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# THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE *AKATHISTOS HYMN* FROM MOLDOVIȚA MONASTERY

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## **Abstract**

Composed between the V<sup>th</sup>–VII<sup>th</sup> centuries, the most probably in the VI<sup>th</sup> century, by Romanus the Melodists (cca. 490-560), the Akathistos Hymn to the Holy Mother of God, a pray with a dogmatic and very rich content, was said, it seems, for the first time, profitably, with the occasion of the siege of the Constantinopol, in 626 A.D. As a consequence of the intervention of the Holy Mother of God, called 'speedy helping hand', the Byzantines, under the leadership of the patriarch Sergius, drove back the attacks of the Avar and Persian invasions.

That's why this hymn was taken by our nation, especially in Moldavia, in the period when it was facing with the Ottoman danger. The presence of the scenes of the Akathistos Hymn to the Holy Mother of God in the outside paintings of the monasteries from the North Moldavia represents an act of theological culture, but also a pray dedicated to the Holy Mother of God as a protector and defender.

Although the image of the Akathistos Hymn is presented on the outside paintings of the monasteries from the North Moldavia, it is being kept very well at the Moldovita Monastery, a reason for which I chose this monastery, so as to describe it in the present study.

*Keywords:* Moldavia, Moldovita Monastery, Holy Mother of God, Akathistos Hymn, outside painting

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## **1. General points**

It is widely known that the Romanian provinces had frequent and beneficial contacts with the Byzantine Empire throughout their history, as they were under its control, with few exceptions. For this reason, the great Romanian historian Nicolae Iorga, in making a thorough analysis of the impact of Byzantine culture, spirituality and civilisation on these provinces, was entitled to declare that they represented 'the Byzantium after Byzantium' [1].

We should add that, rather than adopting elements of Byzantine spirituality and culture or of organisation and civilisation and simply

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transplanting them in their own country, the Romanians adapted them to the local circumstances, thus enriching them. This is also visible in the area of painting known as 'Byzantine' or 'Neo-Byzantine'.

Among the monasteries that illustrate this art movement, the most remarkable are the ones with exterior paintings found in the north of Moldavia, which received in 1975 the UNESCO 'Golden Apple' award, now on display at Moldovita Monastery museum. Moldovita Monastery didn't get in history and in historians' attention just because of its inner and outside painting, but also because of its great status from the necklace of monasteries of Moldavia. Initially, foundation of Alexander the Good, and at the present form foundation of the devoted prince Petru Rares, Moldovita Monastery, dedicated to the Annunciation, was one of "the most opulent monastic settlement from Moldavia" along the time [2].

The painting of these monasteries, exquisitely made by the local Moldavian artists, was inspired from the Byzantine style, yet it also featured new elements, specific both to the area and the time of its creation. Careful analysis of the exterior painting of the monasteries in the north of Moldavia compelled the great art specialist Mikhail Alpatov to declare: "*The art of the native masters features highly original elements as regards the mural paintings made in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries in many churches in Moldavia. (...) They created an art full of love for life, appealing and colourful. They knew how to transform frescoes with countless themes and figures into a decorative carpet, completely covering the outer walls of the churches. (...) What amazing audacity! The Moldavian artists were painting the outer church walls not fearing that the colours of nature could overshadow them. The figures are often drawn against a lively blue background, just as the profile of the church takes shape against the blue sky. Nowhere else in Europe, not even in the original homeland of mural painting, in Italy, will we ever find something that comes even close to these churches whose harmonious colours gleam on the green of the meadows, on the shimmering hilly landscape of beautiful Moldavia.*" [3]

The hey day of interior and especially exterior mural painting was made during the reign of Petru Rares (1527-1538, 1541-1546): "*The time of Petru Rares is the golden age of the old Moldavian painting, just as the time of St. Stephen the Great was the golden era of old Moldavian architecture.*" [3]

In the present study we intend to dwell on the theological significance of the *akathistos hymn* found at Moldovita Monastery, and to briefly refer to the input of local features in iconography, especially in exterior paintings, such as the presence of traditional Moldavian dishcloths and napkins and the depiction of Turks or Tartars in some painted scenes.

We have chosen to present the *akathistos hymn* from Moldovita Monastery because there, the scene is best preserved among all the churches with exterior mural painting in the north of Moldavia. According to the establishment account, an inscription carved in stone "on the southern wall of the narthex", the church was erected between the years '7040-7045' (1532-1537) [4]. We also consider that there is a close link between the church dedication and

the depiction of the *akathistos hymn*. The two dates are essential for the history of the monastery. In his work *Dulce Bucovina*, Ion Miclea, starting from the inscription of the monastery, says that it was built in 1532 and painted in 1537 [5]. The art expert Corina Nicolescu, analysing comparatively the pictures of the monasteries from the north Moldavia, asserts, “the picture of Moldovita makes up with the picture of Voronet, the most precious and charming collection from Petru Rares’ monuments till today” [6].

It is worth noting the composition of the material used in applying the paint bed. The late Assistant Bishop of the Archdiocese of Iasi, Irineu Crăciunaș, a connoisseur of the monasteries, referring to the preservation of the exterior mural painting of the monasteries in northern Moldavia, wrote: “*The preservation of the frescoes on the Moldavian monasteries is an almost miraculous given the local climatic conditions. The over four hundred years that have passed since the creation of these paintings, in spite of the harsh local winters, of the strong winds and storms, have only succeeded in adding a light polish which accentuates their freshness and resplendent charm. This is an outstanding proof of the fact that the Moldavian masters used a truly extraordinary technique, the fruit of long experience.*” [7]

Also according to Ion Miclea, the most important characteristic of Moldovita is the outside painting, a common element with Humor, Probotă, The Sleep from Baia, Saint Dumitru from Suceava monasteries (buildings made in the days of Petru Rares), and also with Voronet, Arbore, Balinesti, Saint Nicolae (near Suceava) and Saint Gheorghe monasteries (Suceava) built before or at the same time with Slatina and Sucevita monasteries, which was founded later [5].

To support this statement, we quote Giorgio Vasari, ‘a famed Italian painter, architect and writer’: “*many among our artists are very good at the other painting styles, namely oil and tempera, but are not expert in fresco painting.*” [8] Significantly enough, the well-known painter made this remark, decades after the Moldavian churches had been painted. Other specialists have praised the skilled technique of the Moldavian artists: “*The unknown authors of the paintings had discovered a ‘secret’, which gave their work extraordinary splendour and resistance, a secret that has not been passed on to us ... In fact, our craftsmen were so proficient in producing colorants that the outcome of their work was regularly exported to the worsted factories in France, a country which produced itself high-quality pigments.*” [9]

As regards the *akathistos hymn*, which is extremely well-known in the Byzantine and Orthodox world, we should mention that the local artists, who made the outer paintings of the monasteries in the north of Moldavia, adopted it and preserved its theological meaning, yet they also gave it special, local meaning, by the addition of original exquisite elements. As for the authors of the picture from Moldovita, the known specialist and teacher Vasile Dragut expresses the hypothesis that it was Toma from Suceava in front of those. The team led by him realised “a pictorial festive collection, both charming through its beauty, and intelligible in its pronunciation of its pictorial programme” [10].

This has also been observed by prominent researchers, who have argued that the *akathistos hymn* (as well as other similar works) “*also has national symbolic significance, as it reflects certain situations and aspects in the cultural, social and political life of Moldavia in the 16<sup>th</sup> century*” [11, 12]. This explains the presence of the Turks and Tartars as those who were regarded as enemies of Moldavians. The composition of the *akathistos* itself in the northern Moldavian monasteries artistically reflects the turbulent political situation and the difficulties faced by our ancestors. At the same time, the depicted scenes demonstrate a profound theological vision. In addition to the purely theological significance, in some of the tableaux, besides the faithful, there appear pagans and heretics, the enemies of the faith. In other words, the artists represented in the pictures both the enemies of the land and those of the faith, art being, thus, an effective pedagogic instrument.

## 2. The Akathistos hymn

The *akathistos* to the Holy Mother of God was composed, according to some researchers, by patriarch Sergius of Constantinople (+638), “as a thanksgiving and praising hymn to the Mother of God for the protection of Constantinople from the Persian and Avar invasion in 626, which was attributed to the miraculous intervention of the Mother of God, who was also the patron of the Byzantine capital city” [6, p. 20; 13]. Others claim that it was produced ‘well before 626’, in the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century even, as a liturgical hymn honouring the Annunciation, the author probably being Romanus the Melodist (cca. 490-560) [14]. The term *akathistos* comes from Greek, meaning originally to stand, to not recline, the *akathistos hymn* being sung while standing [15].

The latter opinion, endorsed by most researchers, seems to be more plausible. Several solid arguments support it:

- After the Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus, when the dogma of the Holy Virgin Mary as the Bearer of Christ was formulated, the worship of the Mother of God developed and expanded greatly.
- By the 5<sup>th</sup> c. the feast of the Annunciation had already been established while in the 6<sup>th</sup> century the feast of the Dormition too was eventually instituted; in the theological writings of the time, Mariology holds a central place, and Romanus the Melodists dedicated many of his hymns to Mary. Yet of all, the *akathistos hymn* dedicated to the Annunciation receives special attention. The account of the miracle of 626 during the siege of Constantinople reveals that the *akathistos hymn* was actually composed prior to the event. During and following the siege, the patriarch accompanied by priests and faithful took the icons of Christ and of the Mother of God from Blachernae church and went on processions around the walls of the capital, intoning the *akathistos hymn* which would indicate that it had already been composed and disseminated.

The same idea is verified by the fact that in the text of the *akathistos hymn*, consisting of 24 stanzas (12 *ikos* and 12 *kontakion*) there is no mention of

any military action, the hymn being purely theological in nature. The content of the 24 stanzas refers to the dogma of the incarnation of the Son of God.

The 24 stanzas can be separated in two groups. The former, having a historical character, evokes memorable moments in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ, such as the Annunciation, the Nativity, the adoration of the magi, etc. The latter has a more mystical content featuring elements of Christian teaching and praises to both the Saviour and His Mother.

The researcher Anca Vasiliu, talking about the akathist, expresses herself in words a little bit different. Thus, she says that the akathistos hymn has a double role: to describe detailed, during the 12 verses, “the historical development of the youthful motherhood and also a role of a poetical, mystic and developed song in the last 12 verses, which are dedicated to the role of the Virgin Mary, of Jesus Christ and of the Church through the world” [13].

A dogmatic analysis of the ideas in the *akathistos hymn* indicates clearly that they are a doctrinal product of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries (another argument in favour of the assumption that it was the work of Romanus the Melodist). Most of the ideas relate to the role of the Mother of God in the economy of salvation.

While in the text of the akathistos there are four lines that would point to defence and victory (“*Rejoice, unshakable fortress of the Church! Rejoice, inviolable wall of the kingdom! Rejoice, Thou through whom victories are obtained! Rejoice, Thou through whom foes fall prostrate!*”), likely thus to be interpreted as an allusion to Mary’s assistance in a difficult war situation, they should not be understood as being the result of the miraculous intervention of the Mother of God in favour of the Byzantines (in the year 626); on the contrary, that the hymn praises the powers of the Mother of God for which was chosen as protectress during the siege.

According to most authors, additions to the akathistos hymn were made after 626, including the initial stanza: “To Thee, the Champion Leader, we Thy servants dedicate a feast of victory and of thanksgiving as ones rescued out of sufferings” introduced either by patriarch Sergius (8<sup>th</sup> century AD) or by patriarch Photius (9<sup>th</sup> century AD). It is now certain that the hymn was sung during subsequent sieges (Namely the sieges of 670 AD - which lasted 5 years, during the reign of emperor Constantine the Bearded, 717-718 - under Leo Isaurian, 860 - when Constantinople was attacked by the Russians, etc.), and the Byzantines’ victory was every time attributed, as in 626, to the aid given by the Mother of God. Moreover, as a token of due veneration of the Mother of God, at the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, patriarch Germanus of Constantinople instituted a special feast, on the 5<sup>th</sup> week of the Lent, when the matins for the following day is celebrated and the akathistos hymn is sung.

It is worth noting that in the subsequent history of the Byzantine Empire, in testing times, its population would address special prayers to the Mother of God, central to which was the *akathistos hymn*.

Because the Mother of God had played a special role in defending the Christians in the Empire and this fact was embraced by all the Christians in the East, the *akathistos hymn* did not remain confined to worship, it also became

part of church painting, its iconographic representation being traceable until the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It was first illustrated by miniatures, then by icons and embroidery, finally by mural painting.

The *akathistos hymn* is found at several monasteries on Mt. Athos (Marea Lavră, Dochiariou, Chilandar, Vatopedi, Xenofontos skete, etc.), at monasteries in Moldovia (Humor, Moldovița, Sucevița, Arbore, Probota, St. Gheorghe and St. Dumitru din Suceava), Wallachia (Cozia, St. Nicolae from Curtea de Argeș, Snagov, Tismana, Mamul, as well as the churches of Dobrușa, Stănești, Genuneni-Vâlcea, Dobreni-Ilfov, the sketes Lainici and Șerbănești, and at Colțea-Bucharest), at Terapont Monastery in Russia, etc.

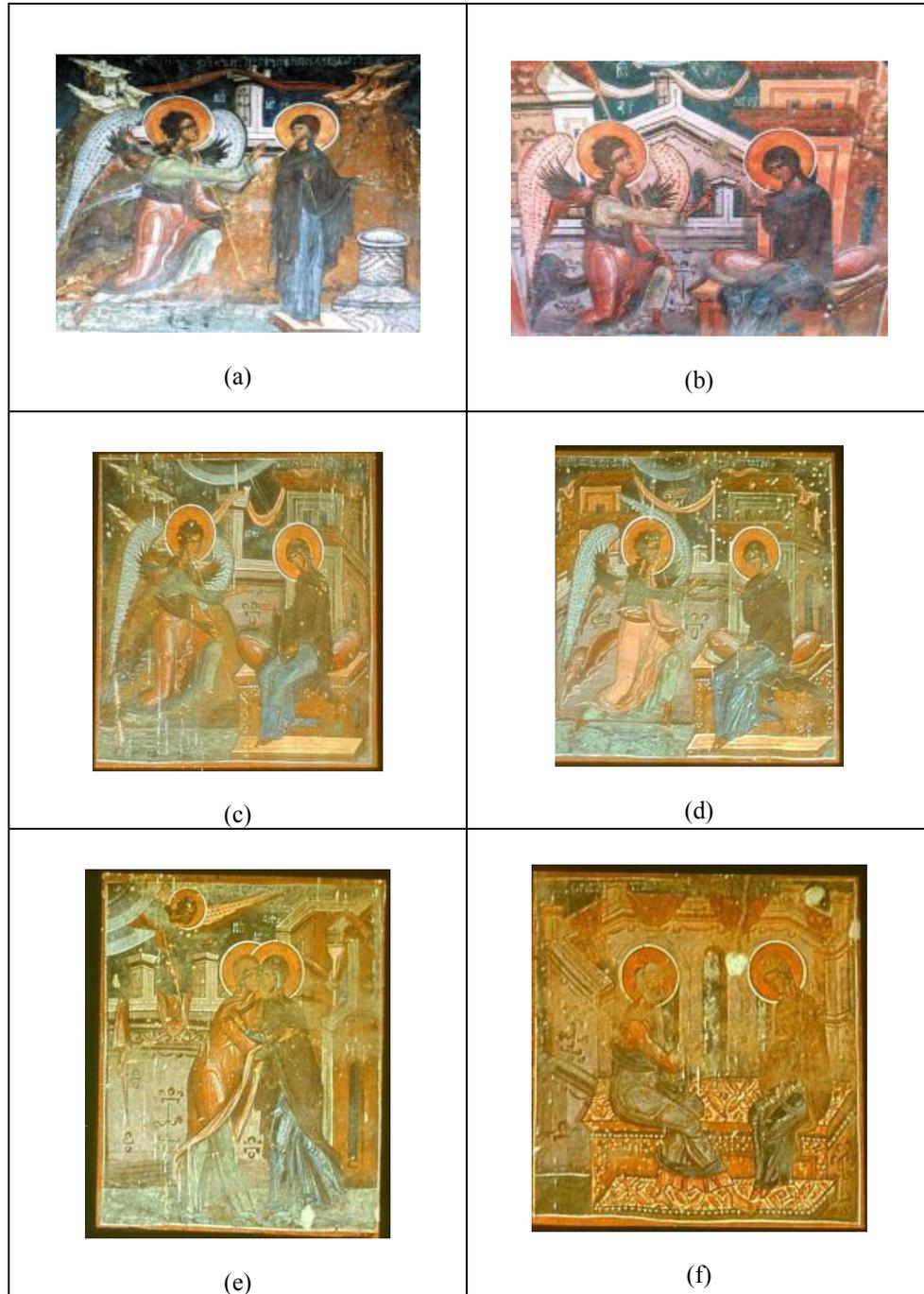
### ***2.1. Scene 1 (ikos 1) - An archangel is sent to speak with the Mother of God***

The subject of this text is: the angel brings the good news to the Holy Virgin Mary (Luke 1.26 – 38) (Figure 1a).

The archangel Gabriel was sent to give the news to Mary, who was in Nazareth, a town in Galilee. The Archangel Gabriel greets her, saying: “Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.” Hearing ‘the greeting’, she is troubled and “wondered what kind of greeting this might be”. Yet the angel tells her not to be afraid, for she has found favour with God and she will be with child and give birth to a Son Who she is to name Jesus.

The first scene of the *akathistos* painting depicts this meeting between the angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary. The angel, represented on the right side, appears to be ‘striding, almost running, when arriving to the Virgin Mary’s place’. With large wings, he holds a thin flowery staff – ‘a symbol of virginity and supernatural birth’ – in his left hand, while with the right he blesses Mary. The angel wears a long dark green vestment, over which there is a purple mantle, and an orarion. His attitude expresses movement and the joy of telling the Holy Virgin Mary the good news of the birth of the promised and awaited one. Mary, the central character in the scene, is depicted in two manners in the *akathistos hymn*. In the former, she is modest, ‘sitting and sometimes weaving’, receiving the news rather passively, which is a more ‘humane’ conception, of Palestinian origin [14]. The latter depiction presents an active Holy Mary, in a ‘lively and active dialogue with the angel’, which reflects the Byzantine influence. The garments of the Virgin Mary are specific to the Antiquity: a long grey robe, topped by a shorter kerchief. These are her garments in all the scenes. The expression on her face indicates the purity and holiness of the Virgin, suggesting rather obviously the typically Orthodox idea of being a reflection of purity and moral inner beauty.

At Moldovita monastery, the Holy Virgin is standing on a small pedestal on the left of the scene. Her hands are raised, the head bowed and facing the angel. The gesture of her hands and the facial expression show Holy Mary’s surprise at the angel’s news.



**Figure 1.** The Akathistos hymn at Moldovița Monastery: (a) Scene 1; (b) Scene 2; (c) Scene 3; (d) Scene 4; (e) Scene 5; (f) Scene 6.

**2.2. Scene 2 (kontakion 1) - Seeing herself to be chaste, the holy one says boldly to Gabriel**

The idea expressed by the kontakion is the Mary's disbelief. Indeed, she has already asked the angel: "*How can you speak of a birth from a seedless conception?*"

The virgin is seen sitting on a bench, behind which there is a portico or a baldachin. Her head is slightly bowed, the left hand lowered, the palm towards her womb. This position indicates the Holy Virgin's submission and humility in front of the will of God as communicated by the angel (Figure 1b).

**2.3. Scene 3 (ikos 2) - Seeking to know knowledge that cannot be known**

The idea is clear: the Virgin submits to the divine will (Figure 1c). As she is preoccupied by the way in which she could fulfil the call of the angel, he tells her that the birth will be possible through the "overshadowing of the Holy Spirit". Mary's answer is unequivocal: "*I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said*". Holy Mary's attitude expresses dialogue, query; from the top right of the scene two thin rays descend, symbolising the grace of God coming upon her.

**2.4. Scene 4 (kontakion 3) - The power of the Most High then overshadows the Virgin for conception**

In other words, the kontakion points to supernatural birth. This is possible due to the union of the two hypostases – the divine and the human – in the person of Jesus Christ. The birth, ichnographically, is represented in two manners. In the former, the Mother of God is either sitting on a bench or standing, praying with her hands upraised - this prayer position is also known as the *Orante*. In the latter, Mary is represented with a drapery or curtain behind, held up by angels or even by virgins. This representation, also present in the Erminia, is very ancient, older even than the transposition of the *akathistos* hymn in painting. In this last scene, the Mother of God is seated on a throne, praying, while three rays descend from heaven upon her. At Moldovita monastery, Holy Mary is depicted with her head slightly bowed, her hand lowered, the hand towards the womb; the right hand, the palm stretched, extends out of the mantle (Figure 1d).

**2.5. Scene 5 (ikos 3) - Having received God into Her womb, the Virgin hastens to Elizabeth**

The ikos presents the meeting of the Holy Virgin with Elizabeth (Luke 1.39-56) (Figure 1e). In the depiction of the meeting, the Holy Virgin is on the left, while Elizabeth is on right, both standing. The scene denotes intimacy, closeness, affection, as they are seen embracing. The oldest painted

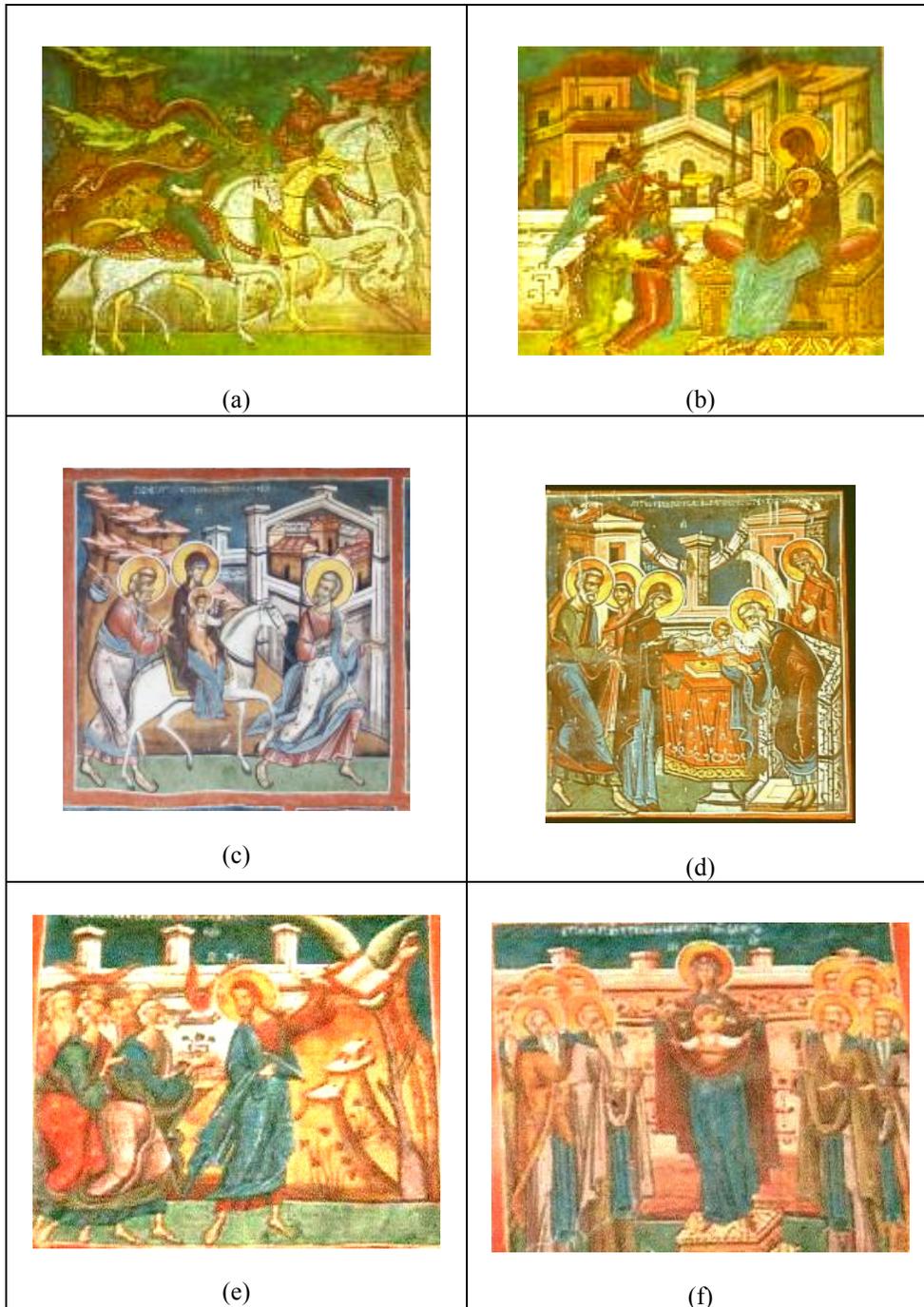
representation of the two saints dates back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century and is found in a scene, which includes the Nativity. Obviously, during the time, other iconographic representations of the scene have emerged.

#### **2.6. Scene 6 (kontakion 4) - Having within a tempest of doubting thoughts**

The kontakion illustrates the ‘thoughts’ or suspicions of the righteous Joseph and the forgiveness of the Holy Virgin Mary (Figure 1f). The two are shown standing facing each other, the Holy Virgin to the right, the righteous Joseph to the left. They both have their hands raised, which represents their dialogue. This scene two is usually illustrated in two manners. In the former, only Joseph and Mary appear, in the latter there are other characters too. Whereas the scene usually depicts them standing, at Moldovita monastery they are seen on a bench.

#### **2.7. Scene 7 (ikos 4) - The angels are proclaiming Christ's coming in the flesh**

At Moldovita monastery, the scene has at its centre the infant Jesus, swaddled and laid in a manger, against the background of a cave (where he was born). In the proximity of the Infant there is the Mother of God, reclined on ‘some blanket’, her head turned towards the Infant. At the top of the scene, the sky is depicted, while to the right there are three angels who represent the hosts of angels who sang the well-known hymn: “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests!*” (Luke 2.14) Slightly below, near the Mother of God, there are the three magi who pay homage and bring gifts to the Infant Jesus. In the bottom right side there are two women, the midwives. They are preparing to bathe the Infant Jesus in a tub filled of water. In most cases, to the left of the scene there are some shepherds with their sheep and some angels, who are the shepherds mentioned in the Bible and the angels who brought the news of the Nativity. (Luke 2.1-20). The shepherds are singing and offering gifts, just as the magi. At Moldovita monastery, however, there are no shepherds or magi, only a few sheep are represented. In the lower left side, Joseph is seen sitting, his head bowed, hand under the chin, thus seeming deep in thought and possibly astonished by what is going on around him. A shepherd is depicted next to him, telling him how the angels heralded the Nativity. The icon of the Nativity is among the oldest scenes in Christian iconography. In a simpler version, it is found even in the catacombs of the early Christian era. The scene of the Nativity of the Lord was developed from the 6<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the general guidelines of the scene being fixed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. It is worth noting that the authors of the scene drew both on the Holy Gospel (the canonical gospels of Matthew and Luke) and on elements from the apocryphal gospels.



**Figure 2.** The Akathistos hymn at Moldovița Monastery: (a) Scene 8; (b) Scene 9; (c) Scene 11; (d) Scene 12; (e) Scene 13; (f) Scene 14.

### **2.8. Scene 8 (kontakion 5) - The Magi see the divinely moving star**

The journey of the three Magi is the central idea of this kontakion (Figure 2a). The scene is based on the account in Matthew's Gospel 2.1-2. At Moldovita monastery, the scene depicts the magi on horseback, from right to left, against a mountain setting. The scene delivers the idea of movement of the horses and characters. The three horses, two white ones and one buckskin, go at a gallop, reined by the magi. A bright star is painted in the top area. Both the horses' saddles and the magi's clothes have Oriental features. The Magi are of different ages (very young, mature and old), an image of the stages in human life. They also represent the three continents (Europe, Asia and Africa) and the three races into which the human kind was separated according to Noah's three sons [14].

### **2.9. Scene 9 (ikos 5) - The sons of the Chaldees saw in the hands of the Virgin**

Undoubtedly, the theme of this ikos is the adoration of the magi (Figure 2b). The three magi are represented kneeling before the Mother of God. In their outstretched hands they each hold a box containing the gifts they offer to the Divine Infant. In the left side of the scene, the Mother of God is seated holding the Infant. Jesus, her hand extended, "in a token of acceptance of the magi's gifts and veneration". The theme of the adoration of the magi is one of the oldest and most widely spread. The oldest representation of the scene is found in a fresco in the St. Peter and Marcellinus catacomb in Rome, dating from the 9<sup>th</sup> century [14]. During the time, it has also been represented variously, the differences concerning mainly the number of characters in the scene

### **2.10. Scene 10 (kontakion 6) - Having become God-bearing heralds, the Magi returned to Babylon**

The scene deals obviously with the return of the magi (Matthew 2.12), a scene that is more rarely depicted, the earliest representation dating from the 10<sup>th</sup> century. At Moldovita monastery, the return of the magi is very similar to depiction of the coming of the magi from scene 8. The natural setting includes two mountains and in between them an angel that tells the magi to return on another route. The only difference between the scenes is that in two horses go eastward while the third faces westward.

### **2.11. Scene 11 (ikos 6) - You dispelled the darkness by shining in Egypt the light of truth**

The theme is the flight to Egypt, as recounted in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 2.13-21 (Figure 2c). The content of ikos differs from the biblical account, in that it presents the fall of the idols and people who, having renounced worshipping the idols, venerate the Mother of God. The setting of the

scene is a mountainous landscape, to the right, and a city enclosed by walls, to the right, a symbol of Egypt.

The Mother of God, holding the Infant Jesus, travels on the back of a white mule, while the Righteous Joseph is behind, holding a staff in the right hand on which a basket with provisions is hanging. This scene, like the previous one, also dates from the 10<sup>th</sup> century. As was the case with other scenes, this one has been variously depicted, sometimes on the basis of apocryphal gospel accounts.

#### ***2.12. Scene 12 (kontakion 7) - Symeon was about to depart this age of delusion***

The kontakion refers to the Presentation of the Lord, 40 days after His birth (Luke 2.25-42) (Figure 2d). In the centre of the scene, near a wall, there is a table that stands for the altar table in the Temple. On the table there is a large tome. To the left, the Righteous Symeon is represented holding the Infant. His face exhibits the joy and satisfaction of having seen the Saviour of the World. The Infant Jesus holds his right hand towards his Mother and the left towards the Righteous Symeon. The Mother of God, depicted to the right, has both her hands outstretched, ready to receive the Infant. Behind her there is the Righteous Joseph who is holds two pigeons or two turtledoves. St. Ann is depicted next to them too. The earliest representation of this scene dates from the 11<sup>th</sup> century. As with scenes, there have been many variations in terms of the number of characters. The particular feature at Moldovita monastery is the presence of St. Ann, the mother of the Holy Virgin Mary.

#### ***2.13. Scene 13 (ikos 7) - The Creator showed us a new creation when He appeared to us who came from Him***

The central idea of this ikos is the image of Jesus Christ as the new creation (Figure 2e). This ikos marks the start of the latter half of the akathistos, which is deeply dogmatic and mystical in character, as compared with the former, historical part. This section of the *akathistos hymn* includes several teachings, and praises addressed alternately to the Saviour and to the Mother of God. At Moldovita monastery, at the centre of the scene there is Jesus Christ, walking, followed closely by the Holy Apostles, 'elderly men, with beards and grey hair'. At the foot of the mountain there is a tree, with two boughs and no branches, having two leaves at the top on which an open book rests.

#### ***2.14. Scene 14 (kontakion 8) - Having beheld a strange nativity, let us estrange ourselves from the world***

This kontakion is an injunction to distance us from the 'empty world' and bring praise to the Mother of God. In the centre of the scene at Moldovita monastery there stands the Mother of God with her hands raised in an attitude of prayer (Orante) (Figure 2f). On her chest there is a medallion that encloses the

Infant Jesus whose hands are extended in a blessing gesture. On either side of the Mother of God there is group of characters, with their hands upraised, and sometimes joined together. Their faces, lifted towards the Mother of God, express joy and passion. This is a very old scene, the earliest representations dating from the 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century AD.

***2.15. Scene 15 (ikos 8) - Wholly present was the Inexpressible Word among those here below, yet in no way absent from those on high***

The ikos contains one of the most profound dogmatic ideas, the Holy Trinity. More specifically, it refers to the unity of the Holy Trinity, in that through the incarnation of the Son of God out of the Virgin Mary, He did not distance Himself from God the Father and the Holy Spirit. At Moldovita, this scene depicts God the Father, to the right, and the Saviour Jesus Christ, to the left, seated on a bench. In the middle, against the background, there is a cross with seven arms, above which there is the Holy Spirit represented as a dove (Figure 3a). The scene of the Holy Trinity is among the most valuable ones in the Moldovita akathistos, both in terms of dogmatic ideas and artistic achievement.

***2.16. Scene 16 (kontakion 9) - All the angels were amazed at the great act of Your incarnation***

The kontakion refers to the glorification of the Redeemer by the heavenly hosts. According to the kontakion, which is based on the Holy Gospel and the worship texts, the angels expressed their amazement at and their admiration for the manner in which the sacrament of salvation was revealed and fulfilled. Jesus Emmanuel is depicted in the painting (Figure 3b). Jesus the child is seated on the throne his hands extended in a blessing gesture. Below the image of Emmanuel, on either side, there is one bowing angel looking at Jesus. Both angels hold branches. Their attitude and gestures express respect, obedience and amazement before the redemptive work of God on earth.

***2.17. Scene 17 (ikos 9) - The most eloquent orators mute as fish***

The idea behind the ninth kontakion is that the miracle of the Saviour's incarnation out of the Holy Virgin Mary is a mystery that goes beyond the laws of nature, making even those 'who are most eloquent unable to speak'. The scenes in Moldovita represent the Mother of God praying (Figure 3c). She is seated on a bench, with Jesus as a child at her chest, with his arms lifted and stretched outside for blessing and protection. In the lower section of the scene four orators are depicted, without auras, almost fallen to the ground, their faces turned, looking upwards. Their attitude and gestures express respect, veneration and amazement at the unutterable mystery of the Incarnation. Over the centuries, this scene has been represented in two ways. In the former, the Mother of God

sits on a bench alone, flanked by a few orators, with another character also present, possibly the righteous Joseph. In the latter, the Mother of God is seated on the throne, with a group of orators holding closed or open books, to the right, and a group of other characters, to the left.

***2.18. Scene 18 (kontakion 10) - Desiring to save the world, He that is the Creator of all***

The kontakion presents the Saviour being taken to the crucifixion site (Figure 3d). Before a wall 'with a canopy and small towers', there is a large cross with 7 arms. At the bottom of the cross there are the skull of Adam and the rib from which Eve was created. To the right of the scene there is Jesus, in a long crimson cloak, which symbolises sacrifice, walking towards the cross, his hands tied. A Roman soldier is walking at Jesus' left side. With his right hand, the soldier carries Jesus to the crucifixion site, with the left he points to the cross, while his scornful face is turned to Jesus. In the left section there are two characters on white horses. The one to the fore is wears kingly attire and a crown, and is probably Herod.

***2.19. Scene 19 (ikos 10) - A bulwark art You to virgins, O Virgin Mother of God***

The ikos asserts that the Mother of God is the protectress of virgins. In the centre of the ikos scene there is the Mother of God, her hands outstretched towards the groups of virgins, as a protective gesture (Figure 3e). On either side of the Mother of God there are two groups of virgins whose faces and hands are uplifted, beseeching the assistance of the Holy Virgin Mary.

***2.20. Scene 20 (kontakion 11) - Every hymn is defeated***

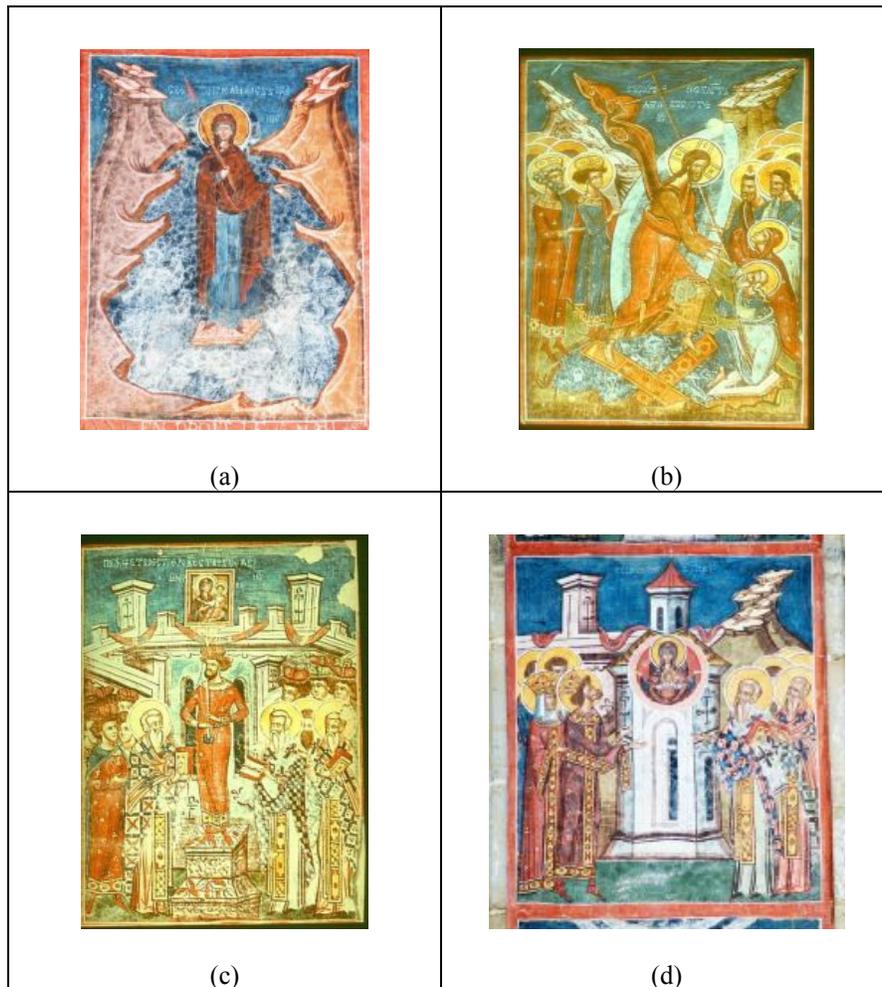
The kontakion glorifies Jesus as high priest whose boundless love and mercy are beyond any song of praise or any thanksgiving. Jesus is depicted as a high priest (Psalm 110.4, etc.). He sits on a fairly high bench and rests his feet on a platform underneath. He wears a miter, sticharion, saccos, omophorion, and gives his blessing with the right hand, while in the left hand he holds a book, the Holy Gospel (Figure 3f). On either side, there are groups of Church hierarchs and priests with auras, dressed in ceremonial vestments, holding books in their hands. Over the centuries, this scene too has been depicted in two ways. In the older version, Jesus Christ is sitting, holding the Gospel in his hand, being flanked by hierarchs and melodists. In the more recent paintings, Jesus Christ, represented as Pantocrator, sits on a throne and blesses a group of hierarchs.



**Figure 3.** The Akathistos hymn at Moldovița Monastery: (a) Scene 15; (b) Scene 16; (c) Scene 17; (d) Scene 18; (e) Scene 19; (f) Scene 20.

**2.21. Scene 21 (ikos 11) - A shining lamp appearing to those in darkness**

This ikos describes the Mother of God as an illuminator of Christians. The scene consists of a large, dark cave, with an opening above that reveals two mountain peaks (Figure 4a). In the cave, the Mother of God is standing. In her right hand she is holding a large candle, and with her left hand she is trying to help the souls of those in the cave. The current scene is an intimation of the intercessory work of the Mother of God. This idea and probably along with the influence of an apocryphal text talking about the Virgin's descent into hell has engendered the representation of Holy Mary imploring her Son to be merciful towards those in hell. It is possible that this idea and its representation to be inspired by scenes of the Saviour's descent into hell.



**Figure 4.** The Akathistos hymn at Moldovița Monastery: (a) Scene 21; (b) Scene 22; (c) Scene 23; (d) Scene 24.

**2.22. Scene 22 (kontakion 12) - The Resurrection. Wanting to bestow His Grace**

The kontakion is based on the teaching on the Saviour's descent into hell. (I Peter 3.18-20) At the centre of the scene at Moldovita monastery there is Jesus Christ whose whole body is surrounded by an elongated aura (Figure 4b). With his feet he breaks the gates of hell, "which coming out of their hinges fall and crush Satan; the gates of hell fall into the shape of a cross, on which Jesus rests his feet." [14] Breaking the gates of hell, the Risen Christ pulls up from the same grave Adam and Eva, and on his sides there are the patriarchs and learned men of the Old Testament who look forward to their salvation.

**2.23. Scene 23 (ikos 12) - "While singing to Thine Offspring, we all praise Thee O Theotokos"**

In this ikos the Holy Mary is honoured as the 'living Church' (Figure 4c). The setting is a fortress wall, before which on a high podium Mary wearing a mitre is seated on an imperial throne. On either side of the podium there are large groups of characters, fronted by priests and hierarchs with auras, all dressed in ceremonial vestments. Behind them there are numerous young men, representing the Church singers and workers. The scene as represented at Moldovita, which also features one character holding an icon of the Holy Mary, suggests both the adoration of the Mother of God and the restoration of the worship of icons.

**2.24. Scene 24 (kontakion 13) - O all-praised Virgin Mother**

In the last stanza dedicated to the Mother of God, she is praised and glorified as intercessor. In the middle of the picture there is a small round church (Figure 4d). Above the narthex, the Mother of God is depicted with the Infant Christ the Infant on her chest. Both the Mother of God and the Infant hold out their hands as a token of protection of the faithful. The Church is flanked by two groups of characters. To the right there is a royal pair, with specific garments and crowns. The empress resembles Elena Rares depicted in the votive fresco inside the church. On the other side, there are hierarchs and priests wearing ceremonial vestments and holding books.

**3. Final remarks**

The *akathistos hymn* is one of the main iconographic themes at Moldovita, having been created both in keeping with Mt Athos representations and with the Erminia of Byzantine painting, but also featuring specific elements. And while this hymn was formulated and gained considerable importance in Constantinople and in the Byzantine Empire in general, in times of peril, the monasteries with exterior paintings from northern Moldavia also adopted it, when the country was

threatened by Turkish invasions. This is proof of the veneration that the Moldavian faithful have offered to the Mother of God, the intercessor and prompt helper. Knowing that she had many times protected the Byzantine Empire from the attacks of the Persians, the Slav, etc, the Moldavians beseeched with hope her assistance in the face of Turkish invasions. The presence of *the akathistos hymn* in Moldavia is also a reflection of appropriate knowledge of theology, of mural painting and equally of its technique.

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