Iconographic Theme of *Saint George Killing the Dragon* in the Exterior Painting of Arbore Church

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Rezumat

Tema iconografică a Sfântului Gheorghe ucigând balaurul în pictura exterioară a Bisericii Arbore

Studiul analizează trei momente succesive care ilustrează lupta dintre Sfântul Gheorghe şi balaur, salvarea prinţesei şi intrarea triumfătoare în castel, aşa cum sunt reprezentate în pictura exterioară a Bisericii Arbore. Utilizând diferenţe semiotice, vom încerca să oferim răspunsuri referitoare la semnificaţia apariţiei acestei teme iconografice în contextul epocii medievale din Moldova, la modul în care este transmis mesajul creştin al ameninţării răului şi salvării prin credinţă şi, de asemenea, la încărcătura politică şi socială pe care această legendă a dobândit-o în timp. Compoziţia unitară concentrează atenţia privitorului asupra liniei narative care duce la transformarea sfântului în cavaler medieval, ca exponent al structurii sociale medievale, care se împarte în oratores, laboratores şi bellatores.

Keywords: *Saint George, the dragon, iconography, symbols, Arbore Church, Moldavia, Christianity.*

Saint George, surnamed *The Victorious*, acquires in the medieval period, an unanimous popularity in occidental Catholicism, but also in the Byzantine tradition space, illustrating the chivalrous ideal, but also the martyrdom in the name of faith, being as well the spiritual symbol of temporal power and the emblem of people's trust in the divine justice. Although the hagiographic legend includes many dramatic moments of his life: as a young man conscripted in the Diocletian's army, publicly affirms his religion and is tortured for that, most popular episode is a complementary one, illustrating the saint's fight with the dragon and the rescue of the princess. Saint George's official life doesn't include this

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apocryphal episode, often connected not only with the Christian lore, but also with the mythological ancient nucleus and agrarian significances.[1]

The research analyses the three successive moments that illustrate the fight of the saint with the dragon, the rescue of the princess and the victorious entrance in the castle from the exterior painting of Arbore Church. Dated at the beginning of the XVIth century, exterior paintings of the hetman Luca Arbore's foundation conserve on the west side an impressive deploy of miniature episodes, illustrating the lifes of Saint George, Saint Dumitru, Saint Nichita and Saint Paraschiva. Systematized from the top to the bottom, the episodes can be written from left to right, from the interior of the stonework to the interior surface and to the western exterior part of the mural extension. Saint George life's includes first three upper sections, divided at their turn in thirty three episodes. The last frieze illustrates the detailed sequences of the legend of killing the dragon and the conversion of the hall community saved by the evil danger. We will analyse the first three episodes, which we consider essential in decoding the message.

The investigation of the images will be realised at a first level from an iconological perspective, in which the significations go beyond the immediately visual, exceeding the iconic stage of primer description and also the iconographical stage of the insertion of the image in the cultural context from which it comes. Pictorial episodes will pass then through the semiotical-structuralist filter, which will alouw the analyse of the objects invested with connotative values, as symbols grouped in unitary systems, within nothing is infertile or incidental, gestures, actions, characters being all invested with valences and significances. The argumentation will be constructed on a tertiary structure, reflected by the three images which reproduce simultaneously three worlds to which the human medieval conscience pertains constantly: the underground world, of the evil forces, associated with the chaos and eternal darkness, represented by the dragon which came out from the deep waters, the terrestrial world, human, dominated by the realities of the everyday life, illustrated by the princess, the castle and its inhabitants, and the celestial one, divine, irradiant,

[1] Valeriu Anania, ***Cerurile Oltului***, Rîmnicu Vîlcea, editată de Episcopia Rîmnicului şi Argeşului, 1990, p. 202.

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appertaining to God and his servants, illustrated by the unnatural presence of the saviour saint, riding a white horse. In the second semantic plan, artistic episodes will be analysed from the perspective of the binary oppositions, which generally characterise the sacred art. The distinction good-bad, sacred-profane, body-soul, will help us answer the questions about the significance of the apparition of the iconographic theme, threaded unusually complex in Arbore's painting, about the way in which the Christian message, of evil menace and salvation through faith, is sent and also to see what social and political aspects gains the legend.

One of the most famous sources used in analyzing the sacred medieval representations, in the Byzantine tradition world, in ***Erminia***, written by Dionisie from Furna, doesn't make any reference about the illustration of the episode. So, we will use as sources, in our research, the hagiographical legend[2] and the mural paintings.

Positional speaking, the analysed images are placed on the west side of the monument, in a niche, an inedited architectural structure which helped the conservation of the paintings (Figure 1). This open wall was invested along history with different functions, such as belfry,[3] rudimentary porch[4] or place for accommodating the table for alms.[5] Any of these functions would have had, the structure served to a social function and the painted episodes are visible for the worshiper, being appealed less dogmatic and more familiar. The social function of the image appears clearly, appealing to the inter-human assistance, stressing the dangers that menace the people and the destructive power of the paganism in relation to the saviour Christianity.

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[2] ***Vieţile sfinţilor pe luna aprilie***, s.l., Editura Mănăstirii Sihăstria, 2005, p. 299-300.

[3] G. Balş, ***Bisericile lui Ştefan cel Mare***, în ***Buletinul Comisiunii Monumentelor Istorice***, an XVIII, 1926, p. 115.

[4] Petru Comarnescu, ***Îndreptar artistic al monumentelor din Nordul Moldovei***, Suceava, Casa Regională a Creaţiei Populare Suceava, s.a., p. 119.

[5] Vasile Drăguţ, ***Arta creştină în România***, vol. V, sec. XVI, Bucureşti, Editura Institutului Biblic şi de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1989, p. 182.

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The episodes illustrating the life of Saint George are pictorially framed by moments of the martyrdom of other three saints, characters with a terrestrial existence, whose sacrifice in the name of faith brought them the eternal life. The exemplary nature of the characters is obvious, offering the worshiper the leading principles to a Christian life.

The first episode (Figure 2) illustrates the fight itself between the saint and the dragon. Positioned on the left of the image, riding a white horse, the heroe stabs with the lance the marine monster. He wears a military coat and his red cloak completes the dynamics of the rampant steed.

Although it eludes the naturalism, the steed leaning only against his back hands, and the tension of the moment doesn't hallmark the impassive saint's face, the episode keeps its energy temper. In opposition with the active coordinate and in order to complete it, stays the feminine principle, illustrated by the princess. From a gender perspective, the woman is always saved while the male is the saviour. Waiting for the moment of sacrifice, the young girl is placed on the bluff. She is individualised by characteristic elements for her social status as the daughter of the king, wearing a princely crown, precious vestments, but also for her status of unmarried women, showing her long, uncovered hair. The character's attitude is human, very suggestive when, with a candid gesture, washes her tears away. The parallel between tears and water, rain, might be associated with the agrarian symbolism of the saint's feast, always connected with spring and fertility. The bluff, the threshold between the two worlds, dissociates terrestrial universe from the underground one. The eddy surface of water is dominated by the elongated profile of the hybrid monster. Its intense colour, perfectly visible, reminds of hell's flames and of anguish of the domes. The hybrid structure of the surnatural animal is very interesting. Reminding of the sinuous shape of the biblical snake, it has short legs and bird's wings, three heads (appealing the mythological hydra), beast's fangs and fire breath. The signifier acquires, through these reunited elements, multiple valences. Snake is the archetypal symbol of hell and chaos, of immorality and sin. It represents the luciferian power emphasized in direct opposition

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with the divine force.[6] Through its typologies, the snake is a terrestrial symbol but, in this context, the monster belongs to the marine space, water itself being a symbol of the unknown, of darkness and disorder.

The background is dedicated to the viewers, those who participate only affectively at the deployment. The castle, illustrated ornamental from a chromatic and stylistic point of view, reminding of back cloth, opens its gates to the inhabitants' group, amassed by the miracle. One of the characters, placed on the upper part of castle's gate, prepares to bow shoot, in order to help the hero. The rocky landscape from the background balances the composition.

The second image illustrates the second stage (Figure 3). On a peaceful atmosphere, Saint George, alongside with the saved princess, victoriously heads for the castle.

The martyr has individualizing attributes: he wears military clothes, a red cloak on his shoulders and has the lance in his hand, the weapon symbolizing the penetrating energy of rays of light and the capacity to overcome the obstacles between the two worlds.[7]

Although the iconographic theme is known as ***Saint George killing the dragon***, the epic line illustrates the domestication, the domination and not the death of the dragon. The princess brings the monster tide up with his belt, as the legend tells us, to the castle. The Christian message is therefore connected with the idea of domination, of keeping under control the evil aspects of human existence and not of killing the reality that coexists with the divine order. The two principles which underline the earthly existence, the good and the evil, the virtue and the sin, are inseparable until the end of the Last Judgement and the Christian, seldom put to the proof, has to fight and win in the battle with the evil forces.

The suggestive gestures of the princess, keeps our attention. In the Middle Ages, corporal attitudes acquire social, politic, theological dimensions, being perceived as an exterior reflexion of the inner

[6] Ivan Evseev, ***Cuvânt-Simbol-Mit***, Timişoara, Editura Facla, 1983, p. 147, 148, 152.

[7] ***Ibidem***, p. 122.

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movements.[8] The character holds with the right hand the belt which tides up the dragon, as a sign of his domination, and, with the left hand raised in a presentation gesture, shows the viewers behind the castle's wall the miracle and his founder.

The last episode shows the encounter between Saint George and the inhabitants of the castle, lead by the king and queen (Figure 4). The fluency of the sequences is realised by the painter in an inventive way, by deploying the body of the defeated dragon in two consecutive images. The main characters' order is invert. If, on the previous image, the princess is in front, addressing to people and the saint was following her, this time the king's daughter is preceded by the hero, viewed while he speaks with the castle's leader. Heads bent, as a sign of submission, and with hands stretched towards the saint in gesture of gratification and reception, the sovereigns receive the saving hero. As a gesture echo, the saint opens his arms in order to receive the people in the Christian community.

Compositionally, the three sequences are unitary, concentrating the viewer's attention on the narration. The background is always represented by the rocky landscape, situated on the left side, and by the imposing castle, illustrated on the right. The two elements symbolise two different types of coordinates of the medieval world and their opposition. It's the antithesis between city-woods, urban civilization-patriarchal environment. The default characters are representative for the two spaces, the princess and the powerless inhabitants in front of the dragon and the warrior saint, the saviour.[9] From a historical point of view, the saint, transformed into the medieval knight, becomes the exponent of the medieval social structure divided into *oratores, laboratores* and *bellatores*. Maybe because of that the general perception of the hero brought most often his image as a rider, his animal getting a symbolic value which speaks about the membership of the owner to a given social category.[10] The castle is the symbol of the medieval urban stereotype. It has all the

[8] Jean-Claude Schmitt, ***Raţiunea gesturilor***, Bucureşti, Editura Meridiane, 1998, p. 23, 34.

[9] Jacques Le Goff, ***L'immaginario medievale***, Bari, Editori Laterza, 2004, p. 9, 51.

[10] Ivan Evseev, ***op. cit.***, p. 96.

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elements needed for the identification, from the walls, towers and gate to the joyful colours of the interior buildings. At the signified level, the castle has the ambivalence and the multidimensional character of any symbol. On the one hand, the Christian vision associates it with the pagan world, descending from the greco-roman heredity, with the immorality and the biblical sin, if we think at Sodom and Gomorra or Babylon. On the other hand, the city refers to the perfect order of the divine, found in the eternal castle of celestial Jerusalem.[11]

The narration and the main characters are placed foreground. Their actions are potentiated by a suggestive ensemble of gestures, concentrated on the expressivity of the hands. Hands are the elements that indicate the sadness, the astonishment, the gratification or the physical power of the one holding the lance.

The symbolized capacity of the hand was actually valued in the hall Christian medieval art, from the orant hypostasis to that of praying and till the glorification of the holy hand of God and its blessing gesture.[12]

On a symbolic level, Saint George killing the dragon becomes a foundation act. His deeds metamorphose a hall community, replacing the old, pagan world with the glorious Christian world. It's not accidental the fact that the saint's icon was on Steven the Great's war flag[13] and it's not incidental that the hetman Luca Arbore, faithful nobleman of the prince and leader of the army, had chose the illustration of the legend on the exterior painting of his family church. The military saint was embodying the idea of victory, the saviour capacity of those who fight in the name of faith, ideals assumed by the ruler and his army.

The three pictorial episodes form a unitary structure although the narative line of the legend goes on with other several sequences. More specific for the occidental space then for the orthodox one[14] and offering the clues about the painter and his inspiring sources, the legend is emphasized by the narrative pleasure of the painter, found in the

[11] Jacques Le Goff, ***op. cit.***, p. 10, 32, 35.

[12] Jean - Claude Schmitt, ***op. cit.***, p. 67.

[13] Valeriu Anania, ***op. cit.***, p. 202.

[14] Vasile Drăguţ, ***Dragoş Coman maestrul frescelor de la Arbore***, Bucureşti, Editura Meridiane, 1969, p. 28.

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ceremonial feast, the gallant clothes and the multitude of characters which give the moment an aulic atmosphere, transforming the image of the holy soldier into the iconic reference to the medieval cavalier.



Figure 1. Arbore Church - Western exterior panting



*Figure 2. Arbore Church - **Saint George killing the dragon** - Western exterior painting*

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Figure 3. Arbore Church - ***Rescue of the princess and the entrance in the castle*** *-*
Western exterior painting



Figure 4. Arbore Church - ***Receiving Saint George in the castle*** *-*
Western exterior painting

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