

## *Images de l'Invisible*

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Luminița Diaconu, Alexandra Lițu, Ecaterina Lung (eds.), *Images de l'Invisible. De l'Antiquité tardive à la fin du Moyen Âge*, București, Editura Universității din București, 2020, 228 pp. (ISBN: 978-606-16-1192-8)



This volume is the outcome of the eponymous conference organized by the Centre for Medieval Studies of the University of Bucharest on December 9, 2017, at the French Department of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures. The participants whose papers were included in this volume are mostly professors or at least alumni of the University of Bucharest, along with one independent researcher and PhD at the “Nicolae Iorga” History Institute of the Romanian Academy of Sciences. The editors themselves are professors at the University of Bucharest: Luminița Diaconu teaches at the French Department of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literature, whereas Alexandra Lițu and Ecaterina Lung teach at the Faculty of History.

As stated by the editors in the introductory chapter<sup>1</sup> (penned by Luminița Diaconu and Ecaterina Lung), the theme shared by the contributions collected in this volume is that of the importance of representing invisible forces (such as God, the Sacred, the forces of Evil or the Devil) or human emotions in European culture. To wit, these articles present the various answers found since the beginnings of Christianity to the conundrum of whether it is even *possible* to represent such things that ought to be beyond human understanding.

It should be noted from the very beginning that the papers presented within the confines of the conference in 2017 were exclusively in Romanian (which is also reflected in its actual title – *Imaginea Invizibilului. Texte și iconografie*), which means that this publication deserves credit not only for

<sup>1</sup> Luminița Diaconu & Ecaterina Lung, « Comment rendre visible l'Invisible, de l'Antiquité tardive à la fin du Moyen Âge », in Diaconu, Luminița, Lițu, Alexandra, Lung, Ecaterina (dir.), *Images de l'Invisible. De l'Antiquité tardive à la fin du Moyen Âge*, Editura Universității din București, colecția „Mediaevalia”, n°. 9/ 2020, p. 7-13.

publishing several of these papers, but for doing so in foreign languages, making them accessible to a wider academic public. As a result, the vast majority of the papers included in this volume are published in English, whereas the introduction as well as two further contributions are in French, and a single article is in Spanish. Nevertheless, each of them is accompanied by an abstract in French (for the English contributions) or English (for the remainder of the papers), which can only be to the benefit of foreign scholars who gain access to these Proceedings.

The volume opens with a contribution by Ilinca Damian, curator at the National Museum of Art of Romania, PhD in Philosophy at the University of Bucharest. The author discusses the representation of the death of Jesus Christ in Christian art, noting that although the moments immediately preceding or succeeding his last breath are frequently represented, the *exact instant* of his death was depicted considerably later and more atypically. Conversely, Early Christian art was less concerned with a historically and biologically accurate illustration of Jesus's death, opting instead for a more symbolical view, notably associating it with the culmination of his final prayer. A similar interest in Christian art is shown in the following article, penned by Vladimir Crețulescu from the Faculty of History of the University of Bucharest. Its subject is the famous portrait of Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora in the mosaic of the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna, which, as noted by previous commentators and confirmed by the author, played an important role in Byzantine propaganda, owing much to its geographic and artistic position to the boundary between the late Roman heritage and the early Byzantine sphere.

The two editors from the Faculty of History, Ecaterina Lung and Alexandra Lițu, dedicate their article to the artistic representations of melancholy via specific gestures from the Antiquity to the Renaissance, with particular attention being paid to the apparently contradictory association with Saint Joseph, even though melancholy was associated with the profile of the demons generating the capital sins. Mihaela Pop, who is a professor at the Faculty of Philosophy, discusses the iconographical representations of the lives of the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ in the two narthexes and the funerary chapel of the Church of the Holy Saviour in Chora, in modern-day Istanbul. In her endeavour to reconstruct the conceptual thought behind this iconographic plan, the author refers to the various meanings of the word *chora* in Platonic and Christian religion.

The following articles move from the visual arts to medieval literature: the first of these, written by Mihaela Voicu, professor at the Faculty of Catholic Theology and currently professor emeritus at the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures (University of Bucharest), is dedicated to an episode from Chrétien de Troyes' *Conte du Graal*, namely the "three blood drops" scene. The key element of this scene is that Percival, the protagonist,

recognizes the face of his beloved Blanchefleur in the pattern created by the three blood drops falling from a wild goose's neck onto the snow: thus, in the author's view, this image makes her absence *present* to Percival by means of contemplation.

Robert Mirică, an independent researcher and holder of a PhD degree at the "Nicolae Iorga" History Institute of the Romanian Academy of Sciences, writes on the *Malleus Maleficarum*, a 15<sup>th</sup>-century treatise on witchcraft, dwelling more specifically on the exceptional figure of one sorcerer, Stadlin, whose case is used by the authors – Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger – to explain the existence of witches and sorcerers from a theological point of view. The final contribution stemming from the aforementioned conference, authored by Șarolta Solcan, professor at the Faculty of History (University of Bucharest), is also concerned with the matter of witchcraft, albeit from a more historical point of view. To wit, she refers to the treatment of witches in 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century Transylvania, citing concrete cases and testimonies and thus allowing readers to reconstruct the way people understood witchcraft at the time, especially given that their existence was attested in Transylvanian documents as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The final three articles are, in the editors' own perspective, less connected to the subject of the Invisible, which is why they were grouped in a section titled *Varia*. That being said, the editors immediately warn their readers that these three contributions are linked by more than just them not being a direct product of the aforementioned conference: all three deal with the matter of Origins, which was the object of the conference held by the Centre for Medieval Studies of the University of Bucharest in November 2018. Although they did not – strictly speaking – result from papers presented at the same scientific event, it is hard to disagree with the editors' assertion that they enrich the present volume.

Thus, in the sole Spanish article, Ruxandra Toma, a doctoral student of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures (University of Bucharest), focuses on one of the founding texts for the Order of Santiago, namely the *Compilación de los Milagros de Santiago*, written by the 15<sup>th</sup>-century chronicler Diego Rodríguez de Almela. This text contributed to the development of the ideological view that the Reconquista owed its triumph to the intervention of the Apostle James, whose cult was restored following the pilgrimage of the kings of Castile to Santiago de Compostela. Lavinia-Elena Vieru's article is dedicated to the votive paintings at the "Holy Archangels" (*Sfinții Voievozi*) Church of the former Meculești monastery near Pitești. The author, who currently teaches at the "Dinu Lipatti" Art School in Pitești and obtained her PhD title at the Faculty of History of the University of Bucharest, provides a richly illustrated description of these frescoes, which, although painted in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, respect the tradition of the votive

paintings of the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries when representing the patrons from those time periods.

The final contribution to this section – and to the volume – belongs to Sorin Langu, who teaches at the “Vasile Alecsandri” High School in Galați and who, like the previous author, obtained his PhD title at the same faculty. His text refers to philately and its use in royal and communist propaganda in Romania, focusing on the representation of founding figures: thus, during the royal era, the depiction of the first two kings, Carol I and Ferdinand I, as the founder and, respectively, the unifier of the country – alongside more ancient figures such as Trajan and Michael the Brave – served to legitimise the reign of Carol II. The communist regime, however, focused on medieval historical figures and, most notably, on the Dacian roots of the Romanian people, which reflected their key ideological role.

This volume helpfully assembles these very diverse contributions dedicated to a subject that may, at first, appear to be rather narrow or even arcane in their scope. These articles will doubtlessly attract the attention of readers interested in the specific fields covered by each author – be it literature, medieval history, or art history – and accomplish the editors’ wish to make the proceedings of the conference in 2017 (and of the Centre for Medieval Studies in general) available to a wider, hopefully international, public.