

Painted inscriptions that accompany medieval representations are basically intended to identify what is painted.

For the common stock of images in Christian iconography – including post-Byzantine art – the inscriptions usually certify what is already known by visual means, supported by education, meaning notions in Evangelical history. This is the case, for instance, of the feasts at Moldovita: *Transfiguration* (**Fig. 1**), *Last Supper* (**Fig. 2**), *Crucifixion* (**Fig. 3**), *Resurrection* (**Fig. 4**).

But when innovation of language interfere – as it happened in 15th-16th century Moldavia – the inscriptions become vital to the identification.

Thus, the titles missing, one could have hardly understood the specific meaning of the eleven *Eothina*, or the *Matins Resurrection Gospels* in the narthex at Dobrovat¹ (**Figs. 5-8**) – unique versions displaying a detailed illustration of the text, as it happens in certain types of manuscript illumination; similarly, one couldn't have known, unless reading the mural explanation/epigraph, what exactly happened in certain episodes of *St Nicholas'* life and peregrinations, as his *Baptizing many People* or his *Visit to Rome* in the exonarthex at Parhauti² (**Figs. 9-10**), as well as in the extended version of *Herod's Banquet* in the narthex at Arbore³ (with a multitude of guests, **Fig. 11**), or of the bizarre, in the context, figure of *Pilate* in the *Last Judgement*, S façade, at Arbore (**Fig. 12**).

Moreover, these inscriptions could reveal, frequently by means of quotations, the source writings that generated the images: for the *Eothina*, it is the *incipit* of the lections sending to the Resurrection Gospels [for instance, the third Evangelion (Mark 16, 9-20, **Fig. 6**) *Now when he was risen ... he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out*

TEXT AND IMAGE IN SIXTEENTH CENTURY MOLDAVIAN PAINTING. BRIEF SURVEY OF CASES*

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seven demons, or the fifth Evangelion (Luke 24,12-35, Fig. 7) But Peter arose, and ran unto the tomb; and stooping and looking in, he seeth the linen cloths by themselves; and he departed to his home, wondering at that which was come to pass...]; for certain special episodes in St Nicholas cycle at Parhauti the inscriptions lead to St Nicholas' Peregrinations, Περίοδοι Νικολάου (Fig. 9, 10) (He baptized and taught many to believe in the living God and He went to the holy fathers to pray and, prayer accomplished, he wished to go and see saint Peter in Rome); for the unusual Baptist's cycle, the names of the guests and the ciphers beneath, in Herod's Feast (Fig. 11), pointed to the homily to the Beheading of St John the Baptist attributed to St Mark (the inscription has been reconstituted following the manuscript version) Nilus the second after Herodes, Koril (Cyrillus) the third, Lucius the fourth, Ignus the fifth, Gannius the sixth, Felix the seventh, Sosipater the eighth, Antonius the ninth, Achilleus the tenth, Alypius the eleventh, Hirrus the twelfth, Alphius the thirteenth, Prochorus the fourteenth, Himerius the fifteenth, Africanus the sixteenth, Iulianus the

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seventeenth, Tranquillinus the eighteenth, Democrates the nineteenth, Herodes the twentieth, Iulianus the twenty-first, Aetius the twenty-second.

Considering the oneness of versions, the fact that they are unparalleled, one might infer that the masterminds of the decorations invented the images out of the text.



Fig. 1 – Moldovita, *Transfiguration*.



Fig. 2 – Moldovita, *Last Supper*.



Fig. 3 – Moldovita, *Crucifixion*.



Fig. 4 – Moldovita, *Resurrection*.



Fig. 5 – Dobrovat, *Eothina I*.

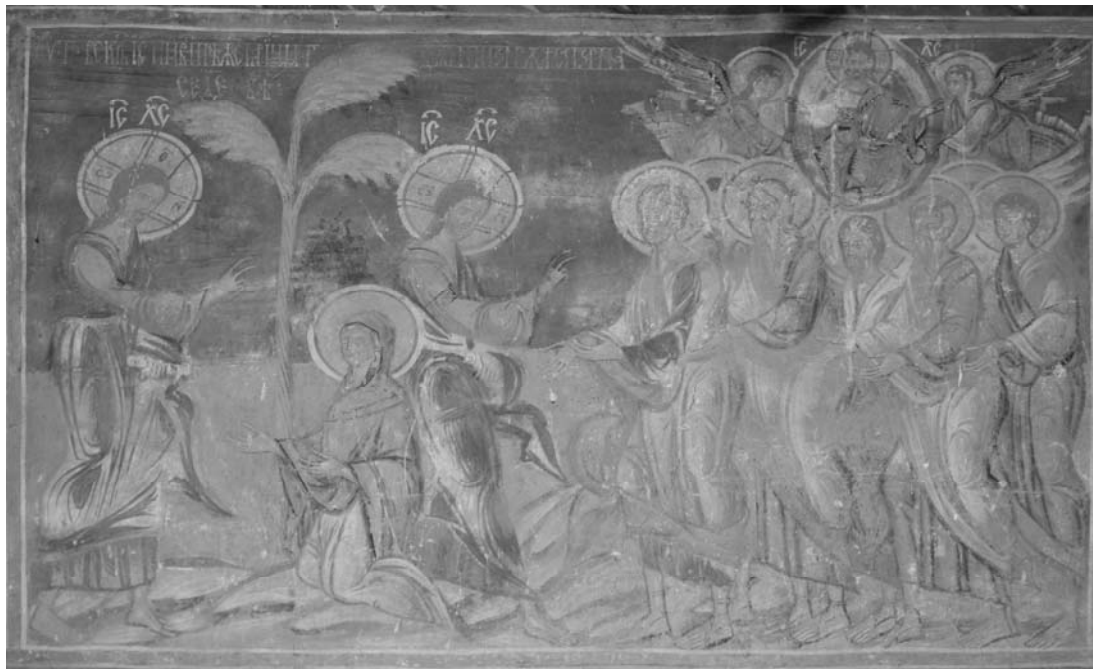


Fig. 6 – Dobrovat, *Eothina* 3.



Fig. 7 – Dobrovat, *Eothina* 5.



Fig. 8 – Dobrovat, *Eothina 6*.



Fig. 9 – Parhanti, *St. Nicholas baptizing*.

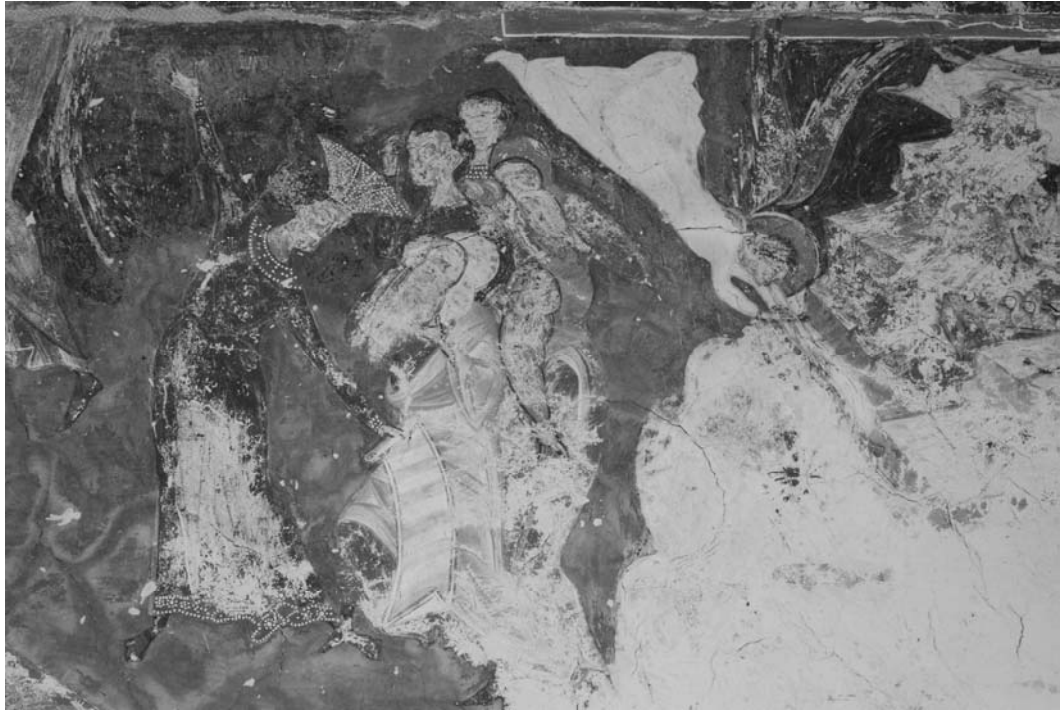


Fig. 12 – Arbore, *Last Judgment*, detail: *Pilate*.

In other instances as in the *Akathistos hymn*, quotations of the *incipits* are simply indicative of the stanzas, while the structure of the illustrations has separate, figurative references: *Because He wished to grant release from all the ancient debts* (stanza 18, kontakion 10, Moldovita, **Fig. 13**) or *O Mother worthy of all praise* (stanza 24, kontakion 13, Moldovita, **Fig. 14**). The inscriptions have no direct, vivid impact on the representations.

Selecting older, sometimes infrequent visual sources for the hymns illustrations as well as inventing images starting from the text seems to be symptomatic of the bookish effervescent activities of the local workshops of the time.

The erudite approach of the mural programs might be as well responsible for certain licences in conferring “titles to some paintings.

In the cycle of *Christ’s appearances after Resurrection* at Dobrovăț, a slight gap between text and image interferes here and there, as in the fifth for example, where the text quotes the first line of the *pericope*, mentioning Peter at the tomb, while the image refers to the following verses, the Emmaus episode.

In the extended *Genesis* cycle at Sucevita, part of the ten episodes dedicated to the first seven days of the world, bear quotations the beginning of which are displaced from the end of the previous ones: for example, the illustration to the third day of Creation – the appearance of the Earth (**Fig. 15**) – is inscribed starting with the reference to the end of the second day: *And there was morning, a second day. And God said, Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together*; the fourth day, the creation of the sun and the moon (**Fig. 16**), is announced by the end of the third: *And there was morning, a third day. And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of heaven*; the inscription to the sixth day – the creation of Adam and Eve (**Figs. 17-18**) reads in the beginning: *And there was morning, a fifth day... And God said, Let us make man in our image..* These quotations initiate an unexpected relation between images: a sort of “lagging behind” of the writing face to the image, suggesting a bookish understanding of the continuity in reading iconography, as turning the pages of a book.



Fig. 13 – Moldovita, *Akathystos Hymn*, stanza 18.



Fig. 14 – Moldovita, *Akathystos Hymn*, stanza 24.

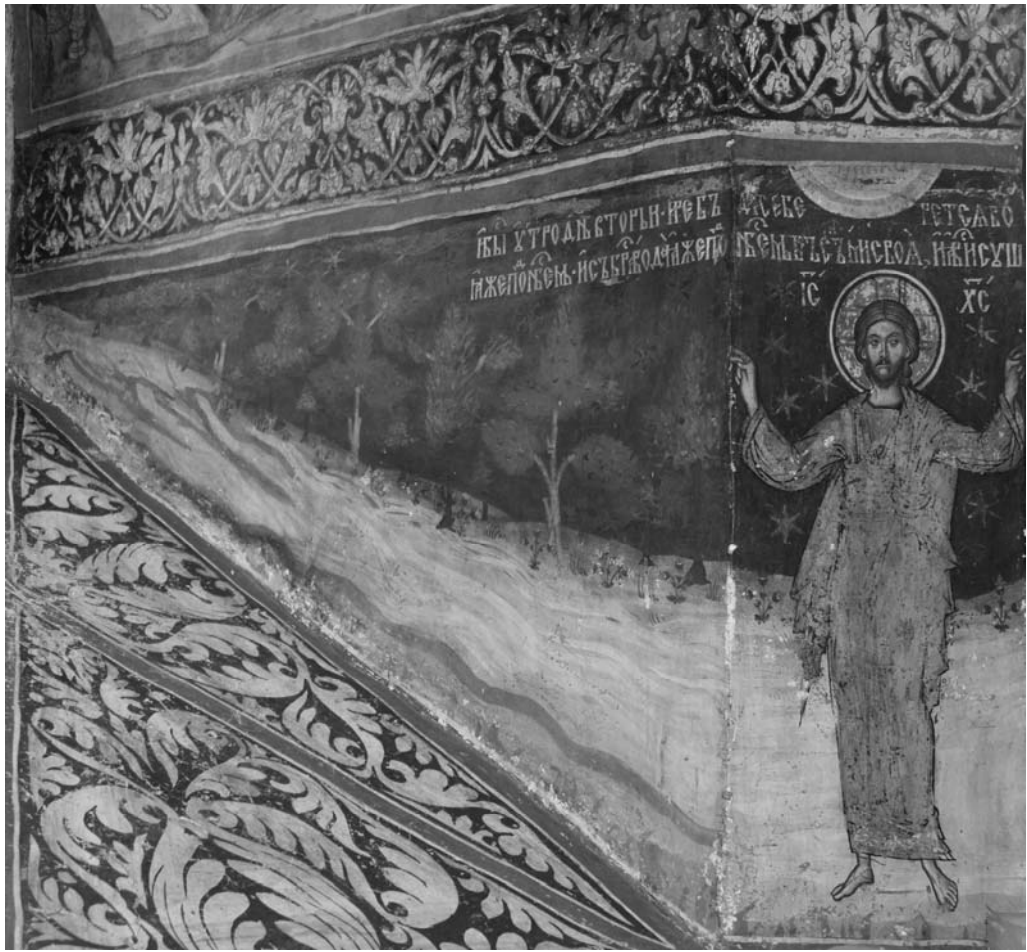


Fig. 15 – Sucevita, *Genesis Cycle: the Earth*.

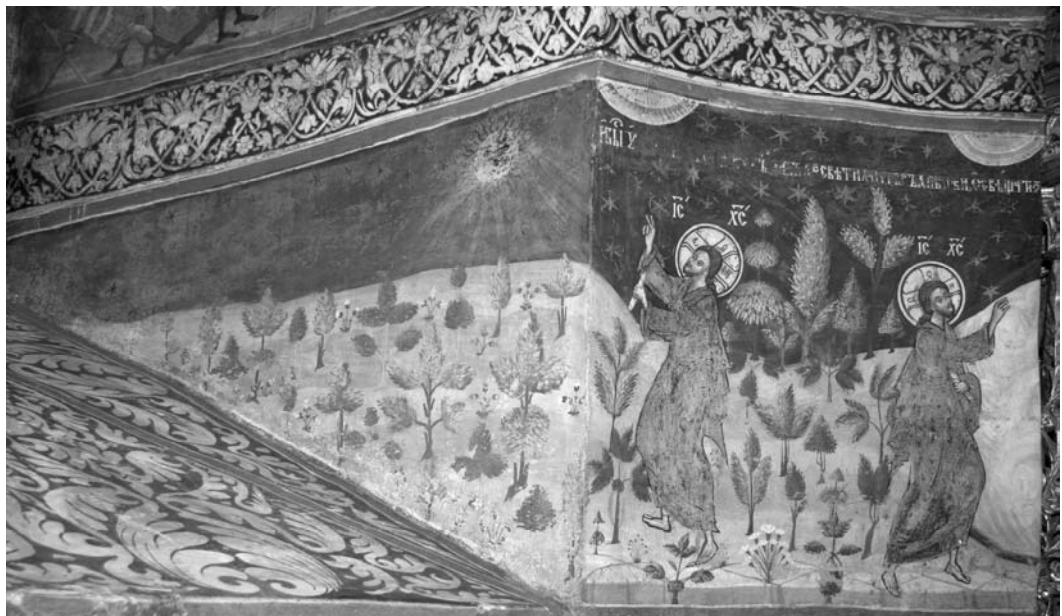


Fig. 16 – Sucevita, *Genesis Cycle: the Sun and the Moon*.



Fig. 17 – Sucevita, *Genesis Cycle: Adam and Eve*.

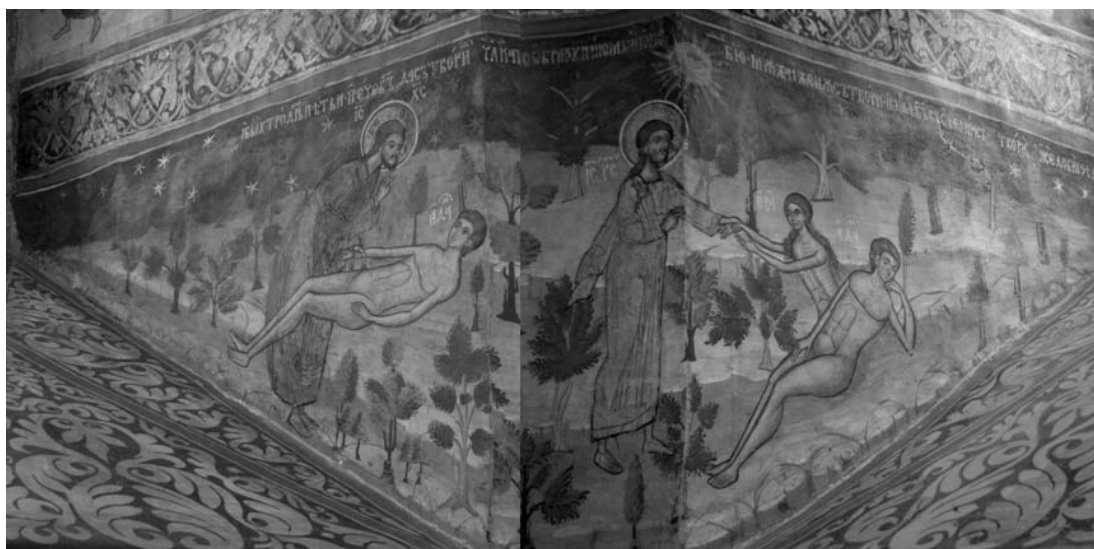


Fig. 18 – Sucevita, *Genesis Cycle: Adam and Eve*.



Fig. 21 – Dobrovăț, *Samaritan Woman*, detail: *martyrdom of Photini's Family, Photini and emperor Nero*.



Fig. 22 – Sucevita, *Plague of the Fiery Serpents*.

In respect to the substance of cognition lying in the inscriptions as compared to the paintings, most of the scenes would plead for equilibrium as it happens with *Abraham's Sacrifice* in the altar space at Sucevita (**Fig. 19**) an example that could be considered classic for the full coverage between word and image. The literary fragment reads (Gen. 22, 10-12): *And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of Jehovah called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. And he said, Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him; ... And Abraham ... looked, and, behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns.*

Nevertheless, multiple instances have been found in sixteenth century Moldavian frescoes where the scenes are much more sophisticated than the titles would indicate. This is the case of the *Samaritan Woman* in the narthex at Dobrovat (**Figs. 20-21**)

where the encounter with Christ is continued – under the laconic inscription *Upon the time of emperor Nero in the holy city of Rome* – with episodes from the life and martyrdom of the Christian Samaritan called Photini.

Reversely, sometimes the written information exceeds the content of the representation, as in a number of episodes from the Moses cycle at Sucevita (**Fig. 22**) – *the Plague of the fiery Serpents* (referring/not quoting/to Num. 21, 5-6): *God's wrath grew hot against them and He stroke them with biting serpents up to 70000/seventy thousand*; the cipher of victims is absent in the biblical source.

The survey of cases might continue, without necessarily directing to a conclusion for the time being.

We may none the less infer that a subtle pressure of text upon painting resulted in a diversity of situations unveiling a scrutinizing iconographic behavior as a symptom of meta-byzantinism.

Notes

¹ Constața Costea, *Narthexul Dobrovățului. «Dosar arheologic»*, in *Revista Monumentelor istorice* LX (1991) nr. 1, p. 10-22.

² Idem, *The Life of Saint Nicholas in Moldavian Murals. From Stephen the Great (1457-1504) to*

Jeremiah Movila (1596-1606), RRHA, série Beaux-Arts, t. XXXIX-XL (2002-2003), p. 25-50.

³ Idem, *Herold's Feast at Arbore* in RRHA, série Beaux-Arts, t. XLI-XLII (2004-2005), p. 3-6.