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'Captatio benevolentiae': A Different History of the Early Romanian Psalters

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Old Greek and Latin have shaped two different *Kulturkreise* in Europe, meeting where the Romanian lands are situated and giving Romanian culture its versatile, on-again, off-again, half-Eastern and half-Western characteristics. It is not a single culture, but a plural one, and the early Romanian Psalters illustrate it best.

As the table of contents of the present volume shows, this, too, is not a single book, but two, or more. The infrequent redundancy between the articles and the short texts has an obvious reason: the overlapping of an exhibition catalogue with the proceedings of a conference. Even though they are intended to serve different purposes, both of them touch on the same subject, thus leading to the many ways in which this book can be read: as a coffee table book – looking at pictures and reading the exhibition texts; in a discontinuous manner – reading more about a certain topic in one of the studies; or even meticulously – with a scientific approach. Another consequence of this multifaceted nature is the brevity of the articles, since they too are intended as introductory forays into a variety of topics (Psalters in various vernacular languages, cultural effects of the Reformation in the Romanian lands, or Metrical Psalters). Well before the preparation of these articles and of the exhibition, the decision to shorten the length of the scientific contributions was made in order to make them accessible to the general public.

This book therefore serves many purposes. First and foremost, it introduces the question of the Romanian Psalters to foreign researchers and draws attention to the still unclear nature of the Western inspiration for these texts. The early beginnings of Romanian culture may be considered strange. The ambivalent heritage of both East and West may account for the heterogeneous nature of the early vernacular Psalters, because the lands inhabited by the Romanians of the 15th century were at a flexible confessional crossroad. Transylvania was both a Catholic and Orthodox land at the same time. However, the effects of Catholicism on the medieval Romanian communities are still a matter of debate.



◀ Fig. 1. Mouse and open book (Psalter?) in a 'trompe l'oeil' cupboard painted in a niche of the St Valentine church in Termeno sulla Strada del Vino / Tramin an der Weinstraße (close to Bolzano, Italy), early 15th century.

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▲ Fig. 2. Poster of the Alba Iulia conference organized by the Museikon section of the National Museum of the Union. June 27th-28th 2018.

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▲ Fig. 3. Poster of the Psalter exhibition organized by the Museikon section of the National Museum of the Union in Alba Iulia. June 27th-August 31st 2018.

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They may have been similar to the cultural effects of the Reformation during the 16th and 17th centuries, when Latin or Western influences led to the writing or printing of other Psalters, in prose or verse. This is why several studies insist on the influence of the Reformation as well as on its medieval roots, on literary, religious, or even cultural continuities – because this line of research needs to be further explored.

Secondly, the present volume wishes to compare the ‘Romanian case’ with similar quandaries in the history of other languages and literatures. Due to its monolingual nature, the Romanian philological research is often centred on its own ‘national’ language, in very much the same way the Czech, Hungarian, French, or English counterparts are too. The meticulous grammatical aspects of philology render it oblivious to the comparative line of approach. However, Romanian translations of the Psalter may easily be compared to the Hungarian or Czech Psalters, and these in turn to the English or French translations of the same sacred text. After the Reformation, the Western *Kulturkreis* gained in stability and growth. Theological aspects prevailed, as the translation into vernacular languages became the profession of learned men. But there were also literary aspects which cannot be ignored, factors that may have been underlying during the medieval times.

These two different approaches have been distilled into a book of modest proportions, with a third intention in mind, that of presenting them to the general public, both Romanian and foreign. In this regard, the volume follows the logic of the 2018 Psalter exhibition in the National Museum of the Union in Alba Iulia. This exhibition was set up with local means. It testifies to the particular character of the Romanian collections, where very few medieval manuscripts exist compared to the great collections of Western Europe. The exhibition included only modern printed books, an incunabulum and very few manuscripts, all of them modern as well, so its storyline was of course incomplete. The exhibition texts (included in this volume) broadened the perspective and addressed topics that the exhibition could not exemplify, such as the medieval beginnings of the narrative. This was also the role played by the accompanying conference: to complement it and fill the same gap. This is, of course, more evident in the present publication, where more articles are dedicated to manuscripts and to the turn of the 16th century than to the modern era, for which the exhibition catalogue, well furnished with explanatory texts, largely compensates.

Last but not least, this book bears a fourth reading, both personal and symbolical. It seals an ongoing collaboration between colleagues who intend to join forces in a common framework and achieve greater results. Symbolically, this volume is the affirmation of what came to be called the “Tower of Bibles”, a future database for the survey, indexation and comparative analysis (scriptural, linguistic, and philological) of the earliest translations of the sacred text in the vernacular languages of Europe. It is of no surprise that its first phase will be devoted to the study of the Psalters.

None of this would have been possible without strong institutional support. This is why the editors, authors, and contributors of the present volume wish to thank the National Museum of the Union for making everything possible: for the exhibition, for the conference, and for the book. And now, without further ado, here is our modest contribution to the history of vernacular Psalters.

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The Romanian Case*



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Muzeul Național al Unirii, Alba Iulia
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Proceedings of the conference edited by
Vladimir Agrigoroaei and Ileana Sasu

Exhibition and presentation texts by
Ana Dumitran and Vladimir Agrigoroaei

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COVER ART AND PHOTOGRAPH: Vladimir Agrigoroaei – mouse and open book (Psalter?) in a *trompe l'oeil* cupboard painted in a niche of the St Valentine church in Termeno sulla Strada del Vino / Tramin an der Weinstraße (close to Bolzano, Italy), early 15th century (see page 8).

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