav Vlaicu. This assumption is supported by the deteriorated inscription painted on the west wall of the nave which still reads: "The God blessed prince and sole ruler... of Ungro-Vlachia... and the lady of Ungro-Vlachia loyal to our lord Jesus Christ". It is moreover natural that a monument of the importance of the princely church should have been completed at the date when Argeş became princely residence (before 1372).

The frescoes decorating the inside walls do not all go back to the 14th century. Many of the episodes featured in the nave are of a later date. The church as has already been mentioned has been subject to repeated restorations throughout the centuries. The painting underwent some significant alterations during the restoration carried out about 1750 by a skilful painter very likely Radu sin Mihai from Tirgovişte, the author of one of the very few "painter's notebooks" that have come down to us (and is preserved in the collection of the Academy of the Socialist Republic of Romania) and during the restoration of 1827 done by a mediocre church painter, Pandeimon; some retouching was also done during the reign of Gheorghe Bibescu (1842—1848). Part of the contribution of these restorers confined itself to consolidating and brightening up the colours of the old fresco; however the original paintings were often replaced either by removing the early coat of plaster and plastering the walls afresh or else by scraping out the original fresco to enable the fresh mortar to stick so that a new fresco could be painted on it.

On the occasion of the restoration work undertaken by the Commission for Historical Monuments in 1920 most of the old frescoes were given a new lease of life. The restorers (the painters Noroceca and I. Mihail) carefully removed the layers of painting superimposed on the original frescoes. The latter were then washed clean and some were retouched in places while others were unfortunately finished off. A close examination of the whole composition reveals the different artistic standards of the original painting and that of later date (the vaults, the drum of the steeple, the lower section of the west wall of the nave). The few retouches and small additions



6. *The Feeding of the Five Thousand* (north of the nave)

carried out during the last restoration cause no disturbance on the remarkable painting as a whole.

Leaving aside the additions made in the 18th and 19th centuries, it should be made clear that the 14th century frescoes are not the work of a single artist but they appear to have been done by at least two painters. A closer scrutiny will reveal some stylistic differences between the painting of the sanctuary and the nave with its fluent elegance and its delicate gradation of colours and the painting in the ante-nave showing in places a more marked preoccupation for the drawing. Despite all this the painting as a whole is coherent and harmonious with its fine and airy vast composition, its fluent and expressive drawing and bright colour full of delicate light and shade.

The Argeş paintings, the only ones known until that date in Wallachia, are by no means the earliest done in this principality. The fragments of painted plaster found in the ruins at Garvăn Dinogetia, Niculiţel and Turnu-Severin are however too insignificant and provide the contemporary researcher with little else than the suggestion that the churches built in the period prior to the formation of the centralized state were also decorated with painting. While the development of the Wallachian painting until the second half of the 14th century cannot be traced, the artistic maturity which is so obvious in the Argeş painting is the result of a long evolution of the art of Byzantine tradition.

A new style called the style of the Palaeological Renaissance which was to be the last in the impressive evolution of Byzantine art was originated in Byzantium in the latter half of the 13th century and reached its acme in the first half of the 14th century under the impact of the art in the capital of the empire. Concurrently the iconographical repertoire grew, the artists showed a marked bias for narration, they emphasized the architectural and landscape elements using them as background to the episodes they painted, which they enriched with epical details and characters; both the individual saints and the scenes are dynamical, lively and exhibit here and there attempts at a realistic presentation. Elements of Hellenistic art that have never really been forsaken in Byzantium regained pride of place and lent subtle elegance to the drawing.

Not only the Byzantine world but also most of the countries of the Christian East adopted gradually and in forms adequate to the stage of the artistic development of every one of them the characteristic features of the style of the Palaeologus epoch particularly through the intermediary of the Greek masters who often worked alongside the local masters in this vast area that had for centuries been linked to the art of Byzantium. The painting of the Curtea de Argeş Princely Church belongs to this style. However, comparatively few direct links can be traced in it with the art of the imperial capital. The similarities established by former researchers with the painting of the Kahrie-Djami Monastery of Constantinople (1310—1320) are mainly warranted by the resemblance (as far as the figure and the position are concerned) of the prince in the *Deesis*, representation featured above the entrance door of the nave of the Princely Church to Teodor Metochites, the founder of the Constantinople Church; as well as by

further similarities of composition and style between some scenes in the nave (*The Census of Quirinus* — the south wall, *The Multiplication of the Loaves* — the north wall, *The Flight to Egypt* — west wall etc.) and the corresponding scenes in the Kahrie-Djami Church. The fact that the scenes contain also Greek inscriptions in addition to Slavonic ones does not necessarily prove that Greek painters were employed here, for Greek was frequently used in other Balkan countries as well in similar circumstances.

The iconographic and stylistic similarities with the paintings of Lesnovo (approx. 1349), Peć (1377) and Dečani (1348—1350) place some of the artistic elements and iconographic subjects of the Curtea de Argeş Princely Church in Serbia, a country with an old tradition in painting. By and large, these elements form part of the Palaeologic painting and from this viewpoint the Wallachian Church has no equal in Romanian mediaeval art.*

On the other hand, in addition to the Angevine crown worn by Prince Nicolae Alexandru, the costume of obvious Western style worn by the character featured on the north-east pilaster should be considered as a transposition by the master painters of their first-hand experience of the life at the Court of the Basarab princes, which was marked by Western influence that reached Wallachia through Transylvania, as also showed by part of the adornments and jewels found in the graves, applied art pieces and the funeral stone with reclining figure (Art Museum, Bucharest).

The considerable number of the scenes painted in the princely church (over 300) makes it impossible to mention them let alone to describe every one of them in detail. By and large the iconography is the one that was common in the orthodox churches of the Christian East.

In the vault of the altar apse, a composition that at the same time observes and turns to good account the curved face of the semicalotte features the Virgin with the Child on her knees, archangel Michael and St. Nicholas the patron of the church on her left and archangel Gabriel and St. John Chrysostom on her right. The profound look in the delicately drawn face of St. John, the feminine beauty of the archangels with oval faces and

* For a detailed examination of the Palaeologic painting, see V.N. Lazarev, *History of Byzantine Painting*, Moscow, 1947



7-8. In the Garden of Gethsemane (south of the nave)

regular features, and the eyes prolonged to their narrow temples give the full measure of the mastery of the artist who painted these characters. The four registers which divide horizontally the hemicycle of the apse are covered with paintings featuring liturgical scenes on the first, *The Tent of Meeting* on the second, *The Eucharist of the Apostles* on the third, and a series of bishops on the lower register flanked in the north and south by the archdeacons Ștefan and Roman.

The Tent of Meeting, one of the most characteristic scenes in the iconography of the princely church, occurs rather seldom in Byzantine iconography but is fairly frequently encountered in Serbia. It recurs quite often in Wallachian painting and in Moldavia in the 17th century. *The Eucharist of the Apostles*, inevitably present in the sanctuary in any orthodox mediaeval church painting, is one of the artistic successes of the Argeș church; moreover, the wide, dancing steps, as it were, of the apostles, the



liveliness and gracefulness of their movements in approaching Jesus make it a characteristic scene of the Byzantine Palaeologic painting. It is likely that this composition was done by two artists: the group on the left (north) is clumsily conceived, the movements of the apostles lack liveliness, the gestures are limp by comparison with the marked dynamism of the group on the right (south).

The scene featuring *The Parable of the Ten Maidens* (south wall of the sanctuary) is distinguished by the lay imprint (encountered rather frequently in the details of the painting of the nave) and the arresting expressiveness that is obtained by the firmness of drawing, emphatic rhythm of the gestures and the almost statuesque proportions of the female characters.

Other scenes in the altar (*St. Peter and St. John in Front of the Empty Grave, Jesus in the Mountains of Galilee* etc.) and in the prothesis (*The Grave, Jesus Wrapped in the Shroud* lying under a canopy and guarded by angels) point to the consummate craftsmanship of the artists. The scenes are equally remarkable for the elegance of the movements (entirely free from mannerism), the admirable rhythm of the hands which epitomize as it were the whole purport of the action, the not ungraceful proportions of the bodies and last but not least, a sense of space and of perspective evidenced by the grouping of the characters and the architectural and landscape backgrounds.

More complex compositions with numerous characters which strike various attitudes, the vast narrative scenes in the nave characterize the strong epic vein of the Argeş painting which retains its expressiveness down to the last detail. The balanced and elegant composition of the *Washing of the Apostles' Feet* and *Christ's Agony in the Garden* (the south-east wall), the arresting expressiveness of *The Kiss of Judas* and *Carrying of the Cross* (the south wall), the lay atmosphere in the *Census of Quirinus*, *Christ Driving the Merchants from the Temple* and especially in *The Parable of He Who Built Himself a House* (the north wall), the bent for the anecdotic episode in the frieze featuring *The Multiplication of the Loaves* (top of the north wall), are as many characteristic features of this painting in which the intensified action makes up for the lack of dramatism.

The vast representation of the *Falling Asleep of the Virgin* (the west wall), one of the largest in the whole Romanian mediaeval painting, a trifle more static than the other scenes in the nave, impresses in the first place by the multitude of characters and the

division of various episodes that make it up. On close examination the figures of the angels turn out to possess a charming sweetness and the actions unfold in an almost aulic atmosphere unlike such episodes as *The Multiplication of the Loaves*, *The Parable of He Who Built Himself a House* and *Christ Driving the Merchants from the Temple*, where the characters move and act with natural spontaneity inherent in a moment of life limited to the present. Together with *The Transfiguration* (top of the west wall) and the *Eucharist of the Apostles*, *Falling Asleep of the Virgin* can be rated among the most remarkable frescoes of the Princely Church.

A few episodes from the life of St. Filofteia, whose relics had been brought from Trnovo probably in the 14th century, were painted on the west and south faces of the north-east pilaster at the end of the 18th century. These scenes are the unsophisticated work yet full of folklore picturesqueness of Radu sin Mihai who is also the author of the icons on the wall separating the nave from the sanctuary. The elements of plant decoration as well as the whole tenor of this late piece retain the characteristic features of the Brancovan style.

A few traces have been left only of *Day of Judgment* on the east wall of the antenave. The south, west and north walls exhibit scenes from the life of St. Nicholas. Above the door on the west wall can be seen the fine scene picturing *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* where unlike in the nave painting one can notice a decorative attempt evidenced by the fact that the area is covered almost entirely by a fine net of white lines ("lights") for purely decorative purposes, and whose profusion is a stylistic feature of the late Palaeologic painting.

The pre-eminently narrative painting of the Princely Church includes some individual characters, saints (Mina, Lupus, St. John the Baptist on the south-east wall), prophets (Zaharia), warrior saints, etc. that display a various range of poses like the personages in some scenes. The penetrating look of their eyes, the expression which never fails to match the feelings conveyed by the action, the purity of the young figures, the often stern authority of the adults impress throughout the painting in the Argeş church. This variety of expressions retains a unifying type: oblong faces with prominent chins, eyes elongated to the temples, shaded on the edge, with large pupils, brushy and widely arched brows and narrow foreheads. All the figures respond to a single stylistic vision.



9. Votive painting. Vladislav Vlaicu

The line and colour play the fundamental expressive role in the Argeş painting rather more obviously than the composition. The line is sometimes traced in wide harmonious curves, supple and fluent, even and assured, and at times it is abrupt, broken in sharp angles drawn two or three times. This contrast is largely responsible for the remarkable communicative character and convincing force of the narration.

The colour is bright and warm — without any abrupt transitions. The same hue covering fairly extensive areas — and comprises a wide range from the pale blue or violet, through green, gold yellow and olive to orange-red. The relief is enhanced by light marked by small patches or else by fine strokes of the brush, sometimes of the shape of a fan in keeping with the style of the late Palaeologic painting.

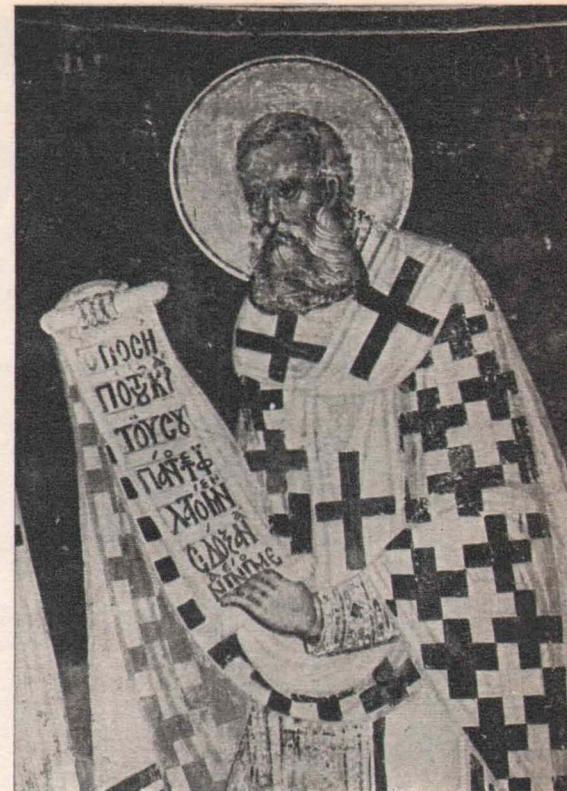
The uncommon proportions of the painting, its excellent state of preservation and particularly the remarkable features of its composi-

10. St. Hierarch Gregory (sanctuary)

tion, drawing and colour as well as the intensive expressiveness down to the last detail and the perfect dovetailing of the painting and the decorated area make the Argeş painting one of the most fully accomplished specimens of its kind in Wallachian mediaeval art. This appears to have been recognized by the Wallachian masters themselves since, despite obvious stylistic differences, echoes of the Argeş painting are traceable in the 17th and 18th centuries and later in the post-Brancovan period.

Moreover, taking into account the fact that this painting is typical of a style widespread in the art of the 14th century in South-East Europe, it must be considered as a testimony of the artistic unity and diversity of this area of Europe.

Designed to serve also as a princely burial place, the church contains fourteen graves: six on the south side, six on the north side and two in the middle of the nave. The graves discovered during the restoration have been provided with new slabs by the





Commission for Historical Monuments. One of the graves, now covered with a movable stone and provided with a thick crystal glass that allows the relics to be seen, is of particular interest. When the grave was opened during the restoration, the almost entirely preserved skeleton was discovered of a man dressed in silk attire and wearing in addition to rings and a pearl diadem and various other jewels, a gold buckle of obvious western appearance typical of the 14th century (now on view in the Bucharest Art Museum). Unfortunately the stone that used to cover this grave (placed at present near the south-west pillar) retains only a few illegible traces of the inscription and consequently the identity of the skeleton cannot be ascertained. In this respect opinions are divided: some researchers maintain it is Basarab I himself, while others — and this view appears to us rather more likely — argue that it is Vladislav Vlaicu. Finally there are others who believe that it is Radu I, the legendary “Black Prince”.

The sculpture decorating this stone, unique in the funeral decoration of the Romanian principalities, is of particular interest. A flat relief on the face of the stone features “*The Tree of Life*” (symbolic element of oriental origin). The tree which is stylized to the point of being hardly sketched is crowned by a twelve-cornered star (obtained by

11. The iconostasis

the combination of four triangles) in the middle of which there is a wind rose, a common motif in the Romanian folk sculpture. One of the long faces of the stone displays a frieze of trees whose tops are so combined as to suggest a series of archways in a broken arch with Gothic rosettes. On the top among the crowns one can see a palmetto inscribed in a heart (a decorative element of wide circulation in the whole area of Byzantine art and in the area influenced by the Byzantine art).

This slab seems to be the eldest among the mediaeval tombstones in the whole of Wallachia (except the funeral stone of equerry Laurențiu from Cîmpulung Muscel, which goes back to 1300).

The funeral slab of "Negru-Vodă" (Black Prince), now on display in the Bucharest Art Museum, which also comes from Argeș, represents in fairly bold relief a recumbent man leaning a little to the left, with his right hand on his chest and wearing a beard and plaits and a Western-style costume. This stone exhibits obvious western influence in the attire of the character and the figurative sculpture decorating it (which is seldom encountered in this country).

Another slab that used to cover, as shown also by the inscription, the grave of Voislav, son of Nicolae Alexandru, stands vertically in the niche formed by the blank (now filled in) of the south entrance of the nave. Decorated as it is with a hardly legible motif that might possibly be an extremely stylized "tree of life", this slab as well as the ones mentioned earlier are unique specimens in Wallachia. Only one other grave lying behind the north-east wall can still be identified owing to the inscribed ring found therein, which belonged to the high official Nan Udobă, a relative of Prince Mircea the Old *).

In addition to the few stones covering 19th-century graves there are now in the north of the ante-nave quite a number of fragments of sculpture decoration of various dates discovered on the occasion of the excavations carried out in the two buildings

* *Documente din istoria României* (Documents on the History of Romania), the 13th, 14th, 15th cent. Wallachia, pp. 41-43. It was Nan Udobă who surrendered the village of Călimănești on the Olt before 1388 for the building of Cozia Monastery



within the precincts of the former Princely Court. Two fragments of window frames decorated with late-Gothic motifs are worthy of special mention. There are also numerous ceramic fragments of interest ranging from Roman brick to 16th-century stove tiles unearthed during the same restoration.

Many other objects collected from all over the town form a modest collection housed in the picturesque cottage of the curator of the monument. From among these mention should be made of two large icons of the 16th century that come from the church of Argeş Monastery.

The Curtea de Argeş Princely Church is one of the most revealing means of assessing the living standards of the Princely Court and the Wallachian feudal lords in the 14th century. From the artistic point of view both the structure as such and the painting are unique in the mediaeval art of Wallachia. Moreover, the Argeş monument played a prominent role in the development of mediaeval art in Wallachia. Consequently, the "inscribed Greek cross" plan recurs in some other monuments of later date (the late 14th-century Church of Hirteşti, the old Metropolitan Church at Tirgovişte, built before 1521 and no more existing today, St. Demeter's Church in Craiova of uncertain date, demolished and replaced by a new structure at the end of the 19th century, and the Princely Church of Tirgovişte, 1583). The painting taken as a whole or details of it were to serve as model to later masters until after the Brancovan period. As early as the 18th century such painters as Radu sin Mihai for instance sketched in their note-books scenes, characters and details of the painting of this church.

The Curtea de Argeş Princely Church as a whole is like a chest that keeps one of the most valuable art treasures bequeathed to us by the founders of the Wallachian feudal state. Lying in an area very much alive with the echoes of the transformations of our times, the foundation of the Basarab princes at Curtea de Argeş bears testimony to Romania's past and forms a bridge between the advances of contemporary Romanian science, culture and techniques and the most valuable and enduring creations forged by our ancestors many centuries ago.

In the text:

1. St. Nicholas' Princely Church and ruins of the princely residence. View from the west
2. Ruins of the Princely Court
3. St. Nicholas' Princely Church of Curtea de Argeş. Longitudinal section
4. St. Nicholas' Princely Church. Plan.
5. *Deesis*. Detail: Prince Nicolae Alexandru
6. *The Feeding of the Five Thousand* (north of the nave)
- 7.—8. *In the Garden of Gethsemane* (south of the nave)
9. Votive painting. Vladislav Vlaicu
10. St. Hierarch Gregory (sanctuary)
11. The iconostasis
- 12.—13. The tombstone of Prince Radu Negru

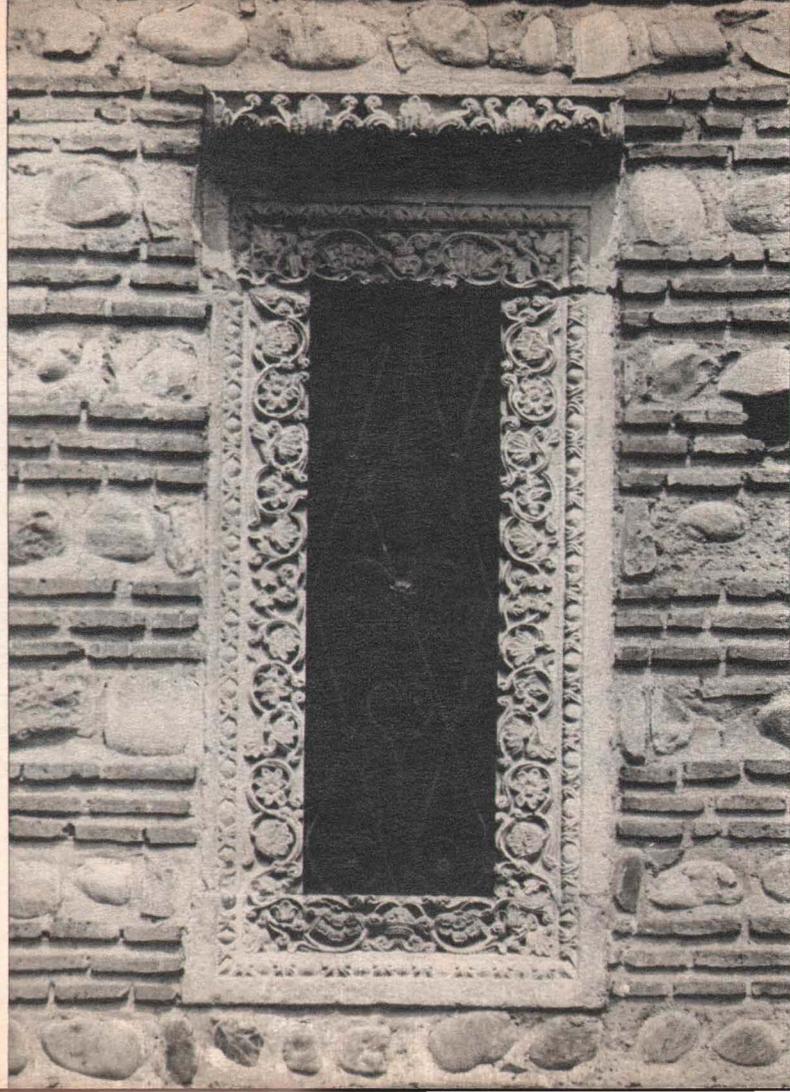
Plates:

14. St. Nicholas' Princely Church. View from the south-west
15. Window frame

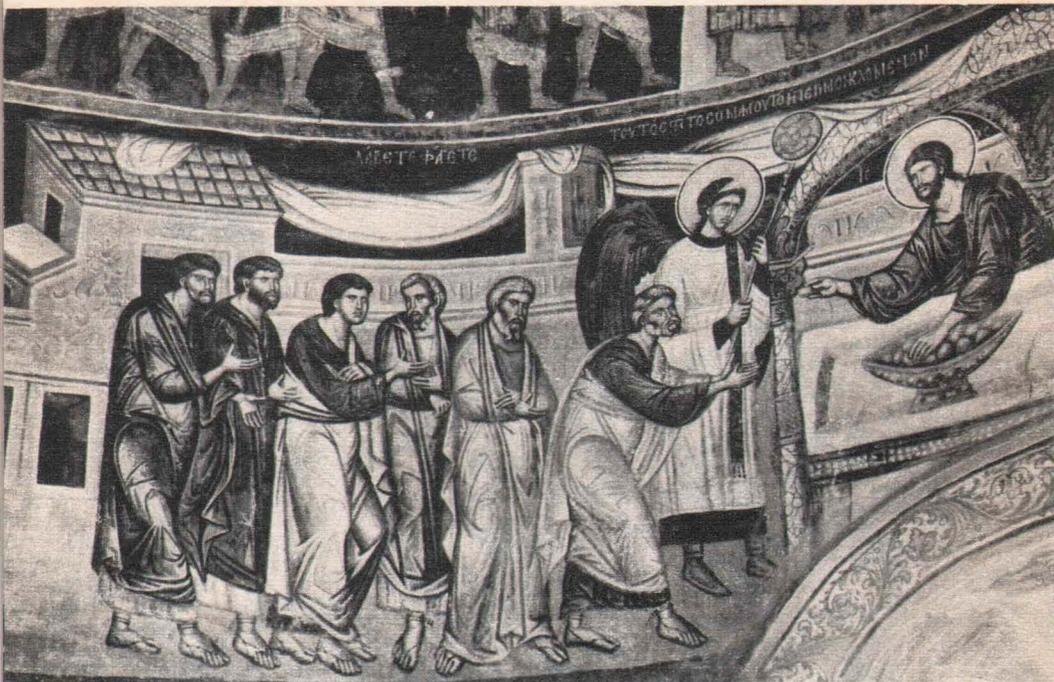
- 16—17. *The Eucharist of the Apostles* (sanctuary)
- 18—20. *The Tent of Meeting* (sanctuary)
21. *Virgin and Child* (sanctuary)
22. *Jesus and the Adulteress* (sanctuary)
23. *The Parable of the Ten Maidens* (sanctuary)
24. *The Washing of the Feet* (small vault on the right side of the sanctuary)
25. *The Parable of He Who Built Himself a House* (nave, north)
26. Hermit saint (small vault on the right side of the sanctuary)
27. *Entry in Jerusalem* (nave, south)
28. *In the Garden of Gethsemane* (nave, south)
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30. *The census of Quirinus* (detail)
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33. St. Nicholas (ante-nave)
34. Three princes (ante-nave)
35. *Betrothal of the Virgin* (ante-nave)
36. *Deesis* (ante-nave)
37. The tower at the entrance in the yard of St. Nicholas' Princely Church



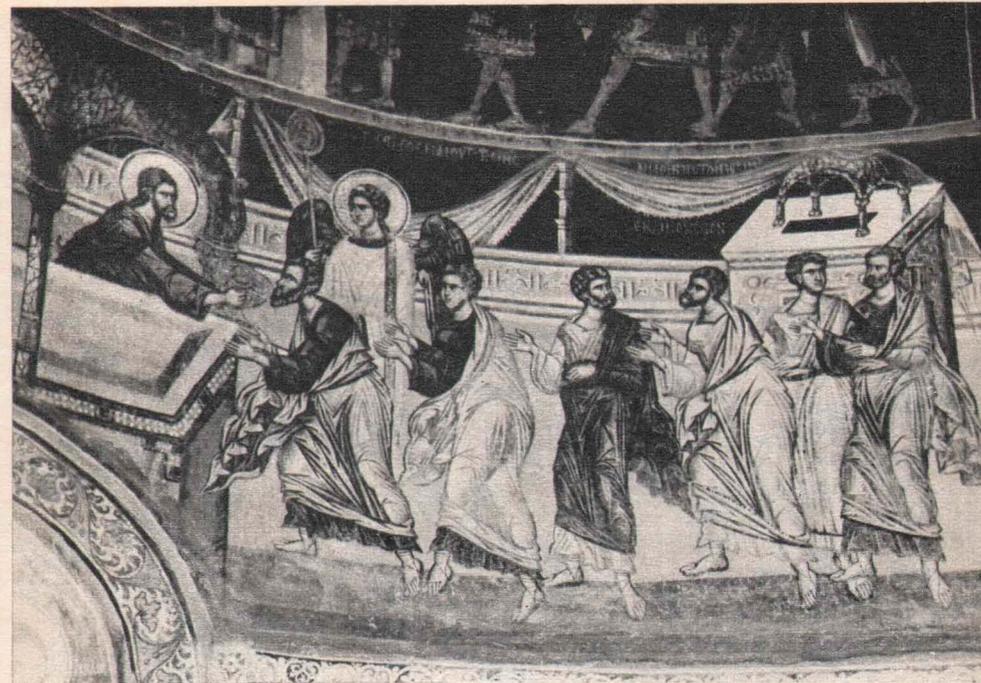
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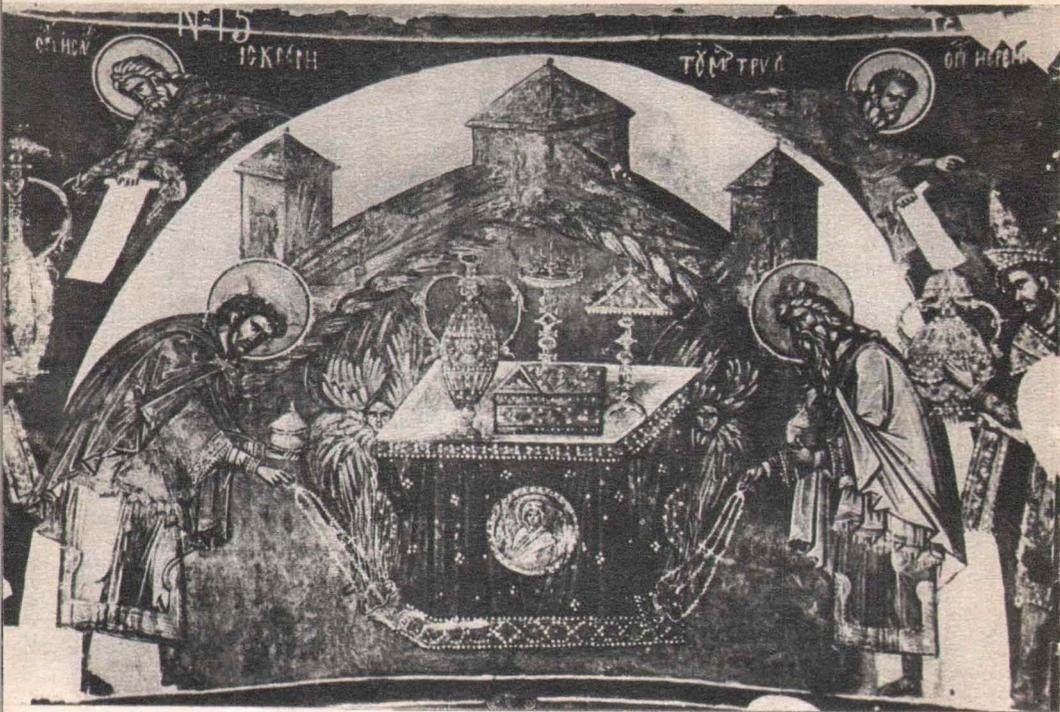
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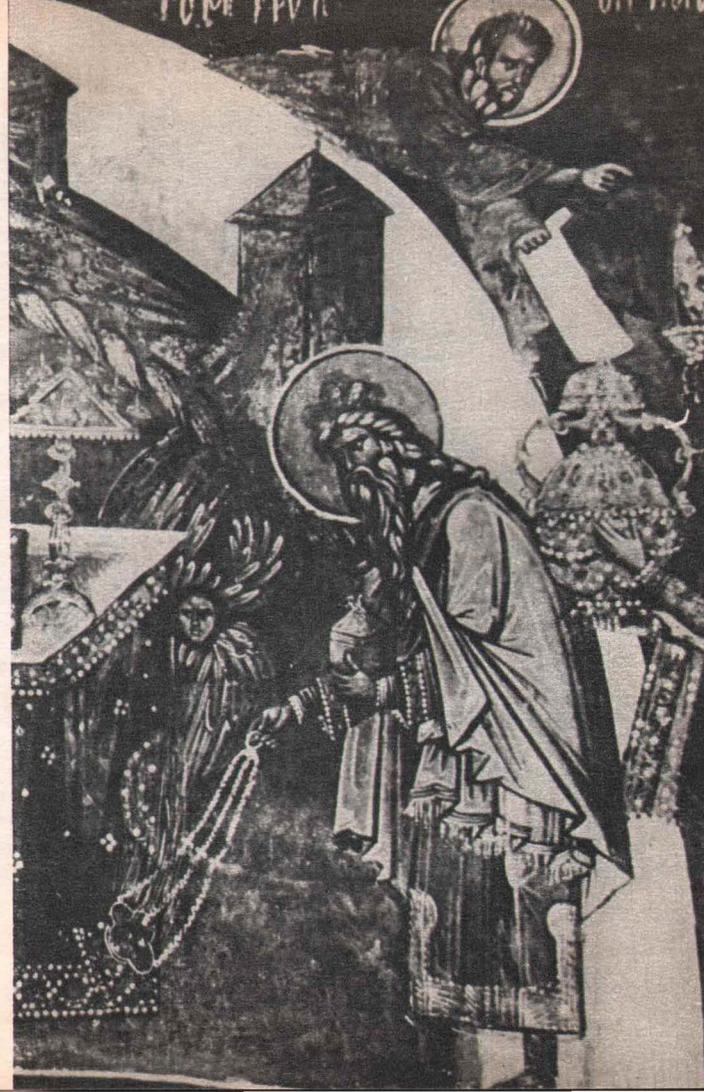
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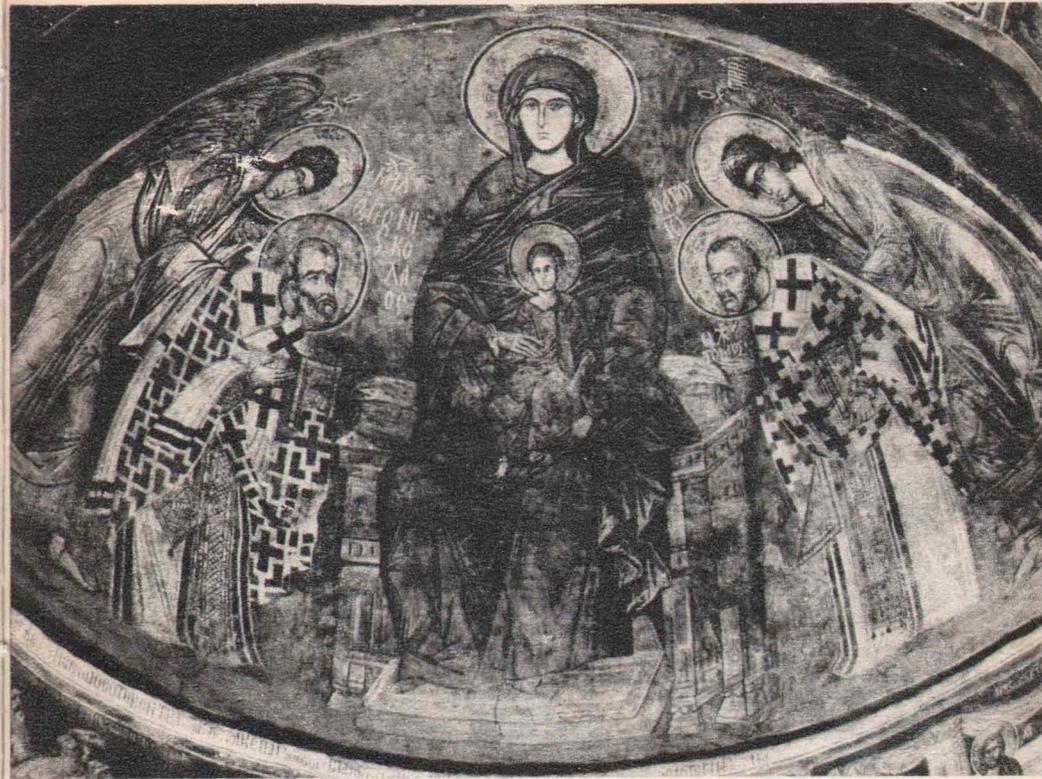
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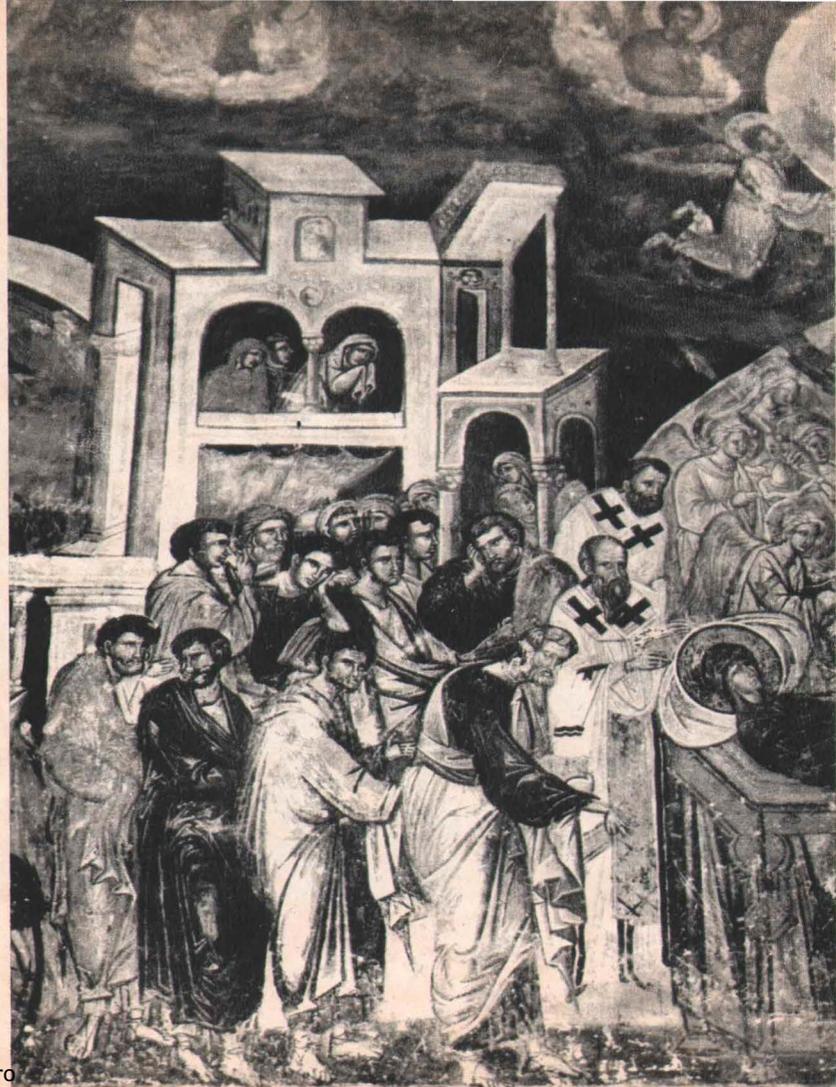
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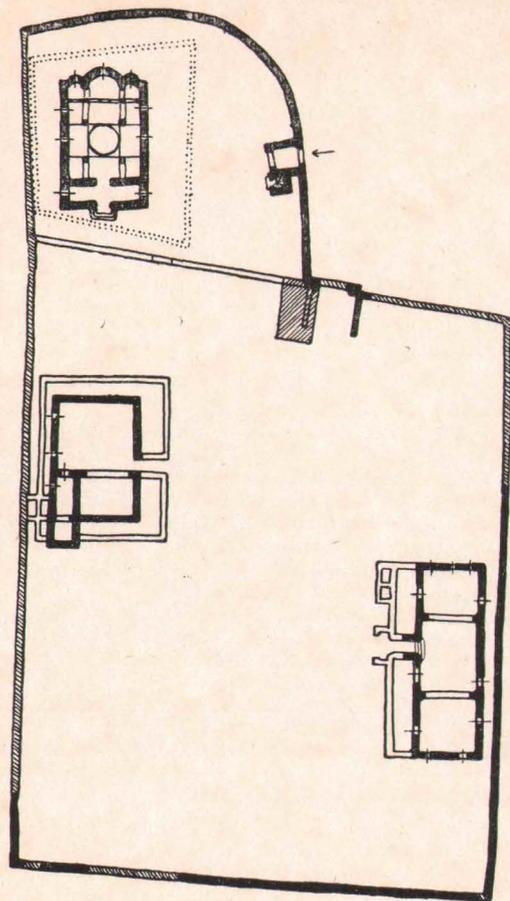


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CURTEA DE ARGEȘ PRINCELY COURT. Plan



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