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**The Sacred Space and Monk Motifs in the First Iconoclastic  
Period: Their Serial Analysis in the *Life of Saint Stephen the  
Younger*  
(Summary)**

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## Summary

Key words: Isaurian iconoclasm, monk, sacred space, tradition, iconodule

In this doctoral thesis, entitled “The Sacred Space and Monk Motifs in the First Iconoclastic Period: Their Serial Analysis in the *Life of Saint Stephen the Younger*” I propose the analysis of one of the few extant sources dealing with the Isaurian iconoclasm written shortly after the dogmatical victory of the iconodules at the Council of Nicaea in 787. Written in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the *Life of Saint Stephen the Younger* presents the historical events in a very expressive and compelling fashion; however, the focus of the present research has been less *what* was said in this hagiographical text, but rather *how* the author said it.

There are two major directions to this research project: the first one is verifying the hypothesis put forward by Peter Brown, namely that “iconomachy in action is *monachomachy*”; the second is analysing the way in which the idea of the sacred was articulated during the first iconoclasm, more precisely the idea of the *sacred space*. Limiting the research to the analysis of the motifs of the sacred space and of the monk, just two of the extremely wide range of motifs employed by the author Stephen the deacon, is partly due to the fact that one of the main traits of the 8<sup>th</sup> century recorded by both the historiographical and the ecclesiastical tradition is the notion that it had been marked by a period of monastic persecution of extreme violence. On the other hand, focusing the investigation of the sacred on the sacred space is motivated by the interest for the episodes of the monks’ being defamed in the hippodrome, since there the space is symbolically charged and exclusively profane; the question emerging from this has been the following: if a profane space had been chosen to publicly desecrate the monastic habit, how was the sacred space understood?

The research focuses on the *Life of Saint Stephen the Younger* because it is the source that promised to be the best suited to verify the hypothesis of Peter Brown, as it is the primary source the secondary literature uses most often in order to illustrate the anti-monastic persecution wrought by Constantine V.

Since there are two research directions I chose to analyse the motifs of the sacred space and of the monk in the *Life of Saint Stephen the Younger* using the text edited and published by Marie-France Auzépy, which also contained a French translation (see *La Vie d’Etienne le Jeune par Étienne le Diacre*, translated by Marie-France Auzépy, Routledge, Aldershot England;

Brookfield, 1997), in the absence of a received translation in Romanian. In order for the research to be oriented away from a mere textual analysis, I chose to employ the serial analysis which allowed me to cross-reference the significant elements against other primary sources dealing with the reigns of Leo III and Constantine V.

The doctoral thesis is divided into seven chapters. The first one is an introduction presenting the stages the research project went through, the reasons behind choosing the *Life of Saint Stephen the Younger* as the object of my analysis, the research paths and the way they veer away from those already taken by the historians who addressed various topics relative to this hagiographical writing, as well as a short *status quaestionis*.

The following five chapters are dedicated to the methodology used (chapter 2), the analysis of the *Life of Saint Stephen the Younger* (chapter 3), the serial analysis of the sacred space motif (chapter 4), the serial analysis of the monk motif (chapter 5), the analysis of the possible reasons as to why the single iconodule episode of the Isaurian dynasty, namely the rebellion of Artavasdus, is missing from the *Life of Saint Stephen the Younger*, despite the fact that its author is fervently Orthodox and the tone of his writing is blatantly polemical and anti-iconoclastic (chapter 6). The paper closes with the seventh chapter, in which the conclusions drawn from the serial analysis of the sacred space and monk motifs in the *Life of Saint Stephen the Younger* are presented.

The second chapter presents the methodological bases of the analysis: I made use of the structural, serial, and implicative analyses. The most important of the three is the serial analysis: with it I was able to identify the symbolical arches spanning the whole of the text in which the two motifs were articulated. Each of these symbolical schemes brings new nuances to each of the motifs, by means of the syntax in which they are set, the connections with other motifs and sub-motifs, particular to each context. The three subchapters detail the specificities of the three types of analysis and the way in which they are corroborated.

The third chapter is the longest, containing first of all a set of preliminaries featuring the data we have regarding the author of the *Life of Saint Stephen the Younger*, Stephen the deacon from Constantinople, the year it was written, and the manuscripts in which it was preserved, the editions of the text, alongside a list of contemporary translations.

Secondly, the preliminaries are followed by an extensive analysis of the *Life of Saint Stephen the Younger*, chapter by chapter: the hagiographical writing presents the miraculous

conception of the future martyr, his birth, baptism and upbringing in Constantinople, the beginning of his monastic life on the Mountain of Saint Auxentios as a disciple of elder John, then his journey towards attaining spiritual perfection. Stephen becomes an exemplary monk, a perfect ascetic, a father for the community of monks living in that holy mountain, as well as for the iconodules who seek his council and solace. Alongside the description of his personal journey towards perfection, the hagiographer provides information on the opposing party of the iconoclasts: just as his hero climbs the steps leading to holiness, the iconoclasts steep deeper and deeper into their heresy, one that destroys both the exterior ornaments of the Church and the souls of the people. The historical data provided do not stand the test of simply comparing them to the extant quasi-historical chronicles, namely the *Chronography* of Saint Theophanes the Confessor and the *Short History* of Patriarch Nikephoros of Constantinople: the *Life of Saint Stephen the Younger* changes the chronological order of the key events in order to set the stage as efficiently as possible for the fate of the iconodules and more precisely, that of Stephen the monk who was to become the new martyr.

The tension between the two sides is manifested in the conflict pitting their representatives against one another: the conflict between emperor Constantine V and Saint Stephen the Younger is constantly escalating. The tipping point of this conflict is the iconoclastic council of Hieria, which marks the beginning for the destruction of icons and for the persecution of the monks, who are forced to flee. Saint Stephen is exiled because he refuses to sign the dogmatic decision of the heretical council, but his banishment does not curb his missionary work: he continues to defend the cause of the icons and to preach the legitimacy of honouring them. He is called back from exile and the key confrontation between the two antagonists takes place, one where the iconodule arguments are presented in a tangible form: Saint Stephen tramples a coin that bears the effigy of the emperor. This gesture brings about his imprisonment and eventually his death.

The analysis of each chapter or cluster of chapters is followed by an overview of the motifs employed therein and of the way they are articulated, of the connections with other chapters, as well as a stratigraphic analysis of the interpretation levels of the text.

The forth chapter offers the serial analysis of the motif of the sacred space and a synthesis of the results of the analysis performed in the previous chapter. The way the hagiographer understands the concept of the sacred space can be resumed with the phrase “true Jerusalem”. The author rarely specifies that ecclesiastical spaces are sacred spaces, whereas other places, marked

by the personal ascetic efforts of holy people, are designated with the help of metaphors and symbolical descriptions that pull them out of the mundane world and transport them to a sacred geography, marked by epiphanies from the Old Testament and the New. Thus, the connection that is carefully constructed throughout the *Life of Saint Stephen the Younger* is the one between orthopraxy and the sacred: personal spiritual effort and a clear separation from the profane can transform a common space into a sacred one that is perfectly transparent and open to the work of God.

The fifth chapter is dedicated to the serial analysis of the monk motif, which indicated that the *Life of Saint Stephen the Younger* says very little verifiable things about Saint Stephen himself, but it does provide us with a portrait of the Monk, as a defender of the Tradition and of the Truth, a victim of the iconoclasts, just like the icons. The monk is a living icon, whose resemblance to Christ increases as his spiritual life becomes deeper, and this requires not only the capacity to live an ascetic life of continuous prayer, but also to be able to bear the treason of those closest to you and even to die for the Truth. Stephen the deacon presents the monastics as a Christian elite, separated from the rest, with direct access to the sacred. The rest of the laypeople and even the bishops are exposed to being contaminated by the worldly evils, so they must seek the monks in order to receive divine grace. The monks are those who can discern good from evil, whereas their adversaries blur the lines separating the two; the monks experience the limit fully – austerity, affirmation of the faith, the courage of bearing witness, martyrdom – and are the ones who saved Orthodoxy. And Stephen the Younger is the most resplendent figure in their midst, the perfect monk and the most important martyr. The monachomachy presented by Stephen the deacon cannot be justified historically, but it does help us to understand the way in which he appropriated his recent history and rewrote it for his own time. A symbolic reading that says more about the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century than of the second half of the 8<sup>th</sup>.

The sixth chapter present an event whose absence from the *Life of Saint Stephen the Younger* brings further proof against seeing it as a historical source, all parachronism aside. Artavasdos, the usurper of the Isaurian throne, has been remembered by the Tradition of the Church as the Orthodox whose attempt to overtake the Empire failed tragically. The fact that Stephen the deacon does not mention anything about his rebellion – despite seizing every opportunity to glorify the iconodules – may prove that Artavasdos’s Orthodox persuasion had been



a political manoeuvre, and that the hagiographer was not constrained by historical accuracy in his writing.

The last chapter, namely the seventh, offers the final conclusions: the text consistently states the idea that any space, however profane, can be recovered and reclaimed for the sacred, by personal holiness, in its turn attained by personal effort. For Stephen the deacon the absolute history is a mere pretext, the main focus being the *idea*, thus events can be antedated, their course can be accelerated or decelerated at will in order to accommodate the idea the author wants to put through. And what the hagiographer wants to prove is that the iconoclasm, a heresy of the anti-Christ, attacked the monks because they were the living icon of Christ. Consequently, Peter Brown's hypothesis, the starting point of this research, namely that "iconomachy in action is monachomachy" is proven to be only partially verifiable, namely on the symbolic level of the text.

The final section of the paper is dedicated to the bibliography where the primary sources and the secondary literature are listed, that have been used when writing the thesis.