

**THE MEDIEVAL ROYAL COURTS AND THE ARTS.  
CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING POLITICAL INTERPRETATION  
OF RELIGIOUS ART**

ELISABETA NEGRĂU

National University of Arts, Bucharest, 19 General Budișteanu street, sector 1, Romania

E-mail: [e\\_negrau@yahoo.com](mailto:e_negrau@yahoo.com)

**Abstract.** *The concept of monarchical court in the history of medieval culture is a subject to which historians show an ever-increasing interest, reflecting, in fact, the important role of the courts in being a model of civilization and a main cultural center for the country, sometimes even more influential than the Church. Royal courts acted as a magnet for ambitious men and spread the aristocratic culture throughout the society. The court culture was mainly a political culture, articulated in ideological, religious and artistic forms. For the Middle Ages and not only, the artistic achievements were often exceptionally designed in order to signify the beauty of the illuminated governance of the monarch, by the grace of God. The concept of aulic art developed an own complex iconography and aesthetics.*

**Keywords:** *religious art, aulic art, royal court*

The cultural concept of “court” is also new and old, since from the Middle Ages, a country court was the central topic of interest in the view of the foreign travelers. Thus, the study of the aspects of theory and perception of the court must begin, firstly, with the testimonies of its contemporaries. However, despite the fame of the subject in literature and in historical studies, there were only few attempts to examine the medieval courts phenomena in their entirety. While there were made significant studies on various aspects of court life, as the arts and ceremonial items, all these aspects were only rarely synthesized into a whole picture.

For the history of the Byzantine area, to which belongs our country, the issue of court culture was discussed only on two occasions. In 1950 the Institute of Byzantine Studies from Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, held a symposium on the theme “The Emperor and the Palace”, with specialists of a high scientific reputation, as Francis Dvornik, André Grabar, Ernst Kantorowicz, Paul A. Underwood. Only in 1994 the subject was revisited, at the same Institute, in a symposium entitled “Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204”. The volume “Byzantine court culture from 829 to 1204” is a synthesis –the only one so far in the Byzantine scientific literature- on the court life in Byzantium, in all its interrelated aspects, which discuss issues related to the imperial palace, gardens, aulic ceremonial and its relationship with the Byzantine Church liturgy, imperial costumes and symbols, icons and other religious relics of the court, court rhetoric, intellectual life, social composition of the court members, the financial level of court officials and art ideology. There are also treated aspects of external political relations of the Byzantines with other medieval courts, particularly those of other religion/ confession: Armenian, Norman, Islamic courts.

Despite the general impression of immobility of traditions in the medieval courts, facts show that there have been many fluctuations in their mentalities and structure. The selection

of the dignitaries could be made by taking or not into account the social condition. In various historical periods, members of a hereditary aristocracy, princes or relatives were promoted and, other times, were raising people according to merit and competence. Vertical social mobility varied from one period to another depending on the court mentalities. This has influenced the level of dependency on the monarch of the court members: sometimes, courtiers earned a pronounced individualistic attitude towards the monarch. They manifested their freedom especially in the intellectual and artistic activities. Social changes and the mentalities of the court regarding the political power were reflected in the sphere of art and architecture. Palaces could present a delicate architecture, with large illuminated pavilions, gardens and terraces or could have an austere form, of a real fortress. Changes in the social composition of the courts, in their mentalities and their material culture, shows that the impression of permanence and unchanging life of the aristocracy is more an appearance than the reality. Beyond the façade of ceremony, rhetoric and art, there have been a constant development and renewal in the structure of the court life.

The present study does not propose a complex analysis that shall require multiple skills, situation which is generally subject for groups of specialists, but considers an issue that is fundamental in development of monarchical court culture during the European Middle Ages and especially in the southeastern Europe, of Byzantine tradition, to which were affiliated also the Romanian countries: the relationship between the court, religion and art, and in particular the creation of aulic art phenomenon.

Two are the most important spheres where the court and religion intersect: the moral - which controls all the aspects of law and ideology of power, and the cultic sphere, which regards the relationship between the earthly monarchic court and Celestial Kingdom from the Christian theology, as expressed in encomiums, in religious literature and art.

It should be mentioned that “aulic art” is a perennial concept and not only a characteristic of medieval art; in fact, it appeared in the first kingdoms and empires of Antiquity. Only the ideologies of modernity had a fundamentally reductive impact on this strong concept, together with the action to free the general art theory from the dominance of theology and political ideologies to which it was subjected for millenniums. The concept of aulic art is as problematic as the concept of religious art. Religious art and the political-committed art were the main conditions under which the art was in the service of ideology. The modern ideals considered this as being in the detriment of art’s spiritual freedom. In the Byzantine world, the aulic art and the religious art were always very closed and interdependent, while in the Western Europe, a third concept appeared: the humanistic one. It began to manifest when the first forms of returning to ancient mythological figures, occurred in art, as “renaissances” of man’s ideals of freedom.

Art historians reported difficulty in precisely circumscribe the frames of aulic art. The main criterion was proposed to be the message and the public destination of the art object: art is considered to be “aulic” when reveals a clear message about a monarch or illustrates a political thought. But all artistic things done by monarchs for their own use, things done in the monarch’s name for the use of community (buildings, infrastructure, religious monuments

and cult objects) or portraits of the monarchs which were not aulic by origin, could be considered as revealing “aulic” significance. What we commonly call artistic products of a royal court were, in general, objects of a high quality, elitist and highly valuable, which entered the treasury inherited from one generation to another. Very rare could become accessible to trade for a wider clientele, of merchants and bourgeoisie.

Researchers agree not to make quality the exclusive criterion for the aulic art. The social quality and dignity of the donor are not always strong arguments to explain the greatness of a monument. The phenomenon of aulic art patronage is not homogeneous because the social background of the various monarchs differs, especially in elective, non-hereditary monarchies, as was the case of Byzantine rulers, for example, or Romanian. Moreover, the building initiative could work for own use; many monuments were built by monarchs as private constructions. The medieval society does not allow us to make a clear distinction between private and public art, religious and secular art.

In what concerns the aulic religious foundation, a typically medieval mentality is to honor a saint with donations or to aid the living monks in the monasteries. However, particularly in Europe, the building activity was stimulated by a mentality inherited from the Roman period, characterized by a strong desire of the donors to have their names commemorated. Inscriptions with the names of donors and donations can be equally found in the religious foundations (churches, synagogues) as in secular ones (institutional buildings). Obviously, the monarchs were in the first position to take major projects of monumental buildings. The spirit of aulic votum (basically religious, but with a national impact), of tradition and of dynastical remembrance are the main characteristics of the aulic artistic founding. The votive portrait is a very popular medieval type of representation, which had not been waived. The votive inscription legalizes the act of donation and the picture has a value of legalization and places symbolically the donor in the Kingdom of God. The significance of votive painting is variable: it may be a prayer, a measure of legitimacy when it joins a donation inscription, or a funeral picture. Also, in medieval societies, in which the dynastic spirit is very strong, the aulic art had to invoke also the predecessors. A monument is, thus, never linked to a single ruler, but also to his antecessors and successors. There are also cases when monarchs pay their vassals with the right to make a great foundation. For this reason, and completing a prayer on the country and leaders, the vassals pay homage to the Prince, representing him in their church, together with the highest ecclesial hierarchy.

The religious art refers to sacred persons and sacred histories; it talks about God, by icons and symbols, to an initiated public. The religious art is mainly designed for churches, but not all that is church decoration (i.e. non-iconic decors) could be considered “religious art”. Instead, any representation of sacred persons is considered “religious art”. There is a theory of medieval art, an iconography and aesthetics, defined by the religious dogmas behind them. This powerful definition was overcome only in the modern and contemporary times, where religious representations are re-contextualized in an autonomous artistic system of thinking that often intends to cancel its initial dogmatic message.

Many icons and relics could have a strong political significance (e.g. the palladia of Constantinople: the Mandylion, the veil of the Mother of God and the Holy Cross). Vladimirskaya icon was also seen as an icon of the Court of Rus'. Both the court and the icon were defending the state. This paradigm was imported also in the Romanian countries (e.g. the cult of St. Filoteia in Wallachia and of St John the New and St Paraskeva in Moldavia).

This is already shown that the medieval monarchical institution has developed over periods its own iconography, formed much alike the Christian iconography and intended to express through symbols and representations its basic ideological content: the political power. Since in the Middle Ages the person of the monarch was considered sacred by God's will, a worship ritual should be developed for him. The highest human merits and virtues were attributed to the monarchs, who were considered by theologians like the reason, which leads the soul and body (e.g. Basil the Great, John Chrysostom). Monarchs are due and are dedicated the most valuable material and spiritual works of the country. The monarch's image was like an icon for believers, an object of religious veneration. The iconography designed especially for monarch's image should, thus, represent by persuasive formulas, his monarchical divine right and power, exalt and glorify his virtues and victories. The aulic art imitated closely the principles of religious art. The aulic spirit is characterized by authority, legitimacy and prestige. In the aesthetics, these are translated into monumentality, luxury, elegance. In the theological plan, the character of aulic art symbolized God's desire for order and beauty. Since in the mysteries of the Church, the idea of kingship was treated, like the marriage, as an emphasis of man's rule over the kingdom of the world (as Adam was in Eden), the "marriage" between the monarch and his country should be emphasized by the beauty of the aulic art.

Is there, however, a theory of aulic art? Is aulic art - in terms of art history- the field of masterpieces, or does not work always according to a real artistic value? Aulic criterion appears rather hard to define. It is not anymore considered a criterion of artistic value, but is instead a distinct conceptual category of art and iconography. The aulic mark of an art object confers it a specific statute that remains indelible in time. But, sometimes the aulic status of religious cult objects, as icons, liturgical embroidery or metalwork is difficult to consider, due to their exclusive religious function. There is a codification of conceptual principles in the aulic art, translated into a specific iconography and there is a highly symbolical aesthetics expressing the beauty of illuminated governance, whether it fluctuates according to the changes in style and taste.

Even there were monarchs who have cultivated the aulic spirit more, others less, depending on their interest and personality, the role of the rulers in selecting and promoting local cultural elements at a national level is important. The Court selected favorite cultural and artistic models which entered the aulic culture, and influenced their spreading at a national level. Together with the Church, the monarchical courts had a main contribution in the formation of the national cultural characters.

## References

# JOURNAL OF SCIENCE AND ARTS

- [1] \*\*\**Art et société à Byzance sous les Paléologues*, Actes du Colloque organisé par l'Association international des Études byzantines à Venise en Septembre 1968, Venise, 1971.
- [2] Belting, H., *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, Chicago Univ. Press, 1994.
- [3] Cubitt, C., Proceedings of the First Alcuin Conference, in *Studies in the Early Middle Ages*, vol. 3, Michigan, 2003.
- [4] Duby, G., *Vremea catedralelor. Arta si societatea: 980-1420*, ed. Meridiane, Bucharest, 1998
- [5] Le Goff, J., *Civilizatia Occidentului medieval*, ed. Științifică, Bucharest, 1970
- [6] Grabar, A., *L'empereur dans l'art byzantin. Recherche sur l'art officiel de l'empire d'orient*, Paris, 1936.
- [7] Maguire, H., ed., *Byzantine court culture from 829 to 1204*, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC, 2004.
- [8] Marin, L., *Le Portrait du Roi*, Paris 1981.
- [9] Panofsky, E., *Renaștere și renașteri în arta occidentală*, ed. Meridiane, Bucharest, 1974.
- [10] Theodorescu, R., *Civilizația românilor între medieval și modern*, 2 vol., ed. Meridiane, Bucharest, 1987

Manuscript received: 12.07.2009 / accepted: 22.09.2009