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**A. Soroceanu, *Niceta von Remesiana. Seelsorge und Kirchenpolitik im spätantiken unteren Donaauraum, (Zivilisationen und Geschichte 23)*, Peter Lang: Frankfurt a. M, 2013, 281 p., ISBN 978-3-631-62157-8.**

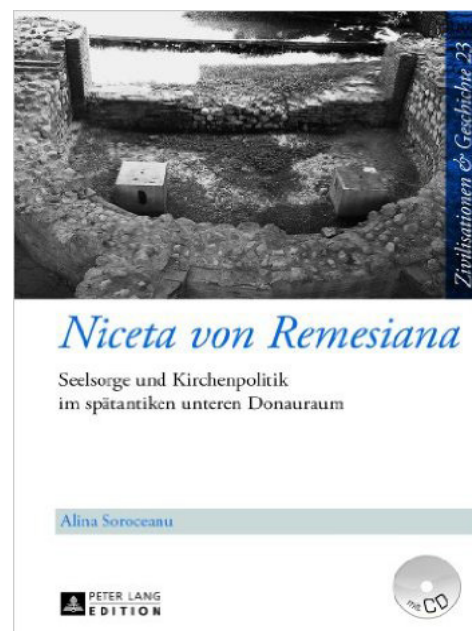
**T**he book discussed below represents the most recent monograph about the bishop Niceta of Remesiana in Dacia Mediterranea, a remarkable figure of the Illyrian Christianity of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Following a useful presentation of the previous research about Niceta (ch. III), the author proceeds to present the Dacian bishop in the historical and ecclesiastic context of his time. The general frame is first established by a detailed description of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century Illyricum (ch. IV.1), a period of profound changes. It is the time of the great migration of the Gothic Tervingi from across of the Danube, followed by the revolt of 378 and the battle of Adrianople and, far more important in the long run, their settling on Roman lands south of the river. This settlement dramatically changed the ethnic and religious structure of the region and created new opportunities for the Christian mission, in which Niceta's was also involved. Another important change of this time, with consequences both political and ecclesiastic, was the partition of the Empire at the death of Theodosius I, which particularly affected the ecclesiastic provinces of the Balkan Peninsula. Although nobody at the time thought it to be permanent, this political division was to accentuate the ecclesiastical ones as well, and the contact area between the increasingly defined areas of influence and canonical authority of Rome and Constantinople was the same Balkan Peninsula. The general view concentrates in the following chapters on the province of Dacia Mediterranea (VI.2) and then on the episcopal see of Remesiana (IV.3). In the description of the city, Alina Soroceanu uses not only the literary, but also the archaeological evidence, drawing an accurate picture of Niceta's residence.

The most important and scientifically interesting chapters of the monograph are, as was to be expected, the two dedicated to the personality of bishop Niceta (IV.4-5). The analysis of the known writings of the Danubian prelate allows the author to draw a well-rounded and interesting image of the activities of a bishop in the Late Antiquity, in a region where Christianity had still to assert itself. The works of Niceta are mostly catechetical and Alina Soroceanu's examination explains the phases and methods of Christian initiation, such as they were on the turn of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. In this period of theological controversies, of which one of the most important centres was in the Lower Danube region, several books of Niceta's *Instructio ad competentes* are intended to carefully establish the pillars of the correct faith. Moreover, Niceta's mission in Dacia Mediterranea regarded not only the ancient inhabitants, like the Bessi mentioned in the famous *Carmen XVII* of Paulinus of Nola, but most probably also newcomers like the aforementioned Goths settled south of the Danube by Valens and Theodosius I. The catechetical writings of the bishop of Remesiana had thus to be adapted to such an audience, and Alina Soroceanu reveals these particularities, visible in some of the examples present in the text of the second book of the *Instructio (De gentilitatis erroribus)*. Apart from the concrete ecclesiastical

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aspects, Niceta's writings allow a glimpse of the society of the time, like the clothing details described in the fifth book, *Explanatio symboli*, and the attitude of the clergy towards the different customs of the time.

In the second subchapter dedicated to the personality of Niceta, the author tries to present him in the ecclesiastical, but also political context of his time. The point of departure in this presentation is, quite naturally, the *Carmen XVII* of Paulinus of Nola, which offers the most substantial information about the historical and geographic context of Niceta's activity. Paulin's *propemptikon* was written as a farewell to his guest from the North, who visited Nola coming from Rome around the year 400. In the absence of any details, one can only speculate about the purpose of the Dacian bishop's visit to Rome, and Alina Soroceanu supposes not only the usual pilgrimage *ad limina apostolorum*, but, apparently following an opinion of Hagith Sivan<sup>1</sup>, also a political agenda. In describing Niceta's journey from Italy to Dacia, the author suggests a land route, on *via Egnatia*, from Aulona (present-day Vlora in Albania) to Thessalonike, and then due North-West through Stobi and Scupi to Remesiana, without entirely excluding a maritime passage. This suggestion disregards however Paulinus' text, which tells us that the bishop would have seen in his journey both the Epirote provinces<sup>2</sup>, and then went on to enter Thessalonike by the Aegean<sup>3</sup>. The author further pursues Niceta's itinerary to Remesiana, following the data provided by Paulinus and accurately presenting the various discussions in the research regarding the stages of the journey. The main problem with the route described in the poem is the mentioning of the *civitas Tomitana* on the Black Sea as a stage in the journey, which does not belong to the usual route from Thessalonike to Remesiana. The opinions in time went from a supposed error of a copyist, who wrote *Tomitanam* instead of *Stobitanam*<sup>4</sup>, to an identification with an otherwise unknown city of Tomea, mentioned by Procopius<sup>5</sup>, to a late interpolation of the entire passage<sup>6</sup>. Alina Soroceanu seems to favour the last interpretation, although Kirsteins arguments are quite complicated and not thoroughly convincing, whereas the copyist error still remains the simplest and most effective hypothesis<sup>7</sup>. Anyway, it is worth noticing that the author regards Tomis in Scythia Minor as an impossible stage in Niceta's itinerary. She further argues for the departure of Niceta from Nola at the beginning of the year 400, based on some *topoi* from the poem, like the mentioning of the winds Zephyris and Boreas (p. 142). Given the fact that we are dealing with a rhetorical writing, this argumentation does not sound very convincing. The same circumspection should rule for the other details (temperature, humidity, speed of the travel), that the author tries to deduct from the *propemptikon*. The whole argumentation has the purpose to explain the departure of Niceta from Italy and his haste to arrive in his diocese with the necessity of supervising the preparation of the new catechumens for the ceremony

of baptism, which should have taken place on Easter that year. However convincing Alina Soroceanu's demonstration about the importance of the catechetical aspect in Niceta's writings is, one simply does not have enough data in order to connect his departure from Italy and his journey to Dacia Mediterranea with a ceremony of baptism.

The same circumspection should prevail in the interpretation of the supposed political and ecclesiastical relevance of Niceta's journey. Based mainly on the argumentation of Hagith Sivan<sup>8</sup>, who suggests an ecclesiastical and political mission for Niceta's journey, Alina Soroceanu brings some supplementary arguments for this hypothesis, which unfortunately do not make it more convincing. Sivan's theory of an ecclesiastical agenda of Niceta, in connection with the establishing of the vicariate of Thessalonike, and of a political one, related to the political ambitions of Stilicho in the Balkan area, has some flaws to begin with. The main one results from the interpretation of Paulinus' poem: Sivan takes the description of the itinerary *ad litteram*, leading Niceta from Thessalonike through Philippi to Tomis on the Black Sea, thus widely expanding his itinerary and disregarding the difficulties of interpretation mentioned above. Without the detour to Tomis, the route of Niceta from Nola to Remesiana remains a very usual one and – in the absence of any other evidence – there is no reason to suppose it to be anything else but a cleric's journey home. Furthermore, neither is there any evidence whatsoever for any political or ecclesiastical actions of Niceta during his journey, nor do we know of any results or consequences of such an activity. The same absence of information is to be observed also for a supposed competition between Rome and Constantinople for influence in Eastern Illyricum in the time of John Chrysostom's episcopate, in which the bishop of Remesiana could have been involved. The endeavour of the Constantinopolitan archbishop to attract the Goths to the Catholic orthodoxy regarded mainly the communities in Constantinople<sup>9</sup>, and the Crimea<sup>10</sup>. As for the Goths on the Danube, to whom missionaries were sent, as mentioned by Theodoret<sup>11</sup>, nothing indicates their location, in Illyricum or elsewhere. However, if one observes the general context of Chrysostom's activity amongst the Goths, it is obvious that his ecclesiastical as well as political aims concerned the defence of the Eastern Empire and of its Church rather than some competition with Rome<sup>12</sup>. As for his correspondence with various prelates from Illyricum, the letters date from the period of his exile and only attest the personal connection between the correspondents<sup>13</sup>. There is thus no reason to presume any possible reaction of the Papacy against a supposed competition from Constantinople that could involve Niceta of Remesiana.

Concomitantly with its historical value, the monograph of Alina Soroceanu has also an incontestable merit for the historiography about Niceta. In a detailed

1 SIVAN 1995.

2 *Carmen XVII*, 18: *ibis Epiro gemina videndus*.

3 *Carmen XVII*, 19-20: *et per Aegeos penetrabis aestus Thessalonicen*.

4 PIPPIDI 1967, 506.

5 *De aedificiis* IV.4.3; ȘTEFAN 1967; BARNEA 1983.

6 KIRSTEIN 2000, 187-189.

7 TRÄNKLE 2002.

8 SIVAN 1995.

9 *Homilia VIII*, PG 63, 499-510.

10 *Epistula ad Olympias* 9, 5.

11 *Historia ecclesiastica* V.31.

12 LIEBESCHUETZ 1990, 169-170, 190.

13 *Epistulae* 162, PG 52, 706, to Anysius of Thessalonike, 164, PG 52, 707 to Alexander of Corinth, and 183, PG 52, 712, to Hesychius of Salona;

PIETRI 1976, vol. II, 1085.

presentation of the literature regarding him, from the end of Antiquity to the present time (ch. III), the author reveals the oscillating interest about the Dacian bishop and the reasons for this interest, which were sometimes more than purely academic. In this context, an important contribution is the analysis of the reception of Niceta by the posterity (ch. V). The importance of this study is given by the fact that his personality was and still is used for ideological reasons in the Romanian ecclesiastic historiography. The author realizes a lucid examination of the mechanisms lucidly examines the mechanisms behind the idealisation of Niceta as an “apostle of the Romanians”.

Not the least important are the documentary chapters of the work under discussion. Alina Soroceanu collected not only the *testimonia* about Niceta of Remesiana (ch. II), but provided her monograph also with some methodologically useful annexes. One of them contains the *Carmen XVII* of Paulinus of Nola, another the facsimiles of what she calls “the first scientific writing” about Niceta, the *Gesta S. Nicetae* of Josef Fekete, from 1750, and the third a report on the archaeological research in the ancient site of Remesiana (present-day Bela Palanka, Serbia), accompanied by plans and reconstructions of the episcopal complex.

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