

The Prophet Elijah in Moldavian Iconography, ca. 1480–1530: Liturgical and Devotional Contexts *

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Abstract: This study aims to share light upon the various iconographic functions that the images of the prophet Elijah undertook in the Moldavian wall painting at the end of the 15th century and in the first decades of the following one. A funeral function is registered in his depictions from nartheka at Lujeni, Rădăuți and Bălinești, paired in the latter two instances with the *Anaperson*. More frequently, Elijah stands alongside John the Baptist on the thresholds of the apse, alluding henceforth to the ‘Elijah redivivus’ theological thread. His relationship with Elisha, shown in the micro-cycle from Neamț and in the iconic portraits from Voroneț and Popăuți, opens eventually Elijah’s iconography towards the theme of spiritual filiation, enhancing the monastic character of the programmes involving their connection.

Keywords: *post-Byzantine iconography, Moldavian iconography, Elijah, Elisha, performative images, monastic programmes.*

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In 1488, Stephen the Great commissioned the building of a new church for a monastery dedicated to the prophet Elijah, already attested in the outskirts of Suceava, in 1443.¹ The cult of Elijah, an arguably scarce presence in the Byzantine devotion,² was therefore gaining an impetus in Moldavia during the 15th century, paving the way for the iconographic material that I intend to briefly analyse in this study. I will try to argue that one of the multi-layered functions carried by the images of Elijah might be linked with the monastic ethos of spiritual filiation.



Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.

The image of Elijah appears to function mainly in the funeral context of the nartheka, connected to the burial installations dedicated to the founders. One notices this option already materialising at Lujeni,³ in 1456,

¹For a general assessment of this monument, see Tereza Sinigalia, “Studiu pentru un proiect de restaurare. Biserica Sf. Ilie – Suceava” [Study for a Restoration Project. The Church of St. Elijah – Suceava], in *Caietele restaurării* 8 (2019), pp. 112–138.

²Edmond Voordeckers, “Élie dans l’art byzantine,” in Gerard F. Willems (ed.), *Élie le prophète. Bible, tradition, iconographie. Colloques des 10 et 11 novembre 1985, Bruxelles*, Institutum Judaicum, Leuven, 1988, pp. 155–196; Gustave Brady, “Le souvenir d’Élie chez les Pères grecs,” in *Élie le Prophète*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, vol. I: *Selon les écritures et les traditions chrétiennes*, 1956, pp. 131–158; Anthony Cutler, Catherine Brown Tkacz, John H. Lowden, “Elijah,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, vol. I, Oxford University Press, New York–Oxford, 1991, pp. 687–688; Eliane Poirot, *Le culte du saint prophète Élie dans la liturgie byzantine*, MA thesis, Université des Sciences Humaines de Strasbourg, Institut Orthodoxe Saint-Serge de Paris, 1991.

³For recent approaches to this monument, see Emil Dragnev, “Noi observații privind programul iconografic al pronaosului bisericii Înălțării din Lujeni” [New observations on the iconographic programme of the narthex of the Ascension church in Lujeni], in Igor Ojog, Igor Șarov, Valentin Tomuleț, Aurel Zancoci (eds.), *Studia in honorem Pavel Cocârlă: Studii de istorie medie și modernă* [Studies in medieval and modern history], Cartdidact, Chișinău, 2006, pp. 51–61; idem, “Programul iconografic al pronaosului bisericii Înălțării de la Lujeni” [The iconographic programme of the narthex of the Ascension church in Lujeni], in Pr. Gabriel

where the conspicuous votive representation of Theodore Vitold is surmounted by a generous depiction of the prophet, during his ascetic retreat at the brook of Cherith (Fig. 1). This insert of Elijah in the iconography of the narthex is attested later at Arbore, a monument probably painted in the first quarter of the 16th century.⁴ Here, the monumental image of the prophet is harboured by the large intrados of the northern window (Fig. 2). The funeral implication of these occurrences, enhanced by the well-known eschatological dimension of Elijah as forerunner of Christ at his second coming,⁵ is furthermore enriched by their coupling with the resurrectional theme Anapeson,⁶ an option registered around 1490 at Rădăuți.⁷ The large southern window in the narthex is stamped by the ascetic Elijah, at the bottom, and by the Anapeson, at its top (Fig. 3). Later, in the first decade of the 16th century, the narthex of Bălinești displays a regrettably almost effaced image of the prophet, joined by holy monks in the small niche of the northern wall, while the Anapeson sits in the large intrados of the southern window (Fig. 4). A noteworthy implication of this interconnection between the image of Elijah submerged in his ascetic contemplation and the natural light entering the sacred space, resides in the obvious subsequent visionary accent, foreshadowing the prophet's role at the Transfiguration of Christ and his relevance for the Hesychast spiritual trend. This logic may therefore be continued in the 16th century for the iconography of the naos, for instance in the southern apse of the church from Moldovița (1537), (Fig. 5).

Herea, Emil Dragnev, Stanisława Jakimowska, Janina Maria Hahula, Cristian Antonescu (eds.), *Schola. Ars. Historia: In honorem Tereza Sinigalia*, Heruvim, Pătrăuți, 2014, pp. 87–128; Constantin I. Ciobanu, “Biserica din Lujeni: Istoria cercetării monumentului și specificul programului iconografic” [The church in Lujeni: The history of its scholarship and the specificity of its iconographic programme], in *Ars Transsilvaniae* 21 (2011), pp. 5–14.

⁴The dispute regarding the dating of the wall paintings from Arbore involves multiple hypotheses and arguments, aptly surveyed by Oana Stan in her study “Biserica Tăierea Capului Sf. Ioan Botezătorul din Arbore” [The Church of the Beheading of St. John the Baptist in Arbore], published online on the platform <https://arhivadragut.netlify.app/> (10 June 2022).

⁵ See note 12 below.

⁶For this intricate theme, see Branislav Todić, “Anapeson: iconographie et signification du theme,” in *Byzantion* 64 (1994), no. 1, pp. 134–165.

⁷For these recently restored frescoes, see Tereza Sinigalia, “Entre Pierre I^{er} et Étienne Le Grand,” in *Anastasis. Research in Medieval Culture and Art* 6 (2019) no. 2, pp. 9–30, and Emil Dragnev, “Programul iconografic al unei biserici episcopale în vremea lui Ștefan cel Mare. Picturile murale de la Sf. Nicolae din Rădăuți în urma intervenției restauratorilor” [The Iconographical Program of an Episcopal Church in the Times of Stephen the Great. The Wall Paintings at St. Nicholas in Rădăuți], in Lucian-Valeriu Lefter and Aurelia Ichim (eds.), *Monumentul XXI, Lucrările Simpozionului “Monumentul – Tradiție și viitor”, Ediția a XXI-a, Iași, 2019* [The Monument XXI. Proceedings of the International Symposium “The Monument – Tradition and Future,” the 21st Edition, Iași, 2019], *Doxologia*, Iași, 2020, pp. 11–35.



Fig. 3.

Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.



Fig. 6.



Fig. 7.

One must note that the funeral role of Elijah in the Balkan area at the end of the 15th century is attested also in the narthex of Kremikovtsi (1493),⁸ where the votive portrait is flanked by the standing figure of Elijah, joined by a visionary depiction of John the Baptist (Fig. 6). As it was already noted, this pairing constitutes a widespread practice at the end of the 15th century around Kastoria and it was propagated mostly on the territory of the Archbishopric of Ohrid, constituting henceforth a landmark for the

⁸ For a general presentation of the monument, see Kostadinka Paskaleva-Kabadaieva, *Tsŭrkvata Sv. Georgiv Kremikovskiya manastir* [The church of St. George in Kremikovtsi monastery], Bŭlgarski khudozhnik, Sofia, 1980.

workshops of wall painting active in the central Balkans.⁹ Their possible connection with the Moldavian artistic practices has been postulated repeatedly over the last decades,¹⁰ and the dossier of this issue comprises also the pairing of Elijah and John, as this became a frequent option in the Moldavian iconography for the bema. This pairing usually involves the representation of Elijah joining John the Baptist on the northern wall in front of the iconostasis, at Dorohoi, around 1525, and at Humor, in 1535 (Fig. 7). However, the earliest preserved occurrence of this iconographic practice is registered in 1496 in the naos of Voroneț, where the couple is exposed in mirrored positions, on the southern and northern walls in front of the iconostasis (Fig. 8). The central role of Elijah in the eastern monastic tradition, revived at the end of the Empire in the hesychast milieu, explains his association with John the Baptist (already frequent in Gospels, based upon Malachi 3:23), and visually expressed in iconography.¹¹



Fig. 8.

⁹Maria Kulusheva, “Izobrazheniyatana Prorok Iliya i sv. Ioan Predtecha v svodanapritvorana Seslavskiyas manastir” [Depictions of the Prophet Elias and St. John the Baptist in the vault of the narthex of the Seslavtsi Monastery], in Emanuel Mutafov, Margarita Kuyumdzieva (eds.), *Art Readings 2019: Patterns. Models. Drawings*, Institute of Art Studies, Sofia, 2020, pp. 316–317.

¹⁰Miltiadis-Milton Garidis, “Les Balkans et la Moldavie à la fin du XVe siècle,” in idem, *La peinture murale dans le monde orthodoxe après la chute de Byzance (1450-1600) et dans les pays sous domination étrangère*, C. Spanos, Athens, 1989, pp. 117–123; Evangelia N. Georgitsoyanni, “Les rapports de l’atelier avec les peintures de Moldavie,” in idem, *Les peintures murales du vieux catholicon du monastère de la Transfiguration aux Météores*, Université Nationale et Capodistriaque d’Athènes, Faculté de Philosophie, Bibliothèque Sophie N. Saropoulos 92, Athens, 1993, pp. 416–430.

¹¹See E. Voordeckers, “Élie” (see n. 2), pp. 183–184.



Fig. 9.



Fig. 10.

At the core of this pairing lies however an important theological thread, labelled as the “Elijah redivivus” tradition,¹² that ponders upon the identification of John the Baptist with Elijah, which occurs in Matthew 11:14. While the identification of John as the Elijah figure did, in fact, become the predominant Christian understanding of the Malachi prophecy, the explicit denial of this identification by John himself in John 1:21, coupled with the allusion to a returning Elijah in Revelation 11:3–13, served to keep diverse readings of the Elijah redivivus tradition current in the Christian community. The solution calls for two advents, the first in humility and the second in glory, each with its own forerunner.¹³ The eschatological role of Elijah, already manifested in his participation to funeral iconographic schemata, is best voiced out by a rare iconographic type that represents the prophet holding an imago clipeata of the Agnus Dei. This option, stressing equally his kinship with John the Baptist, is attested at Dragalevtsi¹⁴ in 1476, and echoed in Moldavia, on the western arch of the apse at Humor, in 1535 (Fig. 9).

¹²See, more recently, Jaroslav Rindoš, *He of whom it is written: John the Baptist and Elijah in Luke*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Mein, 2010; Joel A. Weaver, *Theodoret of Cyrus on Romans 11:26. Recovering an Early Christian Elijah Redivivus tradition*, Peter Lang, New York, 2007.

¹³Joel A. Weaver, *Theodoret of Cyrus* (see n. 12), p. 140.

¹⁴M. Kolusheva, “Izobrazheniyata” (see n. 9), pp. 325–326.



Fig. 11.



Fig. 12.

But a new layer of signification, I believe, stems out from another peculiarity of the redaction from Voroneț. Hidden behind the obliquely projected wing of the lower row of icons, Elisha stands as a witness to Elijah's ascetic contemplation. This feature opens the final section of my study, dedicated to a presentation of an abridged cycle of Elijah, in the diaconicon of Neamț,¹⁵ probably painted around 1500 (Fig. 10). The opening image, on the eastern half of the niche's arch, depicts the moment described in I Kings 17:2-4: "And the word of the Lord came to him: Depart from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, that is east of

¹⁵For this cycle, see Vlad Bedros, "Notes on Elijah's cycle in the diaconicon at Neamț monastery," in *Revue Roumaine d'Histoire de l'Art. Série beaux-arts* 45 (2008), pp. 117–125.

Jordan.”¹⁶ The raven is no more visible, but a discrete white contour of its silhouette is preserved on the right mountain peak (Fig. 11). The upper part of the southern wall is covered by the depiction of Elijah and Elisha miraculously crossing Jordan in the presence of an anonymous witness (Fig. 10), illustrating the verses from II Kings 2:6-8. The cycle continues on the western half of the niche’s arch, depicting the prophet’s fiery ascension, as narrated in II Kings 2:11 (Fig. 12). Downwards on the western wall comes the illustration of verses 12–13: “And Elisha [...] took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of Jordan” (Fig. 13). The prophet’s garment is seized however not only by Elisha, but also by one of the two witnesses behind him. The narration ends on the lowermost area of the southern wall, with the depiction of verse 14: “And when he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other; and Elisha went over” (Fig. 10). Together with Elisha crosses the river yet another anonymous witness. The large and deep embrasure of the eastern window withholds the majestic figures of two seraphim, thus stressing the general visionary character of this program. The painter takes advantage of architectural structure so that, visually, a cave guarded by angelic forces opens underneath Elijah nurtured by ravens, symbolically connecting Cherith and Horeb, two landmarks in the prophet’s ascetic experience (Fig. 14).

The iconographic selection in the diaconicon at Neamț echoes a prestigious byzantine precedent, the diaconicon of the Morača monastery in Montenegro.¹⁷ Compared with this much earlier example, which has a completely different scale, covering a substantially larger pastophorium, the Elijah cycle at Neamț shows however a similitude, since the four episodes it depicts are consistent with the images from the lowermost areas of the southern and eastern walls at Morača.¹⁸ Amongst the iconographic originalities of Neamț it is worth mentioning the presence of witnesses in episodes occurring near Jordan, though the Gospel states clearly that “the sons of prophets” kept distance of Elijah and Elisha and none of them is ever mentioned to cross the river. The most striking insertion of such witness figure is that of the young man who stretches outwards his arm so that he would seize Elijah’s mantle as it falls from the fiery chariot. The first

¹⁶All Bible quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible. Revised Standard Edition*, New York–Glasgow, 1952⁴.

¹⁷On this monument see Voislav J. Djurić, *Byzantinische Fresken in Jugoslawien*, Hirmer, Munich, 1976, pp. 50–52 and 251–252, pl. 33–34 (at p. 176); Anika Skovran, “Freski XIII veka u manastiru Morača,” in *Zbornik Radova Vizantološkog Instituta* 5 (1958), pp. 149–170; Pavle Mijović, “Teofanijau slikarstvu Morace,” in *Zbornik Svetozara Radojčića*, Filozofski Fakultet, Belgrade, 1969, pp. 179–194; Sreten Petković, “The 13th Century Frescoes in the Morača Monastery. A Reinterpretation,” in *Actes du XV^e Congrès International d’Études Byzantines (Athènes 1976)*. *Art et Archéologie, Communications B*, Association internationale d’études byzantines, Athens, 1987, pp. 631–638; E.Voordeckers, “Élie” (see n. 2), pp. 186–187.

¹⁸V. Bedros, “Notes on Elijah” (see n. 15), p. 118.

miraculous crossing of Jordan involves yet another unexpected representation, since there is no use of mantle, the image portraying Elijah in prayer, his arms outstretched, while in the middle of the torrent a whirlpool starts its roundabout.



Fig. 13.



Fig. 14.

A purely hagiographic explanation for this short cycle fails to account for the special relationship of the cycle with the apse. Such an iconographic display suggests a general theophanic meaning, while other scenes, such as the prophet nurtured by ravens could refer to the Eucharist. The sliding of liturgical themes from apse to *prothesis* or from *prothesis* to apse and to diaconicon is not an unfamiliar phenomenon for the 13th century, when the diaconicon still lacks a precise function.¹⁹ Its borrowing of themes from *prothesis* might reflect a liturgical practice according to which the deacon was allowed to celebrate alone the *proskomede* rite in the diaconicon; although Saint Simeon of Thessalonica reacted against this deacon's pre-eminence, such practice was still in use at Mount Athos in the 15th century.²⁰

¹⁹Ibidem, *loc. cit.*

²⁰Simeon of Thessalonica, "De Sacra Liturgia," in Jacques Paul Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Graeca* 155, Migne, Paris, 1857–1866, col. 289c, apud Suzy Dufrenne, "Images du décor de la prothèse," in *Revue des Etudes Byzantines* 26 (1968), p. 299, n. 11; see also Robert Bornert OSB, *Les commentaires byzantines de la divine liturgie du VII^e au XV^e siècle*, Institut français d'études byzantines, Paris, 1966, p. 253.

One should nonetheless consider that the image of the prophet nurtured by ravens is displayed just above the eastern niche in the Neamț diaconicon, which might suggest a liturgical use of this space – a hypothesis which requires however thorough inquiry into the ecclesiastic relations with Mount Athos, where at this late time deacons could still celebrate by themselves the *proskomede* in the diaconicon. Throughout the 13th and the 14th centuries, however, the cycles represented in the pastophoria belong to saints who might serve as examples for the clergy, so that, in monastic contexts, the choice of Elijah becomes henceforth quite suitable. As a matter of fact, the prophet is one of the core ascetic models, leaving a strong imprint upon the monastic life, as it is attested by various treatises, by hymnographic material composed for saints monks and by the frequency of his representations in monastic contexts,²¹ culminating with a monastic influence upon his iconography, namely his portrayal as a hesychast monk in prayer (during his retreat at Cherith, as it is represented also at Neamț), attesting his perfect contemplation praised by Saint Gregory Palamas in several writings.²² The presence of Elijah at the Transfiguration facilitates his association with the contemplation of uncreated energies, and it is precisely this theophany that stands, at Neamț, on the wall of the bema, diagonally opposed to the diaconicon (Fig. 15).



Fig. 15.

²¹V. Bedros, “Notes on Elijah” (see n. 15), p. 122.

²²Théodosy Spassky, “Le culte du prophète Élie et sa figure dans la tradition orientale,” in *Élie le Prophète* (see n. 2), p. 223. Palamas refers to Elijah as a hesychast in his *Second Letter to Barlaam* 49, and *The First Triad in Defence of the Saints Hesychasts* 2, 10.



Fig. 16.



Fig. 17.

But alongside this multi-layered visionary and eucharistic implications of the micro-cycle from Neamț, the centrality of Elisha should be equally addressed, as it foreshadows his unexpected presence at Voroneț (Fig. 8). I propose that this insistence on the linking between Elijah and Elisha could be interpreted in the light of another iconographic program from this interval. At Popăuți (1496), the southern wall of the bema displays the joined figures of Elijah and Elisha (Fig. 16). Most significantly, the scriptural texts selected for the rolls held by the prophets address the issue of spiritual

filiation and its charismatic strength (a rather monastic concern). “And Elijah said: Elisha, you stay here, the Lord is only sending me to the Jordan” (2 Kings, 2:6); Elisha has the spiritual clairvoyance to disobey this command, and this will grant him the fulfilment of a bold request: “And Elisha said: Let me inherit a double share of your spirit” (2 Kings, 2:9). From the opposite northern wall, two unidentified saintly monks, blessed by Christ Emanuel, contemplate the efficiency of the spiritual filiation between Elisha and his master.²³

The connection of the iconography of Christ Emanuel with the idea of spiritual dispersion is reflected in the use of the prophetic verse “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me” (Isaiah 61:1) for his unwrapped roll, as in the image from Saint George in Suceava (1532, Fig. 17). A negotiation of the ebb and flow of spiritual energies is therefore enacted on the threshold of the apse in Popăuți between Christ Emanuel, Elijah, Elisha, and the saintly monks. One might ponder upon a possible echoing, in such iconographic articulations, of the generous vision expressed by John Chrysostom:

Elijah, upon his departure, handed down his mantle to Elisha, whereas Christ, at his ascension, handed down to the disciples the gifts of grace, instituting therefore not only one prophet, but thousands of Elishas, much greater and much more eminent.²⁴

The iconography of Elijah, in Moldavian context, could therefore be placed alongside other exempla of spiritual guidance in the monastic quest for ascetic perfection. While his pairing with John the Baptist falls within an already established Late Byzantine tradition of pictorial practices, the insistence upon his role as spiritual father and source of charismatic authority for Elisha, registered in the iconic images from Voroneț and Popăuți, but also in the selection of the micro-cycle from Neamț, constitutes a specificity of the Moldavian theological and devotional milieu, that seems to have been constantly shaped and informed by the monastic agenda.

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²³ V. Bedros, “The monk, equal to the martyrs? Moldavian iconographic instances,” in *Diversité et Identité Culturelle en Europe* 12 (2015), no. 2, pp. 51-52.

²⁴ Καὶ ὁ μὲν Ἠλίας ἀνελθὼν ἀφ᾽ ἡμελῶν ἐπὶ τὸν Ἐλισσαίου· ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς ἀναβὰς ἀφ᾽ ἡκεχαρίσματα ἐπὶ τοὺς μαθητὰς, οὐχ ἕνα προφήτην ποιοῦντα, ἀλλὰ μυρίους Ἐλισσαίους· μᾶλλον δὲ ἐκείνου πολλῶν μείζοντες καὶ λαμπρότερος. John Chrysostom, “In ascensionem domini nostri Jesu Christi,” in Jacques Paul Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Graeca* 50, Migne, Paris, 1857–1866, col. 450 (translation mine). I must thank Andrei Dumitrescu for pointing out this patristic reference to me.

Fig. 2. Private chapel of the Beheading of John the Baptist, Arbore, post 1500. Narthex, southern window. Elijah at the brook of Cherith. © V. Bedros.

Fig. 3. Church of St. Nicholas, former bishopric of Rădăuți, 1480–1490. Narthex, southern window. Elijah at the brook of Cherith, Anapeson. © Andrei Dumitrescu.

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Fig. 15. Church of the Ascension, Neamț monastery, post 1500. Apse, northern wall, The Transfiguration. © V. Bedros.

Fig. 16. Voivodal chapel of St. Nicholas, Popăuți, 1496. Naos, southern wall of the eastern bay. Sts. Elijah and Elisha. © V. Bedros.

Fig. 17. Voivodal chapel of St. Nicholas, Popăuți, 1496. Naos, northern wall of the eastern bay. Two unidentified monks blessed by Christ Emanuel. © V. Bedros.

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