

REVIEW

For the dissertation on RELIQUARIES IN BULGARIA FROM THE LATE MIDDLE
AGES AND THE REVIVAL PERIOD

Author: Darina Yankova Boykina

for awarding the educational and academic degree DOCTOR"

Academy of Sciences

From Prof. Elena Genova, PhD

In recent decades, we have witnessed a great interest in the humanities for the problem of worship and the development of the cult of relics and others, such as contact relics, questions about the sacral topography of medieval and late medieval cities and religious centers, as well as related sacred objects for the preservation of the relics of saints. Hundreds of publications and scientific forums around the world are devoted to these issues. In the last decade, there has also been an increase in publications on this topic in Bulgaria. Despite the activity of the researchers, we can say that our historiography still lacks summarized works on the problem, as well as the focus in which the issues discussed are addressed. That is why the choice for a dissertation topic on reliquaries in Bulgaria is especially relevant and timely.

The work contains 125 pages of main text, presented in three chapters and a conclusion, 322 titles of bibliography in Cyrillic and 57 in Latin, three appendixes and a catalog including detailed scientific annotations of 95 artifacts. Already in the Introduction to the study, the author outlines the issues related to the cult of relics, emphasizing that these issues are still poorly understood and there is no attempt to fully compile and present the material. Only local reliquaries are listed as the object of study, and the chronological scope is the era of Ottoman Period, with an emphasis on the 18th and 19th centuries. The first main objective is to collect and organize the accessible material, and we have to state that Darina Boykina has been able to maximally search for reliquaries not only from large monasteries and museum collections, but also from a number of smaller monasteries and churches, by studying archives and publications and site visits. It should be underlined that access to these artifacts is extremely difficult, considering, for example, that the collection of the Rila Monastery is well known, but for a number of reasons it is inaccessible and many of the objects are being used in services.

In this introductory part, the paragraph on terminology and its problems is of particular importance. No attempt has been made so far to clarify the terminology. The doctoral student analyzes in detail all the terms used in Western historiography and in our country, which are dictated by the worship and development of the cult of relics in the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox tradition. She succeeds in bringing some clarity to the matter, accepting in her research as two equivalent terms - a reliquary and ark.

The first chapter deals with the role of relics during the Late Middle Ages and the Revival Period. She gives a brief overview of the issue in the context of medieval Bulgaria. The emphasis is on pilgrimage practices related to the Holy Land, the Mount Athos and the Rila Monastery. The analysis of the problem is supported by examples not only from the Bulgarian lands, but also from

the neighboring Balkan traditions. The author manages to present the various aspects of reverence for relics, outlining their importance as a key factor in shaping the identity of the Balkan nations. At the end of the chapter, attention is paid to a still poorly understood aspect of the veneration of relics - the practice of laying on the relics of saints on the holy table from the post-Byzantine and National Revival Period.

The second chapter would be defined as vital and central for the thesis and as a major contribution because of the nature of the issues under consideration - function, form and decoration. In the introductory part of the chapter, the author focuses on some of the issues that are still debatable, such as where they were made, mainly taxidiotis boxes and who defined the decorative program.

So far, the problem of function and form has not been truly researched, or at least it is not sufficiently presented. The author consistently and with arguments distinguishes between six different functional groups, highlighting the place of two new ones - taxidiotis boxes and reliquaries without relics, based on a number of examples from Balkan practice. Of particular importance are her observations on the principles of the functioning of reliquaries in Latin and Eastern Orthodox practice. I.e. continuation of the Byzantine manner of making fully accessible relics during worship of believers.

In the typology and semantics of form, we will highlight the paragraph about the reliquaries in the form of church with center-oriented plan, assuming that there is a similar tradition in the Balkans for storing the relics of saints by associating them with the symbolism of the aedicula of the Holy Sepulcher or Heavenly Jerusalem. Here I will make a recommendation to the author, in future studies, to pay attention to the appearance of the rotunda as an architectural type, which appeared on the graves of martyrs. Also innovative are the paragraphs about the type of reliquaries with the shape of a hand and the very rare type of reliquaries in the form of books.

One of the most important problems besides the function and shape of the reliquaries is the decorative program. Darina Boykina subjected to logical systematization the decoration by seeking the functional and symbolic role of the saintly images and compositions. It evolves and enriches and expands in its symbolic meaning on several levels to the covers and sides of the boxes, the inside of the lid and to the second lid covering the relics. The decoration is systematized in the images of the saints, with the emphasis placed on the healing power of the relics, illustrated with the images of famous saints-healers or through the composition of St. Mother of God of the Life-giving Spring. The most numerous group includes patrons and protectors of monasteries and churches for which the arks and relics are intended. According to the author, a specific pilgrimage site was thus marked. It is also related to the worship of the relics of a saint, if they are kept in a monastery or church, such as is the case with the relics of St. John of Rila.

Special attention is dedicated and extensively commented and analyzed on compositions and scenes of liturgical and Eucharistic nature such as Deisis, Abraham's Hospitality, New Testament Trinity, Christ the Vine and others. Compositions included in the altar program of the temple emphasize the Incarnation of God and Sacrifice of Christ. I will also agree with one of the author's main conclusions that similar themes and compositions correspond to the use of reliquaries as small portable altars by monk taxidiotis.

In the last paragraph of this chapter, Darina Boykina very successfully analyzes the ornamental decoration and architectural elements, giving a new and original reading of herbal compositions as a frame in which the relics are stored and symbolize Paradise.

I would also like to point out that in this chapter the doctoral student demonstrates exceptional observance of the smallest details and particularities. She supports the conclusions and theses with numerous examples not only from our monuments, but also from other Balkan countries.

The last third chapter deals with the famous reliquaries from the Bulgarian lands in the context of the goldsmith centers during the Ottoman period. The author not only situates each of the monuments within a particular artistic circle / goldsmith's center, but also makes a brilliant analysis of the artistic characteristics and specific stylistic features. Again, she is extremely perceptive. She offers new interpretations of some of the goldsmiths' centers, such as the one in Pazardzhik and its relation to orders from the Bachkovo Monastery. Boykina mainly focuses on four goldsmith centers - Sofia, Vratsa, Vidin / Lom, Pazardzhik, which can certainly be said to have produced the greater number of reliquaries.

The Conclusion the author adequately presents the problems addressed in the dissertation and synthesizes conclusions about the parameters of the sacral and artistic phenomenon of worship of relics and their sacred vessels.

An integral part of such an in-depth scientific research is the large-scale scientific catalog, which presents in detail every object studied. It contains 95 catalog articles with information on dating, dimensions, material, origin, location, detailed description with accurately transmitted inscriptions, literature, archival sources and photographs.

At the end of the dissertation several appendixes are included, from which we will highlight the list of relics of saints and relics stored in reliquaries on the Bulgarian lands.

Last but not least, I will emphasize that the contributions of this work are many. This is the first complete systematization of the reliquaries in Bulgarian lands and problems connected with them. A contribution is the presentation of the typology of reliquaries related to the function, form and semantics of the images. A contribution is the detailed catalog of the reliquaries, not a small part of which were introduced into scientific circulation by the author.

We will again emphasize the merits of the author in the search as well as in collecting, the analytical point of view on the problems and the brilliant analyzes conveyed distinctly and clearly with very good style and language.

The abstract presented correctly reflects the structure and content of the text, and the list of publications - three - in prestigious scientific publications is sufficient to defend the thesis.

Taking into account the merits of the presented work and its scientific contributions, I propose to the academic jury to award Darina Yankova Boykina the educational and academic degree "doctor".

/ Prof. Dr. Elena Genova /