

# THE 14<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY REPRESENTATIONS OF NAVICELLA AND THE STORY OF THE MURALS FROM JELNA (BISTRIȚA-NĂSAUD COUNTY)

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**Keywords:** Navicella, Rome, pilgrimage, donor, wind personifications, ship, Ship of the Church, Jelna, St. Jacob, Viștea, Turnišče, Hungarian Kingdom, medieval wall painting, 14<sup>th</sup> century.

**Abstract:** A widely publicized event from 2016 was the rediscovery of a fresco representing a *Navicella* scene at Jelna (hu. Kiszsolna, Zsolna, germ. Senndorf, Romania), a small village near the Transylvanian city of Bistrița (hu. Beszterce, germ. Bistritz, Romania). Bombastic titles, remote from reality, such as “A rare Giotto painting discovered amidst the ruins of a church in Transylvania”, also appeared in the international press.

In this article, I will analyse the paintings from Jelna and compare them with the few 14<sup>th</sup> century examples of *Navicella* known in Europe, especially with the two other frescoes preserved on the territory of medieval Hungary, with an iconography proving the knowledge of the image represented first in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. At Viștea (hu. Magyarvista, Romania) and Turnišče (hu. Bántornya, germ. Turnitz, Slovenia), near the ship, we have few elements taken from the famous mosaic or its copies: the personifications of the winds, the shape of the mast and a traveller covering his eyes, blinded by the presence of Jesus Christ. Jelna presents most features common with Giotto's composition, being the first known *Navicella* reproduction with the Prophets. In all three cases, the image of the donor is placed nearby and in two of them we also find references to places of pilgrimage.

The analysed frescoes combine iconographic elements from different sources, creating original compositions, using the metaphor of life as a journey across the sea, and representing the donor's search for protection during his longer way to Heaven. At the same time, they express fidelity to the Roman Papal See.

**Rezumat:** Un eveniment larg mediatizat din anul 2016 a fost redescoperirea unei fresce cu tema iconografică *Navicella* la Jelna (hu. Kiszsolna, Zsolna, germ. Senndorf, România) într-un mic sat, lângă orașul Bistrița (hu. Beszterce, germ. Bistritz, România) din Transilvania. Titluri bombastice, departe de realitate, au apărut în presa internațională, cum ar fi „O rară pictură a lui Giotto descoperită printre ruinele unei biserici din Transilvania”.

În articolul de față analizez fresca de la Jelna în comparație cu cele câteva exemple din secolul al XIV-lea ale *Navicellei* cunoscute în Europa, în special cu celelalte două picturi păstrate pe teritoriul Ungariei medievale, având o iconografie ce dovedește cunoașterea imaginii reprezentate pentru prima dată în Bazilica Sf. Petru din Roma. La Viștea (hu. Magyarvista, România) și la Turnišče (hu. Bántornya, germ. Turnitz, Slovenia), pe lângă navă, avem doar câteva elemente preluate (demonii vântului, forma catargului, călătorul acoperindu-și ochii). Jelna are în mod evident cele mai multe trăsături comune cu compoziția lui Giotto, este prima copie cu reprezentarea profetilor. În toate cele trei cazuri donatorii au fost pictați în scena din dreapta imaginii navei. În două cazuri găsim și referiri la unul sau mai multe locuri de pelerinaj.

În concluzie putem spune că frescele analizate combină elemente iconografice din diferite surse, creând compoziții originale, care folosesc metafora vieții ca o călătorie pe mare, donatorul cerând protecție pentru călătoria lui mai lungă către Ceruri și exprimă, în același timp, fidelitatea față de Scaunul Papal Roman.

A widely publicized event of the last year was the rediscovery of a fresco with the *Navicella* representation at Jelna (hu. Kiszsolna, Zsolna, germ. Senndorf), in a small village near the city of Bistrița (hu. Beszterce, germ. Bistritz), in Romania. Bombastic titles, remote from reality, such as “A rare Giotto painting discovered among the ruins of a church in Transylvania” also appeared in the international press in 2016.<sup>1</sup>

Specialists have known of the existence of this fresco before. The restorer Loránd Kiss presented it for the first time in 2008, in a conference, as an undefined scene with a ship, as a result of his research on five Saxon evangelical churches.<sup>2</sup> In 2009 and 2010, I spoke about the *Navicella* scene in Jelna, in connection with the

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<sup>1</sup> The news first appeared in the international press in AFP: <https://www.afp.com/en/news/rare-giotto-copy-emerges-transylvanian-church-ruins> (the page could not be found in 2017.09.26), and taken over, between others, see: <http://www.lefigaro.fr/arts-expositions/2016/02/28/03015-20160228ARTFIG00030-un-rare-giotto-aurait-ete-trouve-parmi-les-ruines-d-une-eglise-en-transylvanie.php>; <http://www.lacapital.com.ar/informacion-gral/hallan-copia-un-giotto-una-iglesia-rumana-n501847.html>; <https://www.archaeology.org/news/4219-160229-hungary-the-navicella>; <http://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/actualitate/descoperire-extraordinara-intr-o-biserica-ruinata-din-transilvania-ce-s-a-vazut-pe-perete-dupa-ce-a-cazut-tencuiala.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Loránd Kiss, *Öt százföldi evangélikus templom kutatásának az eredményei* [The results of the research of five Saxon evangelical churches], Monument Protection in Transylvania III. – Sovata (Romania), November 28-30, 2008. See also Kiss 2013.