

The group of Orthodox churches, so well defined in Hateg Country and Hunedoara Region, is now completed by a less known monument, considered lost for a long period of time, the "Sfântul Nicolae" stone church from Bârsău.

Bârsău Village belongs to Tarău Commune and is positioned at about 8 kilometers North of Deva, on the road towards the Certej mining area. Placed on a hill slope, the stone church of Bârsău overlooks the village neighborhoods with its gracious silhouette (Fig. 1).

The description made by K. Torma, the Hungarian historian, containing also a draught, has constituted till now the most valuable testimony about the monument's state in 1879, when the historian had visited the area<sup>1</sup>. At that time, the church was in a sad state, with the nave walls strongly fissured and the western steeple very inclined. The sketch contains a plan consisting of a very large nave with a steeple at its western side and a polygonal apsis of the axle shaped edge type at its eastern side. Both the nave and the altar had two high and narrow windows. Each window had a semicircular arch at its upper part. In front of the access door, from the southern side of the nave, an attached verandah is marked. The elevations marked by K. Torma are arbitrary, his most important notes being however connected to the internal decoration of the monument. The decoration consisted of mural paintings, most of them being degraded at that time. Nevertheless, K. Torma mentioned in the votive picture placed above the narthex entrance two feminine characters that hold in their hands the shrine of a church resembling the one described by him, offered to the Saint Patron of the church, St. Nicholas. Close to this picture is the rotive from the church porch, written in Slavonic. According to the same description, the other frescoes were placed in the nave, and in the altar. These paintings, superimposed to an older stratum made of red borders (probably the curtain's register), were dated by K. Torma as belonging to the second half of the XVI-th Century. The dating was based on the stylistic similarities between the clothes and jewels belonging to the two ladies and the Hungarian feminine fashion of those times<sup>2</sup>.

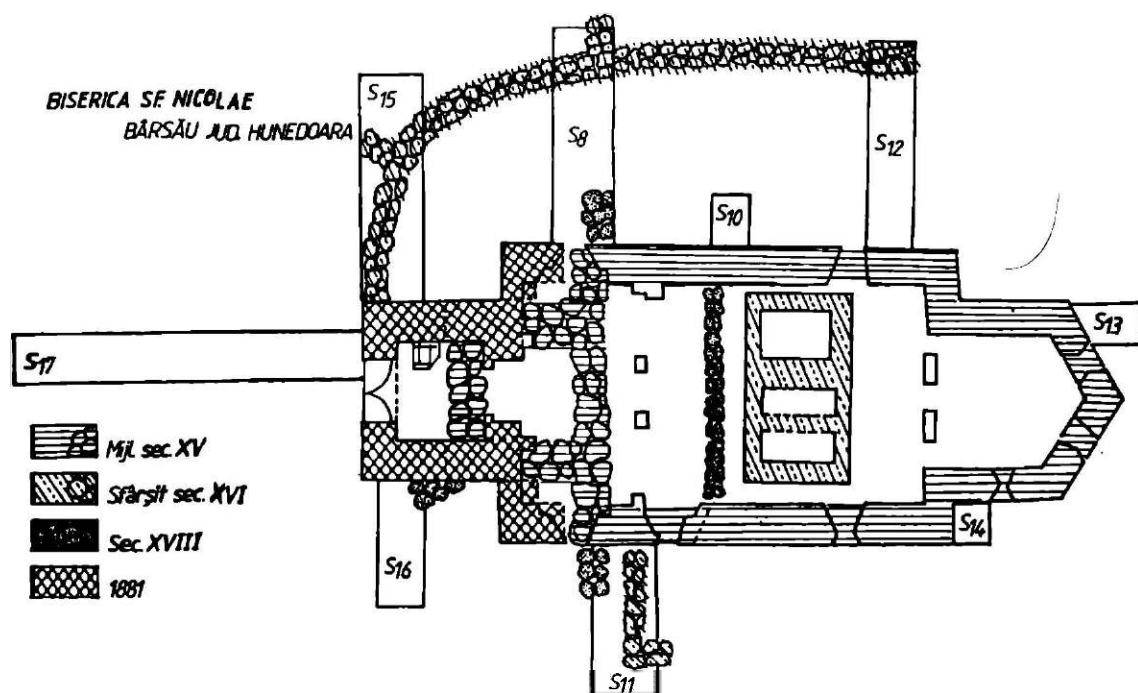
K. Torma's notes also mention the existence of three tombstones with Latin inscriptions. We shall return to these at the chapter about the founders of this church.

The archaeological diggings were made in 1976, on the occasion of the monument's restoration by the Direction of the National Cultural Patrimony. After the sections were made both in the internal part of the church and in its neighboring zone<sup>3</sup>, it was ascertained the lack of foundations or of any other traces connected to the existence of buildings previous to the present edifice (Pl. 1).

<sup>1</sup> K. Torma, *Archaeologiai Közlemények* 1879, p. 53-61; V. Vătășianu, *Istoria artei feudale în Țările Române*. Vol. 1, Bucharest, 1959, p.258-259.

<sup>2</sup> K. Torma, *op. cit.* p.60 and V. Drăgut, *Arta creștină în România, secolul al XVI-lea*, Bucharest, 1989, p. 268-270.

<sup>3</sup> The entire archaeological investigation consisted of 17 sections and cassettes that have not covered the entire area required for archaeological researches.



Pl. 1. Church St. Nicolas Bârsău, Hunedoara county. Layout of archaeological scavings - 1976.

In what regards the stratigraphy of the monument, the foundation ditch was dug in a brown soil layer, deepened in a dark gray soil layer down to a clayish soil stratum. In the altar, above the foundation, a sand layer was discovered, representing a floor support. We consider that the few bricks discovered in this same layer do not belong to the first ground level, as in the rest of the church the same type of bricks was found above the tombs, over the levelling layer, having as support a capping of mortar. Inside the nave there is the following succession: a layer of red soil, representing the utilisation level with the separation wall and a thin layer provenient from the steeple's and nave's internal separation wall demolition. Most of this thin layer was scraped. Tile fragments coming from the steeple and church roof were also found in this layer.

At the moment of the church construction, the building plan consisted of a rectangular nave, with an altar of the axle shaped edge type at its Eastern side and a steeple at the western side (Fig. 2). The steeple's foundations were discovered in the western area of the present nave, overlapped by a new steeple. The used building materials consisted of stones from quarries or riverbeds, cemented with mortar; the bricks marked only the windows' zone<sup>4</sup>.

The following construction stage discovered by the archaeological investigation consisted of the building inside the nave of two arcaded crypts, made of bricks and united by a common foundation. In the crypt from the northern side of the nave four overlapped graves were found. These graves were lacking any inventory, the uppermost grave being disturbed by the internal space

<sup>4</sup> In 1976 the church face was not plastered and its detailed research especially in the altar zone allowed several architectural observations: a first stage from the external ground level to +4.35 m, placed above the windows; a second intervention stage, about 1.20 m. in height, till the cornice and a third stage, consisting of the cornice's four brick rows.

altering interventions. The southern crypt, initially divided in two niches, contained two graves at the time of investigations.

The grave from the northern room, M6, contained a coin issued in 1639. The other grave, M5, placed on the tracks of the former separation wall, contained a coin issued by Sigismund the III-rd in 1619, when the crypt had had only one chamber. Outside, on the Southern side of the church, a small closed verandah was added. This verandah was made of stones cemented by mortar and was mentioned by K. Torma as existing in 1877. On the northern and western sides of the church a wall steadied by buttresses was built (Fig. 3-4). It was not possible to study this wall except for the marked area (Fig. 1: S.15, S.8, S.10), because the southern and eastern perimeters had other destinations<sup>5</sup>.

After disaffecting the two crypts, a separation wall was built inside the nave, at about 0.60 m. west of these. Thus, the narthex room was created. At this moment the door from the southern side was blocked, the western corner of the already built separation wall overstepping with about 20 cm. the embrasure of the southern access door. We considered necessary to scour the lower part of the internal brickwork. This operation cleared the almost entire door embrasure that had still maintained the stratum painted in red borders, mentioned by K. Torma under the XVI<sup>th</sup> Century paintings.

In this newly created space dedicated to the narthex and the naos, several graves were discovered. At their turn, these graves cut older graves, whose inventories are not spectacular, as they consisted of simple clothing accessories and coins from the XVII-th and XVIII-th centuries.

Outside the monument, the archaeological research also revealed the foundations of three buttresses, connected to late building interventions, when the nave and the steeple suffered from a quick deterioration. Correlating the archaeological data with the documentary information, we are able to specify that the stone church from Bârsău had functioned as a cult dwelling for the village community.

The village is mentioned in 1440 as *possessio regalis-Berekszów*<sup>6</sup>, in 1459 being found under the name of *villa Berekzo*. According to Csanky, the village might have belonged to the Soimus Fortress under the possession of Voicu of Hunedoara. According to the same author, in 1479 it changed ownership to the Ungar family<sup>7</sup>.

Having no certain dating evidence for the church, we can consider the moment of its building towards the half of the XV-th Century, being well known that the plan of the altar, with external apsis with four sides of the axle shaped edge type, not often found in the Transylvanian medieval architecture, belongs to this period, representing probably a creation of the late gothic or, why not?, a reflex of the wooden religious architecture. We refer to the Sf. Nicolae church from Hunedoara built, according to the documentary information, in 1459<sup>8</sup>, the Huniads' Castle chapel, the church from Cincis or Church No. 2 from Scheii Brasovului, also built towards the half of the XV-th Century<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> During the archaeological researches, at the southern part of this area there was the parish' house market garden. On the northeastern and eastern parts of the research area there were the parish house and the access road.

<sup>6</sup> C. Suciu *Dictionar istoric al localităților din Transilvania*. Vol. 1, Bucharest, 1966, p.83.

<sup>7</sup> D. Csanky *Magyarország történeti földrajza a hunyadiak korában* Vol. 5, Budapest, 1913, p. 75.

<sup>8</sup> Z. Pinter, the chronics of archaeological researches; 1997 field campaign. Călărași, 1998, p. 29-30, based on the coin issued by Vladislav I of Hungary (1440 – 1444) from M2, he attributes the building of this church as Pre XV-th Century.

<sup>9</sup> E. Greceanu, *Études byzantines et Post-byzantines* 1, 1979, p. 203-204 Fig. 4/b; L.

The following stage of major changes took place in the second half of the XVI-th Century, when the monument is transformed in a funerary chapel for the Crepović family. The two characters from the votive picture seen and described by K. Torma inside the church<sup>10</sup> belong to this family.

Even before K. Torma's arrival to Bârsău the Commission of Historical Monuments from Hungary had made about 21 sketches, exact copies of the church painting, votive picture, votive and tombal inscriptions<sup>11</sup>. The votive picture, which can be studied in detail by now, is placed on the southern wall of the nave, East of the entrance door. It offers several data on some founders of the church. It represents St. Nicholas with his arms opened (now missing), to whom two women offer the church shrine.

L. Réthy deciphered the Slavonic inscription in front of the first lady from the votive picture, dressed in the traditional folk suit specific to Hunedoara County. Thus, the character is identified as Lady Mara, the daughter of Petru Ocarović and former wife of Nicolae Crepović<sup>12</sup>. From that period's documents, Mara's (or Margareta's, as she was also mentioned) father played an important role among the Serbian nobles from Banat. In 1540 he was in the service of King Zapolya and Councilor of the Soimus Fortress and, after the disappearance of the Jakšić family, he remained as the most important representative of the Serbs in Hungary<sup>13</sup>. His daughter, Margareta, was married to another Serb noble, Nicolae Crepović, who had also distinguished himself in the battles against the Turks towards the half of the XVI-th Century. He received from Isabela and Ioan Sigismund the Sasvar Fortress, between Retea and Recas, and in 1553 he also received the Brânsca Fortress and all its territory from King Ferdinand, for the 1000 guilders he had lent to the King<sup>14</sup>. N. Crepović died in 1563, leaving Margareta a widow with two daughters, Elena and Caterina<sup>15</sup>. In 1563 Elena married the Moldavian King Petru Schiopu, but this marriage lasted only till 1566, when she was to be found again in the Deva Fortress, with her only daughter, Tudorita<sup>16</sup>. Her following marriage was with the Russian noble Vladimir the Moskovite. The other sister, Caterina, dressed in an occidental suit and identified by us as the second character in the votive picture, was married to the supreme noble of Hunedoara, Valentin Török of Enning. This marriage also explains and arguments her presentation in a different suit from her mother's. She died in 1572<sup>17</sup>.

Returning to the tombstones, whose epitaphs in Latin were copied and deciphered by K. Torma, we are able to mention that, in the church of Bârsău, the arcaded crypts discovered after the archaeological research, were built to receive the members of the Crepović family. We refer to the broken tombstone that was placed in the churchyard in 1877. The name of Nicolae Crepović was carved on this tombstone.

<sup>10</sup> After the numerous restoring stages performed after the cancellation of the Monuments' Department, the internal part of the church was cleaned (hammer-wrought) of the late plaster layers by the church priest in an uncorresponding manner, the painting described by K. Torma becoming "accessible" again.

<sup>11</sup> F. Gyula, *Magyarország Műemlékei*, p. 267-269.

<sup>12</sup> L. Réthy, *Az oláh nyelv és nemzet megalakulása, N. Beckerek*. 1890, p. 147.

<sup>13</sup> S. Dragomir, *Annuary of the Historical Monuments Commission, Section for Transylvania 1930 – 1931*, p. 143-144.

<sup>14</sup> S. Dragomir, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

<sup>15</sup> A. Ivăie, *Istoria Srba u Ugarskoj*, Zagreb 1914, p. 173; E. Hurmuzachi, *Documente privitoare la Istoria Românilor. Acte din secolul XVI (1517 – 1612)*. Vol. 11, No. VII, p. 876.

<sup>16</sup> E. Hurmuzachi, *op. cit.*, p. 581; 875-876; N. Iorga, *Revista Istorică* 16, 7-9, 1930, p. 154-157.

<sup>17</sup> S. Dragomir, *op. cit.*, p. 145. This opinion belongs to Ileana Burnichioiu, from Deva History Museum, opinion based on unpublished documents discovered in Budapest archives; we take this opportunity to thank her again for the information supplied.

HIC SEPULTUS IACET SASVAR[iensis] NICOLAUS ( ? ) VIT  
MAGNIFI[cus] D[ominus] NI[colaus] ( ? ) VIT CAPITANEUS  
ALFEDIEN[sis] S[erenissimi] IOANIS ELEC(ti regis? )  
CONSILI (arius A.D.) 156? .<sup>18</sup>

The other two tombstones kept inside the church, one in the steeple and the other in the narthex area also had epitaphs in Latin and belonged, the first to Caterina, Margareta's daughter:

*Olczaravit moerens...*

*hoc Margareta sepulchrum...*

*Condiderat natae, nomen qui Caterina suae)*

and the second to Vladimir the Moskovite, Elena Crepović's husband:

*Magnifici domini Vladimir [i]? moschovita[e] ...*

*ann[o] D[omini] MDLXX? XVI, anno aet[atis] ...<sup>19</sup> . (Fig. 5-7)*

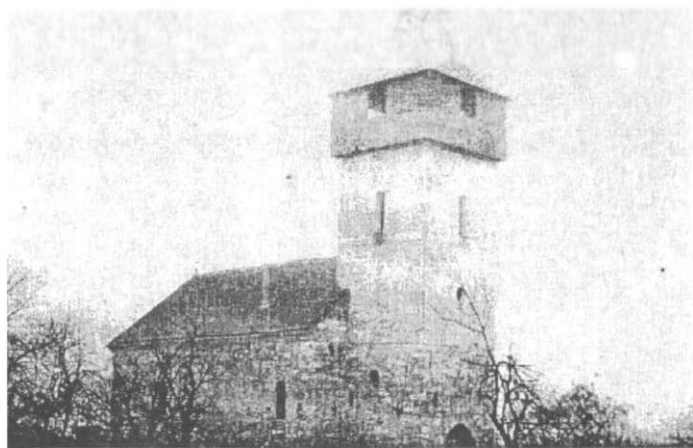
The disaffecting of the crypts was made in the XVIII-th Century, when the wall meant to separate the interior into naos and narthex was built; the southern door was closed and the verandah that was also externally added to this side would afterwards function separately. At that time the buttresses from the northern and southern sides of the nave, as well as from the southwestern corner of the steeple were also added. The last important moment of intervention took part between 1877 and 1881, when the western tower collapsed (the extremely pronounced fissure was archaeologically noticed as continuing till the foundation basis). At that time the church was enlarged by about 1 meter towards the West, and a new steeple was built. The steeple's western wing was positioned on the old enclosure wall, disaffected at that time. In the interior, the separation wall was abandoned by the building of a trellis - work mast, and the church will be elevated with about 1 meter (Fig. 8-9).

Despite all these results, we consider the archaeological investigations as being yet incomplete, especially on the southern side, where the nobiliary residence of the Crepović family might have been placed. We hope that the future restoration of this monument will contain also this wish.

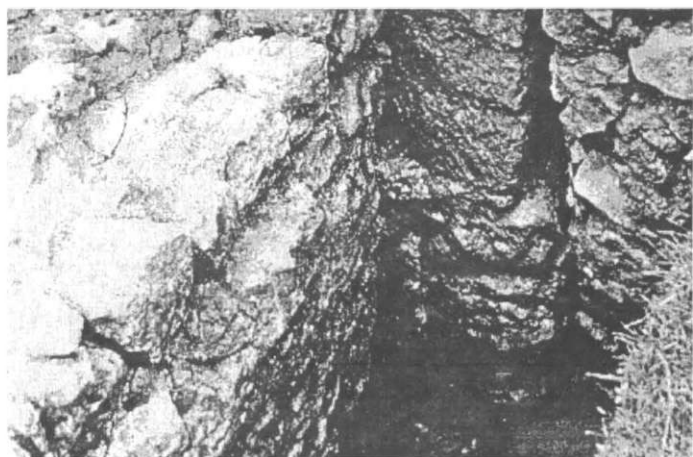
Even though unspectacularly in regard with the archaeological inventory, the researches performed on this monument underlined its identity and importance in the History of Transylvanian civilization.

<sup>18</sup> ibid., p. 142; V. Vătășanu, *Vechile biserici de piatră românești din județul Hunedoara*. Annuary of the Historical Monuments Commission, Department for Transylvania, 1929, p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> S. Dragomir, op. cit., p. 142. Nowadays a fragment of the second tombstone, together with other shaped stones from the monument's external decoration are deposited in the churchyard.



1 – Bis. Sf. Nicolae – Vedere generală de pe latura de N-V.  
Sf. Nicholas church – general view from North-West.



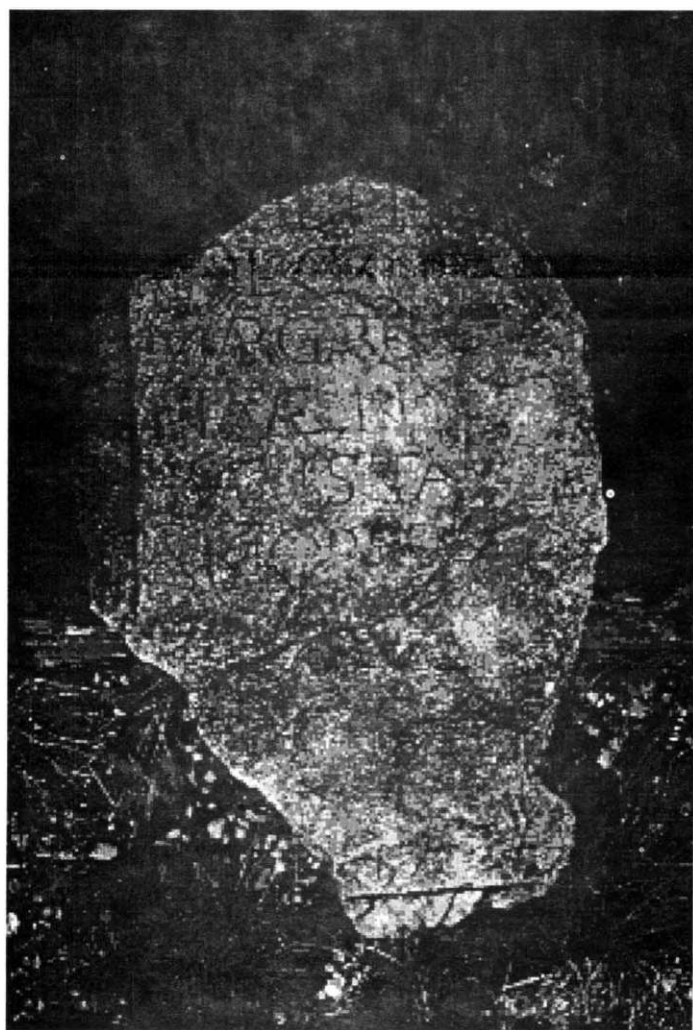
2 – Fundație latura de Nord a bisericii cu zona de aderare  
cu turnul clopotniță actual, ca și fundația contrafortului târziu.  
Foundation of the northern church wall. One can see the link  
with the present belfry as well as the late buttress's foundation.



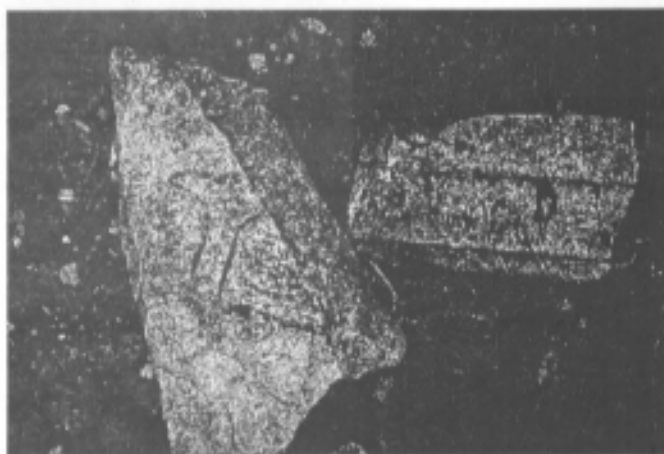
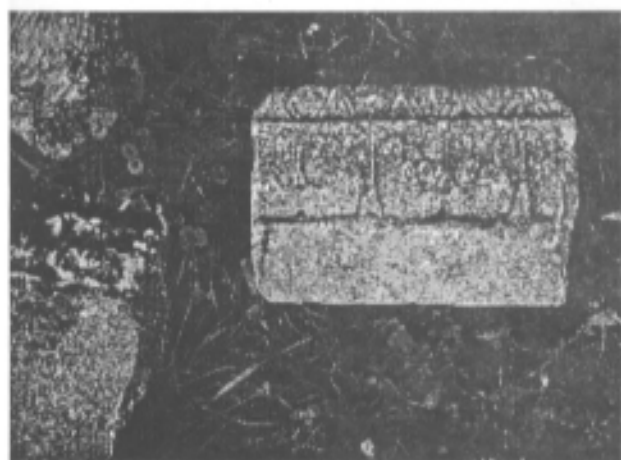
3 – Zidul de incintă cu contraforturi de pe latura de Nord.  
Enclosure wall with buttresses – northern side.



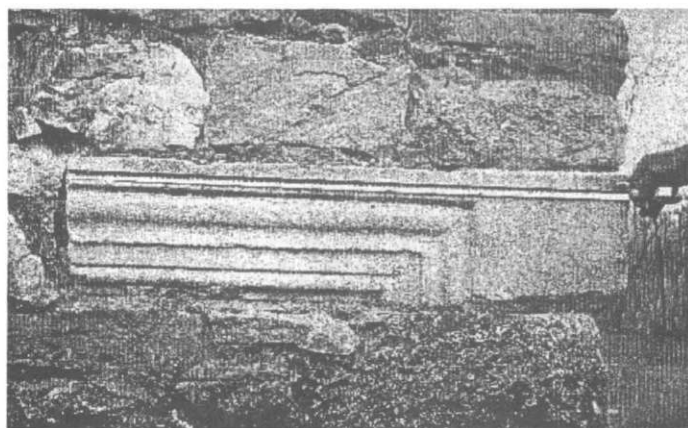
4 – Zid incintă latura Nord din secțiunea S12.  
Enclosure wall – northern side – section S12.



7 – Fragmente din Ispede funerară a Ecaterinei de Torok Enhing.  
Fragments from Ecaterina's de Torok E. tombstone.



5,6 – Fragmente din lespedeă funerară a Ecaterinei de Torok Enhing.  
Fragments from Ecaterina's de Torok E. tombstone.



8,9 – Fragmente din piatră profilată  
din decorația bisericii încestrată în turnul clopotniță actual.  
Fragments of carved stone,  
from the church's decoration, reused in the present belfry.