

# CERAMICS PRAISES THE PSALMS. "THE HOLY TRINITY" CHURCH FROM SIRET

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**Abstract:** "The Holy Trinity" ("Sfânta Treime") church from Siret by tradition, should be the oldest monument in the form a clover of the religious architecture of Moldavia.

By its architectural and decorative elements, the exterior of this church entirely foreshadows the artistic virtues of monuments from the time of Petru I Mușat. Therefore, the apses have a series of niches elongated at their edges with semicircular arches and decorated in tambourines with bricks.

Values are plan and decoration items speaking about relations with the Byzantine-Balkan world.

The outside consisting of rough gray-green stone of the monument is refreshed by a bright and harmonious scenery of ceramic ornaments made out of bricks, leg discs in the form of mushrooms and cruciform colored flowers.

At the top of the monument, about two thirds of the height of the walls (from the pedestal upwards), there can be seen a frieze consisting of two rows of discs alternating with cruciform flowers. They range from the apses (the south side as well) all the way up to the window of the narthex. The semicircular arches of brick niches are also sharpened by a row of discs alternating with cruciform flowers. The windows with the exception of the one of the northern apse are decorated at the top with one rectangular frame consisting of two rows of glazed discs and three cruciform flowers, all framed by glazed bricks (either plain or coloured). The same decoration can also be seen at the niche above the entrance door destined for the church icon. Above this frame, there can be seen a cornice made out of bricks arranged in a zig zag pattern.

The continuous development and enrichment of the ceramic façade during the next century will lead to the finishing touches, in the reign of Ștefan cel Mare (Stephen the Great), of a harmonious and original decorative.

**Keywords:** decorative ceramic enameled, decoration of discs, glazed ceramic, leg discs form of mushrooms, cruciform flowers

The Byzantine legacy became a landmark for religious art and chronicles. There are a lot of proofs that confirm the fact that the Northern way meant to connect Byzantium and the new important places of the Eastern Europe passed through Moldavia. Furthermore, there are also evidences which suggest that Moldavia was at the borderline of the European world regarding the Gothic extended up to Transylvania, in the hall-churches from

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the Saxon cities, up to the Galician space and the Polish-Lithuanian one, the source of fortresses and church plans, facings and cross-vaulting from the time of the first Mușatins.

The architecturally subtle chromatic combination will belong to the Gothic Western world, we also mention here the grey freestone, bricks and ornamental ceramics enameled in green and yellow, in blue, red and brown, with heraldic tenants, griffins, mermaids or lions, everything connected to the winding openings of the flamboyant style and vigorous buttresses.

The Moldavian art and architecture thrilled even the great art historians, the Austrian Josef Strzygowski, who was fascinated by the beauty of churches and who stated: "Above all the things that can be viewed in Moldavia, there are the amazing churches whose polychrome façades can be compared with the Church San Marco from Venice or the Dome from Orvieto ... something similar cannot be offered by another country in this entire world"<sup>1</sup>. The French Charles Diehl, Henri Focillon, Gabriel Millet, Paul Henry, André Grabar, the Russians Victor Lazarev and Mihail Alpatov are only a few of the great specialists who studied and wrote about the art monuments from Moldavia, underlining their deep originality, their unique character in the context of European art.

One of the prototypes of the Moldavian architecture is the small Church „The Holy Trinity” from Siret. Probably built during the time of Petru I Mușat (1377 – 1391), the gracious monument introduces the triconch plan in Moldavia, having South-Danube origins. The building technique involves the usage of quarry stone and it is a proof of integration current techniques in the Gothic architecture from Transylvania, the craftsmen were selected even from the small Saxon colonies from Moldavia, in Baia, Rădăuți and also Siret.

Situated in a region where various monuments and historical vestiges were found, dating back from the epoch of formation and consolidation of the Moldavian medieval state, the nowadays city of Siret on the shore of the river with the same name has been an important urban centre and also an important trade point on the great commercial route that connected Lviv and the Black Sea.

Due to the role that the Siret river played in the beginning of the Moldavian state, documents and local traditions record the existence of many secular and religious buildings.

The most important pieces of information are due to news gathered by local traditions and writings offered by modern scholars. We therefore know that the Ruina hill got its name from the ruins of a city of rectangular scheme that was still intact at the middle of the 18th century. There is the citadel with

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<sup>1</sup> Quotation from M. I. Pascu in the work *Bucovina* -,„Arhipelagul mănăstiresc”, Editura Tipografic, 1995, p.1.

the name of Sasca situated on the west of Ruina, above Negostina river. This citadel is very similar to the one of the city seat of Suceava, whose remains still persisted at the 19th century. In this part of the city, named Sasca, there were situated the old monuments of architectural religion of the Siret River. Today, only one monument is intact in the form of the “Sfanta Treime” Church (“The Holy Trinity” Church) which is situated at about 500m away from the citadel.

The ‘Sfanta Treime’ church was given by tradition, like the Sasca citadel, to the Sas voivode (1354 – 1358) and it is the oldest monument in the form of a clover of the religious architecture of Moldavia. This foundation alongside with the one of Bogdan the 1st of Radauti are the first stone monuments that have been entirely preserved from the beginning of the Moldavian architecture. So different from one another, even though they are both destined to the Orthodox cult, these churches are a proof of the different styles and cultures which have interfered at the beginning of the Moldavian establishment. The shapes of the architectural plan alongside with the structural and plastic elements of the ‘Sfanta Treime’ church are the basis for the evolution of the Moldavian architecture. These elements were processed and improved at the most notable foundations of Stefan cel Mare (=Stephen the Great) and they were the steps towards improving the fully original architectural style in the name of the “Moldavian” style. This is where the importance of this monument lies. Even though it is a masterpiece regarded from an artistic point of view, it is not well known to the lovers of old Romanian art.

The church has relatively small proportions for a princely church, but it may as well be the first stone church of Moldavia. It is built out of rough stone in the shape of a clover with cupolas. Just for the purpose of decorations, only the façades were built using simple bricks or enameled bricks. It is notable that the tower is missing from this construction.

The church consists of a narrow, rectangular narthex, an elongated nave flanked by two semicircular apses and a chancel which is also semicircular.

The narthex is vaulted by an ogive semicylinder. The nave, separated from the narthex by a low wall with a door, has a spherical cap lifted by four pendants on four cantilever springs. The longitudinal springs are very narrow and equal, which are embedded in walls and framing the side apses. The cross springs are wider and uneven.

The church socket, 40 cm high, is built of rough stone which is ordered in a regular manner. It has a hipped roof which rests on a brick cornice. The door into the church, located in the western wall of the narthex, like the five simple stone window frames were partially folded.

By its architectural and decorative elements, the exterior of this church entirely foreshadows the artistic virtues of monuments from the time of Stephen the Great. Therefore, the apses have a series of niches elongated at their edges with semicircular arches and decorated in tambourines with bricks. Constantly

enriched during the following centuries by Moldavian craftsmen, this element will become one of the characteristic features of the Moldavian style. From this church, there will also be inherited the toothed brick belt that surrounds, discontinuously, the church itself.

The most valuable pieces of information are the plan and the decorations speaking about connections with the Byzantine-Balkan world. The conch plan, used mainly in Serbia, was also adopted by the monastic buildings in Wallachia, at Vodița and Tismana, which were the scholl foundations of the monk Nicodemus of Prislop. On the façades, the 'Sfanta Treime' church has glazed ceramic discs, common to those in Bulgaria, at Târnovo and Mesembria, which had also been used by church builders from Cotmeana (district Argeș). Beyond everything consisting of the element of loan (=John), the 'Sfanta Treime' Church (The Holy Trinity) of Siret is to be noticed due to a genuine originality resulting from the joint processes of combining procedures, as well as the subordination of these artistic views in which force is associated with gracefulness.

The outside consisting of rough gray-green stone of the monument is refreshed by a bright and harmonious scenery of ceramic ornaments made out of bricks, leg discs in the form of mushrooms and cruciform colored flowers.

At the top of the monument, about two thirds of the height of the walls (from the pedestal upwards), there can be seen a frieze consisting of two rows of discs alternating with cruciform flowers. They range from the apses (the south side as well) all the way up to the window of the narthex. The semicircular arches of brick niches are also sharpened by a row of discs alternating with cruciform flowers. The windows, with the exception of the one of the northern apse, are decorated at the top with one rectangular frame consisting of two rows of glazed discs and three cruciform flowers, all framed by glazed bricks (either plain or coloured). The same decoration can also be seen at the niche above the entrance door destined for the church icon. Above this frame, there can be seen a cornice made out of bricks arranged in a zig zag pattern.

The continuous development and enrichment of the ceramic façade during the next century will lead to the finishing touches, in the reign of Ștefan cel Mare (Stephen the Great), of a harmonious and original decorative scheme.

Restored in 1873, 1890 and 1922, the church was in the year of 1936 in a state of complete untidy being "almost threatened to fall into ruin". Although the monument has been strengthened since, these restorations sometimes led to distortion of its old forms. All improper interventions were removed by the excellent restoration made by the architect Horia Teodoru during the years 1937-1940. The architect restored the church to its original appearance, with the exception of the improper tile roof which has remained intact since 1890.

With the occasion of this restoration, the missing or damaged ceramic façade pieces were replaced with new terracotta ornaments and the walls were reinforced. As the restoration work was taking place, two important elements

came to light, one constructive and the other decorative with particular importance for dating the monument. These were: the traces of four walls discovered in the four lateral apses (these places are currently drawn over by bricks) and the ceramics of the façade which was unveiled by the plaster layer in which it had been covered until then. These discoveries have been recently studied based on a thorough comparative search and they seem to confirm local traditions, justified by the historical evolution during the first decades of development of the Moldavian state. Only archaeological research done in this village will be able to bring new elements towards the exact dating of this important monument of Romanian medieval architecture.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7





Fig. 8



Fig. 9

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Fig. 8 Discs in the form of cruciform flowers

Fig. 9 Discs in the form of mushrooms

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