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Oreste Tafrali's Contributions to Byzantine Studies before and after the 1924 Congress

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Abstract: This article offers insights into the scholarly contributions of Oreste Tafrali (1876-1937) to Byzantine studies, before and after the First International Congress of Byzantine Studies, held in Bucharest in 1924. Drawing on his published works, correspondence, and other archival sources, it reconstructs his intellectual trajectory from his early academic formation in Paris under figures such as Charles Diehl to his tenure at the University of Iași. The article highlights Tafrali's pioneering research on the topography and social history of fourteenth-century Thessaloniki, his contributions to the study of Byzantine art and epigraphy in Romania, and his active participation in the 1924 Congress. By situating Oreste Tafrali within both national and international scholarly networks, the article offers an appraisal of his standing in the historiography of Byzantine studies in the first half of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Oreste Tafrali, 1924 Bucharest Congress, Byzantine studies in Romania, Thessaloniki, Byzantine art and archaeology, historiography

On 18 April 1924, during the fifth day of the First International Congress of Byzantine Studies held in Bucharest, the Romanian Byzantinist Oreste Tafrali delivered a presentation on an *epitaphios* from Putna Monastery.[1] According to the minutes of the Congress, his paper provoked lively discussions, including remarks from his former doctoral supervisor at the Sorbonne, the distinguished historian and archaeologist Charles Diehl (1859-1944).[2] This episode encapsulates Tafrali's

[1] The communication was titled "L'épitaphios serbe du Monastère de Putna". For a synopsis of the paper, see C. Marinescu, *Compte-rendu du premier Congrès international des études byzantines, Bucarest, 1924*, Bucharest, 1925, p. 62-63.

[2] C. Marinescu, *Compte-rendu...*, p. 63-65.

scholarly stature: a Romanian academic who bridged national and international intellectual networks and played a key role in bringing Byzantine studies to prominence in interwar Romania. A gifted and prolific archaeologist and art historian, Tafrali served for twenty-four years as Professor of Archaeology and Antiquities at the University of Iași, during which time he advanced both archaeological research and art-historical scholarship in the country. Drawing on Tafrali's published works, personal correspondence, and archival materials, as well as on biographical studies,[3] this article offers insights into his intellectual profile and scholarly legacy. It traces his academic formation, major research contributions, and institutional initiatives, situating his work within the broader development of Byzantine studies in the first half of the twentieth century. Particular attention is given to his contributions before and after the landmark 1924 Congress, an event that marked a turning point in the internationalization of the field.

Biographical sketch

Oreste Tafrali was born in November 1876 into a modest family from Tulcea, in the region of Dobrogea. He pursued a degree in Classical Philology at the University of Bucharest, where his intellectual formation was shaped by the mentorship of the eminent historian and archaeologist Grigore G. Tocilescu (1850-1909).[4] As director of the National Museum of Antiquities,[5] Tocilescu not only guided Tafrali academically but also offered him valuable practical training by employing him as a museum secretary during his undergraduate years (1902-1905). This mentorship laid the foundation for Tafrali's later scholarly career and helped secure support for his graduate studies in Paris.

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[3] Several monographs have been devoted to Tafrali: L. Ciupercă, *Oreste Tafrali*, Iași, 2016; I. Asăvoaie, *Oreste Tafrali. Activitatea istoriografică, didactică și publică*, Iași, 2016. See also L. Nastasă, "Orest Tafrali și studiile de bizantinologie", *Cercetări istorice* 16, 1997, p. 157-172; and especially the comprehensive study by L. Rados, "'Supliciile' profesorului Oreste Tafrali la Universitatea din Iași: o poveste despre vanități și incompatibilități culturale", *Archiva Moldaviae* 9, 2017, p. 97-120, which includes excellent critical notes on the above-mentioned monographs (p. 98) ; see also Ioanna Rapti's paper in this volume.

[4] On Tocilescu's life and works, see I. Bogdan-Cătăniciu, "Grigore Tocilescu – întemeietor al şcolii de arheologie românească", *Ephemeris Napocensis* 1, 1991, p. 189-195; A. Avram, "Grigore G. Tocilescu (1850-1909) – arheolog și epigrafist", *Studii și cercetări de istorie veche și arheologie* 43.2, 1992, p. 139-144; M. Mecu, "Grigorie G. Tocilescu (1850-1909), iniţiatorul arheologiei clasice ştiinţifice în România", in A. Barnea (ed.), *Arheologia clasică în România: Primul secol*, Cluj-Napoca, 2003, p. 71-139.

[5] On Tocilescu's activity as director of the National Museum of Antiquities, see A. Ștefan, "Istoricul Muzeului Național de Antichități din București – Institutul de Arheologie. II. Progresele arheologiei și muzeografiei în România în perioada 1881-1927", *Studii și cercetări de istorie veche și arheologie* 35.2, 1984, p. 109-143, at p. 110-125.

In 1905, on the recommendation of Professor Tocilescu, Tafrali embarked on a seven-year period of advanced study in France, attending courses at the Sorbonne, the École Pratique des Hautes Études, the Collège de France, and the École du Louvre. During these formative years in Paris, he studied under some of the leading scholars of Byzantine history and archaeology, including Charles Diehl, Léon-Maxime Collignon (1849-1917), Gabriel Millet (1867-1953), and Salomon Reinach (1858-1932).[6] This rigorous academic training fostered a wide-ranging expertise that encompassed archaeology, art history, philology, epigraphy, and numismatics – an interdisciplinary orientation that would become a defining feature of his scholarly career.

Tafrali's years in Paris were marked by persistent financial hardship, as attested in the prefaces to his published doctoral theses and in his extensive correspondence with the erudite Demosthene Russo (1869-1938).[7] Russo, a Greek immigrant to Romania, was one of the leading specialists in the cultural relations of Southeast Europe and, from the autumn of 1915, Professor of Byzantine Studies at the University of Bucharest – "a respected and feared scholar, a seminal personality and a central figure in the interwar Romanian cultural environment".[8] His academic career and historiographical vision – particularly his research directions and methodological orientation – brought him into direct conflict with the historian and politician N. Iorga (1871-1940), and their relationship further deteriorated amid the controversy surrounding Russo's appointment at the University of Bucharest.[9]

The correspondence between Tafrali and his learned mentor and friend, written in Modern Greek, French, and Romanian, reveals not only the intellectual camaraderie and shared scholarly interests but also provides vivid insight into the financial pressures and personal struggles that shaped Tafrali's student life in Paris. In a letter dated March 1908, for instance, Tafrali lamented his increasingly precarious

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[6] L. Rados, "'Supliciile' profesorului Oreste Tafrali...", p. 100; L. Nastasă-Kovács, *Studenți români la École Pratique des Hautes Études (Section des Sciences Historiques et Philologiques): 1868-1948*, Cluj-Napoca – Bucharest, 2016, p. 35, 101-102; on Gabriel Millet, see Ioanna Rapti's contribution in this volume.

[7] L. Rados, "Epistolar savant. Oreste Tafrali și Demosthene Russo", in F. Ioncioaia and L. Rados (eds.), *Fragmente de pe un câmp de luptă. Studii în istoria universității*, Iași, p. 237-338; id., "'Supliciile' profesorului Oreste Tafrali...", p. 102.

[8] Id., "A 'Dynasty' of Hellenists in Twentieth-Century Bucharest: Demosthene Russo, Ariadna Camariano-Cioran and Nestor Camariano", *The Historical Review / La revue historique* 10, 2013, p. 265-296, at p. 266.

[9] Id., "O pagină controversată din istoria bizantinisticii române. 'Dosarul' numirii lui Demosthene Russo la Universitatea din București (1915)", *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie A. D. Xenopol* 42, 2005, p. 585-602; cf. M. Berza, "Metodă istorică și falsă erudiție", *Revista istorică* 30, 1944, p. 96-108; L. Rados, "A 'Dynasty' of Hellenists...", p. 281: "The relations between them were, in the first years, cold (Russo had amended some erroneous or contestable findings in Iorga's writing), after 1915 worse, and towards the end of their lives disastrous, especially after the emergence of the dissenting historiographic group of the 'New School'".

situation: "Ἀλλά, δυστυχῶς, δὲν ἔχω ἥσυχον τὸ πνεῦμα. Τὰ χρήματα μου τελειώνουν κατὰ τὸν Ἰούνιον".[10] To compensate for the limited financial support he received from the Romanian government and private benefactors – notably Ioan Kalinderu (1840-1913), administrator of the Romanian royal estate – Tafrali took on several additional roles during his Parisian years. Among these, he served as a lecturer in Romanian at the École Orientale des Langues Vivantes and worked as a librarian in the art history and archaeology library founded by the collector and patron Jacques Doucet (1853-1929).

In December 1912, Tafrali completed his *doctorat d'État* in letters. His principal thesis, *Thessalonique au quatorzième siècle*, submitted for examination in January 1910,[11] offered a comprehensive and pioneering study of Thessaloniki, the Byzantine Empire's "second city",[12] examined through cultural, historical, and socio-economic lenses. In reconstructing the complex history of late Byzantine Thessaloniki, Tafrali drew upon an impressive range of both published and unpublished sources, demonstrating exceptional archival acumen and philological precision.

Complementing this major study, his secondary thesis, *Topographie de Thessalonique*,[13] focused on the spatial organization and monumental landscape of the city. It provided a meticulous identification of key monuments and proposed a revised, earlier dating for the construction of Thessaloniki's fortification walls. Enriched with detailed plans and photographs taken by Tafrali himself, the work stands out as a valuable topographical and archaeological resource. The scholarly significance of this complementary thesis was recognized by Charles Diehl, who, in his formal report – an excerpt of which Tafrali shared with Demosthene Russo in a 1911 letter – praised the originality and thoroughness of the research.[14] Diehl particularly emphasized the importance of Tafrali's analysis of Thessaloniki's fortifications, describing it as a pioneering contribution that filled a notable gap in Byzantine archaeological scholarship:

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[10] L. Rados, "Epistolar savant...", p. 261-263, at p. 261.

[11] See Tafrali's letter to Demosthene Russo, written in Modern Greek and dated January 1910; L. Rados, "Epistolar savant...", p. 281-283. O. Tafrali, *Thessalonique au quatorzième siècle*, préface de Ch. Diehl (avec 3 figures dans le texte), Paris, 1913.

[12] J. W. Barker, "Late Byzantine Thessalonike: A Second City's Challenges and Responses", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 57, 2003, p. 5-33; Ch. Bakirtzis, „The Urban Continuity and Size of Late Byzantine Thessalonike", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 57, 2003, p. 35-64.

[13] O. Tafrali, *Topographie de Thessalonique*, thèse complémentaire pour le doctorat, Paris, 1912.

[14] The correspondence between Tafrali and Russo sheds light on a lesser-known aspect of his relationship with Charles Diehl: the plagiarism of several sections from Tafrali's doctoral work by his former mentor, who had previously reviewed drafts of the thesis; see L. Rados, "Epistolar savant...", p. 280-283 (letter no. 15, dated January 1910); and id., "'Supliciile' profesorului Oreste Tafrali...", p. 104.

> Monsieur le Doyen,
> Nous avons l'honneur de vous proposer d'accorder votre visa à la thèse complémentaire de M. O. Tafrali: Topographie de Thessalonique. Ce travail, qui repose sur une étude personnelle et attentive des lieux, qui est accompagné de deux plans excellents et de nombreuses photographies prises par l'auteur, est fort intéressant et par certains points tout à fait nouveau. Les chapitres relatifs à l'étude de l'enceinte fortifiée de Thessalonique sont à cet égard particulièrement dignes d'attention: il y a là une étude de la fortification byzantine qui n'avait point été faite et qui méritait de l'être.[15]

Two years later, in 1913, the academic merit of Tafrali's doctoral work was further recognized when the *Association pour l'encouragement des études grecques en France* awarded him its prestigious silver medal – an important acknowledgment of his contribution to the study of Byzantine history and archaeology.

Having abandoned his earlier plans to settle permanently in Paris,[16] Tafrali returned to Romania in 1913, where he was appointed Professor of Archaeology and Antiquities at the University of Iași.[17] This appointment marked the beginning of a long and productive academic career in the city that would remain his intellectual home for the following decades. In addition to his teaching and research duties, Tafrali also served as substitute Professor of Ancient History and Epigraphy, a position he held for fourteen years, until 1927. His sustained efforts to promote archaeological research in Iași culminated in 1916 with the foundation of the University's Museum of Antiquities, an institution he not only established but also directed with dedication until his death.[18]

During the final phase of the Great War and its immediate aftermath, between August 1917 and June 1919, Tafrali temporarily suspended his teaching duties at the University of Iași to represent Romania's interests abroad. He joined a delegation of Romanian academics in Paris, led by the mathematician, engineer, and former minister Ermil A. Pangrati (1864-1931).[19] Over the course of nearly two years, Tafrali

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[15] Id., "Epistolar savant...", p. 297-299, at p. 298 (the letter dates from December 1911).

[16] In 1910-1911, Tafrali married Geneviève, a Parisian by origin.

[17] On the complex circumstances surrounding Tafrali's appointment at the University of Iași, see especially L. Rados, "'Supliciile' profesorului Oreste Tafrali...", p. 102-106; cf. M. Petrescu-Dîmbovița, "Unele considerații cu privire la cercetarea arheologică ieșeană până la Primul Război Mondial", *Arheologia Moldovei* 20, 1997, p. 171-180, at p. 178-179.

[18] See, e.g., D.-O. Boldur, "Mărturii contemporane despre profesorul universitar ieșean Orest Tafrali", *Carpica* 37, 2008, p. 386-391.

[19] The Romanian academic delegation to Paris included several of Tafrali's colleagues from the University of Iași – Ioan Găvănescu and Ioan Ursu – as well as Ion Nistor from the University of Cernăuți and seven professors from the University of Bucharest. The group operated under the leadership of Professor Ermil Pangrati. See A. C. Ibănescu, *Propagandă și război. Misiunea intelectualilor români la Paris (1917-1920)*, PhD thesis, University of Iași, 2017; V. Mîrza and A. C. Ibănescu, "Activitatea profesorilor ieșeni în cadrul Misiunii Universitare din Franța reflectată în ziarul 'La Roumanie'", *Historia Universitatis Iassiensis* 4, 2013, p. 81-98.

contributed to Romania's cultural diplomacy through a series of public lectures delivered in Paris and other French cities. During his absence from Iași, his courses in Ancient History were entrusted to the archaeologist Ioan Andrieșescu (1888-1944) – a temporary arrangement that would later give rise to professional tensions between the two scholars.[20]

One of Tafrali's persistent ambitions – indeed, an intellectual fixation – emerged soon after his arrival in Iași:[21] the pursuit of a professorship in the capital, Bucharest.[22] His correspondence reveals a series of sustained and carefully orchestrated efforts to secure the support of influential intellectual and political figures who might facilitate this career move. Despite his perseverance, these efforts proved unsuccessful. He applied twice, without success, for the Chair of Art History at the University of Bucharest – first in 1923, and again in 1927.[23] His second candidacy was notably blocked by N. Iorga, who contended that Tafrali's scholarly work did not correspond to the specific academic profile required for the position. In response, Tafrali published a detailed defence of his qualifications in a 1930 article, emphasizing the relevance of his archaeological and art-historical research.[24] This rebuttal appeared in *Arta și Arheologia* (*Art and Archaeology*), the academic journal he had founded and which will be discussed later in this paper. Despite this professional setback, Tafrali remained a leading figure at the University of Iași and one of the most respected professors in its academic community.[25] In 1936, he was appointed Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters.[26]

Tragically, Tafrali passed away the following year, on November 5, 1937, at the age of sixty-one, following complications from a surgical procedure. At the time of his death, he had served as Professor of Archaeology and Antiquities at the University

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[20] D.-O. Boldur, "Orest Tafrali sau Ioan Andrieșescu? Dispută pentru ocuparea unei catedre la Universitatea din Iași", *Arheologia Moldovei* 28, 2005, p. 363-370; id., "Mărturii contemporane...", p. 388; L. Rados, "'Supliciile' profesorului Oreste Tafrali...", p. 111.

[21] L. Rados, "Epistolar savant...", p. 316 (letter no. 35, received from Demosthene Russo in March 1914).

[22] Id., "'Supliciile' profesorului Oreste Tafrali...", p. 97, notes that despite his substantial achievements in Iași, Tafrali never fully integrated into the city's intellectual milieu, seeking throughout his career opportunities to leave Iași for Bucharest, where he believed his true scholarly vocation would be realized and his work would receive the broader and more fitting recognition it deserved; see *ibid*., p. 107-109, 113-118 (in the subchapter suggestively titled "The obsession with the capital: the sun rises from Bucharest").

[23] The Chair of Art History at the University of Bucharest had been officially declared vacant in the *Monitorul Oficial al României* (*Official Gazette of Romania*), no. 107 (18 May 1927); see L. Rados, "'Supliciile' profesorului Oreste Tafrali...", p. 115-116.

[24] O. Tafrali, "Concursul pentru ocuparea Catedrei de Istoria Artelor de la Facultatea de Litere din București. Răspuns unui referat pătimaș", *Arta și Arheologia* 4, 1930, p. 48-61.

[25] D.-O. Boldur, "Mărturii contemporane...", p. 390.

[26] L. Rados, "'Supliciile' profesorului Oreste Tafrali...", p. 117.

of Iași for twenty-four years and had directed the University's Museum of Antiquities for twenty-one. His passing was widely mourned, and his contributions were praised posthumously by several prominent figures in Romanian intellectual life. Among them were the historian and politician Gheorghe I. Brătianu (1898-1953) and the Byzantinist Nicolae Bănescu (1878-1971),[27] both of whom paid tribute to Tafrali's prolific scholarly output and distinguished archaeological achievements.[28] Bănescu poignantly described his death as "une perte cruelle pour la science roumaine, à laquelle il consacra pendant trente ans ses efforts et qu'il enrichit de plusieurs remarquables travaux".[29] Brătianu, who attended Tafrali's funeral, offered a penetrating and insightful assessment of his wide-ranging and prolific scholarly activity:

> His mind, animated by a passion for research, turned toward a wide range of fields. His work brought together distinct areas of inquiry – each of which, on its own, could have secured him the reputation of a specialist in its respective branch of historical scholarship – to which he devoted his unrelenting scholarly zeal. In Tafrali we thus find the classical archaeologist, ... the historian of art, ... the erudite commentator on the sources of ancient history, the discerning connoisseur of ecclesiastical art and iconography, and, finally, the historian of Byzantine institutions and daily life – a field he pursued from his doctoral dissertation, the monumental monograph on medieval Thessaloniki, to the final pages he published in the year of his death, devoted to Emperor Nikephoros Phokas.[30]

Contributions to Byzantine studies

Tafrali's scholarly output was both prolific and wide-ranging, encompassing monographs, journal articles, reviews, brief notes, and – even if less well known – literary works, including novels.[31] A comprehensive account of his œuvre lies beyond the scope of this article; what follows is therefore a selective overview focusing on his principal contributions to the field of Byzantine studies.

A substantial part of Tafrali's early scholarship was devoted to the city of Thessaloniki. In 1909, prior to completing his doctoral theses, he published two important studies in the *Revue archéologique* on the Church of Saint Demetrios

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[27] On Gheorghe I. Brătianu, see Ovidiu Cristea's paper in this volume; on Bănescu, see Ș. Șubă, G. Costache, and L. Regneală (eds.), *Nicolae Bănescu: biobibliografie*, Bucharest, 2010.

[28] N. Bănescu, "Nécrologie – Oreste Tafrali", *Byzantion* 13.2, 1938, p. 761-763, republished as "Oreste Tafrali (1876-1937)", *Échos d'Orient* 37, 1938, p. 504-505. Bănescu also drew attention to one of Tafrali's lesser-known works, a monograph on the ancient Pontic city of Dionysopolis (*La cité pontique de Dionysopolis*, Paris, 1927), which presented the results of Tafrali's archaeological excavations at the site of modern Balçık.

[29] N. Bănescu, "Nécrologie...", p. 761 (p. 504).

[30] Gh. I. Brătianu, "Învățatul Oreste Tafrali. Pentru comemorarea lui Oreste Tafrali la Universitatea din Iași", *Însemnări ieșene* 3.5, 1938, p. 300-302 (translation mine).

[31] See, for instance, O. Tafrali, *Urmărind idealul – roman*, Bucharest, 1921.

the Myroblytes, one of the city's most significant religious monuments. In these articles, Tafrali proposed a revised chronology for the church's construction, placing its foundation in the fifth century – a conclusion grounded in a careful analysis of previously unpublished sources.[32] These studies were later reprinted in 1913 in a volume collecting his early contributions to the field.[33]

Tafrali's two doctoral theses on Thessaloniki were met with considerable acclaim. In the preface to his principal thesis, *Thessalonique au quatorzième siècle*, his supervisor Charles Diehl praised not only Tafrali's extensive use of unpublished sources but also his scholarly diligence and perseverance. Diehl commended the work for shedding new light on the complex history of late Byzantine Thessaloniki:

> M. Tafrali a eu le grand mérite, en étudiant toute une série de manuscrits inédits, de nous révéler plus pleinement le caractère de ces curieux événements et de les mettre en un jour plus vrai. Ce n'est point le seul mérite de son livre: ceux qui s'intéressent à l'histoire de Byzance y apprendront beaucoup sur la société byzantine et les éléments qui la constituaient; sur l'organisation municipale d'une grande cité; sur sa vie religieuse— que le culte de saint Démétrius faisait à Thessalonique particulièrement intense; sur les causes profondes enfin des haines de classe qui troublèrent la ville. Mais surtout ils y trouveront l'étude de ce que fut cette chose inconnue jusqu'ici, une *commune* byzantine. Et de cela, qui est absolument nouveau, nous ne saurions remercier assez l'auteur de ce livre. M. Tafrali a mis à l'écrire beaucoup de zèle, de conscience; il y a consacré plusieurs années de recherches persévérantes: je ne doute pas que l'ouvrage lui fasse honneur et je suis heureux de rendre ce témoignage à un bon travailleur, dont je sais les sérieuses qualités.[34]

A year later, in a review of Tafrali's two theses,[35] Charles Diehl once again emphasized the extensive use of unpublished sources, particularly the writings of Isidore of Thessaloniki, Gregory Palamas, and Nicholas Kabasilas. He considered the chapters devoted to Thessaloniki's social structure, the hesychast controversy, and the Zealot uprising to be especially valuable contributions to the study of late Byzantine society. At the same time, Diehl did not hesitate to point out several shortcomings: he noted the occasional vagueness or incompleteness of the references, a tendency toward overly broad generalizations, and certain linguistic imperfections:

> ... a eu la bonne fortune de consulter nombre de sources inédites, en particulier les écrits d'Isidore de Thessalonique, de Grégoire Palamas, de Nicolas Cabasilas surtout, conservées à notre Bibliothèque Nationale, on appréciera à la fois l'effort accompli

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[32] O. Tafrali, "Sur la date de l'église et des mosaïques de Saint Démétrius de Salonique", *Revue archéologique* 13, 1909, p. 83-101, and id., "Sur les réparations faites au VII[e] siècle à l'église de Saint-Démétrius de Salonique", *Revue archéologique* 14, 1909, p. 380-386.

[33] Id., *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'épigraphie byzantines*, Paris, 1913, p. 1-29, 30-39.

[34] Id., *Topographie*..., p. B-C.

[35] *Revue des études grecques* 27.122, 1914, p. 222-223.

> par l'auteur et la nouveauté du livre qui en est sorti. Évidemment, tout n'est point parfait dans cet ouvrage. La langue, correcte en général, rappelle cependant trop souvent que l'auteur est étranger; bien des indications restent incomplètes et vagues, piquant la curiosité sans la satisfaire; les conclusions du livre enfin, d'une portée trop vaste, appelleraient plus d'une réserve et d'une critique. [...] On eût souhaité sans doute, dans une étude qui pouvait être si importante pour l'histoire de la fortification byzantine, une méthode parfois plus rigoureuse dans l'étude des inscriptions qui datent ces murailles, un emploi plus ingénieux aussi des comparaisons que pouvaient fournir d'autres enceintes byzantines conservées jusqu'à nous. Mais on trouvera dans ce livre des informations tout à fait intéressantes sur l'aspect qu'offrait jadis l'antique Thessalonique, sur les grandes églises qui en étaient la parure, sur la date probable où elles furent élevées. Ici encore il faut louer M. T. de l'effort personnel, persévérant et attentif avec lequel il a conduit ses recherches et des sérieuses qualités scientifiques dont il y a donné la preuve.[36]

In a brief note published in 1994, on the occasion of the anastatic reproduction of the first edition of *Thessalonique au quatorzième siècle* (1913), the distinguished classical philologist Jean Irigoin (1920-2006) described Tafrali's monograph as a "classic". Despite the passage of time and advances in scholarship, Irigoin observed that it remained, even then, the only comprehensive study devoted to fourteenth-century Thessaloniki: "Cet ouvrage, entrepris sur le conseil de Ch. Diehl qui l'a préfacé, a vieilli sur plus d'un point, mais il représente encore, à ce jour, la seule étude synthétique sur la seconde ville de l'empire byzantin au temps de la querelle hésychaste et du second humanisme byzantin".[37]

Despite its enduring value, Tafrali's study has in certain respects been overtaken by subsequent advances in scholarship. This is particularly evident in his interpretation of the so-called Zealot uprising in Thessaloniki (1342-1349), one of the most complex and enigmatic episodes in fourteenth-century Byzantine history. In his chapter on the Zealot revolt, Tafrali drew extensively on the so-called *Anti-Zealot Discourse* attributed to Nicholas Kabasilas – then still unpublished – and interpreted the text as a polemical refutation of the Zealots' political program. This interpretative framework remained largely dominant until 1957, when Ihor Ševčenko published the first critical edition of the treatise and convincingly challenged this reading.[38] Ševčenko's study fundamentally reshaped scholarly understanding of the source, delivering a decisive blow to its credibility as a witness to the Zealot movement and narrowing the documentary basis for reconstructing the events in Thessaloniki.[39] More recently, however, several scholars

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[36] *Ibid*., p. 223.

[37] *Revue des études grecques* 107.509-510, 1994, p. 317.

[38] I. Ševčenko, "Nicolas Cabasilas' 'Anti-Zealot' Discourse: A Reinterpretation", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 11, 1957, p. 81-171.

[39] On the dossier of sources, see M.-H. Congourdeau, *Les Zélotes. Une révolte urbaine à Thessalonique au 14e siècle. Le dossier des sources*, Paris, 2013; ead. (ed.), *Thessalonique au temps des Zélotes*

have drawn attention to interpretative biases in Ševčenko's edition and analysis, which affected both his translation and his overall understanding of the text.[40]

Reviews of Tafrali's complementary thesis on the topography of Thessaloniki recognised its pioneering nature and praised its valuable contribution to the field, particularly the inclusion of detailed plans and photographs. At the same time, reviewers noted certain methodological limitations, such as the insufficiently rigorous analysis of epigraphic material and the relatively restricted use of comparative evidence.[41]

Tafrali's works on Thessaloniki were widely cited by his contemporaries and continued to be referenced in later scholarship.[42] For instance, in a 1919 article on the Christian monuments of Thessaloniki published in the *Revue archéologique*, the French historian Louis Bréhier (1868-1951) referred to Tafrali's "beau livre sur *Thessalonique au XIV^e siècle*".[43] Beyond his two doctoral theses, Tafrali broadened the scope of his research with a comprehensive history of Thessaloniki, published in 1919, which traced the city's development from its foundation through the fourteenth century.[44] This volume was awarded a prize by the *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* in 1921, further consolidating Tafrali's scholarly reputation.

In the later stages of his career, Tafrali broadened the scope of his research beyond Thessaloniki. In 1936, just one year before his death, he published a comprehensive study on the Byzantine emperor Nikephoros II Phokas (r. 963-969).[45] Another important contribution was his study of the *Akathistos Hymn*, which exemplified his combined expertise in art history and Greek manuscript studies.[46] This work offered a detailed iconographic analysis of the miniatures contained in

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(1342-1350). *Actes de la table ronde au 22^e Congrès international des études byzantines à Sofia, 25 août 2011*, Paris, 2014; ead., "Le discours de Nicolas Kabasilas *Sur les audaces contre les biens sacrés commises par les archontes en enfreignant la loi*", in M.-H. Blanchet and R. Estangüi Gómez (eds.), *Le monde byzantin du XIII^e au XV^e siècle: anciennes ou nouvelles formes d'impérialité* (Travaux et mémoires 25.1), Paris, 2021, p. 391-450.

[40] M.-H. Blanchet and R. Estangüi Gómez, "Contextualization and Reinterpretation of Nikolaos Kabasilas's So-Called 'Anti-Zealot' Treatise, the *Discourse on the Audacities Against Sacred Goods Committed by the Archons in Infringing the Law*", in eid. (eds.), *State and Society in the Palaiologan Era (13th-15th Centuries)*, London, 2025, p. 127-178, especially p. 128-129.

[41] See J. B. Bury's review in *The English Historical Review* 29.113, 1914, p. 128-131; *Revue archéologique* 22, 1913, p. 434-435; cf. Ch. Diehl's review in *Revue des études grecques* 27.122, 1914, p. 222-223.

[42] See, e.g., A. Rigo, "Humanism, Hesychasm, and the Fate of Byzantium and Eastern Europe. A Re-Reading of John Meyendorff and Gelian M. Prokhorov", *La Parola del Passato. Rivista di studi antichi* 79.2, 2024, p. 291-312, at p. 294-295.

[43] L. Bréhier, "Les monuments chrétiens de Salonique", *Revue archéologique* 9, 1919, p. 1-36, at p. 3.

[44] O. Tafrali, *Thessalonique des origines au XIV^e siècle*, Paris, 1919.

[45] Id., *Nicéphore II Phocas* (Hommes d'État), Paris, 1936.

[46] Id., "Iconografia Imnului Acatist", *Buletinul Comisiunii Monumentelor Istorice* 7, 1914, p. 49-84.

manuscript no. 113 of the Library of the Romanian Academy and earned international recognition. Louis Bréhier, for instance, praised it as an excellent and insightful study.[47]

Tafrali devoted considerable scholarly attention to the artistic heritage of Romanian monastic complexes. In 1925, he published a substantial volume on the treasury of Putna Monastery, cataloguing a wide variety of liturgical objects, including icons and embroidered textiles.[48] This study was followed by further investigations of the treasuries of Sucevița Monastery[49] and the Byzantine monuments of Curtea de Argeș.[50] The latter work, richly illustrated, examined the artistic and architectural influences emanating from Constantinople and their adaptation within Romanian religious art and architecture. Some of Tafrali's interpretations, however, drew criticism from his contemporaries.[51] Gheorghe Balș (1868-1934)[52] and N. Iorga both expressed reservations about his conclusions. In a critical review of Ioan D. Ștefănescu's monograph on religious painting in Wallachia and Transylvania,[53] Iorga reproached the author for having, in his view, uncritically accepted "Tafrali's opinions on the princely church of Argeș, which are full of historical inaccuracies".[54]

Another major scholarly initiative undertaken by Tafrali was the founding of the academic journal *Arta și Arheologia* (*Art and Archaeology*), launched in 1927, three years after the First International Congress of Byzantine Studies in Bucharest.[55] In the preface to the first issue, Tafrali outlined the journal's aims: to publish, in both Romanian and French, scholarly articles, short reviews, and reports on artistic activity worldwide, along with coverage of exhibitions and the art market in Romania and abroad. The journal's contributors included several foreign scholars as well as a number of Tafrali's students, reflecting his commitment to fostering international scholarly

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[47] See L. Bréhier's review in *Journal des savants* 17, 1919, p. 52-53. The *Akathistos Hymn* has since attracted considerable scholarly attention; see E. Timotin, L. Cotovanu, and O. Olar (eds.), *The Akathistos Hymn in the Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Traditions: The History of a Liturgical Masterpiece Between Text and Image*, 2 vols. (Supplementa Études byzantines et post-byzantines 5.1-2), Heidelberg, 2024.

[48] O. Tafrali, *Le trésor byzantin et roumain du Monastère de Poutna*, vol. 1: *Texte*, vol. 2: *Atlas*, Paris, 1925.

[49] Id., *Le Monastère de Sucévitsa / Das Kloster Sucevița*, Iași, 1929.

[50] Id., *Monuments byzantins de Curtéa de Arges*, Paris, 1931.

[51] D.-O. Boldur, "Mărturii contemporane...", p. 388-389.

[52] See the critical notes published by Gh. Balș in *Revue historique du Sud-est européen* 5.1-3, 1928, p. 91-93; see also *Revue historique du Sud-est européen* 4.10-12, 1927, p. 320-325.

[53] I. D. Ștefănescu, *La peinture religieuse en Valachie et en Transylvanie depuis les origines jusqu'au XIX^e siècle*, Paris, 1932.

[54] *Revue historique du Sud-est européen* 10.4-6, 1933, p. 198: "Dans le domaine de l'art, on ne comprend pas comment telle église de Trnovo a pu influencer une autre de Suceava arménienne. M. Ștefănescu accepte sans broncher les opinions de M. Tafrali sur l'église princière d'Argeș qui sont pleine de contresens historiques". See *Revue historique du Sud-est européen* 5.4-6, 1928, p. 182.

[55] The issues of the journal are available online: https://dspace.bcu-iasi.ro/handle/123456789/725.

dialogue. Notably, however, *Arta și Arheologia* failed to attract contributions from some of the leading Romanian art historians of the time.

The inaugural issue of *Arta și Arheologia* opened with an article by Louis Bréhier, presenting a synthesis of nine lectures on Romanian art that he had delivered earlier that year at the Faculty of Letters in Clermont-Ferrand.[56] As Bréhier himself explained, the inspiration for these lectures came from the "unforgettable" study trip to the monasteries of Moldova and Oltenia, organized during the 1924 Congress of Byzantine Studies:

> L'idée même de ce cours est née en Roumanie pendant l'inoubliable voyage d'études, offert par le gouvernement roumain aux membres du Congrès des Études Byzantines [...]. Comme pour mes confrères du Congrès, ce beau voyage a été pour moi la révélation d'un art extrêmement vivant et original, qui est plus qu'une survivance de l'art byzantin, qui en est la vraie continuation, mais avec une adaptation très remarquable des méthodes byzantines aux traditions et au génie particulier d'une race très vigoureuse et douée de qualités extrêmement personnelles.[57]

The fourth issue of *Arta și Arheologia* featured another contribution by Louis Bréhier, this time devoted to apocalyptic themes in Byzantine art.[58] Tafrali himself authored a substantial portion of the journal's content, using its pages not only to disseminate his research but also, at times, to defend his scholarly positions in response to criticism. Despite his sustained efforts to establish *Arta și Arheologia* as a central forum for Romanian art historical scholarship, the journal struggled to achieve long-term stability. Publication ceased shortly after Tafrali's death, with the final issue appearing posthumously.[59] In parallel with this editorial activity, Tafrali also contributed to international bibliographical projects, most notably the *Répertoire d'art et d'archéologie*.

From the late 1920s onwards, Tafrali's work gained increasing recognition in international academic circles. He was elected a member of the Bulgarian Institute of Archaeology in Sofia (1928) and of the Kondakov Archaeological Institute in Prague (1931). In 1931, he was named an honorary member of the Association of Byzantine Studies in Athens and, the following year, a corresponding member of the Hellenic Academy. His achievements were finally acknowledged in Romania on May 23, 1936, when he was elected a corresponding member of the Romanian Academy, an honour that marked the culmination of his academic career, just one year before his death.[60]

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[56] L. Bréhier, "L'art roumain ancien", *Arta și Arheologia* 1, 1927, p. 2-11.

[57] *Ibid*., p. 2.

[58] L. Bréhier, "Les visions apocalyptiques dans l'art byzantin", *Arta și Arheologia* 4, 1930, p. 1-10.

[59] *Arta și Arheologia* 13-14, 1937-1938.

[60] In the same year, Vasile Grecu was likewise elected a corresponding member of the Romanian Academy, while Nicolae Bănescu was elected a full (titular) member; see Ș. Șubă, G. Costache, and L. Regneală (eds.), *Nicolae Bănescu*..., p. xxx.

As Gheorghe I. Brătianu perceptively observed, Tafrali "enjoyed greater renown beyond Romania's borders than in his own country".[61]

Contributions to the 1924 Congress

Tafrali played an active role in the First International Congress of Byzantine Studies, held in Bucharest in 1924. According to the official minutes, he participated in the discussions of four papers in the art history sections, including a presentation by the Romanian philologist Vasile Grecu (1885-1972).[62] His interventions reflect both the breadth of his expertise and his readiness to engage critically with the work of his colleagues. For instance, he called for clearer terminological distinctions, proposed earlier chronologies for several fresco cycles in the churches of Bukovina, and – drawing on his own research – adduced additional examples of Marian iconography from Thessaloniki and from the miniatures of the *Akathistos Hymn*.

As noted above, on the fifth day of the Congress, Tafrali delivered the final paper of the day, presenting his research on an *epitaphios* from Putna Monastery. His paper was not among the twenty-four contributions later published in the *Bulletin de la Section Historique* of the Romanian Academy, edited under the direction of N. Iorga.[63] This omission was most likely the consequence of Tafrali's strained relations with Iorga and his circle of disciples and protégés, such as Vasile Pârvan.[64] Notably, six months prior to the Congress, Tafrali had already presented a lecture on the same topic at the *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* in Paris. He subsequently expanded this study in his 1925 volume on the treasury of Putna Monastery.[65]

Following the academic sessions in Bucharest, the Congress participants embarked on a week-long study tour of the monasteries of Moldova and Oltenia. On 23 April, they arrived in Iași, where they attended a formal reception organized by Tafrali on behalf of the rector of the University of Iași. As documented in a draft letter to the Ministry of Public Education dated late April 1924, Tafrali was responsible for coordinating the financial arrangements for the delegates' visit (see

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[61] Gh. I. Brătianu, "Învățatul Oreste Tafrali...", p. 300 (translation mine).

[62] V. Grecu presented his paper, titled "Antike Philosophen in der Kirchenmalerei des Morgenlandes", on the fifth day of the Congress, Friday, 18 April. See C. Marinescu, *Compte-rendu*..., p. 54-55; and Octavian-Adrian Negoiță's article in this volume.

[63] *Bulletin de la Section Historique – Académie Roumaine* 11, 1924. The volume brought together contributions by Sir W. Ramsay, G. Balș, N. Bănescu, I. Bianu, Gh. I. Brătianu, L. Bréhier, J. Puig y Cadafalch, A. Guarneri Citati, N. A. Constantinescu, V. I. Drăghiceanu, S. Dragomir, J. Gay, N. Iorga (two studies), Lj. Karaman, S. B. Kougéas, A. Rubió y Llúch, C. Marinescu, C. Moisil, G. Murnu, V. Pârvan, N. Radojcič, G. Sotiriou, and E. A. Stuckelberg.

[64] L. Rados, "'Supliciile' profesorului Oreste Tafrali...", p. 110, 114-115.

[65] Tafrali's transcription and interpretation of the Greek inscriptions on the *epitaphios* did not go unchallenged; they were critically reassessed in an article published in the *Revue historique du Sud-Est européen*.

Appendix). This included organizing a reception for one hundred guests, a task that required considerable logistical and financial planning.

Conclusion

Despite the many challenges posed by the turbulent historical and intellectual contexts in which he worked, Oreste Tafrali distinguished himself through a prolific and wide-ranging body of research. At times he laboured under unfavourable circumstances, shaped, among other factors, by the fraught atmosphere of Romanian academic life – vividly exemplified by the bitter rivalry between Demosthene Russo and N. Iorga.[66] Against this backdrop, Tafrali's contributions to Byzantine archaeology, art history, topography, and epigraphy earned greater recognition abroad than at home, as reflected in the prizes and honours awarded to him by prestigious European academic institutions.[67] While his work was not without its limitations – whether in methodological rigor or interpretive nuance – it nonetheless laid essential foundations for the development of Byzantine studies in Romania. Through his research, teaching, and institutional initiatives, Tafrali played a key role in popularizing the study of Byzantium and in fostering its integration into the Romanian academic landscape. In particular, his studies of Thessaloniki, Byzantium's "second city", provided a starting point for later investigations into the social, urban, and religious life of this major late Byzantine centre. Likewise, his analyses of the Byzantine heritage of Romanian monastic art advanced a broader understanding of cultural exchange between Constantinople and the Romanian principalities.

Although Tafrali was not included among what N. Iorga termed the "modest legion of erudite" scholars in interwar Romanian academia,[68] his intellectual rigor, interdisciplinary approach, and sustained engagement with European scholarship firmly dispel any perception of amateurism or inadequate training.[69] His legacy securely places him among Romania's most accomplished scholars of Byzantium – one whose work bridged national academic traditions and the wider intellectual currents that shaped Byzantine studies in the early twentieth century.

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[66] Cf. L. Rados, "'Supliciile' profesorului Oreste Tafrali...", p. 114.

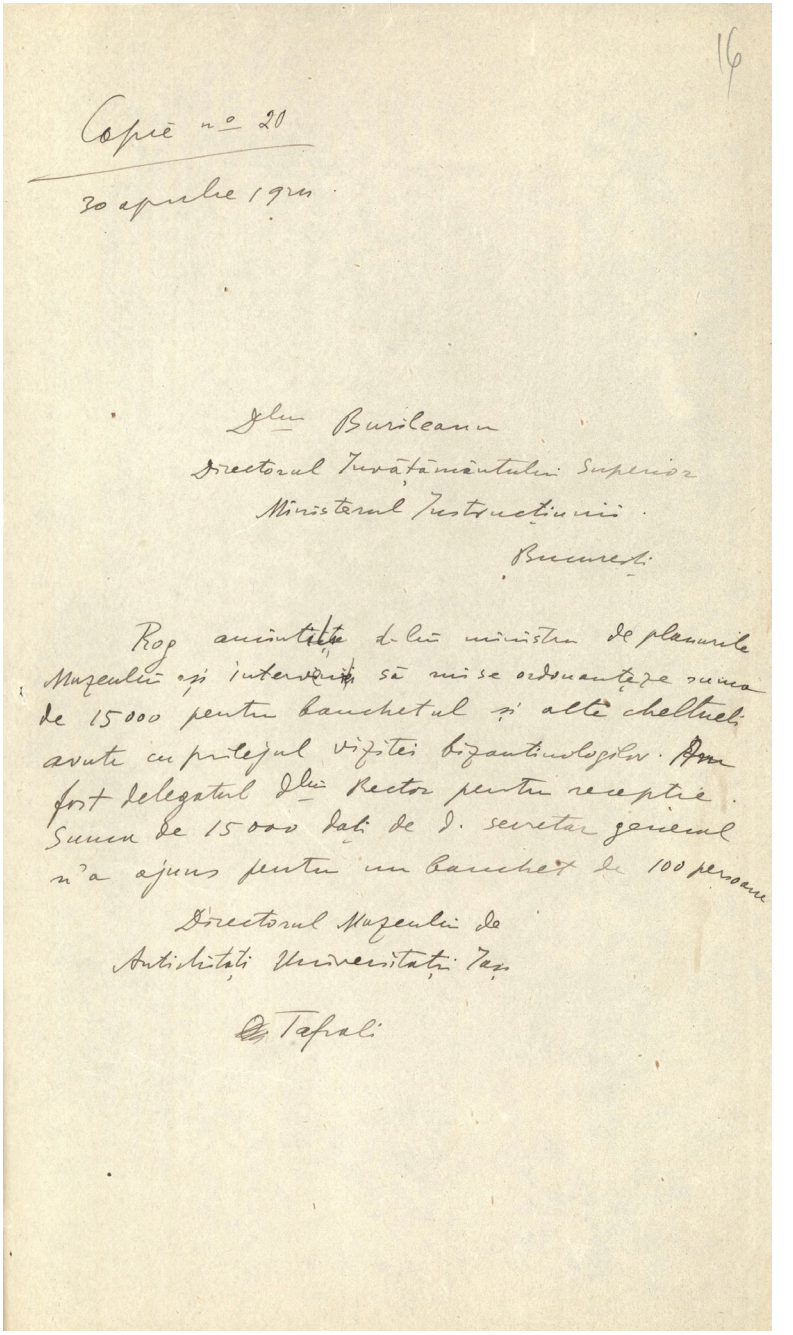
[67] L. Năstasă, "Orest Tafrali și studiile de bizantinologie", *Cercetări istorice* 16, 1997, p. 157-172, at p. 157.

[68] D.-O. Boldur, "Mărturii contemporane...", p. 389.

[69] L. Năstasă, "Orest Tafrali...", p. 157; L. Rados, "'Supliciile' profesorului Oreste Tafrali...", p. 119; V. Pârvan*, Corespondență și acte. Studii și documente*, ed. A. Zub, Bucharest, 1973, p. 293.

Appendix

National Archives, Iași, Museum of Antiquities fund, 2 (olim 7) / 1924



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Copie nº 20

30 aprilie 1924.

Dlui Buricescu
Directorul Învățământului Superior
Ministerul Instrucțiunii
București.

Rog amintiți dlui ministru de planurile Muzeului și interveniți să mi se ordonanțeze suma de 15000 pentru banchetul și alte cheltueli avute cu prilejul visitei bizantinologilor. Am fost delegatul dlui Rector pentru recepție. Suma de 15000 dată de d. secretar general n'a ajuns pentru un banchet de 100 persoane.

Directorul Muzeului de
Antichități Universitatea Iași
Gr. Tafrali

Transcription

D-lui Burileanu
Directorul Învățământului Superior
Ministerul Instrucțiunii
București

Rog amintiți[70] *d-lui ministru de planurile*
Muzeului și interveniți[71] *să mi se ordonanțeze suma*
de 15.000 pentru banchetul și alte cheltuieli
avute cu prilejul vizitei bizantinologilor. Am
fost delegatul d-lui Rector pentru recepție.
Suma de 15.000 dați de d. secretar general
n'a ajuns pentru un banchet de 100 persoane.

Directorul Muzeului de
Antichități <al> Universității Iași

O. Tafrali

English translation

To Mr. Burileanu
Director of Higher Education
Ministry of Public Instruction
Bucharest

I ask that you remind the Minister of the Museum's plans
and intervene to secure authorization of the sum
of 15,000, intended to cover the banquet and other expenses
incurred on the occasion of the visit of the Byzantinists. I was
appointed by the Rector as his delegate for the reception.
The sum of 15,000 granted by the General Secretary
was insufficient to cover the cost of a banquet for 100 people.

Director of the Museum of
Antiquities <of> the University of Iași
O. Tafrali

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[70] *amintește* [imperative, 2nd person singular; informal form of address] ante corr.

[71] *intervino* [imperative, 2nd person singular; informal form of address] ante corr.