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► **To cite this version:**

Vladimir Agrigoroaei. Prolegomena to a Study of the Religious and Cultural Networks Linking the Romanian Communities of Medieval Transylvania. *Journal of Religion & Society*, 2019, Religious History and Culture of the Balkans, suppl. 19, pp.83-123. halshs-02272057

**HAL Id: halshs-02272057**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02272057v1>**

Submitted on 27 Aug 2019

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*Journal of  
Religion & Society*  
Supplement Series

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The Kripke Center

Supplement 19 (2019)

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## Religious History and Culture of the Balkans

Edited by Nicolae Roddy

### 6. Prolegomena to a Study of the Religious and Cultural Networks Linking the Romanian Communities of Medieval Transylvania

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#### Abstract

A critical survey of the religious medieval monuments and art of the western Carpathian mountains, Lower Mureş Valley, and the Haţeg region witnesses to the history of Romanian communities in what was once part of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary. As such, the interpretation of this peripheral artistic corpus remains a never-ending matter of dispute among the religious and cultural complexities of Transylvanian society. This paper asserts that while Transylvania lies outside the usual geographical boundaries of the Balkans, medieval Transylvanian Romanians largely followed cultural norms from south of the Danube, and thus belong within the Balkan milieu.

Keywords: Transylvania, Balkans, religious monuments

## Introduction

“Without deviation from the norm, progress is not possible” (Frank Zappa).

Denunciations of the Western historical paradigm have multiplied: Said struggled with Europe’s cultural and political imagery; more recently, Goody denounced the uneven and arbitrary divisions of the historical periods; and there are many more whose critiques and condemnations seek new theories and criteria. But research has come to a standstill because the theoretical approaches rely on famous corpora. To get out of this problematic block one must look into peripheral areas, and into the history of the individual, in order to find better solutions. The following pages express a personal point of view that does not posit a solution, but attempts to locate a locus of research where a future solution is likely to be found.

The focus here concerns religious medieval monuments and works of art from the western Carpathian mountains (*Munții Apuseni*), the Lower Mureș Valley (*cursul inferior al Mureșului*) and the Hațeg Land (*Țara Hațegului*).<sup>1</sup> Most of these monuments may be linked to the history of the Romanians communities of Transylvania, then a part of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary, so it is no surprise that the interpretation of this peripheral artistic corpus has been a never-ending matter of dispute. Starting with the very notion of feudalism (something much too difficult to analyze in the particular social fabric of the Romanian medieval communities of Transylvania, where the status of the *knez* – the leader – differed from that of the Hungarian noble), and ending with an artificial differentiation of Catholic (Hungarian or Saxon) and Orthodox (Romanian) monuments, one must note that the various theoretical interpretations of this corpus have often relied on exaggerations and hidden agendas. Such things are the norm in the Balkans. Although from a geographical point of view, medieval Transylvania does not belong to the Balkans, medieval Romanians generally followed cultural norms from south of the Danube, thus belonging to the Balkan milieu.

### Hațeg and Neighboring Areas toward the North

Hațeg is a bowl-shaped valley in the southern Carpathians, located in the southwestern corner of Transylvania near the Banat. The concentration of medieval monuments linked with the presence of the Romanian communities is quite high in this region. Compared with the medieval Romanian principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia, where fourteenth and fifteenth-century church monuments are scarce, the density of late medieval churches in Hațeg runs quite high. Colț and Prislop had monastery churches; Densuș, Peșteana, and Ostrov had churches with paintings. There was Sântămărie Orlea, a Catholic church, also with murals, but serving a Hungarian community. Other churches, still preserved, are those of Râu de Mori and Sânpetru. There are ruined ones as well, in which paintings have been found, such as Răchitova.

From this land one could cross into Wallachia toward the south, which at that time was a Romanian Orthodox principality. Hațeg was part of the Hungarian kingdom, and the Romanians of this land lived under Catholic rule. Since Hațeg was a peripheral area, western influences arrived quite late. Their presence is felt mainly from the fourteenth century

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<sup>1</sup> Editor’s note: The Romanian alphabet contains two modified Latin consonants, ț and ș, which represent the phonemes *ts* and *sb* respectively. Modified vowels include ă (pronounced as the *a* in *anon*), â and î (which basically sound alike and, in the absence of any English equivalent, reasonably approximate the sound of *oo* in *soot*).

onwards, and the period that interests us most is that of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when western fashions become more and more evident, conflicting with those coming from the Balkans. This happened also in the churches located to the north of Hațeg, in the Lower Mureș Valley, exemplified by Streisângeorgiu and Leșnic, but by Strei especially. To the north of the Mureș valley are the Apuseni mountains, where other churches linked to a Romanian presence may be found. There is the monastery church of Râmeț, whose paintings date from the second half of the fourteenth century, but there are also painted churches of the next century, namely those of Crișcior, Ribița, and Hălmagiu. There are churches without paintings, such as the two in Lupșa, and churches where it is difficult to ascertain whether they belonged to the Catholics or to the Orthodox, or whether the community was Romanian, Saxon, or Hungarian. Such is the case at Zlatna.

It appears to this writer that all these monuments constitute a network, or several adjoining networks; however, this network cannot be ethnically Romanian, nor can it be politically Hungarian; neither can it be Orthodox, for it also includes Catholic churches. It seems to be the product of several unique or individual choices, connected, yet at the same time disconnected from one another. For this reason this paper pleads for greater theoretical flexibility, doubled by greater rigor of detail. Although it will not be consistent in all respects (for one's mind works with predefined templates), I wish to approach the history of the individual in this way, and not the history of greater cultural phenomena. But what if the individual is not absent? What if these cultural acts are unique? The lack of literature – for literature is the only witness to an individual consciousness or to the experience of the culture creator – makes the history of Transylvanian art seem dependent on history proper or even on archaeology. Because the voices of the artists have materialized only rarely in written form, the actual work of art is more and more elusive. And when it speaks about its cultural context, the work of art becomes the pretext for a discourse of social, political, ethnic, or economic history. In order to be better understood, some theories or assumptions about the monuments of Hațeg or the southern Apuseni Mountains need to be discussed.

### **How this Type of Criticism may be Applied to Transylvania**

Theoretical premises are completely lacking for identifying the medieval Transylvanian cultural networks. The introductory part of the present study may look like a caricature in the eyes of other specialists. The state of research is messy, even though the mess is perfectly understandable from a historiographical level. In the Proletkult era, and later on during National Communist times, Marxism and Protochronism, two not so different incarnations of Determinism, tyrannically governed research in the field of history proper, but also in the world of art history. Even though some western ideas were embraced, most local researchers, for obvious reasons, preferred to use theories and ideas close to, or derived from Marxism. In the absence of a Romanian medieval literature (doubled by the poor state of the neighboring Hungarian one), which could have emphasized cultural history or drawn attention to the existence of what one may call literary subjectivity,<sup>2</sup> nothing was able to counterbalance the

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<sup>2</sup> The absence of a medieval literature in Romanian (Romanian literature begins in the sixteenth century, even though certain translations of the Psalter and Gospels may have been made in the fifteenth century) and the poor state of its Hungarian counterpart forbids us to analyze the middle ground between high culture, of a medieval Latin or Old Church Slavonic type, and the popular culture, eminently oral, of vernacular languages. Such

insistence with which academic research accentuated the social and economic factors. The history of art in Romanian territory became a nursery of Marxist ideas. One decade after another, the specialists embraced a “feudal art,” a “Gothic art” (taxonomic and hierarchical), or – outside Transylvania – a history of mentalities “at the beginnings of Romanian medieval culture,” an idea inspired by the French *Annales* School.

After the Fall of Communism in 1989, newer theories penetrated more easily, but were treated as forms without substance (poststructuralism, postmodernism, theories of power, postcolonialism, even gender studies). The new theoretical approaches met the much needed conditions for the assimilation of Romanian medievalists into the international community, but they were grafted on a theoretical basis formed during the totalitarian regime. Nonetheless, such types of research – based on quantification, social analysis, and on the role played by the political or economic factors (never defined but always invoked) – led to the re-emergence of Marxist, or at least Marxian forms of research.<sup>3</sup> Much like the Romanian society as a whole, Romanian medieval studies never went through a period of lustration. Such an action has been rarely requested, but only on specific topics (Popa 1989; Rusu 2008: 39-67). For this reason, most researchers avoid quoting the old hypotheses, but they are theoretically blind. Since one does not follow any criteria when evaluating these old interpretations, one cannot identify what and how much of them deserve to be reused. With the arrival of the new theories, other types of exaggeration derive.

In essence, the problem is that the study of history has reached a point where, after two centuries of speculation of all sorts, researchers are starving for the Real. However, the premise is wrong, for one should not confuse what is real with what is tangible. Surrounding oneself with someone’s objects looks like the easiest way to recreate a person’s history, but that happens because one still uses a functional system inherited from Marxism. It led to the indissoluble binding of medieval art history to its richer sister, archaeology, to the detriment of the links that art history already had with the history of literature. What drives one crazy is the hunger for the material culture. One forgets that there is something lacking in the links between object and owner. What weaves the two together is the individual mind.

Certainly, when hearing the accusations of Marxism – especially in central and eastern Europe, where since 1989 its heritage has been repudiated – one will always try to defend oneself and prove to be otherwise. But Marxism is a way of thinking, not just the ostentatious display of a certain political ideology. The whole structure underlining the social sciences (including history) was recreated on Marxist bases. Almost nobody questions one of the basic tenets of Marxism, that society should consist of a base and a superstructure, and that the base – comprising the economy and the social classes – should determine society’s other needs, such as the superstructure made up of politics, law, religion, philosophy, morals, art, literature, and so on. In today’s Romania, this Marxism came from the West, not from Soviet Leninism.

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intermediary cultural registers may be identified only in the vernacular literatures of the West. For the existence of literary subjectivity in thirteenth century French literature, a proof of the existence of the medieval individual, see Zink. For an analysis of how this subjectivity manifests itself in the first literary works in the vernacular language (twelfth century), see the chapter “Les traducteurs, leurs plumes et leurs péchés” in Agrigoroaei (2011).

<sup>3</sup> The joke belongs to Raymond Aron. Studying Marx without being a Marxist, Aron declared himself “Marxian,” drawing attention to the fact that he could not break even with certain interpretative clichés.

Base and superstructure became an intricate part of the neoliberal discourse and was presented as the natural way of things. However, there is nothing natural about it; the theory is shaky.

Naively put, and possibly too rudimentary, the point is that objects do not mean anything. The hunger that animates this study is one of people and their minds. The thing is that the base and superstructure premises may seem to work in the case of western cultural history, where the density of the cultural network is great, but when one reaches the outskirts of what researchers once called medieval civilization – in Transylvania, for instance – the whole theoretical edifice crumbles. One has to recreate it differently.

In his critique of left-wing intelligentsia, Aron writes that there is no other way of getting closer to the men of yore than the identification of what we may have in common with them.<sup>4</sup> This idea may be compared to Gadamer's hermeneutics of history, in which he emphasizes the role played by tradition in the *Horizontverschmelzung* ("fusion of horizons"), which is the only way to understand a historical event. To this I would add Ginzburg's *microstoria*, a cultural history, and not a "history from below"<sup>5</sup> as it is often considered. *Microstoria* questions quantitative research on the basis of the fact that it distorts the reality perceived at the individual level.

The drastic reduction of the studied corpus makes it easier to observe the relationships among people, the way in which they develop personal conceptions of the world, the meaning of history, and the meaning they ascribe to their cultural acts. In *The Cheese and the Worms (Il formaggio e i vermi)*, Ginzburg analyzes the case of a sixteenth-century Italian miller, who although not belonging to the learned class of the clergy and nobility, nevertheless had his own conception of the universe. The second part of the book is devoted to the relationship between the dominant culture and the masses. Ginzburg argues that there is no fracture between these two different types of culture. On the contrary, there is much evidence of fluidity that takes the shape of infinite intermediary forms. Ginzburg also studies the political and social repercussions of so-called popular culture, in other words, the exact opposite of the historiographical studies to which Romanian researchers became accustomed. The last part of the book gets closer to the theories of Debray (1991; 1999; 2001) and McLuhan (1962), who consider that changes in social, political and economic history may be regarded as effects of the changes taking place at an interpersonal level, through communication.<sup>6</sup> What

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<sup>4</sup> *Si l'univers dans lequel ont vécu les hommes des temps révolus n'avait rien de commun avec celui dans lequel je vis, si ces deux univers n'apparaissaient pas, à un certain degré d'abstraction, comme des variations sur un même thème, l'univers de l'autre me deviendrait radicalement étranger et perdrait toute signification. Pour que l'histoire entière me soit intelligible, les vivants doivent se découvrir une parenté avec les morts* (44).

<sup>5</sup> I wish to follow the original cultural direction of Ginzburg's *microstoria*, and not the subsequent socializing or economizing directions that turned it towards *Alltagsgeschichte*, or "history from below."

<sup>6</sup> Debray believes that the socio-economic periodization of history (slavery, feudalism, capitalism, etc.) should be replaced by one that highlights the medium used in communication (hence the notion of mediology): an age of clay tablets, an age of papyrus, an age of parchment, of prints and, more recently, of the hyperlink. These media produce a series of changes in the collective mind, which then take political, social, and economic forms. For a similar hypothesis, see McLuhan, who attempts to observe a paradigm of historical evolution according to communication media long before Debray.

distinguishes Ginzburg from the other two is the role given to the individual, the thing that Anglo-Saxon historiography defines as human agency.

Without saying it in an explicit manner, medieval studies eliminate this individual agent by invoking his or her lack of Hegelian consciousness. One might as well speak of the absence of the Cartesian individual. If the latter can proclaim his ability to confer meaning to a world made up of singular beings, if Hegelian self-awareness passes through three stages (from sensitive certainties to a consciousness of one's freedom and further on to an understanding of universal freedom), then the medieval human being, seen with the eyes of a modern one, will be deprived of all consciousness and individuality. Analyzed with the tools of such a theory, the medieval artist ceases to be an artist. He or she becomes a slave of power (Foucault's *pouvoir*, socio-politically substituted by the medieval artist's commissioner, or by invoking artist workshops similar to the craftsmen's guilds). However, instead of believing that the partial abolition of collective identity is the only way to bring the individual to light, one may just as well imagine that the features of this individual existed since at least the twelfth century (Morris), awaiting for their discovery and living an "inner history" (Berlin).

In his essay devoted to Tolstoy's conception of history, Berlin tries to prove that the study of the past cannot become a science. His clarification is simple: as long as history aims to study broad complexes, it will never be able to probe the "inner history" of the individual. The historian may only analyze the deceptive surface of general history, because the other type of history – the one lived by the individual – remains a mystery when analyzed with the tools of determinism. The political, economic and social theories are crushing this other history. They manufacture an anonymous individual lost in a mass of human beings. Of course, one will never be able to separate the individual from his environment (family, group, region, country, and most of all religion), but that does not mean that he is composed of a sum of features inherited or developed only in relation to these particular types of social environment. Why not discover the cultural meaning of each text, of each painting and of each monument, in other words the beauty of each cultural act? It does not really matter if these acts can or will be subsumed to other categories sooner or later. What matters is the act itself, the fact that it represents a knot in the cultural network we are analyzing.

Berlin does not replace one method with another; he simply tries to awaken a conscience. Like Berlin, I think it is preferable to lay aside, at least in the field of cultural history, those studies dedicated to the medieval individual that emphasize his social side.<sup>7</sup> I would rather follow Giddens than Foucault. Instead of considering that power is the central factor motivating human relationships, Giddens advocates a duality in which power is integrated into complex social practices. For him, social structure and human agency are the two factors that build and activate the social relationships. If one accepts that human agency exploits the potential of the individual, that the agent (writer, sculptor, architect or painter, as well as the public or the donor) may be defined according to his cultural act and not by his dependency on a social, political or economic group, then one may reach a level similar to Ginzburg's *microstoria*.

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<sup>7</sup> For a brief bibliography of the subject, see the various studies dedicated to the Renaissance, but also Gourevitch (13-16); Morris; compare Bynum; Bedos-Rezak; Iogna-Prat.

At first glance, the search for a history of the individual seems to be a challenging task for the medieval studies dealing with Transylvania, because they lack the necessary theoretical basis. Besides, the manifestations of a human agency (see, for example, the cases of artists or ktetors who signed, or otherwise represented themselves in the murals of Hațeg and the Apuseni mountains) have always been analyzed according to theories alien to the nature of the representations proper. They are considered to form a bunch of odd cases, strongly connoted politically, socially, or ethnically, and no one notices that the appearance of these individuals substitute an absent literature (be it vernacular, medieval Latin, or Slavonic). The Transylvanian individuals, mostly illiterate, seem to be speechless, and this encourages the researchers to speak in their place with the voices of their own theories. This leads to the false impression that said individuals can only be observed as atoms of society (in various medieval documents), as power figures (when the individual is a ktetor or a dignitary), or from the point of view of material culture (when the objects that the individual owned in the past are the only proofs of his or her existence). Yet, these three types of research turn towards the social, political, and economic history. They bite their own tail, creating a theoretical loop that gives the impression that the individual exists only in relation to the three types of research themselves.

For me, the stake of this article is to state that the inner history of individuals, an idea borrowed from the Berlin essay, is found in an imperfect, but at least sincere form in Ginzburg's *microstoria* and in Geertz's cobwebs (to be mentioned at the end). Both the *microstoria* and the cultural networks show us only the visible part of the iceberg. The rest of the "inner history" must be treated with caution; it must remain a mystery. Yet the awareness that this inner history existed in other times, allowing me to attribute certain cultural acts to human agency, and not to a higher (and impersonal) sociopolitical or economic power. If each cultural act is singular, its explanation cannot be found in a sociopolitical or socioeconomic climate of its time, for the climate forms only the background of the artwork's interpretation, but in a tradition, in a cultural heritage that takes the form of a network woven by all these individuals together.

### **The Social Factor**

For the sake of convenience, I begin with the problem of the social factor. Let us deal with the question of the Romanian "courtly" churches. Certain researchers spoke even of chapels, an exaggeration of the same sort. The problem is that these churches do not serve the nobles only, for all members of the community used them at the same time.

The old argument was as follows: Because art had to be feudal, it could only be linked to the first two orders of medieval society, therefore the church building had to be ascribed to the nobles (the founder was – in all documented cases – a knez). There are many examples. Streisângeorgiu, Ribița, Leșnic and many others have always been discussed in relation to the founders or, in newer times, to the elite. Although recent scholars showed some reservations (e.g., Năstăsoiu), the edifices have been always been sooner or later treated as courtly churches.





Figure 1. Crișcior church. Exterior view. Author's photo.

I do not intend to do a scrupulous and complete inventory of all cases worthy of mention; however, I will offer stunning evidence selected from various cases in which some, desperately looking for traces of feudal character, have put forth the most absurd hypotheses imaginable. At Crișcior, an edifice predating and underlapping the church has been identified as the private dwelling of a noble family (Figure 1).<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, the published layout of the excavations draws attention to the shortcomings in the demonstration (Lazăr et al. 1991: 127). One does not find the archaeological inventory specific to a home. There are no hearth traces, no large ceramic fragments, nor food debris. In this situation, the hypothesis of the noble dwelling seems to be completely ridiculous. That becomes clear if one imagines what would have happened if this hypothesis had been right: the members of Boar's family (the first documented knez in the village, and father of Bălea, the ktetor – founder – of the stone church) must have lived in an ice-cold house, neither eating nor drinking. Since they would have lived in such a saintly manner, the son would have decided to turn half the parent home into a real church. By ridiculing the above scenario, I draw attention to the fact that the building predating the stone church may have been an older wooden church, as believed by R. Popa.<sup>9</sup> In the present state of the monument, following the archeological dig nothing, unfortunately, can be found. The “courtly” hypothesis was enforced with the help of a biased interpretation.

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<sup>8</sup> The authors (Lazăr et al. 1991) write about this building as dating at least half a century before the stone church, without providing any criteria for this interpretation, and describe it as a traditional modern peasant's house with a small hall, a living room, a pantry, and a porch (126).

<sup>9</sup> Radu Popa formulated a critique similar to one presented by Irina Popa. In addition, the only terms of comparison for such bizarre church foundations are extremely late and belong to another cultural context. Such is the case of the Calvinist chapel from Sălașu de Sus, built in the modern age as one of the annexes of the noble residence.



Figure 2. Hălmațiu church. Exterior view. Photo by Anca Crișan.

I do not intend to insist on this idea, but I cannot help mentioning that one may also find among these courtly churches the “voivodal” church from Hălmațiu (Figure 2).<sup>10</sup> This voivodal church is an inflated courtly one. It had to be bigger, for its founder was a voivode – in this case, the voivode Moga. But Moga was not Mircea the Elder of Wallachia, a voivode-prince who may have founded “princely” churches. Moga was a local nobleman who had gathered a certain amount of wealth and ruled over several villages. The church he built (an unconfirmed deduction, actually) is greater only because Moga had money. However, it is not very different from those in Ribița or Crișcior, nor from the one in Zlatna, much larger and yet “un-voivodal” to the researcher’s eyes. The theoretical premises are wrong, for the attribute only makes sense of the social factor. One would better give up this terminology and simply talk about the local church of Hălmațiu.<sup>11</sup>

The mere fact that the edifice was built with the financial assistance of a local noble cannot prove the point. If the noble in question had the material resources to have it built or painted, this does not mean that he was a tyrannical feudal lord who did not allow his poor *laboratores* access to the Lord’s house. And the fact that the church was built in the vicinity of his home also cannot be used to prove the point. Why would he have built the church at the other end of his own village? Perhaps to walk more on foot than his own serfs when he was going to mass? We do not know how well the notion of feudalism works for the Hațeg land and Apuseni mountains, so it would be best to accept that the church was used by all members of

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<sup>10</sup> For the use of the “voivodal” epithet, see Țărcuș.

<sup>11</sup> In the modern age, this church was described as being “the church of the bishop” (*vlădicescă*). This epithet requires greater attention, perhaps even an explanation from the contemporary researchers – medievalists or modernists (Țărcuș: 551).

the community. Research should not avenge a class struggle whose traces have not been found. The churches may be Orthodox, Catholic, cathedrals, metropolitan, chapels, and so on, because these are the natural attributes of a church. They may never be deemed as courtly churches, even if they were built next to somebody's court.



Figure 3. One of the Răchitova mural fragments, preserved at the Art Museum of Cluj. Author's photo.

One may add to this another problem: As long as it is based on the premise that the medieval art of Transylvania was feudal, the assessment of the cultural impact of the artworks can only be made according to the sociopolitical impact of each of the “feudal lords” to which they were ascribed. The works of art are ordered not according to the cultural network formed by them, but in relation to the public functions, matrimonial relations, property or possessions of their founders. One obtains a pyramid of works of art imitating the pyramid of the Transylvanian society in a truly servile way, although there are many cases that contradict it. One of them, the dispute over the filiation of the paintings at Densuș, Ostrov, and Răchitova, is self-evident. Here Drăguț assigns two of the mural fragments from Ostrov to Master Stephen from Densuș. Burnichioiu rejects this possibility but notes similarities between the fragments from Răchitova and the murals from Densuș. She also believes that “the attribution to the same workshop of the paintings in Răchitova and Densuș is supported by the fact that the two settlements and churches were owned by the Densuș knezes” (294).<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, Porumb denies any resemblance between Răchitova and Densuș. Every researcher sees something else, for this is the state of the art in stylistic research; but some of the researchers

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<sup>12</sup> “Paternitatea aceluiași atelier pentru picturile de la Răchitova și Densuș se susține și prin faptul că cele două așezări și biserici au fost stăpânite de cnezii din Densuș.”



are inexplicably attracted by the link between the families of the ktetors. Their interpretation relies heavily upon the rigid social factor (Figure 3).

These types of analyses cannot be reproduced in the more well-documented cases of the West. To give an example, Lorenzo Veneziano's works cannot be studied according to the relationships his commissioners had. His polyptics tell very little about these patrons, and only in an indirect manner. That one of the commissioners may have learned of the painter's skill or fame from a previous patron is not to be ignored. But the painted altar of Lorenzo Veneziano forms a cohesive artistic corpus whose history is rather one of the ways in which the painter blended extra-Italic influences and Po Valley models. The relationship with the sponsor or patron was secondary, since it may help understand the artist's personal life (Guarnieri). Similarly, in Transylvania, medieval artists traveled and painted for various patrons. The latter would have known each other, but this had no effect on the style or themes used by the painters. One should not sacrifice art history research for the sake of a hypothesis that does not explain art, but only the family ties in a vicious circle.



Figure 4. Leșnic church. Exterior view. Author's photo.

Since I do not wish this analysis to be superficial, I will add a final example: In the introductory part of a less known study, Cristache-Panait wondered if there were other churches of stone, nowadays lost, in the Western Carpathians, apart from those of Hălmațiu, Ribița, and Crișcior (60). The problem was rhetorical, but her conclusions were quite interesting. She wondered if the voivodes John of Brad, or Stephen of Birtin might have paid for the building of stone churches, later to be destroyed by the Turkish military following the

Mohács disaster (1526).<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, the only argument is that the two voivodes were recalled in an act of judgment of 1445, an accidental confirmation of their social status. This has nothing to do with any church, be it wooden or made of stone. Thus, no connection can be drawn between the two voivodes' existence and the supposed edification of the churches.



Figure 5. The Holy Kings of Hungary in the murals of the Ribîța church. Author's photo.

Cristache-Panait's deduction was following a pattern. Without reconstructing the whole reasoning, the essential argument is still transparent. With the building of the Leșnic church attributed to a certain Dobre (attested in only two documents); the painting in Hălmagiu attributed to a voivode Moga; and the murals of Ribîța depending upon the destiny of the noble family in the locality, all three cases have one common element: the church was deemed to exist only because a historical character caused it to appear (Figure 4). That is why the noble class is implicitly regarded as a generative force for the edifices of worship. But in reality neither Brad nor Birtin had stone churches, even if their nobles' name were mentioned in documents similar to those who mention the names of the princes and voivodes of Leșnic, Ribîța, and Hălmagiu. Therefore, if the mention of local nobles urges researchers to identify lost stone churches – an echo of the artificial importance of the founder – then the reasoning

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<sup>13</sup> In August of 1526, the Ottoman military defeated Hungarian warriors at Mohács, along the Danube river in southern Hungary. King Louis II was killed in battle, bringing the independent Hungarian kingdom to an end.



is false. Although important places on a social, economic, and political map, Birtin and Brad have not been fortunate from an architectural point of view. The same goes for Obârșia, the capital of one of the Romanian districts. The place may have been “privileged,” but it did not have a stone church.<sup>14</sup> Although one may not like it, the appearance of these churches is actually the fruit of chance. It is not necessarily linked to the destiny of nobility. That some knezes have built churches and others did not, depended on their wishes, their availability, and their cultural expectations. Perhaps John of Brad and Stephen of Birtin preferred to do something else with their wealth. Perhaps they had fewer resources, or maybe they were stingy. How can one know today what was in the minds of these nobles? Prudence is our only research tool.



Figure 6. The Holy Kings of Hungary in the murals of the Crișcior church. Author's photo.

My first hand research on the church of Leșnic proved that Dobre was not the ktetor of its murals (Agrigoroaei 2015). This proves that the social factor can explain the filiation of various works of art or monuments only when it is identified in accordance with the cultural network formed by the latter, and not when it is the sole criterion according to which the works are evaluated and the network is built. I do not deny its manifestation in works of art,

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<sup>14</sup> In the latter case, Cristache-Panait follows the ideas of Pascu (60).

but I think that it is not that important, and certainly not that frequent. The role of this social factor was artificially increased by modern and contemporary research.

### The Political Factor

Because art is subsumed not only to the social, but also to the political, various combinations were attempted through which a work of art was invoked as a historical document. The most interesting case concerns the representations of the three Holy kings of Hungary (Stephen, Emeric, and Ladislas) in two Orthodox churches, Crișcior (again) and Ribița (Figure 5).

A politicizing interpretation has been proposed from the very beginning. Dragomir believed that these paintings appeared out of a political situation: the knezes had to pay homage to the Hungarian sovereigns in the paintings if they wanted to be allowed to build churches out of stone (235-36). Should one understand that the wooden churches were free of ideology, but those of stone were not? Both of them had nothing to do with politics, but this did not prevent other researchers from speculating the political potential of the theory and from using it for various unrealistic purposes. Among these researchers are great names of Romanian art history, from Vătășianu and Drăguș to contemporary scholars. Cincheza-Buculei (1981) noticed that the three Holy Kings of Hungary seem to relate with several military saints on horseback, also painted in the murals. The problem, however, is that the link between the two compositions was again interpreted on the basis of an assumed latent conflict, by which the military saints would have neutralized the Hungarian royal saints (Figure 6).

At the opposite end, Marosi believed that the Romanian knezes were well-behaved children of the kingdom, who worshiped the three Hungarian Kings as patrons of the realm (230, 232, 235; compare Prioteasa 2009: 50). After him, aware that this theory was exaggerated, but realizing that it was preferable to the theory of Dragomir, Rusu diluted it to a digestible level, imagining that the veneration did not concern the Holy Kings directly, but the Hungarian king, thus expressing the conscience of the knezes that they were in line with the rest of the realm's nobility (1999: 137).<sup>15</sup> Finally, the balance seems to have leaned further in the last few years. Prioteasa follows the same theoretical line, completing it with new arguments and drawing it closer to Marosi's initial interpretation.<sup>16</sup> In this way, the interpretation launched by Marosi is sweetened to the point where takes into account the finesse of historical realities. And yet, why not simply think that "it did one good to have a strong saint in his or her church"?<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Rusu brought as evidence certain documents from the fifteenth century, where Romanian knezes from Banat or Maramureș invoked the same kings as warrantors of their privileged status.

<sup>16</sup> One of the documents seems to prove the point. In the oath of a donation dated July 16, 1372, in Argeș, the Wallachian prince Vladislav Vlaicu swore on the *furor et indignatio Dei, beate Virginis Marie, omnium sanctorum, indignatio sanctorum regum Stephani, Ladyslay et Emerici*. (see for this *Documenta Romaniae Historica*, series B: *Țara Românească*, volume 1 (1247-1500), 15, 5). The second document quoted by Prioteasa is issued by George Brancović (mid-fifteenth century), who guarantees the rights and privileges of the Romanian nobles living on the lands belonging to the Șiria fortress, as they had been conceded to them *per divos reges* (Prioteasa: 50-53).

<sup>17</sup> It seems to me that these words of my colleague Cosmin Popa-Gorjanu, uttered in a friendly discussion, best capture the essence of the problem.



Figure 7. The Holy Kings of Hungary in the murals of the Chimindia church. Author's photo.

Let us re-evaluate the problem: The interpretation relaunched by Prioteasa offers many advantages, but it also has shortcomings that give rise to interpretation problems. First of all, the details are treated superficially in favor of general issues. Second, everything has been reduced to a common denominator. This choice led Prioteasa to interpret the murals in the church of Chimindia – where the names of the Hungarian Kings have been written in Cyrillic letters – as being of an Orthodox nature only to fit into the scheme, even if the author herself observes that the three Kings of Hungary represented there do not fall in the same category as the ones painted in Ribița or Crișcior (Prioteasa: 44).<sup>18</sup> Moreover, there is absolutely no evidence as to the presence of any Orthodox parishioners in Chimindia (Burnichioiu: 347). Last but not least, Prioteasa's inventory and comparison with the other Transylvanian murals depicting the Holy Kings of Hungary tries to explain the part according to the whole, and not the other way round (Prioteasa 2009: 48), a choice which leads to ignoring the differences between the representations (Figure 7).

Problem data should be discussed differently. Both parties are right, but only partially. The truth is always in the middle; but it is not, as it was thought, a political truth. The hypotheses of those who follow Dragomir or Marosi are not based on the study of the artwork itself. They represent two different sets of interpretation derived from a perspective which

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<sup>18</sup> Prioteasa notes “the depiction of the kings at Chimindia in robe of state, holding the orb and with no military attribute except the traditional battle-axe of St Ladislav, seems to lay the stress on the royal dignity and authority” (45). For comparison, see Năstăsoiu (2009: 51), who is interested in the differences between the scenes painted in Ribița and Crișcior (“provincialized variant of the Byzantine painting tradition”), and those painted in Chimindia (“product of the fashionable international Gothic”).



does not relate to the murals. They rely on researcher's whim and personal opinions. On the one hand one may find those who patriotically defend the choices of the Romanian knezes in the Apuseni. For them, these knezes were not traitors; they were oppressed and this political coercion translated into the painting of the Hungarian saints. The other party tries to "pardon the traitors," which they do not consider to be traitors because the national patriotic sentiment was not present in the Middle Ages. This reading in a playful keynote of the two theories serves to show that both interpretations are defined according to political correctness (or incorrectness). By ignoring the object of study, the researchers carry an ideological battle. Some wish to be patriots; others wish to be fair. Both of them noble feelings, anyway.

In my opinion, the explanation should be sought somewhere else. In the two related representations (Crișcior and Ribița), it was implied that the murals form a structure, multiplied in the form of a series. The illusion created by Erwin Panofsky's canon is that the meaning of an iconographic series can be found at an iconological level, by comparing it with other similar structures. And because this structure had an apparently political form, referring in the same time to the concept of "holy" and to the notion of "Hungarian king," the analysis got stuck in the equation "Hungarian king" – "Romanian noble." The interpretations chosen by both parties are politicized and ignore the work, for one does not know the specific meaning of each representation. When taking into account the common features of the Holy Kings of Hungary in the entire group of Transylvanian murals representing them (Ribița, Crișcior, Chimindia, Tileagd, Remetea etc.) or in the smaller sub-group Ribița-Crișcior, one does not see the trees, even though one sees the forest very well.



Figure 8. Graffito under the tribune of the Sântămărie Orlea church. Author's photo.

I am following at the same time Rusu (the knezes' respect for the Hungarian king was normal, since he was the protector of their social status); Prioteasa (because the two documents she brought into question explain many of the earlier or later meanings of the Ribița and Crișcior murals); as well as Cincheza-Buculei (the military saints are inextricably linked to the presence of the Holy Kings). Nonetheless, the two depictions of saints Stephen, Emeric, and Ladislas in the *Apuseni* Mountains seem to be radically opposed. In Ribița they appear from a sense of humility, while in Crișcior one may detect a certain pride. Their source seems to be Serbian, having to deal with both the military saints and the iconography of the votive painting or with the inscriptions (Agrigoroaei 2012).

This example is not unique. In one complementary example, previous hypotheses have linked the building of a tribune in the Sântămărie Orlea church – Catholic and Hungarian – with the installation there of the Romanian noble family Câdea (later Hungarian *Kendeffy*). The changes in the political life of this village seemed to provide enough reasons for a historicized interpretation (Figure 8). Nevertheless, the graffiti on the murals dated to the same period as the building of the tribune contain a series of dates that point towards a much earlier

dating. In conclusion, if the tribune was older than the arrival of the Cârdea, the socio-political event did not bear great influence on the evolution of the monument (Agrigoroaei 2014).



Figure 9. Sântămărie Orlea church. Exterior view. Author's photo.

I admit that secular or ecclesiastical power may influence the message of a work of art, provided that the work itself is ascribed to the higher register, where the canons are evident and where the discourse – political, ideological or theological – is well-defined. The problem is that even in cases where the artwork belongs to a dense cultural fabric, subject to a certain authority and clear rules, the political factor is not a mandatory condition. There are many cases where the individual (artist or ktetor) takes the most surprising decisions and does not follow tradition or political pressure, probably because the tradition itself might have been permissive up to a certain point. Or because there were several aesthetics operating at the same time (Eco). That is why, when the work belongs to an inferior cultural register, when it finds itself in that no man's land between high and popular registers, the political factor must be dealt with increased caution. Even though it looks important, it may not be fundamental.

### **The Economic Factor**

Moving forward, we arrive at the third point, the thorniest of them all. By introducing the economic factor, one manages to show that Transylvanian villages did not have the necessary

funds to sustain a continuous campaign of building churches. As such, the craftsmen had to be foreigners. That is why the origins of Transylvanian architecture and painting had to be sought someplace else. In this line of argument, for example, it was stated that the rectangular pattern of the apses in most churches of Hațeg or Apuseni was first put into practice at the church in Sântămărie Orlea (Figure 9), an edifice that would have influenced other constructions with a similar architectural style, of which the most important should have been the one in Strei (Drăguț 1968: 11; R. Popa 1988: 232). This scenario operates only on economic criteria. It required, for instance, the visit of master craftsmen from the West. Once they arrived in Transylvania, they were supposed to participate in the building of Cistercian churches – Gothic, but still preserving Romanesque features. There is nothing to deny until this point of demonstration. The building of the abbey in Cârța could not be done without these foreign craftsmen. The problem is that the Sântămărie Orlea church has absolutely nothing in common with the so-called Cistercian architecture. It resembles a lot of other foundations in the Kingdom of Hungary, and what is more, Sântămărie Orlea was not the first rectangular apse church in the land of Hațeg.



Figure 10. Streisângeorgiu church. Exterior view. Author's photo.

Sântămărie Orlea church was built in the thirteenth century by a newly arrived Catholic Hungarian community, but the smaller church in Streisângeorgiu (Figure 10), with a rectangular layout, dates from the previous century, being both Romanian and Orthodox (R. Popa 1988: 225-27). As such, it matters less that the Streisângeorgiu bell tower was elevated later, in the fifteenth century (Bratu: 286, n. 10), and that it does not have bifore windows, as one finds in Sântămărie Orlea. Even though this bell tower could not have influenced those from the churches of Strei or Sântămărie Orlea, it does not prevent the rectangular church plan from Streisângeorgiu to act as an influence upon the other rectangular plans of the

churches in the region.<sup>19</sup> The network we are analyzing was animated by encounters among the proud communities or individuals of the region, a pride that must have led to a certain competition. In this situation, the larger, western, and more complex church could outdo the older, smaller, one without bifore windows. Ribîța church should also be included in this equation, even though it does not have bifore windows on its bell tower, as well as many other examples.<sup>20</sup> Knowing that fashions operate chaotically, by leaps and bounds (Gullestrup: 156), and that the competition between the local communities is proof of a cultural dialogue, one might as well imagine that the rectangular layout could have appeared in other, older monuments, nowadays lost.

We simply do not know the criteria on the basis of which the architects, craftsmen, or founders made their choices. In the absence of written documents, the cultural act remains a mystery. But its silence does not entitle us to postulate that the high fashion cultural trends (the imported or the newer ones) are the only ones that are should be traced in our analysis. The case of the modern church at Nucșoara proves that the inhabitants preferred a Romanesque model simply because it was a traditional medieval one (Rusu 1997: 235-237).<sup>21</sup> Therefore, if we follow the theoretical line of Ginzburg, there should be a certain fluidity between the higher and lower registers of culture, and influences can come from both sides.

The economic argument cannot help us to interpret this kind of cultural network. It is true that the villages of Hațeg or Apuseni did not have rich financial or economic resources, the conditions for the development of a “class” of craftsmen (I emphasize this word in order to reveal its obvious theoretical premises). But this does not prevent the emergence of a local *forma mentis* to whose mature expression both Romanians and Hungarians must have contributed equally. Consequently, the appearance of the rectangular apse layout in the already discussed three churches, to which one may add the buildings in Ciula Mare, Sânpetru, Suseni, Nălăți, Mălăiești or Leșnic (the latter in the Lower Mureș Valley), may have been influenced by Western fashions,<sup>22</sup> but they may also have been the result of local syncretism. In this precise research field of church layouts, things will never be clear, because there are a number of lost edifices that could have been much more important knots in this network, such as the missing church from Britonia-Grădiște (the ancient Sarmizegetusa Ulpia Traiana, capital of the Roman province of Dacia), or because the foreign fashions did not necessarily need to be Hungarian. They could have originated just as well in other Central European areas, or even

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<sup>19</sup> The same rectangular layout without bell tower is found at Sânpetru. It could have been directly influenced by the initial layout of the church in Streisângeorgiu.

<sup>20</sup> A bell tower similar to those in Ribîța and Streisângeorgiu is also found in the church of Ostrov. It has the same type of windows. For a tower with bifore windows, see the churches of Hamuliakovo (Slovakia), Csempezkopács, and Nagyörzsöny (Hungary), even if they do not have square apses.

<sup>21</sup> Rusu rejects the old suppositions concerning the dating of the Nucșoara church (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries), preferring a modern dating.

<sup>22</sup> The layout and this type of bell tower are also found in Hungary, at Egregy, for instance, in a thirteenth-century church. One cannot exclude the possibility that both churches were influenced by western models, independently. For the resemblance to the Strei church, see Reinsinger (204-).



in the Balkans.<sup>23</sup> When one becomes aware of the unequal and partial state of the documentation, one does not pick up the earliest knot in the analyzed cultural network and invest it with the role of an archetype or prototype. One should be more interested by the very existence of the network. Such a network proves that the many contradictions between economic and ethnic factors are in fact the result of a poorly chosen methodology.



Figure 11. The murals of master Miħu from the Râmeț monastery church. Author's photo.

Next, the use of the economic argument is not reduced to the commonplace of master craftsmen. The exaggerations of this factor are more common in the analysis of murals. Such

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<sup>23</sup> It was previously reported that in some Romanesque churches in Bohemia and Poland the apse was replaced with rectangular ones (Greceanu, note 22). Similar rectangular layouts appear in small churches in Kosovo, as, for example, the church of St. Nicholas of Ljubizda (Mališevo, sixteenth century); see *Zaduzbine Kosova*: 475). The shape of the church and the location of the two Sânpetru portals are also found in another small Kosovo church, that of the St. Troitsa monastery in Mușutiște (fourteenth through sixteenth centuries) (489). As long as we have not yet finished comparing all the examples from the south and north of the Danube, we will not be able to specify the origins of the Hațeg rectangular layout. Last but not least, this topic may also prove to be fruitless. As sincerely put to me by Ileana Burnichioiu in a discussion on this subject, the joining of “two cubes” does not need a source of inspiration.

is the case of the painter Mihu from White Criș, who painted the church of the Râmeț monastery, whose talent could not have existed – as modern research put it – in the absence of a “school” (Figure 11).<sup>24</sup> In fact, when the notion of “school” is invoked (many of these schools have only one or two representatives), there is a Marxist theoretical line behind it. Because everything is defined in terms of progress, this line dictates that progress can only intervene as a result of economic or social evolution. Marxism evaluates cultural changes as effects of economic processes that connect human communities and force individuals to act in a certain way. Starting from such a premise, it is considered that the identification of formal similarities between the various manners of painting of medieval painters provide arguments in favor of identifying some painting schools to which the master painters must have belonged.<sup>25</sup> This abasement of the cultural act reduces the activity of these schools to an economic caricature. The painters painted for money; consequently, stabilizing their activity in a precise social and economic segment allows for the creation of a “class” of painters who gain their existence exclusively from this activity, without having any other social function.



Figure 12. The murals of master Stephen from the Densuș church. Photo by Anca Crișan.

However, this reasoning is wrong and simply does not work. In the case of western Europe, many artists had a polyvalent social or economic profile.<sup>26</sup> They could be painters in

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<sup>24</sup> Porumb considers that the murals from the White Criș Valley (*Valea Crișului Alb*), those of Ribița and Crișcior in particular, are the byproduct of a local school of painting started by Mihu from White Criș. This so-called school would be identified by a rural manner of painting and by an “acute sense of observing local realities” (1998: 16-17). For older ideas, see Drăguț (1966).

<sup>25</sup> I welcome in this way the diplomatic manner in which Năstăsoiu avoided such notions when he discussed the Transylvanian artistic filiations (2011).

<sup>26</sup> For the variety of social status among medieval artists, but also for the manifestation of their individuality in relation to the Divine, see Calkins (265-269). For an aesthetic point of view of the medieval artist, at the expense

a guild, but also monks. They could be sculptors or stonemasons, but also members of a community, architects, traveling artists, and so on. Transylvania could not have been much different. Master Stephen from Densuș was probably a deacon (Figure 12); Mișu from Râmeț could have been a monk. In this land, there must have been a multitude of categories of painters, of whom only some have practiced this constant occupation and subsistence. Others painted occasionally, and some of them may have painted at little or no cost – not as a favor to the patron or founder, but as a personal sacrifice to the Savior.<sup>27</sup> Logic would dictate that the existence of many of these painters could be noticed especially by the naive features of their style of painting, but there are probably also cases of unskilled talents – in other words, self-taught. Even though one always draw attention to the fact that modern and contemporary art is iconic, that professionals and amateurs compete in producing works of art, it would not be absurd to apply its criteria to medieval art, where the situation is the same from a religious point of view (Oikonomidès).<sup>28</sup> Therefore, as with social and political factors, the economic one should not be suppressed, but used only with great care.

### The Ethnic Factor

At the opposite end of the economic or socializing hypotheses, the ethnic factor attributed to the Romanians the entire process of building the Hațeg or Apuseni churches. There a stylistic lineage was invented. Wooden churches (now lost and unknown) would have been prototypes of stone ones. The main argument was the same rectangular apse in the Hațeg churches.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, because this theory was arbitrary (or because Romanian cultural autism was defined in an abusive manner), researchers had to take into account an economic explanation: Romanians would have labored on the royal, feudal, and ecclesiastical sites, learning the craftsmanship of the stonemasons (Drăguț 1979: 84).<sup>30</sup> Needless to say, this naive theory cannot be proven.

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of religious or technological constraints, see Schapiro. For a general demonstration applied to the historical evolution of art as a whole, and for a critique of the Marxist view, see Sánchez Vásquez (257).

<sup>27</sup> For the links between the work of art, the personal sacrifice and the sacrifice offered to the Savior, see Duby. For the first manifestations of this relationship in vernacular literatures, where the voice of the individual expresses this idea coherently, unlike in art, where it can only be defined from context, see Agrigoroaei (2011).

<sup>28</sup> Oikonomidès has shown that the amateur artist, whose creation does not necessarily depend on the order he received, appears in Byzantium in the eleventh century. This artist becomes a demiurge and even a poet's interlocutor when describing and interpreting the opera. Gregory Asbestas, Bishop of Syracuse, working at the end of the ninth century, was one of these amateur miniature painters. Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus was also an amateur artist. We are of course at the level of high culture, but cases seem to multiply and diversify in the coming centuries. One must also include Roman Argyros, a judge at the beginning of the eleventh century, who was also an amateur painter. Oikonomidès assumes the gradual emergence of a liberal spirit; he was aware that art had a symbolic and educational role.

<sup>29</sup> Vătășianu resumes his doctoral thesis held in Vienna under the supervision of Joseph Sztrykowski. The filiation between wooden (lost) and stone (preserved) churches was one of his Viennese master's hypotheses.

<sup>30</sup> "Knowing that when the fortified noble residences and royal castles were raised, many serfs and enslaved peasants were required to perform the most varied heavy work . . . the dissemination of the knowledge of masonry made it possible, in every suitable case, to raise peasant monuments, formally simple, but whose stylistic connections to the edifices build by master craftsmen from guilds are readily recognizable" ("*Știind că la ridicarea reședințelor nobiliare fortificate și a castrelor regale erau obligați să salaborească numeroși iobagi și țărani aserviți, care îndeplineau*



Moreover, although there are some similarities indeed between medieval stone churches and modern wooden ones in the area, it cannot be ruled out that the medieval buildings could have influenced the modern ones in a reverse relationship.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, recent research has proven that it is impossible to identify a Romanian Orthodox type of architecture, liberated from the influence of the Catholic churches of Transylvania (Rusu 1999: 282-283). Research tends to ignore the well documented presence of Catholic Romanians in the Middle Ages (Barbu) and the two categories are defined at the discretion of the researcher. The success of this theory in the National-Communist period (pre-1989) was facilitated by its Protochronist nature as well as by *ab auctoritate* and *ex cathedra* arguments.



Figure 13. Murals from the church in Ribîța. Author's photo.

This is not the only type of exaggeration relying on the fallacy of conflating the ethnic factor. When this theoretical march towards the arguments of a stylistic nature began, many researchers tried to deal with the “hot potato” of Romanian historiography, namely, the continuity of Romanians in Transylvania. This was done by the eternizing of some old, twelfth-century Komnenian stylistic features in the murals of Ribîța church (Figure 13), at turn of the fifteenth century (Ullea). Others saw in the same murals strong indication of a Romanian

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*cele mai variate munci grele . . . difuzarea cunoștințelor de zidărie a făcut posibilă ridicarea, în fiecare împrejurare prielnică, a unor monumente țărănești, de tot simple din punct de vedere formal, dar ale căror conexiuni stilistice cu edificiile datorate unor ateliere de meșteri breslași sunt ușor de recunoscut”).* Drăguț herein resumes hypotheses that he launched on many other occasions.

<sup>31</sup> Cristache-Panait mentions for instance a number of modern worship places made of wood, which are similar to Streisângeorgiu or Ribîța (78). Among them are the Zarand churches from Hărțăgani, Ribicioara, Poiana, Ciunțești, and Secaci.



school of painting, the first of which could be admired in other murals, preserved in the Râmneț monastery church (Porumb 1998). Both hypotheses are, of course, incongruous.



Figure 14. The “Oh, my brothers . . .” inscription in the Leșnic church. Author’s photo.

Another good example is the ethnic keynote interpretation of a strange inscription from the Leșnic church (“Oh, my brothers, how the fear has shrouded me for my sins on this earth!”) (Figure 14).<sup>32</sup> It was said that the sin mentioned in the inscription should have been committed against the speaker’s siblings. And because the only brothers, against whom the founder (who had been abusively identified) could have fought, were Moldavians (Romanians from the other side of the Carpathians), the researcher chose to speak about the battle of Ghindăoani, in 1395 (Cincheza-Buculei 1974: 15).<sup>33</sup> Without further ado, one should draw

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<sup>32</sup> There are two readings of the Leșnic inscription. The older one reads “Oh, my brother, how much did I suffer for my sins in a foreign land!”; the more recent one, “Oh, my brothers, how the fear has shrouded me for my sins on this earth!” (Breazu: 48).

<sup>33</sup> Cincheza-Buculei reinterprets an earlier hypothesis by Drăguț (1963), which proceeded from a wrong reading of the inscription to speak of an “evocation of the blood sacrifices of Dobre the Romanian in the battles with the Turks, struggles in which his relatives also fell, maybe a brother killed by an arrow in foreign lands at the end of the fourteenth century” (“*evocare a jertfelor de sânge ale lui Dobre Românul în luptele cu turcii, lupte în care au căzut rude apropiate, poate un frate ucis de o săgeată pe meleaguri străine, la sfârșitul secolului XIV*”). The brother killed by the arrow is inspired by two lay characters from the Last Judgment scene, one carrying a horned animal on his shoulder, and another carrying a soldier with an arrow in the chest. Attention was drawn to the fact that the characters can also be found in other Transylvanian paintings without any connection with Dobre the Romanian – at Mugeni, for example (Burnichioiu: 280). I have presented my own interpretation of the scene as a jointed depiction of Lamech carrying Cain and the Prodigal Son carrying the calf (Agrigoroaei 2015). Drăguț imagined this character based on the approximate dating of the painting and on the mention of this Dobre the Romanian in a medieval document,

attention to the fact that argumentation relies in all cases on the arbitrary choice of the researcher.



Figure 15. Detail of the inscription accompanying the Holy Kings of Hungary, Crișcior church murals. Author's photo.

Finally, the most delicate issue generated by the abusive use of the ethnic factor is on the one hand that of the Cyrillic inscriptions in the Catholic Hungarian churches, and on the other hand the presence of the same Holy (Catholic) Kings of Hungary in the aforementioned Orthodox churches of Ribița and Crișcior (Figure 15). Although Transylvanian plurilingualism is always invoked, it is periodically reduced to a binary, black and white opposition. A triple postulate dictates that the Slavonic language denotes the presence of the Romanians and the Orthodox cult. Conversely, the presence of Latin texts or letters is taken as indisputable proof of the presence of Hungarian or German Catholics. But the bizarre appearances of Cyrillic inscriptions at Chimindia (Figure 16), Abrud, and Fântânele in Catholic churches,<sup>34</sup> or the

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from which we find out that Dobre, the son of John of Leșnic, received from King Sigismund of Luxembourg the *kenezatus* – that is, possession – of the Leșnic forest. Nobody knows whether this Dobre was a real founder of the church (Burnichioiu: 277, 280); there may have been several founders, according to a pattern encountered in Ribița and elsewhere. There is also the possibility that Dobre did not live in Leșnic, as in the case of the Răchitova family of knezes, descendants of the Densuș knezes. Moreover, there is no information about Dobre's participation in any battle, neither with the Turks, nor with the Moldavians. In this context, the dual introduction of the political factor (Drăguț) and of the ethnic one (Cincheza-Buculei) takes the form of some Chinese whispers in which the interpretation gives the impression that it has some consistency, to the detriment of the object of the research.

<sup>34</sup> At Chimindia, the Holy Kings of Hungary (Ladislav and Stephen) are identified by Cyrillic inscriptions. The local community seems to have been Hungarian, as well as the nobles (Burnichioiu: 344-348). Prioteasa states from the first page of her study that the church of Chimindia was Orthodox, without providing any arguments (41-56). The documents of 1334 and 1336 testify to the presence of Catholics; the presence of the Orthodox is based



three Holy Kings in Ribița and Crișcior – accompanied in the last case by Latin letters inserted among Cyrillic Slavonic inscriptions<sup>35</sup> – cannot be explained in this way. They are manifestations of unique cultural acts, subject to the subjectivity of each creative individual. As far as linguistics go, language is not necessarily linked to the ethnic or confessional factors.



Figure 16. Detail of the inscription accompanying the Holy Kings of Hungary in the Chimindia church murals. Author's photo.

### The Much-Overstated Linguistic Factor

The reductive maneuvering of the four aspects (cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and confessional) is found in one of the most famous Stalinist theories: the functionality of a language and the links between language and society – links considered to be undeniable – transform the former into a faithful mirror of the latter.<sup>36</sup> The discussion of the reciprocal

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solely on the Slavonic inscriptions. For two more examples of Catholic churches with Slavonic inscriptions in the same area, see Burnichioiu: “Other Cyrillic inscriptions were painted in the former Catholic church of Abrud; as for the Reformed (former Catholic) Church in Fântânele, Mureș County, older documents mention the presence of a painting commented in Cyrillic letters and saints considered to be Greek under its lime” (“*Inscripții chirilice au existat și în fosta biserică a catolicilor din Abrud, iar biserică reformată – fostă catolică – din Fântânele (jud. Mureș) ar fi avut și ea sub var, tot după literatura veche, o pictură comentată cu litere chirilice și sfinți considerați greci?*”) (348).

<sup>35</sup> It was assumed that these Latin inscriptions (SCS, followed by the Slavonic name of the saint in Cyrillic letters) could betray the provenance of the Crișcior painter (Trifescu 2010: 81; 2011: n.p.). That is because the edition of the inscriptions was wrong (Tugearu). The middle letter is not Cyrillic, and the inscriptions of other scholars (SAS, STS). In fact, that letter is a Latin uncial C with a rather rudimentary marking.

<sup>36</sup> For Stalin and his theorists, language was a faithful mirror of society. In his opinion, the evolution of a language had to be closely linked to economic, social and political evolution. Because language could not be a superstructure, such as religion, art, or literature, it was supposed to be the environment facilitating the transition from sociopolitical or economic changes to cultural or ethnic ones. Economic and social changes should have

influences between the different linguistic diasystems would become useless as long as language mediates or reflects the ethnic, political and social factors. However, the position of sociolinguistics differs significantly.<sup>37</sup> Linguists work also with idiolects, varieties of language spoken by individuals, or idioglossias, varieties spoken by a small number of people, close to private languages. The panorama thus obtained is so complex that it questions the older geographic or social perceptions of language. Moreover, certain theories go beyond the scope of sociolinguistics. Using the notion of diatopic and diastratic variation borrowed from Leiv Flydal's works, Coșeriu demonstrated that language differs not only according to geographic (dialect) or social criteria (sociolect, idiom, jargon, etc.). He added a third notion, the diaphasic variation, which marks differences in style. The three dimensions of a language sometimes contradict the rules of dialectology, because the linguistic reality is determined by the dynamic interaction of many varieties of a language. As for the third dimension, the aesthetic one, it can explain a series of accidents generated by the arbitrary choices made by some speakers.

By invoking these arguments at a higher level, one may explain a number of cultural accidents. In medieval literature, the third type of variation is represented, for instance, by the choice of Marco Polo to write his memoirs in French. It was not dictated by a social conformism – the works of this type, belonging to the traveling genre, were usually written in Latin – and even less because of the ethnic factor (the memoirs were dictated to another Italian, Rustichello da Pisa, in a Genoese prison). The choice of Marco Polo and Rustichello was personal, and they cherry-picked the cultural network they wanted. In the same way, the bizarre Transylvanian cases encountered in Abrud, Fântânele, Chimindia, Ribița, and Crișcior should be regarded as individual cultural acts (little matter if they were determined by artists, patrons or founders), which do not follow predefined conventions. They can and should not be subsumed to a Romanian or Hungarian art, nor to a Catholic one, different from the art of the Orthodox.<sup>38</sup> At Crișcior, the painter wished to reinforce a nuance and he did as well as he

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triggered lexical transformations into various languages, which would have allowed the creation of a Soviet super-language that would encompass national languages. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that the invention of a Moldovan language, different from the Romanian one, is only one of the consequences of this theory. Furthermore, the denunciation of Marxism-Leninism (or Stalinism) helps to understand other much more important linguistic or cultural phenomena. The case of the Romanian language during the medieval period proves that a successful language may be lacking in the “*pouvoir*” invoked by Foucault, which sociolinguistics defines as *prestige*. In these cases, sociolinguists speak of a “social solidarity” close to the shape of a network. Along with Ginzburg's “*microstoria*” and Geertz's “local knowledge,” this theory can explain how a “lower” language (on a sociopolitical scale) and a culture defined as “popular” or “folk culture” end up surviving or even imposing themselves. In fact, the historians' problem is again the moral and progressive components on which the notion of civilization is based. The two abusively lead to the hierarchy of the studied communities, which would dictate a second, inferior role for the Romanian and Slavonic languages.

<sup>37</sup> Labov, the father of modern sociolinguistics, did not make generalizations of this kind. In his opinion, the evolution of language can be linked to that of society, but sociolinguistics cannot replace linguistics. It can only be complementary to it when the two factors overlap.

<sup>38</sup> To prove that these linguistic details are not reliable marks of an artistic filiation, it would be fair to recall the so-called Serbian names of saints in the Strei church painting (the forms “Iovan,” “Sredă,” or “Nedelea” have been cited as proof that the sources of inspiration were located to the south of the Danube. See for this Popescu, Tugearu (260). The two authors invented a whole story for the local master Grozie, who might have gone to Dalmatia or Serbia in order to learn the painter's craft, and later on returned to Hațeg, where he painted the saints in a Serbian way.

could.<sup>39</sup> The choices made by cultural agents in these examples are evidence of a cultural network that transcends other well-known networks, because the cultural act is trans-social and trans-ethnic.

### Art History between Positivism and Erwin Panofsky

Above all, the cultural act may be trans-cultural. To motivate this idea, I will deal with the methods used in art history proper. The two landmarks between which Romanian research dwindles are Positivism and Structuralism. I should say that these two landmarks must not be dismantled, but they should not be overstated either. Positivism, for example, may classify sculptured profiles. It may even classify the hands of painters from time to time, but not always, and not in any way. Here are the reasons why I make this statement.

Romanian research heavily relies on positivism and believes that identifying certain formal characteristics in the murals automatically leads to the identification of an artist or of a workshop. I will not pick and choose any example, simply because the list of examples is huge. I will concentrate on the effects of this theoretical scourge. The historians themselves show an attraction to these theories when they let us know what their opinion about art is. Living with the impression that a “Byzantine” or a “Gothic” manner must belong to different individuals, they refuse to imagine mixed situations. For instance, some speak of pairs of artists in Ribița and Crișcior – a Gothic master and another one whose traits were of a “Byzantinizing” nature (Trifescu: 72, 86).

Others speak of two “schools” with the same attributes. Although this theory is preferable to an older one, which spoke of nationally-specific Romanian craftsmen, both working methods simply ignore the fact that a painter formed in a Byzantine environment could choose to work with Gothic elements or vice versa.<sup>40</sup> Or that there could have been “painters of Western training working for Orthodox patron” (Năstăsoiu 2017). In fact, no matter how much ink we devote to this subject, we will never know to whose cultural networks belong the crosses on the saints’ vestments, or the geometrical ornaments in the paintings. They can be found in the West as well as the East because they are mere details. Positivist mania, recuperated by Structuralism, gives the false impression that once the forms have been classified, they gain a meaning of their own – that they should only manifest themselves in a diffusionist chain, in which no one would have ever thought of drawing a geometric pattern unless he or she had learned it in a “school” or a “workshop” – that an artist could not have admired some details, borrowing them from a work of art he had seen somewhere else, in the work of another painter.

The same thing may happen with the iconographic program, where certain themes or motifs are frozen down to the form of structures. The Panofskian theoretical model is inspired by linguistic theories, in the absence of which it assumes that the artistic message cannot be

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<sup>39</sup> The insertion of the Latin word in the inscriptions painted at Crișcior may be a naive attempt by the painter to give a tinge of authenticity (Latin) to the figures of some Catholic kings. That he did not know more than a simple word (*sanctus*), this is proved by the rest of the name written in Cyrillic characters.

<sup>40</sup> Such a painter may have also been the one who decided to change his style in the middle of the creative process. It seems absurd, but it may be possible, as long as we know from linguistics that idiolects evolve and that an individual does not speak the same language throughout his life.

conceived. For Panofsky, the work of art must bear a social, political, economic or iconological message. Therefore, the research often focuses on the identification of stylistic influences or interdependencies (the linguistic “significant”) and, on the other hand, the theological or political sense of the scenes that make up iconographic series or ensembles (the “signified”). It is trying to reconstruct the author’s mode of expression, that which linguistics might call “idiolect.” But this Saussurian arbitrary nature of the sign, inherited from Panofsky’s founding work, has been overcome in both linguistics and art criticism. My objections come from the theories of Eco, which take into account the existence of many textual strategies (similar to the diaphasic variation of Coşeriu). One of these strategies is that of the author; the other is that of the reader. The two never coincide; there is only a small segment in which they overlap, which Eco calls *cooperazione (testuale)*. It is here, in this cooperation, that one should concentrate his or her interpretative strategy. If one abuses, substituting oneself for the author, the interpretation is wrong from the very beginning.

But the problem is not that simple. The above criticism is based on a Jakobsonian set of premises. Inconveniences are also presented taking into account the theories of language. But the work of art is not always a Jakobsonian statement. It also translates into the narrative genre (when paintings or sculptures belong to narrative art) or into a lyrical one (iconic art). A convincing critique of Panofsky’s methodology was made by Didi-Huberman. He states that the image is rationally inconsistent, but emotionally revealing; thus infirming Panofsky’s claim to be able to identify the correct criterion of interpretation, which is the fundamental premise of his theory.<sup>41</sup> As far as I am concerned, I am simply criticizing the claim of my predecessors to identify the political, social, economic and ethnic criteria that, once introduced in a Panofskian or Positivist paradigm, give birth to structures that contradict the realities of the field. I do not deny the existence of the iconographic series. I only believe that they should not be looked after everywhere, because in the medieval Transylvanian art one cannot operate within such rigid structures.

### **An Infinite Range of Cultural Registers**

When borrowing fashionable methods from the West, most East European (or Balkan) scholars forget that the situation is quite different in their cases. In the West, art and literature (the Medieval Latin one, not the vernacular) may give the impression that they are true structures. Scholars find it hard to disrupt the deterministic research methods, especially the inheritance of Structuralism, because the density of the network does not allow them to closely understand the knots it was made of. For these reasons, with no great variation in the cultural forms encountered, the most coherent theories must take into account the notion of “structure.” In its absence, research seems to be hard to come by. However, more and more voices draw attention to the fact that the structures are not real and that the fabric (social, ethnic, economic, political and cultural) is much finer. In Transylvania, the absence of true “structures,” the *sine qua non* condition of a deterministic research, shows that this area cannot be reduced to a mere periphery of two or three large cultural networks (the Orient, the West, and the Realm of the Steppes). One should treat it as an entangled and intricate ball made up of many knots and micro-networks. It can only be disentangled by the careful observation of

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<sup>41</sup> I thank Elisabeta Negrău for pointing to me the pertinence of Didi-Huberman’s essay.

the threads making up each network, not by mixing all the factors together, but by using a careful, dissociated analysis.

This entangled Transylvanian ball of cultural networks mixes together cultural acts that fluctuate between the art of high society and its more vulgar, popular, or folk counterpart. When talking about “high culture” and “popular culture,” it would be necessary to realize that the two notions overlap with Geertz’s “global knowledge” and “local knowledge.” They are the extremes between which cultural networks are built, or in other words, the landmarks between which one may identify a lot of intermediary registers. This is why the fragmentation of cultural layers in the form of three registers, which we have become accustomed to, is a compromising solution. Although it seems practical at first sight, it is not at all realistic. In fact, the number of these registers is infinite (Rosenberg). This is due to a fluidity that allows the transition from one to the other. Moreover, the three registers cannot have nothing to do with the three orders of medieval society. The works of those advocating such an interpretation only reintroduce a Marxist inspired methodology, such as that of Bakhtin (1970).<sup>42</sup> At the opposite end, Gurevich advocates a reevaluation of the religious aspect of medieval culture, be it high or popular (1990), and later on approaches the question of the individual (1995), considering that this is the starting point of a coherent theory. Gurevich also drew attention to the fact that the medieval *forma mentis* is different from the modern or contemporary one, thus the naivety of the medieval man is in fact our own naivety (1985). This is my main reason for believing that medieval cultural agents (artists, writers) could choose any cultural level or register for their works. Similarly, the public or the commissioner could have similar tastes, just as diverse.

As proof of this, I quote the medieval French *fabliaux*, short narrative poems on erotic or burlesque topics, whose authors were sometimes clergymen from the scriptoria in which they themselves were copying or writing Medieval Latin scholarly texts.<sup>43</sup> Certain portions of the same medieval text could also belong to the upper-class register, while others may belong to folk literature. François Villon’s poems are the most conclusive example (Mus). The same can be spotted in the field of art (Camille), where similar situations may be encountered from the Middle Ages to the present times. Let us remember fauvism; or, of all the contemporary Romanian examples, the case of Horia Bernea, whose playful oscillation between folk art and the dominant cultural one is the expression of a will that ignores the cheap way of the nationalism. The paintings from Densuş or Hălmagiu are not very different from these examples. They testify to the fact that both forms, specific to the upper-class or lower-class art, may appear in different cultural acts composing the same ensemble. In my opinion, this game is a constant of artistic creation. It has always existed. That is why, when embracing

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<sup>42</sup> For the introduction of the social factor – and that of a Foucauldian *pouvoir* – in the analysis of medieval popular art, see Camille, who draws on Bakhtin’s theories.

<sup>43</sup> A famous case is that of Rutebeuf, a well-known scholar of Latin, author of hagiographic poems, of courtly literature, of satirical or polemic poems. His complaints about the misfortunes of life show that the medieval men’s literary subjectivity and fear of death could reach the same intensity as the voice of a modern man (Dufournet).

Geertz's idea,<sup>44</sup> cultural levels or registers should be imagined as having a sociopolitical or economic connotation only when analyzed according to two absolute types of knowledge. At the level of local knowledge, the economic, political, ethnic, social and cultural factors may seem difficult to dissociate; the whole universe of the studied society seems to be compressed. However, when its gradual expansion develops into a global register through interaction or union with other cultural networks, these factors begin to dissociate from each other. Often, they do not overlap. As for the global knowledge, which one may identify at the level of the great Catholic or Orthodox ensembles, it introduces a series of canons that society members used to respect. The freezing of these canons in the register of high culture gives the impression that they form a structure, that variation is impossible. Yet there is variation under the level of this high register, and the individual is free to associate his or her cultural act to any cultural network he or she wants. It means that both global knowledge and local knowledge act as tyrannical sets of canons, unlike the infinity of intermediate registers, where cultural networks are extremely flexible, permeable, and even mobile.

These registers resemble political doctrines. If the extreme right leads to isolationism and an exaggeration of the ethnic factor, the extreme left leads to a tyranny of the "common denominator" and to overstating the social factor. Between them, the right balance can only be represented by the individual, the only one who understands how much importance he confers to each of the factors. This is why Berlin praised the individual's inner history. Social, economic and political factors are used by the Marxist or Marxian approaches in Romanian research. On the opposite side, the ethnic factor, invoked by the extreme right, was mostly capitalized in the research of conservative historians. As for the infamous cocktail of the ethnic factor with one, two, or three of the preceding factors, it reached its peak in the days of National-Communism.<sup>45</sup> Just as in politics, all these forms of research are exaggerated because they are based on the dilution or even on the dissolution of the individual act to the level of arbitrarily predefined categories.

### **The Cultural Factor: An Absolute Necessity**

Although certain works of art can be defined as Romanian, Hungarian, Catholic, Orthodox, noble, upper-class, imported, popular, or local, these definitions ignore the

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<sup>44</sup> Without denying the existence of laws of cultural history, perhaps influenced by other ones (social, economic, or political), one may equally believe that it is impossible, or even wrong, to identify all of these laws. It is much easier to follow an idea of Geertz, according to which we need to look for a semiology of culture, to give meaning to the spider web that human beings weave around themselves. For Geertz, local knowledge is a network of information, perceptions and behaviors created by a community of people, as a result of adaptation to its environment, to the economic and social situation of its members, but above all to their beliefs and cultural ideas. As long as this local knowledge is studied in the case of some Amazonian or African tribes, it may give the impression that we study a history of mentalities; the moral component of the Progress concept dictates that one should distance himself or herself from the uncivilized, overestimating one's own culture. However, as the cultural network gains in density, the more one notices that these mentalities gradually turn into a cultural tradition, into literature, art, music, etc.

<sup>45</sup> By this, I do not mean that all the researchers in whose methodology the ethnic factor was exaggerated, together with the social, political or economic ones, have emerged under National-Communism. On the contrary, many of them appear even in the interwar period or even at the end of the nineteenth century. National-Communism has only recuperated them and gave them their final shape.



fundamental aspect of the cultural act in favor of its secondary features. Although the agent is an integral part of a social, political, economic, or ethnic system, the very existence of the cultural act proves that it belongs to a fifth category, namely the cultural. For all these reasons, the landscape resulting from the abusive use of the four research methods already criticized above, laid against a Panofskian or positivist background, may give the impression of chaos. Each theory has the right to explain the ensemble, but none of them provides the tools needed to conclude such an enterprise. The results are unsatisfactory, often contradictory.

If we accept that all these theories may be right (but only in part), it is possible to bring them to a common denominator only by relativizing them. Without denying that cultural history could have been influenced by political, social, economic and ethnic factors, we must consider that they are not fundamental but merely secondary. When affirming this, I follow to a certain extent Ionesco, opposed to the interference of politics in culture and humanism:

Lorsque je déclare, par exemple, qu'une œuvre d'art, une pièce de théâtre en l'occurrence, n'a pas à être idéologique, je ne veux certainement pas dire qu'il ne faut pas y trouver des idées, des opinions. Je crois simplement que ce ne sont pas les opinions exprimées qui comptent. Ce qui compte, c'est la chair et le sang de ces idées, leur incarnation, leur passion, leur vie (61).

What Ionesco states bears a resemblance to a famous mathematical theorem, that a finite quantity added or extracted from an infinite one does not make the latter bigger or smaller. Let us note that both the infinity and the work of art represent absolute categories. Thus, one should reformulate the theorem in the following way: An extrinsic quality conferred to an artwork, ignoring its eminently cultural character, does not make it change its original value in any way. This quality is null relative to the cultural act, and its existence cannot be certified in the work itself, but only in the circumstances in which it was produced. Let us not replace, in other words, the verb with the adverb.

Next, if the work of art – be it a literary text, a painting, or an architectural monument – is a cultural act, this act, whether medieval or modern, takes the form of a position assumed by an individual or by a sum of individuals – more specifically, the sum of individual positions. These individuals may be architects, stonemasons, craftsmen, painters, builders, or the public itself. Therefore, each of the cultural acts may become part of one or more networks according to the status of each of their agents. The crossroads linking multiple cultural acts correspond to the knots on a cobweb and interact with ethnic, social, political or economic realities due to the secondary features of each agent. Agency, thus defined, is not automatically subjected to Power, but interacts freely with it. And this Agency should be examined according to the fundamental characteristics of each cultural act.

In writing this, I think that the oppressiveness of several social, economic or political constraints, or ethnic affiliation for that matter, cannot confer meaning to a monument, to a sculpture, to a painting, or to a text. The meaning of these cultural acts is given by the force with which they were invested by an individual, or by a sum of individual minds. Even though most of these individual agents may faithfully represent the factors mentioned above, some of them may favor unexpected solutions for unexpected reasons. But their acts are not exceptions, and their choices should not be regarded as bizarre. Choosing what most people choose or choosing something different will always represent a personal choice. Thus, the

network that was once traced at the ethnic level (Romanian vernacular art or architecture), social (the so-called aristocracy of the knezes), political (the three Holy Kings of Hungary), or economic (the imported models or even the conditioning of art to the existence of a social class of specialized craftsmen) need to be quickly reassessed. Only afterwards should they be recuperated in order to assemble a complex network, on many levels, according to many secondary factors, independent from the knots of our cultural Transylvanian cobweb. Cultural networks may be trans-social and trans-ethnic, they do not depend directly on economic and political factors, but on constantly changing *formae mentis*. Some of these medieval *formae mentis* must have been Romanian, Hungarian, and Saxon at the same time.



Figure 17. The murals of master Grozie in the Strei church. Author's photo.

Such a network is evident in the case of the Italian *Trecento*. Giotto had surrounded himself with disciples, who in turn flourished in their own right in central and northern Italy after the death of their master. These disciples and admirers also assimilated local or Byzantine influences, synthesizing, experimenting, and transforming their master's legacy into what became the canon of Italian art by mid-fourteenth century (Tomasi: 45). Also, it does not matter that this happened in Italy; it could have happened anywhere else. All the medieval painters were looking at the works of other artists.<sup>46</sup> It would be unlikely that Grozie, the painter from Strei (Figure 17), would have painted his murals without seeing the previous work of Theophilus from Streisângeorgiu, located within less than an hour's walk across the river Strei (Figure 18). Considering these examples, I believe that we should look for cultural networks that transcend social, political, ethnic, economic, or confessional categories in the

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<sup>46</sup> The story of Giotto, the painter overturned by pigs, as told by Franco Sacchetti, happens during a trip of this kind. Giotto had gathered his disciples and went to see the paintings of the Florentine churches on the *Via del Cocomero* (Land).

Transylvanian case. We should look for cultural ones, according to the “inner history” of what cultural acts may show they have in common.



Figure 18. The murals of Master Theophilus in the Streisângeorgiu church. Author's photo.

Let us admit that the “inner history” is a general human permanency. Giorgio Vasari, the first art historian, blended research and official biographies with anecdotes about the artists in his in *Vite de' più eccellenti* (Bellosi and Rossi).<sup>47</sup> The story of Cimabue trying to chase away Giotto's painted fly may not have been true, but it surely provides us with a way to understand the manner in which the work of art was seen by the painters, even in jest. Not to mention that Vasari's aesthetic judgments were based primarily on the religious feelings, experiences and revelations that the work of art stirred in their contemporary public (Barolsky). Likewise, the followers of the painter or the public of the artwork itself greatly enjoyed the stories circulating about him and about it. The story of Charles of Anjou's pilgrimage before *Madonna Rucellai* in Florence shows us that the artwork's epiphany was the epiphany of Christ (Barolsky: 11-12). The participation of all those involved in the cultural act escapes us. We lack the stories behind the mural ensembles; but although the work of art becomes a mute object, silence does

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<sup>47</sup> Vasari follows the ancient model of Plutarch, and tries to define the individual talent of each artist. For a subtle analysis of how art history and individual history intertwine in Vasari's work, see Lee Rubin (1995).

not entitle the researcher to speak in its place with the voice of deterministic theories. One must always be aware, like Berlin, that there is an inner history that one may never crush. That above all, one must look and admire. That part of the mystery must remain unsolved.

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