



ACADEMIA ROMÂNĂ
Școala de Studii Avansate a Academiei Române
Institutul de Arheologie „Vasile Pârvan”

DOCTORAL THESIS

Abstract

***Byzantine embroidery in Moldavia and Wallachia in the 14th-18th
centuries. Aëres and epitaфioi***

PHD SUPERVISOR: Daniela-Veronica ISTRATE

**PHD CANDIDATE:
Emanuela-Eugenia CERNEA**

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MAIN IDEAS OF THESIS

The idea of this research emerged during the organization of the exhibition *Broderies de tradition byzantine en Roumanie du XVe au XVIIe siècle. Autour de l'étendard d'Etienne le Grand*, open at the Louvre Museum from April 17 to July 19, 2019, as part of the Romania-France Cultural Season that year. The study prepared then for the exhibition catalogue revealed the paucity of studies dedicated to medieval and pre-modern embroideries preserved in Romania, despite the fact that they are recognized in international academia as "chefs-d'oeuvre insignes du patrimoine de la Roumanie et du patrimoine universel".

The challenge that we tried to face on that occasion was to provide an explanation for the cultural phenomenon that allowed the preservation of the Byzantine tradition of embroidery with "golden" thread in Romania until the dawn of the 20th century, unlike other artistic centers in the Balkans or Eastern Europe, which either died out slowly or started early on a path that distanced them from the Byzantine source.

The mission has proved to be very difficult due to the lack of in-depth studies dedicated to Byzantine embroideries in Romania, which are limited to the brief inventories of collections and the few promising studies published in the interwar period, which announced an impressive research corridor in the field of Byzantine and post-Byzantine art in Romania, unfortunately incompletely explored after the 1950s.

However, an important working tool in this research was the collection of medieval and pre-modern embroideries and fabrics from the patrimony of the National Art Museum of Romania which, thanks to my current professional responsibilities, is directly accessible to me and allowed me to familiarize myself with this type of heritage. Since this collection, which has been in existence since 1865, is part of the oldest public collection of Byzantine and post-Byzantine art in the world and contains the most numerous and representative embroideries that circulated in Romania between the 14th and 19th centuries, it has thus been possible to create an overview of this artistic phenomenon. Thus, this important heritage and, in particular, the museum's collection of *aëres* and *epitaphioi*, became the core of the doctoral research, providing essential technical, iconographic and stylistic information about this type of artifacts and even the general socio-cultural coordinates that marked the chronology of this phenomenon. These artifacts were joined, however, during the course of

the research, by other pieces from Romanian and even foreign collections, but with origins in the Romanian space, which were able to support the conclusions of this research. However, because the latter are mostly preserved in less accessible monastery collections, such as those of the monasteries of Mount Athos, or appear only meteorically in specialized literature, without being identified today, they could not benefit from the same type of investigation as those in the collection of the National Art Museum of Romania and they will appear only as specific references, their presence here, even in this form, is, however, absolutely necessary for understanding the general phenomenon.

An essential aspect of the research is that it focused on the embroideries of Byzantine tradition that circulated in the Romanian space in the medieval and pre-modern period and not only on those produced here. This nuance places us under the sign of an absolutely necessary caution in the current state of knowledge of this artistic field in which, in certain situations, the identification of an embroidery workshop can be risky in the vast South-East European artistic area that "epigonizes" the Byzantine style and where the circulation of artists or models is very difficult to capture in archival documents or in the chronicles of the time. This globalizing approach offers a methodologically comfortable position that also allows for the evaluation of pieces that were obviously not produced in Romania, but which circulated here and are still present in collections in the country. This broad perspective adds a consistent substratum to the research, with reference to the artistic appetite in the area or to the artistic models and patterns that have influenced the culture and, implicitly, the local embroidery production. Thus, the research attempts to capture the broad phenomenon of Byzantine embroidery consumption in the medieval and pre-modern Romanian space, whether we refer to embroideries worked in local workshops or to imports from artistic centers active in the post-Byzantine period, also offering the possibility of future re-evaluations and attributions for pieces that, at this point of the research, could not be associated with certainty to a specific artistic center, but neither can they be excluded from the artistic inventory that we propose.

It is also important to emphasize that the chronological range of the research will be limited to the 14th to 18th centuries, although some pieces dating from the 19th century have also been included in the study, which offer some clues as to how this artistic phenomenon was articulated in modern times. The investigation begins with the oldest dated embroidery preserved in Romania - the epitaphios from Cozia (1395/1396) - although fragments of embroidery with "gold" thread discovered in our space can go back in time to the 11th-12th

centuries, and will stop in the 19th century, when signs of important technological and iconographic changes begin to appear, which invite serious re-evaluations of the field.

At the same time, it is worth explaining the typological delimitation applied in the case of this research, namely the selection of *aëres* and *epitaphioi* from the vast inventory of embroideries that circulated in the Romanian lands. It becomes an extremely useful methodological tool on the one hand because it restricts the material under investigation to a reasonable size for doctoral research.

In addition to this methodological advantage, the *aëres* and *epitaphioi* can be considered as the synthesis of Byzantine embroidery, being, thanks to their primordial role in the ritual, the most precious, the most carefully designed and realized and, above all, the most visible pieces during the liturgy. Because of this privileged position in the liturgical treasury, they were usually princely commissions made in the most prestigious workshops of the time. These pieces, which were so representative of the cult and of the donors, were designed not only to impress the audience, but also to document - through the large number of inscriptions on them - a particular moment in the life of the community or of the donor. Thanks to these generous inscriptions, they can be considered as veritable chronicles, whether official or family chronicles, and more than that, a veritable artistic portfolio of the embroiderers or embroidery workshops of the time.

Thanks to this strict functionality, their iconography is limited to a few scenes illustrating the theme of Jesus' sacrifice, represented by a restricted series of scenes, which subtly balance the symbolic and narrative messages of the theme, while essentially maintaining a certain iconographic linearity that other categories of embroidery cannot offer. This thematic consistency of the *aëres* and *epitaphioi* makes it much easier to highlight even the smallest iconographic or technical deviations or innovations, behind which relevant information about the dynamics and evolution of this artistic phenomenon may be hidden. The thesis that I propose will complement older or recent studies dedicated to embroideries of Byzantine tradition and will put into circulation a first inventory of *aëres* and *epitaphioi* produced or preserved in the Romanian lands between the 14th and 19th centuries, in which a series of unpublished pieces will also appear, each of them benefiting from detailed technical and iconographic descriptions, as well as a careful reading of the inscriptions, whose transcription and translation has been reassessed by the author together with the

reputed specialists in Slavonic or Greek paleography, Ruxandra Lambru, Oana Iacubovschi and Mihai Țipău.

Starting from this important working tool, the research aims at systematizing information on the historical functionality and iconography of these pieces, the typology and content of the inscriptions present on these pieces, as well as the historical context of their production or discovery. We will also be concerned with the relationship between these embroideries and their contemporary mural or icon painting, so that, in the end, we will be able to identify the local particularities of the artistic resolution of the iconographic themes specific to the aëres and epitaphioi and propose a series of stylistic features of the embroideries produced in the Romanian space.

I will also discuss, where appropriate, the results of the physico-chemical investigations carried out during this research, thanks to the collaboration with Irina Petroviciu and Cristina Hașote, chemists at the National Center for Research and Physico-Chemical Investigations at the National Museum of Romanian History, and with Silvana Vasilca, researcher at the Institute of Atomic Physics in Bucharest. This type of investigations and, especially, their results, allow the evaluation of pieces from Romanian collections from a new methodological perspective, of the materiality of the technical elements that compose them, with direct benefits in identifying the centers of production and even the dating of certain pieces.

The core of the thesis focuses, therefore, on the in-depth research of the aëres and epitaphioi in the MNAR collection, and this case study will provide the necessary tools to extend the research to other typological categories of embroideries of Byzantine tradition in the Romanian region. Thus, the most substantial part of the work contains a detailed description of the 31 pieces that make up this collection. The method applied to the research of the aëres and epitaphioi in the MNAR collection explores the heritage object from a complex perspective, looking at its aesthetic aspect, the execution technique, the iconographic message, the documentary message offered by the inscriptions, but above all, the historical and social context in which these pieces were realized, and could be extended to other typological categories of medieval textiles and embroideries.

In order to emphasize the relevance of this case study on the phenomenon of Byzantine embroidery in Romania, chapter 4 of the paper is dedicated to the description of the collection of ancient Romanian art of the National Art Museum of Romania and its

history in the last 150 years since its establishment. This museum is the repository of the richest and most representative collection of medieval and pre-modern textiles in the country, part of the collection of Romanian ancient art, consisting of pieces discovered during the 19th century in various monasteries in Moldova or Walla Walla Walla or during various archaeological research campaigns of medieval monuments carried out during the 20th century.

The exceptional value of this collection lies in the fact that the pieces that make it up are pieces that circulated in the territory of the Romanian Lands during the medieval and pre-modern period; the foreign art market has never been an accessible collection pool during the long period of the collection's creation, not even in the case of the few acquisitions made by the museum during the communist period, from the dowry of the Romanian aristocratic families or local collectors. This aspect also gives it considerable representative value for the evolution of this artistic field in Romania. It includes fabrics, costumes, laces and, above all, embroideries of Byzantine tradition, being the most valuable collection of this type in the country.

The detailed catalog presented in chapter 4 of the paper provides the material on the basis of which the analysis of the particularities of the aëres and epitaphioi used or produced in the Romanian lands in the 14th-19th centuries was carried out. It will also deal with the historical and modern terminology of this heritage chapter, as well as with the functionality of these liturgical pieces over the centuries. The most consistent part of this chapter is the one related to the iconography of these pieces and, in particular, to the question of embroidery workshops of Byzantine tradition in the Romanian Lands, here the main ideas and arguments will be presented, with the help of which we try to prove the hypothesis that the local embroidery workshops were aulic workshops, patronized by the ladies of the Romanian Lands.

This conclusion of our research alters the general perception of embroidery in the Low Countries. Authorized by the voice of the best-known Romanian specialist who dedicated herself to the study of embroidery in the 1970s and who claims that:

"if it is probable that embroidery workshops may have operated at the Princely Courts or in the large urban centers, it is certain that the vast majority were worked in monasteries".

This thesis, which has become a school of thought in the Romanian historiography of the last century, has led to the bizarre situation whereby the place where some embroideries were preserved or discovered is considered to be the seat of a former embroidery workshop. The multitude of monasteries or collections in which these embroideries have been preserved or to which they were originally dedicated makes such a dense map of local embroidery workshops completely implausible.

Compared to this opinion, which has been entrenched in the last decades, during which this artistic field has been deprived of rigorous research, we consider that our investigation is an important step forward. It paves the way for convergent approaches, which may reveal new arguments in favor of the hypothesis that embroidery of Byzantine tradition in the Romanian Countries was an aulic art, patronized by the Lady of the country and by the great boyeroesses. The existence of monastery workshops is also not excluded from this artistic environment, where the men of prayer were courtiers and vice versa, and the ladies often found refuge after the disappearance of their husbands in palaces or stately homes sheltered by the walls of monasteries.

In conclusion, the doctoral research I propose has been motivated by a paradox. In spite of the fact recognized and accepted by the international art world that many of the embroideries preserved in the Romanian collections stand out in the vast ensemble of embroideries of Byzantine tradition by their own particularities, almost nothing is known about the local embroidery workshops or about the artists who worked in these workshops. Our investigation implemented a case study that proved to be extremely effective in capturing the main access keys to the world of embroidery in the Byzantine tradition in the Romanian Low Countries. We analyzed the entire collection of *aëres* and *epitaphioi* in the MNAR patrimony, given its national relevance, being composed of pieces dating from the 14th to the 19th centuries, all of which have been in a public collection since the mid-19th century and come exclusively from the Romanian, medieval and pre-modern, Moldavian and Wallachian cultural basin.

Careful analysis of the *aëres* and *epitaphioi* in the MNAR collection and their placement in relation to the specific cultural phenomena of the era in which they were created reveals other artistic circumstances that converge towards the idea that embroidery workshops in the Romanian Countries were the prerogative of the Ladies and other noble women of the court.

Research of the *aëres* and *epitaphioi* in the MNAR collection has revealed a similar artistic phenomenon in Moldavia and Wallachia. While here the 14th and early 15th centuries were marked by imports from Serbia or Constantinople, from the end of the 14th and especially the 16th century, a certain stylistic unity of the embroideries preserved can be observed. If we look at the iconographic data of the pieces, the content and typology of the inscriptions and their relationship with the icon painting or mural painting of the period, it is easy to identify the local schools of embroidery.

The stylistic, textual and iconographic similarities found in the embroideries of the Mountains and Moldavia over such a long period of time and covering a very wide geographical area for the time is not surprising, given that they are all attributed to royal initiatives. All these new arguments also support the hypothesis that embroidery in the Romanian Low Countries is an aulic art.

The analysis of this collection of embroideries from the MNAR's patrimony, in which there are also pieces attested by their own inscriptions as coming from Viennese workshops (cat. 4.4.20, cat. 4.4.22, cat. 4.4.26), or others with obvious stylistic analogies with Greek or even Constantinopolitan workshops of the 17th century, as well as Russian workshops of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, allows us to highlight the specific features of the local workshops.

The overwhelming proportion of *aëres* and *epitaphioi* originating from a voivodal initiative, together with the other information drawn from the historical and artistic context of each period, allows us to attribute these workshops to the courtly environment and, more specifically, to the entourage of the noble ladies of the time.

The work also contains two appendices, the first of which summarizes the essential information about each piece (date, title, workshop, inscriptions, iconographic details, etc.) and the second of which circulates, in Romanian translation, the first article on the embroideries in the MNAR collection, published in 1874 by Alexandru Odobescu in Russian. Published in a Moscow archaeological journal - A. I. Odobesco, "Vozduh s vâșitâm izobrajeniem položeniiâ Spasitelea vo grob, pojertvovannâi 1601 g. 1601 g. v russkii Tihvinskii monastâr i naidennâi v Bystrițkom monastârea v Valahii", *Drevnosti, Trudî Moskovskii Moskovskago Arheologhigeskago Obșcestva*, Tom 4, Moscow, 1874, p. 1-36 - Odobescu's article is perhaps the earliest study dedicated to embroideries of Byzantine tradition and the first one dedicated to embroideries from Romanian collections. Although

the author submitted a French-language version of the study, it was translated and published in Russian, and for this reason it had very little visibility among specialists and even among those who were involved in the posthumous edition of the author's work. In practice, until recently, when the collections of old scientific journals could be digitized, the journal was almost inaccessible and thus the major contribution of the Romanian archaeologist to the promotion of Byzantine embroideries has been, despite its exceptional value, excluded from the scientific debates of the last 150 years.

Because the research I proposed could not ignore this fundamental study for the history of the art of Byzantine embroideries in Romanian collections and beyond, I managed to obtain an authorized translation of the text, made by Mr. Cristian Chircă, lecturer at the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures of the University of Bucharest, on which I have operated various editorial nuances and with the help of which I was able to explore the rich documentary material provided by this study of Alexandru Odobescu. Noting that his study has remained a point of reference even for current research, I thought it appropriate that, through this doctoral thesis, I could contribute to the circulation of this extraordinarily important text for the field I have been working on.

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Abrevieri

ANR – Arhivele Naționale ale României

BCMI – Buletinul Comisiunii Monumentelor Istorice

DIR - Documente privind istoria României

DRH – Documenta Romaniae Historica

MARPR - Muzeul de Artă al Republicii Populare România

MARSR - Muzeul de Artă al Republicii Socialiste România

MCIP – Ministerul Cultelor și Instrucțiunii Publice

MMS – Mitropolia Moldovei și Sucevei

MNA – Muzeul Național de Antichități

MNAR – Muzeul Național de Artă al României

MNIR – Muzeul Național de Istorie a României

SCIA-AP – Studii și Cercetări de Istoria Artei – Artă Plastică

RBK - Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst

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