

# THE CHURCH OF THE BAIJA DE ARAMĂ MONASTERY BETWEEN THE TRUTH AND THE TREASURE HUNTERS' FANTASY

Radu Ștefan Vergatti\*

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**Abstract:** The church dedicated to the Holy Voivodes of the Baia de Aramă Monastery was built between 1699 and 1703. Its founders were the Great Ban Cornea Brăiloiu and the man of fortune Milco Băieșul. The church stands as an historical, art and architectural monument of the Brâncoveanu era. A fantastic legend has been created that beneath it the treasure of Wallachian prince Constantin Basarab Brâncoveanu was hidden..., which was not possible. At 3.5 meters below the church floor there is granite rock that cannot be dug. Also, 80 tons of gold could have been brought in about 160 carts, a situation that would have awakened the suspicion of the Sublime Porte. The attempts of the archaeologists who carried out the excavations, following this legend, with the approval of the Ministry of Culture, have destroyed the monument. Recently, a restoration has begun.

**Rezumat:** Biserica cu hramul Sfinții Voievozi a Mănăstirii Baia de Aramă a fost ridicată între anii 1699-1703. Ctitorii ei au fost marele ban Cornea Brăiloiu și bogatul Milco Băieșul. Biserica reprezintă un monument istoric, de artă și de arhitectură din epoca brâncovenească. S-a creat legenda fantezistă că sub ea ar fi fost ascuns tezaurul domnului Constantin Basarab Brâncoveanu... Nu era posibil. La 3,5 metri sub podeaua bisericii începe stânca de granit, în care nu se poate săpa. În al doilea rând, 80 tone de aur puteau fi aduse atunci în circa 160 căruțe, situație care ar fi trezit suspiciunea Sublimei Porți. Încercările arheologilor care au întreprins săpăturile, în urma acestei legende, cu acordul Ministerului Culturii, au ajuns la o distrugere a monumentului. În ultimul timp s-a început o restaurare a acestuia.

I have chosen this theme because at the beginning of September 2014, during a scientific papers delivery session, organised right at Baia de Aramă (Mehedinți County), in the presence of His Holiness Nicodim, Bishop of Severin and Strehaia and of His Most Reverend, Academician Irineu, Metropolitan of Oltenia, Mr. Marian Iulian Neagoe, an archaeologist, delivered a material about the existence of a treasure supposedly hidden somewhere beneath the mentioned church.

According to the inscription in the church porch, the church was erected between 22 May 1699 and 7 May 1703 as a worship house of the Monastery located in Baia de Aramă (Mehedinți County). The founders of the church were Milco Băieșul<sup>1</sup> and Great Ban Cornea Brăiloiu.<sup>2</sup> They worked during the reign of Constantin Basarab Brâncoveanu (1688-1714). The Father Superior of the Monastery was the archimandrite "kir" Vasile of Hilandar.<sup>3</sup>

The walls of the church are impressive, not less than 1.2 -1.3 meters thick, being able to withstand even a siege. The walls were finely built of large, well burnt bricks, 27 x 16 x 3 cm in size. The peculiarity of the construction is that some of the spaces in-between the bricks (5 cm in size) were made of hard slag from the ovens where the copper extracted in the area was burnt. Many hardened slag blocks that were used also had the same origin. The use of this type of construction material, especially the copper slag, is a singular case, original in the Romanian environment. This material allowed this church to be particularly durable throughout time. Also the ovens existing in the proximity of the church made it possible for the whole construction to be erected fast enough and with small expenses, since the issue of buying and transporting the material from far away did not emerge (Fig. 1).

\* Historian, PhD, senior member of the Academy of Scientists of Romania, email: rstvergatti@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> A genealogy of this dignitary from Wallachia, of Serbian origin, has been attempted: Poznan, a captain (an ancestor of Milco, mentioned as uncle in the Baia de Aramă inscription in the church porch; Poznan, the captain is mentioned in an act emerging from Matei Basarab as a quarry worker at Baia de Aramă, cf. Virtosu 1955, p. 213), then Milco Băieșul follows married to Mara (entering a convent under the name of Marina), Neculcea, Gheorghe, Milco the cup bearer of the seneschal (1712+1721 = Maria = Ilinca). Ion Donat, the author of the genealogy attempt, writes that it could not be disambiguated who Semen and Nicolai ? Milco, cup bearers, were (cf. Donat 1936-1937, pp. 6, 271).

<sup>2</sup> For biographic data concerning this high boyar see Stoicescu 1971, pp. 121-122.

<sup>3</sup> According to the (painted) inscription in the church porch (Drăghiceanu 1934, p. 118).