

UNIVERSAL AND PECULIAR IN OLD HAGIOGRAPHICAL IMAGES OF ST.NICHOLAS. THE HAGIOGRAPHICAL ICON FROM URISIU DE JOS - A CASE STUDY

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Abstract: The article treats some issues related to the beginning of hagiographical icons and mural paintings as a short pass in review, especially the representations of Saint Nicholas as a very popular character, their common or different features, and their development, depending on their inspiration source. Thus for having a background in what concerns an informed reference and a comparison basis for a case study, the icon of Saint Nicholas from Urisiu de Jos, Mureș County. There are taken into consideration the stylistic particularities, the compositional and symbolic features in a closed relation with the inspiration sources and the message that these representations convey, resulting in a new perspective upon the provenience, the way they were made and spiritual effects. The knowledge is accompanied by examples, and some images to relate to.

For the case study, there is made a characterization of the biographic scenes of the saint, with a closed reference to the general or peculiar features that were studied before. In this way, the frame of its research begun broader, and as a consequence, a more defined portrayal upon the sources of the influences and artistic moves that marked the epoch in which the icon was designed.

Keywords: *Icon, Mural Painting, St. Nicholas*

The aim of this article is to identify, for a short fragment – that of beginning representations that concern the hagiographical cycles of Saint Nicholas, the features that unite and divide their evolution depending on inspiration sources, aiming to achieve an advised approach upon a case study, the icon with the same theme, from Urisiu de Jos, Mureș County. Thus, the stylistic compositional and symbolic particularities will be shown in a new light, that of a whole picture in what concerns the provenience, the way they were made and the implications at the spiritual level, the inspiration sources and the message that these representations convey.

Saint Nicholas has a very special and extended popularity in the Orthodox world, being frequently represented in works of art, in liturgical

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writings, or even as a real person, that has remained nowadays in relation with the offering of gifts on Christmas Eve. We can look upon his extraordinary popularity, in connection with its beginning, that probably appeared in the vicinity of Sinai and Cyprus, as cosmopolitan, cultural, artistic, but especially religious centers¹. Related to the spreading of his cult, we have found² that “*the Latin had great piety for St. Nicholas and there is no other saint that is to be honored by all nations, like this saint. Especially the Russians and Romanians are honoring him more than all the saints that lived from the apostolic times.*”

The iconographical representations that have in the middle the half or the whole figure of a saint, surrounded by its life scenes, belong to the group of “*hagiographical*” icons, the ones named “*vita*” or “*historiate*”. The subjects of these scenes are inspired from hymnography, from Biblical episodes, or from the saints’ lives, sinaxary, but mostly illuminated manuscripts. It looks like fresco paintings are no longer supposed to be the possible immediate inspiration source (as long as they rarely include so many scenes as in icons), as the illuminated manuscripts did, in the displaying and composition of hagiographical episodes.³ This iconographic type spread out quickly first in the Mediterranean basin, and then to all the Orthodox nations: yet, in the 13th century we find variants in the South and the North of Italy, Cyprus, Sinai and Russia. A comparison of the icon of Saint Nicholas from Bari with an earlier one from Sinai Mountain, will lead to the identification of numerous similitudes⁴. This can be put on the account of the important cultural and artistic exchanges between the West and the East in this period, but also on the account of the emulation appeared after the pilgrimage or gifts to the churches and monasteries (a.n.).

To have a whole picture upon the feature, development and circulation of this prototype, we will offer some relevant and documented writings of the same author: “the influence exerted by the hagiographical icons was felt mostly in the Post-Byzantine period, when they became very popular⁵. The most encountered features of this iconographic type are the following: the icons are frequently of big size, ranging from seventy centimeters to two meters high; the scenes (generally around twelve and twenty) are developed alongside the four sides of the image of the saint; the episodes of the life of any other saint vary less from icon to icon; generally, they are keeping a

¹Nancy Patterson Sevcenco, *The Vita Icon and the Painter as Hagiographer*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 53 / 1999, p. 149 -165, p. 39-40, n.75*we render the numbers of the pages in manuscript, as we didn’t access the original version.

²Gherasim Timuș, *Dicționar Aghiografic Cuprindând Pe Scurt Viețile Sfinților*, Ed.Pelerinul, 1998, p.615

³Nancy Patterson Sevcenco, *The Vita Icon...*, p.4

⁴Nancy Patterson Sevcenco, *The Vita Icon ...* p.4-5, n.10

⁵*Ibidem*, p.2.

chronologic presentation of events”⁶. Relating to the function of these icons, one can say that “almost none of the old icons of this type has no dedication and none was found in the initial position, as so our information upon a special liturgical function of them is far from being sure.”⁷

The prototype of the hagiographical icon was taken both by the Western art, and the Slavic world. “A 13th century icon of Saint Elias in Pskov, to the west of Novgorod, is the first of the hagiographic icons of Slavic origin”⁸. The hagiographic icons “as true chronicle history” reached a maximum blooming at the beginning of the 16th century, when the icons consecrated to the great founders of Russian monarchism appeared – Saint Serghie de Radonej, Kiril Belozerskj, or to the lives of metropolitan Peter and Alexie, the founders of the Moscovite church, the long iconographic cycles becoming “visual chronicles” of the foundation of the monasteries, of the faced problems, of the wonders happened.⁹

The life scenes, or “*vita*” that surround a central portray, can be associated with *periphereia*, the precious golden and silver decorated margins, that were added to the icons in the Komnenian period. In these kind of works, the central panel is depicted as a separate unit from the margins, in most cases these being added as a gift to an older panel¹⁰. The margins decorate the portrayal, the inherent possibility of such a dialogue growing strongly in the same epoch¹¹. Searching for the origins of this prototype, Nancy Patterson Sevcenco supposed¹² that these margins were seen as “wings” of some triptych which had their source in the ivory triptych, being part of a bigger image surrounded by smaller ones on sides¹³ or metal icons, or the gilded silver icons found as shown up from the 11th century, which also had marginal scenes¹⁴. In what concerns the place that the large size hagiographic icons were destined, there are suppositions¹⁵ that they did not seem to belong to the iconostasis, or have a precise liturgical function.

Beginning with the 16th century, there are numerous representations of Saint Nicholas, in connection to the iconographic evolution of the cycles of

⁶Ibidem, p.2.

⁷Ibidem, p.4.

⁸Ibidem, p.14.

⁹ibidem, p.17.

¹⁰Ibidem, p. 24.

¹¹ Ibidem, p.24, n.43, after Annemarie Weyl Carr, The Presentation of an Icon on Sinai, (1993–94): 239–48.

¹²Nancy Patterson Sevcenco, Vita Icons and „Decorated”Icons of the Komnenian Period, in Four Icons in the Menil Collection, Ed. B. Davezac, Houston, 1992,p. 57.

¹³Ibidem, after A. Goldschmidt and Wetzmann, Die byzantinische Elfenbeinskulpturen des X-XIII Jahrhunderts, vol.2, Berlin, 1934.

¹⁴N. P. Sevcenco, Vita Icons..., p. 61-62.

¹⁵N.P. Sevcenco, The Vita Icon..., p.31.

saints' lives, which decorated numerous churches. According with the title of "generalist saint"¹⁶ that Henry Maguire gave to Saint Nicholas, it is explained a tendency in the iconography of its life, namely of simplifying the details that personalize the scene, because in this way more categories of onlookers can identify with the ones saved/healed by Saint Nicholas. Maguire observed the same tendency in inscriptions also: for example, instead of the inscription "the three generals in prison", the given name is "the three man in prison"¹⁷.

To have some analytical and comparative point of view, we will further consider some reference representations for the beginning of hagiographical iconography. For example, since according to the chosen theme, we intend to give a special importance to the scenes of consecration (as deacon, priest and bishop), the oldest representations of the consecration scene of Saint Nicholas can be found in two famous hagiographical icons of the saint, e.g. the one in St. Catherine Monastery in Sinai Mountain from the 13th century¹⁸ and the one from the second half of the 13th century from Kakopetria.



Fig. 1. The icon in the St. Catherine Church Sinai



Fig. 2. The icon from "St. Nicholas of the roof" Church, Kakopetria

¹⁶ Henry Maguire, *Icons of Their Bodies: Saints and Their Images in Byzantium*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 169-186 and *Idem*, *Rhetoric, Nature and Magic in Byzantine Art*, Aldershot-Brookfield, Ashgate Variorum, 1998, p. 98-99, quoted by

Ioana Măgureanu, *Ciclul hagiografic al Sf. Nicolae în pictura moldovenească a secolelor XV-XVI*, în *BCSS*, 2003, 9, p. 155.

¹⁷ Ioana Măgureanu, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

¹⁸ Viktor Lazarev, *Istoria picturii bizantine*, Ed. Meridiane, București, 1980, vol. 2, p. 188-189, dated this icon on the basis of the tradition of art in the Komnenian period.

On the inscription correspondent to the consecration scene in the icon of Sinai, it can be seen¹⁹ that “though the inscription identifies the scene as the one of the consecration as priest of Saint Nicholas <<*O agios-cheirotoumenos hierias*>>, he is dressed in deacon vestment”. This can be related with the fact that there is the possibility that in the 12th century, the ceremony of consecration as a priest was represented, in which the candidate was dressed as a deacon, and later, in the 13th century, the end of the ceremony was represented, when the candidate was dressed by the bishop with epitrachelion and phelonion²⁰.

About two meters high, the icon of Kakopetria is the biggest Byzantine hagiographic representation²¹ and it is remarked by the peculiarity of the combined Greek Byzantine elements, as the insertion of the two Latin donors²². It belonged to a former building with a double roof from the 11th century, named also “Saint Nicholas of the roof”²³. This important icon can be put in direct connection with the 12th century fresco in the same building, at the natural scale, which seems to serve as a pattern, and through this local image of the saint, adorned with a *vita*, the kneeling donors hoped to get close to Saint Nicholas and to obtain the salvation²⁴, a fact that is met also in the votive mural paintings. Also here appear consecration scenes, where one can see the consecration as a priest scene, in which the painter chose to represent three assisting bishops instead of one – maybe not knowing the Byzantine Canon Laws²⁵, or maybe because he wanted to give a bigger narrative and official amplex.

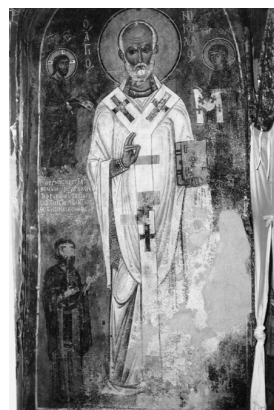


Fig. 3. The mural painting representing Saint Nicholas from the “TesSteges” (of the roof) Church, Kakopetria

¹⁹Maria Ionesco-Huncea, The consecration to the priesthood in Byzantine iconography, in *Ars Transilvaniae*, VIII-IX/1998-1999, p.310, after. N.P. Sevcenco, The life of Saint Nicolas in Byzantine Art, in *Centro Studi Bizantini*, Bari, Torino, 1983 p. 76, n.1.

²⁰Maria Ionesco-Huncea, op.cit., p. 311.

²¹Nancy Patterson Sevcenco, *The Vita Icon...*, p.28.

²²ibidem, p.31, n.48 and p. 34.

²³ibidem, p.31, n.49.

²⁴ibidem, *The Vita Icon...*, p.31.

²⁵Maria Ionesco-Huncea, op. cit., p.321.

For the 14th century, we remark this time as significant the fresco paintings in the churches of Saint Nicholas of the Orphans in Thessaloniki, Greece, and the Ascension at Decani (Serbia). In the salvation of three men from the execution scene in Thessaloniki, as Ioana Măgureanu notes²⁶, beginning with the 13th century, we have the most frequent arrangement (of the characters, a.n.), the one in line, with the back at the executioner, as the sword should cut all the heads at once". The author notes some other aspects, as the composition, which can be inspired from the one of the sacrifice of Isaac from the Old Testament, in which the Saviour's position is a superior one, Saint Nicholas being above the executioner, alike the angel that stopped the knife of Isaac. The victims are shown with their eyes tied and the hands tied in the front, though the texts mention that the hands were tied at the back, this thing being an influence of the representations in the Sinaxary²⁷. In the case of Russian icons, the position of the saint is in the back of the executioner²⁸.



Fig. 4. A detail of the scene where Saint Nicholas saved the three men from execution Thessaloniki, Saint Nicholas of the Orphans Church

The scenes from Decani show the consecration ceremony of the saint, as a priest and bishop. Both are unfold in a space having in central position the altar table and a Ciborium on four pillars, elements specific to Byzantine architecture. The participants in the second plan are making specific gestures of talking. Among them, a priest stretches a hand on the shoulder of the candidate, a gesture that is kept in Orthodox iconography that can be interpreted as a presentation gesture.²⁹

²⁶Ioana Măgureanu, op.cit., p. 155.

²⁷Ibidem, p.155-156.

²⁸Ibidem, p.156.

²⁹Maria Ionesco-Hunceag, op.cit., p.324, after Richard Frederick Littledale, *Offices from the Service, Book of the Holy Eastern Church*, Londra, 1863, p.34, 83; about



Fig. 5: St. Nicholas consecrated as priest Fig. 6: St. Nicholas consecrated as bishop

For the less elaborate style, marked by the simplification and reduction of the number of characters, specific to the Greek school, we took as example the icon of Saint Nicholas of Patmos from the 15th century, where in all the three scenes of consecration, the saint appear differently only through the vestment that he is wearing. We can also mention more complex scenes from an iconographic and hermeneutic point of view, namely the ones that correspond to the consecration as a priest and as a bishop in the chapel of Saint Nicholas of the church of the Holy Trinity at Sopocani (Serbia), the element that they have in common being a scroll held above the head or the neck of the candidate, by the bishop or the assistants³⁰.



Fig. 7. The consecration as a priest of Saint Nicholas. Detail

presentation see also I.D. Ștefănescu, *Iconografia artei bizantine și a picturii feudale românești*, Ed. Meridiane, București, 1973, p. 163.

³⁰Maria Ionesco-Hunceag, *op.cit.*, p.326.



Fig. 8. The consecration as a bishop of Saint Nicholas. Detail

Here (at Sopocani), we assist at an issue with a precise symbolism, through the placing of the Holy Scripture above the candidate's neck, with the meaning (above the head in the text) that he understands this way that he receives the "crown of the Bible"; also, this fact means that the priest is subdued to an authority³¹. We can make in this case an analogy with the presence of the book in the hand of the officiating bishop above the head of the candidate³² in the consecration scenes of Saint Nicholas in the icon from Urisiu de Jos, which can have a double meaning: the one that we have already supposed, related to the reading of the holy texts in the course of the ceremony, and this last one, with the mentioned connotations. We find again this typology of the presence of the scroll above the candidate in the hagiographical scenes of some Russian icons of Saint Nicholas, such as the one of the 16th century of Rostov, or the one of the 15th century in Recklinghausen Icon Museum.

In what concerns some favorite scenes for the Russian icon painting³³, we mention the scene where the young Basilos (Vasile) is brought home after his liberation from slavery from the Arabs³⁴. We quote here just two of the numerous examples in this regard: the scene in the hagiographical icon of the 16th century of Saint Nicholas in Zaraysk (in present in the Hermitage State

³¹from the text after Photius, rendered by J. Lecuyer, *Les sens des rites d'ordination*, in *L'Orient Syrien*, V, fasc.4, 1960, p.471, quoted by Maria Ionesco-Huncea, op.cit., p. 328-329.

³² See also Dionisie Areopagitul, *Despre ierarhia bisericească*, cap.V, p. 92-94.

³³Ioana Măgureanu, op. cit., p. 158-159.

³⁴ This is one of the few exceptions related to posthumous wonders representations in hagiographical icons of Saint Nicholas, as remarks N.P.Sevcenko, *The Vita icon...*, p. 4; 34.

Museum of St. Petersburg) and its homologous in a late Lippovan icon (possibly in the 18th century) from the collection of History department in County Museum in Târgu Mureș, that depicts life scenes of Saint Nicholas „Ciudotvoreț” (Russ. wonderworker). Also in Zaraysk, we found on the background of the consecration scenes, an architecture with pointed roofs, as we will notice also in the case of the icon of 16th century from Urisiu de Jos, which we will analyze as a case study in the content of this article.



Fig. 9. The scene from the icon of Saint Nicholas in the collection of County Museum, Târgu Mureș



Fig. 10. The scene from the icon of Saint Nicholas from Zaraysk, in Hermitage State Museum of St. Petersburg

On the basis of the features identified in the examples, we are now coming back to the object of our case study, the icon of Saint Nicholas from Urisiu de Jos, concluding that the presence here of the Constantinopolitan Byzantine features, with innovative western elements, is in close relation to the profound signification in Christian Orthodox rites.



Fig. 11. The 16th century icon of Saint Nicholas with life scenes from Urisiu de Jos, Mureș County

With a generous size (L=85,5cm; w=4,3cm; H=119cm), the icon takes some of the hagiographical typology of the mentioned representations, which show that these were dedicated to the public and not for contemplation in an impious space. Worked in the Byzantine style, in tempera painting technique, the creation with features specific to the Moldavian school presents Renaissance and late Gothic influences. Fourteen scenes decorate the two sides, two of them, at the upper part, being representations of saint hierarchs Basil and John Chrysostom. The scenes that depict life scenes of the saint are disposed chronologically, in a sinuous way, starting from the upper left side and ending in the lower right corner. The central image of Saint Nicholas, represented half-figure, is flanked on the two sides by the semi-figures of Jesus and Mary in medallion. In two square-shaped figures, with the same disposal, above the medallions, there are inscriptions with Cyrillic letters, designating the name of the saint ("Svetii Nikolao").

Beginning with the first scene, the nativity one, we can notice the identified pattern³⁵ of Jesus's Nativity, adapted to this hagiographical cycle in a simplified manner.



Fig. 12, 13. Nativity and schooling instruction

Furthermore, keeping in mind the fact that the next four of the twelve scenes from the saint's life are dedicated to the period of his formation and spiritual evolution, we consider that a more careful analysis upon the iconographical issues and hermeneutical meaning of these scenes is justified. Beginning with the first stage of formation, the one of schooling instruction, the ascendant way of the saint's life is marking the stages of serving as a deacon, a priest and then a bishop.



Fig. 14, 15, 16. The consecration of Saint Nicholas as a deacon, priest and then bishop

³⁵Ioana Măgureanu, op. cit., p. 15.5

With almost the same composition and chromatic scheme, these last three mentioned scenes communicate an evolution only at the level of ideas and in a barren way, typically for the monumental features from the first period of Byzantine Middle Age painting, marked by the Greek school influences. On an architectural background suggesting an edifice of worship, in front of a square table on a single foot, such an altar table³⁶, in the left it appears the kneeling figure of Saint Nicholas (corresponding to the deacon and priest hypostasis)³⁷, or standing up, slightly bowed (in the priest hypostasis). Slight differences in the case of vestments or accessories show the rank of his investment: as vestments, the sticharion³⁸ and orarion³⁹ are present for the deacon, the sticharion, the phelonion⁴⁰ and the epitrachelion for the priest, to these last three being added the omophorion decorated with crosses for the rank of bishop. As accessories, we notice the thurible, which is present in all the three consecration ceremony, and a book (possibly the Gospel), which is held in the saint's hand at the investment as priest and bishop. The portrayal also suffered some changes, marking different ages (as a young, unbearded deacon, then having beard in the priest hypostasis, and yet with an old man's facial features as a bishop). The officiating character of the ceremony in the right side, dressed like a hierarch, is holding an opened book in his hand in all the three scenes, detail that has the foundation of the ritual of posing the hand/hands on the candidate head, while reading some sacred texts in the consecration ceremony⁴¹, also making the blessing gesture (in the scene of consecration as a priest). In the Syrian ritual, the posing of the hands has a special meaning, the one of descending of the Holy Spirit upon the candidate⁴². In Byzantine iconography, this gesture is replaced or combined with the gesture of blessing, as an adaptation to the Roman speaking

³⁶Maria Ionesco-Huncea, op.cit., p. 331, refers to the evolution of altar table, from a simple square covered with a red cloth, to a Cyborium with a dome-like roof, or a Cyborium with pointed roof.

³⁷ According to Dionisie Areopagitul, op.cit., cap.V, p. 92-94, this posture signifies that the one that adopts it, dedicates his life to the serving of Christ.

³⁸Stihar - according to Vasile Drăguț, Dicționar enciclopedic de artă veche românească, Ed. Vremea, București, 2000, p.404, „liturgical vestment, with the appearance of a long tunic, with sleeves, that was carried by the orthodox clergy, regardless of the rank (...)”.

³⁹Orar – according to Vasile Drăguț, op.cit., p 314, „ a piece of liturgical garment for deacons, with a shape of a long stripe of embroidered fabric that was carried on the left shoulder, over the sticharion”.

⁴⁰Felon - according to Vasile Drăguț, op.cit., p. 200, „liturgical vestment (...), large cap, without sleeves, with a single opening for the head, that is carried in the time of the liturgy, above the othersacerdotal attire

⁴¹ According to Bible, New Testament, Facts, cap.6, v. 6; 6 and cap.13, v.3.

⁴²HeinrichDenzinger, Ritus Orientalium, t.II, Würzburg, 1863-64, p 96-98, quoted by Maria Ionescu – Huncea, op.cit., p. 316.

gesture⁴³. The placing of hands is related to four other rituals: benediction, healing of the sick, confirmation and reconciliation⁴⁴ (forgiveness of sins? a.n.).

We find again here what was identified as an iconographical pattern in the consecration scene of Saint John Chrysostom in the illuminated frontispiece of the work „*De sacerdotio*” in the 11th century, remained in the Byzantine iconography till the end of the empire, namely: ”the officiating bishop, taller than the candidate, is standing up on the right, dressed in a bishop garment with omophorion, in front of a square table, making the blessing gesture. The priest in the left bends toward him.”⁴⁵ In the hagiographical scene chosen as a case study, Saint Nicholas, as a priesthood candidate, is also making the blessing gesture, a fact that shows his partake at the sacerdotal grace. These details are in accordance with the description of Maria Ionesco-Hunceag:⁴⁶ “the three ceremonies (...) do not differ too much in details. One of the differences is represented by the vestments that the candidate is yet wearing: for the deacon the sticharion and orarion, for the priest the sticharion, phelonion and epitachelion. The bishop, in addition, has an omophorion (...)”. All the scenes are unfold under an arch that reminds of older rudiments, as baldaquin, or its far off forerunner, the Ciborium⁴⁷, elements that were kept and evolved from an iconographic point of view. The consecration as a priest rarely appears in Byzantine iconography, and when it does, it is found mainly in hagiographical cycles, the iconography being not only in relation with the saint’s life, but also with the consecration Liturgy, as prescribed in the Euchologion, or the Church Order⁴⁸. It looks like this pattern of the three consecration scenes of Saint Nicholas (beginning with the mentioned pattern of Saint John Chrysostom), could be a mould for further representations⁴⁹.

This analysis cannot be extended too much, we will consider only the aspects that overlap the mentioned influences, or that are highlighted given their out of order pattern. For example, in the scene of appearing in the dream

⁴³Christopher Walter, Church Appointments in Byzantine Iconography, in Eastern Church Review, 10, 1978, p. 123, quoted by Maria Ionesco – Hunceag, op.cit., p.318.

⁴⁴Luciano De Bruyne, L'imposition des mains dan l'art chrétien ancien, în Rivista di Archeologia Christiana, anno XX, nr. 1 și 4, Vatican, Roma, 1943, p.116, quoted by Maria Ionescu – Hunceag, op.cit. p.318.

⁴⁵Maria Ionesco - Hunceag, op.cit., p.308.

⁴⁶ibidem, p.306.

⁴⁷Slobodan Ćurčić, Late Byzantine Loca Sancta?, p. 255, quoted by Maria Magdalena Székely, Mănăstirea Putna-loc de memorie, in Ștefan cel Mare și Sfânt (1504-2004). Atlet al credinței creștine, Ed. Mănăstirii Putna, 2004, p. 59.

⁴⁸Maria Ionesco-Hunceag, op.cit., p.306, after Nancy Patterson Sevcenco, The life of Saint Nicolas ..., p. 80.

⁴⁹Ibidem, p. 323, after N. P. Sevcenco, The life of Saint Nicolas.... p.82.

of Emperor Constantine, Saint Nicholas is represented standing up, somewhere in the back of the rendering plan of the dream⁵⁰, the second plan suggesting his subtle presence.



Fig. 17, 18, 19. The dream of the emperor Constantine; the salvation from execution of the three men; the apparition in the prison

In the salvation scene of the three characters from cutting their head-off, these are shown according to the already analyzed scheme, kneeling and with the back at the executioner⁵¹, with small variations in connection with the position of the tied hands⁵²: only the character in the foreground is shown with his hands tied in the front, while the others seem to have their hands tied at the back. This thing can also be connected with the tendency to simplify often met in Byzantine iconography, which resorts to the artifice of a complete representation of the figure in the foreground, while the other figures are subordinated through the superposition of him, looking to copy the movement through a similar position. A much more simplified scheme is present in the twin figures of the three destitute girls in the scene of helping them with money, their hands seeming hidden under the vestments and under the bed cover.

In connection with the salvation of the three generals in prison (the text describing them in the scene as “imperial soldiers”), the presence of the saint blessing (although not mentioned by the sources, but proved necessary at an illustrative level in the composition of the scene) is on a higher position, like in the borrowed scheme that was mentioned⁵³ in the sacrifice of Abraham. We also identify here the gesture of the hands, suggesting a dialogue between the three prisoners. “Saint Nicholas is present with no exception (in the representations of this scene, a.n.), in Moldavia, as well as in the Russian icons, to emphasize his role in the liberation of the three generals, even if no texts mention that he was actually seen by the three men⁵⁴.

⁵⁰ For this type of representation, see also Ioana Măgureanu, *op.cit.*, p.158.

⁵¹ See note 26.

⁵² See note 27.

⁵³ See note 27 and 28.

⁵⁴ Ioana Măgureanu, *op. cit.*, p.157.



Fig. 20, 21. The salvation from prostitution of the three maids; the salvation from shipwreck

The salvation of the ship from ship wreck presents characteristic elements like the whirling sea, the swollen canvas of the ship by the wind that a demon stirs upon it and the presence of the saint next to the sailors.

The death scene keeps the simplifying scheme mentioned in connection with the representation of the parts of the body, with the difference that here, the saint's body is leaned on a catafalque and not in a coffin or a sarcophagus, as we can see in most representations.

The cycle ends atypically⁵⁵ with the healing of a possessed man, a frequent scene in the hagiographical index of Saint Nicholas, represented here in his quality of a thaumaturge. It is possible that this has to be an posthumous event, as one of rarely registered exceptions, given the fact that this follows the death scene, the positioning of this type being observed also in the case of the representation of posthumous wonders. Although we are in the 16th century, when the representation of the destroying of idols scenes have regressed⁵⁶, the presentation of this alternative of the fight with the demons and the exorcise action are natural and absolutely necessary, as the main feature of Saint Nicholas life. One thing to notice here, as in the other scenes where demons are present, is that these are represented with no exception as some marionettes, deformed, even caricaturized as we meet them often in homologous Russian, Greek, Italian or Cretan icons. A peculiar

⁵⁵ Usually, the last scene is the one of the death; on this, see also N.P.Sevcenko, *The Vita icon...*, p. 3.

⁵⁶ N.P.Sevcenko, quoted by Ioana Măgureanu, *op. cit.*, p.157.

issue that we notice in this icon, is the tendency to caricaturize some characters with a negative action or perverted to an inferior state, as it is the case of the executioner from the scene of salvation from cutting the head off, or as this possessed man, as a reflex of getting closed to the resemblance with the demons.



Fig. 22, 23. The death of Saint Nicholas; the healing of the possessed man

Through light of the things that we have analyzed, we can say that beyond the Moldavian school mark and the stylistic issues of Gothic and Renaissance ornamentations, at the level of the composition and the features of the scenes, one can identify Russian and Greek influences. If we keep in mind that the Moldavian painting school received doubtless influences of the Russian painting icons, this fact does not surprise us anymore, being an extra hint, confirmed even by the issues connected with the execution technique⁵⁷. Through the iconographic aspects, the icon enrolls in the general line of the genre, peculiarity representing the option of the icon-painting master, prior to the patterns that were available and the tendency and illustration intentions of the epoch.

Illustrations list:

Fig.1. The icon in the Saint Catherine Church, Sinai

Fig. 2. The icon from “Saint Nicholas of the roof” Church, Kakopetria

Fig.3. The mural painting representing Saint Nicholas from the “TesSteges” (of the roof) Church, Kakopetria

Fig. 4. A detail of the scene where Saint Nicholas is saving the three men from execution

⁵⁷Raluca Marilena Dumitrescu, Cornelia Bordașiu, Bogdan Ungurean, Restaurarea a trei icoane de secol XVI-XVII clasate în categoria tezaur, în Restitutio, Ed. Muzeului Național al Satului, Dimitrie Gusti, nr. 10/2016, vol.1 p. 169.

Tesalonic, Saint Nicholas of the Orphans church

Fig. 5. Saint Nicholas consecrated as a priest

Fig. 6: St. Nicholas consecrated as a bishop

Fig.7. The consecration as a priest of Saint Nicholas. Detail

Fig. 8. The consecration as a bishop of Saint Nicholas. Detail

Fig. 9. The scene from the icon of Saint Nicholas in the collection of County Museum, TârguMureș

Fig. 10. The scene from the icon of Saint Nicholas from Zaraysk, in Hermitage State Museum of St. Petersburg

Fig. 11. The 16th century icon of Saint Nicholas with life scenes from Urisiu de Jos, Mureș County

Fig. 12, 13. Nativity and schooling instruction

Fig. 14, 15, 16. The consecration of Saint Nicholas as a deacon, priest and then bishop

Fig. 17, 18, 19. The dream of the Emperor Constantine; the salvation from execution of the three men; the apparition in the prison

Fig. 20, 21. The salvation from prostitution of the three maids; the salvation from shipwreck

Fig. 22, 23. The death of Saint Nicholas; the healing of the possessed man

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