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## **Similarities in iconographic art between rural churches from Transylvania in the 17th century and Caesarea of Cappadocia**

### *Abstract:*

The idea of the speech, goes round the importance of byzantine art inside Transylvanian orthodox culture, in the 17th century. The Göreme monastic Complex of Caesarea of Cappadocia has a considerable list of churches with relevant importance in Byzantine iconography. The popular character of this type of art developed on the walls of these architectural jewels manifests itself in the left-handed, but expressive and with such great spontaneity drawing: also, with predilection for narration that lends many elements from the illustration of the Apocryphes, which were born from people's inclination to very detailed stories. This byzantine style we have had for centuries and which is tight to our Christian roots, was cultivated in Wallachia and Moldova and Transylvania in the 14th and 15th centuries and the post-byzantine style in Wallachia in the 15th and 16th centuries. There are similarities between churches raised in the 17th century in Transylvania and the ones from Caesarea of Cappadocia. We refer mainly to the iconographic painting of the Hunedorian churches.

### *Keywords:*

line, colour, church, byzantine, Transylvania.

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## Similitudini în arta iconografică între bisericile rurale din Transilvania secolului XVII și bisericile din Cezareea Capadociei

### *Abstract:*

Lucrarea face referire la importanța artei bizantine în cultura ortodoxă a secolului XVII în Transilvania. Complexul monahal de la Goreme deține o listă considerabilă de biserici de o mare relevanță pentru iconografia bizantină. Stilul popular, naiv dar deosebit de expresiv, spontaneitatea liniei și aplecarea spre narațiune, s-au născut din dorința oamenilor de a spune povestea cât mai în detaliu. Stilul bizantin e strâns legat de rădăcinile noastre creștine și a apărut în Țara Românească și Moldova în secolele 14 și 15 iar stilul post-bizantin în Țara Românească în sec 15 și 16. Sunt similitudini între bisericile de sec 17 în Transilvania și cele din Caesarea Cappadociei. Ne referim în principal la pictura din bisericile hunedorene.

### *Cuvinte cheie:*

linie culoare biserică, bizantin, transilvania.

### **Introduction**

Once with the outliving of the Byzantine Empire, Cappadocia acquires during the first centuries AD, the role of border area, attracting the persecuted Christians by romans. Later, during the 10th and 15th centuries it becomes a place of monastic reclusion, giving birth to the first monasteries. Around 3,000 churches hollowed in stone are scattered on the entire Cappadocian territory, the most known – the ones from Goreme, Zelve or Ihlara [1]. In those places, holy and profane knew the value of cohabitation and the walls were visually laden with Christian Byzantine signs. The coloristic and mystical load of those walls transform these churches in real cultural and religious jewelleryes. *The Black Diamond* of Cappadocia is Karanlik with its most known name Black-Church because of the light which can go in, through a little window, making it dark.

However, still keeps the old frescoes even if time wasn't that supportive. After the removal of monastic life from here, it is been told, that the church was for a long-time pigeon breeding.

It took years (somewhere I found around 14 if I correctly remember), a lot of effort and restorer's determination to bring it to the actual form, which can be seen nowadays. Currently, those frescoes, which represent scenes from the Old and New Testament are considered to be the best conserved from the ancient Cappadocia: Christ Pantocrator, the way to Bethlehem, Nativity, Epiphany, Triumphal entry into

Jerusalem, The Last Supper, The Betrayal of Jesus. Despite the name, the painted frames are a transcendental lull. A fantastic chromatic and compositional balance, the ratio of closed/open or hot/cold well defined.

The elements flow one from the other symmetrical, nothing is left to chance. The saints' face, with a severe air, are treated noticeably and highlighted by clear conscripts.

## 1.

The Göreme monastic Complex has a considerable list of churches with relevant importance in Byzantine iconography: Barbara Church, Cavusin Church, Kiliclar Kusluk Church, Virgin Mary Church, Elmali Church being the smallest and most recent. Famous for her frescoes is, however, the Yilanli church, which is called the Church of the Serpents, representing people from Hell, surrounded by snakes. The ornaments are red/ochre and the frescoes are painted directly on the wall (was also practiced on the canvas glued to the wall). Ochres, dusky or cooler, help having a warm, storytelling atmosphere. From one wall to another, the chromatic dynamics changes, each scene having its dominant colour, keeping steady the neutral grid of the wall. The image of Saint George killing the dragon carries in it, the tension and the timing of the moment through a safe animal drawing, ingenious. A series of other scenes enrich the church, among them: Emperor Constantine and Helena, Apostle Thomas and the founder of St Basileios Church.

On the walls of the church Carikli (called Sandale) appear a series of imposing figures, of considerable proportions. The central dome hosts the image of Christ Pantocrator made in a warm chromatic with refinement and sensibility and a series of busts of some angels, framed in a medallion form. On the central apse there is Deisis (Pantocrator), on the northern apse Mary with infant Jesus, on the southern apse the image of St Michael. The chromatic withdrawn range is red, blue and ochre, predominantly warm.

And because they loved the narrative, in the Tokali church flows the detailed story of Jesus Christ's life, into a heightened chromatic, complicated by the red/green and blue/orange contrast (to ochre). The Sequences of Jesus' childhood are shown us with the simplicity and ease typical of the popular creative act. The blue captures the attention and the warm tents of ochre, by quantity contrast support harmony.

In Elmali Church are simply painted in red, ornaments from the iconoclast period and the frescoes say about Jesus' life and in St Barbara's church, dated from the 11th century, we also find a series of geometric motifs that decorate the dome and the walls like mythological animals and other marks and symbols of host being.

We find here also the preference for the red colour. The broken line – a characteristic of the Byzantine expression in terms of analysis and recomposition of elements which constitute a figure – allows the creation of relationships, as well as the realization of the compositional rhythm.

The popular character of this type of art developed on the walls of these architectural jewels manifests itself in the left-handed but expressive and with such great spontaneity drawing: also, in the predilection for narration that lends many elements from the illustration of the Apocryphes, which were born from people's inclination to very detailed stories [2]. Two types of art are contrasting – the one mentioned above which follows the naïve expression freedom and the aristocratic and theological one, from the capital city, which obeys a strict discipline in subjects' choice and distribution [3].

From the year 843, the Synod of Constantinople strengthened the role of holy icons as liturgical expressions of the spiritual communion with the Church, Christ and His Saints. Since then, the Orthodox Church has kept close these dogmatic foundations, expressing them in an elevated form in the Byzantine and post-Byzantine painting tradition. This Byzantine style we have had for centuries and which is tight to our Christian roots, was cultivated in Wallachia and Moldova and Transylvania in the 14th and 15th centuries and the post-Byzantine style in Wallachia in the 15th and 16th centuries [4].

## 2.

The connection between our Church and Caesarea of Cappadocia is made on October 10, 1776, when the Ecumenical Patriarch Sofronie II and his synod, on Alexandru Ipsilanti's request, granted to metropolitan Gregory II of Wallachia and his followers, the title of *Lessor of the Throne of the Caesarea of Cappadocia*. By This title, the metropolitan of Ungrovlahia would immediately follow the patriarch, this honorary title being an acknowledgement of the importance of the *Metropolitan of Wallachia* and the contribution made by our church and romanian people to Orthodoxy's support [5]. The consequence of this moment, with historical and especially religious importance is the influence on iconography and on church painting from our area, referring here to Transylvanian remains. In the Orthodox tradition, the church painting is a fundamental component of the building itself. There are similarities between churches raised in the 17th century in Transylvania and the ones from Caesarea of Cappadocia. We refer mainly to the iconographic painting of the hunedorian churches. The Art of masonry and mural paintings has its centre, for Romanians, in Transylvania, in the stone sites of voivode's churches.

From a Pavel Binder's review, we find that the churches from Ribita and Criscior were built in the voivode's residence on the infrastructure of wooden churches from countryside in the 14th and 15th centuries and at Densus and Strei, the churches are built following the Byzantine model with cross nave [6]. *The Church of Saint Nicholas* from Densus is on the UNESCO list. On its walls are painted the Doomsday, Saint Marina fighting the devil, the Holy Trinity in which Jesus is dressed in the Romanian traditional shirt, the holy apostle Thomas. Above the place where the priest serves, there is the image of the Pantocrator.

In the other two churches mentioned above, we find as historians say, the first representations of the Holy Kings of Hungary, an iconographic ensemble listed in the UNESCO heritage.

*The Church of the Assumption* in Criscior, built at the beginning of the 14th century, is the result of combined elements from Byzantine and Gothic tradition. On the pronaos' walls were preserved fragments of mural painting from the foundation's age (the votive picture with the founder's family, biblical scenes). The large scenes, realised with bush hammer, are represented in two registers on the three sides of the church. In the upper register, they are painted the Assumption of the Mother of God, Maundy Thursday, barely visible, *The Last Supper and the Cross Road*. Under these scenes, the Ascension of the Cross, the three Holy Kings of Hungary, the votive painting, St Demetrius and Theodor, St Marina hammering the devil and George's struggle with the dragon.

The painting of the military saints has 'socio-political implications'. St Demetrius on the white horse with the high sword and St Theodore on the red horse with the spear in the right hand are placed in direct relation to the votive painting. The episode in which St George kills the dragon is accompanied by a fantasy detail: the maiden who covers her eyes. It is represented with a dress embroidered with pearls, reminding the one of Byzantine princesses.

### 3.

The aesthetics of Byzantine art gives particular attention to details and ornaments. The compositional model is the Byzantine one, with a rigorous drawing. The chromatic palette is smaller here, remains on the second plan as importance, considering on the first place the line. The line is harmoniously connected by colours, the connection between them being very strong.

It also establishes first the outline but also the internal structure between them is very strong. The sense first perceives the colour – all the figures (elements) being in their essence colour.

As the art historian Vasile Dragut notices “the similarities with church paintings in Criscior are so evident” that we can talk about the same popular vision and the same artisan (Dragut, 1968). The richer chromatic range and the stable dynamic, thick-line drawing from Ribița are the conclusive testimonies of a more evolved phase. The church of St Nicholas of Ribița has the image of Archangel Michael sanded in the altar of the church. On the brickwork iconostasis is centrally painted the Mandylion (the face of Jesus with cross form nimbus) on canvas, a theme that has as its source the legend of king Abgar of Edessa, who received a canvas with the image of the Savior – a subject with Byzantine origin. On the sides are showed frames as Annunciation, Birth and the Presentation of Mary. In Ribița, the iconographic canon is preserved, and its fresco is a proof that at that time we were in close artistic connection with the Byzantine World.

The word that expresses the reality of God’s Kingdom is adapted to the imaging of the iconographic painting. This condition is applied in particular to the icon, which is designed to represent, to portray people or events in the light of the God’s Kingdom. These people have lived, these events have taken place in history, in our history, according to the laws that govern our existence, and yet, they allow us to see a reality that does not obey those conditions. True creation requires knowledge and spirit. Therefore, the iconography must use out the techniques and material possibilities belonging to our world (colours, lines, brushes, small coloured stones, etc.), to restore the God’s Kingdom. The direct relation between the icon and the word is clear: what poetry and parables represent for the ear; iconography is for the eye. In the icon’s imaging, the bodily details of the saints are: the neck, ears, eyes, hands become interpretations of reality so that the eyes will be much larger, the neck elongated, the ears shorter, the hands thinner. In the Byzantine painting all the elements exist as movement, as energy. Every detail carries a certain symbolism, therefore, the icon or the Byzantine painting otherwise, becomes a painting of symbols and light of grace. Byzantine painting does not respect the proportions of nature, having its own verbiage and a unique reading code, this is why it surpasses the other church arts. It encodes every element in its own symbols, giving a sacred meaning.

A unique visual language finds out how to render all the spiritual content. In the same register is the iconographic art of the 17th century in Transylvania. Iconography upsets the principles of naturalistic painting (proportion, perspective, linear time, etc.) wishing to suggest a new reality. The people, the events, the animals, the landscapes we can recognize as elements of our earthly existence become bizarre, reorganized in an unusual setting. We can easily identify buildings, trees, stones,

animals, etc., but all this is differently showed us. In our world, the perspective unpreses two lines in a vanishing point, the eye level on the horizon, while its world, the icon, uses a reversed perspective, unwinding the two lines in front of the image. The viewer becomes the one, who is observed, the person in the icon, looks. The divine space opens itself to us, establishes the contact, the icon becomes the window, the relationship portal between the two worlds.

The elongations and thinnings of the Byzantine icon suggest a lack of weight or volume. A peculiarity of the icon is the reference to heavenly Jerusalem, the God's Kingdom where we recognize our world. The frameworks we are accustomed with (animal scenes, landscapes, etc.) are fulfilled with those of the spiritual nature, those from beyond us.

After these mergers at spiritual-creative level appears in iconography, the background painted with gold, with clean golden or golden colour. The person or the event transcend in the world of Christ, bathed in pure light. The symbol of wealth and also the element that best reflects the glow of light, the gold leaf, bring all to a spiritual world where there is no need of sunlight, but there is the divine light and warmth. The framework becomes timeless, undefined space, and the characters seem to float. A naturalistic space would eliminate the backdrop of the divine light, diminish the entry of the kingdom into our world. A Byzantine framework has no depth, figures remain delimited on the surface, the line gives meaning to the colour. Aiming to achieve the rhythm in the relations between figures, the line has plasticity, fluidity and thinness. The image has an existential uniqueness due to the specificity of its line.

### **Conclusion**

Returning to the topic, the connection between the two areas is a very close one, referring to the stylistic and artistic level. The intrinsic rationale of the plastic system, the colourful background and the symbolic characters, the geometric interpretation of the volumes as well as the chromatic refinement, prove the origin of the paintings in these Romanian churches as being Byzantine. Obviously, the iconographic painting of the 7th century in Transylvania, has also known other contributions such the one of Ruthenians in Salișteea Sibiului for example, remembered and studied by Ana Dumitran in an essay on icon and romans (An essay on icon, romans and Protestantism).

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### Notes:

- [1] Cave churches from Ihlara-Capadocia.
- [2] Art. Frescos from Cappadocian Churches, Delvoye, C. June, 2008.
- [3] Idea taken from Art. Frescos from Cappadocian Churches, Delvoye, C. June 2008.
- [4] Art. Cappadocia, A Testimony of a Glowing Christian Civilization, Paunoiu, A. May 2009, Lumina magazine.
- [5] Romanian Patriarch alternate of the throne of Cappadocian Cezaree. Art. Cappadocia, A Testimony of a Glowing Christian Civilization, Paunoiu, A. May 2009, Lumina magazine.
- [6] Pg 91, Considerations on regional churches art from the County of Zarand, Binder, P.



## Appendix



Figure 1. Christ Pantocrator Fresco, Karanlık Church from Open Air Museum of Goreme



Figure 2. Christ Pantocrator Dark Church (Karanlık Kilise) at the Göreme Open Air Museum



Figure 4. Angels Fresco, (Karanlık Kilise) at the Göreme Open Air Museum



Figure 3. Crucifixion Fresco Dark Church (Karanlık Kilise) at the Göreme Open Air



Figures 5-6. Frescos from Yilanli, Goreme Open Air Museum



Figure 7. Crucifixion, early 10th century fresco, Tokali Church



Figures 8-9. Fresco inside Saint Nicholas Church from Ribita in the left side and fresco inside Assumption Church from Criscior



Figure 10. The interior of Ribita Church



Figure 11. The fresco inside Crisan Monastery, Municipality of Ribita