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# THE TRADITION AND THE NEW TENDENCIES IN THE DECORATION OF PUTNA'S CODICES COLLECTION

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## Abstract

This article analyzes the manuscripts collection of the Holy monastery of Putna. The focus is put on the decorating styles represented in the liturgical codices that were written and illuminated in the monastery scriptorium during the XV-XVIII centuries. The purpose is to emphasize the main tendencies in the decorative practices represented in the discussed collection and to point out two problems. The first one, is the necessity of a vaster study based on the comparison of the decoration of this small group of manuscripts with the book production of the other scriptoria in Moldavia, Valahia and outside the Principalities, which will allow us to make more general conclusions. The second one, is the necessity of making a catalogue containing the codicological data and contents of the manuscripts treasured in Putna.

*Keywords:* manuscripts, decorative styles, Putna, Codicology, postbyzantine art

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## 1. Introduction

The foundation of the Holy Putna Monastery (now in the North-East Romania) is connected with one of the most important periods of the Moldavian History – the rule of Saint Steven the Great and, as it refers to culture, this period could be viewed as a basic one for the cultural development of the Principality.

This monastery was built and destined to become an important cultural centre. Judging by the all-round aspects of Stephen the Great's rule, the cultural politic and Maecenas activities took a significant part of it. One of the clearest examples in this direction is the building of the Putna Monastery. The scriptorium in the monastery is set up soon after the foundation of the church and probably it starts functioning in 1466 [1]. There are two remarkable aspects of the book production in this very beginning period of the scriptorium. The first one is the impressive number of the preserved manuscripts or the manuscripts for which we have indisputable reports that were written and decorated then

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(39), and the second one is the considerable number of the scribes (16) who have worked during this period [2]. The decorative styles adopted by the scribes are those used by Gavril Uric in the illumination of Cod. Can. Graeci 122 held in the Bodleian Library of Oxford and Ms. 4 MNAR held in the Romanian National Art Museum. The refined style that both codices mentioned above present, combines two of the ornamental styles already established in the Byzantine tradition, namely – the Neobyzantine and the Balkan one. The first style's characteristic features are the use of the palmetto motifs and the geometric floral motifs in the construction of the initial letters. The second one makes an active use of the plaitwork and interlacing geometric figures and twigs [3]. Great attention is paid to the writing itself. The refined calligraphic semiuncial script with extremely elegant graphic symbols introduced by Gavril Uric has influenced the next generations of scribes who used it till the end of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century [2].

## **2. Exposé**

After all the vicissitudes of history, today the manuscript collection consists of more than 100 manuscripts. Most of the manuscript books are of ecclesiastic content, such as Psalters, Synaxarium, Triodion, the Four Gospels, Menologia, Irmonologions. However, there are also some secular works. Taking into consideration the language they are written in, we have one big group of manuscripts (60) written in Church Slavonic, which maintained its prestigious status for a long time on the territory of Romanian Principalities; one group of codices written in Romanian language, but with Cyrillic letters; one bilingual irmologion written in Greek and in Church Slavonic, and few Late Latin manuscripts.

This paper is based on the research done earlier this year on the decoration of manuscripts treasured in the collection of the Holy Monastery of Putna. The focus is put on the decorating styles represented in the liturgical codices that were written and illuminated in the monastery scriptorium during the XV-XVIII centuries. The number of the codices that meet the time and provenance criteria is not so imposing. The study is limited to 36 manuscripts written in Putna, but taking into consideration also the other codices treasured in the collection of the Holy Monastery of Putna. Although they were written and decorated in other places, they show the connections that the Monastery had with other religious and cultural centres in and outside the Principality, and at the same time indicate the ways in which the new tendencies have penetrated book decoration.

There are two descriptions dedicated to the manuscript collection of the Putna Monastery. The first one published in 1905 is made by Dimitrie Dan [4] and the second study is Claudiu Paradais's book issued in 1988 [5]. Both of them are vaster studies devoted to the history of the monastery, the architecture, the frescoes and the other art objects treasured in the Cloister Museum. None of them includes a real catalogue with an orderly patterns in its arrangement, which is clear because of the different purposes these two studies have, but we have to

point out the necessity of such a specific work focussing on the codicological data and contents of the books.

Ten of the treasured codices belong to the second half of the XV<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century; in other words, they have been written and illuminated during the rule of Saint Stephen the Great. They are three Gospels, two Menologia, three Miscellanies, a Triodium and a Book of Hours. Nine of the codices are undated, but Paradais considers that they could be related to the same period [5, p. 348]. There are five more Four Gospels from the second part of XVI<sup>th</sup> and the XVII<sup>th</sup> century, seven Miscellanies from the XV<sup>th</sup> to the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century, four Psalters, two Books with Lives of the Saints and other liturgical books.

Only three of the manuscripts executed and treasured here are written on parchment. These are the Four Gospels books from 1473, 1489, 1504-1597, all of them are silver bound. The other ones are written on paper and have leather bound or velvet bound.

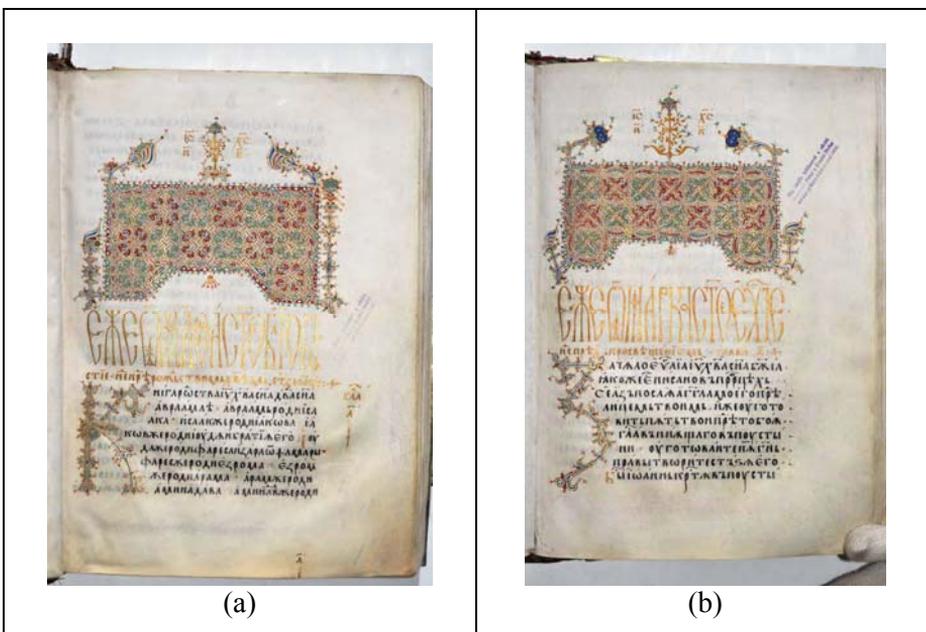
Considering the repertoire of decoration, we can group the discussed manuscript in two. The smaller group represents the so called luxury manuscripts and the second and bigger one consists of the simply decorated books used in everyday ecclesiastical life and read by the monks.

As we mentioned above, the luxury codices adopt the ornamental elements and miniature composition introduced by Gavril Uric [2, p. 47; 6]. The miniatures in the Four Gospels from Homor (Figure 1) show the seated figures of the evangelists and behind them there is an architectural background. Three of them are represented in three-quarters pose, two are facing right, Luke is facing left and John is represented in frontal position facing the top right corner. The colours used by the script Nicodim differ from those used in the illumination of Cod. Can. Graeci 122 held in the Bodleian Library of Oxford and Ms. 4 MNAR, because he had preferred a little bit darker range of colours. There is generous use of gold for the backgrounds and frames of the miniatures. The main ornamental motifs of the frontispieces remain the knitting geometrical figures and the stylized floral elements that resemble the oriental arabesque. The frontispieces differ in their forms as well. They are closer to square form and have a tassel at their lower parts, excepting the last one which has rectangular form and has no tassel but only a cross on the top and stylized flowers coming out of the four corners, which is a characteristic feature of the first three frontispieces as well. There are four initial letters which are more elaborate and larger in size than the ordinary letters. They are executed in the beautiful polychromatic technique of the Neobyzantine style as well as the small head-pieces and the tail-pieces in this manuscript. There are also few capital letters written in gold and ending with floral elements.

The discussed codex is famous for the portrait of Saint Stephen the Great it contains. This portrait is considered the first donor's portrait in the Romanian tradition. It represents Stephen the Great kneeling in front of the Virgin Mary seated on a throne with Jesus in her arms.



**Figure 1.** Four Gospels Book from Homor: (a) Matthew the Evangelist – page 7v, (b) frontispiece and initial letter at the beginning of the Matthew's Gospel – page 8.



**Figure 2.** Four Gospels Book written by Paladie, the monk - frontispiece and initial letter at the beginning of: (a) Matthew's Gospel – page 7; (b) Mark's Gospel – page 59.

The next luxury Four Gospels manuscript we shall scrutinize here is Manuscript 92/48 (Figure 2), written in 1489 by Paladie, the monk. It has no miniatures. The decoration is represented by four big frontispieces, four small head-pieces at the beginnings of the auxiliary chapters and one colophon at the end of the book. All of them conceive the same decorative system recalling, on the whole, the image of the cloisonnés. There are also few capital letters written in gold and ending with floral elements in the lower part. Besides the geometrical knitting motifs, the small head-pieces present small palm leaves and semipalms depicted in heart-shaped medallions, the motif of the winding stalks as well as the motif of the rope knitted in two or three threads. It is noteworthy that the last big frontispiece differs in its dimensions in comparison with the first three.

Last but not least comes the Four Gospels Book from 1504-1507 (Figure 3). It was executed in the scriptorium of the Holy Monastery of Putna by an unknown script. This is the last illuminated codex from the Golden Epoch of the Moldavian Art. The Four Gospels Book was commissioned by Stephen the Great in 1504, and was finished in 1507 with the goodwill of his son Bogdan III.

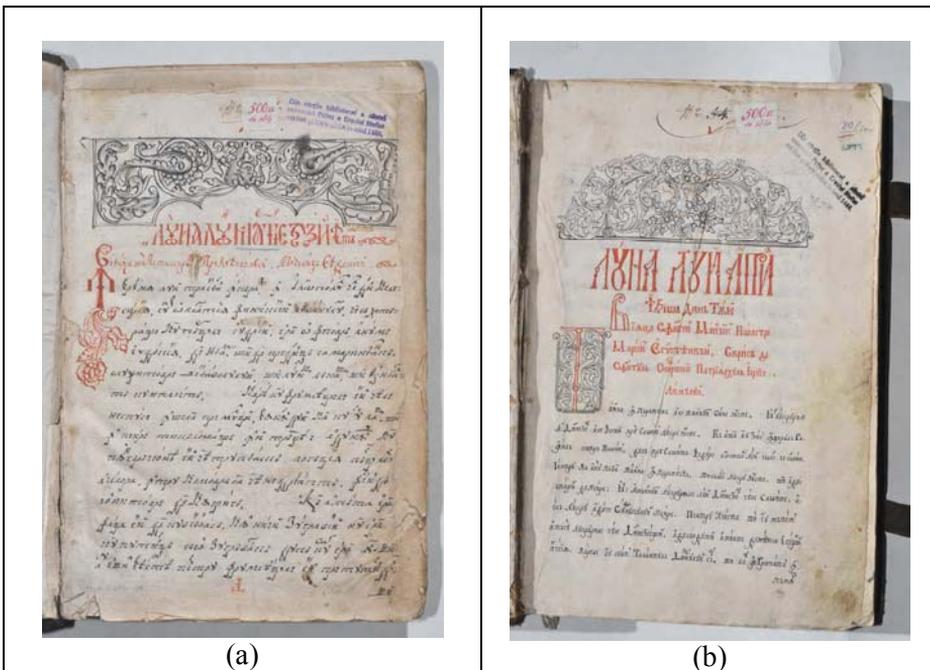
This codex shows more elaborated decoration and some new motifs in the miniatures and frontispieces. It has four miniatures in front of every Gospel.

We could hardly agree with the opinion of Claudiu Paradise that its decorative system allows us to see the new direction of book illumination development in Moldavia [5, p. 379]. It is better to view the floral motifs represented here in relation with those in the Florentine cloths imported into the Principality during the rule of Steven the Great [7]. But we would say that it shows the connection between the decorative practices in the Monastery of Putna and the scriptorium of the Monastery of Neamt. Of course, it could be demonstrated with the miniature of John the Evangelist where his disciple Prohor has been depicted as well - a new feature introduced by Teodor Marisescu in the Four Gospels Book written and illuminated in 1493 in the scriptorium of the Neamt Monastery. Prohor has also been depicted here, but the miniature of the anonymous script from Putna differs in its composition. John is depicted together with his disciple Prohor, but they are set in an architectural background (which is changed in the miniature from the Monastery of Neamt) and there is another new motif which represents the Blessing Hand of God in the top right corner. As far as the other elements of decoration are concerned, we should notice once again the usage of the rich knitting elements in the construction of the frontispieces and initial letters which recall the image of the cloisonnés. One of the specifics of this book are the extremely elegant small head-pieces at the beginnings of the auxiliary chapters and the colophon at the end of the book, the generous use of gold and the golden capital letters which are a little bit bigger than usual and enriched with the floral motifs of the Neobyzantine style.

Unfortunately, we could not study the consecutive development of this group of manuscripts, because there are no other luxury codices made and treasured in the library of the Putna Monastery.



**Figure 3.** Four Gospels Book from 1504-1507: (a) Mark the Evangelist – page 121v, (b) John the Evangelist and his disciple Prohor – page 287v.



**Figure 4.** Frontispiece and Initial letter, XVIII<sup>th</sup> century: (a) Ms. 20, Lives of the Saints – page 3; (b) Ms. 80, Menologium, the April volume – page 1.

The second group of manuscripts is bigger. The decorative specifics of these codices are connected with their function. They are not so richly decorated, especially those written in XV-XVI century, but still keep the great respect for the divine nature of the text which should be arranged in a beautiful way. Their decoration consists of smaller frontispieces, in most of the cases only at the beginning of the book, initial and capital letters. The motifs used here could also be related to the Neobyzantine and the Balkan styles. There is one codex that also shows zoomorphic initial – Ms. 31/44. Few of them are very poorly decorated. For example Ms.71, Ms.72, Ms. 73 where the beginning is simply marked with knitted lines of red ink and a capital letter written in red.

This group is more representative, because it shows manuscripts written during the XV-XVIII centuries and allows us to see the development of book decoration in the scriptorium of the Monastery of Putna. The conclusions could not be of full value because the study includes a small number of books and is limited to only one book depository. Nevertheless, the discussed codices suggest the main tendencies which come to change the decorative composition of the book. The new tendencies are coming through the medium of the incunabula and printed books. The composition of the manuscript page starts to imitate the page arrangement of the printed book. The frontispieces come bigger and sometime enframe the whole page, the initial letter is also enframed or both of them present rich baroque floral motifs (Figure 4).

### **3. Conclusion**

The discussed manuscripts could hardly allow us to create a complete image of the decorative practices used in the scriptorium of the Putna Monastery during the studied period. The codices are not enough and do not represent uniformly all the centuries included. A big part of the manuscripts written here have been treasured in different libraries around the world, a part of them has been devoured in fires or destroyed. Looking for more general conclusions concerning the decoration of the manuscripts written in the discussed scriptorium during XV-XVIII century, we should study this small group of manuscripts in comparison with the book production of the other scriptoria in Moldavia, Valahia and outside the Principalities. This approach will allow us to follow the ways by means of which new tendencies and new motifs in the decorative practice of the Putna's scriptorium have been introduced, and to make more important deductions for the traditional and innovative motifs used in the local decorative school.

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