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**Animals in stone. Special features of the Wallachian visual culture (17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries)**

« Toutes les images intéressent l'historien, y compris, et peut-être même surtout, celles qui paraissent dépourvues de valeur esthétique ou d'originalité. Car les images les plus communes sont peut-être les plus représentatives des tendances profonds d'une époque, de ses conceptions de la figuration, de ses manières de faire et de regarder de tels objets »<sup>1</sup>

Following Jean-Clade Schmitt's opinion in what concerns the importance of all visual patterns in the study of a certain period, our research focuses on a category of images that could be considered in the context of late medieval Wallachian religious architecture as *marginalia* : the sculpted animal motifs.

Scarcely represented in Wallachian architecture before the 17<sup>th</sup> century, these ornamental figures "invaded" in the following century elements like column capitals, portals, window frames, panels, tombstones etc. In the church interior, they were represented especially on column capitals that separated the narthex from the nave, while in the exterior, their locations were more diverse. The zoomorphic motifs, which are still visible in ecclesiastic monuments today, belong to a rich fauna, both real and imaginary, and some of them, like the pelican piercing its chest, the griffon, the eagle or the lion, had a strong role in the medieval Christian iconographical ménagerie.

The question which dominates our research is whether the symbolic nature of the zoomorphic motifs was still an important asset of the visual culture of a society more and more oriented towards the Western modernity. By analyzing the evolution of the cultural context during the 17<sup>th</sup> -18<sup>th</sup> centuries, we realize that this period is in fact a flourishing moment from the point of view of artistic innovation, thanks to the efforts of cultivated patrons, like the prince Constantin Bancovan or the Cantacuzino boyards. They encouraged the artistic production and the educational act, as well as the import of books,

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Le corps des images. Essais sur la culture visuelle au Moyen Âge*, Paris, Gallimard, 2002, p. 21.

models and ideas from the West. These actions contributed to the esthetic taste of the period which exhibited a new preference for ornamentation, with predominant geometrical and vegetal shapes that art historians interpreted as distant echoes of the Renaissance and the Baroque. In this context, the presence of the zoomorphic motifs in stone architecture seems even more intriguing. What were the foundations for choosing to represent these symbolic elements belonging to a medieval repertoire at the brink of the 18<sup>th</sup> century?

Other questions concern the image “makers”, the architects and the stonemasons. The absence of documents concerning their identity and their activity has considerably limited research in their direction. Were they local craftsmen? Where did their models come from? There are several hypotheses outlining the existence of two local schools of sculpture in Wallachia, at Hurezi and Râmnicu-Sărat, but others claim that, given their resemblance, the innovative elements were made by Dalmatian or Venetian hands.

The main sources for our research are the zoomorphic motifs *in situ*, from 17th-18th century brancovan style churches and monasteries: the old church of Sinaia monastery (1694-1695), Fundenii Doamnei church (1699), Coltea church (1701-1702), the Katholikon of Cotmeana monastery (1711) and the Katholikon of Antim monastery (1715). These are monuments that stand out through the richness and the complexity of their zoomorphic architectural elements. More churches, residential ensembles and lapidaries will be taken into consideration for completing the zoomorphic repertoire.

A second type of sources are the written sources. Chronicles, journals and travelling journals will be consulted in order to understand the cultural and social context of the era. Collections of inscriptions will be consulted for information on the craftsmen and to clarify the intentions of ktitors which are reported in the sculpted dedications (pisanii).

The methodology we plan on using is the one which lies at the core of visual culture studies. Panofsky, Bourdieu, Baxandall, Jean-Claude Schmitt, Jerome Baschet highlight in their books the study of shapes, functions and usages of an images in close collaboration with the study of the society which produces it and consumes it. The main idea is that the image doesn't only transmit a meaning to decipher, it produces also an effect on the beholder, in accordance with his social norms of perception. The animal motifs are part of the church's figurative horizon. They are constantly under the eyes of the priests, the monks and the faithful public. By studying them from the cultural studies' point of view means that we should integrate them in system of values corresponding to a social framework.

Besides its potential for enriching the local historiography, the result of this research could contribute to the study of artistic exchanges, portability of ideas and models in the South-East European space.