

# ONE BRICK - MULTIPLE DISCUSSIONS

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**Abstract:** In 2013, archaeological excavations continue at the building adjacent to the gate tower of the first precinct of the Princely Court from Târgșoru Vechi (Prahova County). Here, a surprising discovery was made: a brick with one side completely covered with a “drawing” of a church. Dated, probably, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, this brick raises a number of questions, both from archaeological and architectural point of view.

**Rezumat:** În anul 2013, cercetările arheologice au continuat la clădirea adosată turnului de intrare în prima incintă a Curții Domnești de la Târgșoru Vechi (jud. Prahova). Aici a fost făcută o descoperire surprinzătoare: o cărămidă acoperită pe una dintre părți cu un desen reprezentând o biserică. Dataabilă cel mai probabil în secolul al XVI-lea, această cărămidă ridică o serie de discuții atât din punct de vedere arheologic, cât și arhitectural.

## The discovery

The archaeological ensemble of the Princely Court from Târgșoru Vechi continues to offer important information despite the fact that almost sixty years have gone by since the beginning of the research.

When resuming the excavations at the building adjacent to the gate tower of the first precinct<sup>1</sup> we were surprised by a unique discovery: a brick with one side completely covered with a “drawing”. It is this particular discovery – considered extraordinary by the authors of this contribution – that we would like to present as a starting point for further scientific discussions.

This particular artefact was found during the excavation of the interior of Room II of the above mentioned building (with the inner dimensions of 3.50 m on the North-South axis and 4.20 m on the East-West one). A fragment of the original floor of the room (dating to the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) was still preserved and was subsequently dismantled. Afterwards, excavation was resumed, initially only on the eastern part, in order to obtain a complete stratigraphic section of the deposits, and was later extended over the entire surface.

Thus, several anthropic interventions were observed, their succession allowing insight both on the identification of some chronological landmarks and on the development of the spatial occupation. We shall not insist on these, but will mention that the brick appeared in a layer of debris (mortar and brick fragments), dated to a time prior to the construction of the precinct wall. Considering the fact that the wall was erected after the area ceased to be used as a burial place (sometime at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century or the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>2</sup> the mortar layer cannot be dated earlier than the 16<sup>th</sup> century. For our find though, this is only a *terminus ante quem*, since it could have belonged to an earlier construction (perhaps from the 15<sup>th</sup> century) that had been demolished during the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

## Description of the artefact

The artefact is not entirely preserved, presenting a break on its lower part (lower and upper refer to the orientation of the “drawing”) and some more breaks on the sides, so that the original size of the brick is unknown (Figs. 1-2). At present it measures 18.5 cm in length, 14.5 cm in width and 5.55 cm in height. It was made of a hard, compact paste, well fired, brick-coloured. The clay, containing a small quantity of mica, was mixed with calcareous concretions.

The missing lower part makes for about a third of the maximum length (assumed at about 29 cm, given the fact the norm was that the length had to be double the width). Still, as the piece might have been a special one,

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<sup>1</sup> First excavations were undertaken by N. Constantinescu, with some of the information published in Constantinescu 1969.

<sup>2</sup> For a general overview see Măgureanu, Ciupercă, Anton 2013.

<sup>3</sup> The brick has a long “life”: 1. original purpose; 2. building material, the “drawing” being covered with mortar; 3. debris.



Fig. 1. Photo of the brick.



Fig. 2. Drawing of the brick.

it is possible that the norm had not been respected (Fig. 3).

By “special” we mean that additional to the “drawing”, on one of the shorter sides, on its upper part, we observed a conical depression (width 2.4 cm, height 1 cm, depth 1.4 cm) made while the paste was still crude. Part of the patterns of the drawing develops around this depression, suggesting we are not dealing with an ordinary brick. But we shall return to the character of this brick later.

The “drawing” was made into the raw clay, prior to the firing. It was made on a rather flat and fine surface, much more so than the reverse side of the brick. The “drawing” consists of two main subjects (the church and the animals to the right and left of the main church dome) and a secondary one (decorative elements filling the areas between the main ones).

#### **The church (Fig. 2)**

The main dome (Dome 1) is 6.3 cm high and 5.9 cm wide. It is surrounded by a 6 cm thick frame, decorated with triangles, while the body of the dome is decorated with rows made up of 6 squares (the size of this pattern varies around ca. 5 x 5 cm, with differences given by the depth of the imprint/engraving). These six squares divide the space in four triangular areas, each containing one square surrounded by six or seven triangles; on the top of the dome stands a cross with two horizontal arms, decorated at ends with squares and anchored through a system disposed on both sides of the cross. The main dome stands between two smaller ones: Dome 2 (to the left of Dome 1) and Dome 3 (to the right of Dome 1).

Dome 2 is 3.5 cm high and 2.8 cm wide at the base. It is framed in the same way as Dome 1 but without the decoration. The inside area of the dome is covered with the same combination of squares and triangles, their position being more difficult to identify because of a “spot” of mortar. There is also a cross on the dome, but with only one horizontal arm. In this case also, the ends of the arm are decorated with squares.

Dome 3 is suggested through a fragment of the frame, slightly arched, indicating a dome of similar height as Dome 2, but probably narrower, the available space being more limited.

All three domes are disposed on the same horizontal register (of 11.5 cm preserved length) covering almost the entire width of the brick. The thickness of this register is about 1.5 cm. The limits are marked by 2 cm thick incised lines. They were made with the freehand, resulting in slightly wavy lines. The interior area of the

register was filled with imprinted squares, disposed in two rows of twelve squares each (a minimum number as the right part of the register was destroyed). It is worth noting that the imprinted decoration was applied after tracing the limits of the register.

Below this horizontal register there is a second one, with three successive fields that we shall describe here, from left to right. The dimensions of this register vary from 4.7 to 4.9 cm in height and measures 11.3 cm in length. The register was destroyed on the right side though.

The first field (to the left) is rectangular in shape, 4.5 cm wide and 4.8 cm high. It is delimited by 2.5 cm thick lines. The interior is decorated with three lines formed by imprinted triangles, two of them connecting the corners and the third one disposed on the vertical axis, all united in the centre of the field. In four of the spaces created by the above mentioned lines a square was placed, two of the spaces being left empty.

The second field is rectangular, vertically placed, 3 cm wide and 4.9 cm high. The decoration is formed by five squares disposed on the principal axis, delimited by incised lines and, on both sides, by two rows of twelve, respectively thirteen triangles.

The third field is also the one most affected by the break. From what we still have, we can assume a rectangular shape, probably square, with very similar dimensions to the first field described. This time, the decoration is formed by rows of squares, no triangles. The eight more visible squares seem to suggest an "X" like pattern.

There is also another horizontal register, very similar to the one at the base of the domes. The preserved length is 7.5 cm, while its width varies from 1.5 to 1.7 cm. The inside of the register is decorated with eight squares disposed in two parallel rows, identical to the one on the first register.

The final register is barely observable, being entirely affected by the break. Some elements can still be identified. Thus, the upper limit is marked by a thin incised line, preserved over a length of only 3.4 cm. Underneath there are four or five imprinted lines, one perhaps part of a square, the second perhaps part of a triangle, suggesting a pattern alternating squares and triangles.

#### **The animals** (Fig. 4a-b)

Left and right to the cross on the main dome, there are the figures of two animals: a bird and a four legged animal, probably a horse.

For the bird incised lines sketch the body, head, tail, legs and wings. The shape of the beak (long and pointed) and also long well represented claws suggest a bird of prey. Underneath it there is a thin incised line, the same length as the bird. It is thus possible the bird was a vulture or a raven sitting on a tree branch, a motif frequently used in religious painting or on ceramic fireplace tiles.

From the second animal only half was preserved. Also using thin incised lines were realistically made a head with a long muzzle and pointed ears, a long neck on a thin body, legs rather thick when compared to the



Fig. 3. Reconstruction of entire brick with drawing.



Fig. 4. a. Bird representation; b. Horse/Donkey representation.



Fig. 4. b. Donkey representation.

body. Accidentally or not, the legs finish in a square – perhaps suggesting hoofs. In this case also we might be dealing with a Christian motif, regardless whether the animal is a horse or a donkey.

#### Techniques employed

Two different techniques were used: incision and imprinting. Incision was used for the lines marking the contours of the church and part of the animal figures, while imprinting was used for the ornaments decorating various parts of the “drawing”.

The incisions were made with an instrument with a thick tip in the case of the contours and with a second one, with a thin tip, for the animal representations and the anchoring system of the cross on the main dome. For the imprinting two instruments were used: a square tipped tool (*poinçon*) applied perpendicularly on the working surface - and also a tool with a triangular shaped tip, perhaps the same as the one used for the contour lines, this time applied obliquely to the working surface.

#### Considerations

The “drawing” is only a sketch and for its understanding a large importance falls on the symbols referring to the drawing of the church itself, as well as on those of the animals, present on either side of the church. But first, what does the drawing on the brick represent?

We would like to suggest that it represents a church as seen from the west, with the viewer looking at the front of the church. If so, we can admit the church had no porch, with the entrance going directly into the narthex, or that it had a closed-in porch. It is of course possible that the “drawing” represents a church seen from the side, in which case it is again a porch-less church. We consider this only a narrow probability though, as in this case we would have to admit the following

succession (allowing for the fact that the Pantocrator dome is always the tallest and always positioned over the nave): small dome on the narthex, Pantocrator dome over the nave and a second small dome over the altar.

Thus, in our interpretation we shall start with the most obvious indicator of the church’s architecture: the presence of the three domes.

#### Lateral or frontal view ?

If the view is a lateral one, with the domes disposed in a row, there are not many churches displaying such a feature. Among them there is the Metropolitan Church in Bucharest,<sup>4</sup> only that in this case, the first

<sup>4</sup> Ghika-Budești 1933, pp. 63-65, fig. 285 and 288.

two domes are placed over the narthex with a third one over the nave, and none over the altar. And, our artefact cannot be dated to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when this particular church was erected, thus it could not have been inspired by it. We have no knowledge of a church with a dome built over the altar, and thus we should abandon the lateral view hypothesis.

We are left with the hypothesis on the frontal view. In this case there are also two possible scenarios: main dome over the nave and secondary domes over the side apses, or main dome over the nave and secondary domes over the narthex. This latter observation leads to another: the church must have had either a triconc plan (secondary domes over the nave) or a rectangular one (two secondary domes over the narthex). It is worth mentioning a mixt situation: triconc plan, but with the secondary domes over the narthex, as in the case of the church of the Dealu Monastery.<sup>5</sup>

Three domes - two over the narthex - are present at the church of Dealu Monastery, founded by Radu the Great in 1502.<sup>6</sup> They are situated on the eastern part of the narthex, towards the main dome, making a harmonious group made up of differently constructed domes.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, all churches considered to be architecturally derived from the Dealu Monastery one, are characterized by the presence of three domes, one over the nave and two over the narthex,<sup>8</sup> such as those from Bucovăț (Dolj County) and Tutana (Argeș County), dating to the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Another group of churches with multiple domes originated in the Episcopal Church from Curtea de Argeș, which is characterized by a widening of the narthex, but with no preserved elements referring to domes. Good examples are at Târgșor (Prahova County) and Cobia (Dâmbovița County), dating to the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup>

#### **The shape of the crosses**

Another possible indicator in our analysis may be given by the sketched crosses on the top of the domes. It is visible that the arms of the two crosses end in a square. It was thus considered that such iron crosses with gilded disks could be a particularity of the churches built under the architectural influence of the Athos Mountain.<sup>10</sup>

#### **The decoration of the entrance**

To those mentioned above we can add another piece of evidence. On the second register of the brick, in the middle, there is a rectangular field, perhaps slightly trapezoidal, marked by lines and rows of triangles. We believe it is the image of the entrance into the church, respectively the decorated framing of the door. Such a richly decorated framing appears both at Curtea de Argeș and the church of the Dealu Monastery.<sup>11</sup>

#### **What does the “drawing” represent? Possible hypotheses.**

**Hypothesis no 1** – the drawing illustrates one of the churches from Târgșoru Vechi.

At Târgșoru Vechi (Prahova County) the ruins of four churches were archaeologically identified until the present moment, a fifth was assumed based on the identification of some wall remains oriented East-West and the presence of a sixth was suggested by a foundation inscription mentioning Vlad the Impaler, but there is no additional data about the last two.

The representation on the brick might suggest that the unknown artist had represented one of these churches, but exactly which one?

It cannot be the church founded by Prince Anthony (Antonie-Vodă), since it was built at a date later than the drawing. Moreover, the plan and the architecture of the church, together with the votive painting, do

<sup>5</sup> Ghika-Budești 1927, p. 143.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 141.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> Ghika-Budești 1930, pp. 20-21, 31.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> Ghika-Budești 1927, p. 137.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 142.

not match the representation on the brick, since Anthony's church never had three domes.

The "Red Church" is smaller in size (about 15 m long). Chronologically, if one believes traditions (as there are no archaeological excavations or architectural studies available), it was built during the reign of Mihnea Turcitul in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It could thus be the subject of our discussion, but its sizes do not recommend it as a three-domes church.

The church considered to be founded during the reign of Vladislav II is also of reduced sizes, with an interior length of 12 m and a width of only 5 m. Lacking elevation elements that might have suggested a later development of the roof, despite the fact it had strong foundations (1.20 m deep and 0.90 m wide), the reduced sizes do not suggest it as a possible candidate to three domes.

The "White" Church is one of the best preserved churches from Târgșoru Vechi, and was probably founded during the reign of Neagoe Basarab. It was also the first church to be studied architecturally.<sup>12</sup> The plan resembles that of the church in Curtea de Argeș, with a large narthex and a triconc nave. Unfortunately, none of the vaults were preserved so we have no indication on how its upper part might have looked like. Still, if we take in consideration the ideas of Ghika-Budești, it is possible that, similarly to the Episcopal Church in Curtea de Argeș, the one in Târgșoru Vechi had three domes. It is the only one among the four churches here that could have had more than two domes (Fig. 5). So, could this be our church?

**Hypothesis no. 2** – the drawing has nothing to do with the churches from Târgșoru Vechi.

It is possible that the brick represents a building that had nothing to do with the real churches from Târgșoru Vechi, that it might just reflect a certain vision of the unknown artist. We mean by this that the artist could have made the "drawing" from purely artistic reasons, using either a memory or an imaginary plan.

Supporting this hypothesis is the presence of the animal figures and the filling of the area around the central "drawing" with various decorative elements, things that would rather suggest an iconographic representation.

**Hypothesis no. 3** – the drawing represents the plan of a future church.

We cannot ignore the situation where a certain intentionality might be observed: the artist sketched the plan of a church that he possibly intended to build. Of course, in this case, if we admit the "White" Church is the one represented, it would constitute the ideal situation, where we have the plan of a church before it was built, and the actual church today - in ruins, of course.

Still, the fact that we do not have just the mere plan of the church as the artist filled the empty areas with symbols, together with the presence of the depression in its upper part, makes the argumentation for this hypothesis more difficult.

**Hypothesis no. 4** – the brick as part of a mould?

This hypothesis originates in the presence of the depression in its upper part. Its shape and also the fact it communicates with the rest of the drawing through the incised lines delimiting the essential parts of the church, made us wonder whether we were not dealing with a sort of mould, meant to reproduce the image of a church or icon. Of course, it would be only one half of a bi-valve mould.

On the other hand, the size of the brick, the fact that the lines of the drawing are rather shaky, the main dome deviating from the vertical axis would be arguments against this last hypothesis.

### Conclusions

We presented above a few of the working hypothesis that we considered most likely, together with the arguments for and against them. Of course, other hypothesis might be also suggested, with arguments in favour or against each of them.

We may consider individually the above mentioned hypotheses as working bases. But there is also the possibility of combining some of them. For example, the idea of the brick being part of a mould might start with the "drawing" of the "White" Church. Also, the idea of sketching a plan might start with a "memory" of the image

<sup>12</sup> Ghika-Budești 1930, p. 34.

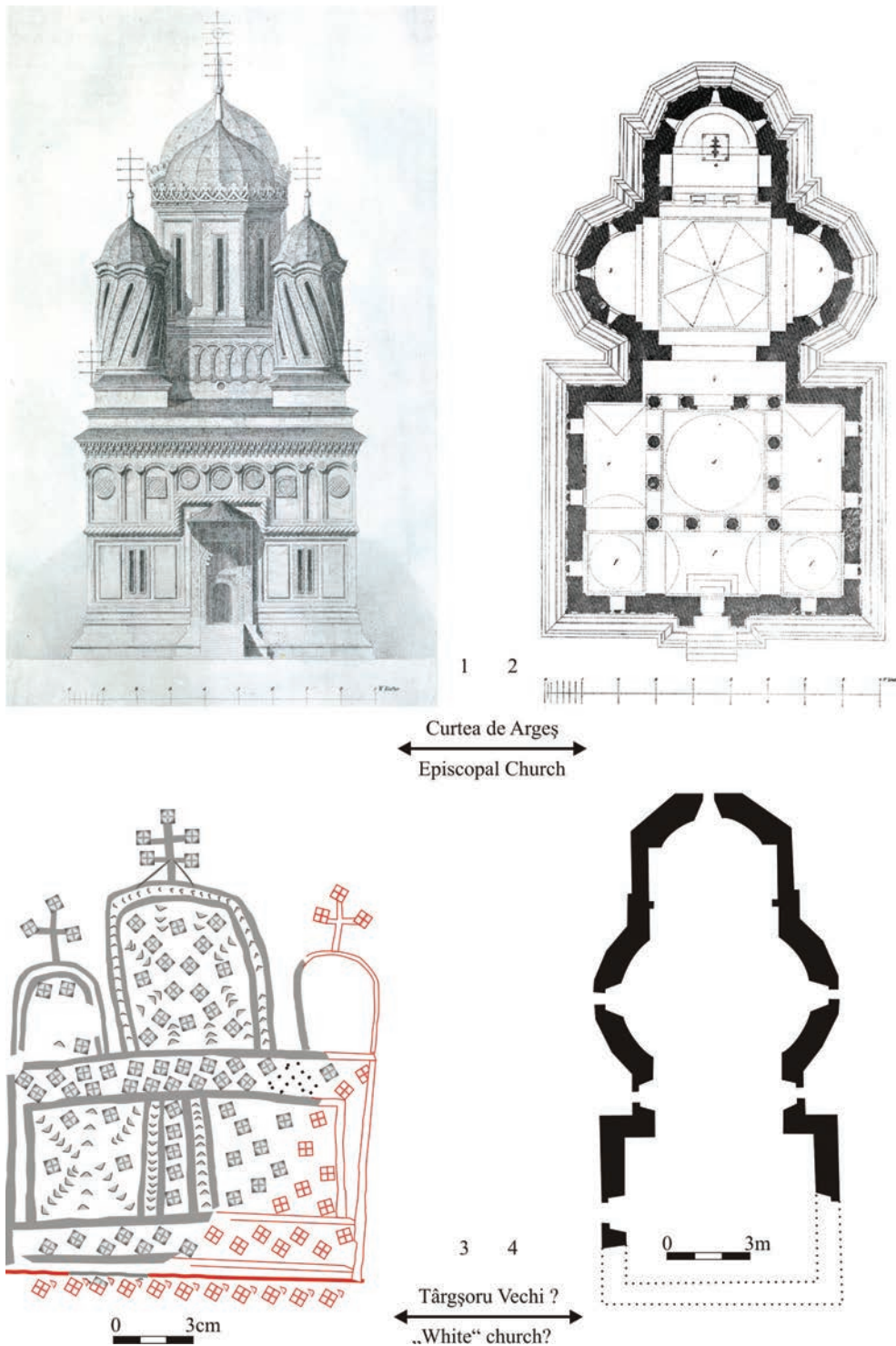


Fig. 5. Curtea de Argeș: 1. frontal view of the Episcopal Church (after Ghika-Budești 1927, Fig. 145); 2. Plan of Episcopal Church (after Ghika-Budești 1927, Fig. 143); Târșoru Vechi: 3. church representation; 4. plan of the „White Church” (redrawn after Ghika-Budești 1930, Fig. 159).

of a church (perhaps the one from Curtea de Argeș) and its materialization in the shape of the “White” Church.

The uniqueness of the piece we are discussing – given by its size, the support of the drawing, the representation of the church and the other symbols – will surely generate many debates. We only intended to offer the core of the discussion to the specialists in medieval studies (both archaeologists and historians) and to the architects interested in religious architecture.

Bibliographical abbreviations:

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|---------------------------------|--|
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