



MACEDONIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND ARTS

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MACEDONIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND ARTS  
MACEDONIAN NATIONAL COMMITTEE

TRADITION DANS LA COMMUNICATION  
ET DANS LA CULTURE SPIRITUELLE  
DE L'EUROPE DU SUD-EST  
(DROIT, ÉCONOMIE, SCIENCES NATURELLES,  
ART, LITTÉRATURE, LANGUE)  
Symposium International

TRADITION IN COMMUNICATION  
AND IN THE SPIRITUAL CULTURE  
OF SOUTHEAST EUROPE  
(LAW, ECONOMICS, NATURAL SCIENCES, ART,  
LITERATURE, LANGUAGE)  
International Symposium

Ohrid, 5–8 September 2018



**a.i.e.s.e.e.**

МАКЕДОНСКА АКАДЕМИЈА НА НАУКИТЕ И УМЕТНОСТИТЕ  
МАКЕДОНСКИ НАЦИОНАЛЕН КОМИТЕТ

ТРАДИЦИЈАТА ВО КОМУНИКАЦИИТЕ  
И ВО ДУХОВНАТА КУЛТУРА  
НА ЈУГОИСТОЧНА ЕВРОПА  
(ПРАВО, ЕКОНОМИЈА, ПРИРОДНИ НАУКИ, УМЕТНОСТ,  
ЛИТЕРАТУРА, ЈАЗИК)  
Меѓународен симпозиум

Охрид, 5–8 септември 2018



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## CONTENTS

### *Welcoming and opening speeches*

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <i>Taki FITI</i> (President of the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts) .....   | 13 |
| <i>Alexandre KOSTOV</i> (President of the AIESEE) .....                             | 17 |
| <i>Razvan THEODORESKU</i> (General Secretary of the AIESEE Committee) .....         | 19 |
| <i>Jovan STOJANOSKI</i> (Mayor of Ohrid) .....                                      | 21 |
| <i>Vera BITRAKOVA GROZDANOVA</i> (President of the AIESEE National Committee) ..... | 23 |

### *Proceedings*

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <i>Razvan THEODORESCU</i> – La tradition étatique des Pays Roumains en relation avec les Balkans .....                         | 27  |
| <i>Vera BITRAKOVA GROZDANOVA</i> – Demitsa en tant que chercheur de l'héritage antique .....                                   | 33  |
| <i>Luan STAROVA</i> – Eqrem-bej Vlora et la question macédonienne .....  | 43  |
| * * *  |     |
| <i>Dragi MITREVSKI</i> – Troada and Central Balkan populations .....   | 53  |
| <i>Vanya LOZANOVA-STANTCHEVA</i> – Sacral infrastructure and communications in southwestern Thrace in the 5th century BC ..... | 77  |
| <i>Aleksandra NIKOLOSKA</i> – Religious communications through Via Egnatia in Roman times .....                                | 105 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <i>Elica MANEVA</i> – Influences byzantines dans la production de bijoux<br>et d’artefacts de la région de Skopje .....   | 127 |
| <i>Anita PAOLICCHI</i> – Elements of continuity and discontinuity in the Orthodox<br><i>kivotia</i> of Southeast Europe .....   | 143 |
| <i>Olimpia DRAGOUNI</i> – The animal sacrifice (kurban) in Christian and Islamic<br>religious texts from the Balkans as means of inter-faith communication<br>and division .....                          | 161 |
| <i>Vitomir MITEVSKI</i> – Byzantine epic poem on Digenes Akritas and epic cycle<br>on King Marko .....  | 185 |
| <i>Snežana VUKADINOVIĆ</i> – On the holy names of the two heroes: Heracles<br>and Marko Kraljević .....   | 193 |
| <i>Dragi GJEORGIEV, Eyüp KUL</i> – The Derbendcis In The Province<br>of Rumeli (In the Beginning of the 18th Century) .....   | 203 |
| <i>Nicolae Razvan MITU</i> – The Role of Mustafa Kemal in the Unification<br>of the Turkish National Resistance at the End of WWI .....   | 213 |
| <i>Biljana RISTOVSKA-JOSIFOVSKA</i> – On the road of one migration<br>of Macedonians towards Bulgaria in the late 19 <sup>th</sup> century .....  | 221 |
| <i>Yordanka BIBINA, Mariyana STAMOVA</i> – Dynamics of the Migration<br>Processes in the Balkans in the 20 <sup>th</sup> Century (Focus on Turkey<br>and Kosovo and Macedonia in Tito’s Yugoslavia) ..... | 243 |
| * * *   |     |
| <i>Emilija CRVENKOVSKA</i> – Church Slavonic Literacy as Communication<br>between East and West: Western Influence in Church Slavonic<br>Literacy at the Balkans.....                                     | 261 |
| <i>Maja JAKIMOVSKA-TOSHIC</i> – Cultural interactions in the South Slavic<br>medieval fiction texts .....   | 273 |
| <i>Aleksandra GJURKOVA</i> – Language borrowing and dialect elements<br>in the discourse of Grigor Prlicev .....  | 291 |
| <i>Evalda PACI</i> – Les anciens textes albanais, témoignage d’une particulière<br>tradition écrite littéraire.....   | 313 |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <i>Zuzana TOPOLINJSKA, Marjan MARKOVIKJ</i> – The impact of multilingual environment on the semantic and formal structure of the languages in contact .....  | 329 |
| <i>Tatjana KRIZMAN MALEV</i> – La tradition de la communication orale et écrite contre le rôle traditionnel de la femme dans les Balkans: la production littéraire et l'engagement personnel de Dragojla Jarnević (1812-1875) et de Marija Jurić Zagorka (1873–1957) ..... | 343 |
| <i>Katica KULAVKOVA</i> – Grotesque Vision of the World in the context of contemporary Balkan Short Stories (Macedonian and Bulgarian) .....   | 371 |
| <i>Jasmina MOJSIEVA-GUŠEVA</i> – Intercultural dialogue: the example of Macedonian-Greek relations .....   | 389 |
| <i>Elizabeta SHELEVA</i> – Balkanism as imagological category<br>In South-East European literatures and cultures.....  | 421 |
| <i>Marica ANTOVSKA-MITEV, Taki FITI</i> – Information as an essential resource in the Economy .....  | 433 |
| <b><i>List of contributors</i></b> .....   | 449 |

Anita PAOLICCHI

## ELEMENTS OF CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY IN THE ORTHODOX *KIVOTIA* OF SOUTHEAST EUROPE

**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to present three different kinds of containers for the Eucharist (*kivotia*) that are attested in the Post-Byzantine Balkans, discussing if their shape was connected to the Byzantine tradition or if, on the contrary, it represented a break with tradition. This paper also tries to highlight the reason that, in the latter case, made that change possible and acceptable in a really conservative context, as Post-Byzantine Southeast Europe was, especially in regards to themes directly or indirectly connected to the very central topic of religious identity.

I strongly believe that the analysis of the elements of discontinuity in the artistic production may allow to a complementary better understanding of the key elements consolidated by tradition: for example, the importance of architectural representation in the (Post-)Byzantine culture, which, as a general concept, has already been highlighted in the bibliography. Based on the assumption that architectural objects are animated by a spiritual, philosophical, or artistic intention, the symbolic prototype which is at the base of each different kind of architectural *kivotion* will be investigated: it will help understand its specific additional message and will contribute to a better understanding of the cultural, religious and political context in which it finds its origin.



**Key words:** *kivotia, liturgical vessels, religious identity, Byzantine tradition, Post-Byzantine art.*

**Апстракт:** Целта на овој труд е да се претстават три различни видови на садови за Евхаристијата (кивоти) кои се посведочени во поствизантскиот Балкан, дискутирајќи притоа дали нивните форми биле поврзани со византиската традиција или, напротив, претставувале прекин со традицијата. Во овој труд, исто така, се обидува да се нагласи причината што, во вториот случај, ја прави таа промена можна и прифатлива во навистина конзервативен контекст, како што била пост-византиската Југоисточна Европа, особено во однос на темите кои се директно или индиректно поврзани со централната тема на верскиот идентитет.

Силно верувам дека анализата на елементите на дисконтинуитетот во уметничкото производство може да овозможи комплементарно подобро разбирање на клучните елементи консолидирани од традицијата: на пример, важноста на архитектонското претставување во (пост) византиската култура, која, како општ концепт, веќе е истакнато во библиографијата. Врз основа на претпоставката дека архитектонските објекти се анимирани со духовна, филозофска или уметничка намера, ќе се испита симболичкиот прототип кој е во основата на секој различен вид на архитектонски кивотион: тоа ќе помогне да се разбере неговата специфична дополнителна порака и ќе придонесе за подобро разбирање на културниот, верскиот и политичкиот контекст во кој го наоѓа своето потекло.

**Клучни зборови:** *кивоџи, литурѓиски садови, релиѓиски идентитет, византиска традиција, пост-византиска уметност.*

The aim of this paper is to present the main shapes *kivotia* – that are the most important among the liturgical vessels, employed in the Christian Orthodox rite to contain the Eucharist – have had in the last centuries, discussing how each one of these shapes was connected to the Byzantine tradition or if it represented a break with tradition. This paper also tries to highlight the reason that, in the latter case, made that change

possible and acceptable in a really conservative context, as Post-Byzantine Southeast Europe was, especially in regards to themes directly or indirectly connected to the very central topic of religious identity<sup>1</sup>.

The most spectacular *kivotia* produced and used in the Post-Byzantine Balkans have an articulated architectural shape, often that of a church. As stated by several researchers, architectural objects are animated by a spiritual, philosophical or artistic intention<sup>2</sup>: the architectural shape of an object is not merely decorative, it reveals something, and carries an additional message.

Being 17th-century Wallachia the starting point of my research interests, I had the chance to observe how the shape of *kivotia* became a mean to transmit additional political messages, instrumental in strengthening the relation between the monasteries and the religious and political *élites*. At that time, Orthodoxy as an identity-making feature was particularly important: the reign of Wallachia was threatened by the presence of the Muslim Turks on the Eastern border, and by the Catholic propaganda issued by the Austrian administration of Transylvania in the North. In this context of religious and political contrast in the Northern Balkan area, the Orthodox religion became the centre of Wallachian consciousness and it is easy to understand why supporting the Orthodox Church with the foundation of new churches and monasteries, but also with valuable presents, became one of the main tools of the Princes' politics. Especially during Constantin Brâncoveanu's reign (1688-1714), but also, to some extent, also during the reign of his predecessors Matei

<sup>1</sup> My presentation is based on my current doctoral research (University of Florence), which aims at a systematic categorization of the reliquaries produced in the Byzantine and Post-Byzantine world, considering their shapes and their evolution through the centuries, looking for similarities and differences within different areas of the Orthodoxy and in comparison with the reliquaries produced and used in Western Europe.

<sup>2</sup> I think it is worth quoting the words of Pierre and Catherine Provoyeur in the opening of the catalogue edited on the occasion of an exhibition dedicated to the representation of ecclesiastic architecture (*Le Temple* 1982, p. 19): «Les œuvres qui renvoient à l'architecture sacrée [...] elles n'en sont jamais des substitutions, des représentations innocentes, mais les manifestations d'une intention spirituelle, philosophique et plastique qui donne un dessin, à la peinture ou à l'objet une existence propre, un contenu autonome en face de tout édifice construit auquel ils feraient référence, qu'ils en soient le projet ou la copie». On the symbolic significance of the architectural representation in Byzantine Art see: *Architecture as Icon* 2010.

Basarab (1632-1654) and Șerban Cantacuzino (1678-1688), the syncretism of the political and the religious plans – evident in a complex and continuous program of foundation of new churches and monasteries – came to its highest point and was reflected in the magnificence of the vessels destined to endow the new foundations under his protection. Donating “personalised” *kivotia*, micro-architectural representation of the church to which they were commended, with an outside decoration mirroring the interior iconography of the church, reflected and reverberated the connection between the founder and the foundation. These *kivotia*, about 30-40 cm tall, are not to be intended as exact scale reproductions, but the inspiring model is easily recognizable because the characteristic features of the building are usually reproduced quite carefully, for instance through the number, position and shape of towers distinguishing each building<sup>3</sup>. In this way, a system of cross-references is established between the church and the *kivotion* contained in it.

Probably, the most relevant example is a *kivotion* of gilded silver and enamel, made in 1691 by a still unknown silversmith as a gift by Constantin Brâncoveanu to the main church of the Horezu monastery<sup>4</sup>, his most important foundation [figure 1]. In this micro-architectural representation, the church structure – with a three-apse plan and two towers – is perfectly reproduced, although the towers are not to scale. The strong relation between the monastery and the Prince is revealed also by a fresco in the same church, representing Constantin Brâncoveanu and his wife Maria holding the model of the church, surrounded by their four sons and seven daughters. We can therefore observe three levels of connection between the donor and the place: the real church, its three-dimensional miniaturization (the *kivotion*), and its two-dimensional miniaturisation on the surface of the wall decoration.

<sup>3</sup> In some cases, these *kivotia* are the last documents of the general aspect of a building that, along the centuries, has suffered major modification or that is no longer existing. It can well be the case of the *kivotion* originally belonging to the Tismana monastery (NICOLESCU 1968, CAT. 198, P. 173), one of the oldest Wallachian monastery churches, which has undergone a number of restorations in the last centuries (NICOLESCU 1968, p. 44). On the pattern of identification of architectural elements in the silver *kivotia* and the real churches, also see PAOLICCHI 2018.

<sup>4</sup> NICOLESCU 1968, cat. 202.

Brancovan church-shaped *kivotia* represent a qualitative height, but, as already said, the existence of this kind of micro-architectural vessel is not limited to the decades of his reign, at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Those micro-architectures – often made with precious metals and gems – were used all around the peninsula, as demonstrated by their presence in the Romanian, Serbian and Bulgarian collections<sup>5</sup>. As a matter of fact, the general features of these *kivotia* are identical, regardless of their origin: Orthodox liturgical vessels were usually based on the Byzantine tradition, and, being the Post-Byzantine Balkans usually quite conservative as to their Byzantine heritage, it is no surprise that architectural *kivotia* were used in the whole region with only minor differences. On the contrary, from the stylistic point of view, these *kivotia* could differ widely from one another, because their authors could be, for instance, Transylvanian, therefore using an unmistakably Western *décor*, or Bulgarian, skilled in the filigree and etching techniques.

Nowadays, *kivotia* still have an architectural shape, often that of a church, even if the connection with the church to which it belongs is usually not so evident. This is probably due to the fact that they are not purposely made for a specific church: once ceased the need to connect symbolically the church and the donor, the shape of the *kivotion* did not have to reproduce a specific existing building's aspect any longer. A magnificent silver *kivotion* made in 1784 for the Monastery of Curtea de Argeș<sup>6</sup> is the proverbial exception that proves the rule: despite its late realization, in an age when the political uncertainties that characterised the Brancovean period were over, it represents a proof of the importance of the identification between the church and the *kivotion*: even the smallest architectural details are carefully reproduced. Its dimensions are bigger than the older *kivotia* as to emphasise the symbolic importance of this gift: its donor, Partenie, spent a huge sum for the architectural renovation of the church, one of the most important in the region, and on endowing it with liturgical vessels, e.g. a Gospel book-binding, reliquaries

<sup>5</sup> See for example, in addition to the already mentioned NICOLESCU 1968: *Masterpieces* 1981, *Cristiani d'Oriente* 1999. Similar objects are also attested as incense caskets, see for example: *Treasures of Mount Athos* 1997.

<sup>6</sup> *Mărturii* 2012, cat. 49, pp. 166-167 (C. Tănăsoiu).

and silver vases. Unfortunately, only a chalice is documentarily attested nowadays<sup>7</sup>.

In this conservative context, four *kivotia* dating back to the decades that precede and follow the year 1700 stand out for their unusual cylindrical shape: two of them were made in Venice and were gifted to Orthodox churches in Wallachia<sup>8</sup> [figure 2], one was probably made in Ottoman Constantinople as a gift by Neophytos, the Metropolitan of Adrianople (today's Edirne, Turkey), to the cathedral of his see in 1669<sup>9</sup>, while the last one, a gift from the abbot Damascene to the Bachkovo Monastery (Bulgaria) in 1705, was probably made in a local atelier<sup>10</sup>.

The main questions I had to deal with at the beginning of my research on these cylindrical *kivotia* were why the donor decided to commission such unusual objects and why was an object with such an unusual shape accepted as Eucharist container in such a conservative context as the Post-Byzantine Balkans. The third question is linked to one of the assumptions on which my research is based: as architectural shape, in Byzantine culture, has always a meaning and it is not simply a matter of taste, what do these cylindrical *kivotia* mean? That question – as a matter of fact – turned out to be the answer to the first two questions.

The hypothesis of seeing their shape as the miniaturization of an existing building was immediately ruled out, because there are no cylindrical buildings in any monastery centre in Southeast Europe. Ultimately, the most consistent hypothesis was to identify their conceptual

<sup>7</sup> His dedication to the monastery is witnessed by an inscription on a *pomelnic*; TOCILESCU 1886, p. 54 *apud Mărturii* 2012, cat. 49, pp. 166-167 (C. Tănăsioiu).

<sup>8</sup> I dedicated one essay to the Venetian provenance of these cylindrical *kivotia* in 2016 (see PAOLICCHI 2016), nevertheless, in summer 2018, during a research internship at the National Museum of Art of Romania in Bucharest, where these objects are preserved, I had the chance to observe that part of the conclusions based on previous bibliography should be reconsidered; an article on this issue is in preparation.

<sup>9</sup> It now belongs to the collection of the Christian and Byzantine Museum of Athens. *Post-Byzantium* 2002, cat. 33, pp. 160-161 (E. Chalkia).

<sup>10</sup> Nowadays, it belongs to the National Church Historical-Archaeological Museum in Sofia, where I had the chance to examine it in December 2018, during a two-weeks stay in Bulgaria funded by the University of Florence to make research for my current PhD research project.

origin in the miniaturization of a symbolic space with religious connotations: maybe a miniaturized *martiryon*, maybe the sepulchre of Christ, or possibly the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem itself. This hypothesis was reinforced by the theological connection between Christ's passion and the Eucharistic moment, especially in the Orthodox rite, where the Holy Communion consists of both bread and wine. However, unfortunately, this is not supported by documents<sup>11</sup>.

In any case, a question was still open: identifying the reasons behind the brief appearance of this kind of *kivotia* in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. The geographical distribution of the four cylindrical *kivotia* on a wide area spanning from Wallachia to the Ottoman empire allows to speculate that this kind of liturgical vessel, at that time, was probably more common than expected, or, at any rate, rare but not incompatible with the Orthodox rite. Furthermore, documentary evidences from the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE back up the hypothesis that this kind of object did have a long tradition both in Western and Eastern Christianity as Eucharist container, but that it was dismissed in the Latin rite because later liturgical evolutions made it useless, while it survived in Greek Orthodoxy, thou becoming progressively more uncommon – as the church shape established itself<sup>12</sup>.

On the contrary, another shape the *kivotia* assumed in Early Modern Age was definitely a break with tradition, as it does not have any connection with the Byzantine tradition of Eucharist containers. This new kind of *kivotion* has the shape of a ciborium, a canopy supported by columns, freestanding in the sanctuary. This kind of architectural structure was used in the ancient times to visually highlight the altar, emphasizing its importance, in both Eastern and Western churches: often there were curtains hanging from the ciborium, and those curtains were closed at the most solemn part of the Mass [figures 3-4]. The introduction of other structures that screened the altar, such as the iconostasis, made the

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<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the hypothesis of interpreting the cylindrical *kivotia* as miniaturized Holy Sepulchre is backed up by the existence, in the Post-Byzantine Orthodox monastic centres, as for example Mount Athos and Mount Sinai, of a rare liturgical object of cylindrical shape called *Zion*. It is usually used as a censer, or as an incense casket, or – rarely – even as a Eucharistic container and, as the name suggests, it symbolises the Heavenly Jerusalem.

<sup>12</sup> PAOLICCHI 2018.

ciborium purposeless, so that it almost disappeared during the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the ciborium had a revival in Baroque churches in the Latin West: a masterpiece in this sense is the famous baldachin in the Papal Basilica of St. Peter in the Vatican, by Bernini. In approximately the same period, in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a ciborium was also erected in the Orthodox church of St. Elijah the Prophet in Yaroslav (Russia): at the time of Catherine the Great, even Orthodox foundations were somehow influenced by Western artistic styles, and this may explain the introduction of the ciborium in that newly built church.

*Kivotia* in the shape of a ciborium are attested in different areas of the Balkans: for example, a 18th century ciborium-shaped *kivotion* is attested in the collection of the National History Museum of Sofia and it is said to have been made for a Greek church, as a gift by two women, namely Elisabeth and Catherine Opadzeni, in 1781<sup>13</sup> [figure 5]. Two later examples, from 1855 and 1865, belong to the National Art Museum of Bucharest and come from Moldova, an area under Russian influence<sup>14</sup>.

This kind of *kivotion* of “Catholic inspiration” was therefore probably introduced in the Balkans thanks to the strong cultural and political connections with Russia: that can probably be regarded as a reason for their early appearance as gifts to Moldovan foundations. As demonstrated by a recent survey I have done in Wallachian monasteries and churches, this kind of *ciborium*-shaped *kivotion* is definitely the most common nowadays, together with the church-shaped typology.

In conclusion, what I would like to point out is that many of these objects, if analysed only individually or in relation to their specific local context, could appear incomprehensible and inexplicable, while – if discussed as part of a broader picture – their origin and meaning become evident.

<sup>13</sup> This is all that can be evicted from the Greek inscription on the *kivotion*, which, unfortunately, does not mention the exact church to which it was donated; RUSEVA 2011, p. 268.

<sup>14</sup> I had the chance to analyse these ciborium-shaped *kivotia* during a research internship at the National Museum of Art of Romania (Dept. of Medieval art) in summer 2018, funded by the University of Florence.

I strongly believe that the analysis of the elements of discontinuity in the artistic production may allow to a complementary better understanding of the key elements consolidated by tradition. For example, the older and newer kinds of *kivotia* presented in the paper have very different shapes, depending on their specific figurative prototype: the real church to which the *kivotia* belong, the Holy Sepulchre, or an isolated architectural element such as the ciborium. Nevertheless, from those particular unusual shapes it is possible to abstract a universal consideration, underlining once again the importance of architectural representation in the (Post-)Byzantine culture, which, as a general concept, has already been highlighted in the bibliography. As stated at the beginning of this paper, architectural objects are animated by a spiritual, philosophical, or artistic intention: detecting the symbolic prototype which is at the base of each different kind of architectural *kivotion* will help understand its specific additional message and will contribute to a better understanding of the cultural, religious and political context in which it finds its origin.



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Fig. 1. Architectural kivoton from the Horezu monastery, 1691, National Museum of Art of Romania, Bucharest (©Muzeul Național de Artă al României)



Fig. 2. Cylindric *kivotion* from the Comana monastery, Venetian provenance, 1698-1699, National Museum of Art of Romania, Bucharest  
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Fig. 3. Rohault De Fleury, *La messe. Études archéologiques sur ses monuments*, vol. II, 1883, pl. 110: the ciborium of the Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio, Milan (the digitalisation on this image has been provided by the Laboratorio Fotografico del Dipartimento di Civiltà e Forme del Sapere, University of Pisa)



Fig. 4. Rohault De Fleury, *La messe. Études archéologiques sur ses monuments*, vol. II, 1883, pl. 103: the ciborium of the Basilica of San Marco, Venice (the digitalisation on this image has been provided by the Laboratorio Fotografico del Dipartimento di Civiltà e Forme del Sapere, University of Pisa)



Fig. 5. Ciborium-shaped *kivoton* (Дарохранилница – Балдахин), 1781 aprox., National History Museum, Sofia (©Национален исторически музей)



Publisher Издавач  
MASA – Skopje МАНУ – Скопје

Translation Превод  
Jana Hadzi-Lega Јана Хаџи-Лега  
Aleksandra Nikoloska Александра Николоска

Computer layout Компјутерска реализација  
Zdravko Kjorveziroski Здравко Корвезироски

Cover design Дизајн на корицата  
Gjorgji Titiev Ѓорѓи Титиев

Print Печат  
Arberia Design – Tetovo Арбериа дизајн – Тетово

Copies Тираж  
300

CIP - Каталогизација во публикација  
Национална и универзитетска библиотека „Св. Климент Охридски“, Скопје

001(082)

TRADITION in communication and in the spiritual culture of Southeast Europe : (law, economics, natural sciences, art, literature, language) = Tradition dans la communication et dans la culture spirituelle del'Europe du Sud-Est : (droit, économie, sciences naturelles, art, littérature, langue) / [editorial board Vera Bitrakova Grozdanova ... и др.]. - Скопје : Македонска академија на науките и уметностите = Macedonian academy of sciences and arts, 2019. - 452 стр. : илустр. ; 25 см

Текст на англ. и фран. јазик. - На стр.3.: Традицијата во комуникациите и во духовната култура на Југо-источна Европа : (право, економија, природни науки, уметност, литература, јазик). - Фусноти кон текстот. - Библиографија кон трудовите

ISBN 978-608-203-262-7

1. Насп. ств. насл.  
а) Хуманитарни науки – Зборници

COBISS.MK-ID 110619914