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## The fall of Constantinople – God`s message for the Prodigal Son



*Moldovita monastery*

In Northeast Romania, there is a beautiful land called the "Second Athos", the name being due to the many monasteries in the area, where one can find unique architectural gems of the painted monasteries. Scattered across the northern Romanian countryside, these monasteries were built in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and are now on the UNESCO world heritage list. The monasteries are famous as a result of the elaborate biblical events depicted around the entire exterior of each church. For the observer, the churches do not give the impression of simply being architecture, rather the observer feels as though they are seeing an enlarged, beautiful shrine.



*Moldovita monastery*

It is said that the origin of the exterior paintings of the monasteries have been inspired by other cultures for we can find frescos above the entrances of churches at Athos, Greece. We find similar decorated porches in Serbian churches as well. The multicoloured traditions of decoration can be found in Armenia and Iran. There is a difference in Romanian churches because all the walls inside and outside are completely covered with icons. Even so, in Romania the painted churches impress not to the fact that there are exterior paintings but due to the size of paintings themselves. In fact the entire exterior is covered with frescos. For all of the churches there is an elaborate iconographical program, thus on each church the paintings are all places in similar order, depicting the same saints and stories.

Many historians have tried to explain the reasoning behind the painting of the exteriors of the churches. One belief is that they are the result of the influence of popular art. The second belief is that they are a defence against the spread of Islam or the Reform. For understanding the paintings, we must consider the idea that the medieval man had another way of thinking and to conceive the reality in an iconic manner. The medieval man could see the signs of God's presences everywhere; they believed in the idea that all around them, nature and life contained signs of God himself.



*The fall of Constantinople - Moldovita monastery*

The iconographical program was initiated by Petru Rares, the Moldavian Prince, son of Stefan the Great, and by his cousin, the metropolitan bishop, Grigore Rosca, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Three of these churches: Humor, Moldovita and Arbore have on the exterior walls an icon which raised the interest of researchers, the assault of the Constantinople because it seems peculiar, the decision to paint between the icons the image of the biggest disaster of Orthodox Christianity. The painting is placed near the icons of Acatist Hymn. The text of Acatist, which inspired the icons, was attributed to the patriarch Sergiu of Constantinople and it was written in thanks to the Holy Virgin who helped the Byzantines in 626 during the Persian invasion. The Byzantines prayed to the Virgin Mary to save them from the Persians, and she heard their prayers.

In this case, the icon could be seen as an adaptation of Romanian realities, with Turks in place of the Persians, a way to invoke the Virgin Mary. As she helped the Byzantines, she was prayed to, to help the Moldavians to escape the invasion of the Turks. But if we consider the manner of thinking of medieval man, we cannot deem the icon in a patriotic message of encouragement, but as an allegory, for the Christians to see the fall of Constantinople as God's desire.





*The fall of Constantinople - Moldovita monastery - detail*

The scene could be a key to understand the entire iconographical program, there is a disaster, but saviour disaster, after which there would be a rebirth of humanity. The scene appears to have no religious connotation, but this is incorrect. It appears to be a historical or laymen depiction, but rather its representation on the churches is purposeful in the minds of the medieval man. The icons are the expression of images as political theology. God decided to punish the Byzantines, because they slide into heresy and they became too proud and unjust. Because of their actions, the heart of the Byzantine Empire and the centre of the Christianity could have been demolished. The contemplation of this disaster could remind the other to behave in a Christian manner, showing them how God acts in history. This is a true Orthodox icon which speaks about the power of God's will and his active presence throughout history.



*The fall of Constantinople - detail*

The icon is next to the depiction of the parable of the *Prodigal Son*, this is the same kind of message as Noah's Ark or the Apocalypse, although after catastrophe is not an end, but another beginning. These are not punishments; rather they are a way to bring the lost sheep, back to the straight path of God. Just as the son expresses his repentance and returns to the father, who receives him with open arms; the Christians of the Byzantine Empire and the Christians of Moldavia must pay penance and remember to be humble, in order to inherit the divine Jerusalem and they will have back what they lost. The message of this scene is the belief that God will always be victorious over heresy and he will always retrieve his prodigal sons.

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Editor(s): Oana-Mihaela Buzinche

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