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FACULTY OF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

DOCTORAL SCHOOL `HISTORY. CIVILIZATION. CULTURE`

**THE EVOLUTION OF LITURGICAL HIERARCHICAL
COSTUME IN THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE ROMANIAN
SPACE (14TH-16TH CENTURIES): BETWEEN SACRALITY
AND THE AESTHETICS OF AUTHORITY**

Doctoral Thesis Summary

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Over time, art history researchers have focused on various subjects within the iconography of the feudal era. While exploring the vastness of this iconography, our attention was drawn to the image of the hierarch and his vestimentary appearances in the frescoes of Orthodox churches from the 14th to the 16th centuries in the Romanian space, leading us to entitle the thesis “The Evolution of the Liturgical Episcopal Vestment in the Iconography of the Romanian Space (14th–16th Centuries): Between Sacrality and the Aesthetics of Authority.”

The iconographic programs do not provide us with fresco depictions of contemporary local hierarchs from the centuries of our interest. However, we do have a series of illustrations of the Procession of the Holy Hierarchs in the hemicycle of altar apses, of the Ecumenical Councils, as well as other such iconographic references to hierarchs, which will constitute the subject of our analytical discourse.

As a time frame, we have chosen the 14th to the 16th centuries, starting from the earliest fresco representations of the figures of holy hierarchs, which are datable to the 14th century, and extending the research up to the end of the 16th century. This point marks the conclusion of our analytical journey, firstly because beginning with the following century, the face of art in the Romanian space undergoes radical changes, and secondly due to strictly qualitative considerations of the research.

We begin our research journey by first formulating the working hypothesis that, in the Romanian space during the 14th to 16th centuries, multiple types of episcopal liturgical vestments coexisted in church frescoes. Their depiction reveals an evolution influenced not only by iconographic models from other artistic regions beyond the country's borders but also by changes occurring within society itself. An extension of this idea is the notion that the episcopal vestment gradually changes its representational function. At times, it assumes a discursive role with an intentional message, pointing to the gravity of doctrinal issues; at other times, it serves as an indicator of the power and role of the Church within the country.

In this sense, our main goal is to establish a developmental trajectory of the sacred vestments depicted in medieval Romanian frescoes. In extension of this goal, several secondary objectives emerge that aim to deepen the understanding of liturgical garments. We intend to identify those iconographic programs preserved in their original form—or, at most, restored in accordance with the original—that include, either in full or in part, the theme of the Procession of the Holy Hierarchs and the Ecumenical Councils. Once these primary sources are identified, we proceed to define the artistic framework and the cultural convergences that shaped the painting styles, seeking to trace elements inspired by local, Balkan, and Western iconography in the depiction of vestments. At this stage of the research, we aim to uncover the communicative relationship between fresco and embroidery, as well as between fresco and portable icons, in an effort to demonstrate the existence of reciprocal influences. The next stage of the study highlights the necessity of a comprehensive understanding of the political and religious atmosphere of the time, examining the impact of political and religious factors on the evolution of the liturgical costume. At this point, our purpose becomes to discover what role the episcopal vestment acquires as a consequence of these analyses. Will it serve merely as a symbol of hierarchical rank, or will it act as a tool to mark certain disputes arising within the confessional communities of the respective centuries? How does its representational function shift from one century to another?

The thesis employs an analytical and qualitative method that focuses on the iconographic analysis of episcopal vestments in frescoes, leading to the identification of sacred vestment types present in the mural ensembles of the three Romanian principalities over the course of three centuries. Another method applied is comparative analysis, which supported the research in identifying artistic zones of influence and uncovering the reasoning behind the presence of various forms of vestments and their ornamentation. The method used for documenting the specific historical context—including political events, international relations, and the movement of religious currents—provided coherent explanations for certain iconographic “artifices,” such as the intentional selection of specific saintly hierarchs in the altar’s liturgical procession or the differentiated vestment representations within the same scene. In the research, we used images collected through various means: personal photography, photographs provided by researchers from other institutions, and published albums.

The thesis is structured into five chapters, preceded by an introduction and followed by final conclusions. The chapters follow a coherent structure, beginning with an introduction to the study of episcopal vestments from their origins up to the 13th century, and continuing with a focused approach to these vestments within the Romanian space. The sequence of chapters is as follows:

I. From the Profane to Liturgical Sacrality. Vestimentary Transfigurations.

This chapter traces the trajectory of the liturgical vestment from its beginnings in the 4th century, inspired by the Roman and Greek dress of the aristocratic man, and how, through a process of “purification,” the religious man transforms it into cultic attire—driven by a desire to distinguish himself within the crowd. The content captures the process of change, refinement, and the addition of mystical meaning to the vestment as a whole up until the 12th/13th century, the point from which our analysis of its evolution in the Romanian space will begin.

II. Faces and Vestments of Holy Hierarchs in Transylvania and Wallachia in the 14th Century.

Divided into subchapters, this section of the research first presents the political, cultural, and religious context in which art emerges in the two Romanian principalities under consideration. It then continues with a descriptive and interpretive analytical excursus on the episcopal vestment models found in early Romanian frescoes. Moldavia is not addressed in this part of the work due to significant gaps in surviving religious mural art. During this century, the function of hierarchical attire is closely linked to the idea of the celebrant of the Liturgy being a direct representation of Jesus Christ, thus carrying on the symbolism established by earlier canonical iconographic traditions—while also introducing new layers of meaning.

III. Faces and Vestments of Holy Hierarchs in Moldavia and Transylvania in the 15th Century.

This chapter follows the same structure: it begins with a contextualization through historical events, artistic convergences, and interconfessional tensions, followed by analysis, comparison, and interpretation. Typologies of vestments are developed, largely inspired by the Balkan artistic environment. In both Transylvania and Moldavia, the hieratic quality of the Paleologan stylistic formula finds a favorable ground. In this century, the function of episcopal attire begins to

register changes due to the pressure placed on the depiction of the holy hierarchs, who now appear in distinct liturgical garments from one another. Moldavia tentatively introduces differentiated vestments in the theme of the liturgical procession. These visual changes serve as a form of theological messaging, initiating a coded, encrypted form of discourse meant to educate and regulate both the faithful and the clergy amid growing religious misunderstandings.

IV. Wallachia in the 16th Century: Resistance Through Culture.

This chapter presents theories regarding the state of liturgical vestments, identifies costume typologies, and relates the same representational function of the vestment as observed in Moldavia and Transylvania during the previous century.

V. Moldavia and the Ecclesiastical Vestimentary Discourse in the 16th Century.

This part reconstructs the appearance of renewed episcopal costumes, noting the introduction of new elements into the vestment ensemble, such as the mitre. A shift in the significance of the vestment's role is observed here. Unlike previous centuries, the end of the 16th century attributes to the vestment the function of illustrating power and ecclesiastical hierarchical status through the aesthetic suggestions of luxurious materials. Transylvania is not included in the study of the 16th century due to the lack of sufficient visual material—very few episcopal images in fresco or icon have survived, making it impossible to construct a clear picture of the episcopal costume in that region during this time.

The earliest forms of liturgical costume in the Romanian space appear in the 14th century, in Transylvania and Wallachia. The frescoes from this period illustrate three vestment typologies: archaic (with a simple phelonion), ceremonial (with a polystavrion phelonion), and Western (inspired by Catholic attire). In Wallachia, the episcopal image is shaped within the framework of Constantinopolitan art, adapted through local and Balkan filters. In contrast, in Transylvania, painting reflects Dalmatian and Central European influences with Gothic accents, emerging in a social and political context less favorable to artistic patronage. As a result, Transylvanian painting primarily serves a documentary function, revealing the realities of the Romanian elite and their attachment to Orthodoxy in the face of confessional pressures.

In Moldavia, the 15th century marks a visible transition. In frescoes depicting the Procession of the Holy Hierarchs and the Seven Ecumenical Councils, three vestment types appear: archaic, ceremonial, and patriarchal (with a polystavrion sakkos). After the fall of Constantinople, new iconographic typologies emerge, such as the patriarchal type, illustrated through the sakkos, reserved for great hierarchs (John Chrysostom, Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian). These convey confessional or dynastic messages, indicating the ruler's position as defender of Orthodoxy. In Transylvania of the same century, a Byzantinization of the liturgical costume can be observed, with efforts to align with models from Wallachia, though Western influences remain present. No significant changes in representational function are recorded.

The 16th century brings economic decline and political instability to Wallachia, which negatively impacts ecclesiastical art. Unlike Moldavia—where a distinctive, original artistic style flourishes under the rule of Stephen the Great and Petru Rareș—Wallachia focuses on refining already existing forms. The episcopal vestment typologies remain: archaic, ceremonial, and patriarchal. Throughout the 15th and 16th centuries, the differentiation of high-ranking hierarchs through vestments becomes a leitmotif in iconography, reflecting ongoing theological controversies.

Moldavia now develops a distinct Moldavian style, fusing Eastern, local, and Western influences into an original aesthetic. The episcopal costume evolves into four typologies: archaic, ceremonial, patriarchal, and patriarchal-imperial (simple sakkos, without decoration). There is a notable openness to Gothic and Renaissance expressiveness, including personalized faces, while some programs maintain the sobriety of Eastern tradition. By the end of the century, the episcopal costume becomes a visible sign of Church power: silk, brocade, metallic threads, episcopal mitre, sakkos adorned with bells and floral or vegetal motifs such as the thistle, pomegranate, or acanthus leaf—all inspired by Gothic and Renaissance art. In Transylvania, the scarcity of episcopal fresco images does not allow for a consistent analysis of the 16th century.