

SUMMARY

«A courageous first in Romanian scholarly literature, the book IMAGES, LEGENDS, SYMBOLS has the main merit of bringing under a single cover a vast body of references, demonstrating the importance of both realistic and fantastic animal motifs in old Romanian art.

By putting to work a rich bibliography of both raw data and comparative interpretations concerning medieval bestiaries, the author has offered us an original work that all readers with an interest in the repertory of shapes of medieval art will find truly useful.»

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I. A BOOK ABOUT ANIMALS...

Bestiary: A treatise on beasts, as written during the Middle Ages, containing fables, stories and moral tales about animals.

A book about animals has, among many other reasons for its existence, the justification that, as the French anthropologist Gilbert Durand remarked, the images of animals are the most recurrent and most familiar of all the images man encounters in the surrounding world.¹ During the period of our first contacts with the

world they represent not only a means of direct knowledge of a certain portion of reality, but also a mode of indirect knowledge, when children learn to decipher the images of animals that do not live in their area.

Moreover, we acquire our first abstract notions of ethical and moral value, of what it means to be good or evil, along with our first models of behavior also by means of animal examples: the wolf represents meanness, the fox – cunning, the bear – naiveté, the rabbit – fear, and so on. All these are abstract notions a child cannot grasp by means of the common words used in daily speech.

For many thousands of years, animals have been a vital factor, an indispensable substance for man's existence, used not only for food and as auxiliary means of quotidian living, but also for transportation, for farm work, for hunting or in combat. In function of their behavior and their rapport with man, animals were conferred benefic or malefic powers corresponding to their degree of "beastliness." The symbolic assimilation of animals in totems, magic and religion was the very next step, since animal worship is one of the main components of man's religious conscience. This is shown to be so by the cave paintings and by the drawings identified on bones or rocks, which represent preponderantly animals, for example the 31,000-years-old representation of a horse (called "The Vogelbert Horse"), regarded as the oldest plastic representation by man that has been preserved.

A book such as this may help us uncover the image of the world that man had during a certain stage of social and spiritual development; also, by deciphering the symbolic significance of certain zoomorphic images, we can pinpoint the type of civilization to which a given society, collectivity or group belonged.

The first writings about animals appear to have their origin in old texts from India and Iran, from whence they spread to Egypt where, in Alexandria, in the 2nd century A.D. they were compiled in a book entitled *The Physiolog*, containing a description of various animals based on their habits and behavior. During the 4th and 5th centuries *The Physiolog* spread all over Europe, mainly via two channels: through Byzantium – in the Christian Orthodox East, and through the Latin world – in the medieval West, where such texts were known as *Bestiaries*. The written bestiaries in turn served as basis for the illustrated and figurative ones (sculpted, painted, sketched, embroidered bestiaries, and so on). Among the many works of this kind, let us mention *The Love Bestiaries* (by Richard

de Fournival), *The Divine Bestiary* (by Guillaume Le Clerc), *De natura rerum* (by Thomas de Cantimpré), *Buch der Natur* (by Conrad de Magdenburg), *Hortus Sanitatis* (by Meydenbach) etc., all of which had essentially moral and ethical purposes.

The Byzantine connection is of a special interest for old Romanian art, because it constituted the main channel by which a certain popular literature reached Romanian culture. As a result, the constant interference of lay and religious elements became a trademark of this cultural region, a characteristic also noted by the late eminent scholar Mircea Eliade, who dubbed this specific Romanian trait "popular Christianity."²

The Physiolog entered the Romanian cultural space through a Serb version,³ derived in turn from a Greek work attributed to Saint Epiphanius, which explains the many Greek animal names in the Romanian version.⁴ The oldest translation of *The Physiolog* (so far identified in Romania) is a manuscript from 1639. It is the work of Costea Dascălu (the Cantor) of Braşov and can be found in the Romanian Academy Library under No. 1436. There are also later versions, especially beginning with the 18th century, when diverse variants of *The Physiolog* became widespread across the Romanian territories.⁵ Some versions can also be found in the Romanian Academy Library. They contain not only (sometimes fantastic) descriptions of animals, but also references to animal fables, to hagiographic legends, and to popular stories, with the end result being a literature that swings constantly back and forth between sacred and profane, lay and religious contents. Through their moralizing character, eulogizing both lay and religious virtues while condemning vice and sin, these widely circulated manuscripts had an important role in and a significant influence upon old Romanian culture.

The Physiolog was also the source of certain images included in a well-known popular romance which had very wide currency in the Romanian cultural perimeter, namely *Alixandria*, describing Alexander the Great's heroic deeds in a narrative containing many fantastic interpretations, as well as in another romance belonging to popular literature, *Varlaam and Ioasaf*. Both of these contain, within a rich texture of stories and naïve or fantastic descriptions, many animal images designed to offer examples of morally correct behavior which would lead to a superior ethics and a comportment in accordance with the commandments of religion.

II. FROM MAGIC SIGNIFICANCE TO ALLEGORY

The impressive thematic inventory of zoomorphic motifs which appear in art works found on the Romanian territory is not covered exhaustively in this work. The intended aim is, within reasonable limits, to attempt to identify the historic roots, causes, conditions, as well as the significance of their manifestation in the space of old Romanian culture.

During the *Neolithic* (ca. 5500–2500 B.C.), the semi-nomadic local population became to a certain extent sedentary, a change that would naturally affect its way of life. Primitive agriculture, hunting, and fishing were practiced. Natural phenomena (rain, sunlight, warmth) influencing “vegetal production” revealed to man the periodic rhythm of vegetation, the “death” and “resurrection” of nature. Magic rituals grew in importance and became a *sine qua non* condition of human existence. In a cave situated on the valley of the Someș River in Romania (in Transylvania), mural art works have been discovered, representing a horse, a feline, a bird, and a human figure; estimated to be 10,000 years old, they are regarded as the oldest expressions of a Paleolithic material culture in the South East of Europe. Obviously, they were related to hunting rituals.⁶

Toward the end of the Neolithic, we also find plastic representations of animals made of clay – figurines representing as a rule animals, with horns, i.e. rams, goats, oxen, bulls, etc., but also to a lesser extent birds, pigs, deer, and so forth. In view of what we know of the well-organized cultural activities that took place during the Neolithic, we may infer that their presence was to a great degree related to ritual needs.

During the *Bronze Age* (ca. 2000–1000 B.C.), contacts with new areas of culture occurred as a consequence of the migration of semi-nomadic population from the Eastern steppes across the territory of Romania. These population brought along a repertoire of fantastic beasts and monsters which were added to the already extant local animal motifs. A mutation also occurred in magic and religious practice, which gradually abandoned the cult of fecundity and replaced it with the Uranian cult of the sun. This is illustrated by the apparition of solar symbols and of the numerous images of birds, assimilated to the sky and the sun in religious rituals.

By the end of the first *Iron Age* (after 1000 B.C.), the Romanian territory is inhabited by the Thraco-Getic population, the ancestors of the Romanian people. Known and mentioned by the ancient Greeks since the 6th century B.C., possessing a well-developed culture, the Getic Thracians enriched the ornamental zoomorphic repertoire with a series of new images, such as animal processions, monsters (harpies, griffins, dragons), horses, birds, reptiles, etc. Some had their source in the Mediterranean basin or in the Oriental perimeter, as a consequence of the contacts with migratory populations from those regions.⁷

An especially prosperous culture and civilization was that of the *Dacians*. Occupying an extended territory north of the Danube River, this population had powerful military confrontations with the Roman Empire between the years 101–102 A.D. and 105–106 A.D., after which the territory of Dacia was partially colonized by the Romans. Naturally, the Roman presence in Dacia also meant the import of new elements of culture and civilization, and implicitly of new ornamental motifs, characteristic to the South European region, including many animal representations or zoomorphic motifs. The images of horses, serpents, deer, boars, dogs, bulls, dolphins, and so on, were recurrent during this period, either as ornamental sketches on different objects or as figurines.

The period of *transition from slavery to feudalism* had as its emblematic motifs (under the influence of the Germanic peoples) those representing birds or prey (eagles, hawks), especially in metal forging, as well as some fantastic animals (griffin, for example) introduced by the population of Avar origin.

In the 9th and 10th centuries, the consolidation of Christianity north of the Danube brought with it an entire range of Christian symbols, as well as ornamental motifs from the repertoire of Byzantine art. Naturally, their purpose was to illustrate the truths of the Bible, the conflict between Good and Evil, the principles of Christian morals, the model of an existence shaped by the commandments of the Gospels. It was during this period that Romanian art acquired – within certain coordinates of ideology and typology – a permanent and widespread repertoire of zoomorphic motifs. Their source was the ambiance of Byzantine art properly speaking as well as the world of the Western Middle Ages of the Orient. The significance of zoomorphic ornaments took on ever more emphatic shades of moral or ethical meaning in the course of time, up to the 19th century.

The progress of zoomorphic images through different levels of meaning – from the magic significance to the allegoric significance of moral values and even to the significance of play or amusement, which implies the involvement of the lay element – has had its necessary laws in the space of Romanian culture. These laws can be discerned by first examining the type of world vision and the spiritual dimension of the Romanian people, as well as the moral and religious hierarchies established during its history.

III. GOALS, FUNCTIONS, TYPOLOGIES

The mutation which occurred from ancient "paganism" to medieval Christianity meant the transfer from the image of "finite" gods, localized in space and humanized in behavior, perceptions and instincts, to the image of a unique, infinite divinity, situated beyond time and space, of unlimited power, chaste and inaccessible. In addition, Christianity introduced the notion of sin, which as such was unknown in the ancient world. The notion of "sin" would become the scaffolding of the entire Christian moral doctrine, stated through a group of "commandments" and illustrated by whole series of symbols, allegoric images, metaphors, etc. A great portion of these came from the animal reign. The man of the Middle Ages extrapolated his own ethical and moral coordinates of life projecting them onto the zoomorphic world; the representation of animals were nothing but the visible components of those invisible forces, of cosmic origin, that abide in nature, in things and in creatures. The moral confrontation between the forces of Good and Evil enriched the repertory of animal images in Romanian Middle Ages with a vast range of fabulous and fantastic elements, of hybrids, demons, and monsters, signifying the part of the unknown in the world, all that man did not know and was afraid of. This zoomorphic universe would be divided into "good animals" and "evil animals" in accordance with human ethical and moral precepts. We must mention the fact that the respective images, regardless of where they appeared, were not imposed upon the artist by a given canon, nor were they standardized by a norm established by the

Church. They represent the fruit of the artist's own fantasy, and for this reason, they are all the worthier of a special interest.

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By classifying zoomorphic images on the basis of the GOAL or the ROLE of their presence in various places, situation, or on certain objects, we can distinguish, in essence, the following functions.

- a. *the magic function or goal*, which obviously characterizes the primitive periods when magic was practiced in order to obtain certain "advantages" or a concrete aid, on the basis of a so-called causal explanation (for example, in cynegetic magic).
- b. *the heraldic function*, used in order to individualize human communities by means of zoomorphic images that concentrated the defining elements of those communities. For example, the (hypothetical) emblem of Dacia (the ancient territory of today's Romania) consisted of two affronted lions with wide open mouths, as appearing in a few sculptures unearthed by archaeologists and as described by several old Romanian chroniclers. The most recurrent heraldic images are the aurochs head, the raven, the eagle, and the unicorn.
- c. *the symbolic function*, where the animal image serves as a specific sign indicating an idea, a notion, a divinity, a hierarchy. Beside the cross (old Accadian sign for the grape, the fruit of Resurrection), we encounter frequently in old Romanian art the lamb, the eagle, the horse, the dragon, and so on.
- d. *the allegoric function or goal*, illustrating by means of animal parables various ideas, concepts, principles, or moral, ethical, and religious norms. For example, the presence of certain monstrous animals on the bases of old candlesticks signifies the struggle between Light and Darkness, with the victory of the forces of Good over the forces of Evil.
- e. *the ornamental goal*, which is the expression of the purely decorative value of the image, left up to the artist's fantasy and imagination (as can be seen, for instance, in the borders of book illustrations, in ornamental carvings, in some embroideries, etc.).

A second category of criteria that can serve as a basis of classification of these highly diverse images are the MORPHOLOGIC CRITERIA.

One rich group of images could consist of the *ichthyomorphic* ones (fish, mollusks, whales, dolphins, water snakes, etc.), encountered less often in old Romanian art (for instance, in scenes such as "The Genesis of Animals" or "The Judgment Day"). By far richer and more diverse are the *avimorphic* images (exotic birds, domestic fowl, assorted wild birds, etc.), which can be found on a wide array of objects (paintings, carvings, forged metal works, embroideries, ceramics, book illustration). This diversity can be explained by the wide currency in the Romanian cultural space of fables and popular books containing a popular ornithology that spread many legends and stories about birds.⁸

The image of *domestic animals* (dogs, pigs, horses, rams, billy goats, etc.) are equally recurrent, for obvious reasons, as are, to the same extent, the image of *wild animals* (wolves, bears, boars, deer, etc.). The meaning of all these are to be found in the same compilations of popular books or in Biblical texts or morals. In addition to these and just as interesting, both for the manner of their rendition and the symbolic meanings they possess, are the images of *mythological and fantastic animals* (harpies, gorgons, griffins, unicorns, centaurs, melusines, various other hybrid images) where the imagination seems limitless.

There are fewer *ophidian* images (various reptiles – snakes, dragons, saurian creatures), and their presence in old Romanian art is connected mostly with the circulation of hagiographic legends and folk tales. The victory over these teratomorphic creatures denotes the consecration of the hero, whose virtues are force, courage and faith.

Another category includes the images of *anthropomorphous hybrids*, mixing human components and segments that belong to other animal species (the devil is one such example). There are also hybrid formulas which have resulted from the syncretism of vegetal elements with elements of the animal kingdom, a kind of "plant-animal".

In conclusion, in old Romanian art, images that belong to the norms of Orthodox Christian mystics coexist side by side with representations that do not observe either norms or patterns – such as the zoomorphic ones – expressing the moral ideals of the common man.

IV. MORPHOLOGIC CATEGORIES

The total ensemble of visual signs created by the medieval artist in the Romanian principalities was designed as a lesson with a preponderantly moralizing character. Man must not forget that in his existence both virtues and vices are always implied, determining the rung occupied by each individual on the ladder of moral value. An example taken from old Romanian art would be the theme known in local iconography as "The Toll-Gates to Heaven" or "The Ladder of St. John of Sinai" which depicts an immense stairway that climbs to the gates of heaven, while those on it must certify their own deeds ("the toll") in order to step onto the next "moral rung." The theme can be found in mural painting in Moldavia. In other examples, elements that have their source in local historic or social realities appear in the midst of the field of images illustrating Biblical themes. A specific feature of Romanian medieval art is that, although it is shaped by the principles of Christian morality, it rejects all exaggerated, excessive and aggressive formulas, as the populace of this region never embraced either an intolerant mysticism or an extreme bigotry. The Romanian – a people that was born Christian – have always believed in God, but also, to the same extent, in their human qualities.

The following is an attempt to decipher the meanings acquired by some morphologic categories in the autochthonous medieval bestiary of old Romanian art.

The ICHTHYOMORPHIC representations have varied interpretations, as do for that matter other categories of zoomorphic images. In general, they are not regarded as benefic because water generates monsters (Leviathan, Hydra, dragons, etc.). An image that belongs to the entire Christian world is that of *the fish*; the origin of this symbol goes back to the paleo-Christian world, being related to the name of Jesus Christ. Such representations became known on the territory of Romanian since the 4th and 5th centuries A.D. In the same category, an important image is that of *the whale*, featured mostly in renditions of the Biblical episode of Jonas, widely recurrent in the 2nd–4th centuries. The theme of "the ritual ingestion" is very old and may be found almost all over the world. In Romanian art, the episode appeared in the painting of some churches especially in the 15th–16th centuries. Among the scenes of "The Jud-

gment Day", one depicts a huge fish that has swallowed a sinner. In addition, popular literature mentions "the fish of the sea" which is the size of an island and cannot stand devils; it generates the waves.

Another character of folk mythology is a *water nymph* who manifests herself as a lovely woman, wearing traditional clothing and luring men with her song (the local equivalent of the sirens of Greek myth). *The dolphin* – a motif that came from the Mediterranean basin – appears mostly in ornamental carvings (in wood or stone) on various ritual objects in the church, especially after the 17th century.

The AVIMORPHIC images are widely present, as popular literary sources considered them to be benefic. The bird is an element of ascension, and the wing is interpreted as a means to gain access to the pure spiritual world. *The rooster* is regarded as a solar element, since it calls up the dawn, seals the victory over death, and signifies The Resurrection (in Romania, there is a custom to sacrifice a rooster above the open grave, in sign of the resurrection). Its image is very wide spread. It appears on traditional pottery up to present, on houses and church spires, on various wooden objects. Equally widespread, the image of *the dove* appears not only as a symbol of the Holy Ghost, but also to represent the soul that has been saved from demons. *The pelican* is a less frequent presence in the Romanian medieval bestiary. The pelican that tears his chest open (as symbol of Christ's sacrifice) is more often represented in the Transylvanian region, in the painting and sculpture of some churches belonging to the Western Christian tradition. *The peacock* signifies immortality, since it was believed that it never rotted. In Byzantium, it can often be seen next to the Tree of Life or drinking from the Communion Chalice; both are images that signifies immortality. In folk mythology, the peacock also has moral connotations (people ought to know their flaws in order to avoid losing their souls), which can also be found in the imagery of Romanian medieval art.

Another bird that is frequently encountered in old Romanian art is *the turtledove* which – both in *The Physiolog* and in folk and court literature – represents fidelity (whether in marriage or to Jesus). Another recurrent image is that of *the eagle*, one of the oldest avimorphic motifs in imagery of art. In Romania, it is identified as a presence in the plastic arts since the time of the ancestral Thraco-Getic population, and has ever since continued to be present in both religious art (embroideries, painting, wood carvings) and lay art (as a heraldic sign). *The Physiolog* presents it as an

example of faith regained, because, the story goes, when it grows old, the eagle soars to the sun, which burns its wings, and afterwards dips three times in the "fountain of life", which gives it back its sight, thereby receiving "the light of Truth." In heraldry, the eagle appears in the coat of arms of the Cantacuzenes, an old Byzantine family. The image of *the raven* is also used mainly in heraldry, where it appears in the arms of the Wallachian princes. However, it does appear in religious art, too, especially in the illustration of the story of Elijah, who, according to the Bible, was nourished by a raven while he stayed in the desert where he had withdrawn. Therefore, the raven is regarded as a symbol of charity.

The owl appears in painting especially in the 18th century and thereafter. It is present in both lay and religious art, its presence in the latter having ambiguous connotations: either it represents "blindness" to the light of Truth, or it represent Christ, seeking light in "the darkness of sin". Other avimorphic images feature *the woodpecker*, *the nightingale* or *the ostrich* each having a moral significance also taken from *The Physiolog*. The same source accounts for the presence of *the stork*, which as a rule appears with a snake in its beak, as a sign of victory over the terrigenous elements. A distinct motif is that of *doubled-bodied* birds (or other animals) or that of *affronted birds* (of Oriental origin). The former is present mostly in carvings (in wood or stone), while the latter especially in embroideries, weavings, or book illustrations.

The presence of DOMESTIC ANIMALS is very frequent. *The horse* possesses many meanings. It is a sign of death (when it is white in color, as is the horse ridden by the Archangel Michael, the angel of death); a sign of fire (the red horse, pulling the cart driven by Saint Elijah, the patron of rain and thunder in Romanian mythology); or a solar sign, as engraved on various objects dating from the Getic Thracians. The horse is seen as a friend of man (helping the hero gain victory) and as an descending element (the winged horse), as well as an entity offering protection against malefic elements (the horse head appears frequently in traditional folk art: sculpted in the wood of house beams, of fountain posts, of various household objects). *The bull* is an ancient chthonic symbol, also related, through its horns, to the symbolism of the moon.

Man's best friend, *the dog* was also considered to offer protection against malefic elements. A rich body of traditional folk tales surrounds the dog, among which the legend of woman's origin. Just as God was getting ready to make Eve out of Adam's rib,

says the story, a dog sneaked up and stole the rib. Taken by surprise, God just barely got a hold of the dog's tail, after which, somewhat jaded, he decided to make the woman out of dog's tail. The woman has had devil hair inside of her ever since, because that dog was no other than a devil, changed into a four-legged animal.

Romanian art also includes many *ovine* images (rams, sheep, goats, lambs, etc.). The keys to their meaning, as before, can be found both in the precepts of Christian morals and in traditional folk literature.

Man confronted and constantly fought WILD ANIMALS since the beginning of his existence. An important place in Romanian iconography belongs to *the wolf*, seen during the Middle Ages as a quintessence of the malefic spirit. In Romanian mythology, the wolf is associated with the Dacians, those ancient forebears of the Romanian people, about whom Strabo himself wrote that they called themselves "daoï" from "daos," the Phrygian word for wolf. Later on, as Mircea Eliade also believes,⁹ the name of "daoï" became "daci" ("wolves"), that is, Dacians, a people whose emblem was a pennon in the shape of a wolf head, as represented on Trajan's Column in Rome. According to folk legend, every night the wolf howls at the sky, toward God, asking to be given flesh to eat, since that is his destiny. In turn, God hears the cry of the wolves and sends them their prey. Also according to a folk legend, *the bear* had once been a poor man, whom the devil tricked into wearing his fur coat inside out, in order to frighten God. God got upset and turned him into a bear. Representations of these wild animals appear more frequently in painting and especially since the 18th century, when the painting of church porches began to feature, more and more often, lay scenes of daily life (illustrating fables or folk narrative, hunting scenes, etc.).

The deer and the doe are old images that first appeared in the North of Europe, before the advent of Christianity, being connected with the cynegetic magic. In some of the oldest Christian forms, the deer appear as drinking from a vessel (or a well) out of which spring the four river of Paradise. In Christianity, the deer is likened both to the tree of life (because of the annual renewal of its antlers) and to Christ (as killer of Satan's serpents). In old Romanian art, it appears in ceramics, stone carvings (on baptismal fonts), silver works, wood carvings, etc. There can also be encountered scenes that depict the contest between a cervine and a predator (wolf,

lion), symbolizing the conflict between destructive beastliness and the act of universal renewal.

The lion has a very wide area of representation in the art of the world, including Christian art, where it possesses multiple (and often contradictory) meanings. In essence, Christianity attributes it four virtues: sovereignty, revitalizing power, ingenuity, and vigilance. The lion also appears as a funerary ensign, or as an element in heraldic emblems. Romanian medieval art places the lion in various position as guardian of the gate (carved in wood on altar screens or royal thrones, carved in stone at the entrance of churches) or a symbol of Saint Mark (the winged lion, appearing in embroideries, on the precious metal cover of Gospels, in church painting). A less common image is that of Samson's fight with the lion, taken from the Old Testament; it can be found in Northern Transylvania, in the region of Maramureș, where it appears in the folk painting of some wooden village churches.

The contest between various wild animals, a theme originating in the Orient, along with cynegetic episodes, can be found in old Romanian art on a variety of different objects from the 16th–18th centuries.

MYTHOLOGICAL OR FANTASTIC REPRESENTATIONS can be found in abundance in old Romanian art, their source being the old magic rituals. Representing the elements that oppose the natural order of things, they include a veritable fauna of monsters, hybrids, and fantastic zoomorphic anatomies, the main source of which is the Oriental world. Among their ranks we can count *Echydna* (the mother of all the monsters, i.e. the Chimera, the Sphinx, the Gorgons, Cerberus, the Nemean lion), who is half serpent and half web-footed bird and woman; *Chimera*, half winged lion, half serpent, with the head of a bird of prey: the *Sphinxes* (regarded as soul-animals), who have the body of a lion and the head and breasts of a woman, and are dangerous predators and demons; the *Gorgons* (Medusa, Euryale and Stheno, according to Greek myth), who are monsters with female heads and serpents instead of hair; and the *Harpies*, also of Oriental origin, with the head and torso of a woman, the body of a bird, and the claws of a lion, as well as several pairs of breasts on their bodies. The Romanian medieval bestiary also features some fantastic representations such as the *Siren* and the *Melusine*, the latter borrowed from the medieval art of Western Europe. *The manticore* ("man eater") is a four-legged monster with the torso and head of a man (wearing a

crown), while its hind side is that of a winged lion. *The griffin* also belongs to the repertory of fantastic images, as it made by the juxtaposition of diverse components taken from birds of prey and wild animals (lion-griffins, eagle-griffins, goat-griffins, etc.)

Within the territory of Romania, such images as these can be found in ornamental carvings (in wood or stone), in painting (especially of the scene of the Judgment Day), in the ceramic work adorning the outside of the religious monuments in Northern Moldavia (where it represents the malefic forces that try to undermine the sacred religious sanctuary), in book illustrations.¹⁰

A somewhat unusual presence is that of the Unicorn, widely known in Western Europe during the Middle Ages. In Romanian art, its source can be traced to old literature and popular romances (i.e. *Varlaam and Ioasaf*, which had a large circulation in the Romanian medieval space). In this case, the unicorn represents the force of death, because it constantly chases man, seeking to hurl him into the abyss of death. However, there are few cases where it appears in the arms of princes or noblemen, such as the coat of arms of the ruling house of Neagoe Basarab (1512–1521), or the heraldic emblem of the well-known scholar and man of letters Nicolae Olahus (that is, the Romanian; 1493–1568), a friend of Erasmus of Rotterdam. (Mention is made in the diploma conferring him his title that the sign attributed to him as family emblem “signifies the strength for which the Romanian blood is known.”)

A creation of the autochthonous bestiary is *the dog of the earth*, said to be a nocturnal animal that lives in graveyards, bothering the dead who must give him a penny to be left alone.

Another reign of fantastic imagery includes the SAUROMORPHIC REPRESENTATIONS – dragons, serpents, titans etc., which became popular in great part due to the knightly romances, the folk tales, and the popular romances (*Alixăndria*) of the Middle Ages. They represent the quintessence of Evil, the Antichrist, the friends of the devil, whose defeat (by the positive hero, by the knight, by Saint George or the Archangel Michael, etc.) signifies the victory of Good and of faith. Such images have wide currency in old Romanian art, where they appear in monumental painting, icons, ornamental wood and stone carvings, forged metal works, embroideries, and ceramics. *The serpent* involves complex and frequently antagonistic meanings. It can represent the World in its cosmic dimension (as the animal progenitor of the Zodiac); it is a symbol of fecundity (by bringing couples together); it appears as an

emblem of eternity (since it possesses the secret of life and death). In association with the tree of life, the serpent signifies the cyclical nature of the world. In Romanian folklore, it is a benefic image, regarded as a good genie (each house, according to tradition, has its own serpent protector). *The devil* is a “mixtum compositum” composed of zoomorphic, anthropomorphous and fantastic elements. In iconography, he appears either as a tempter (represented as an attractive woman) or as an oppressor (with the hideous aspect seen especially in the scenes of The Judgment Day). In Romanian folk tales, the devil is not present as a particularly frightful entity but, rather, as the butt of ironies, farces, and pranks. He is said to be afraid of sweet basil and garlic, as well as of daylight. He goes to a sort of school for devils called “solomonărie” (from the wise King Solomon) where he learns all the tricks of the trade, but he is afraid of old women who can put charms and spells on him, as well as of women in general, who have always duped him. The manner in which this character was interpreted in the local iconography once again attests the optimistic, energetic worldview of the Romanian people, reinforcing the notion of that popular Christianity proclaimed by Mircea Eliade.

V. THEMES AND REPRESENTATIONS

During over half millenium of creation in the plastic arts, the Romanian artistic milieu has produced and utilized a vast repertory of animal shapes and images. Today, most of them can be seen in the patrimony of churches and religious institutions, which, unlike most private residences, were able to better withstand the deterioration of time and the aggressions of history. The MURAL PAINTING in old Romanian art is of two kinds: interior painting, and, for the 15th–16th centuries in Moldavia and the 18th century in some parts of Wallachia, exterior painting. The painting of church interiors was more strictly dictated by canons and therefore included fewer images containing zoomorphic representations. In contrast, exterior painting, freer with respect to the canons, included a great variety of species (birds, wild animals, exotic animals, etc.).

The themes most commonly populated by such representations are: The Genesis, The Paradise, Adam and Eve Banished from Paradise, The Judgment Day, The Zodiac, Psalm 148, various metaphors of Time, The Supper at Mamvri ("Abraham's Hospitality"), The Return of the Prodigal Son, The Jews Driven Out of Egypt. In addition, animal images are associated with some heroes or saints who fight various savage beasts (Saint George, Archangel Michael, Margaret of Antioch, Samson, etc.). Many scenes are set in a local ambiance (peasant dwellings, traditional folk clothes, groups of singers, carts, peasant utensils, etc.) thus placing the religious action in a lay setting. In addition, the scenes inspired by fables, folk tales, or the already mentioned popular romances (*Alixandria*, *Varlaam and Ioasaf*) are especially charming, as they give fullest expression to that specific character of old Romanian art which was the result of an ongoing synthesis between the religious norms and the liberty of expression of the lay spirit.

ICON PAINTING provides fewer occasions for zoomorphic images, as its domain is confined to the representation of themes connected with the lives and deeds of some saints. BOOK ILLUSTRATION is also relatively poor in zoomorphic images (until the 16th century, the ornamentation of manuscripts was mainly geometric). However, the productions of the calligraphy and miniature schools which functioned within the large monastic centers (especially after the 1600s) must be ranked apart. The introduction and spreading of the printing press allowed the wide use of woodcuts, which were used to amply illustrate diverse scenes in both religious and popular books. A masterpiece of the genre is the book illustration of *Alixandria*, printed in Iași in 1790, and illustrated by Năstase Negrule with an overflowing imagination.

The Orthodox Christian church never accepted the presence of sculptures within its liturgical space, in observance of the Biblical commandment against graven images. Hence the SCULPTURE within the Romanian Orthodox space refers mostly to the decoration of monuments: church window and door frames, capitals, consoles, coats of arms, emblems, tombstones, etc. In contrast with the situation in Western Europe during the Middle Ages, free-standing sculpture is practically absent from old Romanian art (except in a few non-Orthodox churches from Transylvania). Let us mention here a Romanian first in this genre, unfortunately too little known within the European artistic space. It is the famous statuary group *Saint George* inside the Hradciani Palace of Prague, made in 1373

by two brothers from Cluj – Martin and Gheorghe – who had been called up by Carol IV to Prague in order to work together with the famous members of the Parler family. It is the first work in the history of this artistic genre which was conceived autonomously, that is free standing from the background of the monument (i. e., contrary to the common practice in the Middle Ages). For the purposes of comparison, let us recall that Donatello worked on *Gattamelata* during 1446–1463, and that Verrocchio had not yet created *Colleoni*, two works regarded as being among the first "free-standing" or "round" sculptures. The *Saint George of Prague* is therefore a Romanian first in the domain of European sculpture.

The sculpted reliefs especially on the surfaces of churches have a distinct repertory of various zoomorphic images that have the function to turn away the forces of evil, offering guard and protection to the sanctity of the edifice. Their presence is signaled since the 13th century and continues up to the present, in the newer edifices. The animals carved on tombstones are related to the symbolism of the Resurrection (birds next to cypresses, "the water of life", and others). Complementing various pieces of religious or lay furniture (seats, doors, candlesticks, chairs, trunks, cupboards, etc.), wood carvings offer a richer and more diverse range of zoomorphic images. In Orthodox religious art, the most impressive piece is the altar screen or iconostasis ("icon bearer") which separates the altar from the rest of the church. It supports the most important icons in the Orthodox cult and is richly ornamented with wood carvings where the vegetal, floral, geometric and zoomorphic motifs are all equally represented. The animal images symbolically depict the confrontation between Good and Evil. The oldest altar screens (veritable syntheses of religious sculpture in wood) date from the second half of the 16th century, but genuine masterpieces of the genre were created in the 17th and the 18th centuries. Wolves, dragons, diverse birds, deer, dolphins, lions attacking their prey, pelicans, eagles, etc., that is, a large portion of the entire zoomorphic repertory of the Romanian orthodox bestiary appear on these monumental pieces carved in wood.

EMBROIDERIES and WEAVINGS have a much more restrained zoomorphic decoration, confined to the presence of a few secondary animal images placed within an ensemble of floral, vegetal or geometric images. The source of their ornamentation is almost exclusively the similar art works of Byzantium. Some ritual vestments or liturgical pieces do feature dragons, twisted serpents the four symbolic images of the Evangelists (the lion, the eagle, the

bull head, and the angel), and others. SILVERSMITH WORKS also feature a vast repertory of zoomorphic images adorning ritual chalices, cups, gospel covers, candlesticks, vessels, and so on. A wide range of typologies can be observed here, with the mention that, when objects are defined for lay use, their role is purely ornamental, as is also the case with objects in the style of the Renaissance.

The powerful influence of Byzantium was also felt in the domain of CERAMICS. In the early period of civilization within the Romanian territory, different types of "zoomorphic vessels" (in the shape of animals) were currently used, probably for magic rituals. In the Middle Ages, the ornaments that adorn various objects come in a very wide variety of animal shapes. In Moldavia during the 15th–18th centuries, the facades of some churches were adorned with multicolored ceramic discs decorated with fantastic animals, symbols of the malefic spirits prowling around the sacred edifice. Harpies, Melusines, Griffins, Sirens, and others like them can be observed on these objects, as well as on terra cotta tiles of stoves in the homes of the local nobility. The malefic genies, constantly lay in ambush for humans, who must find the method to turn them away.

In conclusion, we can state that old Romanian art selectively adopted a bestiary the main source of which was Byzantium (with its own oriental loans); however, its images were selected and adapted to the ethical, moral, and religious principles of the Romanian people. In contrast with the Occident, where Biblical culture had become imperative during the Middle Ages, this formula never existed within the Romanian Orthodox space. The inhabitants of this part of the world saw the divinities as partners in life and treated them accordingly. The presence of a rich folk tradition gave birth to that "religious folklore" mentioned by Mircea Eliade, present in the entire imagery of the Romanian Middle Ages, including the local bestiary. For this very reason we have provided many examples taken from such texts, in order to allow a faithful perception of this autochthonous characteristic of Romanian art in centuries past. The images or themes never led to a negation of the value of the individual. Many of them contain images of contemporary social and political life, as the Church artfully combined its Christian messages with the peculiar ways of thinking and feeling of the common man, whose soul never forgot his own identity and, in turn, found it again within the Church.

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