From Nikodim Kondakov to Seminarium Kondakovianum and to Convivium

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On January 16, 1925, Nikodim Pavlovich Kondakov died in Prague at the age of eighty. A long career as a professor of medieval art history in St. Petersburg and curator of medieval and Renaissance collections in the Hermitage earned Kondakov esteem throughout the West as one of the founders of Byzantine studies. The regard in which he was held is evident from the many tributes he received in Bucharest in 1924, at the first world congress of Byzantine scholars. The words of his Belgian colleague, Henri Grégoire, reflect Kondakov’s exceptional reputation:

“Le patriarche de l’archéologie byzantine, Kondakov, l’illustre savant russe qui vit à Prague dans une laborieuse et féconde retraite, avait tenu à faire le voyage de Bucarest, et son apparition au milieu des congressistes, dont la plupart se proclament ses élèves, provoqua un frémissement d’émotion et un véritable mouvement d’enthousiasme. Ces premiers congrès d’après-guerre font toujours songer au premier Concile œcuménique après la grande persécution…”

The admiration of Kondakov went beyond academia. Since the late-nineteenth century, he had been a powerful figure in Russia, where he was received at the imperial court. Later, having fled revolutionary Russia and despite the difficulties of emigration, Kondakov found doors open to him outside his homeland. In Constantinople, he managed to avoid the humiliation of the disinfections imposed on Russian émigrés because he was a holder of the Legion of Honor. In Sofia, he was received by the Bulgarian king, Boris III. In Prague, President Tomáš G. Masaryk, with the help of Czech academics, assured Kondakov a safe and productive life despite the loss of all of his personal property. Finally, just days before his death, Kondakov received a formal invitation to Rome, where Benito Mussolini himself promised him good housing and a lifelong pension.

In this atmosphere of scientific and political high regard – sometimes approaching devotion – a group of the late Russian scholar’s students and other followers began in 1926 to organize informal meetings to honor Kondakov’s memory. In that year, this same group published the Recueil d’études dédiées à la mémoire de N. P. Kondakov. Archéologie. Histoire de l’art. Études byzantines. In 1927, the group prepared a collection of studies titled Seminarium Kondakovianum. The brief preface of the latter volume announced the hope for a regular publication, and indeed, as soon as 1928, Seminarium Kondakovianum appeared; it continued to do so annually for a decade.

In the aftermath of the events of March 1939 – the Reich’s annexation of the Sudetenland and establishment of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia – most members of the Archeologický institut N. P. Kondakova left Prague and moved to Belgrade. There, in 1940, Seminarium was released for the last time. Thus, World War II cut short the life of the periodical. At the end of the war, the institute resumed its activities in Prague, but the political
climate after the 1948 Communist coup d'état was not favorable to an institution composed mainly of Russian émigrés. In 1952, the institute was annexed to the newly created Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences but, for political reasons, was closed definitively in 1955.

Even in its relatively brief life between the wars (and certain fluctuations in concept, as the structure of different volumes was not fixed), Seminarium Kondakovianum played an essential role mainly but not exclusively in Byzantine studies. After the first issue, written almost entirely in Russian, the periodical opened up to the main European languages. Furthermore, from 1928 on, every Russian article was accompanied by a French, or English, or German précis. While the journal progressively became a medium oriented toward the Eastern Orthodox world, it opened also to Central Europe and the West. Thus, in the panorama of international studies, it served as a bridge. As such, the journal’s position was analogous to that sought by the young Czechoslovakia, which, under Masaryk, aspired to link Europe’s East and West.

Key figures of the Archeologický institut N. P. Kondakova who participated in the journal include George Vernadsky, S. Žebelev, and Okunev ou Toll; important scholars who continued to live in the Soviet Union such as Dimitri Ajnalov; Russian immigrants living elsewhere in Europe such as André Grabar and Georgij Ostrogorskiij; and a constellation of other Byzantine scholars living all over the world including Charles Diehl, Josef Strzygowski, and Kurt Weitzmann. The participation of Josef Myslivec, one of the few local Czech collaborators in this international project, also deserves mention.

One index of the reach of Seminarium Kondakovianum is the farflung and distinguished libraries in which the journal and related monographs are preserved today – the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz and the Biblioteca Herziiana and Pontificio Instituto Orientale in Rome; the Bibliothèque nationale and the Bibliothèque byzantine of the Collège de France, both in Paris; the Library of Congress and the library of Harvard University’s Dumbarton Oaks, both in Washington, D.C.; and the British Library in London.

The series of studies were also published in parallel; these become the real collections of Seminarium Kondakovianum: Zografica devoted to icons, archeology, and history, as well as Skytika dedicated to the ethnography of nomadic peoples. These are two important series that, mainly in the late 1920’s and early 1930’s, collected monographs of Russian and western scholars dedicated to material culture and ethnography and that also reflected the interests of Kondakov.

In essence, Seminarium Kondakovianum, in being launched by President Masaryk, was a retort to the “Russian action.” Masaryk’s goal was to attract to Czechoslovakia the best minds emigrating from Russia. The journal thus made Prague a center of Byzantine studies in general. This intent was made explicit in each issue of the journal, which presented a list of proposed scientific and social activities for the year ahead. But as World War II had done once, the successive integration of Czechoslovakia into the Soviet Bloc, with its crippling effect on Russian emigration, again struck at the very heart of the Seminarium Kondakovianum.

On January 24, 2014, seventy-four years from the last publication of Seminarium Kondakovianum, an unexpected meeting took place in Rome in an apartment not far from the Porta Pia and on the not less legendary Via XX settembre, where Garibaldi’s troops entered Rome in 1870. The founding members of the yet-to-be-named journal found themselves around a table: Klára Benešovská, head of the medieval department of the art history Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic in Prague; Zuzana Frantová, assistant in the Center of Early Medieval Studies of the Masaryk University in Brno; Serena Romano, Professor of art history at the University of Lausanne, and Elisabetta Scirocco, assistant at the Kunsthistorisches Institut. Not present but on the telephone was Herbert Kessler, Professor Emeritus of the history of art at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and invited professor of the Masaryk University in Brno. Finally – and very much at the table – was the author of these lines, Ivan Foletti, assistant professor of art history at the Masaryk University in Brno and maître-assistant FNS Ambizione at the University of Lausanne.

Although practical considerations determined the place for this first meeting, its being in Rome is emblematic of the new history of Seminarium Kondakovianum. The original Seminarium was a project of Russian émigrés who, supported by Czechoslovak integration policy, created a journal that became progressively international in perspective. In its new incarnation, it stands as an intentionally international foundation. Though printed, as was its predecessor, in the Czech Republic, Convivium has been conceived as a multicultural project. In fact,
the journal will be co-published in two countries by three international institutions: the Faculty of arts of the University of Lausanne, the department of art history of the Masaryk University in Brno, and, last but by no means least, the Institute of Art History of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic – the direct heir to the Institutum Kondakovianum. Appropriately, the journal’s two different committees – the editors, and the editorial board – comprise scholars in the Czech Republic, Switzerland, Italy, the United States of America, France, Germany, Israel, and Russia. The choice to introduce the journal in the group Brepols, one of the world’s most important disseminators of texts on the Middle Ages, fits perfectly with this project.

The orientation towards multiculturalism is underscored by the new name of the journal: Convivium. Exchanges and Interactions in the Arts of Medieval Europe, Byzantium, and Mediterranean. Seminarium Kondakovianum Series Nova. It is rather a long name – and it will almost certainly be cited systematically as Convivium – that states its intentions.

Convivium is to be built around the historiographical concept that is the Middle Ages in the broadest definition, spanning the third to the sixteenth centuries. Like its predecessor journal, Convivium seeks to bridge diverse cultures. Going farther than the internationality that, in the inter-war period, characterized Seminarium Kondakovianum, the different poles to unify will be, like the contemporary world itself, not just Byzantium and the West, but many regions. It will encompass all the Mediterranean world, with its Arabic, Semitic, and other cultures. The Americas and the Far East, too, will be considered.

Significantly, the journal starts its new life with a monograph: “Circulation as a Factor of Cultural Aggregation: Relics, Ideas and Cities in the Middle Ages”. This first issue is intended to reflect the scope and direction of the journal itself: to describe the Middle Ages in motion, a world in which cultures meet, define, and construct themselves, and then meet again. Situated between tradition and innovation, Convivium aspires – as Seminarium Kondakovianum did – to return to the roots of a discipline made up of dialogs and encounters. The choice of the language of Molière for the introductory lines is intended to underscore this dimension of continuity: it was in French that the first introduction of the Seminarium was written, and it is therefore in French that the discourse continues. Nevertheless, the title of our new journal indicates that the new koiné, English, is different, and it is this language that will take over as the official language of the journal. To illustrate this passage, the French introduction is here followed by an English translation.

As an Editor-in-Chief, I wish, in behalf of all the founding committee, to acknowledge the many women and men who have made this project possible. For his decisive role in enabling our aspiration to take root and flourish, we are indebted to Ondřej Jakubec, head of the Department of Art History at the Masaryk University in Brno; Professor Jakubec was the first to believe in the project and gave it his unconditional support. Recognition goes also to Vojtěch Lahoda, head of the Institute of Art History of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, for allowing the lost tradition of Seminarium Kondakovianum to be reborn in Convivium. Our thanks also go to François Rosset, dean of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Lausanne, for his generous support of faculty members.

We also owe much gratitude to the scholars who agreed to be part of the editorial board. Their participation has given our new journal a solid foundation on which to build. Thanks to Michele Bacci, Université de Fribourg; Xavier Barral i Altet, Université de Rennes and Università di Venezia Ca’ Foscari; Nicolas Bock, Université de Lausanne; Valentina Cantone, Università di Padova; Clario Di Fabio, Università di Genova; Ondřej Jakubec, Masaryk University in Brno; Xenia Muratova, Université de Rennes; Assaf Pinkus, University of Tel Aviv; Jiří Roháček, Department of Art History of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic; and Alicia Walker, Bryn Mawr College.

I would like also to thank the students at the universities of Brno and Lausanne who, with their enthusiasm, facilitated the birth of this journal – in particular, Monika Kučerová, Petr Vronský and Adrien Palladino. All three have worked diligently for the realization of Convivium.

Finally, I only have to wish to this new/ancient journal, built as a link between tradition and innovation, in the mother tongue of N. P. Kondakov – многая лета – a long life.

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