

# A CANTACUSINE FOUNDATION BETWEEN THE ACT OF SECULARIZATION AND CONTEMPORARY RESTORATION – THE DOAMNEI CHURCH IN BUCHAREST

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**Abstract:** Neglected through the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries by the priors of the Cotroceni Monastery, dispossessed of its riches and income, the Doamnei Church slowly entered a downward spiral of degradation and devastating events. In 1868, in an era when the Church suffered the effects of secularization and Occidental renewal, the foundation of Lady Mary suffered radical reparation. The essential gesture, that produced the change and the damaging simplification of the iconographical discourse was the partial hammering of the 17<sup>th</sup> century painting, and its covering with a new layer of painting, after the taste and mentality that has defined the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The information acquired from the analysis of archive photographs, corroborated with *in situ* observations, allowed for the reconstruction of the dramatic journey that the old painting of the Doamnei Church was to suffer, from the destructive act of hiding it under a new pictorial décor to the moment of its rediscovery and bringing to light. The recent reconstitution, of an archaeological type, of the iconographical ensemble from 1683 lead to a new lecture of the manner in which the works of painters Constantinos and John developed. The interruption of the iconographical programme of the Doamnei Church and their leaving the site generates questions and hypotheses regarding the evolution of the reign of Șerban Cantacuzino.

**Rezumat:** Neglijată pe parcursul veacurilor XVIII-XIX de egumenii Mănăstirii Cotroceni, deposedată de averi și venituri, Biserica Doamnei a intrat treptat pe panta descendentă a degradărilor și evenimentelor devastatoare. La 1868, într-o epocă în care Biserica suferise efectul secularizării și al innoirilor occidentalizante, ctitoria Mariei Doamna a suferit reparații radicale. Gestul esențial, care a produs schimbarea și simplificarea păgubitoare a discursului iconografic a fost martelarea parțială a picturii secolului al XVII-lea și acoperirea acesteia cu o nouă pictură, în gustul și mentalitatea ce a definit cea de-a doua jumătate a secolului al XIX-lea. Informațiile dobândite din analiza unor imagini de arhivă, coroborate cu observațiile realizate *in situ*, ne-au permis o reconstituire a parcursului dramatic pe care vechea pictură a Bisericii Doamnei a trebuit să îl suporte, de la actul distrugător al ascunderii ei sub un nou decor pictural până la momentul regăsirii și scoaterii ei la lumină. Recentă restituire, de tip arheologic, a ansamblului iconografic de la 1683 a condus la o nouă lectură a modului în care s-a desfășurat lucrarea zugravilor Constantin și Ioan. Întreruperea programului iconografic de la Biserica Doamnei și părăsirea șantierului de către cei doi zugravi generează întrebări și ipoteze care privesc evoluția domniei lui Șerban Cantacuzino.

Overshadowed by its condition as parish church, from the *mahala* (neighbourhood) whose name still reminisced its founder,<sup>1</sup> the Church of Lady Mary (*Maria Doamna*), wife of voivode Șerban Cantacuzino (1678 - 1688) maintains the traces of its dramatic past. Dedicated to *The Entry of the Most Holy Theotokos into the Temple*, the royal foundation was placed in the centre of the capital city of Bucharest, not far away from the Sărindar Monastery – a monument of Bucharest that has since disappeared – which was found at a short distance from the Șerban Vodă inn and from another Cantacusine foundation that belongs to the historical city – the Colței Church. However, as opposed to this church that stands out in the University Square (*Piața Universității*), an area itself loaded with ancient and modern history, the Doamnei Church of today appears hidden in the narrow interior courtyard (Fig. 1) created between the Nifon Palace, the buildings erected between Doamnei Street (*Strada Doamnei*) and Elisabeth Boulevard (*Bulevardul Elisabeta*) and the concrete curtain that is the modern block of flats which, in an unfortunate manner, has reconfigured the crossroads still elegantly marked by the architecture of the Boulevard Hotel and the building of the Military Circle, after 1977. A passageway leads towards the royal foundation, starting from Victory Avenue (*Calea Victoriei*), passing by the abandoned courtyard of the Nifon Palace and exiting through unwholesome areas in Doamnei Street.<sup>2</sup> The church greets us with its austere and elegant exonarthex, subsequently forcing the viewer to descend several stairs

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<sup>1</sup> According to the 1798 census, *mahalaua Doamnei* was mentioned with only 40 houses. Before Lady Mary had founded the church, the *mahala* was named *Popa Istratie*. Giurescu 2009, pp. 699, 703.

<sup>2</sup> A description of the Doamnei Church from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “huddled and humble”, “forsaken... between the trash deposits of two stores” is in the book written by Popescu-Lumină 2007, p. 222.