Abstract. *The double-sided icon of the Virgin Hodegetria and St. George preserved at the Neamț Monastery is a Byzantine work of the 14ᵗʰ century. The present note offers a new reading of two Greek inscriptions on this icon, proposes an explanation for an unusual detail in the image of St. George, and examines the written sources about the panel's history.*

THE MIRACULOUS ICON OF NEAMȚ MONASTERY

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A few years ago Archimandrite Luca Diaconu published excellent photographs of one of the oldest icons preserved in Romania, which he convincingly dates to the fourteenth century[1]. The panel's front side may have once contained a dedicatory inscription above the proper right shoulder of the Mother of God[2]. Its text has been reproduced in somewhat garbled form on the silver cover that the image received in 1844: Δέ(ησις) τοῦ δούλου τοῦ Θ(εο)ῦ | Πέτρου [...], i.e. 'Prayer of the servant of God Peter ...' (I cannot make sense of the remaining characters)[3]. Tempting as it is to identify this donor with the Moldavian prince Petru I Mușat (fl. 1367-1368), there is no evidence for that.

A second Greek inscription accompanies the enthroned St George painted on the back side: + υπερκαθεθ(εῖς)· ἐν σχολ(ῆ) μάρτ(υς) | πόνω τὸν ἐνθάδ(ε) ναῶν· | ὡς ἔμνους βλέπ(εις)· ίνα κ(αὶ) τοὺς | βλάπντοντας συστέλης φόβω | δοκ(εῖς) ἀπηλην· εὐ|πρεπες γαρ | τὸ ξίφο|ς[4]. With a few corrections, this resolves itself into four twelve-syllable verses: Ὑπερκαθεθεὶς ἐν σχολῇ, μάρτυς, πόνων / τὸν ἐνθάδε λαὸν ὡς ἀμνοὺς βλέπεις. / Ἵνα καὶ τοὺς βλάπντοντας συστέλλῃς φόβῳ, / δοκεῖς ἀπειλεῖν· εὐπρεπὲς γὰρ τὸ ξίφος, i.e. 'Seated in respite from [your] labours, martyr, you watch [over] the people here like lambs. And to keep down with fear those who [mean] harm, you seem to threaten – for [your] sword is stately[5].'

This epigram's unknown author was probably inspired by a poem that Manuel Philes (d. c.1345) wrote 'For [an Image of] the Great [Martyr] George Seated in Front of the City with [His] Sword Half-Drawn':

After the end of [your] martyr's struggle, in which you overpowered the enemy of [human] souls, you are still alert, [even] in respite – for you, blessed one, were trained as a sleepless guard, and you sit here with a glad countenance, and you unsheathe part of [your] sharpened sword (σπάθη), showing courage against [all] dangerous enemies from afar[6].'

Soldier saints are seldom portrayed seated. The closest parallel for the Neamț St. George is a figure on the south-east pillar of the Princes' Church (*Biserica Domnească*) in Curtea de Argeș: that warrior, whose name in the accompanying inscription is now illegible, also holds a leaning spear in his right hand, supports a standing sword with his left, and tramples upon a serpent[7].

Over the top part of the sword on the Neamț icon is painted a sponge-like whitish object[8]. This might be the omelette (σφουγγάτον, свунгата) involved in one of St George's posthumous miracles (BHG 691g):

There is in the *theme* [province] of Paphlagonia a most glorious church of the Great Martyr Saint George which the locals call Phatrynós. At first, being very small, it threatened to collapse, and there was no way of repairing or, better said, rebuilding it. Then the following thing happened: Some children had gathered there, playing games. One of them, having lost a number of times, was being teased by the others. Turning [his] eyes to the Church of Saint George, [the child] said: 'Saint George, if it be your will, make me win, and I shall bring to your church a nice omelette.' And starting to play [again], he immediately won – not once or twice, but many times. Then the child went to his mother and asked [her] to give to the saint the gift that [he] had pledged. Being fond of her son, as well as of the martyr, the woman quickly did what was requested and gave the child [the omelette]. The child took it, put it inside the church in front of the altar, and left. Shortly thereafter, four merchants passed by and went into the church to pray. On finding the omelette, [which was] giving off a pleasant smell, they said to each other: 'Since the saint has no need [of this], let us eat it ourselves and give him incense instead.' Which they did – whereupon they were [miraculously] stopped from going out and could not leave. Each paid one *miliaresion* [silver coin], but they were stopped just like before. Then they gave *nomismata* [gold coins] and prayed the saint to let them go – but they could not leave the church in this way, either, being invisibly kept in check. [Only] when each laid down one [full] *nomisma* and prayed ardently, could they go out without obstacle. 'You sell your omelettes way too dearly, Saint George!', they said on leaving. 'Forgive us for this; we shan't buy anything else from you.' Countless miracles have occurred in that church, and occur to this day[9].

This story is illustrated in the mid-sixteenth century murals at Voroneț – there, however, the omelettes (the artist understood the word *свунгата* as plural)

are not stuck on the saint's image but neatly placed before it in a basket[10].

The whitish object on the Neamț icon is pierced by a piece of metal embedded in the board. On the silver cover that the panel received in 1845, this damage was deliberately left exposed[11]. Andronic Popovici (1820-1893) identifies it as the broken drill with which some (unspecified) heretics abortively tried to bore through the icon, suspecting that its miraculous movements were caused by quicksilver contained inside[12]. The miraculous movements themselves are first recorded by Joannicius Galiatovsky (d. 1688):

There is in the land of Moldavia a monastery [called] Neamț, where in the Church of the Ascension of Christ is found an image painted on a wooden board: on one side is the Most Holy Mother of God holding Christ in [her] hands, on the other is the Great Martyr St George standing and defeating a serpent with a spear. When priests or bishops carry this image in procession at the time of the Lord's Resurrection, holding it with [their] hands, then the Most Holy Mother of God, being in the hands of the priests or bishops, bows low to the ground, lowering and raising herself – and in no way can the priests or bishops restrain that image with their hands. (Know that by bowing low to God, the Most Holy Mother of God prays and intercedes for the people.)

That same image of the Most Holy Mother of God in the land of Moldavia, in the Neamț Monastery, when they carried it in procession and entered the church with it, the image broke loose and jumped out of [those] people's hands, moved by itself through the air, and stood over the ambo. From there it went through the royal doors to the altar, and having gone round the altar, stood in its place behind the altar – for its [regular] place is there. (We should know that the angels who serve the Most Holy Mother of God carried her image on the wind.) This occurred in the reign of Stephen Gorgitsa, lord of Wallachia [i.e. Moldavia][13].

'Stephen Gorgitsa' (István Görgicze) is Gheorghe Ştefan (r. 1653-1658). The words 'St George standing and defeating a serpent with a spear' show that Galiatovsky had not actually seen the icon, yet he must have had a Moldavian source – perhaps the young Nicholas Milescu (1636-1708)[14].

The panel's way of moving spontaneously resembles to some degree the behaviour of the miraculous icon of the Virgin *Hodegetria* in fourteenth-century Constantinople: 'They place [the icon] on the shoulders of one man who is standing upright, and he stretches out his arms as if [being] crucified, and they bind up his eyes. It is terrible to see how it pushes him this way and that around the monastery enclosure, and how forcefully it turns him about, for he does not understand where the icon is taking him.'[15] The front side of the Neamţ panel is inscribed with the word ἡ Ὁδηγήτρια and probably copies this once-famous Constantinopolitan image[16].

In 1723, Metropolitan George of Moldavia claimed that the Neamţ icon had been received by his predecessor Metropolitan Joseph as a gift from Emperor Andronicus Palaeologus, during the reign of Prince Alexander[17]. Since Joseph is documented in 1391-1406[18] and Alexander the Good ruled from 1400 to 1432, Andronicus can only be the child-emperor Andronicus V[19]. His mother, however, was named not Anna (as George has it[20]) but Irene.

An even less reliable source reports that the icon arrived in Moldavia on 31 March 1491[21].

Notes

[1] Luca Diaconu, *Icoana bizantină a Maicii Domnului de la Mănăstirea Neamţ. Consideraţii istorice, artistice şi teologice*, Iaşi, 2010 (I thank Marina Sabados for drawing my attention to this book and Ivanka Gergova for lending me a copy of it). See also Alexandru Efremov, *Icoane româneşti*, Bucureşti, 2002, p. 73-74, 76, 173-174 (note 6), 199 (cat. 61), with bibl.

[2] Luca Diaconu, *op. cit.*, fig. 3.

[3] *Ibid.*, fig. 1.2, p. 123.

[4] *Ibid.*, fig. 4.3.

[5] Cf. Luca Diaconu, *op. cit.*, p. 308; Constanţa Costea, 'A Palaeologan Icon in Moldavia', in *RRHA-BA*, 26, 1989, p. 4.

[6] *Manuelis Philae carmina* (edidit Emmanuel Miller), I, Paris, 1855, p. 119 (no. I.226).

[7] Ana Dumitrescu, « Une iconographie peu habituelle : les saints militaires siégeant. Le cas de Saint-Nicholas d'Argeş », in *Byzantion*, 59, 1989, p. 51, 60, fig. 3-4. See also Marina Sabados, « Une icône moldave inconnue dans une collection de Grèce », in *RRHA-BA*, 41-42, 2004-2005, p. 91-102; Luca Diaconu, *op. cit.*, p. 315-317.

[8] Luca Diaconu, *op. cit.*, fig. 4.

[9] Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, MS grec 1573, fol. 260v-261r (reproduced on-line at http://gallica.bnf.fr). On the fourteenth-century date of this manuscript: Ernst Gamillscheg, Dieter Harlfinger, *Repertorium der griechischen Kopisten*, II, Wien, 1989, no. 186. A very similar text is printed in Johannes B. Aufhauser, *Miracula S. Georgii*, Leipzig, 1913, p. 103-107 (no. 10).

[10] Ecaterina Cincheza-Buculei, « Le programme iconographique du narthex de l'église du monastere Voroneţ », in *RRHA-BA*, 30, 1993, p. 8 (fig. 5), 11.

[11] Luca Diaconu, *op. cit.*, fig. 2.

[12] Luca Diaconu, *op. cit.*, p. 258.

[13] Іоаникїй Галятовский, *Небо новое з новыми звѣздами сотворенное, тоестъ Преблагословенная Дѣва Марїа Богородица з чудами своими*, Львовъ, 1665, fol. 77r-v (no. 42-43). In the book's third edition, Могилевъ, 1699 (reproduced on-line at http://escriptorium.univer.kharkov.ua), the same text is found on fol. 120v-121r. See also Arkady Joukovsky, « Relations culturelles entre l'Ukraine et la Moldavie au XVIIe siècle », in *Revue des études slaves*, 49, 1973, p. 224-225; Constanţa Costea, *art. cit.*, p. 8-9.

[14] Ştefan S. Gorovei, „Un episod din «recuperarea» Bizanţului: prima «operă» a spătarului Nicolae «Milescu» ", in *AIIAI*, 22, 1985, 2, p. 449-450.

[15] George P. Majeska, *Russian Travelers to Constantinople in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, Washington DC, 1984, p. 36.

[16] Luca Diaconu, *op. cit.*, p. 130, fig. 3.

[17] Luca Diaconu, *op. cit.*, p. 81; Nicolae Cârlan, „O versiune a «Relaţiei Mitropolitului Gheorghe» ", in *Valori bibliofile din patrimoniul cultural naţional. Cercetare şi valorificare*, II, Bucureşti, 1983, p. 176. On the date of this text see also Ştefan S. Gorovei, „Precizări necesare", in *AIIAI*, 22, 1985, 2, p. 805-806.

[18] Erich Trapp et al., *Prosopographisches Lexikon der Palaiologenzeit*, Wien, 1976-1996, no. 9034.

[19] *Ibid.*, no. 21429.

[20] Luca Diaconu, *op. cit.*, p. 82; Nicolae Cârlan, *art. cit.*, p. 176.

[21] Luca Diaconu, *op. cit.*, p. 256-257; Alexandru Elian, „Moldova şi Bizanţul în secolul al XV-lea", in *Cultura moldovenească în timpul lui Ştefan cel Mare* (culegere de studii îngrijită de Mihai Berza), Bucureşti, 1964, p. 141. Andronic Popovici, *Istoria sfintelor mănăstiri Neamţ şi Secu*, I (editor: Ion Gumenâi), Piatra Neamţ, 2015, is not accessible to me.