

# Notes on the Iconography of Witchcraft in Romanian Art<sup>1</sup>

**Bogdan Neagota**

*"Babeş-Bolyai" University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania*

ORCID: 0000-0003-0965-3385

*Bogdan Neagota is historian of religions and ethnologist/anthropologist, associate professor (senior lecturer) at the Department of Classical Languages and Literatures from the "Babeş-Bolyai" University, Cluj-Napoca, where he is giving courses of Latin literature, history of ancient religions, folklore & ethno-anthropology. He is also co-founder (in collaboration with Ileana Benga, researcher at the Institute of Folklore Archive, Romanian Academy, Cluj-Napoca) of an ethno-anthropological group (starting from 2004), Orma Sodalitas Anthropologica, with a large archive (audio and visual ethnographic materials), covering field researches made by B. Neagota, I. Benga and their collaborators in the last 18 years, especially in rural areas from Romania, Italy, Serbia and Ukraine (www.orma.ro). Its research topics covers different aspects of the popular cultures, from the oral narrative traditions to the seasonal and family ceremoniality, popular religiosity (magic, daemonology, folk piety, pilgrimages etc.).*

Correspondence: bogdan.neagota@ubbcluj.ro

Neagota, Bogdan. 2023. "Notes on the Iconography of Witchcraft in Romanian Art." *Martor* 28: 213-236.

[DOI: 10.57225/Martor.2023.28.16]

## ABSTRACT

In this article we seek to describe the methodology that gives shape to the various components of the documentation of the book and identifies the different fields to which the issues discussed belong: art history (iconography, religious art), late antique and medieval literature (apocryphal texts), ethno-anthropology (with ramifications in visual anthropology, ethnology, folklore studies) and the history of mentalities (where research into witchcraft takes place chiefly within historical anthropology). The aspects discussed in this reading note: the social and cultural contextualisation of iconography, through an exploration of its social, cultural and mentality-related forms of expression, which connect it at a profound level to traditional peasant/pastoral societies; eschatological iconography concerned with witchcraft in Romania, seen as an eschatological replacement, with preventative and punitive functions, for the punitive institutions of Central and Eastern Europe that were responsible for eradicating the phenomenon of witchcraft; a comparative treatment of eschatological themes in Romanian iconography, in the regional context of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, through a comparison between them and those of the region south of the Danube (Bulgaria) and of the northern Slav area (Ruthenia); the absence from iconography of the distinction between the morphological classes of magic, based on their trans-human magical agents, that we find in oral narrative traditions; a systematic handling of local eschatological iconography and oral narrative repertoires; the issue of cultural transmission and the structure and composition of mechanisms of transmission, whose orality consists not only of words but also of images; discussion of the linguistic and iconographic typologies advanced by the book's authors.

In the context of the particular cultural style we find in books about popular witchcraft, in terms of their corpuses of texts and rituals and their level of scholarship, this work is notable for its methodological rigour, extremely minute documentation, systematic coherence, its analysis that descends to details while also presenting an overview, and its *ground-breaking* (in a Ricoeurian sense) hermeneutic; restrained (despite the seductive appeal of a wealth of ethnological and ethnographic material), free from speculative temptations (in an ethnological

culture that is predisposed to interpretative story-weaving), and free from ideological concessions (despite contemporary dictats of the gender studies and political correctness type), and free from explanatory schemas and mannerisms (which abound in works of historical anthropology).

The authors' intention is undergirded by a profound hermeneutical necessity that has in view a multifaceted understanding of the phenomenon of iconography in the context of the oral and written cultural traditions of

## KEYWORDS

Magic; witchcraft; eschatology; iconography; punishment.



INCEPUT





Eastern Romania, as these have been expressed as *diachronic intertextualities*.<sup>2</sup> The present book is the second part of a “diptych” devoted to the phenomenon of witchcraft and is an organic continuation of the subject-matter of the first book, *Magie și vrăjitorie în cultura română. Istorie, literatură, mentalități* [Magic and witchcraft in Romanian culture. History, literature, mentalities] (Pop-Curșeu 2013). As Ioan Pop-Curșeu himself says, the first part of the diptych deals with “how wizards and witches have been treated in this world (legislation, trials, punishments),” while the second part “focuses on the torments those guilty of witchcraft suffer in the other world, after death,”<sup>3</sup> as portrayed in complementary descriptive forms, the iconographic and the narrative. This also explains the epistemic ramifications of the roots of the central theme, as is already apparent from the book’s title and subtitle: the history of art (iconography, religious art), late antique and medieval literature (apocryphal texts), ethnoanthropology (with ramifications in visual anthropology, ethnology, folklore studies), and the history of mentalities (where research into witchcraft takes place chiefly within historical anthropology).

It is not our intention to summarise the book or to deal with it *in extenso*, all the more so since this volume needs to be read and re-read. In addition, its thematic complexity and its particular emphasis on exhaustive documentation give it the status of a working tool, indispensable both to the art historian and to the ethnologist studying magic and popular witchcraft *in situ*. Our interest is rather in the methodology that gives shape to the various components of the documentation of the book and identifies the different fields to which the issues discussed belong. We prefer the term methodology or the more artistic one of *methodological clusters* (to use Sanda Golopenția’s expression), since a subject of this complexity, which extends all the way from post-Byzantine religious iconography to the witchcraft and magic that underlie folk piety, calls for a suitable methodological matrix. This is a methodology that proceeds both synchronically and diachronically in equal measure, the purpose

being to work out a stratigraphy of the mentalities that underpin the major iconographic themes that the book covers. We are dealing not with a history of religious iconography that treats witchcraft and popular magic in isolation, but rather with a morphodynamic examination that aims to reconstitute the magico-religious vision of traditional rural societies in Romania over the past four centuries. At the same time, the authors look at the social life of religious iconography and avoid the temptation to give a static assessment.

The book belongs within a tradition of historical-anthropological research into the subject of native Romanian iconography that found expression among researchers of the generation born in the 1970s (Silvia Marin-Barutcieff, Cristina Bogdan, Cosmina-Maria Berindei and others). It handles the issue of iconography not only in textual and intertextual ways but also contextually: we are talking about the social and cultural contextualisation of iconography by means of an exploration of the social, cultural and mentality-related connections that link it at a profound level to traditional peasant/pastoral societies. We are talking about a genetic context (and here a number of mechanisms involved in the origin from folklore of iconographic themes are identified) and about a context of reception (the authors also describe the impact/s the iconographic themes studied had on the collective rural mentality and the popular imaginary). Thus the relationship between the documentary, iconographic and oral (narratives and rituals) levels is not one of morphological juxtaposition but one of epistemic symbiosis; to this end, the discovery of spatial vicinity between iconographic subjects connected with magic (the condemnation and punishment of witches) and narrative traditions is taken further and taken on board in a genetic and intertextual way.

In rural communities in Romania, the absence of any theological-political institution qualified to identify, judge and punish local witches was to a certain extent counterbalanced by this efflorescence of posthumous condemnations of witches and of a veritable phenome-

nology of punishments, inventorised by the authors with minute attention and humour. Eschatological iconography concerned with witches thus compensates, in terms of punishment and deterrence, for the lack of a punitive institution responsible for eradicating the phenomenon of witchcraft. However, behind this iconography of Hell we can discern a juridical casuistry devoted to the various kinds of magical activity; this is underpinned by a copious imagination, although one characterised by a degree of mannerism. The authors of the book analyse the different categories of punishments and draw up a taxonomy of magical practitioners (in the *Iconographic Typologies* chapter), in which the morphological description is filled out via a reconstruction of the diachronics (the derivation of types of representation, apocryphal literary sources) and of the historical (see the *History and Geography* chapter) and iconographic (see the *Romanian Painters and their Vision of the World* chapter) contexts.

Furthermore, the iconography of Hell in Romania is treated in its regional context of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe and compared with the iconographies found south of the Danube (in Bulgaria) and in the Northern Slav area (Ruthenia). In this broader area, some routes and mechanisms of cultural transmission are reconstructed, as a working hypothesis and in a way that avoids the temptation to fall into a classic diffusionism. With great skill, the authors instead subscribe to “the hypothesis of a more complex origin for the iconographic type discussed, in a Slav-Romanian environment of mountain rearers of animals, living on high mountains and dependent on their flocks”: “the Slav-Romanian Carpathian origin of these iconographic figures” (p. 317). The deeply folklore-influenced nature of eschatological iconography, lying as it does at the interface between orality and written culture, is of course taken into consideration. However, in popular cultures, which easily transgress linguistic boundaries, the issue of authorship and originality has its own particular ways of expressing itself. There is a profoundly inter-

textual creativity, in a cognitive sense, in which what is transmitted is not so much cultural texts in their entirety as the invariables that generate and underpin them. We are dealing with an extremely complex cultural morpho-syntax in which mechanisms of transmission have to do – in an overwhelming proportion – with orality. We think of the ways in which Romanian ethnologists too have responded to this challenge, handling a number of narrative/ritual complexes in a comparative context (*inter alios*, Petru Caraman, Ion Talos, Adrian Fochi).

One point that struck us as symptomatic as we were reading the book is the absence of distinctions between two morphological classes, following the criterion of the identity of the trans-human magical agents: witches who operate with daemons/spirits (practitioners of ecstasy – witches *căzute în Sfinte* and ecstatic casters of spells) and those who *work with the devil/devils* (operators of black magic). This distinction is active in the south of Romania (Mehedinți, Caraș-Severin; see also Neagota 2015; Neagota 2012) and in Transylvania, was still identifiable in the live ethnological field in the decade after 2000, and can be found in the reports of many witchcraft trials, analysed and interpreted in an ecstatic register by a whole exegetical tradition (Margaret Alice Murray, Gustav Henningsen, Carlo Ginzburg, Franco Nardon, Emma Wilby *et alii*). However, this distinction is absent from the iconographic treatment of the judgment and punishment of witches, which, despite its folklore character, was affected by the same process of demonisation of spirits and of the majority of magical activities, with similar patterns and intensity, as was shared by the whole of medieval Europe with its folklore cultures, whether Catholic or Orthodox. The explanation for these demonising hermeneutical mechanisms, evident in iconographic depictions of the Last Judgment, is a theological (expressed in the canonical and apocryphal Christian texts, iconographically transposed) and ecclesial (pronouncements of Synods) one.<sup>4</sup> But, in the final instance, the epistemic *situs* of the eschatological themes seen in rural iconography, especially in the



case of parish churches, remains twofold: these iconographic cycles owe their existence to determinants that are multiple, intertextual (being generated by painters and wall-painters belonging to nearby schools and trends) and contextual (pressure from the future users of painted churches, the country believers and priests, whose instructions and thematic preferences surely had an influence on the choice of subjects).

On the other hand, these iconographic programmes had a deep influence on the rural imaginary, generating mutations and interpretations of local events with a magical resonance and of magical actors. The evaluation of the impact of iconographic themes on patterns of interpreting events, as seen in some oral narratives from Maramureş, is of very great interest here. The authors directly affirm the existence of this symbiosis between local eschatological iconography and the oral narrative repertoire: “we believe the images can only gain from being viewed through the lens of ethno-folklore oral narratives, as sometimes it is highly likely that the texts are based on a solid foundation of images” (p. 217). We are dealing with an intertextuality that operates in both directions and that can help towards a far-from-simple understanding of popular piety. But, as the authors of the book have observed, there is not always a local/regional basis of ethnological documentation that can serve as a foundation for the systematic treatment of witchcraft and magical practices in the iconographic themes and narrative and ritual traditions of the area, in such a way that their intertextual coherence can be analysed. In Oltenia and in northern Romania (Maramureş, Lăpuş, Codru and Chioar), the authors affirm, “there seems to be a convergence between the wealth of the magic-related folklore and the diversity of the visual representations connected with witchcraft” (p. 216). The presence of ethnological documentary bases of this kind, oral and iconographic, represents the fortunate case that will allow the researcher to investigate their interaction in terms of present or recent orality (close diachronics), but limits its archaeological reconstruction to the age of

the available oral documents; from then on, the methodology employed needs to adapt itself to the nature of the available documentary base. In Moldova, by contrast, the authors discovered a different situation. “iconographic poverty/ethno-folklore wealth”: “a province very rich in beliefs and practices connected with witchcraft, to which only a few visual representations correspond” (p. 219).

The book challenges readers to rethink the entire issue of cultural transmission, including the nature and composition of the mechanisms of transmission, whose orality consists not only of words but also of images. How are iconographic models transmitted in parallel and in interaction with narrative and ritual patterns? Our question is far from being a generic one, for it reaches the very heart of the debate around transmission, which requires the unpacking of iconographic models into icono-narrative invariables, which, grouped together in limited series, generate, by means of diverse combinations and recombinations, isomorphic iconographic syntaxes. We are thinking here of the application *cum grano salis* and adaptation of the cognitivist model suggested by Culiănu in *Călătorii în lumea de dincolo [Out of this World: Otherworldly Journeys from Gilgamesh to Albert Einstein]* (1991).

On the other hand, attention must be paid to the fictionalising/mythopoeic mechanisms that have affected or affect the reading of eschatological iconographic themes, since their interpretation and understanding is clearly conditioned by the local/regional cultural tradition in which the true hermeneut has been raised. In other words, we are not speaking of a hermeneutic level of zero for the reading. The ethnological insider is bound up in a cycle of readings in which he understands iconographic images by making use of the cultural codes he has already internalised, and his readings will not only reify the understanding (hermeneutics) but will also revitalise local culture by enriching it. Paying attention to the role of church iconography in the generation and development of the eschatological imaginary should have the effect of producing nuances and revealing



new mechanisms of cultural transmission by amplifying the explanatory models of fictionalisation/mythopoeia (Neagota 2013; Benga 2013), which circumscribe the processes of demonisation of magical activities in iconographic cycles. We are thinking here of a possible parallel reading, in the key of church iconography and in that of folklore (mythic-fictional and magical-ritual): the fate of witches after death, as portrayed in church iconography, versus the after-death behaviour of *living casters of spells* (now become *dead casters of spells*), of magical-ecstatic practitioners and of magical-maleficent practitioners in oral narrative traditions; the iconographic topology of the other world versus the narrative topology of the other world (as understood from oral narratives, from its representation in dreams and in funeral laments); the reciprocal reification of the iconographic imaginary and of the folklore imaginary.<sup>5</sup> This is a twofold approach, a simultaneous reading, that any ethnologist dealing with magic-related rural piety and vernacular *mythology* will need to take into account after he has read this book, and all the more so since the authors have opened up with such clarity this route for ethno-anthropological research and understanding to follow.

The chapter entitled *Linguistic Typologies* gives a helpful list of terminological distinctions (enchantress, witch, destroyer of crops, caster of spells, werewolf, etc.) whose usefulness is increased by the fact that it takes into consideration not only wide-ranging synchronics but also early modern and recent diachronics (the eighteenth to twentieth centuries). I am not convinced of the usefulness of statistical analyses, since the semantic fluidity of regional terms for practitioners of magic and ecstasy is affected not only by space but also by time (inter-generational differences): contamination and interference between these can arise for multiple reasons, and no mapping by zones can function as anything more than an X-ray of a given moment, a slice of time, beyond which we must assume the existence of a swarming mass of oral intertextualities

that are impossible to quantify into *strong typologies*. On the other hand, any local/regional ethnographic/linguistic documentation is far from attaining exhaustiveness, which remains a utopian desideratum in living oral cultures. And in this case the relevance of the statistical method is in danger of being undermined by the very paucity of quantified material. I would prefer to opt for *weak (debole) cartographies*, the elastic structure of which allows for terminological permutations and confusions. We find a similar situation in the case of regional folklore daimonologies, the mapping of which is still a highly provisional enterprise. In this fluid ethnographic and linguistic situation, which requires a flexible methodology, which also factors in a certain epistemological weakness (*debolezza*), I am afraid that any statistical quantification runs the risk of being irrelevant.

By contrast, *iconographic typologies*, given the “definitive” nature of visual narrations, have a far greater right to a *strong (forte)* status, in spite of the fact that they are far from fulfilling the criterion of exhaustiveness: many eschatological iconographic cycles are lost for ever or in an advanced state of deterioration. To the extent to which they factor in this documentary incompleteness and even precariousness, iconographic typologies can be constructed, cautiously, on the basis of the available iconographic material. And this the authors do, in a professional way: the identification and description of each iconographic type is achieved with minute attention to detail and literary skill. Moreover, the visual typologies are related to isomorphic narrative types (pp. 289-300), thus adding nuance to the taxonomic achievement and linking it to the oral narrative/ritual traditions in an effort to reconstruct the social life of the iconography of witches. The analysis is also extended to take in apocryphal literature, at least in the case of the magico-ecstatic category of *destroyers of crops*, whose mythico-fictional roots are firmly fixed in the soil of everyday ethnographic experience, since these women were a recurring presence in the Romanian villages of Transylvania and Maramureş in the

O x e x i t i

1990s and the decade after 2000.

Looked at from another point of view, this is also one of the reasons why the book is so fascinating: its documentary and thematic richness, the fineness of the analyses, which instead of delimiting the subject open it up for other approaches and interpretations. More than a reference book in its area, *The Iconography of Witchcraft* is an *opera aperta* that bears within it a plethora of potentialities. You may or may not be in agreement with some of the authors'

analyses or conclusions, but you cannot ignore this book without being in danger of committing a cognitive crime. It is a book in which other books are in gestation, at various stages of development, as they await their midwives. For all these reasons, this work by Ioan and Ștefana Pop-Curșeu has from its first appearance become a classic and a point of reference, a bibliographical *sine qua non* for anyone writing and researching on the subject of witchcraft and magic in the Romanian or Romanian-speaking cultural space.



## NOTES

1. Ioan Pop-Curșeu, Ștefana Pop-Curșeu (2020, 470 p.). The book won a Romanian Academy award in 2022.
2. Tradition is "the complex of attestations exposed to the action of time, the way of presenting the diachronic development of a work or, more precisely, the sedimentation over time, in the individual history of a text, of the system of cultural signs to which it belongs" (Caprettini 1992: 20).
3. <https://jurnalul.ro/special-jurnalul/interviuri/witchcraft-romania-stefana-pop-curseu-ioan-pop-curseu-922496.html>
4. The demonisation of spirits during late antiquity and the Middle Ages is, to a great extent, the effect of the conceptual and methodological inability of Christian scholars (the intellectuals of the Patristic period, medieval theologians, inquisitors, etc.) to grasp the folklore nature of mythic-fictional and magical-religious cultural complexes that belonged to traditional mental frameworks. Their intellectual background (Judaean-Christian and

Greco-Roman) did not predispose them to develop a conceptual apparatus of an anthropological/historico-religious kind, a *sine qua non* precondition for the *constructive* understanding of the self-referential accounts of the witches being investigated, but rather to convert their depositions into narrations formatted according to their own cognitive schemas, into reductionist narrative constructs, produced by specific hermeneutical mechanisms (*interpretatio iudeo-christiana et graeco-romana*). Consequently, the ethnological facts recorded were distorted by a process of reinterpretation and reduction.

5. In this case we must accept as a premise the concrete experiential basis (events/facts, concrete experiences) of the majority of the beliefs that are characteristic of popular religiosity/piety, as Mircea Eliade (1993, 39) proposed in a revolutionary article from the 1930s: "At the basis of the beliefs of people in the 'ethnographic phase,' and of the folklore of civilised peoples, lie facts, not creations of fantasy."

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Benga, Ileana. 2013. „Tales we tell are tales we dwell. The tale between belief-tale and fairytale.” *Revista de Etnografie și Folclor / Journal of Ethnography and Folklore*. New Series, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Publishing House, 1-2: 89-100.

Caprettini, Gian Paolo. 1992. *Simboli al vivo*. Palermo: Sellerio.

Culianu, Ioan Petru. 1991. *Out of this World: Otherworldly Journeys from Gilgamesh to Albert Einstein*. Boston: Shambhala.

Eliade, Mircea. 1993 [1943]. „Folclorul ca instrument de cunoaștere” (1937) [Folklore as instrument of knowledge]. In *Insula lui Euthanasius* [The Island of Euthanasius], Mircea Eliade, 25-42. Bucharest: Humanitas.

Neagota, Bogdan. 2012. „Căzătoare, necromante, vrăjitoare. Experițe și tehnici arhaice ale extazului în regiunea Dunării de Mijloc” [„Ecstasies, Necromancers, Sorceresses. Experiences and Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy in the Middle Danube region”]. In *Religiozitate și ceremonialitate folklorică*. Orma 17, ed. Ileana Benga, 51-96. Cluj-Napoca: Risoprint.

----- . 2013. “Cultural Transmission and Mechanisms of

Fictionalisation and Mythification in Oral Narratives.” *Revista de Etnografie și Folclor / Journal of Ethnography and Folklore*. New Series, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Publishing House, 1-2: 63-88.

----- . 2015. “Avatururile documentului etnologic, de la generare la înțelegere: căderea-în-sfinte și vrăjitoarele extatice în tradiția manuscrisă” [From Generation to Hermeneutics: The Avatars of the Document in Ethnology. “Falling Amidst the Sainly Ones” and Ecstatic Witches in the Manuscript Tradition]. In *Nașterea documentului de folk-lore. Răspântii metodologice*. Orma 24, ed. Ileana Benga, 73-97. Cluj-Napoca: Risoprint.

Pop-Curșeu, Ioan, and Ștefana Pop-Curșeu. 2020. *Iconografia vrăjitoriei în arta religioasă românească. Eșeu de antropologie vizuală* [The Iconography of Witchcraft in Romanian Religious Art. An Essay in Visual Anthropology]. Cluj-Napoca: Școala Ardeleană & Eikon.

Pop-Curșeu, Ioan. 2013. *Magie și vrăjitorie în cultura română. Istorie, literatură, mentalități* [Magic and witchcraft in Romanian Culture. History, Literature, Mentalities]. Iași: Polirom.

