REPRESENTATIONS OF THE ZODIACAL SIGNS IN THE WESTERN AND ROMANIAN ICONOGRAPHY (2)

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Abstract: The artistic representation of the zodiac in the space of the church is similar in both the Western and the Eastern areas, the only difference being that concerning the technique used: stained glass, mosaic and relief sculpture, on the one hand, and mural painting, on the other (with numerous examples from France, Italy, Romania, Greece, Macedonia). The representation of time and of the zodiac in the Romanian churches followed two well-known paths: the linear representation and the circular representation, each with their own meaning. The linear representation of time, start from the principle according to which the world has a beginning and an end. In the compositions containing signs of the zodiac is the recurrent use of the circle, especially of concentric circles (the circle is considered the symbol of the original unity and of the canopy). The presence of the signs of the zodiac in the very space of the Western cathedrals was permitted because they were correlated with a calendar of agricultural works and the types of activities specific of each season and month.

Keywords: zodiacal signs, artistic representation of the zodiac, linear time, cyclic time.

1. The monasteries in Northern Moldavia and the representation of linear time

The artistic representation of time has always been a major challenge for painters. While the space has been mastered using shapes, colour and light, so that they convey the impression of volume, of distance, of what is commonly known as perspective, in order to represent time it was necessary to resort to allegories and symbols. It implies using something that would convey the idea of passage, of lapse. It is true that perspective, too, was referred to as a "symbolic form" (Erwin Panofski's theory can be mentioned here).

The representation of time in the Romanian churches followed two well-known paths: the linear representation and the circular representation, each with their own meaning. Many of the painters of the monasteries in Moldavia opted for the linear representation of time, starting from the principle according to which the world has a beginning and an end. Thus, in Voroneț and Sucevița, Moldovița, Probota and Saint Dimitry (Suceava), time is represented as a horizontal band, a large *rotullus* (or a *volumen*, more precisely) held at both ends by angels; this plays the role of the empyrean where the planets and stars are placed, the sun, the moon, as well as the zodiac signs. All these murals centre round an image of the Ancient of Days.

The *Bible* provides information about the Ancient of Days: "[9]I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment *was* white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool: his throne *was like* the fiery flame, *and* his wheels *as* burning fire. [10] A fiery stream issued and came forth from before him: thousand thousands ministered unto him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him: the judgment was set, and the books were opened." [*Daniel*, 7.9-10]

The opinions regarding this excerpt from Daniel are divided. Some interpreters consider that the Ancient of Days is God the Father. However, a similar description can be found in the Apocalypse, describing the Son: "His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow" (*Revelation*, 1.14). For this reason, the interpetations of the theologians provide the explanation according to which the two natures of Christ are both equally contained in this image: His human nature (the Son of Man) and His divine nature (the Ancient of Days).

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Voroneţ[1]. At the monastery of Voroneţ, the representation of the zodiac is placed on the outer Western wall, right under the roof (as the last horizontal tier of the ensemble). The theme, which may seem surprising for the space of a Christian church, is associated by the painters with the Last Judgment; this is in fact common to all the other monasteries where the theme is approached.

The inspiration for a part of the painting's details are extracted from the Bible, in the Revelation by St. John. The canopy is full of stars; it is presented as unfolded by four angels ("I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth" *Revelation*, 7.1; "The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up" *Revelation* 6.14). The angels' gesture can be interpreted as an indication of the end of time (the signs of the zodiac and the time intervals that they indicate are thus annihilated) and as a form of reducing space to the extent of annihilation. The explanation for the central representation can be found in the Revelation as well: "and there before me was a throne in heaven with Someone sitting on it" (4.2) "And the One who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne." (4.3). Indeed, around the Ancient of Days a circle is painted in the colours of the spectrum (like a rainbow), a detail that can be found in all the paintings discussed in the present paper.

In the murals in all the monasteries in Moldavia, the Ancient of Days is painted as the Father as described by Daniel (7.9) and this is the image that announces the beginning of the Last Judgment. On the next horizontal tier, the Son is presented and under it there is a throne on which the Holy Ghost is painted as a dove.



Monastery of Voroneţ, photo: Antonela Corban

The canopy is painted in several shades of blue (placed in a linear sequence one above the other) and is decorated with golden stars. The representation of the zodiac signs is indicative of the fact that the painters had researched the topic and had knowledge of how it was represented in Western art. As in many of the paintings or reliefs in Western cathedrals, where the animals are represented in a distorted manner (sometimes just crudely, in other cases their symbols are simply imaginary, in the murals at Voroneţ the situation is similar (which is probably accounted for by the source of inspiration): the Capricorn is painted as a unicorn, the Aries resembles a he-goat, while the Scorpio is closer to a crab.

At the Probota Monastery, in the exonarthex, the narrative description of the Last Judgment is completed by the paintings on the dome which seems, in turn, a Biblical story: four angles unfold the volume on which past time is "written" and described (this is the old time of the magi, of astrology and of the zodiac); in its midst other four angels open the gates to a new time, the time of the Last Judgment, with the Ancient of Days on the throne in the middle. The murals were completed in 1532, during the reign of Petru Rareş (who is also the founder).

[1] Voroneţ Monastery was built in 1488, during the reign of Stephen the Great, but the outer murals was not completed until 1547, during the reign of Petru Rareş and of metropolitan archbishop Grigore Roşca.

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Probota Monastery

Unfortunately, along the time the painting was deteriorated due to fires, negligence or ignorance. Across the sky painted in the manner described above, on either side of God the father are placed the Sun, Sagittarius, Cancer, Aries, Pisces, Libra, Leo (to the left) and the Moon, Taurus, Virgo, Scorpio, Capricorn, Gemini, Aquarius (to the right).

Similar to the paintings at Voroneţ, in terms of the manner of representation of the zodiac signs, here are certain particularities: Capricorn is painted like a unicorn, more similar to a horse than a goat. Aries is presented in a manner that makes it resemble a he-goat, while Leo looks very much like a feline (on closer inspection, with facial features very similar to a human face, one could say).

Moldoviţa Monastery[2]. While at Voroneţ and Probota the space allowed the unfolding of the composition along one wall (or on the domed ceiling) and the visualization of the whole is possible at one glance, at Moldoviţa Monastery the limited space in the open porch forced the painters to compress images and to use optimally each inch of the wall; the continuity is interrupted by arches, doors and windows.



Moldoviţa Monastery, photo: Antonela Corban

As in the murals at Voroneţ, the sky is represented as an unfurled *volumen*, on which the signs of the zodiac are painted. Several shades of blue are used to indicate day time and night time. The same four angels fold the scroll of time, covering a part of the Sun and the Moon. The houses of the zodiac are fragmented: to the right of the Ancient of Days (the left of the image), behind a stanchion and an arch, there are Cancer, Aries, Gemini and Leo; to his

[2] The church was painted in 1537 by Moldavian painters of the time, trained by the famous Toma from Suceava. He was the official artist at the court of Prince Petru Rareş, the founder of the monastery. Specialists assume the that the painters' names remained unknown becuase they refrained from signing their work for reasons of Christian humility (Cf. Constantin Severin, Imperiul Sacru. Mănăstiri şi biserici din nordul Moldovei, Editura Paralela 45, Bucureşti, 2003); this is a common feature for icon painters as well.

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left (the left of the image), behind a stanchion and an arch, there are Aquarius, Pisces and Taurus. Continuing these images, behind other stanchions and arches, there are the Sun, Sagittarius and Libra(to the left), and, on the other side Scorpio, Virgo, Capricorn and the Moon(to the right). It is interesting to note that some of the images – persons and animals – are placed into what appears to be small boats, to suggest the almost liquid flow of the time (as there is definitely no connection with the water signs); there are also representations that follow the pattern of the Western iconography, where the body of the Taurus, Capricorn, Aries and Leo end in a fish-like kind of tail. Such images are common in the compositions of all the churches analysed in this paper (Voroneţ, Sucevița, Sf. Dumitru, Probota).

St. Dimitry Church of Suceava was built in about same period as the Monastery of Moldovița. As there are many similarities between the two in terms of architecture, the hypothesis has been put forward that they were erected by the same team. The painting was done between 1537 and 1538 and the inside murals are original. In the porch, however, the images in the painting were damaged and were restored in 1997; although the restoration work was done carefully, the overall result does no longer bear the mark of 16th century painting. The representation of the zodiac is similar to that in Voroneț or Probota (on the ceiling of the exonarthex): it is linear, flowing, without abrupt breaks caused by architectural features. The order of the signs is different, however. A change can be traced in the inscription: Latin characters are used when the name of Savaot, the Lord of the Hosts, is spellt to indicate God the Father.

Sucevița[3]. At the Monastery of Sucevița the sign of the zodiac are also placed in the porch, which is closed in this case; the signs are painted on two arches, delimiting the *Last Judgment* on both sides. The choice was determined by the lack of more room. Six signs of the zodiac are placed to the right, next to the Sun, while the other six are placed to the left, together with the Moon. The scroll (*volumen*) is divided into two images, with each fragment of the scroll folded by two angels and with representations of the Sun, Leo, Cancer, Gemini, Taurus, Capricorn and Pisces on one side, and the Moon, Virgo, Libra, Sagittarius, Aries, Scorpio and Aquarius on the other.

It is interesting to note that at Sucevița Monastery, the zodiac can also be found in the Pronaos. The common element of the iconography of all the monasteries in Northern Moldavia is generally acknowledged: the images are arranged in such a manner as to form narratives. The remarkable aspect here is that the painter chose to indicate the temporal dimension of the scene depicted by means of a medallion in yellow ochre where a sign of the zodiac is painted. All the important feasts and holidays in the calendar of a month are placed horizontally and somewhere between these images the temporal clue is given. What could have been the source of such a representation? The answer could be found in the fact that the two painters of the monastery, the two brothers Sofronie and Ion, were well acquainted with both Italian and Russian architecture and painting. It is well known that painted or sculpted circular zodiac emblems were frequently used in Italian art under the influence of ancient mosaics or cameos).

Monastery of Sveti Gavril Lesnovski[4], Macedonia. In this church, the zodiac is placed on the ceilinig of the narthex; its elements are on either side of the circular image of Jesus Christ Pantocrator[5]. Unlike the paintings in other churches, here a large group of angels (not organized according to the hierarchies) surround Jesus. Although a part of the fresco was preserved and the colours are still fresh and clear, the rest has disappeared due to the damage

[3] The founders of Sucevița Monastery are the Movilă family and the painting of the church was completed in 1595, which is much later than the murals of the other monasteries.
[4]The monastery in the village of Lesnovo, built in 1341 by the feudal lord Tyrant Oliver.
[5] The fresoe at Lesnovo monastery was painted by four painters in two stages: between 1341 and 1346, and between 1347 and 1349

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of the wall. An angel riding a fantastic creature holds the Sun in both hands. Aries, Taurus, Leo, Cancer and Gemini, as well as winged creatures hold in their hands or claws or paws a kind of spiral-ending clubs or sticks. I initially hypothesized that they were angels; on closer inspection, however, I remarked that they are no clad – a very strange detail indeed. Only the Moon, Libra and Pisces can be still seen from the right side of the composition.

2. Circular time and the circular zodiac

The distinctive element that captures the attention in the compositions containing signs of the zodiac is the recurrent use of the circle, especially of concentric circles. The circle is considered the symbol of the original unity and of the sky/canopy. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite associated the image of the circle and of the centre with the relation between the creature and its cause, in that, when separated from its central unity, everything multiplies and divides. This aspect can be also found in all the paintings discussed in the present paper: God the Son or Father is placed at the centre, then the angels, while the signs of the zodiac are placed at the far end or margin and away from the centre of the circle; the signs of the zodiac are models or types that can further be identified and detected at the human level.

At the church of the *Three Hierarchs* (Filipeştii de Pădure), at *Moni Dekoulou*, in Greece and at the church of *Svetitskhoveli*, Georgia, a line at the border of the zodiac can be seen, like a cord or thread round the circle. In Ancient Egipt, the cord or rope with the ends brought together in the shape of a ring was the symbol of eternity[6]. The similarity with another well known shape, that of the Ouroboros, cannot escape us; the snake Ouroboros biting its own tail signifies a continuos repetition of an end, of a closure which thus opens up towards a new beginning. It is true that this indicates the relation of the circle with the concept of the eternal return, that Christian theology does not agree of.

The zodiac at the *Saint Archangels* at Milies, Greece, displays separating lines in the shape of spikes; at *Cetăţuia*, Iaşi, at *Moni Dekoulou* and at *Svetitskhoveli* there are triangle shaped rays which all suggest the wheel. As far back as Ancient Greek art, the brightness of the turning wheel was a solar dynamic symbol associated to Apollo. It is true that many of the solar myths in various cultures are associated with the wheel. It is one of the ”emanation-return” symbols expressing the evolution of the universe and of the person[7],; the hub symbolically illustrates the cosmic centre on one hand and the mystical centre on the other.

At *Holy Trinity* Church of Piteşti, also known as Beştelei church from the name of the founders[8], there is a circular zodiac. The painting is placed in the nave of the church and it was completed in 1731. In the centre there is Lord Savaot with His distinctive mark – a golden triangle at the level of his head, the Sun on his right and the Moon on His left against a background in dark blue, studded with stars as the canopy. The twelve signs are placed around Him in circles. An element that stands out in comparison with the other representations is the presence of diamond shaped contours containing vegetal images, which can be reminiscent of the seasons and the passage of time. On closer inspection, this is, however, revealed not to be the original painting. Most likely, when the church was restored, certain changes were made in terms of the painting and words in Latin characters were also added.

[6] Hans Biedermann, Dicţionar de simboluri, Saeculum I.O., Bucureşti, 2002, p. 89
[7] Chevalier J., Gheerbrant A., Dicţionar de simboluri, Editura Artemis, pp.176-178
[8] The founder of this church was Prince Matei Basarab; the building was initiated in 1654 but it was completed later by a High steward.

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The *Cetăţuia* Monastery, Iaşi, photo: Pr. dr. Daniel Jitaru

The circular zodiac at the *Cetăţuia* Monastery near Iaşi is placed in the porch. This is also the area where some of the initial painting is best preserved[9]. The technique used in decorating the church is the fresco, which was completed in 1673 by the Macedo-Romanian painters brothers Michael and George and the Greek painter Dima of Ioannina; they were helped by the Romanian painters Nicholas „the old painter" and Stephen, who had also worked for the church at *The Three Hierarchs* in Iaşi[10].

Jesus Christ Pantocrator is placed at the centre of the composition; He is surrounded by the nine celestial hierarchies, each of them placed in a different circle: Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones/ Authorities, Dominions, Virtues – Powers / Principalities, Archangels, and Angels (Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Celestial Hierarchy*, VI, §2). They are divided by red triangles reminiscent to a certain extent of the Sun of Vergina. In the final outer circle, there are the signs of the zodiac. Even if the wall is very much damaged, the remaining part is clear enough and traces of intense red, yellow ochre, white, and blue can still be seen.

At the Church of *The Three Hierarchs* at Filipeştii de Pădure, the zodiac is also presented in relation to the representation of Jesus Christ Pantocrator. The Son of God is also surrounded by the nine celestial choirs (in the hierarchy by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, as described in the painting at the *Cetăţuia* Monastery). The inscriptions are placed in the next circle, while the signs of the zodiac are placed in the last. Interestingly, the church was painted by the famous painter Pârvu Mutu in 1692 and this is one of his most significant creations. Because of the beauty of its murals, the church has also been called "the Voroneţ of Muntenia". The name is explained by the fact Pârvu Mutu improved his technique by studying and working for six years with a famous Russian painter.

Similar to the monasteries in Moldavia, this composition includes the *volumen* unfolded by angels, with the Sun to the right (the left of the image when we look at it) and the Moon to the left. What differs in this painting from those in the monasteries in Northern Moldavia is that the theme *Deisis* is placed on another volume, also unfolded by angels.

The circular zodiac can also be found in Greece in several places. One of them is West Mesa Mani, in a 16th century monastery called *Moni Dekoulou* and also in Eastern Mesa Mani, in the 14th century monastery *Moni Sotiros.*

At *Moni Dekoulou*, the painting in very vivid colours and very well preserved is placed on the ceiling of the church; it represents Jesus Christ Pantocrator. In the circle where the Saviour is painted there are also the animal symbols of the four evangelists. The next circle contains nine angels, clearly reminscent of the nine heavens. The next circle contains

[9]Much of the painting was altered in the 18th and 19th century.

[10] Constantin Cihodaru, Gh. Platon, Istoria oraşului Iaşi, vol. I, Editura Junimea, Iaşi, 1980, p. 349

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the signs of the zodiac together with the Sun and the Moon. Many of the figures in the circle are fantastic representations of the actual animals or persons (Leo, Sagittarius, Capricorn, Aquarius, Aries, Taurus) and end in a spiralled tail.



Areopoli, The church of *Agioi Taxiarches*

In the church *Agioi Taxiarches* (Saint Archangels) of the village of Milles, Pelion Mountain, the circular zodiac is placed on a lateral wall in the first room. The central image is a person seated on a throne, called *Cosmos* (gr. the order of the Universe) holding a scroll (which can be interpreted as related to either time or the law). The symbols of the zodiac are placed around him in clearly delimited panels.

On the church in Areopoli (1798), also named *Taxiarches*, the sign of the zodiac (the symbols in their fantastic representations with a tail like that of a sea creature) are sculpted on the outer walls around the apse.

In the church *Svetitskhoveli*, at Mtskheta in Georgia, the signs of the zodiac, together with beast in the Book of Revelation, are among the few fragments that remained from the initial 13th century fresco. The presence of the 12 signs of the zodiac on the walls of the church is explained by the monks in the area as a symbolic manner of presenting time and temporality; they cautiously distance themselves from the traditional interpretation of the zodiac, their position being a manner of rejecting astrology.

The composition is grouped in large circles. Jesus Christ Pantocrator seats on His throne in the middle, surrounded by the symbols of the four evangelists: the lion, the bull, the eagle and the angel. They are followed by inscriptions and the next circle contains the angelic hosts. The signs of the zodiac, the stars, the Sun and the Moon are painted in the outer circle.



St. George church (Mirăuți), Suceava, photo: Antonela Corban

In St. George church (Mirăuţi) of Suceava, the zodiac is painted on a lateral wall. As the original mural was considerably damaged along the time, it was restored between 1898 and 1903 by the Viennese painter Karl Jobst. Unfortunately, he no longer did it in the

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Byzantine style specific of Moldavian church painting, rather he resorted to the Art Nouveau manner (according to the fashion of the day). One other aspect that the artsits who restored the church ignored was that the zodiac was placed next to the *Creation of the world* theme and not together with the traditional *Last Judgment / Apocalypse*.



Săcărâmb, Deva, photo: Antonela Corban

The image of the circular zodiac can also be found near a church in Săcărâmb, close to Deva. On a cross in the yard of the Orthodox church dating from 1785, above the image of Jesus crucified, there are sculptures of the Sun and the Moon surrounded by the twelve signs of the zodiac placed in a kind of spiral carved in the stone of the monument. Among the many meanings of the spiral, the most obvious association in this case is that with "the complex topic of death and resurrection."[11]

3. The zodiac and the works and activities associated to each month

What should be mentioned from the very beginning regarding the representations of the Western zodiac (irrespective of the techniques used) is the presence of a number of simple, popular elements; some of the forms even have grotesque or monstrous or inaccurate shapes (most likely in the shapes imagined by those who painted them). Even if most of them appear in Gothic cathedrals, it has to be stated that influences of Roman art can still be traced in these drawings, with all its very popular representations of strange beasts and their didactic and moralizing purpose.

The presence of the signs of the zodiac in the very space of the church was permitted because they were correlated with a calendar of agricultural works and the types of activities specific of each season and month. The Gothic style in architecture favoured large windows decorated with stained glass; this is in fact the place where the most famous images related to the zodiac appear (Chartres, Notre Dame de Paris, Angers). Along with such representations on the inside of the church, reliefs of various degrees of complexity appear on the outer walls, on tympanums, archs, archvolts (Chartres, Amiens,Autun, Issoire, Vezelay-Franţa, San Isidoro-Spania, Domul din Lucca-Italia). In such stained glass windows, the signs of the zodiac as a manner of marking a period of time by records of man's agricultural works are surveyed by a *Christ Chronocrator* from above (as in Chartres or Soissons) or by Virgin Mary and Her Son from the centre (as in Notre Dame of Paris). The cathedrals are also the places where the zodiac appears in the technique of the mosaic (Pantaleone – Otranto, St. Gudule – Bruxelles, Canterbury).

The graphic of the signs of the zodiac, of the months of the year and of the works associated with them (either painted or sculpted) has many similar and also many different elements in various geographical areas. They will be mentioned here.

January. The image presents either a man seated at table, feasting, with two cups in front; it may well present the two-faced god Janus (one face directed towards the year that has passed and one towards the year that is just beginning), the god of doors and gates, of the

[11]Hans Biedermann, Dicţionar de simboluri, Editura Saeculum I.O., 2002, p. 415

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feasts of passage and transitions (as in Notre Dame of Paris). Interestingly, in Chartres, January has three faces: one directed towards the past, one towards the present and one towards the past.



Chartres, Aquarius, January

Aquarius is presented as a man pouring water from a vessel or pouring it from one vessel to another (Chartres, Notre Dame de Paris, Autun, Amiens, San Isidoro de Leon).

February (from lat. *februum* which means "purification"). A man wrapped in a blanket warms his hands and bare feet to the flames coming out of a stove (Chartres, Otranto); in a different version, the man has one foot raised towards the flame and has one boot in his hand (Notre Dame, Paris).



Aquarius, Amiens, *Capricorn*, Chartres, *Pisces*, Autun

Pisces. Twin fish are represented facing opposite directions tied by a thread coming out of their mouths. / March is the month when agricultural works start: also vineyards start being pruned (Autun, Vezelay, Chartres, Paris) or digging the ground begins (Amiens).

Aries. Spring is celebrated, there are drawings of blooming trees, of young people or women with flowers in their hands (Autun, Vezelay, Chartres, Paris) (Amiens).

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Taurus. Libra. Issoire



Pisces, Aquarius, Taurus, Sagittarius, Scorpio, San Isidoro de Leon

May it is a month dedicated to hunting in the woods, to daydreaming of the loved one or simply to meditating. / Gemini. They are represented in various positions, either holding hands or embracing.

June. It is the month when people are focused on agricultural works: they skin the meadows, clip the sheep. / Cancer. Its representations vary: sometimes it looks like a crab, sometimes as a many-legged monster.

July. It is the month of harvesting the wheat with a sickle. / Leo. Sometimes it is presented as very fierce, at other times as proud.

August. It is the time when the wheat is threshed. People have given up clothes and walk barefoot due to the heat. / Virgo



Capricorn, *Sagittarius*, *Scorpio*, *Libra*, *Virgo*, *Leo*, Lucca Duomo

September is the month when grapes are harvested and processed by crushing them, or fruit is gathered (Amiens). / Libra

October. It is the month when the new wine is stored in barrels. In some other representations, people plough the land. / Scorpio. It is one of the ugliest and weirdest representations: it has a body which is too broad or it has several curls in its tail. In San Isidoro de Leon, the scorpio has a snake wrapped around it (a detail that is also found in the representations of Leo and Capricorn, Sagittarius and Leo).

November. Preparations for the winter are under way, fire wood is gathered or late tilling and sowing is done. / Sagittarius

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Sagittarius. Chartres, photo: Antonela Corban.

December. It is the season when the pigs are slaughtered, the bread is baked or people are feasting at table. / Capricorn.

4. Conclusions

In Eastern church art, the zodiac is presented especially in murals, while in the cathedrals of the West the reliefs on the outer walls, representations in stained glass windows or mosaics on the floor are prevailing. The manner in which they are depicted in the two areas of Christianity has both similarities and differences which are not related to technique alone. In terms of meaning, the zodiac is used differently in Western religious art. While in Eastern religious art, the presence of the zodiac is determined by the need to explain time, its beginning and end (it has an eschatological purpose), in Western art each sign of the zodiac is associated to a month and the respective activities and agricultural works, related to man's immediate needs in his ordinary life.

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