

A POSSIBLE PORTRAIT OF UNGRO-WALLACHIA'S FIRST METROPOLITAN. IACHINT OF VICINA (1359-1372)

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Abstract: Founded by the first Basarab princes, the "Saint Nicholas" Princely Church of Curtea de Argeș is a valuable part of Wallachia's history due to its exceptional documentary and artistic value. The church is of a Byzantine art influence with its elegant and sober appearance, the cross-in-square plan, as well as its iconography and stylish frescos. This paper is focusing on the scene painted on the walls of the narthex, scene that represents the *Consecration of Saint Nicholas as a bishop*. The frescos of several monuments of Byzantine art found in the Balkans or Greece are, in part, similar with the scene from Curtea de Argeș; however, their compositions might differ from case to case. The innovative character of the Curtea de Argeș fresco consists of presenting the personages attending the consecration of the saint. While, according to the Herminy, this consecration should be attended by three bishops, at Curtea de Argeș the three characters present at the consecration of the saint are two psaltai and a cantor. We suggest that the portraits of the two psaltai are executed after real life personages, i.e. the first Metropolitan of Ungro-Wallachia, Iachint of Vicina (1359-1372) and the Metropolitan Antim, which was consecrated in 1370. They are singing hymns of glory to Saint Nicholas, the patron saint of the Princely Church of Curtea de Argeș. Thus, the painting of the narthex can be dated around 1370-1372, with the consecration scene holding an outstanding documentary value.

Rezumat: Ctitorie a primilor voievozi Basarabi, Biserica Domnească „Sfântul Nicolae” de la Curtea de Argeș se înscrie în istoria Țării Românești prin excepționala sa valoare documentară și artistică. Edificiul de cult poartă pecetea artei bizantine atât prin aspectul său elegant, sobru, cu planul în „cruce greacă înscrisă” cât și prin repertoriul iconografic și rezolvările stilistice ale picturii în frescă. Studiul aduce în prim plan scena *Hirotonirea Sfântului Nicolae ca episcop*, pictată în narțex. Frescele câtorva monumente de artă bizantină din spațiul balcanic sau din Grecia oferă unele asemănări cu scena de la Argeș dar, în același timp, în fiecare caz sunt sesizabile variante în rezolvarea compozițională. Caracterul particular al frescei de la Argeș, *inovația*, constă în conceptul de redare a personajelor care asistă la hirotonirea sfântului. Deși, conform Erminiei, la această consacrare ar fi trebuit să asiste trei arhierei, la Argeș, cele trei personaje participante la hirotonirea sfântului sunt reprezentate prin doi recitatori de psalmi și un cantor. Portretele celor doi recitatori de psalmi, redată cu mult realism, presupunem că au fost executate după modele reale și păstrează, unul, chipul primului mitropolit al Ungrovlahiei, Iachint de Vicina (1359-1372), iar celălalt, chipul lui Antim, mitropolit hirotonit în anul 1370. Ei înalță imnuri de slavă către Sfântul Nicolae, patronul Bisericii Domnești. Prin această inovație, compoziția introduce într-o scenă sacră timpul prezent, contemporan pictării și sfințirii monumentului argeșean. În acest caz, pictarea narțexului s-ar înscrie în perioada anilor 1370-1372, iar scena capătă o valoare documentară deosebită.

The Princely Church "Saint Nicholas" of Curtea de Argeș is the first church commissioned by a ruler and the oldest cult edifice preserved as such on the territory of Ungro-Wallachia. It is still raising controversies among the historians as far as the precise moment of its construction, the identification of the tombs,¹ the dating of the paintings² and, especially, its function as the first location of the Metropolitan Church of Ungro-Wallachia³ are concerned. The elegant, but sober monument was built according to a cross-in-square plan. Its present aspect is the outcome of a restoration process carried out between 1911-1912.⁴ The archaeological researches of 1920, supervised by Virgiliu Drăghiceanu, brought to light a fascinating inventory of the princely tombs.⁵ The foundation of the old church, dating from the turn of the 13th century,⁶ were discovered during the archaeological campaign led by the archaeologist Nicolae Constantinescu between 1967-1973.

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¹ Drăghiceanu 1923 (CDA), pp. 43-58; Sacerdoțeanu 1935, pp. 52-54; Chihaiia 1974, pp. 7-34; Constantinescu 1984, pp. 94-103; Iosipescu 1998, pp. 25-29.

² Vătășianu 1959, pp. 388-389; Musicescu, Ionescu 1976, pp. 21-31; Theodorescu 1976, p. 186; Dumitrescu 1979 (a), p. 53, (b), pp. 541-558; Constantinescu 1984, pp. 42-43; Iosipescu 1998, pp. 25-27.

³ Iorga 1908, pp. 17-30; Lăzărescu 1968, pp. 151-152; Chihaiia 1974, pp. 46-65; Musicescu, Ionescu 1976, pp. 10-14; Theodorescu 1976, pp. 175-177; Ionescu 1977, pp. 43-44; Constantinescu 1984, p. 26.

⁴ Cerchez 1923 (CDA), pp. 77-100; Ghika-Budești 1923 (CDA), pp. 105-121.

⁵ Drăghiceanu 1923 (CDA), pp. 9-76; *Ibidem* (JS), pp. 134-152; Brătianu 1921, pp. 1-23; *Idem* 1923; *Idem* 1924, pp. 39-54.

⁶ Constantinescu 1984, p. 144.



Fig. 1. St. Nicholas is consecrated Bishop, a fresco, “Saint Nicholas” Princely Church of Curtea de Argeș, second half of the 14th century (narthex).

The frescoes, which are more than 300, have become the subject of numerous and thorough studies regarding their dating, the iconographic representation, the stylistic analogies with the mosaics of Chora Church⁷ or with the paintings on the Byzantine monuments spread across the Balkan world,⁸ each time pointing out the elements that are particular to them. Dating from the 2nd half of the 14th century, the fresco decoration “reflects a period when the innovating experiences in the field of the Byzantine painting had come to an end and bringing forth the outcome; the shapes of the Paleolog’s style had been interwoven both in the fundamental structures and their different variants (...). The painting of the Princely Church belongs to an artistic period that had attained its very peak”.⁹

The paintings have undergone, only partially, several preservation and restoration interventions: in 1750 made by Radu Zugravu, in 1827, less successful, by Pandeileimon Zograf, then in 1916¹⁰ performed by the painter Noroceea and, eventually, in the 1980s and 1990s by a team of restorers led by Professor Dan Mohanu.¹¹

The Painting of the Narthex

The present study is pointing out some observations regarding one of the scenes painted on the walls of the narthex. The frescoes of this part of the church as they are today, grasp: many scenes from *Saint Nicholas’ Life*, *The Presentation of Virgin Mary to the Temple*, *The Wedding of the Virgin*, fragments that depict *Ecumenical Councils* and *The Last Judgement*, prophets, martyrs and the scene of the Deisis. This last painting has been studied by scholars who have tried to identify the portrait of the prince-founder.

⁷ Analogies between the iconographic representations at Curtea de Argeș and the ones of Chora Church (Kahrie Djami, Istanbul) in: Mihail 1923 (CDA), p.182; Diehl 1926, pp. 831-833; Underwood 1966, I, pp. 94, 118, 121; II, pl. 177-179, pl. 238; Vătășianu 1959, pp. 356, 357, 359, 373, 374.

⁸ Grabar 1968, p. 108, finds stylistic analogies of the iconographic representations on the monuments of Nagoričino, Gračanica, Lesnovo or Dečani; Vătășianu 1959, pp. 340-391; Musicescu, Ionescu 1976, pp. 21-31.

⁹ Musicescu, Ionescu 1976, p. 21.

¹⁰ The restoration of the painting begun in 1916 identified the former restoration works over the original painting, see: Mihail 1923 (CDA), pp. 172-189.

¹¹ Mohanu 1984, p. 44; Mohanu, Bălan 1998, pp. 53-60.

Still bearing the original paint from the 14th century, the frescoes showing *Saint Nicholas' Life*, the patron of the church, have been barely mentioned by the art critics. The iconography, depicted in friezes, consists of 13 scenes as follows: *The Birth of Saint Nicholas* and *The Schooling of the Saint*, on the eastern wall of the narthex, right part of the entrance to the nave, *Saint Nicholas is consecrated bishop*, *Three generals in prison*, *Saint Nicholas appears to Constantine*, on the western wall, right part of the entrance to the narthex; above the entrance door, the scenes: *Saint Nicholas appears to Ablabius* and *The Saint saves three young men from execution* and at the left part of the entrance, the scenes: *Three generals come before Constantine*, *Three generals thank St. Nicholas* and *The Three Maidens*. The frescoes *Praying at the Saint's icon*, *The Saint destroys idols* and *Sea Stories* are painted on the eastern wall of the narthex, in the left part of the entrance to the nave. It should be mentioned that the scene *The Death of the Saint* is not depicted.

The Scene: “*Saint Nicholas is consecrated Bishop*” in the fresco of the Princely Church of Curtea de Argeș

Saint Nicholas is consecrated bishop is one of the scenes from *Saint Nicholas' Life*¹² (Fig. 1) that has drawn my attention. It takes place in front of the ciborium. The altar table, a triangular pediment carried by two Corinthian columns, and the curtain are depicted in the scene. An old archbishop with a halo, wearing sticharion with short liturgical embroidered cuff, stole, epigonation, polystavrion and omophorion,¹³ is giving the blessing to the Saint with his right hand. He is keeping the consecration roll unfurled in his left hand. The Saint with a halo is wearing the same clothes as the archbishop and is receiving the consecration. His body is slightly bent forward, his hands reaching for the archbishop. This part of the fresco observes precisely the recommendations of the Hermyni. Further more, the same religious dogmas show that three bishops¹⁴ or three hierarchs and two deacons carrying tricerions with torches¹⁵ are present at the Saint's consecration. Three characters are present at the Saint's consecration in the left part of the fresco of Argeș. The first character is standing behind the Saint. He is an elderly man with a majestic posture, who is keeping with his left hand a long crosier with a T-shaped handle, while he is making a gesture with his right hand as those who recite psalms or sing hymns of glory. His long face is framed by his long grey hair and beard. He is wearing a hemisphere-shaped white hat decorated with horizontal parallel rows. His red clothes consist of two pieces: a long robe with tight sleeves and decorative cuffs and another large-sleeved piece of clothing up to his knees and decorative stripes on his shoulders. The character's clothes are made of brocade richly decorated with vegetal motifs. The painter skilfully grasps his attitude: calm, sober, deeply wrapped in thoughts and somehow sad, thus revealing his noble spirituality. It goes without saying that the gifted painter manages to convey his deepest feelings (Fig. 2). There are two other young men in the left part of the composition. The first one is wearing a conical-shaped hat and a robe with tight sleeves. There is another large-sleeved piece of clothing over the robe, up to his knees. Both robes are blue. The clothes and the position of his arms and fingers are proper to a cantor.¹⁶ Next to him, there is a character with long black hair and beard who is frowning and seems to be waiting the cantor's answer after a previous conversation. His golden clothes are a plain long tight-sleeved robe and another large-sleeved one over it. He is wearing a hemisphere-shaped white hat decorated with horizontal parallel rows (Fig. 3). The pieces of clothing worn by the three characters present at the Saint's consecration are in keeping accordance all decorated with a medallion in the central area around a male bust rendered in grisaille. The shape of a high building with a gable roof is painted in the right part. There is a red awning between the building and the ciborium.

¹² Mihail 1923 (CDA), p. 183, fig. 287, the image is not interpreted correctly as “Saint Nicholas is consecrated as priest”.

¹³ Braniște 1985, pp. 526-531.

¹⁴ Dionisie din Furna, *Carte de pictură*, București, 1979, p. 214.

¹⁵ Erminia picturii bizantine, Oradea, 1979, p. 226.

¹⁶ Regarding the cantors' representation, mention should be made on N. Zias', *Some representation of Byzantine cantor*, in Αρχαιολογία αναλεχτα εξ Αθηνων, 2, 1969, pp. 233-238, apud Ševčenco 1983, p.83, note 27. Another study, Neil K. Moran, *Singers in late Byzantine and Slavonic painting*, Canada, 1986. The works have not been accessible.



Fig. 2. St. Nicholas is consecrated Bishop, a fresco, "Saint Nicholas" Princely Church of Curtea de Argeș, second half of the 14th century (narthex) - detail.



Fig. 3. St. Nicholas is consecrated Bishop, a fresco, "Saint Nicholas" Princely Church of Curtea de Argeș, second half of the 14th century (narthex) - detail.

The subject of the scene is written above the image.¹⁷ In the upper part, the frieze is bordered by a decoration with white stalks and half-palmettes on a dark background.

As far as this group is concerned, of the three characters attending the Saint's consecration, there are two descriptions in Romanian historiography. Thus, O. Tafrali made the following observations: "*A gauche, trois personnages, dont deux évêques, couronnés de leurs mitres, assistent à la cérémonie. Le premier est un vieillard. Il s'appuie sur un long bâton et fait un geste vers le groupe de droite. Les deux autres s'entretiennent. Au fond, on voit des édifices décoratifs, au milieu desquels il y a un bas-reliefs représentant un personnage dans un médaillon. Les restaurations du XIX^e siècle avaient modifié cette scène quant aux détails. Les*

polystavrion et les mitre des évêques avaient été supprimés".¹⁸ The same scene is described by D. Barbu as follows: "[...] the Saint is consecrated bishop: to his right there is a haloed character with polystavrion, who gives the Saint, he himself dressed with a polystavrion, a roll; to the left, other three figures, two of them being bishops wearing mitres; in the background, there is a sanctuary with triangular pediment and awning".¹⁹

N. Ševčenco on mentioning the scene of the Saint's consecration of the church "St. Nicholas Orphanos" of Thessaloniki, made analogies with the fresco of Argeș and identified the characters as follows: "Other clerical orders are also represented. At Nicholas' consecration as bishop at Salonica, there are, in addition to three priests, three men wearing white beehive-shaped hats, presumably the cantor, or Psaltai. These cantors reappear in the bishop scene at Curtea, one wearing a triangular hat, and one leaning on a staff watching the

¹⁷ The inscription with Slavonic letters is partially preserved. It is not mentioned by Brătulescu 1923 (CDA); Tafrali 1931, p. 200, considers that it was initially written in Greek.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Barbu 1986, p. 56 (pt. 9).



Fig. 4. Akathistos - detail, Dečani, 14th century (Todič 1989).

consecration. On this fresco, all the other, more familiar, figures are absent".²⁰

The Byzantine art revealed in frescoes, icons or illuminated manuscripts, depicts cantors or psaltai. Thus, in the scene *the Akathistos Hymn* of Dečani,²¹ painting dating from the 1st half of the 14th century, there is a representation similar to the cantor of Argeș as far as the position of the hands, clothes type and their colour are concerned (Fig. 4). At the church St. Nicholas Orphanos of Thessaloniki²² (third decade of the 14th century), in the scene *The Death of Saint Nicholas*, there are "two men wearing white spherical hats and full-sleeved robes, one blue, one red; over their shoulders they wear golden stoles, which are embroidered with an elaborate pattern of crosses inscribed in circles. Their gestures identify them as psaltai, or cantors. The spherical hat is the *skaranikon*, worn not only by the Emperor and imperial officials, but by certain members of the clergy as well".²³ N. Ševčenko further describes the clothes worn by another group of characters: "To the left of these two figures is another psaltes, wearing a conical hat, the *skiadion*, and a long robe without the stole. Behind the psaltai is a group of bareheaded figures, possibly other members of the choir".²⁴

At Marcov Monastir (1376-1381), in the fresco that shows *The Death of Saint Nicholas*: "On the far side of the bier stand the psaltai, this time all seven of them in conical hats, the *skiadia*. The two foremost of them

have lavishly embroidered mantles with squares of differing embroidery on their shoulders".²⁵ The same conical hats are worn by the cantors who worship *The Saviours' Birth*, at Ravanica (1385-1386).²⁶ At Târnovo, chapel *Saints Peter and Paul*, the scene *The fourth Ecumenical Council* depicts elderly characters in the background, left part, who might have been clerics wearing phelonion and *skaranikon*²⁷ (Fig. 5). An illuminated Greek manuscript dating from 1370-1375 and representing the Council of Constantinople (1351) presided by Ioan VI Cantacuzino, immortalises, in the background, cantors, some of them wearing *skaranikon*, while others have *skiadia*²⁸ on their heads. At the end of the same century, in Ungro-Wallachia, at Cozia, in the scenes depicting

²⁰ Ševčenko 1983, p. 83.

²¹ Todič 1989, fig. 5.

²² Ševčenko 1983, fig. 23:13.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 137 and see notes 16 and 17.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 138.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 139, fig. 36:13.

²⁶ Millet 1916, pp. 163-167, fig. 121; Velmans 1983, p. 239.

²⁷ Grabar 1928, pl. XLVII.

²⁸ Paris, National Library, gr. 1242, fol. 5^v, *apud* Ebersolt 1926, pl. LX; Rice 1959, pl. 190.



Fig. 5. The 4th Ecumenical Council, fresco, Tărnovo, 15th century (Grabar 1982).

depicted differently: the three of them, just two or one of them. An outstanding work³⁰ mentions chronologically these iconographic matters as they are shown in the oldest icons, dating from the 11th -12th centuries,³¹ in the frescoes of Monemvasia, St. Sophia (late 12th or early 13th century), Kastania, St. Nicholas (second quarter of the 13th century), Bojana, St. Nicholas (1259),³² Sopočani Diaconicon (about 1270), Manastir, St. Nicholas (1271), Klenia, St. Nicholas (last quarter of the 13th century), Arilje, St. Achilles (1296), Prizren, Bogorodica Ljeviska (1307-1309), Staro Nagoričino, St. George (1318), Gračanica (1321), Thessaloniki, St. Nicholas Orphanos (third decade of the 14th century), Donja Kamenica, Church of the Virgin (second quarter of the 14th century), Maza, St. Nicholas (1325-1326), Kyriakoselia (first half of the 14th century), Platsa, St. Nicholas of Campinary (1348-1349), Sopočani, Nicholas Chapel (about 1342-1346), Dečani, Church of Ascension (about 1343), Markov Manastir, St. Demetrius (1376-1381), Curtea de Argeș, St. Nicholas (last quarter of the 14th century), Caledžica, Church of Saviour (1384-1396), Kalotino, St. Nicholas (late 15th century). Since the painting of Curtea de Argeș depicts just the scene *Saint Nicholas is consecrated bishop*, I am going to mention some of the churches where this very fresco appears, pointing out the way the clerics, who are assisting the consecration, are painted. Thus, at Donja Kamenica, Church of the Virgin, there is only a priest and a bishop who attended the consecration. They are behind the Saint³³ (Fig. 6). At Dečani, there are four bishops and a deacon behind the Saint³⁴ (Fig. 7); I have already mentioned the fresco of Thessaloniki,³⁵ while at Sopočani the Saint is assisted by another bishop. There is another subdeacon behind the bishop who performs the consecration. He is holding a ewer and a chalice in his hands³⁶ (Fig. 8). At Marcov Manastir, in the Serbian Macedonia, the saint's consecration is witnessed by a deacon carrying a torch³⁷ (Fig. 9). This kind of composition by simplifying the scene is frequently painted on icons since the surface reserved to the scenes on the longitudinal

the Ecumenical Councils, there are high-ranked characters wearing skaranikon decorated with the basileus' bust.²⁹ The skaranikon worn by the clerics is different in shape and decoration.

The Scene “*Saint Nicholas is consecrated bishop*” in the Byzantine Painting, 13th-14th centuries

The iconographic subject draws its inspiration from *The Life of Saint Nicholas* and is often tackled in the Byzantine painting present on Greek, Bulgarian or Serbian monuments. This cycle includes the scenes *Saint Nicholas is consecrated deacon*, *Saint Nicholas is consecrated priest* and *Saint Nicholas is consecrated bishop*, which are

²⁹ Barbu 1986, fig. 77, 79, 80.

³⁰ Ševčenco 1983, pp. 76-85.

³¹ *Ibidem*, Sinai Icon, fig. 1, fig. 3:3, 3:4.

³² Grabar 1928, pl. XVII, XVIII, XIX.

³³ Ševčenco 1983, pl. 24:2.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, fig. 34:5.

³⁵ Ševčenco 1983, p. 83.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, fig. 32:2.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, fig. 36:5.

sides is quite limited. There is just a deacon carrying a torch³⁸ (Fig. 10) painted on the icon *Saint Nicholas*, dating from the 14th-15th centuries, kept at the Church "Saint Nicholas" of Petritis Kastoria. This composition is quite similar to the fresco of Marcov Manastir. There is the same consecration scene, but this time without any witnesses³⁹ (Fig. 11), on a Greek icon at the Monastery of St. John of Patmos, dating from the 15th century.



Fig. 6. St. Nicholas is consecrated Bishop, a fresco, Donja Kamenica, church of The Virgin, second quarter of the 14th century (Ševčenco 1984).

Ecclesiastical Life in Ungro-Wallachia in the second half of the 16th century. Iachint of Vicina, the first Metropolitan of Ungro-Wallachia (1359-1372)

The activity of erecting the church at Curtea de Argeș, following a cross-in-square plan, as well as the selection of the iconographic themes for the frescoes inside, must have been closely supervised by Iachint, the first Metropolitan of Ungro-Wallachia.

In the spring of 1359 two documents, both in Greek,⁴⁰ speak of the acknowledgement of the Metropolis of Ungro-Wallachia by the Patriarchate of Constantinople, an acknowledgement which meant establishing connections and duties towards the Constantinopolitan Patriarchate, as well as giving the Wallachian hierarch a place in the Patriarchal Synod. One of the documents contained the synodal resolution, which enclosed "the powerful and Saint Emperor" Ioan V Palaiologos' acceptance (Emperor between 1341-1376 and 1379-1391) to remove the Metropolitan Iachint from Vicina to the Court of the Wallachian Prince, where he had already been living. He was also acknowledged as "Metropolitan of all Ungro-Wallachia", with the rights and the duties associated with this position.⁴¹ The other document is the letter sent by the Ecumenical patriarch Callistus I (1350-1354, 1355-1363) to Prince Alexandru Basarab, and where Iachint of Vicina's appointment as Metropolitan of Ungro-Wallachia is recognized.⁴² For more than ten years the Metropolitan has piously and peacefully followed his spiritual vocation, overseeing, at the same time, the erection of the ecclesiastical edifice at Curtea de Argeș, a complex which has been believed to have played the role of Metropolitan See in that period, by most historians.⁴³ In 1369, during Vlaicu's reign (1364-1377), a document dated September 1369 mentions Metropolitan Iachint when it records Hieromonk Hariton's visit in our country, a hieromonk who came from Koutloumousiou Monastery in Mount Athos.⁴⁴ In the following year, 1370, three documents

³⁸ Catalogue p. 26, fig. 12.

³⁹ Ševčenco 1983, fig. 41:5.

⁴⁰ Hurmuzaki XIV, 1, nr. III, IV, pp. 1-6.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, nr. III, pp. 1-4; DIR XIII, XIV, XV, nr. 9, pp. 13-14.

⁴² Hurmuzaki, *op cit.*, nr. IV, pp. 4-6; DIR XIII, XIV, XV, nr. 10, pp. 14-16; Giurescu 1959, pp. 678-680; Șerbănescu 1959, pp. 730-733.

⁴³ See the 2nd footnote.

⁴⁴ DIR XIII, XIV, XV, nr. 11, p. 17.



Fig. 7. St. Nicholas is consecrated Bishop, a fresco, Dečani, Church of the Ascension, ca 1343 (Ševčenco 1983).



Fig. 8. St. Nicholas is consecrated Bishop, a fresco, Sopočani, Church of the Trinity, Nicholas chapel, ca. 1342-1346 (Ševčenco 1983).

hierarchy for Ungro-Wallachia, he would have his approval.⁴⁷ In the same year, a document written in August by Daniel Kritopoulos, the *dikaiophylax*, states that the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Holy Synod had ordained him *Metropolitan of a part of the most holy Metropolis of Ungro-Wallachia*.⁴⁸ The Patriarchate, knowing Daniil Kritopoulos's ambitious nature, asked him to give a written statement that he would not upset Metropolitan Iachint, and he would live in harmony with him, without trying to take over the whole Metropolis.⁴⁹

mention an unpleasant situation which affected the Metropolitan. Patriarch Philoteos (when he became Patriarch for the second time 1364-1376) suspects Iachint of a desire to obtain the Wallachian Church's independence from the Ecumenical Patriarchate and, because of this, in the same year he sends *Dikaiophylax Daniil Kritopoulos* to investigate if the charges against the Metropolitan of Ungro-Wallachia are indeed accurate.⁴⁵ In a "Pitac" (an official letter) addressed to the Patriarchate, Iachint complains about the patriarch's low opinion, an opinion which was the result of evil plots done: "and I have this arrow in my heart, and it totally infects my soul (...) because I know that certain people have provoked Your Beatitude's wrath against me and may God forgive their sin".⁴⁶ After these words, the metropolitan asks to be forgiven for not being able to come to pay homage to the Patriarch. The Wallachian Prince prevented him to make the journey, because the journey was long and also because there was a threat of plague. It was also difficult for him to travel because he was old and sick. In his letter Iachint also mentions the fact that the *dikaiophylax* is on his way to the Patriarchate, and that he was sent by the great Prince and his noblemen (boyars) to pay homage to the Patriarch. Iachint also explains that if the *dikaiophylax* is ordained

⁴⁵ Giurescu 1959, p. 695; Șerbănescu 1959, p. 732.

⁴⁶ Hurmuzaki, *op. cit.*, nr. VI, pp. 7-8; DIR XIII, XIV, XV, nr. 13, pp. 20-21.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ Hurmuzaki, *op. cit.*, nr. V, pp. 6-7; DIR XIII, XIV, XV, nr. 14, p. 21.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*; see also Giurescu 1959, pp. 695-696.

In October 1370, through a synodal document, Antim (the former *dikaiophylax* chir Daniil) was appointed Metropolitan of a part of Ungro-Wallachia, while the one who had been moved from Vicina was his archbishop.⁵⁰ The synodal document contains Antim's detailed moral portrait: "a pious, virtuous and praiseworthy man, a steadfast person, having the grace of Christ, who is suitable for this great dignity and is above others in wisdom and virtue."⁵¹ It was then when the second Wallachian Metropolis was established, a metropolis with its see at Severin. In 1372, Iachint passed away.⁵² His tomb is probably at the Princely Church of Curtea de Argeş, whose patron is Saint Nicholas, the place where he celebrated the liturgy until the end of his life.⁵³

I consider it is important to summarize the Wallachian ecclesiastical life during Iachint's office (1359-1372) and Antim's first two years (1370-1372), because I believe that the scene The Ordination of Saint Nicholas as Bishop presents the faces of the first Wallachian Hierarchs in the persons of the two *psaltai*, i.e. assistants to the saint's consecration.⁵⁴ The individualised rendering of the proportions of the body

and the expressivity of the faces suggest the fact that these characters are portrayed using real models. The documents preserved in the archives help us identify the older character, a person with features showing a great spiritual noblesse. He is pensive, solemn and sad, and leans on a T-shaped crosier (i.e. a long pastoral staff with a head shaped similar to the letter T) and he probably is Metropolitan Iachint, in his last days of office. The second Protopsaltis (i.e. a person who is in charge of the music and the chanting during the office) was probably Metropolitan Antim, a younger man, praiseworthy, pious and virtuous, but ambitious, who was in office during Metropolitan Iachint's last two years, 1370-1372. The group of chanters sing a hymn of glory for Saint Hierarch Nicholas, the patron saint of the church. The solemn sacredness of the scene receives through this compositional solution a present time, contemporaneous with the sanctification of the monument. The composition unfolds on a vertical plane, in an atmosphere of intense spirituality. The painting of the narthex was done between 1370 (the year when Antim was appointed the second Metropolitan of Ungro-Wallachia)



Fig. 9. St. Nicholas is consecrated Bishop, fresco, Marcov Manastir, 1376-1381 (Ševčenco 1983).

⁵⁰ Hurmuzaki, *op. cit.*, nr. VII, pp. 8-9; DIR XIII, XIV, XV, nr. 15, p. 22.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² Iachint's successor was Hariton (1372-1381), and he was followed by Antim Kritopoulos (1381-1402), the former Metropolitan of Severin; see Șerbănescu 1959, pp. 733-740.

⁵³ Rădulescu 2011, pp. 133-150.

⁵⁴ For the representation of hierarchs in Byzantine painting see Velmans 1971, pp. 123-132.



Fig. 10. St. Nicholas, Icon, 14th - 15th centuries - detail. Byzantine Museum of Kastoria (Catalogue 2008).



Fig. 11. St. Nicholas is consecrated Bishop, Icon, Patmos, Monastery of St. John, second third of the 15th century - detail (Ševčenco 1983).

and 1372 (the year when Metropolitan Iachint died).⁵⁵ I believe that the sanctification of the church was done in the same period. Furthermore, the art historians have supported the theory that the church was painted during the reign of Prince Vladislav Vlaicu (1364-1377).⁵⁶

Conclusion*

The research on the mural paintings of the Princely Church of Curtea de Argeș has not discovered the name of the first painter of the first frescoes. The great artistic endeavour during the 14th century still remains veiled by anonymity,⁵⁷ unless the name of an artist is hidden somewhere on the plaster under the 14th-century frescoes.⁵⁸ The stylistic commentators discussing the characteristics of the murals in the altar and nave on the one hand and those in the narthex on the other hand, have noticed the existence of at least two artists, the one who painted the nave and the altar being more talented.⁵⁹ It is believed that the manner of execution of the images with scenes from “The Life of Saint Nicholas”, in the graphic style, differs from the rest of the mural: *“exact and inelastic contours, almost calligraphic faces, with little expression: a static, linear painting, although very elaborated. The colour has no vibration and becomes decorative, without brilliance or nuances.”*⁶⁰ The hybrid aspect presented by some characters in “The Life of Saint Nicholas” cycle seems to be due to the common division within *fresco (affresco)* paintings, namely some painters drew the clothes, others the background, while others had the role of portraying the faces, some details, etc.⁶¹ In rendering the three characters who take part in the scene of Saint Nicolas’ consecration we notice the difference between the expressive realism of their faces

⁵⁵ Other hypothesis of dating the wall paintings in the Princely Church at Curtea de Argeș, based on stylistic or historical perspectives were commented on by Vătășianu 1959, pp. 388-389; see also Dumitrescu 1979 a, b.

⁵⁶ Sacerdoțeanu 1935, p. 51; Musicescu, Ionescu 1976, p. 11; Theodorescu 1976, pp. 185-186; Constantinescu 1984, pp. 42-43.

⁵⁷ In Serbia the names of some fresco painters from the first half of the 13th century are known, see: Radoici 1955, pp. 113-119.

⁵⁸ Mohanu 2010, p. 56, fig. 8.

⁵⁹ Mihail 1923 (CDA), pp. 172-174; Musicescu, Ionescu 1976, p. 25.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 29.

⁶¹ Mohanu 1984, p. 50.

and the rigid and static treatment of their costumes; yet, under those drapes, their bodies show their age. The psychological treatment of the faces contributes to the characterization of well-defined individualities. The artist introduces some special relations among the characters. The older character, who watches the ordination of the saint, acquires an increased importance because he is situated in the centre of the scene, where he creates a certain balance in the composition, because of his figure and his impressive garments, which are red and with rich phytomorphic embroideries. This decorative pattern can be found, in a stylised rendering, on the phelónion of a gisant from the Princely Church, a gisant which is situated on what is believed to be Metropolitan Iachint's tomb.⁶² The hierarch supervised the execution of the murals and must have instructed the painter-artist to immortalise his and Metropolitan Antim's faces, in that particular fresco. The painting acquires thus a special documentary value. The presence of portraits of princes and hierarchs in the edifice of worship at Curtea de Argeş distinguishes Ungro-Wallachia as a politically, administratively and ecclesiastically well-organised power.

Saint Nicholas Princely Church of Curtea de Argeş, which is an important monument of Byzantine art, bearing evidence of the establishing of the Principality of Ungro-Wallachia, requires urgent procedures of conservation, of removing any decay factors and of securing a microclimate necessary for the preservation of the painting. It is mandatory that the administrative institutions in charge of protecting our cultural heritage must start the procedures to save this monument which is a landmark of national and universal civilisation.

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