

The Fortified Church from Opațița

Reflections on the Identity of the 15th-Century Ecclesiastical Architecture of a Frontier Space

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THE VILLAGE of Opațița is located at the southwestern extremity of Gătaia Plain, a hilly plain with altitudes that do not exceed 110 m.¹ It is located on the border with the settlements of Deta, Sângeorge and Berecuta, situated on the middle course of the Bârzava River. Geographically, in Gătaia Plain there are several higher fields that have distinct characteristics and are dissected by short streams. Șipet Field, which marks the boundary of the Opațița settlement, is flanked by the course of Birdeanca Brook, a tributary of the Bârzava. The entire flat area of Gătaia opens wide towards the south, serving thus as a geographical gateway to the north of the Banat Plain, towards Timișoara, which is the administrative center of the territory. Medieval archeological research conducted at Opațița is part of a broader effort to reconstitute, at the level of the entire Banat province, its medieval ecclesiastical geography and to highlight the identity of its medieval architecture. In the 14th and 15th centuries, the chancery documents issued in the Catholic Diocese of Cenad recorded 226 parishes. The parish churches were concentrated mainly in the flat areas of the Banatian territory, whose villages and medieval churches had been laid waste to by the beginning of the 18th century.²

The name of the village Opațița has its etymology in the Hungarian appellative *apacza*, meaning “nun.” The area with medieval monuments lies on the banks of Birdeanca Brook, a tributary of the Bârzava River, which flows by the north-western edge of the village, being recorded as *Călășturi* in the local toponymy. The name *Călășturi* is a Romanian phonetic adaptation of the Hungarian *Kolostor*, which stands for “monastery.”³ According to the medieval diplomatic documents, the village of Opațița appeared in the papal collectors’ lists between 1333 and 1335. In 1333, the *Apacha* parish was included in the structures of the Archdeanery of Caraș and in the years 1334-1335 it appeared mentioned in the deanery between the Timiș and the Bârzava, from the Archdeanery of Timiș in the Diocese of Cenad. A document issued in 1373 shows that the medieval village of Opațița was divided. It was in the possession of nobles in 1494.⁴ The ruins from Opațița aroused the interest of the German archaeologist Felix Milleker at the end of the 19th century.⁵ He carried out research at Opațița-*Călășturi* and his observations were published in the journal of the History and Archaeology Society from Timișoara

in 1884, where he gave a description of the earthen fortification located between the Opațița-Birda dirt road and Birdeanca Brook. The moat was visible then on three of its four sides, whose lengths, according to Milleker's measurements, were 38 m to the south, 43 m to the east and 42 m to the north. The Romanian toponym *Călășturi*, the brick debris from the dismantled walls that was found at the surface, the pottery dating back to the Arpadian period—all these were arguments whereby Milleker identified at Opațița-*Călășturi* the remains of a medieval monastery of nuns destroyed by the Turkish invasions.⁶ During the interwar period, the ruins from *Călășturi* were recorded in a monograph of the village Opațița, which was a source for brick exploitation.⁷ The most serious and profound disruption of the stratigraphy, resulting in the destruction of the traces of the medieval church, took place during the Cold War, in the years 1951-1953, when two pillboxes were built on the eastern edge of the fortification. The fortification interior was leveled down and that disrupted the topography and stratigraphy, modifying, in

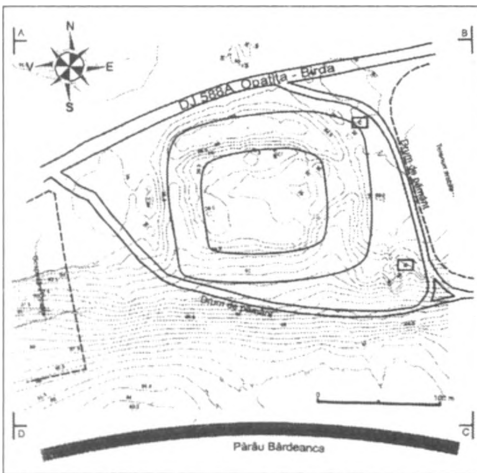


FIG. 1. Opațița.

Ground plan of the medieval fortification

equal measure, the medieval structures from the south and the east (Fig. 1). Research on the medieval archeology from Opațița was carried between 2005–2009, an area of about 750 sqm being investigated.² The medieval fortified church from Opațița-*Călășturi* is bounded by Birdeanca Brook along its southern extremity, which has a valley that is 10 m below the current treading level, and by the Opațița-Birdeanca road to the north. The concrete pillboxes from the time of the Cold War lie to the east. Between these limits, the archaeological area occupies about 1400 sqm.² It should be noted that field research has detected traces of medieval habitation east of the medieval earthen fortification, along the right bank of Birdeanca Brook. The objectives of the

medieval archeology research carried out at Opațița have been to identify the ground plan of the medieval church, to demarcate the earthen fortification and its structure, and to examine the necropolis identified inside the fortification. The documentation accumulated in the current state of research provides partial answers to the questions invoked above.

The medieval church. The premise underlying the search for a church rested on the information provided in a note of 10 November 1432, suggesting that the parish church was dedicated to the Virgin Mary.⁸ It was a building with two towers, defended by wooden walls against the Turkish incursions.⁹ Due to its age, it was in need of repair at the time of its documentary mention. Intrusive research and geomagnetic prospecting have failed to identify the site of the church inside the fortification made of earth and wood. What has been identified is the segment of a brick wall from an eccentric area of the

fortification, along the south-eastern side, which was also the most seriously affected by the changes afflicting the medieval structures when the casemates were built in 1951–1953. The wall, preserved along a distance of 4.80 m, is oriented to the northeast-southwest. It has a width of 1.00 m, being made of brick. A single type of brick was used, measuring 29/15.5/5 cm. The stratigraphy of the wall area, covered with red-brown earth, identical with the untrodden soil in the region, suggests that some leveling action occurred in a recent period. The same disturbance has been highlighted stratigraphically in the intrusive research from the eastern side of the fortress, where a massive layer of mortar and debris transported there was found. These stratigraphic disruptions considerably lower the chances of identifying the medieval monument and its planimetry.

The fortification of earth and wood. Archaeological investigation has provided information about the earthen and wooden fortification that defended the parish church from Opațița in the 15th century. The fortification had a rectangular ground plan attached to the steep bank of Birdeanca Brook. The church and, implicitly, its defensive system were placed on a high plain, with an absolute height of about 100 m. The defensive elements have been preserved unchanged only on the west side. The Opațița-Birda causeway partially overlapped the moat and the modern fortification works from the years 1952–1953 have changed the medieval defense structures on the south-eastern side of the medieval church. The moat is currently apparent as a semicircular shape opening towards the south, on the steep bank of Birdeanca Brook (Fig. 1). The observations on the west side reveal a complex defense structure, consisting of a wooden fence and a dirt wall positioned between two moats. In the present state of research, the wooden fence surrounding the area around the church has been identified on the west, north and south sides, and towards the east it was heavily destroyed by the military landscaping works conducted in the recent period of the Cold War. The palisade route had an irregular quadrilateral ground plan that delineated an area of about 1400 sqm. The palisade structure and its route have been preserved only in the northern and western area of the fortification, the rest being dismantled. The palisade had the structure of a simple fence built of horizontal beam wreaths across the western part of the church. In this sector of the fortification, the fence was reinforced on the inside with fittings that have a triangular layout (Fig. 2). The base of the triangle measured approximately 2 m and was about the same size in height, the entire arrangement having the shape of an isosceles triangle. The construction behind the fence was erected using the same technique of horizontal beam crowns. Recent destructions that have disrupted the stratigraphy within the fortress have allowed ascertainments to be made concerning the structure of the palisade in the southern and eastern space of the fortress. The northern side of the fortress was defended by a double fence made of wood. It had a width of 3.25 m measured on the exterior. The palisade walls were built of horizontal beam crowns bound together by transverse tree trunks, stacked using the same technique of horizontal crowns, reinforced, here and there, with pillars (Fig. 3). The palisade did not have the same width, since in the north-eastern area it measured just 2.35 meters on the outside. The north-western corner of the space that protected the church from Opațița, bounded by the simple fence and the double palisade was defended by a pentagonal-

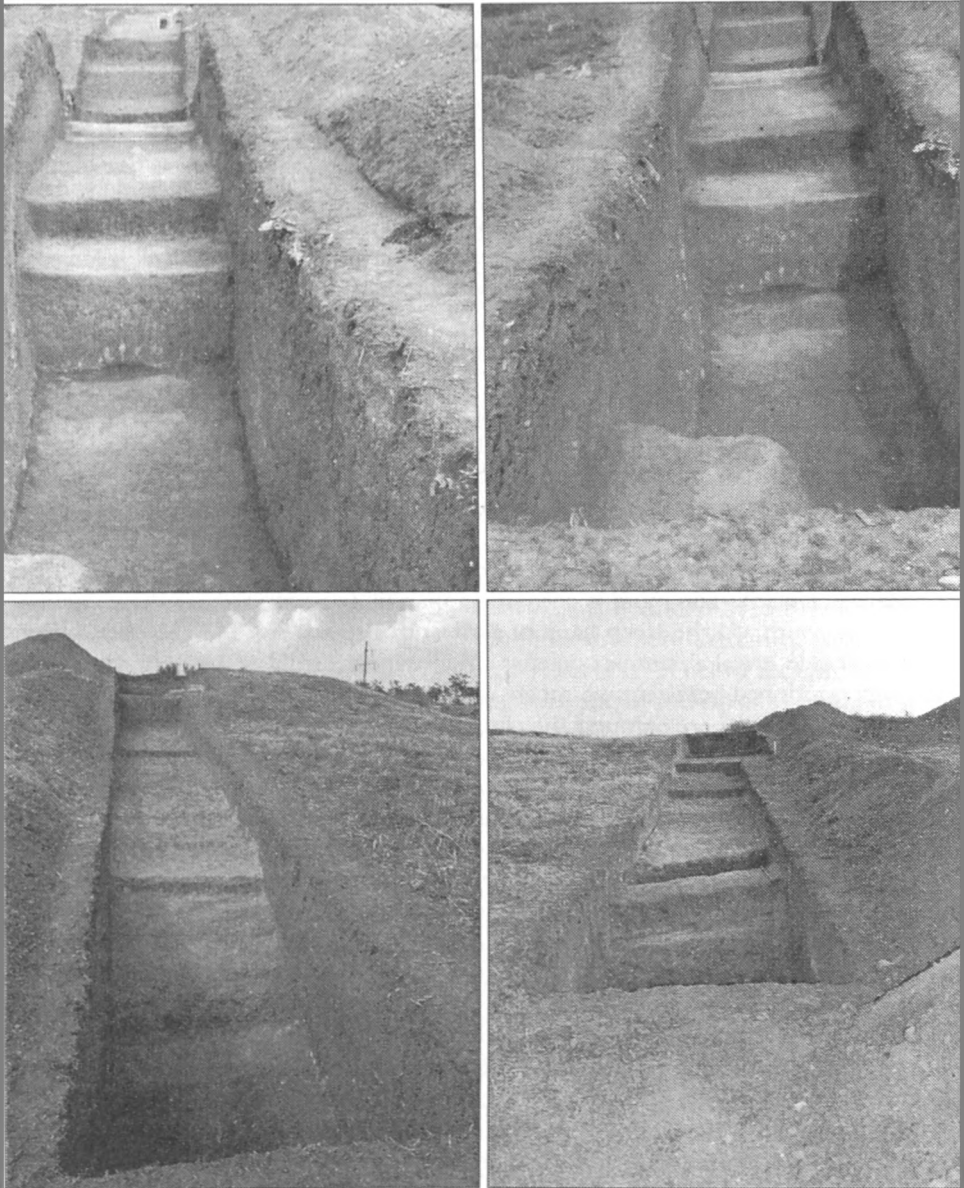


FIG. 2. Opațița. The structure of the palisade

shaped wooden tower, organically linked to the wooden fences. The tower had uneven sides that measured 2.5 m/ 2.75 and 5.25 m (Fig. 4). The moats were intrusively investigated in the northern, southern and western space of the fortification. The exterior elements of the fortification around the parish church from Opațița consisted of two moats between which an earthen rampart was raised. The technical characteristics of the moat dug along the palisade, conventionally known as moat I, are clearly demarcated in the western area and, partly, in the northern and southern sections. The moat had a frontage of 12 m in the west and 12.5 m in the north. It had depths ranging between 1.90 m and 2.20 m. The second moat, conventionally known as moat II, was found only on the western side of the fortification. It was 5.50 m wide and 2.10 m deep. The earthen rampart was archaeologically cross sectioned at the same time as the two moats on the western side of the fortification and, in part, on the northern side. Its trajectory has been topographically delineated on a length of 50 m to the west and northwest of the defense structure from Opațița. It measured 7.5 m at the base and had a height of 2 m. The necropolis built on the terrace by the bank of Birdeanca Brook occupies the northern half of the fortified enclosure. 57 graves have been investigated and their funerary inventory is very modest. The disruptive factors that affected the necropolis included the massive land dislocations caused by the building of the military pillboxes and the exploitation of the medieval church ruins, which turned into a brick quarry. The bodies in the graves had their arms placed along the body (M₁₇), on the abdomen (M₁, M₃, M₁₀), or the palms touching the clavicle. The series of coin unearthings includes emissions from the end of the 13th century, issued by King Stephen V (1270-1272), from the 14th century, issued by Louis I (1358-1371) and Maria (1382-1395), the largest number of coins being issued by Sigismund of Luxembourg (1387-1437). The coin issued by King Stephen V (1270-1272) represents a benchmark for the beginnings of the necropolis built at Opațița. The monetary findings from the moat on the southern edge of the fortification and those from the arson level of the palisade date back to the period of Sigismund of Luxembourg (1387-1437), offering a time reference for its destruction at the beginning of the 15th century. The wooden palisade that defended the church from Opațița was burned down in a Turkish attack from the early 1330s. The document cited earlier, dating back to 10 November 1432, reflects the violent destruction of the elements for the defense of the church from Opațița, located in a flatland area that was frequently attacked by Turkish armies.¹⁰ Starting in 1390, the Banatian province was periodically attacked by the Ottoman troops.¹¹ After the 1391 raid, in the summer of 1392 an Ottoman expedition starting from the city of Ersomlia (Vrșac) devastated the plains from Mezösomlyo (Șemlacu Mare)—Opațița.¹² The Pauline monastery from Gătaia, in the vicinity of Opațița, was set fire to and destroyed in the attack of 1392.¹³ The Ottoman pressure from the first decades of the 15th century intensified exponentially over the territory of Banatian Plain, the main target being the city of Timișoara. The documents recorded the incursions from 1401, followed by those of 1415 and then from 1420 and 1436. The consequences of these Turkish military incursions were reflected on the demographics of the province, the settlements and the parish system from the Diocese of Cenad. The fortification of the parish churches from the plains, highly vulnerable to Turkish attacks coming from the south, was a measure that was recorded in

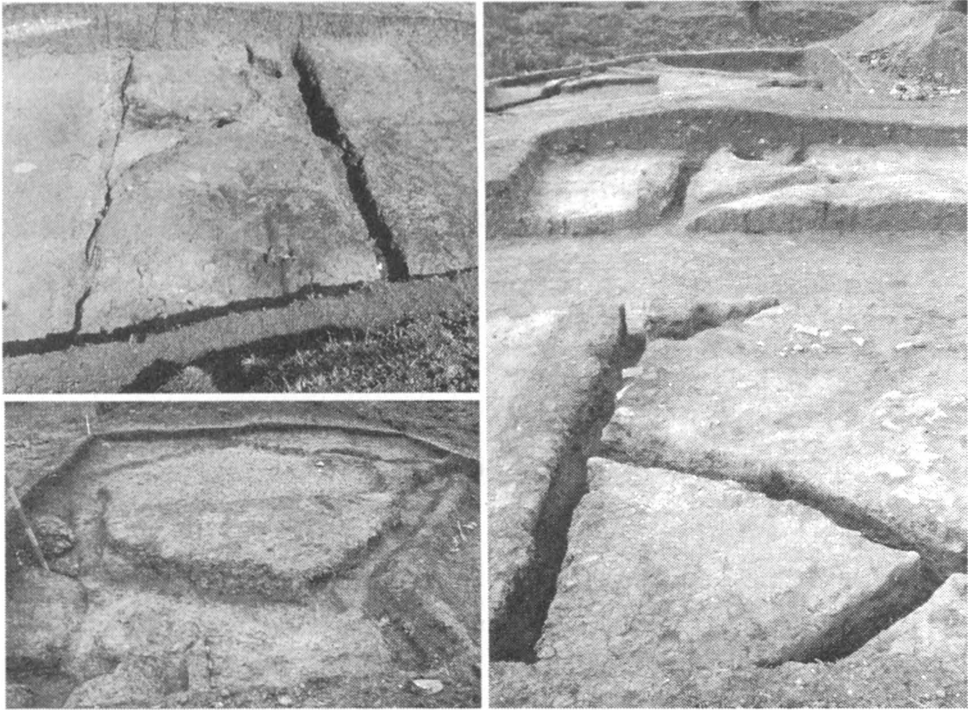


FIG. 3. Opatița. The moats and the earthen rampart.

the documents from the end of the 14th century. The church from Obad, in the proximity of Jebel, was defended by a fortification in 1402.¹⁴ A moat and a rampart defended, in our opinion, the church from Giera too.¹⁵ The village destruction phenomenon, caused by the Ottoman attacks, was especially acute in the space of the Banatian flatland in the 15th century. With its 84 parish churches, the Diocese of Cenad from the Archdeanery of Timiș had here, in the 14th century, the largest parish church structure.

The archaeological research conducted on the medieval constructions from Opatița offers a few solid points of reference towards acquiring knowledge of the defense structures built, on the cusp between the 14th and the 15th centuries around the churches in the Banatian Plain, and of the mutations that affected the ecclesiastical architecture in this space. From the perspective of their construction technique and defense conception, the fortified structures from Opatița, with moats and earthen ramparts featuring wooden palisades belong to a tradition encountered in large areas inside the Carpathian basin and on the flatland of the Lower Danube.¹⁶ Over the past few decades, medieval archeology has accumulated information on 31 medieval ecclesiastical monuments from this province, 20 of which date back to the 14th–16th centuries. Archaeological research files have provided support for the identitarian construction of the Banatian ecclesiastical architecture. The 14th century represented, in our opinion, a period of maximum flowering for ecclesiastical architecture in the Banat, which was part of the Central European

cultural sphere.¹⁷ The 15th century was coeval, on the one hand, with accumulated elements borrowed from the world of Serbian architecture, more visible in the Orthodox world from the south of the province; on the other hand, this was the onset of the decline of ecclesiastical architecture, again more evidently underway in the plain area from the north of the province. In the current state of investigation on medieval archeology, the fortification of the medieval church from Opațița offers historical information about this historical process that took place in the early 15th century. The 1424 document about the church from Teremia or the 1435 one on the church from Remethe, both in a state of ruin, let transpire pale images of the state of insecurity caused by the Turkish attacks and, ultimately, the phenomenon of village destruction from the same period.¹⁸ After 1552, the inclusion of the Banatian Plain in the structures of the Ottoman Vilayet of Timișoara completed the changes observed at the beginning of the 15th century in this cultural landscape. A document from 1758, which inventoried an ecclesiastical architecture based entirely on wood, wicker and earth in the flatland of the Banat, perfectly illustrates the utter disappearance of medieval ecclesiastical architecture made of stone.¹⁹ Through their spatial forms, medieval churches dominated the landscape of the province, becoming a landmark of the cultural identity of the territory. Thanks to the research carried out at Opațița, medieval archaeology brings into question the relationship between territory and identity, a frequent topic in archaeological discourse, and on the one hand, it highlights the efforts made towards the identitarian construction of a territory.²⁰ The social, political and confessional circumstances in which the Catholic communities evolved in homogenous manner offered support for the birth of the cultural and confessional identity of this border region, whose reflections may also be detected at the level of ecclesiastical architecture.



Translated into English by CARMEN-VERONICA BORBELY

Notes

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Abstract

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The village of Opațița is located at the southwestern extremity of Gătaia Plain. It is located on the border with the settlements of Deta, Sângorge and Berecuta, situated on the middle course of the Bârzava River. Medieval archeological research conducted at Opațița is part of a broader effort to reconstitute, at the level of the entire Banat province, its medieval ecclesiastical geography and to highlight the identity of its medieval architecture. From the perspective of their construction technique and defense conception, the fortified structures from Opațița, with moats and earthen ramparts featuring wooden palisades belong to a tradition encountered in large areas inside the Carpathian basin and Lower Danube. In this case medieval archaeology brings into question the relationship between territory and identity, whose reflections may also be detected at the level of ecclesiastical architecture.

Keywords

earthen fortification, necropolis, 14th-15th century churches