

# THE GOTHIC STYLE FRESCOES BENEATH THE WESTERN GALLERY OF THE CHURCH OF SÂNTĂMĂRIE-ORLEA

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**Keywords:** Mural painting, 1400, Saint Elizabeth, The Three Holy Hungarian Kings, Pauline Order, St. Paul

**Abstract:** The present study is intended to provide a fresh analysis of the Gothic murals in the currently Protestant church of Sântămărie-Orlea. The church and especially its precious frescoes have raised the interest of many scholars, both Hungarian and Romanian, but the poor state of conservation of the paintings allowed room for many different interpretations. A new reading of these frescoes is proposed here, based on a series of historic copies, until recently unknown, which provide the grounds to clear up some misinterpretations. Nevertheless, a certain degree of incertitude will remain for as long as these valuable paintings, dated around 1400, are not restored. The wall paintings are placed inside semi-circular frames formed beneath the vaults supporting the western gallery. Generally we can say that they represent saints important to the royal court. South of the entrance there is St. Elizabeth of Hungary, the first woman canonized from the Árpád Dynasty, who offered a new model of piety. North to the entrance there is a hardly interpretable mural with standing saints. The middle figure is supposedly representing one of the Three Holy Hungarian Kings. The scene placed on the northern wall, with the inscription *OBIT PAUPER PAULUS*, seems to be an original composition most probably connected with the Pauline order, very close to the royal court, whose important achievement was the transportation of the corpse of St. Paul of Thebes (the order's protector) in 1381 to the monastery from the Buda hills. The determination of the style and of the time when this mural was painted is hampered by the actual state of conservation of the frescoes. There is no doubt that the mural is part of the International Gothic style fresco circle, with elements from Italian *Trecento*, dated around 1400. The restoration of the murals will surely bring out new information and even show completely new valences of the Transylvanian Art.

**Rezumat:** Studiul de față are ca subiect frescele gotice de sub tribuna de vest a bisericii reformate din Sântămărie-Orlea. Picturile s-au aflat mereu în atenția cercetătorilor, dar starea lor de degradare a născut diferite interpretări. Prezentarea de față se bazează pe copii istorice inedite, necunoscute până în prezent. Cu toate acestea, incertitudinile vor persista până când frescele vor fi restaurate. Pictate în chenare semicirculare, cele trei scene prezentate aici reprezintă sfinți al căror cult a fost propagat de curtea regală maghiară. În strânga intrării, pe peretele vestic al navei se află Sfânta Elisabeta, prima sfântă din casa Arpadienilor, reprezentând un nou model de pietate. În dreapta intrării se află o frescă greu de descifrat, cu trei sfinți în picioare, cel din mijloc putându-l reprezenta pe unul dintre cei trei regi sfinți ai Ungariei. Scena de pe peretele de nord, însoțită de inscripția *OBIT PAUPER PAULUS* se pare că este o scenă originală legată de călugării paulini, foarte apropiați de curtea regală, a căror realizare importantă a fost aducerea moștelor Sfântului Paul Eremitul, protectorul ordinului, în mănăstirea din Budaszentlőrinc, în anul 1381. Picturile sunt greu de analizat din cauza stadiului lor de degradare. Este fără dubiu vorba despre o frescă aparținând cercului de picturi al stilului goticului internațional, cu elemente italianizante, databilă în jurul anului 1400. Restaurarea acestor picturi aparent neînsemnate ar putea să dea noi valențe artei gotice transilvănene.

The present study is intended to provide a fresh analysis of the Gothic murals in the currently Protestant church of Sântămărie-Orlea (Hunedoara County). The church and especially its precious frescoes have raised the interest of many scholars, both Hungarian and Romanian, but the poor state of conservation of the paintings allowed room for many different interpretations. A new reading of these frescoes is proposed here, based on a series of historic copies, until recently unknown, which provide the grounds to clear up some misinterpretations.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, a certain degree of incertitude will remain for as long as these valuable paintings, dated around 1400, are not restored.

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<sup>1</sup> The present study is a continuation of my PhD dissertation (Szabó 2008). The purpose of it was not to write a monograph of the church of Sântămărie-Orlea, but to analyse the main *fresco* layer from 1311. During the study it became necessary to clarify the essential problems of the history of the building and those of the different painting layers. One of my primary interests was to complete a study of the documents concerning the historical restorations of the church and to catalogue each representation. This catalogue includes an improved description of the images, their sources and bibliography. It also includes my analysis of the style, iconography and iconology, and also a revised interpretation of the scenes. I present the historical and artistic environment at the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, too, with a special focus on the wall paintings of medieval Hungary, paying a special attention to newly discovered frescoes.