

## THE CULTURAL, HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL EXPRESSIVITY OF THE GOVORA MONASTERY, ROMANIA, MENTIONED IN THE HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS DATING FROM THE 15<sup>TH</sup> – 16<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES

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### ABSTRACT

The historical monuments represented by the places of worship are the most important cultural, artistic and architectural resources, offering historical and social information for many generations. The purpose of this study is to capture the religious and social role that this place of worship had within the mentioned period, of the 15th -16th centuries and of to make visible the cultural expressiveness in art, in painting and in the form offered by architecture, as well as to make transparent the kind and number of people who visit this place of worship today. The consultation of documents and publications related to the role played by Govora Monastery, is mentioned in the documents issued by each ruler, or in the donation acts offered by the boyars or the common people. The documentation meant to help understanding the concern of Govora Monastery for religious and cultural education, has been made within the National Archives of Romania in Bucharest. All these aspects highlight the religious, social, economic and cultural role held by this monastery for the entire territory located in the south and southwest of Romania. It is one of the monasteries in Romania whose orientation towards the education offered to the monks was distinguished by writings with historical value and by the art expressed in painting. The art rendered in painting is today a real starting point in understanding the religious message from a rather turbulent period. The role of this study is to decipher the messages transmitted with the help of the brush through painting, or of the art rendered in wood and wall. These are just some of the values left by those who were able to leave the treasures to the further on generations.

**Keywords:** monastery, culture, painting, religious architecture, education

### INTRODUCTION

The church was organized in Wallachia in close connection with the development of relations in the medieval period. Documents from the 15th and 16th centuries regarding the existence, functionality, development and involvement of the church in community life often appear as donations from boyars or others in support of the church or documents that provide implications of the church in mitigating conflicts or in establishing rules for the division of property or land.

Many of the donations made to the church have helped to improve the appearance of places of worship. Many of the churches were built on wooden structures and their

deterioration was inevitable. This is exactly what led to their reconstruction, renovation or expansion. From this point of view, the 15th and 16th centuries are notable for the changes in the interior and exterior appearance of churches and monasteries. Govora Monastery is no exception, being in the attention of the voivodes of that period, and the documents reproduce these aspects, through the multitude of donations offered by ordinary people, boyars and Wallachian rulers of these two centuries under study, because it is in a stage not exactly favorable [6], [11].

Very few documents directly mention painting in places of worship which is a surprising result for that period. The analysis of the church art and implicitly of the architecture was made taking into account the economic, social and historical context of the period. There are peculiarities in drawing lines of force in art, color, shape, height and orientation, thickness and decorative elements. All these forms a style or within the same style, elements of style are captured, which come to particularize a century or an epoch [4], [7]. The 15th and 16th centuries are quite full of events, which played an essential role in architecture, especially in religious architecture, dominating the cultural landscape of the villages and fairs of that time. Oltenia is the historical province of Romania that does not deviate from these events, all oriented towards the establishment of the independent state, Wallachia. This struggle is very well represented in art and architecture being in line with the trend of that time in which buildings were enriched in their appearance with paintings or decorative elements carved in stone and wood. It is the century of historical events when the directions of consolidating the central authority against the centrifugal (removal) tendencies manifested by the great feudal lords and the defense of the borders against the danger of conquest posed by the neighboring powers are pursued [5], [11], [10].

## **METHODOLOGY**

Regarding the method used to develop this study, we went through the following steps:

1. Identification of the Govora Monastery and the particularities of art and architecture characteristic of the analyzed period, ie those of the 15th and 16th centuries;
2. Analyzing the specific documents existing in the National Archives of Romania with the Govora Monastery;
3. Discussions regarding the cultural value offered by architecture, picture and sculpture, present at Govora Monastery.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Regarding the construction of this place of worship, there are assumptions about the existence of a much older church. The existing documents place it in this area starting with 1495, when it is mentioned in the document issued on September 15 by Radu cel Mare, the ruler of Wallachia. The inscription of the monastery is not from that period being rebuilt together with the church. What is important are the mentions made, regarding Radu the Great and also about the general condition of the church and its painting. "...from it's beginning, it is not known who erected this church, and during Radu Voda's time, the son of Vlad-Voda, they had found this church as deserted and broken at the date of 7000 (1491-2) and through good will they started to fix it and make it more beautiful..." (fig. 1).

Due to the "deserted and broken" state of the monastery church at the end of the fifteenth century, in regards to its deterioration, we can admit that the church was built before this time, maybe it was even built during the reign of Mircea the Elder (Mircea cel Bătrân) [6].

Following the historical documents carefully, we can conclude that during the reign of Radu cel Mare the construction of this place of worship was completed. During his reign, which lasted 12 years, he paid special attention to it, offering him gifts (donations) and privileges, mentioned in the 12 documents that are kept today at the National Archives of Romania. What is interesting is that none of them (out of the 12 documents issued by Radu the Great) mention Radu the Great as the founder of the monastery.

Thus, the first existing document referring to the Govora Monastery is the one dated April 14, 1496, which mentioned the donation to the Monastery of the village of Ionesti, Selistea Corbenilor and a vineyard on the border of Copacel [19]. From another document issued on August 1, 1496, Radu the Great donated gypsy slaves and an annual gift of money and food to the villages of Govora Monastery [3]. It is mentioned in the document that "with all my heart, especially towards the holy monastery, the place called Govora", shows that has a certain attraction towards this place of worship. The ruler explains his intervention by the reason that "I saw it without saints" and therefore, working hard, I raised and renewed it"[19], [12].

The document from March 22, 1497 is the one that, among those offered to the Govora Monastery, makes one last and important reference to the foundation of the monastery. It is mentioned in the document that "... 3000 aspri are donated, the village of Stoicianii, half of Stolniceani and part of Curtisoara..." [19] and "Seeing that the well-honored lords, who built and beautified and took pity for the holy churches, especially those in that place, were the Govora Monastery" [19].



Figure 1. The inscription of the Govora Monastery.

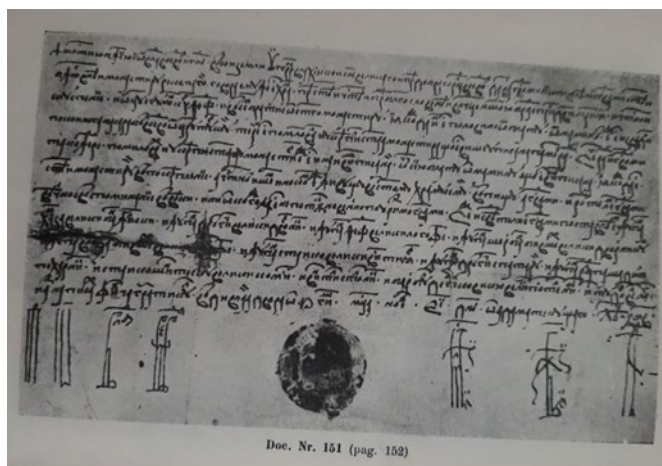
The 16th century brings other documents that refer to the Govora Monastery especially to the donations received from the rulers of this period. At the beginning of the 16th century, on June 6, 1508, the document was issued by Mihnea the evil voivode, who donated the village of Glodu and Hinta to the Govora Monastery, following a judgment [19], [14].

It can be stated that the Govora Monastery in the 16th century played an important role in the social, cultural, religious and economic life of Oltenia. This can be supported by the multitude of documents issued by the rulers of this century and beyond.

Thus, Prince Vlad the Younger issues a series of documents supporting the donations to the Govora Monastery. One of them is the one issued on April 19, 1511 in Targoviste, through which 3 slave gypsies with their sons were donated by Neaga, daughter of Dan Durduca to the Govora Monastery [19].

Neagoie Basarab the ruler (1512-1521) focuses on the Govora monastery through a series of donations. Similarly, to the others before him, he reinforces the donations already received. Thus, out of the documents issued by him, it is worth mentioning: the document issued on 16th of September 1512, which gives hill in Bunesti and gypsies, gifted by Danciu when he became a monk; another document is the one issued on the 1st of April 1513 through which the ruler gifts the Nevoia meadow to the Govora Monastery, gifted by the treasurer Tudor and the hill near the meadow, gifted by the ruler; but also the document issued on the 30th of October 1517, through which Neagoie Basarab the ruler gifts villages, parts of villages, vines, mills, ponds, gypsies, a quarter of the royal customs from Rancu, and 2000 litres of wine from the royal winery in Ramnic, exempting them of all taxes and services. Radu from Afumati is the ruler who gifts the enslaved gypsies to the Govora monastery on the 31st of March 1526 [19].

During the reign of Vlad Vintila Voievod (1532-1535), a series of documents are preserved by which the previous donations are confirmed (fig. 2). A series of documents are also issued during the reign of Radu Paisie (1536-1545), who continues to pay attention to the goods and aspect of the Govora Monastery, issuing 9 documents. He confirmed the donations of his predecessors (fig. 3 and fig. 4) and gave villages and gypsies. [1]. Mircea Ciobanu Voievod, with his reign in Wallachia interrupted in terms of duration (1545-1552; 1553-1554; 1558-1559), is the one who offers a series of privileges and attentions to the Govora Monastery, through the donations he made [8].

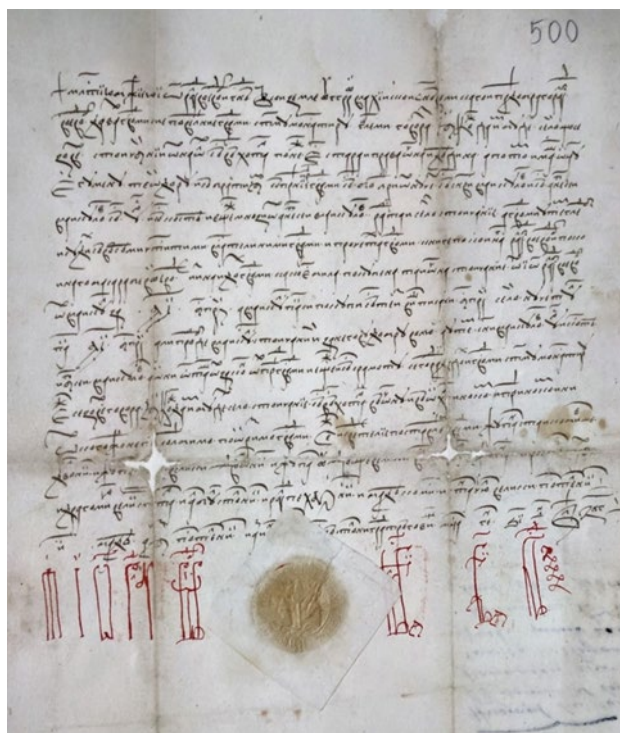


**Figure 2.** The document issued on November 15, 1533 at the Court of Arges, in which Vlad Vintila Voievod donates to the Govora Monastery half of Balta Mamina; National Archives of Romania, Bucharest



**Figure 3.** The document issued on June 30, 1542 in Târgoviște in which Radu Paisie Voievod donates to the Govora Monastery the village of Strâmbele, the National Archives of Romania, Bucharest





**Figure 4.** The document issued on January 16, 1545 in Târgoviște. Radu Paisie donates to the Govora Monastery Stoiceni village on Olt, National Archives of Romania, Bucharest.

The architecture of today's Govora Monastery is mostly the one rebuilt during these two centuries, intervening only to maintain the specificity of this place of worship (fig. 5). Many of the donations and revenues of this place of worship were aimed to maintain the cultural value of Oltenia in the 15th and 16th centuries, with details attached in the following centuries, especially during the reign of Constantin Brancoveanu [11], [18], [15].



**Figure 5.** General image of Govora Monastery today.

Inside, since the reign of Radu the Great, the preoccupation for restoring the painting has existed. These are the clear influences of Byzantine painting, today presented as a true point of analysis and understanding of what the Byzantine represented for the entire

Orthodox church in Romania in the medieval period [16], [17] [13], [9]. There have also been some changes over time, but the basic features are clear. The most important image is the one of the winged Virgin Mary (fig. 6). The whole picture highlights the Byzantine cultural values (fig. 7)

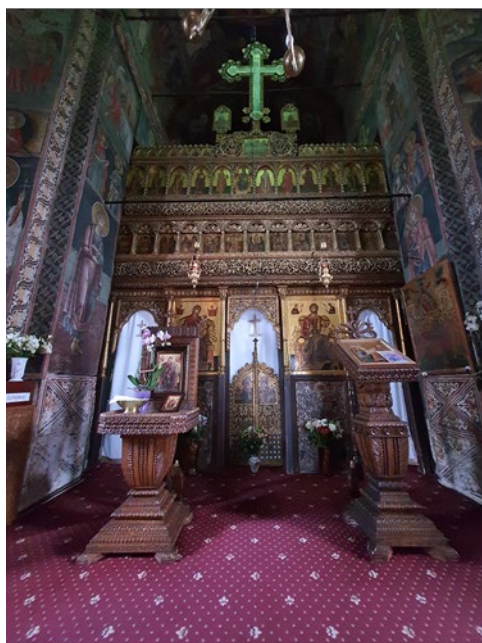


**Figure 6.** The winged Virgin Mary.



**Figure 7.** Interior painting at Govora Monastery.

The cultural value is completed by the wood and stone sculpture present at the Govora Monastery (fig. 8 and fig. 9). These wooden embroidery elements offered by the iconostasis comply with the requirements of the 15th and 16th centuries but are remade due to damage.



**Figure 8.** Iconostasis - wood carving at Govora Monastery.



**Figure 9.** Framing of the entrance door - stone sculpture at Govora Monastery.

The vegetal elements were in all the geographical space of Oltenia a real source of inspiration for those who decorated the places of worship in painting or sculpture. All

these artistic representations respected the requirements imposed by certain dispositions in order to maintain the significance of each form. The same thing was observed in the painting and sculpture at Govora Monastery [2].

The exterior decorative elements, from the median area, which separate the two registers, also come to complete the mentioned ones. The whole image offered by the Govora Monastery keeps the clear image of its construction in a period disturbed from social and historical point of view, but from artistic point of view, under the clear Byzantine influence.

## CONCLUSIONS

Govora Monastery is one of the places of worship with a remarkable cultural value, not only for Oltenia but for the entire southern part of Romania and for Romania as a whole. It is a symbol of orthodoxy in this space, with a remarkable antiquity, founded in historical documents.

The historical documents, through the impressive number referring to the Govora Monastery, reinforce the idea that the importance of this place of worship is great. For only two centuries, dozens refer to this place of worship. Every ruler of this period considered it, through the donations or reinforcements of the previous donations.

Through the historical information provided, through the details of architecture, painting and sculpture in wood or stone, it offers multiple possibilities, from the religious ones to the cultural-tourist. The cultural values of any area, through the peculiarities provided by the historical information supported by documents as evidence of what is stated, to which is added the appearance, color, shape or location, can generate the ideal support for knowing the true history of that place.

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