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The Painted Fortified Monastic Churches of Moldavia: Bastions of Orthodoxy in a Post-Byzantine World

My research examines how critical historical moments are visually articulated and how cross-cultural exchange and translation operated in frontier regions leading up to, and following, historical moments of crisis. My dissertation centers on a group of painted and fortified Orthodox monastic churches built in the highly under-studied yet critical region of Moldavia—in northeastern modern Romania and the Republic of Moldova—in the decades following the Turkish conquest of Constantinople in 1453.

In the crucible of the post-1453 world, Moldavia emerged as a Christian frontier, indeed a bastion, situated at the crossroads of western European, Slavic-Byzantine, and Ottoman cultures. Continuous contacts at this time resulted in the local assimilation of select elements from the Latin and the Greek spheres in particular, often with unusual and surprising results. This eclecticism with respect to sources is most evident in the fortified monastic churches from Moldavia built initially under the patronage of Stephen the Great (*reg.* 1457-1504) and then under the guidance of his illegitimate son, Peter Rareș (*reg.* 1527-1538; 1541-1546).

The churches reveal fascinating discontinuities among their forms and image programs, presenting an unprecedented mixture of western Gothic, Byzantine, and Slavic architectural and iconographic features alongside local developments. By the early decades of the seventeenth century, the visual rhetoric of these buildings takes on Islamic features as well. Whereas the churches conform to an Orthodox plan, and have dimly lit interiors with image cycles that emulate Byzantine stylistic and iconographic patterns, their exteriors present architectural features adopted from western models, such as pointed arches with Gothic curvilinear tracery and large buttresses against the walls. On the exteriors of these *katholika*, moreover, hundreds of brightly colored scenes in

multiple registers wrap around the whole of the churches. Christological, Mariological, and hagiographical stories are represented alongside full-length depictions of saints, prophets, martyrs, and angels. Interspersed with the religious imagery are historical moments such as the famous siege of Constantinople in 626 by the Avars and the Persians, an event that was foiled with the help of miracle-working objects. This powerful historical episode—a story of divine aid in the fight against non-Christian enemies—had particular resonances in the early sixteenth century and was painted on eight of the fortified monastic churches, presenting thus a clear response to the Ottoman threat against Moldavia's independence, political stability, and religious identity.

A critical framework for the evaluation of these churches, I have found, is lacking in current scholarship. The monuments have largely been studied by local historians who have formally examined the buildings from archaeological and iconographical standpoints, but have not used this corpus of monuments to broach larger issues of cultural contact and assimilation, for instance. Western European and North American scholars have paid little attention to the works of this region. To a large degree, this is the consequence of twentieth-century politics. The Iron Curtain created an actual and ideological barrier, rendering certain kinds of studies and scholarly exchanges difficult. The evidence, however, suggests that the artistic production of Moldavia, and of East-Central Europe more generally, should be analyzed through cultural connections and through more nuanced interpretative strategies, as art historians have done in the case of Venice and Crete, for example.

My project engages with the architecture, image programs, and functions of these buildings in the context of religious politics and patronage, the Orthodox liturgy, the cult of saints, and the theory of images. As such, my work considers the extent to which these churches aided in the construction of a new sacred landscape in Moldavia at this crucial moment, while presenting a response to the events of 1453, to the end of the world in 1492 as predicted by the Eastern Orthodox Christians, and to the Reformation unfolding in the west in the early decades of the sixteenth century. Notions of history, cultural memory, artistic integration, spatio-temporal experiences, and cross-cultural rapports and modes of translation stand at the core of my research.

While shaped by (and, in turn, operating in direct relationship to) complex social and religious politics, the Moldavian *katholika* also illuminate how cross-cultural exchange and translation operated in frontier regions in moments of crisis, and how, in turn, these critical moments were articulated artistically. This is one of the driving issues of my project, which seeks to look at the ecclesiastical architecture of Moldavia in light of cultural interactions, rather than as if existing in isolation. Thus, I place this rich corpus of Moldavian ecclesiastical monuments in dialogue with comparative sources from other regions, including the Holy Roman Empire and its adjacent territories, parts of the Balkans, Mount Athos, and Armenia, a region with which Moldavia established maritime connections through the Black Sea from the fourteenth century on. In doing so, I seek to draw out the complexities of cultural contacts and to chart their operation in this region, while contributing to current conversations about border crossings and cultural exchange. Since current narratives of medieval, early modern, Byzantine, and post-Byzantine art still exclude the artistic production of Moldavia from their geographical, thematic, cultural, and temporal purview, the larger goal of my research is to encourage a rethinking of standard art historical narratives. This will involve, too, an examination of existing periodizations since “medieval” artistic forms were produced in this Eastern European region well into the seventeenth century.