

THE SURVIVAL OF BYZANTINE SACRED ART FROM CAPPADOCIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY¹

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Abstract: *Located in Central Anatolia, the historical region of Cappadocia (approximately 91,000 square kilometres) in antiquity included parts of the current provinces of Kayseri, Kırşehir, Aksaray, Niğde and Nevşehir in Turkey. The earliest mentions of Cappadocia date back to the end of the 6th century BC, when the region was inhabited by the Hittites, Phrygians, Persians, Romans, Byzantines, Seljuk Turks, and Ottoman Turks. In this region, inscribed on the UNESCO heritage list, around 1,000 Christian churches were built, starting in the 1st millennium AD, with many dating from the 4th-5th centuries. Based on ancient and medieval sources, as well as an extensive specialised bibliography, 65 Christian rock-hewn churches from the Byzantine period of the region are described and analysed for the first time in Romanian historiography.*

Keywords: *Cappadocia, Central Anatolia, Turkey, Christianity, Byzantine sacred art, fresco, rock-hewn churches*

Rezumat: *Supraviețuirea artei sacre bizantine din Cappadocia în secolul XXI. Situată în Anatolia Centrală, regiunea istorică Cappadocia (aproximativ 91.000 kilometrei pătrați) cuprindea în antichitate părți din actualele provincii Kayseri, Kırşehir, Aksaray, Niğde și Nevşehir din Turcia. Cele mai vechi mențiuni despre Cappadocia datează de la sfârșitul*

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¹ Vasile M. Demciuc, *Cappadocia. Istorie, credință, artă și civilizație bizantină* [Cappadocia. History, Faith, Art and Byzantine Civilization], Bucharest, Basilica Publishing House, 2020.

*secolului VI î.Hr., regiunea fiind locuită, de-a lungul timpului, de hitiți, frigieni, perși, romani, **bizantini**, turcii selgiucizi și turcii otomani. În această regiune, înscrisă în patrimoniul UNESCO, au fost construite, începând cu mileniul I al erei noastre, circa 1.000 de biserici creștine, multe dintre ele datând din secolele IV-V. Pe baza surselor antice și medievale, ca și pe baza unei ample bibliografii de specialitate, sunt descrise și analizate în premieră în istoriografia română 65 de biserici rupestre creștine din perioada bizantină a regiunii.*

The year 2009 was dedicated by the Romanian Orthodox Church to the Cappadocian Saints, providing a valuable opportunity to deepen understanding of the role of this region of Central Asia Minor in the history of Eastern Christianity. Alongside the Holy Places in Jerusalem, the imperial city of Constantinople, and the ecclesiastical centres of the Mediterranean basin, Cappadocia represents a rich treasury of spirituality and culture from the first Christian millennium.

During that year, the idea began to take root in the mind of Dr Vasile M. Demciuc, a Suceava-based university researcher, to dedicate himself to combining the historical and artistic approaches with the theological thinking of the founders and confessors of the spiritual beauty of this ancient Christian-inhabited region. After nearly a decade of dedicated work, which included studies at Erciyes University in Kayseri, the archaeological and epigraphic field research, a primary source documentation and the examination of an extensive bibliography, the outcome has been in the form of a volume of 744 pages, which was published in 2020 at the Basilica Publishing House of the Romanian Patriarchate.

Without a doubt, Cappadocia has had – and still has – a special resonance for Byzantinists due to its history and cultural treasures. In this regard, we limit ourselves to quoting the opinion of a classic in the field.

“Cappadocia was then a frontier country which had played an important role in the history of Christianity, and particularly in the development of theology and monasticism. It was there that the famous fathers of the Greek church – St. Gregory of Nazianzus, also called the Theologian; St. Gregory of Nyssa; and St. Basil – all taught, and where the latter formulated the basis of Byzantine monasticism. Between the time of these Cappadocian Fathers (the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century) and that of the rock paintings, centuries passed. Destructive wars and invasions obliterated the memory – and, of course, all material remains – of this glorious past. The re-settlement of a great number of monastic communities around the ninth century proves that the initial Christian

movement in this province had not been forgotten.”²

Therefore, it is not a surprise that a medievalist and Byzantinist from Romania is interested in this topic. Vasile M. Demciuc, from the Stefan cel Mare University of Suceava, has also published a series of works on religious architecture and, more generally, on Byzantine spirituality in Asia Minor.³

Despite its dense style, rich in technical detail and containing over 1,300 footnotes, the reviewed volume is compelling. It invites readers to engage with it, offering many new insights and serving as a landmark in Romanian historiography.

Right from the very beginning, the author emphasises the reason behind his choice of an interdisciplinary approach: “Cappadocia, with its fascinating natural landscapes, a region that includes the UNESCO World Heritage sites, represents a genuine spiritual landmark of the Byzantine Christian civilisation. It is not only a popular tourist destination, thanks to its unique, almost paradisiacal scenery, and a place where one can admire the beauty of faith through the Byzantine frescoes in the rock-hewn churches, but also, above all, it is the living memory of a beautiful chapter in the history of Christianity.”⁴

In the first chapter of the book, the author offers an overview of Cappadocia, a land situated at the crossroads of Constantinople, Antioch, and the ancient Silk Road. The detailed historiographical exploration presented by Vasile M. Demciuc highlights the interest of numerous researchers from various fields (i.e., archaeologists, historians, geologists, linguists, theologians, etc.) in the region’s vast natural and cultural heritage. Among those mentioned are Guillaume de Jerphanion, Paul Lucas, William John Hamilton, Anastasios Levidis, Ioannis Sarantides Archelaos, Ioannis Kalfoglou, Charles Texier, William

² André Grabar, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire. Byzantine Art in the Middle Ages*, translated from French into English by Betty Forster, New York, Greystone Press, 1967, p. 156.

³ Vasile M. Demciuc, *L’église Sainte Sophie de Trébizonde – un repère dans l’architecture religieuse byzantine*, in “Codrul Cosminului”, XVIII, 2012, No. 1, p. 29-42; Idem, *Trapezunt – fascinație și reper spiritual bizantin*, Bucharest, Basilica Publishing House, 2014; Vasile M. Demciuc, Ismail Köse, *Vazelon (St. John) Monastery of Maçka Trebizond*, Iași, Opera Magna Publishing House, 2017; Vasile M. Demciuc, Oana Nesteriuc, *Two Cave Monasteries of Byzantine Cappadocia – Bezir hane church and Aynali Church. Some Observations*, in “Teologia Pontica”, X, 2017, No. 3-4, pp. 98-105; Vasile M. Demciuc, *Yusuf Koç church – Göreme*, Iași, Opera Magna Publishing House, 2018; Vasile M. Demciuc, Oana Nesteriuc, Anca Violeta Epure, *Hagia Sophia – Trabzon*, Iași, Vasiliana ’98 Publishing House, 2019.

⁴ Vasile M. Demciuc, *Cappadocia. Istorie, credință, artă și civilizație bizantină*, p. 15.

Ramsey, Gertrude Bell, Hans Rott, Robert Cornack, Nicole and Michel Thierry and several others.⁵

The following ten chapters of the book present 65 rock-hewn churches from the Cappadocian region and provide detailed descriptions of their architectural elements, iconography, historical development, and state of preservation. The churches are grouped by site and identified by their current sites, bearing Turkish names such as Göreme, Avcılar, Güllüdere, Çavuşin, Zelve, Ürgüp, Gülşehir, Soğanlı Valley, Ihlara Valley, and Güzelyurt. The architectural plans include measured drawings, graphic details, and the specific iconographic style of each monument. The architectural plans are described with their surveys, graphic information, and the specific iconographic style of each memorial.

As expected, the final part of the volume includes English, French, Greek, and Turkish summaries, a rich bibliography, and numerous suggestive images that complement the work's contents.

We particularly appreciate the fact that the author of this volume has presented in detail the essential aspect related to Cappadocia and its special ties with the Romanian Orthodoxy which dates back to the 4th century when the correspondence between Saint Basil the Great and the military commander Junius Soranus from Scythia was preserved as well as the request for the relics of Saint Sava the Goth who was martyred on April 12, 373. The author also explains the honorary title of *locum tenens of Caesarea of Cappadocia*, granted in 1776 to the Metropolitan of Wallachia. This title is still preserved today in the official title of the Patriarch of Romania.⁶

The volume written by Vasile M. Demciuc, which we present to the readers, represents an important contribution to Romanian historiography on the rock-hewn churches of Cappadocia. At the same time, it serves as an invitation to spiritually cultivate a once-flourishing Christian civilisation, of which only museum-like testimonies have remained, studied by specialists, and preserved as elements of humanity's cultural heritage.

At the end of the analysis, some conclusions are necessary. First, we emphasise that we are dealing with a solid, well-written and excellently documented work, which can be considered a gain for historiography in general. However, any human thing can be perfected.

Secondly, we recommend that the author, in a future revised edition of this volume, place greater emphasis on epigraphy, archaeological discoveries, and

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 38-67, *passim*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24-27.

modern methods of analysis and dating, as these can enhance the accuracy of the researched subject.

Last but not least, we look forward to a second volume of this work, dedicated to other monuments of Cappadocia, including those that are not only ecclesiastical, which the author has surely researched as part of the Erasmus+ Program. We hope to find in this second volume studies devoted to the region's secular monuments, such as Byzantine fortresses and underground cities, as well as information about the renowned caravanserais, the remains of which can still be seen today.

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