

ALICE ISABELLA SULLIVAN, *Europe's Eastern Christian Frontier (Past Imperfect)*. Leeds: ARC Humanities Press 2024. xxix, 99 pp. – ISBN 978-1-64-189079-3

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Objective treatment of the medieval history and culture of Moldavia is complicated by conflict of interests among various Eastern European nations. Different historiographic traditions interpret the available sources in very different ways and emphasise very different cultural and political aspects of Moldavia's past. Thus, studying medieval Moldavia involves not only a variety of primary sources, but also the absorption of secondary literature written in several modern languages that reflect different scholarly approaches. Some Eastern European nations, e.g. the Romanians, Moldovans, Bulgarians, or Ukrainians, consider Moldavia's cultural and/or linguistic heritage an integral part of their own heritage, while for other ones, such as the Hungarians and Poles, medieval Moldavia played a non-negligible role in their own history.

Medieval Moldavia is the subject of a short but very nicely produced book by ALICE ISABELLA SULLIVAN, a North American art historian of Romanian parentage. The title *Europe's Eastern Christian Frontier* not only reflects the current fashion of broadly conceived titles for narrowly focused texts, but also anticipates the book's main – and very interesting – thesis, which I will comment on later. The author's objective, described at the very beginning, is quite modest: to provide an introduction to the medieval history of Moldavia for Anglo-American readers, who due to language barriers have no access to the primary and secondary literature on the subject. A Central European such as myself finds it interesting to read that the pre-modern history of Eastern Europe (meaning east of the former Iron Curtain) is 'relatively unknown outside local circles'. At this point (p. ix), SULLIVAN indicates that she will base her account on the Romanian perspective. This is evident throughout, not only in the use of secondary literature written exclusively in Romanian (or English), but also in the adoption of Romanian spelling for some non-Romanian names.¹

1. E.g. *Halici* for Halyč in Ukraine, or *Grigorie Țamblac*, in English-speaking literature usually known as Gregory Tsamblak.

The book is structured very neatly, with an introduction and three main chapters, supplemented by a detailed chronological table of Moldavian history between 1359 and 1527 and a list of rulers up to 1546. An annotated bibliography at the end has the noble purpose of encouraging further reading. There are many illustrations, including maps and plans of churches. In general, one gets an impression of fieldwork reliability – most of the photographs were taken by the author herself, and she cites as primary sources mostly manuscripts, not printed editions.

SULLIVAN notes from the outset that the concept of ‘Middle Ages’ is problematic for a region whose dynamic differed from that of Western Europe. Although *medieval* Moldavia can be temporally bracketed between ca. 1350 and 1504 (death of Voivode Stephen the Great), the author rightly mentions that the beginning of Phanariote rule (1711) forms a more important break in the country’s (political and cultural) history. SULLIVAN’s introduction presents Moldavia as a crossroads between Latin and Byzantine cultures, as well as part of the spheres of interest of Hungary, Poland, and the Ottoman Empire. The various names used for Moldavia in documents issued by the princely chancery reflect this multipolar political landscape.²

The book is divided into three chapters, with a certain build-up toward the third one, which contains the author’s main thesis. Chapter One, ‘Formative Periods’, speaks of the establishment of the Moldavian state, church, and ‘spiritual identity’ up to the recognition of the Ottoman overlordship by Voivode Peter Aron following the conquest of Constantinople (1453). Here, SULLIVAN seems to emphasise the Western orientation of the early Moldavian state, especially on the political and architectural levels – but with some Eastern features.

Chapter Two, ‘Diplomacy and Military Encounters’, describes the consequences of allegiance to the Ottoman Empire. Just as the Moldavian rulers had previously been involved in Polish politics, they now became supporters of the sultan. The author describes Voivode Stephen the Great’s attempt to free himself from Ottoman tutelage through his relations with Christian countries – not only with the traditional suzerains (Hungary and Poland), but also with the rising power of Muscovy, where one of Stephen’s daughters got married.

2. The names are in the genitive case, which is common in charters. This may be a little confusing to non-specialists.

The most interesting chapter is the third, 'Ideologies and Patronage', which is based on the interpretation of the title *царь* (tsar)³ given to Stephen the Great since 1473 in his Annals and in the Gospel codex of the Humor Monastery (p. 50). SULLIVAN connects this title with Stephen's marriage to Maria of Mangup (1473), daughter of a Greek princely family from the Crimea and distant scion of the last Byzantine imperial house (p. 53).⁴ According to the author, it was at this time that Stephen made an important ideological turn from the originally syncretic (Latin-Eastern) character of Moldavian culture to a preference for the Byzantine tradition. SULLIVAN does not openly say that Stephen aspired to become a political successor to the Byzantine emperors, but acknowledges that he saw himself as ruler of the last Orthodox Christian stronghold on a civilisational frontier. This is evidenced by depictions of the conquest of Constantinople in Moldavian frescoes, by generous patronage of the monasteries on Mount Athos (pp. 64–67), and by references to Emperor Constantine the Great's victory at the Milvian Bridge in Moldavian annals. Truce with the Ottomans (1486) and the achievement of a large degree of autonomy for Moldavia brought about cultural efflorescence in the last part of Stephen's reign (p. 33).

SULLIVAN follows in detail the complicated political development of the Moldavian state and the history of its architecture and visual culture, illustrating her thesis of the turn from syncretic to Byzantine ideology. For a philologist, the book's most striking feature is its lack of interest in the development of written culture⁵ and the somewhat vague treatment of the linguistic situation in Moldavia. This can probably be explained by the author's training as an art historian and by her preference for Romanian historiography.

At times SULLIVAN comes very close to the history of written culture, only to end up not mentioning it. She cites copies of Matthew Blastares' *Synagma* (p. xxi: an important excursus), the Humor Gospels (1473), and the Moldavian Annals as primary sources in support for her thesis. On p.

3. In medieval Moldavian Slavonic texts, this imperial title is normally used for Byzantine and Ottoman rulers.

4. Her exact relationship to the Byzantine dynasty is actually a matter of speculation, but a Greek inscription on an icon preserved on Mount Athos identifies her as Maria Asanina *Paleologina*: ȘTEFAN S. GOROVEI, Maria Asanina Paleologhina, Doamna Moldovlahiei (I). *Studii și materiale de istorie medie* 22 (2004) pp. 9–50, esp. p. 14.

5. For a very basic overview in English, see DENNIS J. DELETANT, Slavonic Letters in Moldavia, Wallachia and Transylvania from the Tenth to the Seventeenth Centuries. *The Slavonic and East European Review* 58/1 (1980) pp. 1–21.

22, she refers to the translation of the relics of John the New and his rise as Moldavia's patron-saint, depicted in the murals of Moldavian churches. However, it remains unsaid that the Slavonic texts associated with John and often attributed (but not by Romanian scholars) to the Bulgarian emigré Gregory Tsamblak, laid the foundations of Moldavian literary culture.⁶ The marriage of Stephen's daughter Elena (who called herself Olena) in 1483 (p. 34) is recorded in many Russian manuscripts.⁷ The donation of a Byzantine icon of St Anne (p. 20) from the twelfth or thirteenth century is described in an eighteenth-century Moldavian Slavonic text, which, sadly, is all but ignored in current scholarship.⁸ Among the many proponents of Church Slavonic culture in the fifteenth century, one could at least mention the scribe Gavriil Uric (fl. 1413–1451), who established the linguistic and aesthetic standard not only for Moldavian manuscript production, but also for a wider area within *Slavia Orthodoxa*.⁹

As far as the main primary source is concerned, I was somewhat confused by SULLIVAN's referring to it as *The Anonymous Chronicle of Moldavia*. (In the context of Moldavian Slavonic historiography, this name reminded me of the *Anonymous Bulgarian Chronicle*, which is part of the first Moldavian historiographical corpus preserved in a codex from 1558–1561.)¹⁰ The text in question has carried different labels in philology (the one most recently used is *Letopisețul lui Ștefan cel Mare*, 'Annals of Stephen the Great'), yet it is also among the few works which manuscripts transmit with a proper title: Лѣтописецъ ѿтоли нача(с) произволеніємъ б(о)жїе(м)

6. Among the existing literature on the subject, it is worth mentioning: PEN'Ō RUSEV – ANGEL DAVIDOV, Григорий Цамблак в Румъния и в старата румънска литература. Sofia 1966; SERGEJ JU. TEMČIN, Гимнографическое творчество Григория Цамблака: вильнюсский список службы с житием Иоанну Новому Сучавскому. *Krakowsko-Wileńskie studia slawistyczne* 2 (1997) pp. 143–203.

7. See, e.g., ALEXANDRU PASCAL, Scisoarea mării cneaghine a Moscovei Elena Stefanovna (Voloșanca) către tatăl ei, voievodul Moldovei Ștefan III (cel Mare): noi aspecte de cercetare. *Analele Putnei* 16/1 (2020) pp. 219–232.

8. VLADISLAV KNOLL, *The Story of the Moldavian Tradition from the 18th Century: the Church Slavonic Original and Its Russian Translation*. In: JAN SOSNOWSKI (ed.), *Z dziejów języków wschodniosłowiańskich*. Łódź 2024, pp. 95–110.

9. See, e.g., ALEXANDRU PASCAL, О рукописном наследии молдавского книжника Гаврилла Урика из монастыря Нямц. In: CONSTANTIN MANOLACHE (ed.), *Istorie și cultură. In honorem academician Andrei Eșanu*. Chișinău 2018, pp. 343–375. In Romanian: SIMONA ANTOFI, Uric, Gavriil. In: EUGEN SIMEON (ed.), *Enciclopedia literaturii Române vechi*. Bucharest 2018, pp. 928–929.

10. See, e.g., IOAN BOGDAN, *Scrieri alese*. București 1968, pp. 273–288.

молдавскаа землѣ, ‘Annals since by God’s Will the Moldavian Land Began’ (i.e. since the Moldavian state was founded).¹¹

The linguistic situation in Moldavia is mentioned on three separate pages. ‘From 1359 onward, although Church Slavonic and Latin were the primary official languages of the documents issued by the princely chancellery and the Church in Moldavia, there is evidence in inscriptions that Greek was also present’ (p. xxvi) is almost directly followed by another statement that ‘[t]he official chancery language and that of the Church in Moldavia [...] was Church Slavonic’ (ibid.). A contradictory claim is found on p. 6: ‘[w]hile Teoctist was head of the Orthodox Church in Moldavia [i.e. between 1453 and 1478 (V.K.)], Church Slavonic in a Middle Bulgarian recension replaced Latin and Greek in church books and all other writings in the principality’. Finally, SULLIVAN refers on p. 7 to a switch from Latin to Slavonic ‘much earlier in the fifteenth century in Moldavia, during the reign of Alexander I’ (r. 1400–1432). Each of these four divergent statements is supported with references to various Romanian articles.

In fact, the written languages used in medieval Moldavia can hardly be the subject of dramatic discussion, since many documents have been preserved and are readily available in numerous scholarly editions. The choice of language depends on the author and the addressee of a text within a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional context that SULLIVAN ignores. Documents intended for internal use (preserved since 1392)¹² and for communication with Poland (since 1388)¹³ were composed in an East Slavic idiom based on local Slavic dialects and East Slavic chancery traditions (Ruthenian). A charter of the first Moldavian metropolitan Iosif (1407)¹⁴ is the first to be written entirely in Church Slavonic of the Bulgarian type, which became the language of the Orthodox Church and of religious literature. Before the establishment of the Moldavian metropolitanate, it seems probable that the local Orthodox Church, subordinated to that of Halyč, used

11. See the latest edition: GHEORGHE MIHĂILĂ, «Letopisețul de când s-a început Țara Moldovei». Letopisețul lui Ștefan cel Mare. Bucharest 2006.

12. CONSTANTIN CIHODARU – IOAN CAPROȘU – LEON ȘIMANSCHI (eds), Documenta Romaniae Historica. A. Moldova, I (1384–1448). Bucharest 1975, p. 3.

13. MIHAI COSTĂCHESCU, Documentele moldovenești înainte de Ștefan cel Mare, II. Iași 1932, pp. 603–606.

14. CIHODARU et al., Documenta, p. 29. The charter for the administrative unification of the monasteries Bistrița and Neamț is linked to another Moldavian Church Slavonic text of Bulgarian type, begun in the same year: the *Bistrița Beadroll*, on which see DAMIAN P. BOGDAN, Pomelnicul mănăstirei Bistrița. Bucharest 1941.

liturgical texts produced in the East Slavic areas¹⁵ (some of these are still preserved in Romanian collections). By the time of Stephen the Great, the charters of the land administration had gradually become a mixture of the original Ruthenian base and Church Slavonic. Latin was used by the Roman Catholic Church, as well as for state correspondence with Hungary¹⁶ and, later on, with Poland. The oldest preserved Latin letter issued by a Moldavian ruler (for the Roman Catholic community) seems to date from 1384.¹⁷ Latin church inscriptions from the fifteenth century are found in the Catholic church of Baia, known for its German settlement.¹⁸ From 1404, we have a letter written by a Suceava citizen in German.¹⁹ A document from 1402 mentions Tatars residing in Moldavia, another Slavonic document from 1401 is addressed to an Armenian bishop.²⁰ Sources from the early sixteenth century refer also to Poles, Serbs, Bulgarians, and Hungarians, while East Slavs are known to have been compactly settled along the Moldavian borders.²¹

Changes of language are illustrated in a very interesting subchapter on Moldavian coins (pp. 4–6). From Peter Mușat (1375–1391 ca.) to Roman II (1447–1448), these carry legends only in Latin script, while Alexander II's *grossi* (*moneta*, грошч) are inscribed in both Latin and Cyrillic. SULLIVAN does not mention that until Stephen the Great († 1504) only coins with Latin inscriptions were issued, with the exception of an issue of Bilhorod/Cetatea Albă, which has Greek legends.²² Later on, some rulers issued coins with Cyrillic inscriptions, others with Latin ones. In general, the language, or more precisely the script, of medieval coinage in Eastern Europe was not always what we would expect. In Wallachia, a country that, just like Moldavia, was emancipated from Hungary (1330) but had a predominantly Orthodox culture and was subject to Bulgarian-Serbian cultural influences,

15. IOAN IUFU, *Despre prototipurile literaturii slavo-române din secolul al XV-lea. Mitropolia Olteniei* 15/7–8 (1963) pp. 511–535, esp. p. 516.

16. E.g., ȘTEFAN PAȘCU et al., *Documenta Romaniae Historica. D. Relații între țările române, I (1222–1456)*. Bucharest 1977, p. 303.

17. Cihodaru et al., *Documenta*, p. 57.

18. GHEORGHE DIACONU, *Contribuții la cunoașterea culturii medievale de la Suceava în veacurile XV–XVI. Materiale și cercetări arheologice* 6 (1959) pp. 913–924, esp. p. 913–914.

19. COSTĂCHESCU, *Documentele*, p. 627.

20. CIHODARU et al., *Documenta*, pp. 23, 21.

21. VLADISLAV KNOLL, *Written Languages in Moldavia during the Reign of Peter Rareș (1527–1538, 1541–1546)*. *Studia Ceranea* 12 (2022) pp. 528–559.

22. GEORGE BUZDUGAN – OCTAVIAN LUCHIAN – CONSTANTIN C. OPRESCU, *Monede și bancnote românești*. Bucharest 1977, pp. 43–84.

two series of coins were issued in Latin and Cyrillic between the reigns of Vladislav I (1364–1376 ca.) and Mircea the Old (1386–1418). The coexistence of Cyrillic (and sometimes Greek) and Latin inscriptions, with a clear preference for the latter in the imperial period, was also typical of medieval Serbian coinage.²³ The coins of medieval Bosnia had Latin script only, although the literati and the local administration used the Cyrillic one.²⁴ The Muscovite coinage of Dmitrii Donskii (starting in the 1370s) and Vasilii I († 1425) used both Cyrillic and Arabic.²⁵

Returning to the book under review, I must say that it is a very enjoyable read. It outlines the rise of a complex political structure on the border between the Latin, Byzantine-Slavic Orthodox and, finally, Muslim worlds. Its main theme is Moldavia's search for identity amid this cultural Babylon. SULLIVAN's focus on visual art as reflecting the period's ideas and politics, her rich pictorial material, and the clear and concise exposition add to the book's value.

Keywords

medieval Moldavia; Byzantine Commonwealth

23. VUJADIN IVANIŠEVIĆ, *Новчарство средњовековне Србије*. Belgrade 2001, pp. 238–258.

24. AMER SULEJMANAGIĆ, *Bosanski srednjovjekovni novac u kontekstu europskih monetarnih tijekova, periodizacija te analiza njegove ikonografije, metrologije i grafije do 1353. godine*. *Numizmatičke vijesti* 56/67 (2014) pp. 44–78.

25. GERMAN A. FEDOROV-DAVYDOV, *Монеты Московской Руси*. Moscow 1981, pp. 26–42.