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## ORTHODOXY AND HETERODOXY IN THE MYTHOLOGEM OF “HEAVENLY CUSTOMS”, BETWEEN RUMANIAN POPULAR BOOKS AND FOLKLORE\*

Considerable attention has been given to the emergence, first in Judaism, later in Christianity, of a great number of Apocryphal writings at the beginning of the Christian era, which reflect hopes regarding the end of time and the afterworld<sup>1</sup>: the Apocrypha of the New Testament complying with its categories (gospels, epistles, etc.) and the Apocrypha of the Old Testament, most of which belong to Apocalyptic literature. It follows that

les apocalypses, autrement dit les révélations prêtées à un personnage de l'Écriture, à un saint ou à une personne quelconque, constituent la catégorie la plus vivante, la plus durable et par conséquent la plus complexe<sup>2</sup>.

In the Byzantine world, apocalyptic output may be organized into two categories: on the one hand, a predilection for the end of time, which starts with the *Visions of Daniel*, bringing about a long and complex textual tradition with works, of their respective traditions, such as *The Revelations of Methodius* and *The Life of Andrew, a Fool for Christ*<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, there is an ancient theme of a journey to the netherworld and the motif of a reward for the deceased with its starting point in the *Apocalypse of Paul*, a forefather of a plethora of works within the hagiographical framework dedicated to the exploration of

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\* The following contribution represents a revised and extended version of the article published in *Religiosità popolare tra antropologia e storia delle religioni*, ed. I. BENGA, B. NEAGOTA, Cluj-Napoca 2002, p. 59–73.

<sup>1</sup> P. DINZELBACHER, *La «Visio S. Pauli». Circulation et influence d'un apocryphe eschatologique*, *Apocr* 2, 1991, p. 165.

<sup>2</sup> E. PATLAGEAN, *Remarques sur la diffusion et la production des apocryphes dans le monde byzantin*, *Apocr* 2, 1991, p. 157.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 158–159.

the afterworld. That's why Le Goff remarks that this text *represents the prototype of the medieval journeys in the afterworld and the medieval imaginary of the afterworld*<sup>4</sup>.

C'est sans doute l'*Apocalypse de saint Paul* qui a contribué le plus à accréditer le thème du voyage eschatologique. Non seulement parce qu'elle est la plus ancienne; se gravant dans la mémoire, son découpage en tableaux bien délimités et ses images impressionnantes ont exercé une influence sur quantité d'œuvres médiévales, tant religieuses que profanes<sup>5</sup>.

The diffusion and the reasons for the success of the work depend on its

mise en place d'un au-delà chrétien, centré sur la condition des âmes entre la mort du corps la résurrection finale. Les âmes... comparaissent *tout de suite* devant le tribunal divin, avant d'être envoyées dans deux endroits séparés et organisées en fonction du degré des mérites ou de fautes, pour profiter, dès maintenant, d'un traitement «paradisique» ou «infernale»<sup>6</sup>.

The apocalypses and the visions of the netherworld – as opposed to the end of the world prophecies – do not represent any historical reference and are constituted by two indispensable elements: ascension to Heaven and contemplation of the joys of Paradise along with the punishments of Hell. The apocalypses are, without doubt, the most popular texts: derived from, as mentioned above<sup>7</sup>, the *Apocalypse of Paul*, probably written in Greek in the Egypt of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the *Apocalypse of the Virgin* (“the most popular Byzantine Apocalypse”) and the *Apocalypse of Peter*, all texts making-up *les éléments du «canon» des «visions» médiévales occidentales*<sup>8</sup>. In this regard, S. Mimouni, according to whom *il est très probable que l'Apocalypse de la Vierge dépende de l'Apocalypse de Pierre comme de l'Apocalypse de Paul mais aussi de bien d'autres textes*, observes that numerous Greek manuscripts and their diffusion could possibly provide us with precise information about the representations of the netherworld in certain areas of the Byzantine Empire, especially in the Balkans, where the theme of *Mary's Descent into Hell* was particularly developed. Therefore, *nul doute que l'Apocalypse grecque de la Vierge ait pu influencer au plus haut point l'iconographie byzantine sur les supplices des Enfers*<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. J. LE GOFF, *Racconti di viaggi nell'aldilà*, [in:] *Dizionario dell'Occidente medievale*, vol. I, *Temie percorsi*, ed. J. LE GOFF, J.-C. SCHMITT, Torino 2003 (s.v. *Aldilà*).

<sup>5</sup> H. BRAET, *Les visions de l'invisible (VI–XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, [in:] C. KAPPLER et al., *Apocalypses et voyages dans l'au-delà*, Paris 1987, p. 411.

<sup>6</sup> P. PIOVANELLI, *Les origines de l'«Apocalypse de Paul» reconsidérées*, *Apocr 4*, 1993, p. 56.

<sup>7</sup> P. DINZELBACHER, *La «Visio S. Pauli»...*, p. 165.

<sup>8</sup> A. TIMOTIN, *La littérature eschatologique byzantine et post-byzantine dans les manuscrits roumains*, *RESEE 40*, 2002, p. 155.

<sup>9</sup> S.C. MIMOUNI, *Les «Apocalypses de la Vierge». Etat de la question*, *Apocr 4*, 1993, p. 106.

On the other hand, A. Timotin highlights that among the eschatological Byzantine and Post-Byzantine writings, the visions are the least studied, often not even published or available only in some old, outdated editions. Nevertheless, as the scholar continues,

la diffusion manuscrite remarquable de ces textes tout au long de l'histoire byzantine et post-byzantine, montre que pour les Byzantins les visions suscitaient un intérêt qui était bien loin d'être secondaire.<sup>10</sup>

These works appear circa in the 10<sup>th</sup> century with common themes and motifs, originating in apocryphal apocalypses, akin, in terms of structure, to the works circulating as the visions attributed not to the Virgin or the Apostles, but to Byzantine monks<sup>11</sup>. Among those works, the *Vision of Gregory* occupies a particular position, as the episodes of mystical ascension and the vision of Paradise and Hell *sont censés écarter au moins ses doutes concernant la foi judaïque*<sup>12</sup>.

Since the journey to the netherworld rapidly gains the status of a hagiographical topos, allowing it to point out the exceptional destiny of a character<sup>13</sup>, it happens that a particular eschatological vision included in the *Vision of Gregory* and, in turn, in the *Life of Saint Basil the Younger*, is in the center of my interest. Saint Basil, who lived in the 10<sup>th</sup> century and died probably circa 950, becomes a protagonist of a hagiographic narration enriched with elements destined to stimulate the imagination of the reader/listener. In fact, although the manuscript tradition received by *Acta Sanctorum* does not diverge from the canonical elements displayed by the life of a saint, a conspicuous number of Greek testimonies<sup>14</sup> – starting with the ones edited by Veselovskij and Vilinski – introduces in the narration attributed to Gregory (a disciple of the saint), an eschatological part that includes a description of the afterworld, of the Hell and the punishments received by the sinners, together with textual inserts, considered to be later than the “life” as such<sup>15</sup>. The narrative begins with the story of Theodora, who describes to Gregory

<sup>10</sup> A. TIMOTIN, *L'eschatologie byzantine. Historiographie et perspectives de recherche*, RESEE 41, 2003, p. 248–249.

<sup>11</sup> *A partir du XII<sup>e</sup> siècle, les voyages se multiplient, tendent à se détacher de l'hagiographie et à devenir un genre autonome*. Regarding the Western tradition it should be noted that: *Lorsqu'une vision en latin passe en langue vernaculaire, ce passage s'accompagne souvent d'importants changements: nouveaux supplices, développement des horreurs* (C. KAPPLER, *Introduction*, [in:] IDEM et al., *Apocalypses et voyages...*, p. 400).

<sup>12</sup> A. TIMOTIN, *La littérature eschatologique...*, p. 156.

<sup>13</sup> H. BRAET, *Les visions de l'invisible...*, p. 406–407.

<sup>14</sup> For bibliographical references and the Greek manuscript tradition, see F. HALKIN, BHG, <sup>3</sup>Bruxelles 1957 [= SHa, 8a], p. 93–94; IDEM, *Auctarium BHG*, Bruxelles 1969 [= SHa, 47], p. 43; IDEM, *Novum Auctarium BHG*, Bruxelles 1984 [= SHa, 65], p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> G. DA COSTA-LOUILLET, *Saints de Constantinople*, B 24, 1954, p. 492–511.

the path of her soul through 21 heavenly customs. Such an enriched version of the text circulates broadly, both in Slavic-Orthodox and in the specifically Rumanian area<sup>16</sup>.

The recent critical edition of the Rumanian text<sup>17</sup> by Maria Stanciu-Istrate dates the oldest version of the text to the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. There are eight variants identified, which represent the subsequent translations from Church Slavonic, Russian or directly from Greek and are articulated in three different editions, testifying the number of customs that oscillates between 20 and 21<sup>18</sup>.

The abundance of testimonies and the variable arrangement of the different sections, based only on the presence or absence of some particular episodes, demonstrate the broad circulation of the work also in Rumanian area.

The editor continues Cartoian's observations in order to highlight how strongly *The Life* is related to the iconographic representations of heavenly customs, especially the ones depicted in the monasteries of Bucovina, where 21 toll houses are portrayed. According to Cartoian, this demonstrates that the monks followed, in this respect, the literary written text they probably read in Slavonic.

More generally, Cartoian also noticed that the *Life of Saint Basil* with the heavenly customs, *illustrated by religious iconography, had a strong impact on the popular imagination and have left its profound mark on the cycle of beliefs and superstitions related to the burial*<sup>19</sup>.

In fact, the narrative is associated with one of the most peculiar and strongly individualizing aspects of the Rumanian funeral ceremony, represented by the motif of the "heavenly customs", or *vămile văzduhului*. In his seminal monography *Înmormîntarea la Români*<sup>20</sup>, Marian does not hesitate to dedicate ample space to this belief, related in the first place to the fall of the rebel angels: knowing that some of them act against His will, God throws them to eternal darkness; nonetheless, having realized how many fallen beings there are, he orders them to stop where they are. Therefore, some angels remain in Heaven, others fall to the earth, giving rise to devils, and the rest of them remains suspended in the air. These last are devils too, since they are unable to come back to Heaven, however, they do not manage to sway people to evil, as they cannot stay on earth.

Therefore, not long after their fall, they gather to reach an agreement: a certain number of tolls will be created between the earth and the third Heaven, where the dead souls, travelling towards Heaven, would be held in order to discover and consider carefully their evil deeds and, if needed, throw them to the infernal

<sup>16</sup> Of the antique Rumanian translations of the *Vita* remain still irreplaceable the pages dedicated to the subject by D. ROUSSO, *Studii bizantino-romine*, Bucuresti 1907, p. 51 and N. CARTOIAN, *Cărțile populare în cultura românească*, vol. II, *Epoca influenței grecești*, <sup>2</sup>București 1974, p. 202–216.

<sup>17</sup> *Viața sfântului Vasile cel nou și vămile văzduhului*, ed. M. STANCIU-ISTRATE, București 2004.

<sup>18</sup> M. STANCIU-ISTRATE, *Studiu filologic*, [in:] *Viața sfântului Vasile cel nou...*

<sup>19</sup> N. CARTOIAN, *Cărțile populare...*, p. 209.

<sup>20</sup> S.F. MARIAN, *Înmormîntarea la Români*, București 1892, p. 448–456.

flames. The aerial devils also decide that each of them should prepare a book made of black pages to write people's sins in white letters, in order to show it to the souls on their path. This way, in a short time Heaven fills with customs called "heavenly customs", each of them taking its name after one sin (customs of theft, murder, gluttony, injustice, etc.), whose number varies between 21, 24 and even 94 in the folklore tradition. The last and most terrible custom, consisting of a long bridge, thick as a nail and wide as the blade of a razor<sup>21</sup>, passes over a dark, bottomless pond inhabited by dreadful monsters: the soul of the sinner is dragged into Hell, while the soul of the non-sinner manages to cross over and enter Paradise. Besides the book of sins, every custom-officer has a scale, by which he weighs the dead people's deeds. He is accompanied by a guide-angel, who bears another book, white with black letters, in which all the good deeds are written: the final destination of the soul is obviously determined by the prevalence of one or the other book. Nevertheless, in front of every custom, the soul can pay a toll using one of the coins and *colaci* (ring- or knot-shaped bread) he/she gave to the poor during lifetime or offered to the same soul in suffrage during the funeral. If the soul has nothing to offer, it is inevitably thrown to Hell<sup>22</sup>.

As can be observed, we are dealing with a particularly vivid and complex part of the funeral rites, all interwoven with references and allusions to the belief in customs<sup>23</sup>, attested in the *Life of Saint Basil*. Accordingly, as for the Rumanian funeral rite, it seems to be the consequence of the folklorization of an apocrypha, reputed *de facto* a canonical text of the Orthodox Church<sup>24</sup>.

It should be noticed that "heavenly customs" are linked to the "doctrine of telonia" (Gr. *τελωνία*), which in the Russian dogmatic context coincided with that of individual judgement<sup>25</sup>.

According to this doctrine, starting from the premise that God does not intervene in it directly, but makes use of the service of good and evil angels, and relying on the testimony of the most ancient Fathers (from Cyril of Alexandria to Ephrem the Syrian), it is affirmed that such Judgment begins precisely with the examination of the souls in different customs or *telonias*, which the examined souls are expected to cross in order to reach Paradise.

<sup>21</sup> In Christian milieu, the oldest testimony of *pons probationis* appears in *Dialogues* of Saint Gregory the Great, probably based on oral sources. Cf. *Visioni dell'aldilà in occidente. Fonti, modelli, testi*, ed. M.P. CICCARESE, Firenze 1987 [= BPat, 8], p. 146.

<sup>22</sup> S.F. MARIAN, *Înmormintarea...*, p. 448–456.

<sup>23</sup> See I. ANDREESCO, M. BACOU, *Morire all'ombra dei Carpazi. Dieci anni di indagine nella Romania rurale*, Milano 1990, especially section II: *Passaggio delle dogane*, p. 105–117, and the contribute of P.-H. STAHL, *L'autre monde. Les signes de reconnaissance*, BBRF S.N. 10, 1983, p. 87–106. For the mythologem of the bridge, cf. the valuable study I. CULIANU, "Pons subtilis". *Storia e significato di un simbolo*, Ae 53, 1979, p. 301–312.

<sup>24</sup> M. JUGIE, *La doctrine des fins dernières dans l'église gréco-russe*, EO 17, 1914, p. 17–22.

<sup>25</sup> MACAIRE, *Théologie dogmatique orthodoxe*, vol. II, Paris 1860, p. 630–640.

In the Western theological environment, where the concept of individual eschatology seems to be less extensive<sup>26</sup>, such interpretation is rejected remarking the fact that, in early Patristics, the *telonias* were, actually, nothing more than a simple metaphorical representation of the individual judgment<sup>27</sup>.

Therefore, the hagiographical text puts itself in a problematic relationship to an articulated type of oral tradition, which, at a deeper analysis, turns out to be not so much folkloric. In reality, the apocryphal narrative, inserted into the hagiographical text along with a related folkloric belief, perfectly illustrate a form of eschatology, based, as well as on a patrological tradition of “heavenly customs”, on two particularly complex, and, for the same reason, interesting thematic lines: the “demonization of the cosmos” and the souls’ ascension or *Himmelsreise*, subjects of multivariate analysis by Culianu, who proposed new interpretations of the issue<sup>28</sup>.

As for the demonization of the cosmos, the scholar observes that

among the first testimonies attesting, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, the diffusion of the ideas concerning the relation between spirits and celestial bodies, and those which, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, inform us about the demonic character attributed to the astral spheres we have to include (between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC) the appearance of an intermediate representation, the “celestial Hell”<sup>29</sup>.

With regard to the origins of the celestial eschatology, that is to the aerial position of the Hell, Culianu stresses the fact that we have to consider the influence of the dualistic Orphic-Pythagorean doctrines and the formation and evolution of a certain number of concepts and images, which converge to elaborate a Jewish pre-dualism.

Furthermore, Culianu observes on the one hand how Oriental and Greek eschatologies influenced the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic literature and the Jewish Throne mysticism<sup>30</sup>; on the other hand, he notices how numerous motives

<sup>26</sup> J. RIVIÈRE, *Rôle du démon au jugement particulier chez les pères*, RSR 4, 1924, p. 43–64. See also A. RECHEIS, *Engel, Tod und Seelenreise. Das Wirken der Geister beim Heimgang des Menschen in der Lehre der Alexandrinischen und Kappadokischen Väter*, Roma 1958, p. 193–196, where we can find the section *Die Telonia*, with the diverse interpretations of “toll houses”.

<sup>27</sup> M. JUGIE, *La doctrine des fins dernières...*

<sup>28</sup> I. CULIANU, «*Démonisation du cosmos*» et dualisme gnostique, RHR 196.3, 1979, p. 3–40; IDEM, *L'«Ascension de l'âme» dans les mystères et hors des mystères*, [in:] *La soteriologia dei culti orientali nell'impero romano*, ed. U. BIANCHI, M.J. VERMASEREN, Leiden 1982 [= EPROLR, 92], p. 276–302.

<sup>29</sup> IDEM, «*Démonisation du cosmos*»..., p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> Also Daniélou, had previously noted how the vision of the universe which appears in the Judaic-Christian theology and in the Hebrew apocalypics is largely based on some relevant conceptions having a parallel in the Hellenistic world. That seems related to the fact that the Judaic apocalypse is influenced by the Greek tradition while, at the same time, the Judaic-Christians of Syria and Asia Minor are in contact with the Oriental religions (Cf. J. DANIÉLOU, *Théologie du judéo-christianisme*, Tournai 1958, p. 151).



document an opposite influence too: *the Judaic pre-dualism has left permanent marks on all these speculations, providing, as a consequence, an essential contribution to the formation of the Gnostic dualism.* Therefore, according to the Rumanian scholar, it can be claimed that from the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, Judaism developed a number of pre-dualistic representations, which by superimposing themselves over the dualistic doctrines of the ancient Greek stratum *justify the appearance of the Gnostic dualism with no need of going back to the theory of an Iranian influence*<sup>31</sup>. This would explain – according to Culianu – the demonization of the cosmos in the religious atmosphere of the first centuries AD and also the roots of Gnostic dualism so that in the doctrinal area of the late Judaism (and particularly in the figure of the “angels of the peoples”) there are elements that may identify the genetic start of the “hostile powers” of the celestial world, which, in their evolution, produce the figure of the Gnostic Archons. In conclusion, starting from the 1<sup>st</sup> century after Christ, the generalization of the celestial eschatology contributes to explain the demonization of the universe, a phenomenon which becomes dominant from this era, being well represented by the Gnostic systems<sup>32</sup>. *The first consequence of this atmospheric demonology... has a soteriological character: after death, the souls of the deads have to pass through the demonic spheres and elude deceptions set by the demons*<sup>33</sup>.

Next to the demonization of the cosmos and connected with the same spiritual atmosphere, appears the subject of the ascension of the soul, which is defined by the same Culianu as *neither a topic, nor a mythologem, but an inextricable whole of problems concerning the compared history of religions*<sup>34</sup> and which includes topics such as celestial eschatology, astral origins of soul, the cosmological framework in which psychanody projects itself, etc. No less complex remain the issues related to the visionary phenomenology and to the content of the ascension vision, where *gates of Heaven, stations, door-keepers, customs, passports and watchwords, classes of angels, Hell, classes of demons and condemned, categories of damned and correspondence between sins and punishments, Paradise, etc.* can be found<sup>35</sup>.

Therefore, the journey of the soul through planetary spheres at first downward and later upward, in the form known in ancient Greece, evolves up to the concurrent pattern of the journey through heavenly customs, where

terrible door-keepers with animal shapes and very strange names indeed, were in charge of controlling the passport (i.e. the seal or badge), the knowledge of the watchwords and, sometimes, the moral luggage of the soul. A sort of military régime was, in that case, installed

<sup>31</sup> I. CULIANU, «*Démonisation du cosmos*»..., p. 33–34.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> B. NEAGOTA, *Demonologia iudeo-creștină. Mecanisme hermeneutice și reguli de generare*, Orm 1, 2004, p. 114.

<sup>34</sup> I. CULIANU, *L'«Ascension de l'âme» dans les mystères*..., p. 276.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 287.

in the sky, and the soul was supposed to have been instructed in the profound lore of *the mots de passe*, names of the watchers and protective seals in order to be able to cross the large heavenly zone occupied by enemy forces and reach her allies<sup>36</sup>.

This way, we can precisely outline the motive of the celestial journey of the soul returning to Heaven in Hans Jonas' words as

one of the most constant common features in otherwise widely divergent gnostic systems, and its significance for the gnostic mind is enhanced by the fact that it represents a belief not only important in gnostic theory and expectation, and expressive of the conception of man's relation to the world, but of immediate practical relevance to the gnostic believer, since the meaning of *gnosis* is to prepare for the final event<sup>37</sup>.

In fact, Gnostic texts, such as the fundamental *Pistis Sophia*, contain the secret names and formulas intended to secure the transit of the soul through the doors watched by terrific guardians<sup>38</sup>.

Consequently, a mythologem of the heavenly customs and the transit of the soul emerges, based on the scheme illustrated by the hermetic *Poimandres*, but with the difference that

in Christian Gnostic texts the transit of the soul assumes more gloomy and threatening shades. Unlike the hermetic planetary governors, archons are stern, implacable controllers. One needs a special pass in order to pass the diverse planetary boundaries<sup>39</sup>.

We are therefore dealing with a double textual course, one in the Orthodox Christian system, the other in the dualistic Heterodoxy. Both courses display a considerable doctrinaire and – broadly speaking – cultural interest, however, with possible tangencies, which will be analysed forthwith.

With regard to the Orthodox textual course and the long, colorful patristic tradition of the mythologem, it should be reminded that in the strictly literary, as well as theological, context, the figure of a demon represented as an agent of individual judgment appears for the first time already in the writings of Origen. The latter was soon followed by a large group of Eastern Fathers, who – in certainly more gloomy and dramatic tones – describe the moment when the soul, having left the body, is facing its otherworldly journey.

<sup>36</sup> IDEM, *Psychnodia*, Leiden 1983 [= EPROLR, 99], p. 11 (cf. the Rum. edition: *Psicanodia*, București 1997, p. 31).

<sup>37</sup> H. JONAS, *The Gnostic Religion*, Boston 2001 [1958], p. 165.

<sup>38</sup> I. CULIANU, *Psychnodia*..., p. 13 (cf. 1997, p. 33–35).

<sup>39</sup> G. FILORAMO, *L'attesa della fine. Storia della gnosi*, Roma–Bari 1993, p. 217.



Athanasius, Ephrem and, above all, Cyril of Alexandria<sup>40</sup> give an authentic, literary substance, at times plastically coruscating, to Origen's theological speculation, to which *can be traced back the responsibility for having introduced in the patristic theology of Redemption the idea of a ransom paid to Satan, justifying it with the latter's right on sinners*<sup>41</sup>. On the other hand, Origen claims that *les juifs... avaient connaissance d'aporrêta tels que la transmigration des âmes... le contexte suggère que l'auteur fai allusion à des traditions ésotériques concernant l'ascension mystique*<sup>42</sup>. Therefore, it is since Origen, that the doctrine of the heavenly demons has solidified<sup>43</sup> and its echoes can easily be found in the works of the patristic authors mentioned above.

The Heterodox course is witnessed by Gnostic texts – especially those written by Nag Hammadi – which abundantly portray the figures of custom archons who, in the seven aeons, are in charge of interrogating each soul in order to discover whether it committed the sin on which they have jurisdiction, letting the soul pass only if it has a special watchword consisting of magic numbers and words.

I shall restrict my analysis to the texts in which the mythologem is more explicitly exposed: the *Gospel of Mary*, where, during the ascension, the soul encounters seven powers (Darkness, Desire, Ignorance, Zeal/Jealousy of Death, Kingdom of the Flesh, Foolish Wisdom of the Flesh, Wrathful Wisdom)<sup>44</sup> and the two *Apocalypses of James*, where the Gnostic is reminded that he should first deal with the multitude of the archons and then three of them which, being with the demiurge, are ready to seize the soul – while sitting as heavenly custom guards – demanding a toll<sup>45</sup>.

On the other hand, in the so-called *Psalm of the Naassenes*, known through the writings of Hippolytus, Jesus wants to come down from Heaven in order to rescue human souls and teach them the mysterious path to the Kingdom of God:

<sup>40</sup> It should be reminded that Cyril with his 14<sup>th</sup> sermon about the "journey of the soul" is the first to provide the enumeration of the customs, each related to a particular kind of sin (cf. *Cyrylli Alexandriae archiepiscopi Epistolae*, [in:] PG, vol. LXXVII, col. 1071–1090).

<sup>41</sup> J. RIVIÈRE, *Rôle du démon...*, p. 44.

<sup>42</sup> G. STROUMSA, *Paradosis. Traditions ésotériques dans le christianisme des premiers siècles*, Apocr 2, 1991, p. 148–149.

<sup>43</sup> J. DANIELOU, *Les démons de l'air dans la «Vie d'Antoine»*, SAN 38, 1956, p. 139. Moreover, Daniélou clarifies that the conception of the air as the sphere of demons cannot be related to the Old Testament: it does not appear in the Hebrew Pre-Christian apocalypses, but only in the Rabbinic Judaism and is close to the Greek, especially Hellenistic, conception of the aerial presence of *daimones* (p. 136–137).

<sup>44</sup> Cf. *L'Évangile selon Marie. (BG 1)*, ed. A. PASQUIER, Québec 1983 [= BCNH.ST, 10], p. 39–43; *The Gospel of Mary*, ed. C. TUCKETT, Oxford–New York 2007 [= OECGT], p. 175–180.

<sup>45</sup> *La première apocalypse de Jacques (NH V, 3); La seconde apocalypse de Jacques (NH V, 4)*, ed. A. VEILLEUX, Québec 1986 [= BCNH.ST, 17], p. 43.

*Therefore, send me forth, O Father, with the seals in my hand I shall descend and all aeons I shall pass through, all mysteries I shall reveal, and show the forms of the gods*<sup>46</sup>.

In reality, the *telonias* or customs are common, and, therefore, characteristic elements of the Gnostic literature. We can mention the *Apocalypse of Paul*, in which the guardian wants the apostle to show the *semion* to get access to the *ogdoade*, something which may reflect the existence of a heavenly custom in front of every Paradise<sup>47</sup>.

Having mentioned the latter Gnostic text, I can now introduce a further observation concerning the tangency of the two mentioned diverse doctrinal traditions. It has turned out that the theme of the journey to Heaven, a literary genre present in the Judaic Apocrypha, reappears in the text of Nag Hammadi, in which context the *Apocalypse of Paul* best illustrates the topic<sup>48</sup>.

Furthermore, in the Orthodox Christian tradition, the *Apocalypse of Paul* is the first text to describe, along the way followed by a living person, the path of the souls in the netherworld and also the first interested in the immediate eschatology of an individual<sup>49</sup>. In his volume, dense and extraordinarily documented, dedicated to the *Apocalypse of Paul*, Carozzi observes that it can be supposed that the analysed text was expected to represent a response to the homonymous Gnostic vision, which may also justify the use of language close to the one used by Gnostics and Hermetics, but at the same time compatible with Christian teaching<sup>50</sup>.

Obviously, this apocalyptic text, spread in all Europe thanks to its exceptionally rich tradition, is one of the oldest and most abundantly attested Apocrypha in the Rumanian area: the text, strongly contaminated and incomplete, describes an ascension to Heaven and the role of collectors played by demons<sup>51</sup>, despite the fact that the whole mentioned eschatological theme is well presented in the Old Rumanian literature. Therefore, the *Life of Saint Basil* with its celestial interpolation actually makes up, together with other works of the mentioned fathers, a textual constellation. In manuscripts or in ancient printed editions, the literary canon was enriched by homilies about the fate of the human soul after death,

<sup>46</sup> A. MASTROCINQUE, *Studi sulle gemme gnostiche*, ZPE 122, 1998, p. 115.

<sup>47</sup> *La première apocalypse de Jacques...*, p. 86.

<sup>48</sup> M. SCOPELLO, *Contes apocalyptiques et apocalypse philosophiques dans la bibliothèque de Nag Hammadi*, [in:] C. KAPPLER et al., *Apocalypses et voyages...*, p. 325. In addition, the author explains that the text of this apocalypse was probably redacted in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century by a Gnostic familiar with the intertestamentarian Judaism literature. In fact, topics of Hebrew origin related to the image of a celestial journey receive, in the *Apocalypse of Paul*, a Gnosticized interpretation (p. 332).

<sup>49</sup> C. CAROZZI, *Eschatologie et au-delà. Recherches sur l'Apocalypse de Paul*, Aix-en-Provence 1994, p. 7, 9.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 153–154.

<sup>51</sup> N. CARTOJAN, *Cărțile populare în cultura românească*, vol. I, *Epoca influenței sud-slave*, <sup>2</sup>București 1974, p. 81–92.

starting not only from Ephrem the Syrian but also from Cyril of Alexandria<sup>52</sup>, who, as mentioned above, were the first ones to enumerate the customs in connection with to human sins.

Now I would like to take up the mythologem of the "heavenly customs" again, showing how its representation coincides substantially in the two psychanodies (the folkloric and the Gnostic one) also with regard to their number: it is the magical seven for the Gnostics; a highly variable number in the Rumanian folklore, where the oldest and, above all, the iconographic attestations document (in agreement with the hagiographic narrative) the number 21<sup>53</sup>. All in all 21 is the result of the multiplication of the two magical numbers: 7 and 3.

At this stage, further clarification on the subject of the two psychanodies should be introduced. The angels and the spirits of the Orthodox text inspect souls' deeds luggage and their unique occupation is dividing the good ones from the bad ones. In this case, we are not dealing with the process of anamnesis which can be found in the Gnostic apocalypse, according to which the possession of a secret word assures the passage to knowledge<sup>54</sup>. Thus a substantial, different eschatological vision seems to create an insuperable divergence between the two, Orthodox and Heterodox, ascensions of the soul. Still, Carozzi, while talking about the confluence of the pagan and Christian traditions in the *Apocalypse of Paul*, clarifies that such an encounter rests on a *common mentality, whose expressions do not diverge, apart from their different religious objectives*<sup>55</sup>.

Moreover, Daniélou noticed that since *the habitat of the evil angels is located in the lower parts of the sky... after death, souls have to cross the demonic spheres in their journey to Paradise*, attempting to escape from the demons that try to hold them. The doctrine has been distinguished from *the one of the soul's journey through the angelic spheres that appears in the Ascension of Isaiah and was interpreted by Gnostics as planetary cosmocrators*. However, as observed by Daniélou, these two conceptions can be juxtaposed, as in the case of the Valentinian Gnostics<sup>56</sup> and in many Orthodox texts. Thus, the demons trying to impede souls' ascension and the angels guarding Heaven's door and demanding the warranty of the seal to let the souls come in, are both displayed by the same text<sup>57</sup>.

<sup>52</sup> For the success of Cyril in Rumanian area, see D. Rouso, *Studii bizantino-române...*, p. 13–14. For the impressive presence of the sermons of Ephrem and Cyril, along with Athanasius', see the catalogue of the manuscripts stored in the Library of Bucharest (cf. G. ȘTREMPEL, *Catalogul manuscriselor românești*, vol. I–IV, București 1978–1992).

<sup>53</sup> N. CARTOJAN, *Cărțile populare...*, vol. II, p. 207–209.

<sup>54</sup> C. CAROZZI, *Eschatologie et au-delà...*, p. 168–169.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 91.

<sup>56</sup> A. ORBE, *Los primeros herejes ante la persecucion. Estudios valentinianos*, vol. V, Romae 1956 [= AGr.SFTh, 83], p. 116–125.

<sup>57</sup> J. DANIÉLOU, *Théologie du judéo-christianisme...*, p. 150.

Going back to the *Life of Saint Basil*, it has been stressed above that in its original Greek redaction scholars identified two precise moments in its composition: the first one, earlier, consists of a purely hagiographical narrative, collected in *Acta Sanctorum* and dated exactly to the mid-10<sup>th</sup> century; the second, a later one, characterized by the eschatological insertion of the story of Theodora including the description of the customs and Gregory's vision of the Last Judgement, "considerably later", with the insertion of long, epic fragments in a primitive plot<sup>58</sup>.

The shift of the date of the revision to a period following the 10<sup>th</sup> century brings us, realistically, to the time in which in the Balkan Peninsula appears and flourishes the Bogomilism.

I will not enter the issue and the controversies concerning whether is possible to find any link between the various dualisms following one another from the Iranic till the Gnosticism.

Favouring phenomenological over historical information, scholars such as Puech<sup>59</sup> and Culiانو<sup>60</sup> claimed the complete independence of a system over its precedents. One can easily observe, however, that in the history of dualisms, a dualistic system establishes itself in areas where another had already established itself before.

In this respect, Puech made some concessions. Comparing Bogomilism with the antecedent ideologies and specifying that the term "Manichaeism" used by Byzantine and Medieval heresiologists is equivalent to "Dualism", without any further reference to the doctrine of Mani, Puech claims that *the formation of "Bogomilism" is for the most part due to the Paulician farmers combined in unequal dose with Manichaeist contribution*<sup>61</sup>. According to this scholar, it would be more reasonable to assume the features identifying the Bogomilism and the sects of the Archontics and Audians to be basically common to them. Developed in Syria, the sects spread then in Armenia and in the Danubian area, where traces of them can be found only until the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. They both present elements in common with the Bogomilism, such as the use of various Apocrypha, for example, and with particular emphasis on the *Ascension of Isaiah*, but they cultivate above all the myth of the origins of humanity generally adhering to the model of the Bogomilist legends. Besides, it was Cumont who pointed out the fact that the Manichaeist readings comprised a great number of Christian Apocrypha; therefore,

<sup>58</sup> G. DA COSTA-LOUILLET, *Saints de Constantinople...*, p. 496.

<sup>59</sup> H.-C. PUECH, *Cosmas le prêtre et le bogomilisme*, [in:] *A Le traité contre le Bogomiles de Cosmas le Prêtre*, ed. et trans. A. VAILLANT, H.-C. PUECH, Paris 1945, p. 129–346.

<sup>60</sup> I. COULIANO, *I miti dei dualismi occidentali. Dai sistemi gnostici al mondo moderno*, Milano 1989. Related and innovative is the method adopted by Culiانو, who builds his analysis in accordance with rigorous structuralistic criteria and follows it without looking for ideal "invariants", but applying to the variants of the Gnostic myths, "bundles of opposition" in order to define the spectrum of action.

<sup>61</sup> H.-C. PUECH, *Cosmas le prêtre...*, p. 325.

it is difficult to assess to what extent such works were rewritten by the innovators who had adopted them<sup>62</sup>.

From the reference to the Bogomilism, we can infer that the fortune of the above-mentioned dualistic doctrine would have had the effect to reactivate and modernize the mythologem of the Gnostic ascension of the soul, possibly survived in the South-Eastern European area in the form of the oral tradition<sup>63</sup> and introduced in the saint's life in the same way as the references to the historical events (Rus' attack against the Byzantine Empire, Hungarian invasion) coeval to the writing of the text.

Once identified the possible origins of this particular ascension of the soul, another problematic aspect remains to be explained, that is the folklorization of the same mythologem.

Interestingly, despite the fact that this hagiographic story – with its eschatological interpolation, having often an autonomous diffusion<sup>64</sup> – was very well known in the whole Orthodox Slavic-Byzantine area, the folkloric reflection of a belief in the customs is attested only in the Rumanian area. By referring to the fact that in European folklore we can find survivals of apocalypses and Judaic, Christian or Heretic Apocrypha, Eliade underscores how a mythological motif, frequent among Mandaeans and Manicheans but of more likely Sumerian origin,

still plays an essential part in the mythology of death and the funeral rituals of the Rumanians and other peoples of eastern Europe. Mandaean and Manichaean writings speak of 'custom

<sup>62</sup> F. CUMONT, *À propos des écritures manichéennes*, RHR 78, 1920, p. 10–11. Cumont observes that the Manichaeism could have possibly lasted longer than expected (the 6<sup>th</sup> in the Latin world and the 9<sup>th</sup> in the East) and develops an hypothesis according to which the Manichaean literature survived secretly until the middle of the Western Middle Ages.

<sup>63</sup> M. Eliade claims that in southeastern Europe *certain Bogomil conceptions have been transmitted by Apocrypha and still survive in folklore... In following the model of certain Gnostic sects, the Bogomils probably reinforced the dualism by enhancing the Devil's prestige* (cf. M. ELIADE, *Storia delle credenze e delle idee religiose*, vol. III, *Da Maometto all'età delle riforme*, Firenze 1983, p. 203). When it comes to the presence of the Bogomils, especially Bulgarian, in Rumanian territories, it is documented by Cartoian who reminds how their migration in the 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> centuries originated, initially, as a result of the anti-Turkish revolt and later under the pressure of Franciscan missionaries (N. CARTOIAN, *Cărțile populare...*, vol. I, p. 39–51). Also worth mentioning is an interesting description of the miniatures, certainly Bogomil, discovered in the Rumanian area and dated back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, in G. CANTACUZINO, *Les tombes de bogomiles découvertes en Roumanie et leur rapport avec les communautés hérétiques byzantines et balkaniques*, [in:] *Actes du XIV Congrès International des Études Byzantines*, Bucarest, 6–12 septembre 1971, ed. M. BERZA, E. STĂNESCU, Bucarest 1975, p. 515–528.

<sup>64</sup> It should be noted that this phenomenon is the answer to the general laws suchlike which in the West multiplies from the 12<sup>th</sup> century and sees the eschatological part gaining an autonomous popularity. For the purpose of my discourse, it seems particularly relevant Braet's observation according to which the *Apocalypse of Paul* would have undoubtedly contributed more than any other work to *accredit the subject of the eschatological journey* (cf. H. BRAET, *Les visions de l'invisible...*, p. 409–411).

houses' at each of the seven heavens and of the 'customs officers' who examine the soul's 'merchandise' (i.e. its religious works and merits) in the course of its heavenly journey. Now in the religious folklore and funerary customs of the Rumanians there is mention of a "road of death" through the seven 'custom houses of the atmosphere' (*vămile văzduhului*)<sup>65</sup>.

Another similar critical perspective was adopted by S. Lupaşcu in his extensive study – by then I had published the first version of my paper – which confirms and supports my conclusions illustrated in these lines. Lupaşcu moves, in fact, from the observation that not only *can we point out the Biblical (Apocrypha-pseudoepigraphical) and Balkan Gnostic mediation in the construction and transmission of the heavenly customs doctrine*, but also that

Gnostic hypothesis allows to exegetically set the Rumanian folkloristic narration in the passage of the soul towards heavenly customs in the vast setting of the Gnostic texts, which describe the path followed by the souls after the thanatic threshold.

The simplification of the old Gnostic scheme, specifies Lupaşcu, is determined by a long chain, partially unknown, through which, in the oral register, the Gnostic wisdom was transmitted from the Northern African world of the Hellenistic period to the Medieval Rumanian peasant world.

The conclusion reached by the scholar conforms to the results of my research, as it states that

folkloric imagination on heavenly customs has its roots in the Gnostic imagination of aeons and archons, the passage of the initiates through the planetary spheres and the intermediate heavens<sup>66</sup>.

As regards the Balkan zone, it should be recalled that if in the Greek folklore it is believed that unbaptized new-born babies become "custom officers", i.e. little demons that turn back to torment the living<sup>67</sup>, in Bulgarian folklore it is believed that certain angels are guardians at the heavenly customs<sup>68</sup>, whilst the soul is expected to pass through 24 little doors to enter the Paradise, and at each

<sup>65</sup> M. ELIADE, *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. II, *From Gautama Buddha to the Triumph of Christianity*, trans. W.R. TRASK, Chicago–London 1982 [1978], p. 406 (cf. the Italian ed.: *Storia delle credenze e delle idee religiose*, vol. II, *Da Gautama Buddha al trionfo del cristianesimo*, Firenze 1980, p. 404).

<sup>66</sup> S. LUPAŞCU, *In the Ninth Heaven: the Gnostic Background of the Rumanian Folklore Tradition of "Heaven's Customs-houses"*, SEE 30, 2003, p. 131–146 (cf. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/revista?codigo=10284> [27 II 2019]).

<sup>67</sup> C. STEWART, *Demons and the Devil. Moral Imagination in Modern Greek Culture*, Princeton N.J. 1992 [= PMGS, 38], p. 196–197. The scholar makes reference to the folkloristic texts that can be found in N. ПОЛИТΗΣ, *Παραδόσεις*, vol. I, Αθήνα 1965, p. 608–609.

<sup>68</sup> Д. МАРИНОВ, *Избрани произведения*, vol. I, *Народна вяра и религиозни народни обичаи*, София 1981, p. 250–251.



one to account for his actions<sup>69</sup>. It seems that in both cases we can identify the underlying memory of the mythologem, which is not displayed as such explicitly in the beliefs related to the journey to the netherworld. In the paper dedicated to the "path to the netherworld"<sup>70</sup> in the traditional vision of East-Central Europe, Francis Conte meticulously describes the stages of the journey to the netherworld without mentioning belief in the heavenly customs. So the question arises of why has it taken roots so long and deeply in the Rumanians' ultramundane mythology; and why did they adopt such a mythologem which was preserved in the rest of south-eastern Europe exclusively in the written tradition, even if, on a more general level, the presence – common to the Bulgarian folklore – of the Dualistic elements characteristic of the cosmogonic narrations is clearly recognizable<sup>71</sup>.

According to M. Eliade, *For example, it is significant that the biblical cosmogony vanished from European folklore. The only 'popular' cosmogony known in southeastern Europe is dualistic in structure: it involves both God and the Devil. In the European traditions in which this cosmogony is not documented, there is no cosmogonic myth*<sup>72</sup>.

In this regard, the narrative acting, in the text, as a frame for the description of the customs seems to me illuminating. As has been mentioned earlier, the customs exist since they were created by fallen angels, stopped mid-air by God's will. Now, this subdivision of Satan's angels which, expelled along with their lord, came to a stop in the abysses, on earth or in the air, appears in the same terms in the *Legend of the Tiberia Sea*, one of the Middle Bulgarian texts which best illustrates the Bogomil dualism<sup>73</sup>. Is it possible to assign to the receptiveness of the Rumanians such a value that it can justify the conservation of the Gnostic mythologem in the oral dimension?<sup>74</sup>

<sup>69</sup> *Етнография на България*, vol. III, *Духовна култура*, ed. И. ГЕОРГИЕВА et al., София 1985, p. 34.

<sup>70</sup> F. CONTE, *Le chemin vers 'l'autre monde' dans la vision traditionnelle des paysans d'Europe centrale et orientale*, RES 69, 1997, p. 281–297. The monographic volume is dedicated to "Vieux-croyants et sectes russes du XVII siècle à nos jours".

<sup>71</sup> A detailed presentation of such a legendary *corpus*, with inevitable references to the circulation of the Bogomil literature in Rumanian area together with an extensive critic bibliography is offered by G. VLĂDUȚESCU, *Filosofia legendelor cosmogonice românești*, București 1982.

<sup>72</sup> M. ELIADE, *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. II..., p. 405 (M. ELIADE, *Storia delle credenze...*, vol. II, p. 403–404).

<sup>73</sup> J. IVANOV, *Livres et légendes bogomiles (aux sources du catharisme)*, trans. M. RIBEYROL, praef. R. NELLI, Paris 1976, p. 272–273.

<sup>74</sup> A parallel which confirms the mentioned hypothesis can be found in the Coptic area. There, the Egyptian traditions concerning the journey of the soul to the netherworld together with the trials to which it is going to be subjected are preserved in spite of the Christianization. Many Coptic literary works continue having interest in the ultramundane life keep using the fantastic details in which the memory of ancient beliefs survives. (A. VAN LANTSCHOOT, *Révélations de Macaire et de Marc de Tarmaqa sur le sort de l'âme après la mort*, Mu 53, 1950, p. 159–166).



The survival of the elements at great chronological intervals does not seem to pose any real obstacle. In fact, it is always Eliade to underscore how the persistence of the Manichean topics enters simultaneously between the components of the Armenian Paulicianism (7<sup>th</sup> century) and the Bulgarian Bogomilism (10<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>75</sup>. It should be reminded that the presence of the Paulicians as an Armenian sect is attested until the modern era, since in 1837 a copy of *The Key of Truth*, a Paulician sacred book from the 9<sup>th</sup> century, was found in a village in Russian Armenia. In fact, Christianity was introduced in Armenia starting from Edessa, where, however, it was received in the form of Adoptionism.

This means that also Armenians, being simply Christian, are considered Heretics and banished from the city; therefore, along with Gnostics and Marcionists, they take shelter on the mountains, where they become a real sect. From there, they are deported by the Byzantine emperor to the Balkans, mostly in Bulgaria, the country in which the Bogomilism would soon flourish<sup>76</sup>.

On the other hand, Runciman observes that the Heretic dualistic tradition was preserved principally thanks to the existence of a literature of the Gnostics, who tended to write books on visions of the famous personalities (such as Enoch, Isaia, Baruch or some apostle) placing them in the skies described following the Gnostic disposition.

As a consequence, it happens that Bogomils adapt and modify popular Greek legends of Gnostic origin: this way a literature of Slavonic translations, with a strong heretic colouring, was born<sup>77</sup>, although, it would be wrong to label it as a Bogomil literature, since its richest flourishing took place in Russia, where the Bogomilism has never arrived<sup>78</sup>.

The question remains, however, connected to a specific Gnostic presence in the Rumanian area only generally feasible when we talk about Pre-Bogomilist Dualisms (Archontics or Paulicians) in the Danubian area.

Already at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was noticed that the Gnosticism, probably brought by Syrian elements, was generally documented in the Dalmatic-Danubian area<sup>79</sup> by the presence of gems with Gnostic inscriptions. More specifically what was affirmed later, namely that in Transylvania and Oltenia there were

<sup>75</sup> M. ELIADE, *Storia delle credenze...*, vol. III, p. 394.

<sup>76</sup> *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. V, ed. M. ELIADE, New York 1987, p. 573.

<sup>77</sup> Speaking of Slavonic translations, M. Garzaniti made an interesting observation about pilgrimage narratives in the Holy Land as a vehicle for the diffusion in the Slavia Orthodoxa of themes present in the apocryphal literature: *Quoi qu'il en soit, nous pouvons dire avec certitude qu'à travers la littérature de pèlerinage de nombreux motifs apocryphes sont entrés dans la culture slave*. M. GARZANITI, *Les apocryphes dans la littérature slave ecclésiastique de pèlerinage en Palestine (XII<sup>e</sup>-XV<sup>e</sup> s.)*, Apocr 9, 1998, p. 157-173.

<sup>78</sup> S. RUNCIMAN, *Le manichéisme médiéval. L'hérésie dualiste dans le christianisme*, trans. S. PÉTRÉMENT, J. MARTY, Paris 1949, p. 26, 78.

<sup>79</sup> V. PÂRVAN, *Contribuții epigrafice la istoria creștinismului daco-roman*, București 1911, p. 25-29.

found Abrasax gems<sup>80</sup>, some of which to be connected with the Basilidian Gnostics of the 3<sup>rd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>81</sup>. It should be noticed that *abrasax* (also spelled *abraxas*) is the most important magic word known by the Fathers of the Church as the word used by the Gnostics, especially by Basilides, to designate the ruler of the 365 heavens – diverse and superior to the Creator.

The attribution to the Gnostics is principally due to the fact that the magic word *Abrasax*, recurring on many gems, is frequent in the works of the Fathers of the Church, according to whom it was the name given by the Gnostics to the ruler of the 365 heavens, considering that his name indicated the number 365<sup>82</sup>.

Speaking of Gnosticism in the Rumanian area, we should mention a clarifying text written by Zevin Rusu<sup>83</sup>, who attempted to give his own interpretation of one of the most enigmatic works of the Late Danubian Graecity: the so-called *Glycon of Constanța*, which had been given multiple possible interpretations, none of which imposed as conclusively illuminating, and which was put by Rusu in relation to the Ophite Gnostics. We are referring to a sculpture which, found in Tomis and being unique in the world<sup>84</sup>, represents a strange representation of a maned-serpent, upright on its coils and placed on a round pedestal, both carved in the same block of stone<sup>85</sup>. First, archaeologist A. Clucer<sup>86</sup> linked the statue to the cult of the snake god Glycon, founded by Alexander of Abonuteichos in Paphlagonia in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century (circa 140) and active at least until the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. The most information about the cult comes from Lucian of Samosata, who talks negatively about it in *Alexander The False Prophet*, from which we can infer that the fame of the serpent was spread in the regions of Bithynia, Thrace and Galatia, while, at the same time, the first commemorative coins, painted plaques and bronze or silver statues start to be made<sup>87</sup>. The cult of the false prophet soon arrives at Rome and

<sup>80</sup> Abrasax was claimed to be actually Mithra, whilst the Gnostic gems would have been inspired by some solar cults such as Mithraism. Later, however, it was believed that these talismans, preferably called “magical” since then, and the magical papyri, would have been made by sorcerers of the imperial age, setting aside the hypothesis of a Gnostic or Mithaistic origins. (A. MASTROCINQUE, *Le gemme gnostiche*, [in:] *Sylloge Gemmarum Gnosticarum*, p. 1, Roma 2003 [= BNum. Monografia, 8.2.1], p. 66–67, cf. <http://www.numismaticadellostato.it/> [17 I 2019]).

<sup>81</sup> D. PROTASE, *Problema continuității în Dacia în lumina arheologiei și numismaticii*, București 1966, p. 142, n. 322.

<sup>82</sup> A. MASTROCINQUE, *Le gemme gnostiche...*, p. 66, 100.

<sup>83</sup> Z. RUSU, *Der Kult der Schlange von Tomis*, D 6, 1981–1982, p. 133–160.

<sup>84</sup> Z. COVACEF, *Șarpele Glycon – un artefact unic în lume* (<https://www.historia.ro/sectiune/timp-liber/articol/sarpele-Glycon-un-artefact-unic-in-lume> [17 I 2019]).

<sup>85</sup> M. ALEXANDRESCU-VIANU, *The Treasury of Sculptures from Tomis. The Cult Inventory of a Temple*, Da N.S. 53, 2009, p. 30–31.

<sup>86</sup> A. CLUCER, *Cultul lui Glycon la Tomis și la Apulum*, Apu 6, 1967, p. 611–617.

<sup>87</sup> The excavations in the Ancient Agora of Athens have brought to light small bronze statues featuring Glycon, very similar to the statue of Tomis and the one that appears on the coins. Its cult had

its provinces: Latin inscriptions found in Moesia Superior and two altars in Dacia confirm its presence along the Danube<sup>88</sup>, which is why it was believed that the marble statue found in Constanța demonstrates the probable existence of a public cult in ancient Tomis. The oracle of Glycon represents a singular religious creation related to the iatromantic cult of Asclepius, a manifestation and personification of a “new Asclepius”, denominated Glycon, “the Sweet”. Originally born in Thessaly, recognized as a divinity in the 6<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> century BC, Asclepius becomes a healing divinity par excellence of the Greek-Roman Pantheon, with a serpent which is his primary totem animal, and adopts the role of a spiritual guide for all the believers in all their life situations<sup>89</sup>.

In Dacia, Asclepius was frequently worshipped together with other gods in order to guarantee the divine protection<sup>90</sup>. An example comes from Apulum<sup>91</sup> (Alba Iulia), where undoubted evidence of the cult of Mitra and Liber Pater exist, but also cults of other gods are mentioned, included Asclepius. The conquest of Dacia favoured the introduction of immigrants, bearing memory of their place of origin. It is evidently relevant, thus, the inscription that comes from the *castrum* of the Legio XIII Gemina in Apulum: “Glyconi/M(arcus)/Onesas/iusso dei/l(ibens) p(osuit)”. Glycon shows here one of the most representative examples of the impact of Rome upon the cult of Asclepius<sup>92</sup>. On the marble objects and coins of Tomis, there is a rampant serpent with raised human face depicted, which corresponds with the iconography representing at that time Sarapis-Agathodemonic<sup>93</sup>.

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followers also in Athens. The reduced dimension of the discovered figures seems to reflect the fact that they were made to be carried as an amulet providing the protection of New-Asclepius. Cf. R. LOUIS, *Le serpent Glycon d'Abônouteichos à Athènes et Artémis d'Éphèse à Rome*, CRAIBL 125, 1981, p. 513–514.

<sup>88</sup> S. CHIȘ, *Cultul șarpelui Glycon în imperiul roman*, BCȘS 1, 1995, p. 97–101.

<sup>89</sup> A. Magri points out that the Perates identify Christ with Asclepius, probably considered His pagan incarnation *ante literam*. Both gods possessed almost identical attributes, their activities analogous and their terrestrial lives presented similarities. *For a just conversed pagan, a sincretism of that kind did not present nothing suspicious*. Cf. A. MAGRI, *Le serpent guérisseur et l'origine de la gnose ophite*, RHR 224, 2007, p. 395–434 (here p. 58, cf. <https://journals.openedition.org/rhr/5351> [18 I 2019]).

<sup>90</sup> In Dacia, the presence of a sacred earthenware decorated with serpents is documented. Cf. D. ALICU, *Vases décorés de serpents, découverts à Sarmizegetusa*, L 39, 1980, p. 717–725, [www.jstor.org/stable/41531904](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41531904) [22 I 2019].

<sup>91</sup> *The conurbation of Apulum was one of the most important political and cultural centers of Roman Dacia in the period of 106–271 [...] Although a large part of the city's archaeological heritage is related to its religious life – having the most significant repertory of this kind in Roman Dacia*, C. SZABÓ, *Discovering the Gods in Apulum. Historiography and New Perspectives*, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265736195> [20 XI 2018].

<sup>92</sup> G. VAN DER PLOEG, *The Impact of the Roman Empire on the Cult of Asclepius*, University of Warwick 2016 (PhD Thesis), p. 209–211 (<http://webcat.warwick.ac.uk/record=b2870430~S1> [29 XII 2018]).

<sup>93</sup> D. OGDEN, *Drakon. Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, Oxford 2013, p. 330.

It should be recalled that initially the cult shows up as a normal cult of Asclepius with his sacred serpent, but soon it becomes a mystery cult. The symbol of a serpent was used by innumerable cults:

La stratification de ses significations religieuses le rend présent, ...dans presque tous les rituels des divinités anciennes. Mais l'un d'eux était probablement plus populaire que les autres: cela aiderait ainsi à expliquer l'identification par les Pérates du Logos et du reptile. Il s'agit du culte d'Asclépios, le dieu guérisseur le plus connu de la culture gréco-romaine, qui atteint le sommet de sa popularité précisément au II<sup>e</sup> siècle... Au II<sup>e</sup> siècle, qui dit serpent, dit Asclépios: c'est surtout ce culte qui met le reptile «à la mode».

Besides, Magri's article remarks that *il est vraisemblable que les Pérates aient conçu une forme de syncrétisme entre le christianisme et le culte de ce dieu grec, origine de l'ophitisme*<sup>94</sup>.

According to G. Sfameni Gasparro *iconography of the new Asclepius is testified by the famous statue discovered in Tomis, the statues (-amulet?) found in Athens and an unusual gem in which, an image of Decano Cnubis... having an analogous serpentine shape is accompanied by the name of Glycon*<sup>95</sup>.

A. Mastrocinque claims that:

In the same Anatolian regions in which *Glycon* was worshipped, there was also the cult of a serpent of Gnostic Ophites, and some Christianized sects identified the snake with Jesus... The sacred serpent worshipped by the majority of Gnostic Judeans and pagans was a luminous snake with the lion's head *Chnoumis*, that is Egyptian creator god *Chnoum*, identified with the Hebrew god, a deity of the water and of the light. A gem portrays this god and puts him beside the name of the Hebrew god, *Iao*, and the name of *Glycon*, confirming the existence of the forms of contact and identification<sup>96</sup>.

Numerous texts and astrological remnants and, above all, many magical gems depicting Chnoubis or Chnoumis, the strange divine figure of Egyptian tradition: a serpent with a radial head of lion, which was an astral decan<sup>97</sup>, a creator god who

<sup>94</sup> A. MAGRI, *Le serpent guérisseur...*, p. 35–36, 56, 58, 65.

<sup>95</sup> G. SFAMENI GASPARRO, *Oracoli e teologia: praxis oracolare e riflessioni*, Ker 26, 2013, p. 139–156 (in particular *L'oracolo di Glycon: un falso storico o una fonte di "oracoli teologici"?*).

<sup>96</sup> A. MASTROCINQUE, *Alessandro di Abonouteichos e il culto di Asclepio*, [in:] *Il culto di Asclepio nell'area mediterranea*, Atti del Convegno Internazionale – Agrigento 20–22 novembre 2005, ed. E. DE MIRO, G. SFAMENI GASPARRO, V. CALÌ, Roma 2009, p. 195–196.

<sup>97</sup> The Decans were divinities of the fixed stars, who ruled over a third of any astrological sign, that is 10 degrees of the wheel which Chaldeans used to divide into 360 degrees. There were 36 Decans, who influenced the life on earth for 10 days every year. In an astrological treatise attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, Chnoumis is the first of the sign of the lion and is described as a leonine serpent with a radiate head and body wound up in coils. (A. MASTROCINQUE, *Un'altra immagine transculturale: Chnoubis*, [in:] *Images et religion dans l'antiquité gréco-romaine. Acts of Images et religion dans l'antiquité gréco-romaine*, Roma, 11–13 dicembre 2003, Napoli 2008, p. 391–397).

provokes the ebb of the Nile, identified with a biblical Creator and, later, with the snake of the terrestrial Paradise. Chnoubis is composed of two elements: a serpent raised on two coils in the form of a number eight and a radiated lion's head. His images are sometimes depicted over a circular base, which could be interpreted as an altar, like the ones with serpent represented on the coins from the Hellenistic or Imperial period<sup>98</sup>. It was observed that the name of the Hebrew god YHWH resembled an HYWAH, "animal": there are traces of this speculation in the Gnostic treaties in which the Hebrew god, called Ialdabaoth, together with other Archons of the planetary spheres, had the form of an animal, and in particular a lionine form. We should add to that the fact that there was, among the Gnostics, a common belief that the Cosmocrator, Ruler of the world, had a shape of a serpent: *in the Apocryphon of John (chap. 10) it can be read that Ialdabaoth 'had the form of a dragon, the face of a lion with fulminant fiery eyes...'* It sounds like a perfect description of Chnoubis<sup>99</sup>.

Furthermore, Mastrocinque points out that the sorcerers of polytheistic-Egyptian, or Egyptianising, inspiration prescribed amulets with Chnoubis and those who used to wear them must have been mostly polytheistic, while we do not know whether the Gnostic speculations determined the production of gems depicting Chnoubis. On the other hand, the diffusion of the symbol of Chnoubis could also suggest that the leonine serpent was present in the doctrines and religious practices of the members of Judaizing or Christianizing sects, to which it should be added that the typology of a serpent seems typical of gems coming from Egypt<sup>100</sup>. The Decan of the Lion was perhaps an image of the incarnation of Asclepius, which was a serpent Glycon worshipped in Abonuteichos.

All the observations above allow us to establish a connection between Chnoubis and the Glycon of Constanța, in which we can preferably see a proof of its cult in Tomis, being its identification with the serpent Glycon all in all accepted by the majority of researchers. Nevertheless, Cecilia Pașca, a museographer, has recently recalled another hypothesis according to which we would be dealing with a depiction of the Ophite serpent: this conclusion *results from the fact that the serpent Glycon could be represented in every form; the Ophite serpent, instead, only in the form discovered at Tomis*<sup>101</sup>.

It should be noted that, always in Constanța, in a tomb of the 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, was found a ring decorated with a Gnostic gem, bearing a lion-headed radiated serpent, that is Chnoubis. Its presence is related to the penetration of syncretic cults of Egyptian origin in the lower basin of the Danube. In his article,

<sup>98</sup> A. MASTROCINQUE, *Le gemme gnostiche...*, p. 82.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 79.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 79–80.

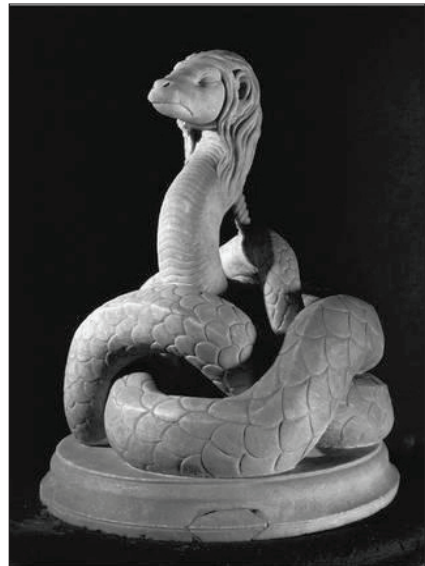
<sup>101</sup> C. PAȘCA, *O reprezentare unică a Șarpelui Glykon, expusă la Muzeul de Istorie* (cf. <http://www.telegrafonline.ro/1169503200/articol/19121> [28 XII 2018]).

R. Ocheșeanu points out that the mentioned penetration was favoured mostly by trade relations with Egypt in the Hellenistic-Roman age: the first evidence of the Egyptian cult in the danubian region dates back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, while the presence of a Gnostic gem of the 3<sup>rd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD is rather related to a possible coming of Roman soldiers, perhaps of Gnostic faith, arrived from the Christian environment of Syria or Egypt. According to the scholar

Chnoubis was assimilated in early Christian environments. His cult seems thus related to the diffusion of Christianity in the 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC, while his image becomes one of the main mystical Gnostic-Ophite symbols.<sup>102</sup>

Assuming Z. Rusus’s hypothesis as a basis, we should remark the acute intuition by which this scholar first, regardless the information he did not possess, connects the Glycon to the Ophite Gnostics attributing them an agathodaemonic function. The interpretation, in itself suggestive and stimulating, becomes convincing in a concrete way if we compare Glycon to the gems of the Gnostic amulet depicting a lion-headed serpent, which in some cases was put over an altar or a base – exactly as in the case of the Glycon of Constanța (cf. *infra*, fig. 1, 2 and 3) – possibly an evidence of the fact that we are dealing with the cult statue reproduced on the gems<sup>103</sup>.

The convergence between these images is clear, starting from the strange maned-head, in this case, an ovine head: its presence would document a deeply-rooted presence of the Ophites in the Rumanian lands. It should be restated that, as was said above about the proximity between

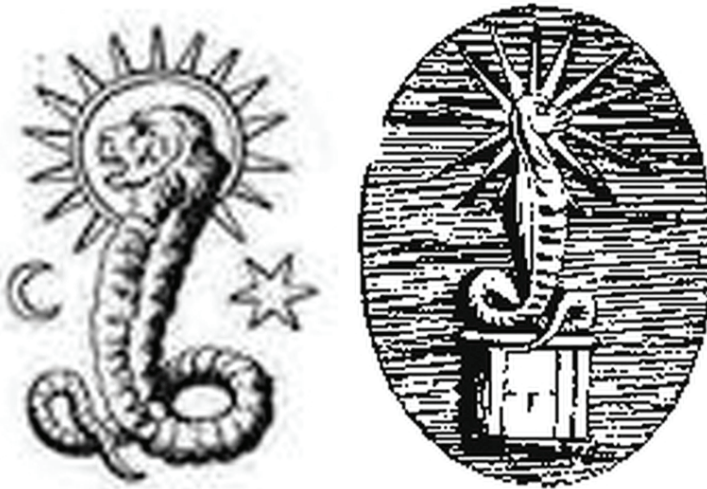


**Fig. 1.** A marble statue of Glycon, Museum of National History and Archeology in Constanța (Photography by CRISTIAN CHIRITA, 2009. License Creative Commons BY-SA 3.0)

<sup>102</sup> R. OCHEȘEANU, *O gemă gnostică descoperită la Constanța*, Pon 4, 1971, p. 303–309. What is interesting, here, is Ocheșeanu’s conclusion that the owner of the amulets could have been one of the first Paleochristians, whose presence would be attested in Tomis, since *the rest of the funeral inventory certainly indicated the fact that the dead was not a Greek-Roman but an autochthonous element*.

<sup>103</sup> A. MASTROCINQUE, *Le gemme gnostiche...*, p. 82; *Sylloge Gemmarum Gnosticarum*, p. 1..., Catalogo, fig. 158, p. 249; fig. 183, p. 260 (images courtesy of the Italian Ministry of Arts and Cultural Heritage, Roman National Museum, Medagliere).





**Fig. 2–3.** Gnostic gems (*Sylloge Gemmarum Gnosticarum*, p. 1..., Catalogo, fig. 158, p. 249; fig. 183, p. 260. Authorized reproduction)

Bogomils and Archontics, the presence of this sect is attested in the Danubian area until the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The testimony of Epiphanius demonstrates that we are dealing with a system akin to the Ophite one, emphasizing the negative role of the Archons related to the even planets: during the ascension across different heavens, the soul had to overcome a number of obstacles interposed by the same Archons, which is why the sect probably considered so important the magical-salvific vehicles that helped the believers to overcome Archons' hostility<sup>104</sup>.

Thus, however, we are coming to justify also the specific receptiveness of the Rumanian folklore toward the Gnostic mythologem concealed under the Orthodox one and preserved by the oral tradition or recognised as an element of a collective religious memory.

The course seems thus to come to its conclusion: the mythologem associated with the ascension of the soul, despite its very antique origin and its presence as a citation in the writings of the Fathers of the Eastern Church, such as Ephrem the Syrian or Cyril of Alexandria, emerges with time displaying specific connotations, thanks to which it enters the Gnostic imaginary, to be refracted later in Christianized key in the hagiographic-eschatological narrative hinged on S. Basil the Younger.

<sup>104</sup> *Enciclopedia delle religioni*, vol. I, ed. M. GOZZINI, Firenze 1970 (s.v. *arcontici*).



From here, with a spectacular diffusion, the mythologem of Theodora's heavenly customs is attested by tens of codices from the whole Orthodox area, but it is the Rumanian area only to retransmit and rework, also at folkloric level, the suggestive belief in the heavenly customs. Dualistic memory, oral tradition, and Orthodox hagiography seem to blend, at last, without any contradiction into an extraordinarily vivid and imaginative psychanody.

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**Abstract:** The article shows that the mythologem associated with the ascension of the soul, despite its very antique origin and its presence as a citation in the writings of the Fathers of the Eastern Church, emerges with time displaying specific connotations, thanks to which it enters the Gnostic imaginary, to be refracted later in Christianized key in the hagiographic-eschatological narrative hinged on S. Basil the Younger.

Saint Basil, who lived in the 10<sup>th</sup> century and died probably circa 950, becomes a protagonist of a hagiographic narration. In fact, although the manuscript tradition received by *Acta Sanctorum*

does not diverges from the canonical elements displayed by the life of a saint, a conspicuous number of Greek testimonies introduces in the narration attributed to Gregory (a disciple of the saint), an eschatological part that includes a description of the afterworld, of the Hell and the punishments received by the sinners, together with textual inserts, considered to be later than the "life" as such. The narrative begins with the story of Theodora, who describes to Gregory the path of her soul through 21 heavenly customs.

The mythologem of Theodora's heavenly customs is attested by tens of codices from the whole Orthodox area, but it is the Rumanian area only to retransmit and rework, also at folkloric level, the suggestive belief in the heavenly customs. Dualistic memory, oral tradition, and Orthodox hagiography seem to blend, at last, without any contradiction into an extraordinarily vivid and imaginative psychanody.

**Keywords:** heavenly customs, *vămile văzduhului*, orthodoxy, heterodoxy, *Life of Saint Basil the Younger*, Rumanian funeral ceremony, Rumanian folklore

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