



**III. Magic and Religion:  
Contributions to an Old Anthropological Discussion**

# Oneiric Authentication of a Miraculous Shrine. Case Study from a Dobruja Monastery, Romania

Laura Jiga Iliescu

"Constantin Brăiloiu" Institute of Ethnography and Folklore, The Romanian Academy, Romania  
ORCID: 0000-0001-6688-6543

Laura Jiga Iliescu is Senior Researcher at the "Constantin Brăiloiu" Institute of Ethnography and Folklore from Bucharest, The Romanian Academy and Associate Professor at the University of Bucharest. Her main fields of interest include the relation between orality and literacy, folk narratives and their ritual continuity, devotional and charming practices, Christian religiosity in premodern and modern times, interconfessional exchanges as well as ethnology of the mountain and the anthropology of the body.

Correspondence: [laura.jiga.iliescu@gmail.com](mailto:laura.jiga.iliescu@gmail.com)

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## ABSTRACT

An interesting phenomenon of incubation ritual was attested in open air in southwest Dobruja at the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at a healing stone cross that, two decades later, was enclosed by an Orthodox Christian monastery. The article focuses on the narrative strategy that asserts Christian authority over the site. The strategy includes a corpus of legends that associate the origin of the cross with the local martyrdom past, its miraculous finding, and a modern hagiography whose main character is a thaumaturgic monk. The dream as a realm for divine communication, represents a theme that coagulates the entire narrative corpus and contributes greatly to the construction of a sanctuary. Over the last decades, energy and spiritual healing practitioners have enriched the group of visitors to the monastery.

## KEYWORDS

Dream narratives; divination; incubation; multi-religious sacred space; monastery; holy grave; healer monk; Dobruja.



## Premises and description of the case study

Space of reclusion, the monastery is not totally enclosed, isolated, and detached from the outside world. In addition to the permanent cenobite community, there are fluctuant and provisional groups of visitors, such as tourists, pilgrims, and, occasionally, scholars, who enter in contact with each other and with the monastery's inhabitants.

The case under my survey here is Dervent Orthodox Christian Monastery inhabited by monks. Its walls, legends, and rituals have been rising around a miraculous stone cross that "grows by itself"<sup>1</sup> and is assigned with therapeutic power by Christians and Muslims, and, more recently, by bioenergy practitioners. Such a germinating arena for devotional and social practices might turn into a fluid space of

religious encounters and exchanges of stories with or without a religious subject, rituals, images, objects, expectations, and impressions that go beyond the canonical prescriptions of a certain religious confession and beyond ethnicity, but are influenced by them. In the case discussed here, multi-participation and "encounters between Christians and Muslims are asymmetrical: it is the Christians who welcome Muslims into Christian holy places" (De Rapper 2012, 44).

Actually, there are two crosses. One cross, located in one oratory of the church is dedicated to healing people and represents the main attraction of the monastery.<sup>2</sup> The other cross is outside the church and is specialized in healing animals.<sup>3</sup> A small board warns visitors that it is forbidden to light candles at it.<sup>4</sup> The cross inside the church is almost 90 cm high and 45 cm width. It consists of a massive rock devoid of any inscription. On its crown there is a small

hollow for oil candle from which people collect “natural” myrrh. The monastery’s territory also includes a spring whose miraculous power makes it a pilgrimage destination, especially on the Day of the Life-giving Spring celebrated on the Friday following the Orthodox Christian Easter. The entire complex of the monastery will be the subject of further research. The present article focuses on the stone crosses.

The monastery is located in the southwest of the multi-ethnic and multi-religious Dobruja region in Romania. It is close to Bugeac Lake, the shore of Danube, and 15 km away of Silistra (Bulgaria). The region matches Maria Couroucli’s observation:

[B]oth the Byzantine (4<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> centuries) and Ottoman (14<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries) Empires were multiconfessional political constructs and were culturally less homogeneous than their Western counterparts. From Morocco to the Middle East and from the Balkans to Anatolia, local communities often consisted of more than one religious group. Here the *Other* was the neighbour with whom one exchanged, not always peaceful, and never on an egalitarian basis. (Couroucli 2012, 2)

Close to the Dervent Monastery, archaeological excavations identified the ruins of a Byzantine citadel dating from the 10<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries, ten tombs dating from the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and a Christian necropolis situated on the Dervent Hill dating from the 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>5</sup> 40 kilometres east, there is a cave where, according to a relatively recent tradition, St. Andrew or some of his disciples lived for a while. 28 km east from the cave there are the Adamklissi Tropaeum Traiani monument, a Roman fortress, and four ancient Christian basilicas and crypts where human bones have been excavated (Cătănciu 2021).

I learned about the healing cross from Dervent Monastery in 2004, when I visited the area to attend the pilgrimage to St. Andrew’s cave, which was at its beginnings at that time. I returned fifteen years later, in September 2019, for a short fieldwork prospection. These

years represent my timelines to compare direct observations. Therefore, I will highlight the transformations of the site that took place in this period. Bibliographical information that covers a larger period, from around 1900 to 2022, will complete the field data.

I start by describing the relations between the setting, including the scenery and the scenography of the site, and the people acting in it. Pilgrims’ contacts with the healing cross are articulated on two levels. One level is more visible during the day and consists in a repertoire of vernacular and institutional gestures that are common in Christian worship at Jesus’s tomb or the worshipping of relics and miracles-working icons. Worshippers kneel and/or prostrate in front of the cross, kiss the stone and/or the ground in front of it, touch it with the hands and with the forehead, touch the cross with personal or other people’s pieces of clothing on their behalf, touch the cross with photos of absent people, place such items/objects at the base of the cross for a while, use small pieces of paper to write wishes and/or write in columns names of living people and names of departed and then lay them near the cross, read or whisper prayers in a low voice, and anoint their forehead and painful parts of their body with oil collected from the hollow on the head of the cross.<sup>6</sup> In the evening, after the Vesper religious service, a monk enters the oratory to bless the pilgrims, to anoint them, to speak with them and, especially on Friday evening, to read aloud the Holy Unction Prayer (*Rugăciunea Sfântului Maslu*). (Picture 1.)

The second level of rituals performed in this monastery has incubation features that consist in spending the night in the oratory or sitting on the floor with the head oriented toward to cross with the purpose of getting divinely inspired or having therapeutic dreams. (Picture 2.)

I did not observe the sleeping ritual. However, in 2004, I noticed small pillows on the benches against the walls and carpets covering the wooden floor. In 2019, the cross was protected by a window box with an opening on one of its sides that seemed like the “face” of the cross. The benches were still against





Picture 1. The cross. 30 August 2019.  
Credit photo: Laura Ilga Iliescu.



Picture 2. Sleeping at the cross. 1996.  
Credit photo: <http://dervent.ro/index-ALB.php?dD=cat-dervent-album&rID=19&rType=ALB&rTB=ZGVYdmVudf9jYXRfMDFFZGVYdmVudA==>  
[accessed in 14 May 2023]

the walls, but the new floor was made of cold, ceramic tiles, and there was no carpet, except a small one at the entrance at the cross box. It seems that pilgrims are not encouraged to sleep in the oratory anymore, though the practice is not totally or explicitly forbidden.<sup>7</sup> At the same note, I observed that as the testimonials about the curative miracles presented on the official website of the monastery are more recent, sleeping and dreaming at the cross occurs more rarely.

A young monk from Cernica Monastery (20 km from Bucharest) visited Dervent in 1930 and accounted a number of dreams and miracles in the booklet *The Miracle-working Cross* (Hagiul 1933). He collected testimonies and local legends especially from clerics. The booklet was published in 1933, reedited in 2007, and it is available on the monastery's website.<sup>8</sup> The website also presents miracles of the healing cross that took place between 1933 and the present times.<sup>9</sup> Some miracles were written

by the healed pilgrims themselves, some other miracles have been dictated to the secretary of the monastery or to lay administrative persons from the neighbouring village (e.g. the Mayor), and some miracles were written by the administrators of the monastery's website.

One can distinguish three categories of oneiric miracles. Firstly, there are dreams that reveal the existence of the cross and demand a journey to it. Secondly, there are healing dreams when the healing process takes place during the dreaming/sleeping activity. Thirdly, there are warning dreams against inappropriate behaviour at the cross.<sup>10</sup> Almost on every occasion and especially in the first two categories above, the main protagonists of these dreams are the person who dreams and a "strange" figure who can be a beautiful woman, an angel, the Mother of God, or an old man. It is this presence who guides to and reveals the shrine or heals the person having the dream. We may speak about supernatural encounters narratives that



express certain continuity between the oneiric and the awake realms of reality. While people share dreams within a specific performance arena and under specific conditions of time and space,<sup>11</sup> multiple processes of transfer take place, including transfers from dream to memory and from mental images and sounds to words. These processes turn personal visionary dreaming experiences into a collective religious experience shaped by dynamic historical, confessional, cultural, social, and political contexts. When the dreams are delivered to a public, they are interpreted and included in the process of constructing the legendary prestige of the shrine.



### Goals and methodology

In this article, part of a work in progress dedicated to the religious landscape the Monastery of Dervent is part of, I focus on the sleeping-dreaming theme that contributes to the construction of a veritable *locus*<sup>12</sup> marked by the healing cross(es). The main source of data I use is the website of the monastery. Created in the last seventeen years, it has articulated and authorized legends recorded in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in relation with later testimonies and new hagiographic narratives. I will read the website as a multileveled narrative by itself, which provides an “official” perspective on the phenomenon and its history. Through the method of narrative deconstruction, my aim is to identify a possible strategy for the legitimization of the present from the perspective of the historicized past (see *infra*). At this stage of the research, the approach is fragmentary because the attitudes, practices, and narrative repertoires of pilgrims, tourists and, not the least, of local Christians and Muslims are considered only tangentially in the article. These aspects are of major importance for understanding the phenomenon in its entirety, but they are not present on the website.



The publication of *The Miracle-working Cross* in 1933 is of great importance since the booklet is published on the website as a primary source that speaks about the origin and the miraculous discovery of the healing crosses. The legends are retold by more than sixty online magazines, touristic and religious blogs.

The author of the booklet, monk Macarie Hagiul, combines the miraculous history of the stone crosses with factual events during the foundation of the monastery. I propose a similar way of retelling the story. Events that took place between 1933 and 2020 will be added to events that happened before 1933 to complete a story which is still open since new miracles are narrated and related to the place (see *infra*). The article will also include a critical view on etic-emic perspectives and their epistemological relevance for the dynamic contextualisation of the stories about miracles and the constitution of a sacred space.



### First narrative and factual history. The shepherd

*The Miracle-working Cross* tells the story of a Romanian deaf and speechless young shepherd from the village Coslugea who, “after the Independence War” (Hagiul 1933) of 1877<sup>13</sup> suddenly felt an irresistible drowsiness while watching the community’s flock of sheep. He fell asleep right on the spot. He woke up cured, loudly shouting about the miracle. When people went to the scene, they realized the shepherd had laid his head on a small stone, which was part of an earthed cross that was “rising” to the surface.<sup>14</sup> Few meters away, there was another stone cross, without arms. We do not know the sources of Macarie Hagiul, but it is possible the legend had been circulating orally among local people, as suggested by a letter written in 1957, more than 20 years after the *The Miracle Working Cross* was published. This letter was written by a healed pilgrim.<sup>15</sup>

I was born on the 28<sup>th</sup> of August 1883; and in 1904, at the age of 21, I left this holy place without crutches; now I am content of my age; I am 74 years old. So, my father heard from people about this holy place, that there was a Mute (sic!) and deaf boy from Gârlita or Gălița<sup>16</sup> grazing the sheep on this ground, he saw a big stone and fell asleep, he slept until the next day; and when he went home, he spoke and heard. Then, we went to this holy place too and reached it; what we saw on this place, [there was] a shack made of wooden boards; inside, there was a cross with broken head, and behind it, at its feet, a large icon with mother of god (sic!) with her son Jesus Christ placed on four stakes, and on its north side there was a candlestick. I prostrated and prayed to be healed; Please be good attentive and believe me, because I don't do propaganda and I recovered. Listen, leaving the place, I stuck the crutch near the cross and walked to Ostrov. (Hagiul 1933)<sup>17</sup>

The phraseology and orthography of the letter point to a semiliterate person.<sup>18</sup>

In the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a local layman raised a small roof above the holy crosses because Christians (Romanians and Bulgarians) and Muslims (Tartars and Turks) came there and some spent the night sleeping at the base of the cross.<sup>19</sup>

In 1923, the Episcopate of Tomis decided to build a hermitage. A small wooden barrack (with candles and icons) was erected around the cross. The refuge burned down in an accident. The friary was built between 1938 and 1940, with lay financial support.<sup>20</sup> The cross was sheltered in an oratory of the church's monastery and the stone without arms remained outside. In 1959, an ordinance of the communist regime forced the hermitage to close. In 1970, the re-opened church served the parish of Gălița village. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February 1990 – less than 2 months after the collapse of the communist regime in December 1989 – the monastery was re-opened. It has attracted an increasing number of visitors and it flourished. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of October 2011, the High Archbishop of Tomis

laid the foundation stone for a new and large church that is now ready. The healing cross is still in the old church.<sup>21</sup>



## Second narrative and the historicization of the past. The martyrs

The very origin and nature of the crosses is explained by another legend, at its turn written in the booklet mentioned above (Hagiul 1933). The legend asserts a prestigious filiation of the crosses, which increases (and warrants) the source of their healing power. In the times of the Roman Emperor Diocletian, the tortured corpses of a Christian man and three Christian maidens, “descendants of St. Andrew’s disciples,” were thrown in the Danube River. Immediately, the place of martyrdom was marked by four stone crosses who have risen from the ground. Two of the crosses had been destroyed during the persecutions against Christians. Centuries later, Ahmet Bey, the Ottoman governor of the province, learned about the miraculous power of the remained crosses and protected them. “There were many Christians who came to serve this pasha with the reason of touching the holy Crosses (...). Some say that he was baptised secretly.”<sup>22</sup> Ahmet Bey constructed a small roof for the Muslims and Christians sick pilgrims who spent the night there.<sup>23</sup> It is worth noting that in Islam the incubation ritual is known as *istikhara*, meaning to sleep and to dream at holy person’s graves, called *türbe* (see Iain and Henig 2010, 252; Akhtar 2014), and it was also attested among Muslims from the Balkan Peninsula. Could we presume that the text above suggests a place used as a shared shrine? Further investigations are required in this regard. “The protection of these holy crosses entered the tradition of the pasha’s family” until one of his descendants, “an ardent follower of the Koran, cut the arms of one cross with the sword and removed [the other one] from the ground” (Hagiul 1933).<sup>24</sup> Then the crosses entered into the ground. After a long





time, when the area entered under Christian authority, the crosses rose back to the surface and were discovered after the healing of the deaf shepherd. The narrative circle is complete. Nowadays, the so-called cross with cut arms is stored outside the oratory and is dedicated to healing animals. Without arms, it looks like a stone column. (Picture 3.)

The legend is narrated in a way that suggests that the crosses shared the martyrs' fate, as if the crosses embedded the holy relics of martyrs and their powerful potential.

My own interpretation uses a different chronology in the history of the healing cross/crosses than the one presented by Macarie Hagiul. The author started with the origin of the crosses related to the martyrdom, continued with the life of the crosses during the Ottoman rule, and ended with the legend of the shepherd. Rather, I propose the event of the miraculous re-discovery of the stone crosses following the healing of the deaf shepherd as the initial moment in the creation of the site's narrative.

Picture 3: The cross outside the church. 1999.  
Photo credit: <http://dervent.ro/index-ALB.php?cID=cat-dervent-album&rID=19&rType=ALB&rTB=ZGVydmVudF9jYXRfMDFfZGVydmVudA==>  
[accessed in 14 May 2023].



The reason for this interpretation is the story of the deaf shepherd is possibly genuine, while the narrative about the origin of the crosses is much more susceptible to subsequent creation in clerical and intellectual milieus by people aware of the ancient history of the region. Ethnologists know very well that real events are not preserved in the oral memory of a social group more than one hundred years without distortions. In any case, from a certain point on, both stories entered the pilgrims' legendary repertoire and suffered mutual interchanges.

In the early Christian incubation practice, "those receiving dreams typically would be sleeping in the shrine of a saint in close proximity to his or her tomb or relics" (Renberg 2016, 749). In this context, the second group of legends seems to encourage the identification of the healing crosses with the tomb crosses of local martyrs:

[A]ny cross has its own holiness, as the Cross on which the Saviour was crucified. Especially, the crosses at the saints' graves, as those from Dervent. (...) They have even stronger healing power. (Hagiul 1933)

When speaking about miracles in emic terms, the logical contradiction between the legend (the corpses were thrown in the Danube River) and the above statement (the relics are in the ground under the crosses) does not represent an inconvenient. Neither the fact that no martyrs have been attested by archaeological and historical research (including Martyrologues) in connection with the site of the healing crosses at Dervent. In the same emic logic, the attested presence of Christians and Christian martyrs in certain sites of Dobruja as early as in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century seems to be extended too easy to the entire region.

I suggest the story which asserts a martyr origin of the crosses, was initially provided by clerics at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in accordance with the strategy of the Romanian Orthodox Church to reconnect the present with the prestigious Christian past of Dobruja, after a long period of Ottoman dominance. The

legend that suggests a direct connection with St. Andrew aims to symbolically re-construct the antique Scythia Minor “as the cradle of Romanian Christendom” (Valtchinova 2010, 27). The phenomenon was restored many years later, after the fall of the communist and atheist regime in Romania, when religious (re) valorisation of the region has been sustained through new founded monasteries, especially those dedicated to ancient Christian local martyrs, and through local pilgrimages to martyrs and places of martyrdom. Galia Valtchinova noted that “the ‘miracles’ of the healing crosses (...) of Dervent, close to Silistra, revived these claims” (Valtchinova 2010, 28).

The earliest testimonies of the miracles date from 1903 and 1904 (Hagiul 1933).<sup>25</sup> Thus, we may assert that the practice of sleeping and dreaming by the stone cross for therapeutic purposes was prior to any modern religious settlement at Dervent. Implicitly, the first accounts did not mention the clergy’s involvement or guidance. Hence, we may suggest that in the beginning there was a certain place marked by holy artefacts with special potential for local therapeutic and incubation-like vernacular rituals, and much later the Christian monastery enclosed the artefacts and the healing and devotional practices.

During the field research in 2019, I identified in the Izvoarele village, around 20 km from Dervent Monastery, an anonymous *healing cross* – this is the local emic term to distinguish it from other common crosses on the sides of the roads or at crossroads. This *healing cross* has no connection with graves or martyrs. Inside the village, in one crossroad, close the old church of the village, there is a stone cross smaller than the one at Dervent. The stone cross is surrounded by benches and covered by a roof and has a cavity at its top, where people pour oil.<sup>26</sup> When passing by, people would dip their fingers in oil or simply touch the cross with the hand and then touch the painful part of their body.<sup>27</sup> I wonder about the possibility that, at first, the cross from Dervent was such a *healing cross* outside any settlement, and then became the most famous in the region. Of course, the

question why it became the most famous in the region still needs to be answered. The issue of a specific category of crosses specialized in healing rituals requires more ethnographic investigations.



### Third narrative and the revelatory dream

While real relics are missing, a new narrative is needed to connect the healing cross with a holy Christian grave.

One important motivation to make a pilgrimage is the conviction that if a miracle happened, it may happen again. The practice of sleeping in physical connection with the healing cross is legendary legitimized through the story of the deaf shepherd, an event which prompted and sustained through repetition a significant number of ritualized sleeps for therapeutic purposes. As narrated by Macarie Hagiul, this legend does not mention any dream the shepherd might have had.<sup>28</sup>

The dream *topos* and the therapeutic nature of dreaming at the stone cross are “officially” credited by another group of legends that has marked the identity of the monastery as a depository of the healing cross and a *special grave*. The protagonist is Father Elefterie, a key figure strongly connected with the establishment of the monastery and its fate. The biography of Father Elefterie is enriched with hagiographic episodes and therapeutic abilities. He was born in 1900, in Leaskova, Bulgaria, in a family of Aromanian descent.<sup>29</sup> Being paralysed, at the age of three his mother brought him to the Dervent healing cross.

After praying at the holy cross for her son, in the evening the boy fell sleep (...). During the night, the mother dreamt a beautiful young girl who turned the child healthy. Next morning, when the mother woke up, her child was already awake and walking. Having tears of happiness in the eyes, she thanked Mother of God for this wonder.<sup>30</sup>





Together with its curative effect, this dream and the contact with the stone cross determined the boy's future. As an adult, Elefterie attended a medical school in Adrianopol, "where he learned traditional herbal methods and bones correction techniques."<sup>31</sup> At the age of 32, he became hieromonk at Dervent Monastery. "His medical training was doubled by the priesthood grace, by the help of God and by the power of the Holly Cross."<sup>32</sup>

The biography of Father Elefterie, as narrated "by those who knew him," has martyrdom features. He was persecuted by the communist police, as an opponent of the atheist regime, and forced to leave Dervent. He joined other monasteries in Romania, away from Dobruja. Everywhere he lived, he cured the body (especially the bones) and the soul (through reading prayers, listening to confessions, and using herbs) of numerous patients. He became famous, sometimes in dissonance with the Church hierarchy, but always humble (see Bălan 2011, 715-16). His own body was marked by a permanent physical suffering (bone pain) and by ascetic life.<sup>33</sup>

In 1990, Father Elefterie obtained the permission to re-open Dervent monastery and to return there. His companions witnessed that when he entered the monastery's yard he said: "I am home again." He died four months later, at the age of 90, and was buried on the right side of the church's exterior, in line with the healing cross inside the church.

Reborn in the place where he was miraculously healed at the base of the cross and dying near the same stone cross, Father Elefterie has been touched by the essence of the cross and substantiated it throughout his life: his sufferings correspond to the cross's damages, the years when he lived away from Dervent correspond to the underground period of the cross, his own healing power corresponds to the power of the cross. Consequently, Father Elefterie, an uncanonised martyr, qualified himself to having the revelatory dream that connected the healing cross with the ancient relics of the martyrs.

Witnessing so many miracles that took place at the Holy Cross and having a deep faith in it, Father Elefterie felt the desire to find out the mystery that surrounds it. Not knowing to whom the cross belongs to, he fasted for 40 days with a glass of water and holy bread, held the Holy Liturgy service daily, and prayed God to enlighten him. In a dream, Mother of God revealed him that [the martyr] was Constantin, of Greek origin, martyred in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>34</sup>

When the past is unknown, a revelation is required to disclose it, as part of the local process of historicization (Steward 2017, 173). In the emic terms of faith, which qualify Father Elefterie's vision as true, his dream certifies the cross as a cross of the holly tomb of an identified martyr, whose *praesentia in absentia* is embodied by the healing shrine.



### Energy healing. New testimonies and tensions

Enforced by the miraculous past of the healing place, the narrative thread of the crosses enriches the site with new approaches and understandings of the sacred in relation to the state of the body, soul, and mind. Many visitors of the monastery evaluate their own religious background in relation with an eclectic corpus of information delivered by different spiritual and religious magazines, booklets, internet blogs, and other media. At the same time, oral, written, direct, and virtually shared narratives and simple spontaneous discussions point to an *energetic* power of the place. This attribute has been indirectly suggested by the legend about the shepherd who "suddenly felt an irresistible attraction to sleep." While older testimonies mostly referred to physical invalidities being healed, new forms of medical conditions are expected to be healed at Dervent. New beliefs and new characters have entered the legendary repertoire of the site and the oneiric realm. For example, an Orthodox Christian man around

fifty years old, told me in the summer of 2019 that he learned about this place in a dream: a beautiful, mysterious, and very tall stranger – which he interpreted as an alien angel – advised him to go to Dervent to clean his mind of “all the dark thoughts.”

Here are other examples taken from the internet. On the blog <http://www.lumea.spirituala.ro/spiritualitate/dervent.htm> a Reiki practitioner who visited Dervent site, described it as an,

[E]nergy field which emanated an extremely powerful electric field, soft, and positively charged. I knelt down and prayed, being convinced that I am in front of a gate towards Light (...). That place might be a gate to a different space-time realm, might be the tomb of an anonymous saint, might be the trace of some alien remains, might be...<sup>35</sup>

It is easy to recognize the continuum between the Christian background of the Reiki practitioner and her own understanding and interpretation of the shrine in relation to the narratives on the monastery’s webpage and a corpus of contemporary legends and beliefs related to communication with the energy of the universe.

In 2019, under the guidance of a specialist in energy-therapy, the Interad travel agency organized “an initiatic quest” in order “to discover the master inside you. When you’ll be back to your daily life, you will be cured of all your fears (...). This is neither a tourist circuit, nor a religious pilgrimage. The emphasis is on the personal feelings and the ability to perceive the vibrations of these places.” The agency promises self-recovery techniques, identification of fears, DNA activations, and training of the soul.<sup>36</sup> The monastery denies the new understandings of the power of the healing cross which are not part of the Christian miracle-working register. In the Dictionary section on the monastery’s internet page, *new age* is described as a dangerous and almost conspiratorial eclectic movement whose aim is to “totally destroy the values of this world, of this era.”<sup>37</sup>



## Forth narrative and the saint’s holy grave

Recent events included in Father Elefterie’s hagiography contributed to the process of reinforcing Orthodox Christian authority over the healing site.

A visible tomb with material relics completes the narrative. The body of Father Elefterie was buried on the 12<sup>th</sup> of May 1990 directly in the ground, without a coffin, in accordance with the tradition for a monk’s burial. Here is a description of the event, as perceived by two nuns who attended the funeral:

When we came closer to the Father, we felt a good scent around him. He was wrapped in his cloak and the face was covered by the headscarf of his *kamilavkion*. You could feel a strong spirit near him (...). Then the corpse of the Father was engraved in a cavity that has been dug in the vertical wall of a pit near the chapel – so sideways – in a place where only a coffin [sic] could fit, and the hole was filled with earth.<sup>38</sup>

Father Elefterie was buried in a niche. However, at the surface of the ground, the place was marked as a grave, as if the body has been placed at the bottom of the pit.

In 2019, the monastery launched an appeal on its website. Those who benefited from Father Elefterie’s therapeutic help and spiritual guidance were asked to send their testimonies to compile his hagiography. Very soon, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of November 2020, the signs of Father Elefterie’s holiness seemed to be confirmed and shared on the internet. The current abbot of the monastery asked a historian specialized in the excavations of human remains of anti-communist fighters to organize Father Elefterie’s exhumation. With the scientific endorsement of the archaeologist, he delivered the results of this excavation to Mediafax, one of the largest news agencies in Romania.

Yesterday at noon, it was not surprising to find, carefully cleaning the pit, not the skull of





the father, who died on the 12<sup>th</sup> of May 1990, but his *kamilavkion* preserved in its entirety, although it is made from thick woollen fabric. Underneath, with the head covered by this *kamilavkion* and by the monachal cloth, also intact, I fully unveiled the father's body, positioned east-west, slightly oblique to the axis of the church (as it had been placed in a niche dug on the vertical wall of the pit). It was perplexing (and this is the right word, although it's unusual for an archaeologist) to discover, during a thorough scientific excavation, not bones, as expected more than three decades after the burial, but the vestments that covered the earthly remains of abbot Elefterie. He was not wearing shoes [when he was buried], but even the wool socks were still on his feet. I cannot give a scientific explanation to the fact that they did not rot, although the father was settled directly in the soil of Dobruja (a sandy soil, mixed with limestone particles). All his monachal clothes appear to have been buried only a short time ago. (Oprea 2020)

The visible archaeological evidence entered the realm of miracle, and it was immediately published in more than 20 newspapers, print and online magazines, and blogs. The scholar's statement sustained the limited power of science to endorse the miracle. Rewording Paolo Apolito's assertion, "more than simply *investigate* wonders," science "*produced* them" to a considerable degree (Apolito 2005, 6). The respective Mediafax article has been seen by 73,440 people by September 2021 and by 74,208 by June 2023, which proves the active interest in Father Elefterie.

Claimed as material proofs for Father Elefterie's holiness, the unrotted clothes were put back on his intact corpse after the bones had been washed, and then deposited in a sheltered reliquary in the same chapel with the healing cross. The reliquary will be relocated in the new church of the monastery. Finally, Dervent owns the holy remains of *its* martyr who was himself a healer during his lifetime.

Father Elefterie's fame is reinforced by new stories, recipes and testimonies distributed

by mass media.<sup>39</sup> Homeopathic treatment against cancer, stomach ulcers, heart diseases, strokes, orthopaedic disabilities, and many other diseases have been assigned to "the doctor without scalpel" – as Father Elefterie is surnamed – and entered the medical folklore. The accounts of miraculous healings are often completed with a short biography of Father Elefterie or with longer testimonies shared by his medical disciples. One of his apprentices confessed to a journalist from the eclectic magazine *Formula As* that he had oneiric meetings with his master.

In the last 8 years, I dreamt of him 4-5 times and, each time, he either advised me or warned me about those with bad thoughts. Many times, I had to face new, unusual cases, and suddenly the solution came to my mind. For me, Father Elefterie is like a saint. I often think of him and ask for his help to heal people. (Constantinescu 1998)

The apprentice's account qualifies Father Elefterie, in his posthumous hypostasis, as a real therapeutic holy authority. He enters the gallery of Christian martyrs who oneirically work miracles in connection with ancient incubation rituals, such as Saint Thecla and Saints Cosmas and Damian, as one of their descendants.



### Instead of conclusions

The investigation above does not belong to the domain of witchcraft and has little in common with magic (the main themes of this volume), but approaches the issue of vernacular religiosity, that is dreaming miracles that assume a direct, personal, and private communication with the divine. Apparently, in this communication the dreamer seems to be almost freed by exterior influences, but intimately shaped them. Yet, when dreams occur at consecrated religious shrines, the very experiences of dreaming and of dream sharing are controlled by the sanctuary's "guardians." In the case of Dervent

monastery, the “guardians” are represented by the monastic authority. I did not approach the personal dreaming experience. Rather, I focused on the sleep and dreaming themes as they have been articulated by the monastery narrative. I showed the narrative is used to legitimize Christian authority over a place charged with multireligious potential in the eyes of the various pilgrims who seek miracles irrespective of their religious affiliation.

Secondly, the role played by the internet in the process of the new construction of this wonder “site” is obvious. Except a few accounts I recorded directly from the visitors of the shrine, all narratives explored in the article can be read on the web. The corpus of these legends is homogeneous, and mostly consists of rewording (or simply copying-and-pasting) the monastery’s official page. Apart of this visible and uniform collection of legends and testimonies, there has to be another more discrete collection, the collection of narratives shared orally by the visitors. These latter narratives can be coherent with or might

diverge from the narratives accepted by the monastery.<sup>40</sup> Exploration of visitors’ narratives represents the next stage of my research.

Finally, internet, as a means for transmitting personal experiences inspired by communication with the supernatural, influences contemporary interactions between religious and non-religious attitudes towards the sacred.



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## NOTES

1. Personal field record; 46 years old woman, Orthodox Christian confession, 2 Mai village, Constanța county; 30 November 2004.
2. <http://dervent.ro/index-ALB.php?cID=cat-dervent-album&rID=19&rType=ALB&rTB=ZGVydmVudF9jYXRfMDFfZGVydmVu dA> [accessed in 20 July 2023].
3. In the past, Christian and Muslim people used to tie their sick animals by this stone during a whole night, or to leave overnight corn grains or grass at its base, to melt them with the ordinary food of their animals. Nowadays, as I noticed in the summer of 2019, the stone is protected by a fence, so animals cannot enter there.
4. This indirectly means that lighting candles at the outside cross had been practiced.
5. According to the National Archaeological Repertory available online, the Romanian Ministry of Culture.
6. This gesture is consistent with the belief that the stone cross emanates holy oil. In fact, I noticed that people pour oil in the hollow and then collect it and take it home.
7. From the very beginning of Christianity, the question of supernatural dreams required caution (Le Goff 1991, 349-435). The practice of sleeping in a sanctuary had pagan roots and was

perceived as ambiguous (see Graf 2014). In 2019, I asked a monk who lived in the monastery about the sleeping practice at the foot of the cross. “It is good to pray here. But, you see, when you fall asleep, there could be the devil one who sticks his tail and disturbs you. Of course, there are also good dreams sent by God. It is not easy to receive them. And you have to distinguish evil from good dreams.” After a small pause, he continued: “Would you like to sleep here tonight?” Unfortunately, for technical reasons, I had to decline.

8. <https://manastirea.dervent.ro/minunile-de-la-crucea-de-leac-document-din-anul-1933/> [accessed in 20 July 2023].

9. <https://www.dervent.ro/dervent.php?cID=cat-dervent-daruri&rID=10&rType=ART&rOP=more> [accessed in 20 July 2023]

10. Here is an example: “An infirm lame woman leaned her back against the Cross and, around midnight, a monk appeared to her in a dream and scolded her because she dishonours this place, and an invisible power threw her over the Cross, right on the porch of the chapel, in the view of all the patients there (according to the abbot’s statement)” (Hagiul 1933).

11. “When dreamers decide, for whatever reason, to share a dream experience, they choose an appropriate time and place, a specific audience and social context, a modality (visual or



auditory), and a discourse or performance form" (Tedlock 2001, 249). Performance arena is understood as a space "in which some specialized form of communication is uniquely licensed to take place" (Foley 1995, 8).

12. I use the term as Peter Brown used it in his book *The Cult of Saints*, that is, a place which embeds "a special" dead; the grave of a saint, the place where "Heaven and Earth met." "It was a place where the normal laws of other graves were held to be suspended" (Brown 1981, 10).

13. This is the Russo-Turkish War that ended with the peace treaty signed at San Stefano, that freed Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Montenegro from Ottoman rule). The insertion of historical references is not meaningless. It symbolically refers to the Romanian authority exercised over an area that was previously under Ottoman administration. The miraculous revealing of the cross to a Romanian shepherd certifies Christian (and Romanian) governance over the territory. In the booklet, it says: "Let's say that in the past these lands were under foreign rule, and this is why they [the crosses] couldn't be highlighted. But now, it is under pure and faithful Romanian rule and all believers should be aware of these Holy Crosses" (RO: *Pe vremuri, să zicem că aceste ținuturi au fost sub stăpânire streină și deaceia n'au putut fi scoase din evidență. Acum însă este sub stăpânire curat românească și dreptcredincioasă și ar trebui ca toți credincioși să știe de aceste sf. Cruci.* <https://manastirea.dervent.ro/minunile-de-la-crucea-de-leac-document-din-anul-1933/> [accessed on 20 July 2023].

14. "The cross is still growing and secrets chrism" (personal field records; 46-year-old woman, Orthodox Christian confession, lives in 2 Mai village, Constanța County. The discussions took place in 2 Mai village on 30 November 2004; a similar belief was asserted by M.P., 61-year-old man, Orthodox Christian confession, lives in Oltna village, Constanța County. The discussion took place at Dervent Monastery, 14 September 2019).

15. The letter was addressed to one of the monks from Dervent Monastery.

16. We note that the letter mentioned two villages and that none of them is the village mentioned in the booklet. Both Gârlita and Galița are closer to Dervent than Coslugea.

17. <https://www.dervent.ro/dervent.php?cID=cat-dervent-daruri&rID=10&rType=ART&rOP=more> [accessed in 20 July 2023].

18. RO: *Eu sunt născut în anul 1883 August 28; și în anul 1904 am plecat de la acest loc sfânt fără cârji; la etatea de 21 ani care ea veam eu atunci; acum sunt mulsumit la etatea care sunt acum la bătrânețe; am eu etatea de 74 ani. Așa că tata al meu a auzit de acest foc sfânt prin lume că a fost un băeat din Gârlita sau Gălița Muto surd pascând oile pe acest teren, a văzut o piatră mai mare și isa făcut somn, a dormit până a doua zi; și când sa dus acasă a vorbit și auzit. Atunci am plecat și noi la acest locu sfânt am ajuns; ce să vedem pe acest loc, făcută o giretă de scânduri; în nauntru o cruce ruptă vârful, și pus lingă tulpina eii, în dosul ei o icoană mare cu maica domnului, desemnată cu fiul ei Isus Hristos aşzată pe patru țărui și în parti icoani despre miează noapte un feșne. Mam închinat mam rugat să mă fac bine; Vă rog fiți buni atenți și credețimă pe mine că nu fac propagandă și mam făcut bine. Asculțați, la plecarea noastră, am fipt cârja lângă cruce și am plecat de acolo pe jos, până la Ostrov.*

19. <https://manastirea.dervent.ro/minunile-de-la-crucea-de-leac-document-din-anul-1933/> [accessed in 20 July 2023].

20. <http://www.dervent.ro/dervent.php?cID=cat-dervent-istoric&rID=4&rType=ART&rOP=more> [accessed in 20 July 2023].

21. <http://www.dervent.ro/dervent.php?cID=cat-dervent-istoric&rID=4&rType=ART&rOP=more> [accessed in 20 July 2023].

22. <http://www.dervent.ro/dervent.php?cID=cat-dervent-istoric&rID=4&rType=ART&rOP=more> [accessed in 20 July 2023]. Until now, I did not find local Muslim versions of this history.

23. <https://manastirea.dervent.ro/martirii-de-la-dervent-sistoria-sfintelor-cruci/> [accessed in 20 July 2023]

24. <https://manastirea.dervent.ro/minunile-de-la-crucea-de-leac-document-din-anul-1933/> [accessed in 20 July 2023].

25. <https://manastirea.dervent.ro/minunile-de-la-crucea-de-leac-document-din-anul-1933/>. For further references see also <https://manastirea.dervent.ro/parintele-elefterie-mihail-staret-al-manastirii-dervent-1938-1959-1990/>. [accessed in 20 July 2023].

26. Personal field record; man, 78 years old, Orthodox Christian confession; Izvoarele, Constanța County.

27. Personal field record; woman, 56 years old, Orthodox Christian confession; Izvoarele, Constanța County.

28. Yet, an article published in 1940 in the *Grănicerul* magazine, presents a variant of the legend that points to a curative dream. "That night he [the shepherd] dreamt a beautiful dream in which an angel came to him and said: 'Stand up and walk further, because you are cured.'" The article was downloaded from the internet in 2021. <https://tehirghiol.com/crucea-facatoare-deminuni> [accessed in 15 April 2023].

29. We can not check this information. <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-locale/constanta/istoria-legendarului-preot-elefterie-duhovnicul-1724431.html> [accessed in 15 May 2023].

30. <https://manastirea.dervent.ro/parintele-elefterie-mihail-staret-al-manastirii-dervent-1938-1959-1990/> [accessed in 20 July 2023].

31. <https://manastirea.dervent.ro/parintele-elefterie-mihail-staret-al-manastirii-dervent-1938-1959-1990/> [accessed in 20 July 2023].

32. <https://manastirea.dervent.ro/parintele-elefterie-mihail-staret-al-manastirii-dervent-1938-1959-1990/> [accessed in 20 July 2023].

33. <https://manastirea.dervent.ro/parintele-elefterie-mihail-staret-al-manastirii-dervent-1938-1959-1990/> [accessed in 20 July 2023].

34. <http://www.dervent.ro/dervent.php?cID=cat-dervent-istoric&rID=6&rType=ART&rOP=more> [accessed in 20 July 2023].

35. <http://www.lumeaspirituala.ro/spiritualitate/dervent.htm> [accessed in 15 November 2022].

36. <http://www.travelinfinite.ro/arhiva-tabere-si-excursii-initiative/7-octombrie-2018-manastirea-dervent-crucea-facatoare-deminuni-izvorul-tamadurii-si-pestera-sf-andrei/> [accessed in 10 January 2022].

37. <http://www.dervent.ro/dictionar.php?dTitle=Tm91YSBlciYjMjU5Ow> [accessed in 15 May 2022].

38. <https://www.dervent.ro/dervent.php?cID=cat-dervent-istoric&rID=6&rType=ART&rOP=more> [accessed in 25 October 2022].

39. A google search with the keywords *Leacurile părintelui Elefterie* [Father Elefterie's remedies] shows around 2,000 entries.

40. For example, the man who shared with other visitors his dream in which an alien advised him to go to Dervent.

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