

# THE STONE PALACE IN HEREȘTI (GIURGIU COUNTY) SCULPTOR ELIAS NICOLAI FROM SIBIU AUTHOR OF THE PORTALS' DECORATION

Maria-Venera Rădulescu\*

**Keywords:** palace, portal, pediment, dressed stone, Elias Nicolai, gryphon (griffin), volutes, sculptor.

**Abstract:** The stone palace in Herești, erected around 1641-1644 by the great boyars Udriște and Cazan Năsturel is considered to be the only monument of Romanian civic architecture from the era to have been built, both on the inside and on the outside, of finished hewn stone. The originality of the building is also given by the use of space and architectural forms. The decoration on the pediments of the two portals as well as the coat of arms of the great scholar Udriște Năsturel, which is lost today, but which once completed the pediment ornamentation on the western façade of the building, find stylistic analogies in the works of the famous sculptor from Sibiu, Elias Nicolai, the same artist that made the tombstones of Voivode Matei Basarab (1632-1654) and his family.

**Rezumat:** Palatul de piatră de la Herești, ridicat prin anii 1641-1644, de marii boieri Udriște și Cazan Năsturel, este considerat, pentru acea epocă, sigurul monument de arhitectură civilă românească construit în întregime, în exterior și în interior, din piatră de talie - șlefuită. Originalitatea construcției constă, de asemenea, în folosirea spațiului și a formelor arhitecturale. Decorul frontoanelor celor două portaluri precum și blazonul marelui cărtuar Udriște Năsturel, blazon pierdut astăzi, dar care a completat cândva ornamentul frontonului de pe fațada de vest a clădirii, își găsesc analogii stilistice în opera renumitului sculptor sibian Elias Nicolai, artist care a lucrat și pietrele funerare ale voievodului Matei Basarab (1632-1654) și ale familiei sale.

## Brief history

One of the most interesting monuments of civic architecture in Wallachia, The *Stone Palace* in Herești is on a high terrace on the valley of the Argeș River, about 15 km north of the Danube River, in the village of Herești, Hotarele Commune, Giurgiu County. The building was most probably erected around the years 1641-1643 by the great boyars and statesmen Cazan and Udriște Năsturel, brothers of the Lady Elina,<sup>1</sup> the wife of Voivode Matei Basarab (1632-1654). In Herești (Fierești), where the court of the boyar family Năsturel had been, a church was built near the palace in the year 1644, a foundation of the Lady Elina and her brothers Cazan Năsturel and Orest (Udriște) Năsturel, according to the inscription.<sup>2</sup>

The first historical source that describes the sumptuousness of the palace dates from 1657, the year in which the Patriarch of Antioch Macarios III Zaim was hosted here. The companion of the Patriarch, archdeacon Paul of Aleppo, impressed by the preciousness of the house, notes in his journal: "(...) we crossed with boat the mentioned river<sup>3</sup> arriving in the afternoon to a village called Fierăști<sup>4</sup> where there are houses and palaces of the brother of the Lady of Matei-vodă, for she raised him there palaces. I rightfully say that they have no rival in the world, maybe only in the lands of the Franks, since she brought stonemasons from the Lands of the Hungarians<sup>5</sup> and stone from the Lands of the Turks.<sup>6</sup> Then they proceeded to cover everything in dressed stone, both outside and inside, even the vaults in their entirety, then the cellars below and the pantries. Everything is in dressed stone, finely crafted, enchanting for the watchers. [The building] has three levels one over another, [so beautiful] that they banish the sorrows from the heart of the sullen. I am not even able to describe the chambers of these buildings and their making (...). *They told us* that all the rooms in the Lands of the Hungarians are thus made. What happiness upon those that live here and their guests!"<sup>7</sup>

\* The National Museum of Romanian History, Bucharest, e-mail: mariavenera\_radulescu@yahoo.ro

<sup>1</sup> Lady Elina, Cazan and Udriște were the children of the *Postelnic* (chamberlain) and then *Great Logothete* (high chancellor) Radu Năsturel, see: Stoicescu 1971, pp. 214-215.

<sup>2</sup> Iorga 1905-1908, I, p. 91; Drăghiceanu 1931, p. 134.

<sup>3</sup> The River Argeș.

<sup>4</sup> Today Herești village, Giurgiu County.

<sup>5</sup> Referring to the Principality of Transylvania.

<sup>6</sup> The limestone was brought from south of the Danube, probably from Vrața, a territory at the time governed by the Ottoman Empire.

<sup>7</sup> Paul din Aleppo 2014, pp. 391-392.