
BENDING IN FRONT OF GOD

ANALYZING THE PHILOSOPHER'S FRIEZE FROM THE VORONET MONASTERY

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Abstract

The iconographic messages of some Moldavian medieval painted monasteries have in several cases an important philosophical dimension – especially when considering the so called frieze of the philosophers. The pretext of the discussion is the Holy Monastery of Voronet - where there are used the two colours associated with the high spirituality – blue, but also yellow – and where the ‘lecture’ of the frieze’s messages – with focus on that part representing Socrates, Plato and Aristotle – is both physical and metaphysical. These lectures are the vectors for a highly universal philosophical lesson for a religious individual.

Keywords: philosopher, Christian, spirituality, blue, universality

1. Introduction

Romania is a magic land, abounding of places of worship: churches, monasteries, basilicas, etc. Built during almost a millennium, in a multitude of architectonic styles – a mixture of the Byzantine style and Western influences - they are expressing a strong commitment not only to the Christian values, but also to some deep philosophical positions, emerged from the popular culture.

Among the most well known treasures of Romania are the painted Orthodox churches of the monasteries of the southern Bucovina. Their exterior painted walls were decorated with frescoes (many of them elaborated in the 15th and the 16th century), featuring scenes from the life of Jesus, images of angels and demons, Heaven and hell, as well as portraits of saints and prophets.

Those frescoes are not merely wall decorations, but complete religious and philosophical messages, having as purpose to make known the story of the Bible and the lives of the Orthodox saints known to the folk, through the use of images: *Tree of Jesse* and *the Last Judgment* (Voronet), *Ladder to Paradise* and *the Hymn to the Virgin* (Sucevita), *The Hymn of the Dead* (Saint John –

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Suceava), the *Siege of Constantinople* (Moldovita), the *Return of the Prodigal Son* (Humor), the *Genesis* (Arbore), etc.

Some of those painted churches have the so called *Frieze of the Philosophers*, sometimes associated with the *Tree of Jesse* – displaying some unexpected portraits of some ancient philosophers – Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, Solon, etc.

Let us observe the importance of this theme, as it is used in the similar frescoes of the *Saint George* church from Saint John Monastery of Suceava, *Saint George* church from Voronet Monastery, *Resurrection Church* from Sucevita Monastery, *Assumption of the Virgin Church* from Moldovita Monastery – just to remember several of the Moldavian painted churches where the *Frieze* is used.

This is directly confessing their Greek philosophical heritage through the Byzantine heritage [N. Iorga, *Byzance apres Byzance*, online text, based on the original 1935 edition, published by the Institute d'Edutes Byzantines, <http://www.unibuc.ro/CLASSICA/byzance/cuprins.htm>, accessed on September 5, 2012].

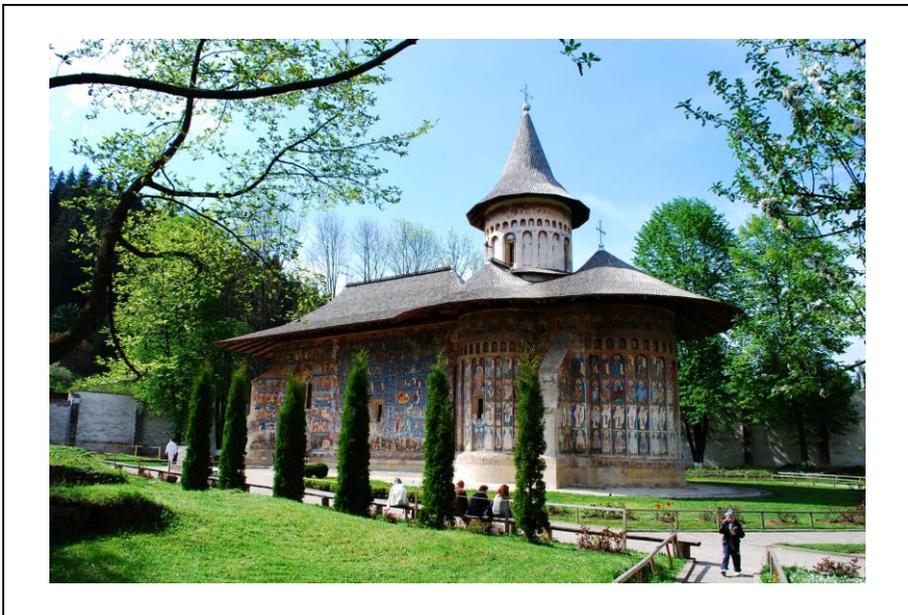


Figure 1. Holy Voronet Monastery (<http://www.en.romanianlandscape.com/voronet-monastery-2.html>, accessed on September 5, 2012).

When accepting this filiation, we will be necessarily led to the following question: What could be the lesson inherited by the Orthodox Christianity from the ancient Greek Philosophy?

Our thesis is that the four philosophers represented on one of the branches of Tree of Jesse, on the southern wall of the Saint George Church (1487) of the Holy Monastery of Voronet (Figure 1) are expressions of the Spirit that bends to

Absolute High – as one of the most important philosophical lessons that should be remembered by any genuine Christian: assuming the lesson of the humble understanding.

2. Bending to High - explanation

Philosophy and Science have always been loved in the Christian areas, because both the philosopher and the scientist (scientist could be read these days as: computer scientist, genetic engineer, physicist, etc.) remain somehow illustrative for the proud human thought and knowledge.

As it is known, philosophers (*largo sensu*, as one can include here some historians – as it is the case of Thucydides and Plutarch, or writers - as it is Homer, too) and the so called Sibyls (women with the prophetic gift [M. Popescu, *Sibilele in viata greco-romanilor si in iconografia crestina*, online at: <http://www.crestinortodox.ro/diverse/sibilele-viata-greco-romanilor-in-iconografia-crestina-69383.html>, accessed on September 5, 2012]) are the only representatives of the pagan pre-Christian world, who enjoyed the honour of being represented in the outdoor Byzantine painting, together with the prophets and the kings of the Old Testament (Moses, Solomon, David) as portraits/icons of peoples who have not been in Church, but would liked to be in it, and wise individuals that have predicted Christ's living Church. Thus, they have prepared the intellectual world of their time for the arrival and acceptance of the Messiah.

Philosophers are usually represented as wearing long robes, crown on head (symbol of the majesty of the spirit – moreover, in the case of Aristotle icon, at the Voronet Monastery, it is named 'Tsar') and with phylacteries – “prophetic texts of the Old Testament scriptures, which can be written on rolls (books) various prophets and righteous patriarchs” in hands, as “a true, iconographic program of the Orthodox churches” [1].

3. The iconographic program of the Moldavian painted churches

One of the most interesting sources of information on this iconographic program can be found in the researches of Constantin Ciobanu, member of the Academy of Moldova [2], where he states that:

- a) Both the image 'Siege of Constantinople' and the 'words/texts' depicted on the phylacteries of the *ancient sages* of the medieval Moldavian mural paintings were created using in *original literary sources* (or translated) Slavonic.
- b) The iconographic sources of the 'Siege of Constantinople' and the sources of the 'words/texts' depicted on the phylacteries of the ancient sages as they are represented in the Moldovan medieval paintings have a complex character because they cannot be limited to the information contained in a single manuscript.

- c) The very existence of some identical errors in the allocation of these prophecies and testimonies prove the existence of a common protograph behind the ancient words of the ancient sages.
- d) The Western tradition of presenting the ancient philosophers differs substantially from the Byzantine one.
- e) The oldest collections of prophecies of the ancient sages appear in Byzantine literature only after the 5th century, improper untitled, at least six times, the Oracles of the Gods the Ancient Greeks.
- f) The title of the latest edition of these Byzantine traditions is linking the Ancient Greeks Sages to the *Tree of Jesse*.
- g) The oldest of those ancient prophecies, as it is in the Eastern Christian mural paintings, is preserved at Arilje (1296).
- h) There are numerous monasteries with frescoes in which the ‘words/texts’ of the ancient sages are not directly related to the ‘Tree of Jesse’.
- i) The oldest collections of prophecies of the ancient sages were kept only in the mural painting of the Moldavian monasteries during Petru Rares and in the refectory of the Great Lavra of the Holy Mountain of Athos.
- j) To the date there is no preserved manuscript - Byzantine and post-Byzantine or Slavonic, which would encompass all the prophecies of the ancient sages, as they are depicted on the exterior paintings of the Moldavian Churches of the 16th century.
- k) Some important investigations on the wise ancient prophecies were performed between 1920 and 1960.
- l) An important step in studying the *Tree of Jesse* iconography sources was made by Michael D. Taylor in a doctoral thesis and also in a number of studies [3]. They have demonstrated the existence of a composition archetype developed in the *Tree of Jesse*, which appeared already in 1262-1264. From this archetype there were two lines of evolution: the Western and Eastern (richer and more branched to whom belongs the Romanian model).

Examples: the philosopher Aristotle is depicted as saying “the birth of God’s nature is without effort, because from Him the Word is originated”; the philosopher Plato is represented as saying: “the young old and the old young, as the Father is (in) the Son and the Son is (in) the Father, as the one is divided into three and three is one, without the body...”; the philosophy Pythagoras is depicted as saying: “The Glorious God will descend and will live among men ...” [2, p. 21]

4. The philosopher’s frieze from the Holy Voronet Monastery

In this paper we are particularly interested in the philosophical significance of the mural paintings of the Holy Voronet Monastery – with focus one of the branches of the *Philosopher’s Frieze*, as part of the *Tree of Jesse*, because they have some intriguing particularities that are creating, altogether, a

genuine philosophical experience, when considering the Eastern Christian philosophy.

“Perhaps the most famous and stunning of the painted monasteries is Voronet, widely known throughout Europe as ‘the Sistine Chapel of the East’ due to its interior and exterior frescos. The predominant colour of this monastery is a vivid blue, known as ‘Voronet blue’. The composition of the paint remains a mystery more than 500 years after the church was built.” [4]

As it was the case with all the Moldavian painted Churches, “highly skilled painters were needed to create the frescos. The rough stone of the walls were evened out with a thick layer of mortar, after which a fined grained layer of lime plaster mixed with natural fibres such as straw was applied. The artists then had only a few hours to paint before the plaster dried. The artists also needed to understand the chemistry of the paint; from mixing pigments from rare clays to using azurite and malachite to create vivid blues and greens and heating ochre from clay to produce reds, yellows and browns. As the plaster dried, it reacted with the mineral pigments, fixing the colours. The technique, which involved no organic materials, unlike other frescoes that use egg whites as a binder, made the colours unusually durable.” [4] On the techniques used in the mural paintings of Voronet Monastery, a deeper and closer look can be found at Ioan Istudor [5]

The major themes of the exterior surface of the southern wall of the Voronet are not only highly religious or artistic expressive but also highly philosophical too. “As in Dobrovăț, the painting of Voronet Monastery (16th century) makes this contrast between the vitality and vigorous movement of saints together with their quiet grace. This stands in striking contrast with the direct realism, often cruel, of some faces. These way, are being put into opposed positions the ineffable beauty of saints and the dark faces of damned.” [6]

The reasons for our choice are the following ones:

a) *Blue and yellow are the two predominant colours of the composition of mural paintings at Voronet.* This is our second thesis. It is a common place to say that every onlooker will observe the famous ‘Voronet blue’ used as “a background of vivid cerulean blue. This blue is so vibrant that art historians refer to Voronet blue the same way they do Titian red” [C. Robbins, *Colors of the Domes of Orthodox Churches*, http://www.ehow.com/info_8129233_colors-domes-orthodox-churches.html, accessed on September 5, 2012].

Looking closer however, one will find that blue has a dramatic and continuous dialogue with the yellow of the saints’ auras/aureolas/halo/nimbus/glory.

Let ‘agree that the use of the yellow auras of the saints was clearly indicating their appurtenance to a high sacred spirituality, while in the case of the Mother God praying in Moldovita Monastery the portraits of the prophets have not auras [6]. Indeed, “in the Theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church, an icon is a ‘window into Heaven’ through which Christ and the Saints in Heaven can be seen and communicated with. The gold background of the icon indicates that what is depicted is in Heaven. The halo is a symbol of the Uncreated Light (Greek: Ἄκτιστον Φῶς) or grace of God shining forth

through the icon. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in his *Celestial Hierarcies* speaks of the angels and saints being illuminated by the grace of God, and in turn illumining others.” [*Halo (religious iconography)*, in *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halo_\(religious_iconography\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halo_(religious_iconography))], accessed on September 5, 2012]

Both colours have an important signification in the Orthodox Christian Church and are clearly related to spirituality. In the case of Orthodox domes, for example, “the symbolism of the colors of Orthodox domes is not strictly assigned, but can be extrapolated from the rules guiding Orthodox art. For instance, in Orthodox iconography, gold represents the light of God and his divine nature. Red is traditionally a reminder of the passion and suffering of Jesus and the martyrs, but also signifies the Resurrection and eternal life. Green is the color of the Holy Spirit, the natural world and new life. Blue is a color associated with the ‘God bearer’, or mother of Jesus, Mary. White is another symbol of the light of God, and is also used to denote righteousness, purity and holiness.” [C. Robbins, *Colors of the Domes of Orthodox Churches*,]

It is important to observe that those particular two colours have a similar symbolism in other several religions/cultures – even there the colours of halos are not only yellow, but also golden, white or even red [*Halo (religious iconography)*, in *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*,] as well as in other forms of visual arts (as it is, for example, the case of fractal art [7]).

b) The texts/words of the phylacteries are sometimes ichnographically independent to the general composition of the *Tree of Jesse* [2].

In the case of the Philosopher’s Frieze any link to the ancient philosophers’ writing could be realized only as an exercise of allegoric interpretation.

This is why, it is essential to agree the true history (at least that of ideas) has not the same timeline with the written works/testimonies, as it is the case of the texts presented in the phylacteries. On the vertical of the confession, it is not so important what it is assigned as said by the ancient philosophers represented in the *Frieze of the Philosophers* – but the allegoric and symbolic message of the whole mini-composition.

Our claim is that *in some cases, as may be in Voronet, the iconographic program of the Moldavian painted churches of the Holy Story is showing – speaking in a cinematographic language - the difference between linear and non-linear storytelling* [J. Hally, *Basics of Writing Drama for Stage and Screen*, online at: http://michel.blanc.pagesperso-orange.fr/SuiteArticles/Suite/Writing_Drama.html].

c) Let us observe that among philosophers represented on the Moldavian painted churches one will find: Solon, Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle. Bolding that we are particular interested here on a one part of the Philosopher’s Frieze from Voronet, *we will agree the philosophers represented Voronet have to be regarded as the closer to a pro-Western tradition, than to a pro-Oriental one* [2]. Moreover, all four ancient philosophers depicted in the Voronet’s frieze

are strongly claimed by the Western cultural tradition as being at the origins and the basis of the Western European identity.

d) One of the purposes of the representations of the words/texts of the ancient philosophers as they are represented on the murals of the Moldavian medieval painted churches, was to demonstrate the futility of human wisdom for the salvation of mankind [E. Fudge, *God Confounds Man's Wisdom*, <http://www.edwardfudge.com/written/stgo7.html>, accessed on September 5, 2012] – a subject dear to the Apostle Paul, who wrote: “the world did not know through wisdom God” (1 Corinthians 17.30). Most likely, this is the case for the majority of Moldovan monasteries [8].

At Voronet Monastery [*Voronet Monastery*, in *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vorone%C8%9B_Monastery, accessed on September 5, 2012], their positioning on a vertical and not in a horizontal chain (as in Sucevița, for example) is a crucial element of differentiation, because it allows a two-way reading. If a text written horizontally iconographic have – in the European Christianity - only one sense of reading, in the vertical layout we might differentiate between the physical (chronological) reading and the metaphysical (sacred) reading.

We are particularly interested in this paper by the right side (as we are looking at) of the *Tree of Jesse*. Here are depicted several of the most important ancient philosophers, but also a Sibyl and a historian.

In the natural/physical reading, the top-down sequence, independently of the content of the phylacteries, lead us from Thucydides to Socrates, Pythagoras, a Sibyl and to Plato, to finally reach Aristotle (the ‘Tsar’). It roughly corresponds - if ignoring the presence of the Sibyl in that chain - to the chronological evolution of the Philosophy and does not allow unexpected interpretations.

Instead, in the metaphysical/sacred reading, from the knowledge of Substances and Forms (Aristotle), we will rise up to reach universal knowledge (Plato), then we will continue the ascension (over the prophetic Sibyl) to the knowledge of Natural Number (Pythagoras) in order to finally understand and accept the knowledge of human condition and precariousness (Socrates), under the history (Thucydides).

As a gradual tendency towards high, accompanied by inward folding on our deep soul, the history of Philosophy gains sense, until the bounce of the (human) knowledge as it is in Aristotle (surnamed, in the Middle Ages, the Philosopher) is sublimated in the (human) knowledge that is understanding its precariousness (Socrates).

Considering the presence of an historian (Thucydides) at the top of the right side of the *Philosophers Frieze* on the murals of Voronet Monastery we will eventually reach the sacred significance, too – as everything in the human knowledge starts or ends in a sacred history – in the perfect expression of the God’s revelations, specifically made for every human being.

Here we met the first idea of this essay: only from the understanding of his precariousness, one can get to reach *the lesson of the humble knowledge* – the only real lesson of philosophy one can hold as true.

e) As argument, we will observe the essential importance of the representation of the Mother of God in the iconographic program of the Moldavian medieval painted churches – including Voronet.

There is a bipolar gravity in the religious art as well [9]. Or, the Holly Mother, the human being, is in fact, depicted as bending in front of her Son, the Perfect Being. This is why our final claim is that *this is the secret reference of the Frieze of the Philosophers, as it is represented at Voronet: the lesson of the (humble) human being (Mary) bending before God.*

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