

The Church in Densuș. Between the Sacred and the Profane

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Abstract: *Temple of Zamolxe, pagan Roman temple of the god Mars, mausoleum of Trajan's best friend, the general Longinus Maximus, church built by the Goths in the 4th century, "divine work stolen by nocturnal genies"¹, the first church in Hațeg and perhaps in the entire country, "unparalleled in all Romania"², foundation of Litovoi, a church similar to Sân-Nicoara in Curtea de Argeș, or a church with a triptych as valuable as that of the famous Rubliov, "St. Nicholas" Church is an Orthodox place of worship in Densuș, Hunedoara county; one of the oldest churches in Romania, apparently dating from the 12th-13th centuries, built on the ruins of a building from the 4th century AD, it has a square plan, with the nave pierced by a tower, resting on a vault and equipped with a deep semicircular apse; the entire construction is covered with stone slabs, and most of its material (river boulders, marble slabs with Latin inscriptions, capitals, tombstones, sewer pipes) comes from Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa, the capital of Roman Dacia (located nearby); the mural painting of the monument dates from the 15th century. The Densuș church, like any unclassifiable and imprecisely dated monument, becomes a mitigating argument for any demonstration about the descendants of the Dacians, the beginning of Christianity, the paths of migratory peoples, the existence of Romanians or about the creative and universal genius of our people.*

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The country of Hațeg³ is an area full of charm, poetry, mystery and history in the south-east of Transylvania. It is considered to be one of the

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¹ George Călinescu argued it was a "bizarre church, made of marbles and columns, collected from Sarmizegetusa. a small pillar of the four supporting the narrow spire is a Roman stela bearing the name of Longinus. It is a marble with an elegant inscription, bright, beautiful like a statue. Hidden in the shadows, barely illuminated by a few strands of sunlight coming through some windows, it gives the impression of a divine work stolen by nocturnal genies.", George Călinescu, *Studii și conferințe*, Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă, 1956, p. 10

² Nicolae Iorga, *Byzance après Byzance. Continuation de l'histoire de la vie byzantine*, Ed. Mihai Breza, București, 1971, p. 21.

³ Radu Popa, *La începuturile Evului Mediu românesc. Țara Hațegului*, Ed. Dacia, București, 1988, p. 18.

densest regions in the country from the point of view of historical monuments. The depression between Retezat, Poiana Ruscă and Șureanu mountains is divided by the natural border of the Dumbrava, Ploștina and Poieni hills into two territories: Hațeg to the west and Pui to the east. The area is also known as Hațeg-Pui and is mentioned in the *Ioaniți Diploma* in 1247⁴.

The imagination of the visionary writer Jules Verne places the action of a well-known novel, *Castle in the Carpathians*⁵, in the Hațeg county, in the Colț Citadel, whose ruins guard the road and a stone church, which are shrouded in a special mystery.

The people of Hațeg, inhabitants of the territory once occupied by the great city of the province of Dacia Colonia, Ulpia Traiana Augusta Dacica Sarmizegetusa Metropolis⁶, did not refrain themselves and came up with the construction of stone, marble and metal from the ruins of ancient buildings in the Roman Empire⁷. These materials, many of them with Latin inscriptions still visible, can be found in the structure of the solid walls of the stone churches, treasures of the local history, insufficiently known and exploited.

Among the existing stone churches in the Hațeg country, four are reproduced in the images of the postage stamps of the show “Stone Churches in the Hațeg country”. On the postage stamp with the nominal value of 3 lei, the image of the *Saint Nicholas Church* is reproduced in Densuș, the oldest Romanian church where religious services are still held today, dating from the 13th century.

⁴ I. Voledî, *Drumuri în Hațeg*, Ed. Stadion, București, 1971, p. 20.

⁵ Adrian Andrei Rusu, *Castelarea Carpatică*, Ed. Mega, Cluj-Napoca 2005, p. 15.

⁶ Adrian Andrei Rusu, *Monumente medievale din Țara Hațegului*, Ed. Mega, Cluj-Napoca, 2008, p. 50.

⁷ Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa (full name: Colonia Ulpia Traiana Augusta Dacica Sarmizegetusa) was the capital of the Romanian province of Dacia. Located at a distance of 40 km from Sarmizegetusa Regia, the former capital of the Dacian kingdom, the Ulpia Traiana colony was founded after its conquest by the emperor Trajan, between the years 108-110. According to an epigraphic monument, the city was founded by order of the emperor by the governor-general Decimus Terentius Scaurianus. Under Hadrian, the name Sarmizegetusa was added, and during the reign of Emperor Alexander Severus it became a *metropolis*. The settlement experienced a period of development that lasted until the second half of the 3rd century, when the Aurelian retreat took place. During this period, it was built using various materials, such as local river and rock stone, marble, brick and tile. The most imposing building, the amphitheater, had a capacity of approx. 5000 people. The ruins of the ancient city constitute an archaeological complex (LMI code HD-I-s-A-03205) located in the village of Sarmizegetusa in the Hunedoara county. Nearby is the Sarmizegetusa Archeology Museum, established in 1924, which houses objects recovered during archaeological research. To date, a large part of the surface of the ancient city has not been excavated by archaeologists.



Fig. 1 Postal stamps



Fig. 2 Densuș image



Fig. 3 5000 lei banknote

I learned about the church in Densuș for the first time when I was a teenager, due to the money⁸. The church appeared, next to the gate of the Alba Iulia fortress and the Dacian wolf on the 5000 lei banknote in the early 1990s. The purple banknote had the bust of Avram Iancu on the front, and on the reverse a landscape from the Apuseni mountains with a church before the Aurelian withdrawal. Then I found it mentioned very often in the articles of dacophiles who referred to the birthplace of the Densușian family⁹, especially that of Nicolae, who authored *Dacia Preistorică* (only when I entered the Hațeg country and saw the church did I realize that it was normal for an intelligent man, like Nicolae Densușianu, to go crazy and believe that the whole civilization of the world was born inside the Carpathian arch). I have always wanted to see the building catalogued by Nicolae Iorga as “unparalleled in all of Romania”. Densuș¹⁰ is a quiet village, where time

⁸ <https://www.romfilatelia.ro/ro/biserici-de-piatra-din-tara-hategului/>

⁹ Nicolae Densușianu (b. 18 April 1846, Densuș, Hunedoara - d. March 24, 1911) was a Romanian jurist and historian, corresponding member of the Romanian Academy, best known for his work *Dacia preistorică*. As a historian, Densușianu stood out as one of the successors of Eudoxiu Hurmuzaki's work: he published between 1887 and 1897 six volumes of documents related to Romanian history, the monograph from 1884, entitled *Revoluția lui Horea în Transilvania și Ungaria, 1784-1785*, and many studies of military history. Influenced by the Transylvanian School, he was a follower of the Latin movement. Like Bogdan Petriceicu Hașdeu, he attributed the ideas of his generation to the previous era and had an obsession with elucidating the beginning of Romanian history, an undertaking during which he appealed, in the absence of reliable sources, to traditions, legends and folklore. He worked on the book *Dacia preistorică*, published posthumously in 1913, for a quarter of a century; it was described by contemporary and later historians as a work of fantasy. If at the time of publication, the *opus* only aroused the emulation of some amateur historians, clashing with the professionalism of the critical school, during the communist regime it became a source of the protochronist current. The son of the united parish priest in Densuș, *Bizantius Pop*, and of *Sofia*, Nicolae was the brother of Aron Densușianu, poet and literary critic, professor of Latin at the University of Iasi. Professor Aron's son was the poet Ovid Densușianu. Nicolae's family name was *Pop*, and the first to have his name changed was his brother Aron. When he arrived at the Gymnasium in Blaj, he received the name Densușianu to be more easily distinguished from the other students who bore the name of Pop; the new name was later appropriated by Nicolae.

¹⁰ Densuș commune is located in the central-western part of Hunedoara county, at the foot of the Poiana-Ruscă mountains, having as a relief form extensions of the radial peaks of the

seems to stand still. It houses a real Romanian treasure: the oldest stone place of worship in our country where services are still held. The church in Densuș has something magical, hard to put into words, but which will forever link you to this blessed land.



Fig. 4 Densuș village



Fig. 5 Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa

The area is charged with a special energy; could it be from its neighbors, the enchanted mountains of the Retezat and the ruins of the fortress of Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa, the former capital of Roman Dacia? We do not know exactly, it is certain that it conquers you irremediably. The short road from Hațeg to Densuș is a delight, you cross a smooth area of the Hațeg Depression, and the image of the Retezat Mountains is wonderful.

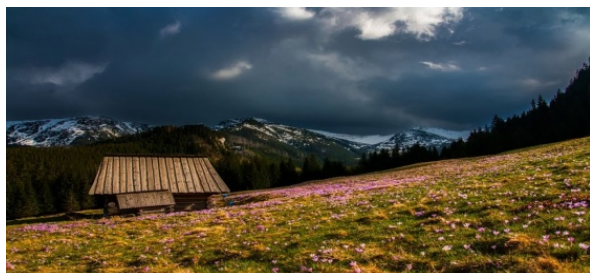


Fig. 6 Hațeg depression



Fig. 7 Bust of Nicolae Densușianu, at the Church gate

mountains that unfold in the form of a fan lost in the depression of the Hațeg Country, similar in appearance to a real plain, which according to some geographers, was once a sea bay. The climate, in general, meets the characteristics of the mountainous area with the four seasons, with a temperate-continental character with submontane specificity. The precipitation regime is quite rich, a characteristic of the areas at the foot of the mountains. Densuș commune, located in the south-western part of Hațeg town, is connected to it by DJ 687 G Densuș-Totești and further by DN 68 Totești-Hațeg.

I would like to tell you the date of construction of this mysterious church, but even historians have not agreed on this point. Some say that before the arrival of the Romans, there was a temple dedicated to Zamolxe on the site of the church. Others claim that the mausoleum of the general Longinus Maximus would have existed on the site of the church in Densuș.¹¹ Just as many say that the church in Densuș was built in the 2nd – 3rd century, on the ruins of a pagan temple dedicated to the god Mars, at whose altar the Romans brought to Dacia used to make sacrifices. This hypothesis is supported by the presence of an unusual aspect for an Orthodox church: its altar is not built on the east side, but is oriented to the south. After the adoption of the Christian religion, the temple of Mars would have been transformed into a paleo-Christian church, then rebuilt in the 13th - 14th centuries, when it underwent the most important changes since the first documentary attestations exists.

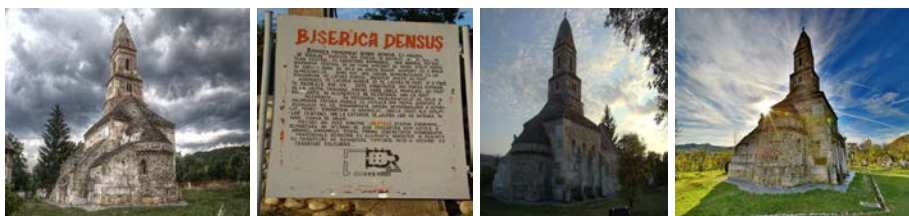


Fig. 8 Images of the Densuș Church and the plan of the

Leaving the elucidation of the origins of the monument to the archaeologists and the investigations on a wider territory than the strict perimeter of the church, and the impressionist appreciations in the service of those passionate about the mysteries of history, we will begin the description of this monument of architectural uniqueness, generally placed by art historians after the churches of Sântămărie - Orlea and Strei; precisely because of this, precise dating of the construction is impossible¹².

The textured walls of materials of different consistencies from different eras, as well as the proportion of the monument, which resembles the monument from Adamclisi rather than a church, raised the spirits of those who, with more or less aplomb, examined it from the second half of the 18th century until recently.¹³ Architraves, thresholds, canal tubes, votive altars, columns and capitals, gate slabs, large blocks of dressed stone, marble,

¹¹ David Prodan, *Supplex Libellus Valachorum*, Ed. Dacia, București, 1967, p. 65.

¹² Radu Popa, *Viața bisericească a romanilor din spațiul intracarpatic în secolele XII-XIII. Biseica din Densuș*, Studii și articole I, Ed. Mega, Cluj-Napoca, 2014, p. 25.

¹³ David Prodan, *op.cit.*, p. 36.

limestone or sandstone, raw stone and bricks are the pieces that make up the palimpsest of the monument¹⁴.

A new day seems to be born from the abyss of darkness. Drowsily, the sun tries to open its eyes on the walls of the Densuș church. Its glow leads us towards the two lions on the roof, then flowing smoothly on the construction of river stones, marble and columns, old ruins of Sarmizegetusa, which changed its name to Ulpia Traiana after the Roman conquest. A mysterious monument that bewitches you with its beauty is waiting to be discovered... Densuș Church has been there for hundreds of years, as a call to not forget, to rediscover history. It does not look like any of the churches I have seen before. It is bizarre and fascinating, a wonder whose secrets have not been and perhaps will never be discovered. Its history is all the more interesting because it is said that, before becoming an Orthodox church, the monument was a Roman temple dedicated to the god Mars, that cruel god of war, whom only bloody battles made him happy, to the despair of his father, Jupiter.

With an unusual severe appearance, this “conglomerate of several eras” rises on a central plan somewhat similar to the Byzantine simple Greek cross plan with a vaulted semicircular apse. The central square nucleus is marked in elevation by what would have been the spire in a church of this type, the space around it being vaulted in a quarter cylinder. Here it is rather about a bell tower made up of two superimposed prismatic bodies, with a pyramidal stone covering, as can be seen in the two churches mentioned above. The period most often used for framing the church is placed in the last quarter of the 13th century, corresponding to the late Romanesque, and the constructive stages vary depending on the researcher. The problem of appendages attached to the central body not being elucidated, will simply be mentioned in the order of their importance¹⁵. To the south of the semicircular altar covered with inscribed Roman bricks, a diaconicon of considerable size which entered under a Gothic stone portal, was attached. An L-shaped corridor started from the southern side, near the cloakroom, and ended at the northern end. Probably built in the 15th century, the fact that the icon of the patron saint is placed, according to custom, above the entrance to the church, was cited as an argument; this space was assimilated to a porch, demolished in 1842-1843 to save the church and the tower. The eastern end of this corridor-pronaos seems to have been the site of a side chapel with vaulted altar and nave. To the west, the church ended with a facade with a triangular pediment. There were also disputes regarding the function of the place as a

¹⁴ Virgil Vătășianu, *Vechile biserici de piatră românești din județul Hunedoara*, Tip. “Cartea Românească” S.A., Cluj, 1930, p. 80.

¹⁵ Dobrei Florin, *Tezaur hunedorean - bisericile ortodoxe monument istoric*, Editura Episcopiei Devei și Hunedoarei, Deva, 2014, p. 72.

nezial court church or a monastery. The annexes were interpreted as a transition towards the latter function.



Fig. 9 Priest serving at the Densuș Church

Inside, a few rays of light boldly penetrate through some tiny windows, as if wanting to cut the power of the darkness that tends to hide everything. The feeling you get when entering here is one of peace and mystery, and the priest who greets us seems like a character who is part of this painting. His kind look makes you think of a keeper of treasures or a wise man who is waiting for you to go and ask him, and he kindly answers: “The church is one of the oldest in Romania, being declared a historical monument. It has the Patron Saint Nicholas. The nave, square in shape, is centrally superimposed by a tower supported on four massive pillars, around which there is a narrow space covered by a semi-cylindrical vault. The mural dates from the first half of the 15th century and belongs to the artist Ștefan Zugravul. The iconostasis, but also the scene of the subsequent judgment, were painted in 1789, by Popa Simeon from Pitesti. In the church there are eight Roman altars, dedicated to the gods, some of which have inscriptions in Latin... Inside the narrow and high interior, the tower is supported by four pillars formed by two Roman votive altars placed one above the other, connected by raised arches.¹⁶ Above the place where the bell hung, you entered the tower directly from the roof to a secret, through a shorter corridor, vaulted in a quarter cylinder.¹⁷ An escalator led to another room, flanked by stone benches. Under the roof, on the cornice of the tower and the central body of the nave, as well as in the upper part of the apse, there are decorative girdles made of bricks laid in a zigzag pattern, and at the southeast corner of the base of the spire there are two sleeping lions”¹⁸.

I think the most interesting thing about the church in Densuș is the fact that the stones from which it is built were brought from the ruins of Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa, located just a few kilometres away. The building is massive with late Romanesque influences and has an unusual

¹⁶ Mădălina Mirea (autor), Dominica Macri (trad.), Șerben Bonciocat (foto), *Hațeg, Țara Biseriilor de Piatră*, Ed. Igloo, București, 2007, p.18.

¹⁷ https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biserica_Sfintul_Nicolae_din_Densuș.

¹⁸ Radu Popa, *Viața bisericească a românilor din spațiul intracarpatic în secolele XII-XIII. Biserica din Densuș*, Studii și articole I, Ed. Mega, Cluj-Napoca, 2014, p. 55.

appearance with a square nave. The roof is built entirely of stone, and the altar is oriented to the south, and not to the east, as in normal Christian churches. Right next to the roof, above the altar there are two statues in the form of lions, which once touched their tails. And the roof is not an ordinary one at all, having the shape of a bird with open wings in flight.

The stone tower dominates the surroundings. It is covered with stone slabs. The stone casing system of the tower is also present in the towers of the churches in Strei, Sântamaria-Orlea or the Colț Monastery. The jagged decorations of the tower are made of Roman bricks. This type of decoration can be found in the traditional architecture of Maramureș, but it is carved in wood and is called “wolf’s teeth”, having, according to traditions, an apotropaic role (role of defence against evil spirits). At the top of the tower there is a stone cross of the “Latin cross” type. On the edge of the second section of the tower, the craftsmen placed a Corinthian capital upside down in a corner. Why is this? The vents at the top of the tower are actually ingeniously reused ancient Roman ceramic piping elements¹⁹.

In the immediate vicinity of the Densuș Church there are the family tombs of the famous historian Nicolae Densușianu (born Pop, 1846-1911), originally from the village of Densuș. The Greek-Catholic priest Byzantius Pop, Densușianu’s father, is buried here. Historian Nicolae Densușianu is the author of the controversial book “Dacia Preistorica” published posthumously in 1913. This historian and his brother, Aron Densușianu, launched quite bold hypotheses about the origins of this church in their native village.

This architectural conglomerate is composed of rough quarried stone in the form of slabs, “of large squared blocks, partly of marble, partly of limestone and sandstone, of spindles and bases of columns, of slabs from gates, sewer pipes and votive altars with inscriptions, to which additions of raw stone, probably quarried nearby, and bricks for an ornamental frieze can be seen.” The building materials were not uniformly used, but certain parts of the building contain more stone pieces of large size (the nave and the diaconicon) and others are exclusively made of raw stone (the apse, the awning and the corridor). Regarding the plan of the church in Densuș, this monument appears to have a square plan, with a spire in the center, and a semicircular apse. Some authors consider this plan to be an adaptation of a Byzantine church of the central Macedonian type, with a Greek cross plan.

The problem that gave historians a lot of trouble was the handiwork of the first craftsman who gave life to the church. This problem found two conflicting possible solutions. Virgil Vătășianu claims that: “However, the elevation presents details that indicate that the craftsman from Densuș has never seen a church of this type” (Byzantine church of central Macedonian type). He states that the vaulting system, composed of a support vault in the

¹⁹ Dobrei Florin, *Bisericile ortodoxe hunedorene*, Ed.Eftimie Murgu, Reșița, 2011, p. 32.

shape of a quarter cylinder and arranged around the central span, is a very different stability solution from the typical vaulting system for the Greek cross plan.

In opposition there lies the opinion of Vasile Drăguț²⁰ who believes that the craftsman Ștefan of Densuș travelled over a geographical area that covered the Romanian extra-Carpathian countries. The craftsman was therefore familiar with inscribed Greek cross architecture.

A satisfactory argument in this sense can be found in Adrian Andrei Rusu who states that “At the end of the 13th century, the master builder from Densuș proved that he was in a relationship with what had been built outside Hațeg. The Catholic model from Sântămăria-Orlea, with the specific shape of the roof, was not the only one for him. The alignment of the reused Roman columns clearly indicates that the role of the buttresses was already known, even if they had no functional purpose at Densuș. However, nowhere, in contemporary Hațeg, did the craftsman have anywhere to observe buttresses”.²¹

As discontinuous and eclectic the architecture of the church in Densuș, as chronologically and partially stylistically the fragmentary preserved painting. Painted “in the year 6952 (1443) the month of October 23”, the ensemble here is significant for the way in which the Byzantine iconographic program was adopted in the Transylvanian Orthodox environment during a period of strong Catholic offensive, but also for the privileged position it held. This is because of the victories of the Romanian princes in the 14th and 15th centuries. Under the south-eastern window of the apse of the altar there is signed in Cyrillic letters the name of the painter Ștefan, with whom a second craftsman, “smaller among the painters”, also worked.

The western wall retains vague traces of the Last Judgment scene. The advanced stage of degradation does not allow a thorough analysis of the paintings in this area.

The paintings of the central pillars were also unknown in the past. *Saint Marina* is painted on the western face of the NW pillar and is preparing to hit a devil with the hammer, which she holds tightly by the forelock with her left hand. On the western face of the pillar, the Holy Trinity is depicted, in a completely original iconographic composition. The southern face of the same pillar is decorated with the figure of a crowned holy martyr – represented up to the hip. On the northern face of the SE pillar, there appears the figure of *Saint Bartholomew* carrying his skin on a stick²².

²⁰ Adrian Andrei Rusu, *Biserica Sfântului Nicolae și curtea nobiliară a Arceștilor de la Densuș (jud. Hunedoara), Arheologia Medievală VII*, p. 52.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² I.D. Ștefănescu, *Iconografia artei bizantine și a picturii feudale românești, Editura Meridiane, București, 1973, p. 27.*

On the eastern walls of the nave, on either side of the triumphal arch, two important painted areas are preserved. Divided into four registers – the first two upper ones flanked towards the triumphal arch by a wide decorative bandeau with a zigzag ribbon (light red and grey-green on a dark red background) – both areas have a similar compositional organization. In the NE corner, the upper registers are dedicated to the saints, “doctors without silver”, represented up to the hip, with the usual iconographic attributes: chalice, box, spoon. Of large size, group two in each register, the holy *anarchs* cannot be precisely identified due to the lack of inscriptions. The figures from the first register are preserved only fragmentarily, the upper part being destroyed. The third register, much narrower than the previous ones, includes four bust images of saints: Kison with a cross and a bowl, Cliporta with a cross, Paul with a scroll and Peter with a scroll, as well. In the lower, wider register, two warrior saints are depicted – Procopius drawing an arrow from his quiver and Theodore with spear and shield; there is also St. Nicholas as bishop, blessing. In the SE corner, from the upper register, only one figure is preserved, a holy martyr with a crown, next to the triumphal arch. The second register includes three figures of saints, the last two in a precarious state of preservation. Repeating the arrangement in the NE corner, the third register is much narrower, iconographically devoted to the representation of some saints. Efimia, Donosia, Anastasia can also be identified, a saint dressed in white, followed by the fragment of another figure (probably also a saint). In the last register, the Archangel Michael and the holy warriors George, Dumitru and Theodore appear.

In the altar, the painting²³ has been satisfactorily preserved only in the lower register. The very small remains that are preserved in the other areas still allow the reconstruction of the overall iconography. The central area of the vault was probably reserved for *Platitera* (The Mother of God with the Enthroned Child) between the Archangels and the Prophets. In the SE part of the vault only an old, haloed figure with a beard and white hair, definitely a prophet, is visible, if one is looking up. From *Împărtășania apostolilor/ The Apostles' Eucharist*, which occupies the next register, only one erased figure of an apostle is preserved, in the NE part of the hemicycle. There is also a trace of register with busts of prophets of which only five vague figures remain in the north side. The lower register contains a theory of great hierarchs and deacons; in the center, Jesus is represented Jesus in a paten, on a canopied altar, with an officiating deacon angel on either side. In the assembly, the register has the following composition: holy hierarch (mutilated face) in a sackcloth decorated with black and white checks, followed by two silhouettes of hierarchs, almost completely erased, an image of Jesus in pain, projected on the background of a cross, Arsenius holding a

²³ *Ibidem*.

locked gospel, Athanasius with a phylactery, angel with censer, canopy altar and Jesus in paten; angel burning incense, candlestick, archdeacon with censer, holy hierarch Gregory with the gospel, hierarch with phylactery (door to diaconicon), deacon, hierarch. It should be noted that all the hierarchs are dressed in tunics with clavis, they have epitrachelia and cassocks, sackcloths and omophoria decorated with crosses. The lower part of the wall is decorated with the usual drapery pattern²⁴.

In addition to the fragments listed so far, we should also mention the patron saint icon, very mutilated, from the deep rectangular niche above the entrance door, representing the Mother of God with the baby – *Glykophilousa type* – and Saint Nicholas. The sides of the niche are decorated with a wide border composed of a band of semi-palms arranged in a circle with mutual alternations and of a band decorated with a zigzag ribbon having at the entrances small rhombuses provided, in the corners, with tiny lily flowers with three petals and, in the center, with the cross motif made up of dots. Remains of colour can also be seen on the eastern wall of the room added on the southern side of the church.

What is surprising about the paintings of the church in Densuș is the limited iconographic program, the essence of the complex representations from the Christological cycle, the entire decoration being concentrated around the rendering of the main categories of saints.²⁵ Emphasizing the importance of the fact that the entire ensemble bears the stylistic and iconographic stamp of Orthodox painting – in the Byzantine tradition – therefore integrating into the artistic family of which the Romanian countries were part, we justify the comparisons with distant monuments. The iconography of the Densuș Church finds an equivalent in the Moldavian painting of the period, in the pronaos of the famous founder of Dolhești Mari of the hetman Șendrea, the gatekeeper of Suceava, whose decoration was made before 1481. As there, the original iconographic decoration occupies the restricted surface and was made up of several unequal registers affecting several categories of saints.

Some more special iconographic aspects are revealed by the analysis of the paintings on the interior pillars. The representation of the *Holy Trinity* from the *New Testament* is rarely found in old orthodox iconography. At Densuș, it appears as follows: on a blue background, God the Father is depicted, with white hair gathered in two tails falling on his shoulders; with a white beard, in white clothing, he holds his hands on the shoulders of the baby Jesus dressed in a white shirt, which is reminiscent of peasant shirts through its decoration. Jesus blesses with his right hand and holds a twisted

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ Ioan-Aurel Pop, *Istoria Transilvaniei medievale: de la etnogeneza românilor până la Mihai Viteazul*, Ed. Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca, 1997, p. 15

candlestick with his left. The Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, whose head, with a halo, exceeds the frame of the panel, is painted on the crest of God the Father. Also, quite unusual for Orthodox historiography, Saint Bartholomew is depicted as a martyr. The ochre-pale silhouette of the council, completely naked, skinned or rather wearing his skin on a stick placed on his left shoulder is drawn on a vaguely bluish background, in brown colour; in his right hand, he holds a small sickle, an iconographic symbol²⁶.

Artistic virtues – the monumentality of vision²⁷, the firm but also generous design, the chromatics with serious modulations – prove that the craftsman Ștefan is the author of the paintings in the altar, of the first two upper registers in the nave and of the patron icon. Against the ultramarine background of the support, the figures painted by this craftsman stand out with majesty and grace alike, enveloping themselves in the broad rhythm of the drawing, in the calm chromatic harmony, in the mysterious solemnity of the ritual. Of particular beauty are the two thaumaturgist saints. Represented from front to hip, the first holding a box, the second a chalice, both make the same gesture as if they want to offer the healing medicine with the spoon held in the right hand. The saint on the left is a beardless young man with a pouty face, his hair combed in tight curls, after the Hellenistic fashion taken up by the painting of the Palaiologan period. The face, calligraphed with purity, the long and fine nose, the small mouth, the large and expressive eyes – recall the models of the same era, as well as the subtle modelling, rarely emphasized with white flashes. His garment, consisting of a white tunic and a yellow cloak, is richly decorated with pearls, either arranged in strings along the borders, at the cuffs and at the collar, or scattered in groups of four. The wide folds are harmoniously grouped but the modelling is flat, achieved either by darker tones of the local colour or by flashes of white. Presenting the same stylistic characters, the neighbouring saint is depicted with the face of a mature, bearded man with a stern expression, almost ascetic. His green cloak, fastened with a pin over his right shoulder, falls in stiff folds, emphasizing the impression of severity, while in the young personage the carelessness of the folds echoed his youthful expression. This consonance of plastic language is a proof of artistic fullness, of deep understanding of the means of artistic communication and mature mastery of it.

²⁶ I.D. Ștefănescu, *Iconografia artei bizantine și a picturii feudale românești*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1973, p. 25.

²⁷ Studii și cercetări de istoria artei seria arta plastica, Tomul 13, 2, 1966, Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, p. 10.



Fig. 10 Paintings in the Densuș Church

In the Hațeg country, the heart of the ancient Dacian Kingdom, which leads to the Poiana Ruscă Mountains, resides one of the oldest Romanian churches where religious services are held – Densuș. Strange in form, but proud and elegant, it stands as a symbol of the power of faith. Historians have not agreed on an exact date, so it is said that the place was originally a temple dedicated to the god Mars, then it became the tomb of one of the Roman generals during the time of Trajan, Cneius Pompeius Longinus.²⁸ After the first Daco-Roman war, he commanded the remaining Roman garrisons in Dacia.²⁹ In 105, he was captured by Decebalus, who demanded war reparations and the withdrawal of the troops in exchange for his release. It is said that Trajan did not yield to the Dacian king's demands, and Longinus took his own life. The chimney in the middle of the church, used to expel the smoke during sacrifices, and a Latin inscription commemorating the Roman general, are testimonies that support this point of view³⁰.

Built of massive blocks of stone and marble, columns and statues brought from Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa, Densuș shows its antiquity³¹. Austere, full of Latin inscriptions, with a low entrance, the church urges you from the first moments of the meeting to make a gesture of humility. Here, time stood still; the chronicle of bygone times is still written in stone, speaking of emperors, legions, generals, of nobles and raids, of courage and faith. The medieval wall painting has been partially preserved, as proof of its existence. The church in Densuș did not budge, still bearing the footprints of its ancestors. Cross its threshold and you will find not only history preserved with sanctity, but also closeness to God, the emotion of a place that offers you peace and an opportunity for silence.

²⁸<https://www.crestinortodox.ro/biserici-manastiri/biserica-sfantul-nicolae-densus-67830.html>.

²⁹ Dobrei Florin, *Tezaur hunedorean - bisericile ortodoxe monument istoric*, Editura Episcopiei Devei și Hunedoarei, Deva, 2014, p. 67.

³⁰ Mălinaș Ioan Marin, *La umbra Sarmizegetusei Romane, Basilica din Densuș, Reflexii istorice și liturgice inspirate de o carte tipărită la Viena în 1775*, Viena, Editura Mihai Eminescu, Oradea, 1997, p. 66.

³¹ <https://www.Densuș.ro>, cea mai veche biserică în care se slujește, 10 septembrie 2011, Alexandru Briciu, *Ziarul Lumina*.

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