

The Fortified Church in Iacoveni

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Bibliography at the end of the brochure.

The Fortified Church in Iacobeni

Iacobeni(r), Jakobsdorf (g), Jakabfalva(m), Villa Jacobi (l)



Fig. 1. View of the fortified church from the northeast
Drawing by Juliana Fabritius

The village is located in a right-side valley of the Hârtibaciu River, 12 km northeast of Agnita, 1 km away from the Agnita-Brădeni-Sighișoara road. The fortified church stands on a hill in the northwest of the village.

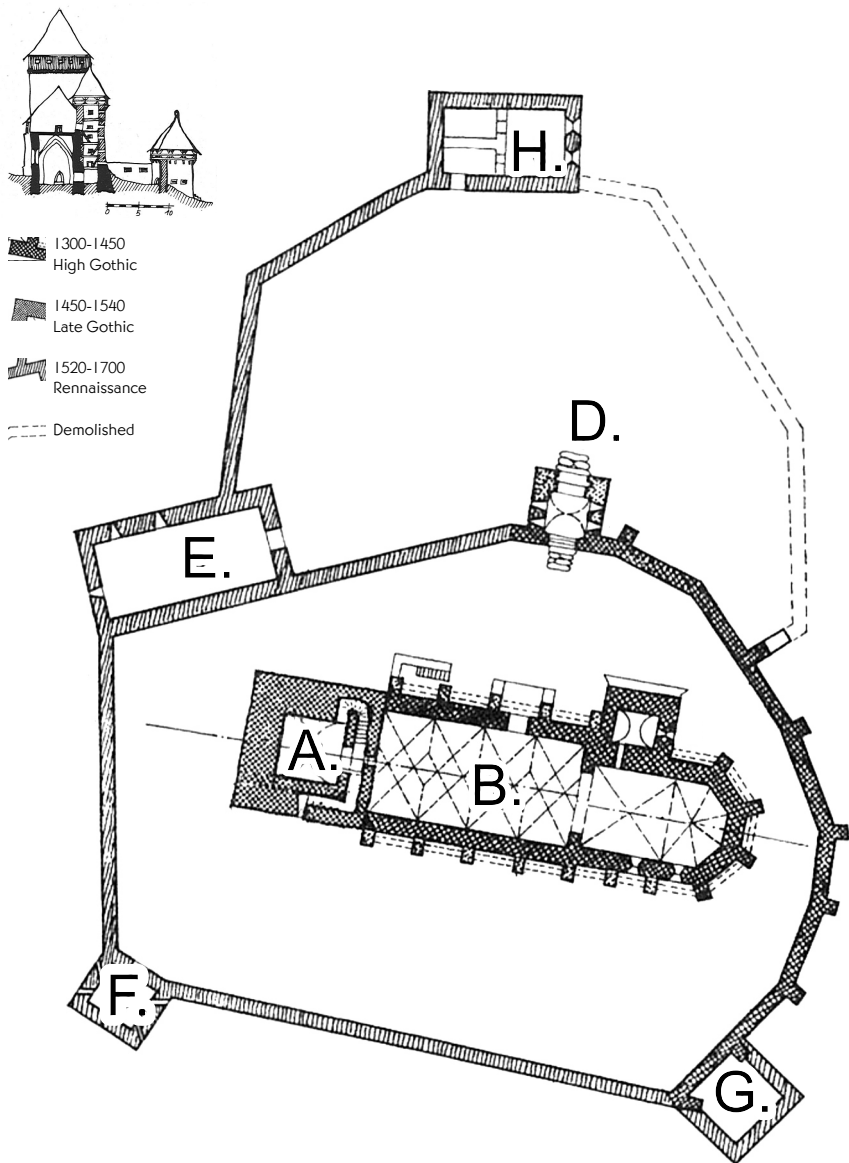


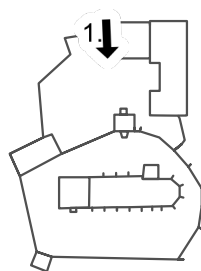
Fig. 2. Floor plan of the fortified church in Iacoveni / Agnita.

A. West Tower (Bell Tower),	E. Provision House (Granary),
B. Nave (Hall),	F. Southwest Tower,
C. Sacristy Tower,	G. Southeast Tower,
D. Gate Tower,	H. Fortified House

Tour of the Fortified Church

I. Outer Ring and Warden's House

We begin our tour in front of the outer defensive ring. This outer courtyard, was likely added only in the 17th century. It served as an additional line of defense and provided space to bring the villagers' livestock to safety in times of danger. At the current entrance to the outer courtyard on the right is the spot where a separate Gate Tower, a bastion, once stood. In 1823, it was converted into a dwelling for the Castle Warden, but it collapsed in 1992 – only the staircase remains as a reminder (HOG). We now enter the outer courtyard through the first opening in the wall.

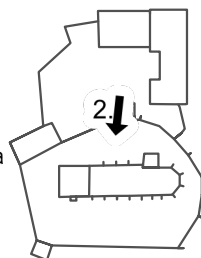


To the left, we see the school building. A school is documented in Iacobeni as early as around 1500 (Klima). An older building on this site was erected in 1810, for which part of the eastern outer wall had to give way (HOG). The current, stately school building was then rebuilt between 1899 and 1904 (HOG).

We now walk straight towards the mighty Gate Tower, which guards the main entrance to the inner, older defensive ring. It was built around 1500. Notice the guide stones next to the archway (Fab.-Dancu 1983) – these once held a heavy portcullis, which could be dropped quickly in case of danger (HOG). We now pass through the Gate Tower into the inner courtyard.

2. In the Inner Courtyard

The inner defensive ring was laid out around 1500. Originally, it had four defensive towers: the Gate Tower to the north, the Provision House (later Bacon Tower) to the northwest, the Southwest Tower (Residential Tower), and a Southeast Tower that has since been removed (Fab.-Dancu 1983).

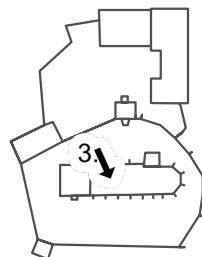


Looking around, our gaze is immediately drawn to the imposing church before us. To the left rises the Sacristy Tower (East Tower). It is so named because it was built directly above the church's sacristy. It was created as the last of the three major defensive construction phases, probably around 1620, as suggested by the dating on the beams (HOG; Klima). It has five defensive levels and a timber-clad defensive gallery (Fab.-Dancu 1983).

Directly in front of us is the current church entrance, the North Portal. It was moved to the then newly relocated north wall around 1500 and received this small porch in the 19th century (Fab.-Dancu 1983). Look up at the church: Above the choir and the nave (hall), you can see the mighty defensive level. It was added to the church walls around 1600, resting on 17 supporting arches between the 18 buttresses (Fab.-Dancu 1983) and projecting outwards by about 40 cm. Between the arches are machicolations, through which hot pitch or water could once be poured onto attackers (Fab.-Dancu 1983). Up in the defensive gallery (wall-walk), one can still recognize the door through which ammunition and supplies were hoisted up with a winch (Fab.-Dancu 1983). This fortification of churches was vital protection against external threats in Transylvania from the 15th century onwards.

3. Inside the Church

Let us now enter the church. Immediately, the beautifully painted galleries ("Glater" in Saxon dialect) catch the eye (Fab.-Dancu 1983), stretching along the walls to our left, right, and behind us. They were built and expanded in several stages between 1742 and 1805 to accommodate the growing population (Fab.-Dancu 1983). Especially beautiful are the oldest paintings from the beginning of the 18th century (Fab.-Dancu 1974), which we see on the right gallery in the front row. Above these, we see an epitaph (memorial plaque) (HOG). It commemorates Pastor Michael Schullerus (pastor here from 1725-1743). His son Daniel, the subsequent pastor, donated this monument in 1748 (Klima).



Before this stone church was built in the 14th century, a simpler wooden church from the 13th century likely stood here (Klima). The current church is an originally towerless Gothic hall church. The hall only received its late-Gothic net vaulting at the end of the 15th century (Horwath; Vătășianu). According to oral tradition, a well was once located here in the central nave to ensure water supply during sieges (HOG).

Let us now move forward towards the choir area. Before us, we see the altar and the organ. Between the nave and the choir, beneath the floor, lies a crypt which we can descend into via a staircase. During renovation work in 2005, two burial chambers from 1771 were rediscovered and opened (SZ 2005). Pastor Daniel Schullerus was laid to rest in one. There we can see the remains of the interred. Who rests in the second chamber remains a secret to this day (HOG).

The organ was built in 1802, and the organ crown was gilded in 1840 (Klima). It accompanied generations of Iacobenii residents at baptisms and weddings

and was used until 1994. Unfortunately, the original altar painting was stolen after 1991 (HOG). The choir is traditionally oriented towards the east. To the left in the choir is the door to the sacristy, a storage room that already belonged to the first stone church. Above this room stands the Sacristy Tower.

4. Tour of the Inner Courtyard

We leave the church again through the North Portal and turn left. As soon as we leave the church, we see a prayer house to our right, which has unfortunately collapsed in recent years. On this spot once stood the Provision House, built around 1500, which later also served as the Bacon Tower (Fab.-Dancu 1983). Thanks to its location on the cool north side, it was ideal for storing supplies. The tower collapsed in 1948, after which the current house was built (HOG).

To our left now rises the mightiest tower of the complex: the West Tower

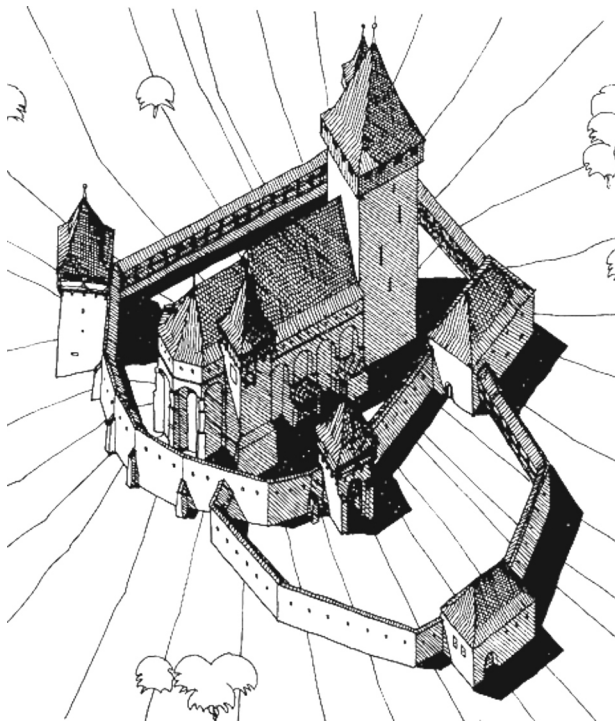
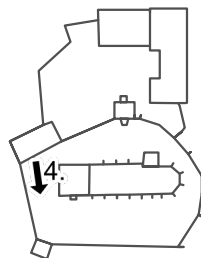


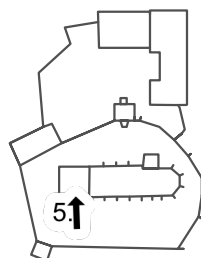
Abb. 3. Isometrische Darstellung der Kirchenburg von Hermann Fabini

(also called the Keep or Bell Tower). It was the first major defensive structure built here at the end of the 15th century (Fab.-Dancu 1983). With its height of 26 meters to the main cornice and walls 3 meters thick at the base, it is the highest defensive tower in the upper Hârtibaciu Valley (Fab.-Dancu 1983; HOG). It was built from hewn sandstone. Originally, its entrance was located higher up and accessible only via a ladder (HOG). Do you see the narrow arrow slits? They are designed for archers (HOG), indicating the early construction period. During the construction of this tower, which was wider than the church nave, the north wall of the church was moved outwards around 1500 and connected to the tower (Fab.-Dancu 1983).



6. Ascent and View from the Bell Tower

To the left, we now see the concrete stairs leading to the current entrance of the bell tower. The ascent leads partly through stair passages within the wall thickness, and partly via wooden stairs (Fab.-Dancu 1983). Up on the seventh floor, under the steep pyramidal roof with the timber-clad defensive gallery, is the bell frame. Today, three bells from the 20th century hang here (the large one from 1908, the medium and small ones from 1923) (HOG). They replaced older bells, some dating back to the 17th century (Klima), which were melted down for military purposes in the First World War.

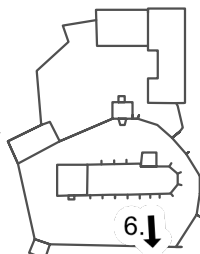


From up here, we have a wonderful view over the village and the surroundings. It is noticeable that the bells do not ring towards the village, but in the direction of the cemetery and the fields (HOG). Thus, farmers in the field could hear the evening bell or alarm signals. At the evening bell, a prayer was traditionally spoken: "Night bell! Help us God: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. Amen." (HOG).

7. Further Tour

We descend again. From the third floor of the bell tower, there is access to the defensive level above the church (Fab.-Dancu 1983). Let's take a look into the roof structure of the church. On a beam, the year 1602 can be found (Fab.-Dancu 1983), which presumably refers to the raising of the roof structure necessitated by the addition of the defensive level. The West Tower, defensive level, and Sacristy Tower are connected and formed a well-thought-out defensive system (Fab.-Dancu 1983).

As we step out of the tower, our gaze falls directly in front of us on the striking Southwest Tower (Residential Tower). On it, clearly visible to the outside in the rectory courtyard, the year 1547 is emblazoned (Klima). This tower was an important cornerstone of the defensive system in the inner ring.



We continue our tour in the inner courtyard and walk further to the left, along the inner curtain wall. Pay attention to the double embrasures (Maulscharten) in the curtain wall – these are special slots added around 1620, whose wooden shutters could only be opened from the inside to fire out with firearms (Fab.-Dancu 1983). As we now leave the curtain wall to the right and head towards the rectory courtyard, we pass the spot where the Southeast Tower, built around 1500, once stood; unfortunately, it has been removed (Fab.-Dancu 1983).

We now enter the rectory courtyard. Directly in front of us, we see the Rectory, built in 1843 (Klima). Next to it is the Community Hall, built between 1934 and 1938 by the village community (Klima). Here ends our tour.



Fig. 4. View of the fortified church from the south.
Watercolor by Juliana Fabritius.

Village History

In the 12th century, the Hungarian King summoned German settlers to Transylvania to develop and secure the land. It is believed that many of these settlers came from territories west of the Rhine, from the region of today's Moselle (HOG). Iacobeni was likely founded by the first or second generation of these settlers, probably at the beginning of the 13th century. A 'Locator' may have played a key role in this process – someone who organized the settlement, recruited the settlers, and supported them materially (HOG). The German village name, Jakobsdorf (Jacob's Village), could point to such a founder.

Decisive for its development was its foundation on the so-called "Royal Land" – a territory directly subject to the Hungarian Crown. This special political position gave the Saxon inhabitants a unique legal status as free people, unlike in other parts of Europe where they were serfs of local nobles. The people of Iacobeni enjoyed extensive autonomy in administration and jurisdiction (Klima). They had the privilege of electing their own pastors and judges and paid their taxes directly to the King.

It is conceivable that descendants of the Locator or other early leaders held a prominent position in the early days of Iacobeni, comparable to the "Greavs" (Counts) known in some Saxon settlements (HOG). The mention of an influential Henning of Iacobeni in 1336, who could even afford a conflict with the powerful noble Apafi family (Klima), might indicate such a figure. At the latest from the late 14th century, as suggested by the land purchase document of 1374 by the "honest plebs" (the honorable people/community), the community was led by officials elected by the village population, such as the Hann (mayor) and judges (Klima). These elected representatives regulated the internal affairs of the village, administered justice, and represented the community in higher bodies like the Cincu Seat, to which Iacobeni belonged (Klima).

Transylvania's situation as a border region of the Hungarian Kingdom led to constant threats and invasions, for example by the Mongols, Tatars, Ottomans, and Kurucs. Already in the 13th century, the inhabitants likely used a common refuge castle in the forest (HOG). These constant dangers moved the village community, starting in the late 15th century, to monumentally fortify the village church. The West Tower, built first, could theoretically hold the entire village population of that time, about 300 people (HOG). The fortified church thus became not only a spiritual center but also a vital place of refuge.

Over the centuries, the village continued to develop. The population grew, as indicated by the count of 75 households around 1500 and 81 households in 1532 (Klima). This growth, combined with the importance of agricultural land, inevitably led to conflicts over land and resources. Repeated border disputes, especially with the neighboring community of Șoarș (Schönberg), but also with Stejărișu (Probsdorf) (Klima), often had to be settled before higher authorities like the University of the Saxon Nation. For instance, in 1567, the population growth in Șoarș was explicitly cited as the reason for a dispute (Klima). There were always hard times, such as a famine between 1725 and 1727 (HOG, Schöffén Testament) or an epidemic (presumably dysentery) that claimed forty lives in 1783 (HOG). Towards the end of the 19th century, roughly between 1890 and 1910, the first major wave of emigration to America occurred. The reasons were the collapse of grain prices, high tariffs, and the destruction of vineyards by phylloxera and downy mildew. Many residents of Iacobenii were thus driven to emigrate (HOG).

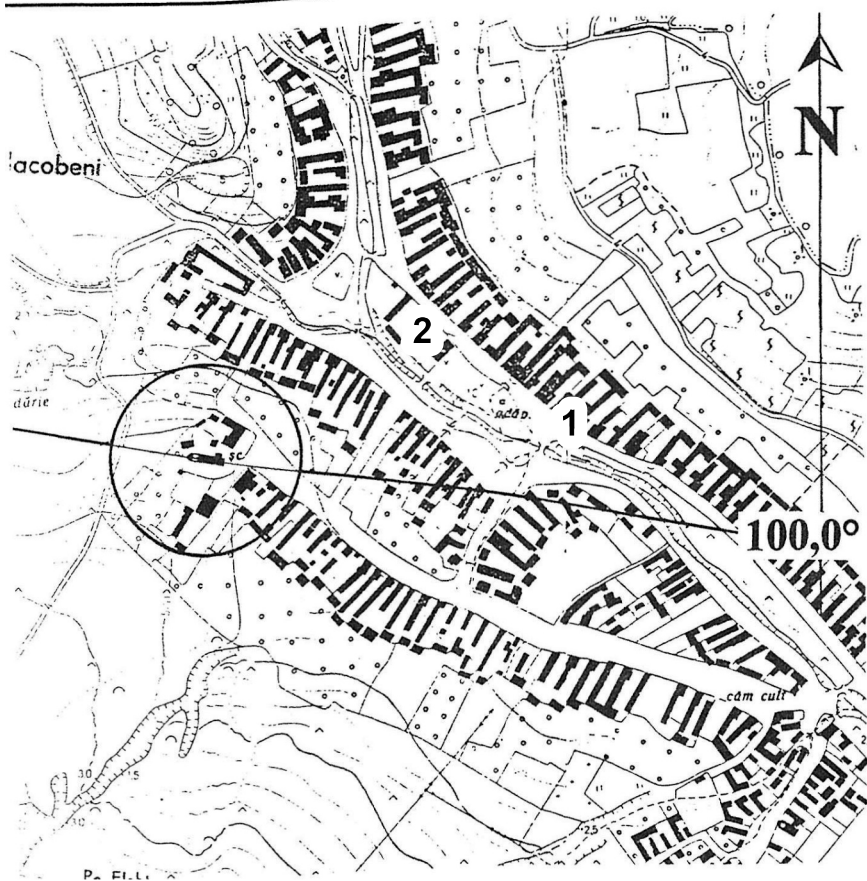
The upheavals of the 20th century brought even more profound changes: In the First World War, Iacobenii became a theater of war in the autumn of 1916. After Romania entered the war, Romanian troops crossed the border into Transylvania, which then still belonged to Austria-Hungary, leading to a panic-stricken flight of the village population. Shortly thereafter, German and Austro-Hungarian troops arrived, and heavy fighting took place in the neighboring villages of Movile and Brădenii. Iacobenii narrowly escaped destruction and subsequently housed a large German field hospital, where over 600 wounded were cared for in the school, rectory, church, and barns. The village community and neighboring villages supported the hospital with food and assistance until it moved on after a few weeks. The soldiers' graves in the cemetery remained as silent witnesses of this time (HOG Report Schuff). The war also claimed a high toll in blood among the people of Iacobenii; many conscripted men fled or went missing (HOG).

The Second World War also brought suffering and loss once again. Of the conscripted soldiers from Iacobenii, 33 fell or went missing. Of the survivors, 29 did not return home after the war for various reasons – often out of fear of the political situation in Soviet-occupied Romania or because they had built a new life in Germany or Austria. Only 20 returned home (HOG). Immediately after the war, the next catastrophe followed for the remaining German population: On January 14, 1945, "Black Sunday," men between 17 and 45 and women between 18 and 30 were rounded up under dramatic circumstances and deported to forced labor in the Soviet Union (HOG Reports Philp, Schuff née Wolba). Deported in cattle cars, they had to work under the harshest conditions in camps and mines. Hunger, cold, exhaustion, and disease claimed many victims. Only at the end of 1949 were the survivors allowed to return (HOG Report Schuff née Wolba).

The post-war period under communist rule brought further profound upheavals from which the Transylvanian Saxon community did not recover. Already in 1948, the expropriation of Saxon farms began (HOG Report Grommes née Rau). Parallel to this, the collectivization of agriculture took place through the founding of a State Farm section in Iacobeni. Private agriculture was crushed, and farmers were degraded to employees on state farms or day laborers (HOG Autobiography Wolba). These events permanently destroyed the traditional economic and social structures of the village.

The sum of these experiences – war losses, deportation, expropriation, collectivization, and the general pressure under the dictatorship – finally led to almost the entire remaining Saxon population leaving Iacobeni within a short time after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1990, emigrating to Germany (HOG). Today, it is the remaining inhabitants of diverse origins who carry the village history forward.

The historical documents known to us today often focus strongly on the history of the Transylvanian Saxons. This is due to sources, as written records over centuries were primarily kept by the administratively organized Saxon community, which held the privileged legal status on the Royal Land and maintained a school as early as around 1500 (Klima), testifying to an early organizational and educational structure. However, this does not mean that Iacobeni, especially in later centuries, was a purely Saxon village. Romanians and Roma have been part of Transylvanian society for centuries. Even if their presence is not explicitly documented in the early Saxon village records of Iacobeni, they were nevertheless an important part of the social and economic fabric. Especially after the great upheavals of the 20th century, including the emigration of many Saxons, it is today the remaining inhabitants of diverse origins who carry the village history forward. Iacobeni thus remains a place whose story of resilience and community is told across ethnic and temporal boundaries.



Site plan of the village center 1:10,000.

Fig. 5. The fortified church, the rectory, the former school, and the former community hall are circled. 1. - The Town Hall of Iacoveni
2. - The School of Iacoveni

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Floor plan of
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