DEATH AHEAD. POPULAR WISDOM, REPRESENTATIONS AND HISTORY IN EARLY 19th CENTURY WALLACHIA

(Abstract)

The “Death” character appears rather late in the South-Eastern European Orthodox iconography, more precisely in the first half of the 19th century, in Wallachia. Epidemics, probably as important in size as the ones the Western 14th century is known for, led to this unexpected extension of the iconographic programme of the Romanian village churches. Thus, if the representations of “Death” as the Winged Skeleton, Hunter Thanatos, Death with Scythe on Horseback, etc., are to be found in western iconography, the scenes inspired by popular literature in the rural environment, such as “the Old Man and Death”, “the Strong Man and Death”, etc., represent a quite novel, original approach of the death-and-life issue in the Romanian area. Moreover, the relation that could be established between certain mythical or symbolic representations (“mighty Samson”, sun dials, etc.) and the Christian iconography proper (the Annunciation, Prophecies, etc.) is truly significant. The idea of accepting death as an ineluctable reality of life in the perspective of “Resurrection”, places the Romanian peasant’s ancestral wisdom in a fully aware Christian context. This is why we believe that the perception and representations of “Death” in Wallachia are as many incontestable proofs that a certain optimistic Christian standpoint has always defined the Romanian village, as the European civilization as a whole.