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No Limits: Iconoclasm and Iconophilia in Contemporary Romania

The Attitudes Towards Saint Christopher's Modern Iconography

To medieval Catholic Christians, Saint Christopher was one of the most popular and most frequently invoked sacred figures. With his giant stature, as well as his status as a *Christ-bearer*, the character ranks among the most effective protectors against death. Despite the popularity he enjoyed between 1350 and 1530, Christopher's representations based on hagiographic accounts were repeatedly banned from the sacred space. The two waves of iconoclasm - 726-787 and 820-843 - did not spare Saint Christopher's representations in the Eastern area, especially as some were zoomorphic. In the Roman-Catholic Christian tradition also, after 1520, his visual representations fell victim to the campaigns of the Reformation started by Luther and Zwingli. His image found shelter in the Orthodox East. In the Romanian Principalities, its ability to reinvent itself, after 1500, is impressive. Although its existence is recorded in the Moldavian Orthodox iconography of early 16th century, it became widespread only in the second half of the following century – and not in the same region, but across Wallachia and Transylvania. After 1880-1900, the image was discarded from the iconographic program of Romanian churches, and replaced by other sacred figures. Moreover, during the last three decades, at the turn of the 21st century, in several cases pre-modern icons have been destroyed, and replaced by anthropomorphic representations. On the other hand, there are recent cases that evince the willingness of painters and communities to reintroduce the zoomorphic figure in the iconographic program.

The present study aims at investigate the current contexts where the Romanian zoomorphic iconographic representations of Saint Christopher are being damaged, as well as the iconophile attitudes towards this theme of mural painting. Based on a personal archive, accumulated over my 15 years of on-site research in the respective areas, I investigate the visual metamorphoses alongside the symbolic, theological and cultural grounds of the decisions made by priests or the community, as reflected in the oral testimonies accompanying the various alterations on monuments.