

A RE-EXAMINATION OF THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE: THE CASE OF ARNOTA

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Abstract: Still far from providing a comprehensive picture of the architectural variety and creativity of the nineteenth century Wallachia, specialist works have mainly concentrated on buildings dating from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, subsequent to the coronation of Carol I. The case of Arnota Monastery, in Vâlcea County, is interesting and important firstly because the alterations led by “monastic architect” Johann Schlatter to this complex during the nineteenth century inaugurated the autonomous programme of prison architecture in Wallachia, and, secondly, they illustrate, among numerous other examples still preserved, the beginnings of modern practices of restoring old architecture. At the same time, the recent reconstruction and extension work undertaken at the monastery brings to light contemporary issues connected with the lack of understanding of the conservation and restoration of a heritage still little valued.

Rezumat: Departe încă de a crea o imagine cuprinzătoare a varietății și creativității arhitecturale din secolul al XIX-lea valah, scrierile de specialitate s-au concentrat în special pe producția din ultimul sfert al secolului, după încoronarea lui Carol I. Cazul Arnotei, jud. Vâlcea, este interesant și important în primul rând pentru că transformările conduse de „arhitectul mănăstiresc” Johann Schlatter asupra ansamblului în secolului al XIX-lea inaugurează programul arhitectural al închisorii în Țara Românească și, în al doilea rând, pentru că ilustrează – printre numeroase cazuri încă păstrate – debuturile practicilor moderne de intervenție asupra arhitecturii vechi. Totodată, recente lucrările de reconstrucție, extensie și completare suferite de incinta mănăstirii pun în lumină problemele contemporane care privesc slaba înțelegerea a conservării și restaurării unui patrimoniu încă prea puțin prețuit.

The architectural heritage of the nineteenth century did not become a subject for research until quite late, during the last decades of the twentieth century. Still far from providing a comprehensive picture of the architectural variety and creativity of the period, specialist works have mainly concentrated on buildings dating from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, subsequent to the coronation of Carol I. Although numerous studies exist, the contextualisation of their subject matter is lacunary, and clichés and prejudices are still rife in their analyses. This is to a certain extent pardonable given that from the viewpoint of the history of architecture, study of nineteenth-century Wallachia is still at the accumulative phase. The incomplete knowledge of the century’s heritage, the poor popularisation of subjects pertaining to it, and the persistence of unfounded preconceptions (such as those regarding foreign architects involved in the first interventions in the historical architecture of Wallachia) have had often serious repercussions on conservation practices.

The example of Arnota, in Vâlcea County, is interesting and important from a number of points of view. On the one hand, the alterations to this monastery complex during the nineteenth century inaugurated an autonomous programme of prison architecture in Wallachia, and, on the other, they illustrate, among numerous other examples still preserved, the beginnings of modern practices of restoring old architecture. At the same time, the recent reconstruction and extension work undertaken at the monastery brings to light contemporary issues connected with an understanding of the conservation and restoration (often based on unjustified analogies) of a heritage still little understood.

Wallachia’s prisons before 1866. For the architecture of the nineteenth century, the importance of the prison Barbu Știrbei ordered to be built at Arnota cannot be explained or understood outside the context of the then efforts to reform the penitentiary system in Wallachia. Compared with developments in the West, public architectural programmes in Wallachia began to diversify, gaining autonomy, rather late in the day, not until after the middle of the century. The problem of the Principality’s prisons was resolved in various forms, more often than not resulting from improvisation or adaptation of usually inadequate spaces, sections of buildings or complexes with administrative or religious functions.

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