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8. Depictions of the Other in the Paintings of Bucovina’s Fifteenth and Sixteenth-Century Orthodox Monasteries

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Abstract

Several churches and monasteries commissioned by the rulers of fifteenth and sixteenth-century Moldavia are decorated with frescoes colorfully adorning their exterior walls, eight of which are on UNESCO’s list of world treasures. The scenes reflect and reinforce Romanian Orthodox Christian identity formation, as evidenced by depictions of the Other in images of the Last Judgment. There are multiple and varying discourses that accomplish the task of “othering,” including conversation, meta-narratives, plays, politics, religion, war, and so on. In the religious domain, the Other functions as a symbol against which a community can unite and fortify itself. This paper examines the theological and political implications of Bucovina’s Last Judgment frescoes in mobilizing against Ottoman Turks, while depicting Jews as infidels and presenting Armenian and Roman Catholic Christians as heretics.

1An earlier version of this study, written from a political science perspective, was published in Analele Universității din București, Seceția Științe Politice, 20, 1 (2018), special issue on “Politics of Identity.”
Introduction

For millennia the Balkan peninsula has served as a crossroads for the migration of peoples of various religions and cultures, many of which settled down, thus establishing a rich tapestry of diversity while co-existing in a wary environment of mutual otherness. As a result, Jews, Muslims, Roma, and various Christian confessions have practiced their respective faiths and customs in dense proximity to one another. Despite this rich area of study, I am aware of no scholarly works dedicated to the task of analyzing the identity-consolidating process of othering reflected in the art and architecture of South East Europe’s churches, monasteries, synagogues, and mosques. This article attempts to help fill this gap by exploring the process by which the famous Romanian Orthodox monasteries of Bucovina reflect religious-cultural and political-economic tensions through the otherization of non-Romanian, non-Orthodox peoples.

The Bucovina Monasteries

Bucovina is a mountainous region located in the western part of Moldavia, a former principality situated in the northeastern third of modern-day Romania. Moldavia became an independent state in the fourteenth century, reaching its full political ascendancy during the anti-Ottoman crusades of Stefan III “the Great” (1433-1504) and his illegitimate son, Petru Rareș (ca. 1485-1546). Their reigns directly brought about the founding of a number of Orthodox Christian monasteries, the most significant of which are the subjects of this study: Putna (1466), Voroneț (1487), Pătrăuți (1487), Arbore (1503), Probota (1530), Humor (1530), Moldovita (1532), and Sucevița (1585) (Stănciuc, et al).

These monasteries were established during a time of Ottoman expansion, as the Islamic Turkish advance on the Carpathian frontier forced many Christians to retreat into the depths of Moldavia’s northern forests. Even so, the Ottoman advance was held at bay by the efforts of these two great Moldavian warrior chieftains (voivodes) or more than fifty years. According to Moldavian popular legend, Stefan the Great commissioned the construction of a monastery with every victory, beginning with Putna in 1466. The monastery was dedicated to the Mother of God and is today the site of Stefan’s tomb. In 1487, Stefan founded the Church of St. George at Voroneț to commemorate his victory in the Battle of Vaslui (1475), which according to legend the monk Daniel the Hermit foretold he would win. From there Stefan and his son

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2 For tangential studies dealing with Christian othering of Jews in medieval Europe, see Mellinkoff; Fromovic; and Rowe.

3 One may appeal to various literary, cultural, psychological, and psychoanalytic theories to explore the notion of otherness and othering, postmodern philosophical discussions of alterity, or modern philosophical discussions of alienation. Sociological, anthropological and ethnographic theorists and studies have much to say on the notion of Otherness as well (Mannon: 2). This paper adopts a sociohistorical approach that represents “a type of history that is necessarily a little complicated and micro-historical, yet which demonstrates possibilities that have not been fully realized by the historical profession” (Himka: 6).
went on to build monasteries commemorating their victories against the Ottomans. These edifices were not simply monasteries, but fortified strongholds complete with an outer rectangular defensive wall and corner towers. All in all, forty-seven such monasteries were constructed in Moldavia between the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries. While not all of these monasteries were commissioned by Stefan and his son, the ones they built witness to their success in staking claims to Moldavian land while holding Ottoman encroachment at bay.

Each of the forty-seven Bucovina monasteries is a masterpiece of Byzantine art. While the floorplans follow a canonical cruciform design, each interior possesses its own particularities. The naos is squared, with three semicircular apses, the overall shape referencing the cross. The apse at the front is beyond the iconostasis, and the innermost sanctuary contains the altar. Many of these paintings are elaborate fifteenth century frescoes featuring portraits of saints and prophets, scenes from the life of Jesus, and images of angels and demons, heaven and hell. Deemed masterpieces of Byzantine art, these churches are one-of-a-kind architectural sites in Europe. Far from being merely wall decorations, the murals represent complete cycles of religious depictions. Among the forty-seven Bucovina monasteries, eight were added to UNESCO’s World Heritage in 1993. These include Voroneț, Humor, Sucevița, Moldovița, Arbore, Pătrăuți, Probota, and Suceava. All are located within a sixty-kilometer radius of Suceava, the principle residence of the Moldavian warrior princes. Six of these – Voroneț, Humor, Râșca, Sucevița, Moldovița, and Arbore – are especially famous for their exterior frescoes, decorated with a unique blue-green colored paint derived from a secret recipe using lapis lazuli, an imported precious stone. The vibrant colors of their marvelous frescoes have resisted harsh exposure to the elements for over 450 years.

**Interpretation of the Frescoes**

One of the purposes of the frescoes was to teach stories of the Bible, the lives of Jesus Christ and the Saints, to illiterate peasants and villagers; thus, the scenes serve both religious and didactic purposes, educating the faithful while promoting Orthodoxy (Vujko and Plavșa: 192). The Moldavian notion of adorning the external facades of churches with paintings is original and provides an excellent illustration of the cultural and religious context of the Balkans between the late-fifteenth and late-sixteenth centuries. Through the use of vibrant colors, anonymous painters followed canonical iconographic norms while depicting traditional biblical scenes in unique ways: heaven and earth, Adam and Eve, events from the lives of the Holy Virgin and Jesus Christ, and speculative images of life after death. Interestingly, the occasional Greek philosopher is also depicted, as Guliciuc notes:

\[ \ldots \text{those frescoes are not merely wall decorations, but complete religious and philosophical messages, having as a purpose to make known the story of the Bible and the lives of the Orthodox saints known to the folk through the use of images: Tree of Jesse and the Last Judgment (Voroneț), Ladder to Paradise and the Hymn to the Virgin (Sucevița), The Hymn of the Dead (Saint John’s at Suceava), the Siege of Constantinople (Moldovița), the Return of the} \]

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Prodigal Son (Humor), the Genesis (Arbore), etc. Some of those painted churches have the so called Frieze of the Philosophers, sometimes associated with the Tree of Jesse – displaying some unexpected portraits of some ancient philosophers – Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, Solon, etc.” (170).

In addition to serving didactic and religious functions, the outstanding composition, elegant outline, and harmonious colors of the frescoes blend perfectly with the surrounding landscape’s blue skies, green forests, golden grain – and red blood. At Voroneț, the unique color known to every serious artist as Voroneț Blue fills the background for the Last Judgment (Judecata de Apoi), an icon that contributes the monastery’s popular sobriquet, the “Sistine Chapel of the East.” Humor is characterized by its distinctive red color, while Sucevița, arguably the largest and finest of the monasteries, has thousands of images painted on a background of emerald green. Last but not least, Moldovița, a fortified enclosure with towers and heavy gates situated in the middle of a quaint farming village, presents itself in beautiful yellow.

**The Last Judgment**

The tradition of painting the exteriors of churches is done according to specific iconographical norms and is dominated by certain obligatory themes, including (among other things) the Celestial Hierarchy of Angels; the Tree of Jesse, representing Christ’s genealogy and serving as a symbol of the continuity between the Old and New Testaments. These general themes are found throughout Europe during the Middle Ages, but are given unique artistic interpretation by anonymous masters according to Orthodox iconographic tradition. Among all these images, perhaps the most striking is the icon of the Last Judgment (Judecata de Apoi), upon which we turn our gaze.
Earliest known depictions of the Last Judgment date to the third century, with the canonical theme introduced in 988, with the Christianization of Kievan Rus (Knorre). The scene is vertically divided by a bright red River of Everlasting Fire, an image borrowed from the book of Daniel, into which the condemned are thrown, which flows toward the gaping maw of the Devil. At top center, the thematic center of the entire composition appears, namely Jesus Christ, enthroned in a mandorla and flanked by the Mother of God and John the Baptist interceding for sinners (Knorre). Below this stand the Apostles, assisting in the judgment of sinners along with Christ. The outcast nations, as well as the Orthodox who did not live righteously, stand by a fiery stream, an image borrowed from the book of Daniel (7:10). Although these are the standard elements, over the centuries the iconography of the Last Judgment became more complex as new, often localized folk elements were incorporated.

Himka calls scenes of the Last Judgment among “the most complex iconography in the Byzantine and post-Byzantine cultural sphere,” adding that it evolved to become more and more fanciful as it aimed at illiterate and semi-literate highland villagers in a way that expressed their concerns – “amusing and arousing them, until there was a disciplining reaction on the part of the educated clerical elite” (189). Traditionally placed at the western end of the church, the Last Judgment frescoes contain of dozens of discrete elements. Monasteries and churches adorned with the scene of the Last Judgment were common throughout the Carpathian mountain region, even before the warrior princes’ massive building projects were undertaken. In most churches, the fearsome scene is strategically placed on the western interior wall, serving as a reminder to the faithful exiting the church that they will one day stand before “the dreadful judgment seat of Christ,” words they hear in the Divine Liturgy.

Of the Last Judgment icon generally, Mouriki writes:

It is well known that this composition, which epitomizes the main Christian concepts regarding the Divine scheme of human salvation, is not based on a single source of inspiration. Evangelical passages, especially from St. Matthew, the Apocalypse of St. John, a homily of Ephraim the Syrian, and the liturgy have provided the main elements for the iconography of the subject. Despite the variety and profoundly allegorical nature of these textual sources, the pictorial expression of the Last Judgment almost invariably retained a number of standard themes which remained unchanged throughout the Byzantine period. These include: the central Deisis group as the nucleus of the composition; the choir of angels around Christ; the twelve apostles seated on either side of the central group and various categories of Elect and condemned figures appropriately disposed on either side of the composition. The fully developed iconography of the Last Judgment appears in Byzantine art from the eleventh century onwards, as observed in the extant pictorial material. Moreover, the expansion of the iconographic elements of the scene has led to its arrangement either in a multi-register composition on a plane surface or in a three-dimensional space made possible by the use of the upright and curved surfaces in churches. In monumental painting both these types were usually reserved for a specific area in the church, i.e. the western part, and more precisely, the narthex.
In Bucovina, depictions of the Last Judgment underwent a unique evolution, painters retained particular details of local tradition, but integrated the preferences of those who commissioned the murals in light of their own particular artistic styles. For example, at Moloviţa monastery one sees a besieged Constantinople being defended by a Moldavian warrior, reinforcing a militaristic message that may have sparked the imagination of young men and inspired them to be willing to take up arms against the Turks.

The Last Judgment is among the largest paintings on the walls of Bucovina’s monasteries. In it one sees the standard repertoire of sins visible in Byzantine and post-Byzantine depictions of the Last Judgment, including the falsifier of weights, the dishonest grain miller, the man who usurps another man’s field, the usurer, the blasphemer, those who sleep late on Sunday instead of going to church, prostitutes, adulterers, monks and nuns who have broken their vows, the woman who refuses to nurse her child, and so on. Such unrepentant sinners do not require any textual justification for their condemnation in the artwork, for they were part of everyday experience and were familiar to all (Mouriki). However, in a striking example of local adaptation that incorporates political and economic concerns, one finds among the damned Turks, Tatars, Arabs, Moors, Jews, and non-Orthodox Christians, such as Armenians and Latin-rite Catholics. Such representations of the selected damned in Last Judgment icons is not wholly unique to Bucovina, but begin to appear in Byzantine art around the turn of the twelfth century at Mount Sinai, and in Greece, Serbia, Macedonia, and Russia (Garidis). Following the Latin sack of Constantinople (1204), Roman Catholic infidels were also introduced into the Last Judgment scene.

Concerning the appearance of Jews in the Last Judgment, Himka remarks:
It is probable that Jews were depicted in Byzantine iconography of the Last Judgment, but they were not so identified in the inscriptions. Moses, labelled, and the Jews, unlabelled, can be found in a fresco from the mid-1450s in the Moldavian Church of the Ascension in Luzhany, near Chernivtsi, on the fringes of Carpathian Rus. (This church may have been painted by Rus artists.) Jews, identified by inscription but without Moses, are also depicted on their way to hell in an illumination of the Last Judgment in the Kyivan psalter of 1397 (54).

In some of the Moldavian monasteries, inscriptions that identify the damned appear above them: individual Jews (but not Moses), depicted as ripping their beards in anguish; Turks and Tatars being mauled by a dragon and thrown into the River of Everlasting Fire; lines of biblical villains, including King Herod and Caiaphas; and enemies of the Christian faith, including the emperor Trajan Decius, Julian the Apostate, and notorious heretics like Arius and Nestorius. Also included among the damned are military leaders of the Ottoman Turks, identified by the crescent on their banners. At Moldovița, the Prophet Muhammad himself is depicted among the damned (Drăguț 71-72).

All of these condemned Others become an accepted norm in Romanian iconography. In the depiction of hellfire – a gargantuan funnel of live coals opening at the feet of Jesus – the damned helplessly and futilely struggle to get out. But safely aside the Seat of Judgment, Adam and Eve appear, along with Moses and the biblical prophets, and church hierarchs and martyrs. In another illustration, a hand holds the scales of justice upon which the sins of humankind are weighed, as devils to the right and to the left quarrel for possession of condemned souls.

In sum, the boldly colorful iconography of the Last Judgment provides a striking example of a process of artistic “Otherization” in isolating Jews, Turks, Tatars, non-Orthodox Christians, and others as being among those condemned to eternity in hell. Despite their
otherworldly architectural and artistic beauty, extreme otherness evolves and manifests itself in Orthodox Christian art of the fifteenth and sixteenth-centuries.

In addition to identifying the Other, the Last Judgment icon also provided an opportunity for Orthodox Christians to ponder their own judgment, thereby reinforcing their own sense of in-group allegiance (Hahn: 56). In the midst of the chaos of Ottoman-Hapsburg rivalry during the sixteenth century, the decidedly anti-Ottoman iconographic representation was also a product of the rise of fervor over what many perceived to be the end of days (Artimon: 9).

Conclusion

The fifteenth and sixteenth-century fortified painted monasteries of Bucovina offer a lesson in how religious art and architecture may be used for political ends, integrating a particular political outlook in time and space within Orthodox canonical iconographic norms. In the icon of the Last Judgement, the inside group, the “good,” are conventionally depicted as somber and pious, while various Others – Turks, Tatars, Jews, Arabs/Moors, Armenians, and Roman Catholics – often represented in an exaggerated pejorative fashion, as if somehow disfigured by their sinfulness. In focusing the center of attention on the damned, the icon of the Last Judgment in Bucovina was seeking to accomplish something more than mere religious education, but a theo-political project of identity consolidation through its fusion of political-economic and theological elements (Artimon: 13). Such a phenomenon is evident in the region from the fifteenth century onward; however, interestingly, “the Moldavian version of the element differs from the Carpathian and northern Rus’ versions in that it never includes Greeks or Rus’ or any other Orthodox people” (Himka: 57). This is explained by Skrobucha in his analysis of the Russian space by the fact that an important role in the selection of the peoples representing “the other” was played by national aversion and antipathy (69). Romanian researchers also consider that images on the Moldavian monasteries have a clear political connotation, which emphasizes the difference of “the others” and justifies their portrayal as enemies (Crăciun).

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