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**Religion and Politics in Moldavian Ecclesiastical Discourse.
The Cult of Saint John the New (15th to 17th Centuries)**

PhD. Thesis
(Abstract)

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Religion and Politics in Moldavian Ecclesiastical Discourse.

The Cult of Saint John the New (15th to 17th Centuries)

(Summary)

In the year 1415, the principality of Moldavia acquired from Crimea the uncorrupt body of St. John the New, a Greek neo-martyr, who had died in the name of the Orthodox faith, in a pagan city somewhere at the northern shore of the Black Sea. Once they reached the country, his relics were solemnly welcomed by the local political and ecclesiastical authorities in a ceremonial *adventus*, during which the saint was publicly proclaimed as divine protector of the country. Subsequently exposed for public worshiping in the metropolitan church from Suceava, they soon became the focal point of the veneration enjoyed by St. John the New in his adopting country, which finally led to his inclusion to the universal pantheon of saints. In an internal context marked by confessional competition with the Catholics, this was the first and, for a long time, the only *translatio reliquiarum* documented for medieval Moldavia. Playing the role of a local canonization, it was also the starting point of the cult of its most representative saint - the most important Moldavian contribution to Eastern hagiography. For, since nothing certain is known about his veneration prior to the arrival of his relics to Suceava, all the prerequisites for St. John's formal recognition as a saint and for the ensuing formation of his cult (the *translatio* and ceremonial *adventus* of the relics, followed soon after by the writing of a hagiographical text, the liturgical celebration of the saint, the foundation of churches dedicated to him, the creation of specific iconographical representations, culminating with the elaborate monumental cycles illustrating his martyrdom) were of Moldavian origin. Therefore, one can fairly consider that the officialization, the formation and further promotion of St. John's cult are a local creation, an endeavor of the Moldavian Church.

Since John the New was not a traditional saint of the Byzantine-Slavic *Synaxarion* and, moreover, since his relics were not prestigious, the direct participation of the political and ecclesiastical authorities in adopting and promoting the saint suggests the deliberate establishment of an official cult, implemented top-

down and invested from the beginning with special significance for both the princely institution and the local Church. If their combined efforts were decisive for the local embracement of a quasi-anonymous neo-martyr brought from the fringes of the Empire, the subsequent evolution of the cult suggests that the cult gradually started to trigger popular support and even devotional enthusiasm after it lost its traditional patrons. On the long term, this is the successful story of the adoption of a recent cult, its formal recognition and `naturalization` in Moldavia and, finally, its slow transformation from an official cult embedded with ideological implications, into one attractive for the general public of believers.

The investigation of these complex phenomena, as reflected in the ecclesiastical discourse during the first centuries of St. John's veneration in Moldavia, was the general subject of the present endeavor. Its most specific research interest, however, focused on the exploration of the iconographical discourse, more precisely on the investigation of the gradual formation of St. John's profile of sanctity and its political and religious implication through images. For this purpose, the research has inventoried and analyzed all the iconographical representations of St. John the New in different media of Moldavian religious art, from the 15th to the 17th centuries: metalwork, icons, manuscript illuminations and, mostly, monumental frescoes. It has also identified several such representations unknown until now in previous literature. Commissioned, in their vast majority, by members of the high clergy, they constitute the visual dimension of the local ecclesiastical discourse referring to St. John the New and his proper veneration. Considered as integrant parts of the same hagiographical effort of inventing (in medieval terms) and promoting a saint, these images were approached as primary sources for the investigation of his cult in Moldavia. Such an endeavor is all the more relevant, since previous historiography has never before considered the entire visual corpus of St. John's iconographical representations and, moreover, the latter have never been systematically examined in relation to the evolution of his cult.

The chronological span under scrutiny covers the medieval and early-modern phase of the cult, when its hagiographical, liturgical and devotional identity was consolidated. Inaugurated by the key moment of the relics' transfer from 1415 and symmetrically ending with their first departure from the country, in 1686, this is the period of the forging of St. John's cult and of his veneration as official protector of the country, in close connection with the continuous presence of his relics at Suceava.

Nevertheless, the evolution of his cult during this period is neither linear nor easy to reconstruct. The difficulty is due primarily to the discouraging scarcity of the documentary or narrative material. As far as the latter is concerned, for the first two centuries after the arrival of the relics to Suceava the only available sources for the reconstruction of St. John's cult are the hagiographic text, the liturgical office, the panegyric and the religious hymn dedicated to him. The internal chronicles do not even mention his name, there is no record of any collections of miracles, while the chancellery documents which have survived only rarely and obliquely refer to him. Nor other cult indicators are richer in relevant information: of the very few churches dedicated to St. John only two have preserved their original dedicatory inscriptions, while the silver reliquary which hosted his relics has only fragmentarily survived. Even concerning his sanctuary in Suceava one cannot but speculate, since the old metropolitan church has long been destroyed and within the church that actually hosts the relics nowadays, their original setting was completely different.

Against the background of an unprecedented revival of the cult, only starting with the first decades of the seventeenth century the name of St. John the New started to be more often recorded in documents issued by the princely chancellery. From the same period date the first narrative accounts of his local miracles, included in Peter Mohyla's manuscript notes. However, nor the frequency or the amount of such data is sufficient for a more in depth analysis of the various aspects connected to the development of St. John's cult or the more profound implications associated to it.

Fortunately, the available iconographical sources compensate for these shortcomings. Starting with the partially preserved decoration of the two medieval reliquaries which hosted his relics, continuing with the iconic or devotional representations of the saint in religious painting or manuscript illumination and culminating with the extended sixteenth century monumental cycles illustrating his martyrdom, they practically cover the entire chosen chronological span, while they constitute the most privileged and substantial source material for the present analysis. Moreover, the most numerous and spectacular iconographical representations of the saint date back from the first two centuries of his veneration in Moldavia, thus filling in for that particular phase in the evolution of his cult less documented by other categories of sources.

The core of the present analysis, which also influenced the structure of the whole argument, consisted in juxtaposing the hagiographical construct dedicated to

St. John in the narrative and liturgical sources, to the one reflected by the visual ones, with the purpose to explore their common ground, the specific differences between the two of them or the mutual influences. The deliberate choice not to investigate the different stages in the formation of St. John's profile of sanctity in their chronological sequence, but following the discursive means through which it was promoted, served a double purpose within the present research. Firstly, it offered the possibility to identify and investigate all the iconographical representations of the saint in Moldavian medieval art, which in its turn facilitated the interpretation of their full panoply. Only their serial examination made it possible to investigate how the initial hagiographical construct reflected in the iconographical sources and/or the way it changed over time. Secondly, only through such a distinction one could underline the decisive contribution of the visual evidence to the history of St. John's cult and its implications, during the whole period under scrutiny.

A first section of the present analysis was dedicated to the careful evaluation of the inauguration of St. John's local cult and its initial significance. A second part focused on the gradual formation of his profile of sanctity in the hagiographical and liturgical sources, starting with the fifteenth century copy of the *Passio* and culminating with its first translation in vernacular language, included in Varlaam's *Cazania*. This comparative survey has pointed out that, by ignoring the visual evidence, one could get the general picture of a rather stagnant cult for the first two centuries of its existence, despite the saints' special status as official protector of the country. As for the transmission of St. John's hagiography through these narratives, the comparison of the fifteenth century textual prototype to Varlaam's version of the story showed that the original profile of sanctity had crossed the centuries almost unaltered, except for several minor details. It followed closely the classical neo-martyrial typology, with a perceptible polemical touch confronted to Catholicism and only vaguely dwelling on the thaumaturgic powers of the relics. In addition to this discourse and apparently without any continuity to it, the only preserved miracle accounts portray an active and vindictive saint, whose cult was centered on the popular veneration of his relics at Suceava and whose main function was that of revealing the true faith and defending the Orthodoxy in confessional confrontations.

The inventory, the contextualization, as well as the individual and comparative analysis of all St. John's visual representations in Moldavian medieval art fortunately completed and refined this image of the evolution of the cult. The third and most

substantial part of the present analysis was dedicated to them. Firstly, the fourteen case study investigations pointed out to the diversity of St. John's iconography and to the complex significances these images were invested with by their commissioners. Their overall analysis, inquiring on their impact upon the cult, finally revealed the subsequent stages in shaping a more complex profile of sanctity, pointing out to the various functions associated to the St. John's veneration at different moments of its development. Only through the analysis of the images one could grasp the metamorphosis of his profile of sanctity, from the unambiguous affirmation of the saints' affiliation to the martyrial typology, to the exploitation of his intercessory role, then of his apotropaic function as military protector of the country and of the ruling dynasty and finally to that of revealer of the true faith, in the context of the confessional challenges the Moldavian Church was facing in the second half of the sixteenth century. More than a necessary addition to the history of St. John's medieval and early modern cult, the exploration of the visual evidence thus proved to be the privileged method for a more in depth analysis of the dynamics of his local cult, as well as its political and religious symbolism.