

**BUKOVINIAN SPIRITUALITY: THE CHURCH OF 'SAINT
GEORGE THE GREAT MARTYR' OF THE 'SAINT JOHN
THE NEW OF SUCEAVA' MONASTERY**

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Abstract: *Literature that focuses on the monasteries and places of worship in Bukovina contributes to a higher understanding of this region's spiritual/religious magnetism. The work under review - "The Church of 'Saint George the Great Martyr' of 'Saint John the New of Suceava' Monastery. History, Faith, Culture and Civilization" by Vasile M. Demciuc, PhD, is an excellent example of such writing. Thanks to the author's efforts readers gain knowledge about the architectural ensemble's historical setting, the founders, inscriptions, iconostasis (Moldavian Baroque style), architecture, altar, or nave, the external painting which was severely damaged during the Habsburg period and largely covered by a thick layer of plaster.*

Keywords: *Bukovina; monasteries; churches; Saint Ioan; Saint George; medieval architectural landmarks; Moldavia.*

Rezumat: *Spiritualitate bucovineană: Biserica „Sfântul Mare Mucenic Gheorghe” a Mănăstirii „Sfântul Ioan cel Nou de la Suceava”. Istorie, credință, cultură și civilizație. O literatură a mănăstirilor și locașurilor de cult din Bucovina (Romania) ne facilitează mai buna înțelegere a magnetismului spiritual/religios al acestei regiuni. În respectiva categorie de literatură se încadrează și lucrarea asupra căreia ne concentrăm atenția: Biserica "Sfântul Mare Mucenic Gheorghe" a Mănăstirii "Sfântul Ioan cel Nou de la Suceava". Istorie, credință, cultură și civilizație, semnată de Arhid. dr. Vasile M. Demciuc. Prin efortul autorului, cititorii vor afla date și informații privind încadrarea ansamblului arhitectural în contextul istoric, despre ctitori, pisanie, iconostas (care aparține stilului*

baroc moldovenesc), arhitectură, altar ori naos. Se adaugă la acestea și un aspect nefericit: pictura exterioară a fost sever deteriorată în perioada habsburgică, în plus fiind și în mare parte acoperită cu strat gros de tencuială.

Romania, in almost its entirety, is an Orthodox territory; however, it must be said that the region of Bukovina is unique in this regard. Bukovina, also known as *Moldova de Sus* (Upper Moldavia), genuinely emerged onto the stage of history in the second half of the 14th century. It is the heart of Moldavia's feudal state, created in 1359, and includes the regions of Chernivtsi and Suceava. From the mid-14th century to the end of the 18th century, the northern part of this region was marked by an intense Romanian life, manifested through institutions and places of worship/culture. An active spiritual life evolved in this area, with a particular emphasis on renowned monasteries, such as Putna, Moldovița, Sucevița, Voroneț, Arbore, Solca, Dragomirna, etc. The Byzantine influences and those brought from Western Europe are prevalent in the impressive medieval architectural monuments, many built in the 15th and 16th centuries with the financial contributions of Moldavian rulers and boyars and especially with the efforts of the population. Millions of people visit Bukovina each year, both from within the country and from abroad, to admire the beauty and natural riches and take in the various Austro-Hungarian influences that can be sensed from the first moments of a visit. The cultural and historical settlements and the hospitality of the inhabitants, among countless other reasons, are the factors when labelling the region as "Sweet and Holy Bukovina". However, what truly sets this territory apart is the remarkable number of monasteries and places of worship. In connection with this, new literary works are constantly generated to help readers better grasp the region's spiritual and religious magnetism.

Such an example is "The Church of 'Saint George the Great Martyr' of 'Saint John the New of Suceava' Monastery. History, Faith, Culture and Civilization", by Vasile M. Demciuc, Assistant Professor at Stefan cel Mare University of Suceava's Faculty of History and Geography.¹ We must mention that the author has older scientific concerns related to the monastery of St. John in Suceava and its spiritual

¹ Vasile M. Demciuc, *Biserica „Sfântul Mare Mucenic Gheorghe” a Mănăstirii „Sfântul Ioan cel Nou de la Suceava”. Istorie, credință. cultură și civilizație* [The Church of 'Saint George the Great Martyr' of 'Saint John the New of Suceava' Monastery. History, Faith, Culture and Civilization], Bucharest, Crimca Publishing House, 2022, 197 p.

patron². Archdeacon Vasile M. Demciuc holds a Ph. D. in History (1994) and a double bachelor's degree in history-Geography (1983) and Theology (1995). He has had a remarkable career as a museum curator, university lecturer, and director of the Department of Human and Social-Political Sciences at Stefan cel Mare University of Suceava's Faculty of History and Geography. He was also the Chief Counsellor of the County Inspectorate for Culture in Suceava before becoming the Director of the County Directorate for Culture, Religions, and National Heritage (Suceava). He has won several awards and honours for his achievements. Archdeacon Demciuc has authored numerous articles, studies, monographs, and books about local and national personalities, as well as monuments in the former Byzantine region³. He has been a counsellor in the Archdiocese of Suceava and Rădăuți's Heritage department since August 1, 2020.

The work indicates that the 16th century is the historical reference segment for the construction of the Church 'Saint George the Great Martyr' located at the centre of the architectural ensemble of the Monastery 'Saint John the New of Suceava', founded by prominent Musatine Dynasty representatives, Bogdan III (1504-1517) and Stefan Vodă (1517-1527), direct descendants of the Voivode (Prince) of Moldavia, Stephen the Great.

The author positioned the architectural ensemble in the context of Moldavia's geopolitical situation at the beginning of the 16th century, which was influenced by the great empires of southeastern Europe. Professor Demciuc emphasized the political and military involvement of the two rulers who led the country of Moldavia during that period, as they were worthy successors of the great Voivode Stephen the Great, who played a significant role in the history of his time. "What Stephen the Great achieved in terms of diplomacy and military affairs remained unchanged during the reigns of his son and grandson", noted Vasile M. Demciuc.

² Idem, *Sfântul Ioan cel Nou de la Suceava* [Saint John the New of Suceava], 2nd edition, Jassy, Doxologia Publishing House, 2012, 140 p.

³ In this respect, we mention only his recent representative books: Vasile M. Demciuc, *Cappadocia. Istorie, credință, artă și civilizație bizantină* [Cappadocia. Byzantine History, Faith, Art, and Civilization], Bucharest, Basilica Publishing House, 2020, 744 p.; Idem, *Dicționar de artă și civilizație medievală* [Dictionary of Medieval Art and Civilization], 2nd edition, Jassy, Vasiliana '98 Publishing House, 2019, 256 p.; Idem, *Yusuf Koç church - Göreme*, Opera Magna Publishing House, Jassy, 2018, 75 p.; Idem, *Trapezunt - fascinație și reper spiritual bizantin* [Trebizond - fascination and Byzantine spiritual landmark], Bucharest, Basilica Publishing House, 2014, 309 p.

The work's organized material includes significant events as well as a variety of data and information about:

- *Foundations and Inscriptions*: The inscription placed above the entrance door of the church narthex, written in Old Slavonic, reveals that the construction of the Church 'Saint George the Great Martyr' was begun by Bogdan III and finished by Ștefăniță Vodă.

- *The iconostasis*, belonging to the Moldavian Baroque style.

- *The former metropolitan cathedral's architecture*. It included besides the Church, the Bell Tower and the Metropolitan's Ecclesiary of Anastasie Crimca.

- *The frescoes that decorate the church* offer undeniable testimony to Moldavian craftsmen's impressive display of creative force during Petru Rareș's reign.

- *The altar*, which in its upper part houses the customary fresco with medallions of saints.

- *The nave*. Stylistically, the painting in the nave is the most representative; according to the author, "the tendency to amplify the forms in the mural painting of previous churches reaches its zenith."

The author noted the unfortunate aspect concerning "The exterior painting executed in continuation of the interior one, which lent splendour to the Suceava Metropolitan Cathedral, suffered significant damage during the Habsburg period when it was largely covered with layers of plaster. Furthermore, to enhance the adherence of the new plaster layer, the previously painted plaster was struck with a hammer, as revealed during the recent restoration and conservation efforts of the exterior painting."

It is worth noting that Archdeacon Vasile M. Demciuc, as a servant of the Holy Altar, has skilfully described, based on the foundation of the Holy Scriptures and the pictorial tradition, iconographic scenes that have survived to the present day. These descriptions are rich in symbols and theological connotations, making them accessible and useful for the reader.

In this perspective, we note that the architectural context behind the Cross symbolizes the wall of Jerusalem. This particularity emphasizes that Christ was crucified outside the city but simultaneously conveys a profound spiritual idea: just as Christ suffered outside the gates of Jerusalem, so must Christians follow Him and go beyond the walls to discover Him.

It is also worth noting that, by examining the church life in Moldavia at the beginning of the 16th century, Professor Demciuc managed to highlight the contribution of those who succeeded Stephen the Great and completed

construction works that he had left unfinished. This also includes the aspect of equipping these structures. According to Professor Demciuc, Bogdan III was successful in completing what remained unfinished by his father in terms of church construction.

Notwithstanding all the author's strengths emphasized here, the value of the work may have been enhanced concerning the discussed theme if the author had additionally focused on meanings and implications pertinent to our modern times, and the immediate relevance. They could have started with the opportunity that the Church now provides to society, its many contributions to life and continued existence, and so on.

A subsequent investigation on this topic would be appropriate to address the pilgrimages to holy places and the broader phenomenon of religious tourism that defines the Bukovina region. Along with refining the structuring of the text, it would be equally beneficial for the English and French summaries to be accompanied by a Romanian version, which is now missing from this book.

Such suggestions are intended to facilitate the reader's attempt to engage with the thematic content, thereby achieving a greater understanding of the Muşatin spirit and the spirituality of Bukovina as a whole.

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