



The Public Defense of the Doctoral Thesis in Medieval Studies

by

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on

MEDIEVAL WALL PAINTINGS IN TRANSYLVANIAN ORTHODOX CHURCHES
AND THEIR DONORS

will be held on

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Nádor u. 9, Budapest

Examination Committee

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Doctoral Dissertation Abstract

Medieval Wall Paintings in Transylvanian Orthodox Churches and Their Donors

The churches that belonged to the Orthodox Romanians occupy a special place among the numerous painted churches that have been preserved in the territory of medieval Hungary. Their decoration surprises the viewer with the use of both Byzantine and Western styles, and with a number of iconographic peculiarities. The paintings reflect interactions between the Romanian (Vlach) knezes and the Hungarian authority, the Orthodox and the Catholics, as well as the Byzantine and Western painting traditions. Deciphering their message may contribute to a clearer portrait of their donors, local Romanian leaders about whom historical sources are scarce.

The bulk of the preserved medieval wall paintings in Orthodox churches comes from two neighboring medieval counties: Hunyad and Zaránd. The researched paintings date to the early fourteenth through the second half of the fifteenth century and decorate nine churches, now situated in Romania, in Strei, Streisângeorgiu, Sântămărie Orlea, Densuş, Leşnic, Chimindia, Ribiţa, Crişcior and Hălmagiu. The paintings were commissioned by local Romanian leaders, knezes or voivodes, who were landowners with limited privileges. Their property was situated on the estate of a royal castle -- Haţeg, Hunedoara, Deva or Şiria -- and one of their main duties was military service, which also allowed them to move up the social scale. This aspect is particularly visible starting with the end of the fourteenth century, when Hungary came under direct Ottoman threat. In late medieval sources, the Romanians in Hungary appear usually as 'schismatics' (Orthodox), although some of them are also mentioned as being Catholic or in the process of conversion. The only official Church was the Latin one and the elites were probably more prone to conversion for pragmatic reasons. This is especially likely because the few preserved sources do not suggest a well organized local Church of Greek rite. The connections with the Wallachian and Moldavian Churches are attested after the foundation of their respective metropolitan sees in the second half of the fourteenth century. The Catholic Church usually put pressure on the 'schismatics' to convert. Its efforts were supported by the lay power varying upon region and historical context. King

Louis I (1342-1382) was particularly involved in the conversion of the Orthodox, while King Sigismund (1387-1437) and later rulers showed more tolerance. The presence of the Ottoman threat at the Hungarian border and the Church Union proved to be favorable for the social evolution of the Romanian leaders.

The paintings have been here regarded as instruments of communication that may be understood to the extent to which their historical framework can be reconstructed. As good as possible knowledge of the historical context was therefore essential for the research. Also, the use and meaning of similar images in Byzantine and Western, particularly Hungarian painting has been taken into account. The main criteria according to which I have selected the iconographic topics for research were an acceptable state of preservation and suitability for interpretation based on preserved historical data. In addition, the researched topics had to reflect specific features of the social, religious and political life of the donors. Thus, the analysis of the donor portraits, military saints, the Holy Kings of Hungary and the Exaltation of the Cross particularly highlights social and political aspects of the life of the knezes. The study of the iconographic program of the sanctuary and of the image of St Bartholomew mainly brings to light aspects of their religious life.

Some of the researched subjects have been approached to a certain extent by previous scholars (the votive paintings, the military saints, the Holy Kings of Hungary, the iconography of the sanctuary), and the present research nuances or broadens their interpretation. Other topics have not yet been investigated (St Bartholomew) or have received only cursory treatment in the literature (the Exaltation of the Cross). The present study also uses a wider variety of sources and incorporates more recent studies regarding the Romanian elite, the history of the Church in Transylvania, and particular iconographic topics in Hungary and elsewhere.

The knezial churches were situated in the vicinity of the knezial residences and, besides their functional role, had also one of representation. In painting, this is primarily visible in portraits, through which the donors manifested their contribution to the construction or decoration of the holy place and their position within the smaller or larger community. The votive paintings of Streisângeorgiu, Ribița, Crișcior, Leșnic, and Hălmațiu give pride of place to the knezes who founded or renewed the church. The donors, represented as a family, entrust the church to its protector saint. The type of composition and the monumental scale of the

votive paintings were common in Balkan Orthodox painting at that time. The kneeling posture, however, reflects the influence of Western models. The males' costumes and haircuts follow the Hungarian and Central European fashion. The weapons on their belts were probably meant to stress their military role, which was a characteristic feature of their social status. Sometimes, as in the churches of Leșnic and Ribița, in addition to the ktetors represented in the votive painting there were also lesser donors, who left their inscribed supplications next to the saints' images they had commissioned. No donor portrait has been preserved in the church of Densuș, but many supplicatory inscriptions may be found in the nave. This situation suggests a collective sponsoring by several knezes who shared the ownership of the village and were related among each other.

The numerous warrior saints represented in the knezial churches reflect the concerns of the period and the importance of the military duty in the life of the donors. The equestrian saints in the churches painted around 1400 and in the church of Streisângeorgiu (1313/1314) stand out in terms of their number and their location in the church. The military duty of the knezes, the location of Transylvania at the south-eastern border of Hungary and the prestige of the knight in the eyes of the knezes who themselves had a status close to a noble, all explain why the equestrian saints were so cherished in the knezial churches.

The Holy Kings of Hungary occupy places of honor in the naves of Crișcior and Ribița. They are closely associated with the portraits of the ktetors, the holy warriors and the Exaltation of the Cross. The kings are also represented in the church of Chimindia, which appears to have belonged for a period to Romanian knezes. The veneration of King Stephen I (997-1038), his son Duke Emeric (†1031) and King Ladislas I (1077-1095) was initiated by the Árpád dynasty and had a marked political character. The Holy Kings of Hungary embodied the virtues of the ideal ruler and eventually came to be venerated as patron saints of the country, being frequently represented in medieval Hungarian churches. Written sources suggest that at least the knezes living on royal land also regarded them as protectors of law and of their social status. By representing Sts Stephen, Emeric and Ladislas in their churches, the knezes expressed their loyalty to the Hungarian Crown and joined the nobles of the country in their cult of the Holy Kings. The way the kings are represented at Ribița and Crișcior, with a cross-decorated shield, as well as their association with the Exaltation of the Cross seem to highlight

their quality as Christian rulers, defenders of Christian faith, in a period when the Hungarian kingdom was involved in direct confrontations with the Ottomans. Later sources also suggest that a phenomenon of adaptation could sometimes take place. Two legends preserved in later copies but presumably of medieval origin, refer to a certain King Ladislas, in whom one may identify St Ladislas as well, as being a concealed Orthodox and supporter of the Romanians. Unfortunately, no sources have emerged to let us know to what extent the cult of the Holy Kings of Hungary was assimilated into the liturgical practice or personal devotion of the Orthodox in Transylvania.

The churches of Ribița and Crișcior partially preserve a scene that may be called the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. One may see St Helena standing on the left side of the Cross, as well as fragments of other secondary figures. The scene is situated in a prominent position in the nave, next to the sanctuary and the Holy Kings of Hungary. The iconography is peculiar and displays a mixture of Western and Byzantine features. The scene does not fully follow either the Byzantine Exaltation of the Cross or the iconic representation of the Holy Emperors Constantine and Helena with the Cross. The fragments of secondary figures are a reference to the Finding of the Cross and the dress of St Helena contains Western influences. St Helena with the Cross or the Finding of the Cross often appears in late medieval Hungarian murals. Their frequent representation may have been prompted by more factors that are not mutually exclusive: the special cult of the Cross promoted by the Franciscan friars, the cult of Cross relics and the Ottoman threat. The special attention given to the Exaltation of the Holy Cross at Ribița and Crișcior, may be related to the anti-Ottoman fight in which the knezes were also involved. The Cross was also the weapon of Christian kings and their triumphal banner. Therefore, the depiction of the Exaltation next to the Holy Kings of Hungary shows them as exemplars of Christian rulers.

The iconography of the sanctuary in the churches researched here displays some deviations from the common program found in late Byzantine sanctuaries. The precise extent to which space restrictions, archaic schemes, Western iconography and personal choice of the painter or of a clergyman contributed to the design of the sanctuary's decoration is difficult to assess. Together with the style, the iconographic peculiarities suggest infrequent contacts with regions where the painting of Byzantine tradition was strongly rooted. Nevertheless, the

concern displayed to adapt the painting to the liturgical meaning of the sanctuary and to the basic lines of the Byzantine program is evident. Moreover, several subjects may be identified as reflecting specific local situations. Such is, for instance, the Eucharistic scene represented in the churches of Hălmagiu and Ribița, with St Nicholas as the main protagonist, which betrays a concern for the rejection of heresy. The nearby representation of the authors of the two main Byzantine Liturgies, St Basil the Great and John Chrysostom, accompanied by a deacon, seems to stress the attachment to the Greek rite and its orthodoxy.

Finally, the representation of the Holy Apostle Bartholomew, with his specific Western iconography in the sanctuary of Hălmagiu and the nave of Densuș, shows that aspects of his Latin cult were adopted by the Orthodox. The flaying of the saint, as part of his martyrdom, was specific to his Latin cult and gave rise to his representation as a flayed man carrying his skin and holding a knife. With this iconography, the apostle also occurs in the paintings of several Catholic churches in medieval Hungary. His martyrdom by flaying was interpreted as a symbol of repentance and conversion, but the apostle was also venerated as patron of various occupations and protector against many diseases. Given the present state of research, it is difficult to single out with precision which aspects of his cult were adopted by the Orthodox. However, it appears that the theological interpretation of his martyrdom was not alien to them.

The dissertation aimed at recreating the historical background of selected paintings and understanding their meaning in their respective contexts. This approach has been previously applied to some of the subjects, but the present research broadened the context, refined or contributed to previous interpretations, and included new subjects. The results highlight aspects of donors' life that characterize their special social, political and religious position as knezes and Orthodox in the Hungarian kingdom. By making a synthesis of different types of sources pertaining to various fields, this work has also set the stage for further research and for adding new topics to the general picture that has been delineated here.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Elena Dana Prioteasa

University Education

- 2010-present: Postgraduate course in the “Preservation of the Built Heritage,” Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of History and Philosophy, and Transylvania Trust Foundation, Cluj-Napoca, Romania.
- 2002-present: PhD studies, Central European University, Medieval Studies Department
- 2001-2002: MA in Medieval Studies, Central European University, Medieval Studies Department, Budapest, Hungary. Thesis title: “Western Influences on the Iconography of Medieval Orthodox Painting in Transylvania: Murals in the Sanctuary.”
- 2000-2001: MA in Art History (European Connections of Fine Arts in Transylvania and the Banat, 16th-18th centuries), Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of History and Philosophy, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Thesis title: “Byzantine Tradition and Western Influences in the Painting of Simion Silaghi Sălăjeanu.”
- 1996-2000: BA in History, specialty History - Art History, Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of History and Philosophy, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Thesis title: “The Church of Stăneşti, Vâlcea County.”
- 1996-2000: Specialist Physician in Laboratory Medicine
- 1989-1995: BA in General Medicine, Iuliu Haţieganu University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Faculty of General Medicine, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Languages

- English: fluent speaking, reading, writing
- French: Diplôme approfondi de langue française. Sciences humaines et sociales (1998)
- German: Zertifikat Deutsch (2001)
- Modern Greek: Certificate of Greek Language Proficiency, Greek Language Teaching Center, University of Athens (2005)
- Italian: good reading
- Hungarian: beginner

Scholarships and Grants

- 2001-2002: Central European University scholarship for MA studies
- 2002-2004, 2005-2006: Central European University scholarship for Ph.D. studies
- 01/10/2004- 30/09/2005: Scholarship for collection of research data, State Scholarships Foundation (IKY), Greece
- 2006, July: Central European University research grant for field research in Serbia, Montenegro and the Republic of Macedonia
- 01/2008-06/2008: Doctoral Research Support Grant from CEU for research at the University of California, Los Angeles

Publications

- 2009: "The Holy Kings of Hungary in Medieval Orthodox Churches of Transylvania." *Ars Transsilvaniae* 19 (2009), 41-56.
- 2003: "Western and Eastern Themes in the Iconography of the Sanctuary of the Church of Strei (Hunedoara County, Romania)." *Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU* 9 (2003), 181-196.
- 2002: "Tradiție bizantină și influențe apusene în pictura bisericilor din Goești, Gârda de Sus și Mușca (jud. Alba)" (Byzantine tradition and Western influences in the paintings of the churches in Goești, Gârda de Sus and Mușca (Alba County)). In *Artă românească. Artă europeană. Centenar V. Vătășianu* [Romanian Art. European Art. V. Vătășianu Centenary], ed. Marius Porumb and Aurel Chiriac, 189-202. Oradea: Editura Muzeul Țării Crișurilor, 2002.

Participation in Conferences

- 2011: 22nd International Congress of Byzantine Studies, Sofia, August 22-27, 2011. Paper: "The "Exaltation of the Cross" in the Churches of Ribița and Crișcior (Hunedoara County, Romania): A Less Usual Iconographic Type and Its Meaning".
- 2007: 33rd Byzantine Studies Conference, Toronto, October 11-14, 2007. Paper: "The Apostle Bartholomew in Transylvanian Orthodox Churches: A West-Inspired Devotion to the Saint"
- 2006: International Congress of Byzantine Studies, London, August 21-28, 2006. Paper: "Between East and West: The Annunciation Scene in the Church of Saint Nicholas at Ribița"
- 2003: International Medieval Congress, Leeds, July 14-17, 2003. Paper: "Western Influences on the Iconography of Medieval Orthodox Painting in Transylvania"

Participation in Archaeological Excavations

- 2006, July: The Ravenna-Classe Project: Archaeology of a Deserted City