



NEAGOE BASARAB: SHAPING THE SOUL OF ROMANIAN CULTURE AND SPIRITUALITY

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ABSTRACT

As Monarch of the Romanian Principality (1512–1521), Neagoe Basarab was one of those chosen by God to safeguard and strengthen both the faith and the Romanian nation. His cultural vision, remarkably broad for his time, is embodied in his most significant work in Slavonic: The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Theodosius. This work, both instructive and testamentary in nature, was designed to cultivate a fully realized human being, capable of governing oneself and guiding others. Its value within early Romanian literature is paramount. In many respects, it is a pioneering work that places its author among the creators of culture on a European scale. Neagoe's humanism bears the unmistakable imprint of Byzantine culture. Another remarkable achievement of Neagoe Basarab is the Curtea de Argeș Monastery – a monumental masterpiece of Romanian architecture – whose construction at the Court of Argeș stands as a singular event in our medieval history. These accomplishments ultimately led the Romanian Orthodox Church to canonize this devout and faithful monarch.

Keywords: *Neagoe Basarab; medieval history; the Teachings of Neagoe; Theodosius; humanism; Curtea de Argeș, culture; hesychasm;*

INTRODUCTION

For many, the decision of the Holy Synod to canonize Prince Neagoe Basarab (July 2008), if not entirely surprising, was at least puzzling. The perception of the sainthood of a Romanian voivode mirrored the same psychological dynamics observed in the far more widely debated case of Stephen the Great. After a careful discernment of the criteria, and responding to a longstanding desire, the Romanian Orthodox Church proceeded to canonize Neagoe Basarab, establishing 26 September as his feast day. Popular devotion, together with the testimonies of his contemporaries, fully justify the Church's decision to include yet another Romanian ruler in the pantheon of those who, at the head of their people, regarded the defense of the faith as a supreme calling.

This is how the chronicler Gavriil Protul described the personality of the ruler: “What shall we say about the things and monasteries they have blessed? [...] And in all directions from East to West and from noon to midnight, he nourished all the holy churches with great mercy everywhere. And he was good not only to Christians, but also to pagans, and he was a merciful father to all, resembling the heavenly Lord, who shines His sun and rain on both the good and the bad, as the Holy Gospel shows.”¹

¹ Gavriil PROTUL, in *The Life and Holy Life of Our Father Nifon, Patriarch of Tsarigrad*, ed. Tit Simedrea. See the website: http://saraca.orthodoxphotos.com/biblioteca/viata_sf_nifon_patriarh



If, for the first time, the brilliant expression of our Christian soul was Saint Stephen the Great – the voivode and saint of the struggle for the cross and for the survival of the nation in the face of betrayal by the “Christianity” in which he had placed his hope – the ruler in whom the “power of the earth” permeated by divine energies became invincible and remained so for half a millennium, in the face of all attempts to wipe us off the face of this earth, the one who helped us see our Christian soul in its most representative, greatest, most courageous and at the same time most humane form, and taught us that he owed all this to his roots in God, was the author of the “first great book of Romanian culture”, Saint Neagoe Basarab. Professor Dan Zamfirescu rightly emphasised that “nowhere was the Romanian soul, shaped by our innate Christianity and capable of giving Christianity an unmistakable human voice, after knowing how to place the Nativity at the centre of human history, more fully revealed than in the 'Teachings to Theodosius'.²

From a biographical point of view, Neagoe Basarab was a prominent personality, an energetic and highly cultured man, married to a Brancovici princess, from the old family of Serbian despots, Despina Milița, half-sister to the wife of Petru Rareș of Moldavia, Elena Brancovici. Neagoe Basarab distinguished himself through two major achievements: 1) the Episcopal Church in Curtea de Argeș (with strong Eastern influences in its ornamentation), consecrated in the presence of several high-ranking hierarchs of the Eastern Church, was considered at the time to be a miracle of the East³ and 2) the book of advice to his son Teodosie, which is a precious document on the morals, customs and institutions of those times, written with a Hesychast spirit.⁴

Ruler of Wallachia (1512-1521), Neagoe Basarab is one of the people chosen by God to preserve and strengthen the faith and the Romanian nation. He is a model Christian ruler, a brilliant scholar, diplomat, founder of Holy Altars and teacher for posterity. “A chosen, learned, good... and peace-loving ruler,” Neagoe Basarab embellished the life of the Romanian people by founding two great creations of universal value: one artistic – the Argeș Monastery, and the other literary – the Teachings to his son Teodosie. The art of constructing the artistic and literary monuments remains one of the great titles of nobility of the voivode; the clarity of the building reflecting the depth of his thinking.⁵

1. CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL VECTORS GENERATED IN THE TEACHINGS OF NEAGOE BASARAB

Neagoe Basarab's personality made a strong impression throughout the Byzantine world at the beginning of the 16th century, both culturally and politically, as well as in the church. He became, we might say, a symbol and expression of his era, an era of cultural and spiritual effervescence, at a time when the Byzantine world was going through difficult times: Constantinople had been under Ottoman rule for almost seventy years. And that is precisely why the Orthodox world found hope and support in the Romanian lands. Neagoe thus embodied the *typos* of the Byzantine Christian prince, the *basileus*, the monarch who was the protector of all Christians suffering under Turkish

² Prof. Dan ZAMFIRESCU, *Reasons for the canonisation of Neagoe Basarab*, Source: Diocese of Argeș. See website: <http://www.crestinortodox.ro/diverse/69725-temeiuri-pentru-canonizarea-lui-neagoe-basarab>

³ It was restored with excessive zeal during the reign of King Carol I, which detracted from its charm, especially since the old cells and outbuildings were replaced with new buildings that had no stylistic connection with the church; finally, inside, Neagoe Basarab's frescoes were replaced with modern portraits of King Carol and Queen Elisabeth.

⁴ Neagu DJUVARA, *A Brief History of the Romanians Told to Young People*, 4th edition (revised), Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2002, p. 101.

⁵ Nicolae IORGA, *History of the Romanian Church and the Religious Life of Romanians*, 2nd edition, vol. I, Bucharest, 1929, p. 5.



rule. But at the same time, Neagoe established diplomatic relations with the Catholic West and European humanist culture. Therefore, we are dealing with a very complex personality, one of great synthesis, without ceasing to be himself, that is, a symbol of Romanian culture, deeply marked by Hesychasm. Neagoe continued the policy of great openness begun by Prince Radu the Great (1495-1508). After Mihnea the Evil (1508-1510) and Vlad the Young (1510-1512), a descendant of the great Basarab family, Neagoe, took the throne of Wallachia. His reign (which lasted almost nine years) is one of the most brilliant in the entire history of Romania. While Radu the Great brought the former Ecumenical Patriarch Nifon II to the metropolitan throne of Wallachia, Neagoe became the disciple of the great Hesychast. He was a contemporary of Gavril Protul, author of hagiographic writings (including “The Life and Times of His Holiness Nifon, Patriarch of Constantinople”), and of Manuil of Corinth, also renowned for his intellectual activity.⁶

His cultural breadth, astonishingly great for that time, is evident in his most important work in Slavonic: *The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to his son Teodosie*. It is a work of a testamentary and initiatory nature, intended to prepare the complete man, capable of leading himself and others. Precisely for this reason, the scope of the guidance that Neagoe gives to his son is very broad, covering various areas and making various codes accessible.

Unfortunately, the scholarly and political qualities of Voivode Neagoe Basarab have long been contested even by illustrious Romanian historians and philologists, and his *Teachings*, considered an amalgam of collages from religious texts, gathered by a monk in the 17th century within the walls of his cell, who had no knowledge of the realities of feudal society in the first half of the 16th century. For example, A. D. Xenopol describes Neagoe's reign as “a long series of religious ceremonies” and, therefore, “he no longer had the necessary time to engage in other affairs”⁷, which is why Neagoe's policy was characterised by the same author as follows: “To the Turks, humiliating servility; to the Hungarians, worship according to the principle of the church... a bowed head will not be cut off by the sword”⁸, demonstrating a lack of knowledge of social relations in the first half of the 16th century and a failure to understand the political skills required of a voivode of Wallachia.

Although the question of the authorship of *the Teachings* is not the subject of this study, we will briefly mention a few elements that are very important for the history of early Romanian literature. In contrast to most researchers who have expressed their views on authenticity, D. Russo formulated, in 1906, the thesis that *the Teachings*... do not belong to the prince, but to a monk, arguing that too many theological passages had been inserted, copied by the alleged monk from Byzantine theological literature. P.P. Panaitescu succeeded for a time, by taking up D. Russo's point of view, in imposing a reservation on this great book of our ancient literature, which was considered, until the interventions of researchers such as I.C. Chițimia, G. Mihăilă and others, to be a simple compilation. Many researchers have argued for the authenticity of *the Teachings*: Al. Lepădatu, Sextil Pușcariu, V. Grecu, Ștefan Ciobanu, George Călinescu, Virgil Căndea, I. Bogdan, P. Olteanu, Nicolae Iorga, and others. Today, especially after the 1970 edition (with an introductory study and notes) by professors Dan Zamfirescu and G. Mihăilă, the issue seems to have been fully resolved in favour of authenticity.⁹

⁶ Neagoe maintained a rich correspondence with cultural figures of his time. He sent envoys to Pope Leo X, with a view to a possible union of the Churches and a common struggle against the Turks.

⁷ A.D. XENOPOL, *History of the Romanians in Dacia Traiana*, 3rd edition, vol. IV, Scientific and Encyclopaedic Publishing House, Bucharest, 1985, p. 178.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁹ Cf. Ovidiu MOCEANU, *Old Romanian Literature*, Transylvania University Press, Brașov, 2002, pp. 45-46.



However, the controversies were not limited to Neagoe's authorship, but also extended to the succession of Slavonic, Greek and Romanian versions. But such specialist identifications concern us less than the extent to which both the original and its Romanian translation are part of the osmotic movement between a literary coefficient and a philosophical-religious one. The presence of this concrescence is beyond doubt, even if it was achieved within a predominantly religious traditional formula with an ethical-political purpose. The original is Slavonic and is the work of the prince himself. The Greek translation, whose author is believed to be Manuil of Corinth, a great rhetorician of the Patriarchate of Constantinople (1480-1530), followed immediately after the book was written, and the Romanian translation was made before 1645 (possibly on the initiative of Udriște Năsturel). *The Teachings...* is a manual of religious, moral and political education, of the “mirror of the prince” type - a literary genre frequently cultivated in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.¹⁰

The ruler instructs his son for a dignified reign, for which purpose he mobilises the most eloquent examples, which then lead him to effective conduct. In this context, moral and political thinking is inserted and put into action, which commentators have likened to that of Marcus Aurelius or Machiavelli.¹¹

The work consists of two parts that are united by the same thinking and the same mosaic technique applied in the use of sources. The basic idea is the divine origin of royal power, which does not emanate from the boyars, but from God. The lord is God's “anointed one”. He placed him above the people to rule with justice and kindness.¹²

In order to understand the complex meanings proposed in this book, we must bear in mind the existential moment of its creation: the end of life, when, before the “great passage”, a pause is required, a look back at what has been, a “summary”, a testament. For, as has been less noticed, *the Teachings* are, above all, *the Great Confession*, a fundamental statement about the truths of life that feels the breath of extinction. The confessional passages are concentrated in the “words of teaching,” in the “letters,” in the “prayers.” “The time of composition,” says one specialist, “offered the chance to share fundamental insights into life and death, which a lord, and at the same time a man of exceptional talent from the 16th century, could reach [...] *Neagoe Basarab's Teachings* consist of disturbing answers, using the arguments of highly authoritative texts and, above all, of undeniable literary beauty.”¹³ The attempt to interpret from this angle is older. Thus, Constantin Noica analysed “the tension created by the encounter between the eternal and the historical” in the states experienced by this author at the beginning of the 16th century.¹⁴

¹⁰ Works of this kind are known in Byzantine-Slavic literature, such as: *The Teachings of Basil the Macedonian* to his son Leo, *De administrando imperio* by Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *The Teachings of Theophylact*, Archbishop of Ohrida, and *The Teachings of Vladimir Monomakh* to his sons. Around the same time, Niccolo Machiavelli was writing his famous work, *The Prince*. V. Ion IANOȘI (general coordinator), *Dictionary of Romanian Philosophical Works*, Edit. Humanitas, Bucharest, 1997, p. 115.

¹¹ Idem, *A History of Romanian Philosophy (in its relation to literature)*, Apostrof Publishing House, Cluj, 1996, p. 16.

¹² This refers to the doctrine of Byzantine absolutism, formulated by Agapetus, Basil Macedonian, Patriarch Photius and all authors of Byzantine parenetic writings. This doctrine has its origins in biblical theocracy, in the political conception of the great monarchies of the ancient East, but also of the Roman Empire. See Idem, *Dictionary of Romanian Philosophical Works*, p. 115.

¹³ Doina CURTICĂPEANU, *Fortuna labilis* from “*The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab*,” *Steaua*, 1971, no. 5 (May); reprinted in *Orizonturile vieții în literatura veche românească (Horizons of Life in Old Romanian Literature)*, Ed. Minerva, Bucharest, 1975, pp. 30-34.

¹⁴ Constantin NOICA, *Pages on the Romanian Soul*, Bucharest, 1943 (*What is eternal and what is historical in Romanian culture*); V. and ed. 1991, Ed. Humanitas, Bucharest, from which we quote (pp. 6-34). Noica approaches *the Teachings* from a philosophical perspective, valuing them as a philosophy of the Romanian soul.



The two main parts of the text, which have no different reasons for existing, are united by concept, philosophy of life, and rhetorical devices. The opening words of the first part clearly establish the starting point and the conclusion of all considerations: “My beloved son, first of all, you must honour and praise the great, good, and merciful God, our wise creator, day and night, at all times and in all places. And it is very fitting to glorify and magnify him unceasingly, with unceasing voice and unceasing songs, as the one who made us and brought us out of darkness into light and from non-existence into existence.”¹⁵

The first part seems like an *Old Testament* but presented through the lens of Christian thought. It is no coincidence that the pages are dominated by parables, stories, and characters taken from the Old Testament: Saul, Solomon, Elijah, Rehoboam, Ahab, Absalom, David, and others. The second part, dominated by the New Testament message, begins with a plea for the veneration of icons and continues with teachings for certain situations in life: parents and children, lords and subjects, court life, judgments, the veneration of customs, etc. It is a *guide*, a *code* conditioned by “the *fear* and *love of God*.”

In the first part, the author did not take fragments from the Old Testament at random. Thus, the Books of Kings are very relevant in this context because they are brought as an example for future rulers taken from the lives of good judges and kings in the Bible who followed God's commandments. The lord must be faithful to God, shun heretics and pagans. Emperor Constantine the Great believed in the sign of the cross and with “*that sign he won all wars*”. And Neagoe Basarab recounts Constantine's story based on the hagiographic works he had at his disposal, demonstrating Constantine's faith in God and his holy life.

Despite the inconsistency of the quotations and longer texts borrowed from Scripture, this part of the work highlights the duties of a ruler of peoples, who is God's envoy, towards God and his subjects. But the subjects are also obliged to obey the ruler.

“*For from God comes the kingdom and dominion, both on earth and in heaven [...]*”
“Therefore, let no one dare, neither servant, nor peasant, nor anyone else, to raise their nature and thoughts, with cunning craft, at the instigation of the devil, against their emperor and lord and master [...] he will truly bring God's righteous wrath upon his own head, and the wrath of the living God will descend upon him.”¹⁶

The second part, devoted more to advice on governance, begins with two chapters that are linked in content to the first part: one concerning the veneration of icons, the other relating to the love and fear of God. This is followed by a chapter (not closely related to the previous ones) of rare lyrical beauty: Neagoe Basarab's book when he transferred the remains of his mother, Neaga, and his sons Petru, Ioan, and Anghelina to the church in Argeş, a chapter that is followed by several pages from the novel by *Varlaam and Ioasaf* and from *Fisiolog*. This letter or book, as well as the prayer “at the departure of the soul,” are lyrical, poignant meditations on the fragility of human existence. They are the first contributions to the development of a universal poetic theme – *ubi sunt!* – in our ancient literature. Another theme of the era – *fortuna labilis* – taken from *Ecclesiastes*

¹⁵ *The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to his son Theodosie*, text established by Florica MOISIL and Dan ZAMFIRESCU, with a new translation of the Slavonic original by G. Mihăilă, introductory study and notes by Dan Zamfirescu and G. Mihăilă, Minerva Publishing House, Bucharest, 1971, p. 125. We will use this version of *the Teachings* with preference in the present study. See also: <http://sitadeasa.wordpress.com/2006/08/08/invataturile-lui-neagoe-basarab-catre-fiul-sau-teodosie/>

¹⁶ *Ibid.* “That the kingdom and reign of kings and lords, which is the kingdom and reign of faithful and righteous kings and lords, is the heavenly kingdom and reign. And the Lord, the Son of God, will be their king and will judge the world with justice.”



appears in chapter VI. Everything “passes like smoke”, so the wise man thinks about the hour of death, the customs of the air and the fearful judgement.¹⁷

Continuing the funeral speech from chapter III, Neagoe, asking for forgiveness and mercy from those left alive, mourns, but not because he is leaving the world, but because he does not know where his soul will go (“and there is no one to help him, except to hope now for God's mercy”) and because he feels sorry for the pain his death causes:

“For I have had great pity for you and your sons. But God will teach you to have pity on my soul and my children...” The one who lamented was not just anyone, but a ruler. All the more significant for the message of this book are the last pages, which offer a mirror image of life in the past through the questions addressed to the lazy soul: “*you never believed that you would die (...), but like one without death and like a blind man, you have sinned against God.*”

It has been rightly said that until Eminescu's *Oda (in ancient metre)*, we will not find more heart-rending words on this subject.¹⁸ The author places particular emphasis on justice and humanity, while at the same time giving profoundly optimistic, vitalistic meanings to man, the creation of the divine. The section is a pedagogical anthology, an initiatory book, a form of education through selected and meaningful parables. Themes such as forgiving the sins of one's neighbour (taken from the Gospel according to Matthew) or judging someone fairly according to their character and not their appearance, or moral meditation on the vanity of the world, introduce the Platonic motif of the superiority of the soul over the body, “for God has given us minds to think for ourselves what is good.” The idea was taken up and perpetuated in Christian theology, appearing later in Dimitrie Cantemir's *Divanul sau gîlceava înțeleptului cu lumea sau giudețul sufletului cu trupul (The Divan or the Wise Man's Quarrel with the World or the Judgement of the Soul with the Body)*. “Honour wisdom so that you may reign forever,” Neagoe Basarab would say, drawing, by way of example, from the religious novel *Varlaam and Ioasaf*, the parable of the four rakes, the parable of the nightingale, the city, or the parable of the snake and the dove from *Physiologus*. The praise of the mind is dominant: the snake offers its body to be crushed but protects its head. All these parables and pieces of advice serve Neagoe Basarab's true goal: “to renew man from within”. Thus, the first section offers a succession of Christian anthropological plans, from the spectacle of nature and man as the master of creation, through the hypostases of historical man (biblical personalities and Constantine the Great) to man confronted with the drama of his mortal condition, with the vanity of the world, with the open grave before him. This would be the initiation into the destiny of man and of the Lord.¹⁹ These chapters are followed by a series of practical advice on governance: “how and in what manner to honour the boyars and servants” who will serve him “righteously”; rules regarding the reception of foreign envoys; matters of military tactics on the battlefield; advice on how to judge and dispense justice; exhortations to mercy and compassion, to the removal of envy and thoughts of revenge. The work ends with a prayer, that is, with the “word of forgiveness” that the lord, at the hour of his death, addresses to “his lords and ladies, his boyars great and small, and all his other servants.” This part, which represents the core of the entire work, constitutes a parenthesis on the level of Renaissance masterpieces.²⁰

¹⁷ The text is reminiscent of Miron Costin's poem – The Life of the World. Cf. Ion IANOȘI, *Dictionary of Romanian Philosophical Works*, p. 116.

¹⁸ Ovidiu MOCEANU, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

¹⁹ Ion IANOȘI, *Dictionary...*, p. 116. See also George IVAȘCU, *History of Romanian Literature*, [vol. 1], Științifică, Bucharest, 1969, pp. 78-79.

²⁰ Cf. N. CARTOJAN, *History of Old Romanian Literature*, edited by Rodica Rotaru and Andrei Rusu, Romanian Cultural Foundation Publishing House, Bucharest, 1996, p. 79.



The core of this teaching is the idea of *absolute monarchy by divine right*, but subordinate to the Christian creed. Man must not attach his mind to the deceptive and vain things of this passing world, for “the love of the things of this world detaches the mind and thought from God,” and he who seeks glory loses his soul, “for as rust eats away at iron, so does human glory eat away at man, if his heart becomes attached to it. And as the bindweed or the vine wraps itself around the vine and destroys its fruit, so, my child, pride and arrogance destroy the fruit of the king and the lord.”²¹

In order for the lord to be “perfect and whole,” he must love the truth and “uphold justice,” be brave, “have an understanding heart and wisdom,” be modest, calm, generous, a good psychologist, to know that self-interest is the motive for all human actions, not to share the leadership of the country with anyone, to choose skilled and faithful servants. Using excerpts from Simeon the Monk, Neagoe urges rulers to be “merciful and restful,” to always remember the Last Judgement, for as they judge their subjects, so shall they be judged then.

The precision of some recommendations, such as those concerning the organisation of the army or behaviour towards subjects, at court, in the court of justice or at royal banquets, does not exclude, but rather implies, the presence of the moralist, who guides through sentences, often of great conciseness and beauty. The fragility of the human soul (“for the heart of man is like glass”) is always taken into account, but so is its richness, between which human relationships are established. The use of parables, the frequency of metaphors and allegories, the presence of *topoi* that enhance the expressiveness of the discourse (notable here are the garden with stone walls, cultivated by the ruler, signifying the royal advice, destined to be defended by the successor and cleansed of “dry weeds”, or that of the “sealing” of the book in spirit) imprint that characteristic of the style, in accordance with Byzantine sources, whose use often reaches the point of naturally incorporating various fragments into *the Teachings*.²²

The thesis of promoting royal officials according to merit, not according to boyar origin, is undoubtedly marked by the modernist wind: “But the poor, who toil in your service, do not place them below the sons of boyars, but let them be alongside them, for you will need them someday.”

Equally evident in *the Encyclopaedia* is the development, for the first time in the East, of a *diplomatic* and *political doctrine* intended not to serve medieval-style imperial expansion or domination over a conglomerate of peoples (a concern that gave rise to Constantine Porphyrogenitus's classic Byzantine work, *De administrando imperio*), but to defend the interests of a people threatened by disproportionately large forces, such as those of the Ottoman Empire.²³

Both an introductory and educational work, *The Teachings* alternately reveal a shadow or a light side, the author's attitude constantly oscillating between the pole of mystical asceticism, on the one hand (towards which he tends and with which he confuses himself, assimilating, to a large extent, the philosophy of the era), and that of immediate responsibility, of concrete, sometimes dramatic reality, which required the promptness and sagacity of responses on which ultimately depended the very destiny of the country ruled by the “prince”. Diplomatic skill and strategic acumen, generally the ideals of the autocratic ruler, do not contradict, in this contemporary of the Florentine Machiavelli, with moral principles and a high idea of humanity, which are reflected both in the initiatives born in solitude, which must be determined not by arbitrariness but by the ruler's

²¹ *Ibid.* See also fn. 15.

²² Rodica ȘUIU, *The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to his Son Theodosie*, article in *Dictionary of Romanian Literature from its Origins to 1900*, (collective work), Published by the Academy of the Socialist Republic of Romania, Bucharest, 1979, p. 471.

²³ Dan ZAMFIRESCU, *Contributions to the History of Old Romanian Literature*, Scientific and Encyclopaedic Publishing House, Bucharest, 1981, pp. 93-94.



right judgment, and in the stringency of hierarchical relationships or in the essence of ceremonial gestures.²⁴

As for *the theological value* of this monumental book, it is so significant that it has led some, starting with D. Russo (1906), to deny its royal authorship in favour of a learned monk, a contemporary of Neagoe. In fact, the abundance of references to the biblical text and theological writings can be explained by the fact that Neagoe possessed a wealth of information in this regard, as a former disciple of Saint Nifon. The book is a guide to faith for a layman destined to live his life not in a monastery, but in a secular context that is not only complicated, but even dangerous. In fact, this was one of the aspects that sparked controversy surrounding its authenticity: to whom is the book addressed? To Teodosie or, through this name, to any other young person facing fundamental life experiences? In any case, it is hard to believe that a *monk* could have touched, as a result of his specific life experience, on the profound aspects of responsible fatherhood, as expressed in this way of transmitting the experience gathered over the years, in confrontations with problems, situations from which the father wants to protect his son. A similar situation is represented by Cantemir's masterpiece *Divanul sau gâlceava înțeleptului cu lumea (The Divan or the Wise Man's Quarrel with the World)*. If we did not know the author of this highly theological book, would we attribute it to a monk, since Cantemir demonstrates a perfect mastery of all aspects of faith discussed?²⁵

Although he does not provide a theological analysis of the work, Nicolae Iorga clearly states that “Neagoe-Voda, the fourth Basarab, was also the first ecclesiastical writer to emerge from among the Romanians.”²⁶ Of course, this is not to claim Neagoe exclusively as a church writer, but by highlighting him in this capacity, his figure will occupy an even greater place in the history of Romanian culture. However, we look at it, the theological content – as emphasised by Metropolitan Antonie Plămădeală, among others – cannot be underestimated either.²⁷

Analysed from a theological perspective, the work takes on new and such valuable dimensions that many find it unbelievable that such a book could have been written in our country at that time. Romanian religious culture must therefore consider it as *its first monument* of dogmatic theology, moral theology and Christian spirituality; as the first Romanian collection of prayers and even as a first form of Romanian *nomocanon*.²⁸

²⁴ Rodica ȘUIU, *op. cit.*, p. 471.

²⁵ Ovidiu MOCEANU, *op. cit.*, p. 46. Initially, Neagoe Basarab had two of his sons in mind, Petru and Teodosie, but after Petru's death, he addressed only Teodosie. The mourning of his lost son, but also of other “coconi” (Ioan and Anghelina) should be the strongest argument in support of authenticity. The work was divided into two main parts, to which were added *the Letter to his mother's bones* and *Prayer at the departure of the soul*. Until the 1971 edition by professors Dan Zamfirescu and G. Mihăilă, based on 18th-century adaptations, those who first republished the book (Ioan Eclesiarhul in 1843 and N. Iorga in 1910, for example) established 11 parts. The study of the text, restored according to scientific criteria in 1971 after many years of research, offers a somewhat different picture from that presented in previous commentaries. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

²⁶ N. IORGA, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

²⁷ V. Antonie PLĂMĂDEALĂ, *The Theological Content of Neagoe Basarab's Teachings*, in “Studii Teologice” (Theological Studies), XXI (1969), no. 3-4, pp. 245-262. Also, the study by the same author: *Neagoe Basarab, Lord of Romanian Culture*, in the volume: *Teachers of Romanian Thought and Feeling (Dascăli de cuget și simțire românească)*, IBMBOR, Bucharest, 1981, p. 40.

²⁸ Neagoe has original pages on judgement, on advice before judgement, on the opinion of the people and the attitude of the judge, etc. See *The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab, Prince of Wallachia*, ed. Vasile Grecu, Greek version, National Printing House, Bucharest, 1942, pp. 89, 125, 127, 139. It is true that almost all researchers have highlighted the religious character of *the Teachings*, but almost all of them have focused mainly on the moral texts, which are also considered to be borrowings. However, objective research into the work leads to the conclusion that these borrowings, however extensive they may seem, are part of the author's own vision and personal perspective, together with which the



There is a burning desire for perfection in this book, and perhaps this is its most impressive aspect: salvation, through perfect care for one's own being and for others, is accessible; of course, if one's life, regardless of rank, fulfils the commandments. That is why Neagoe addresses not only his son, but also others who “will follow him, anointed by God”; he has in mind all his “boyars, great and small,” “other lords,” and addresses “the patriarchs, the bishops, the boyars and the abbots, the rich and the poor.” Neither temporary political power, nor corrupting wealth, nor even ecclesiastical rank confer moral superiority. For this, one must fight ceaselessly, until the last moment of life. The father shows his son the steps to perfection: “For, first of all, there is silence, and silence brings pause, pause brings humility and lamentation, and lamentation brings fear, and fear brings meekness, meekness brings reckoning of things to come, and that reckoning brings love, and love makes souls speak with angels. Then man will understand that he is not far from God.” In fact, Constantin Noica commented with fascination on this passage, “which may be from an ascetic treatise, but which expresses, as revealing as a poem, the religious and philosophical sensitivity of a 16th-century Romanian thinker.”²⁹

The same elevated tone can be detected in the praise of the mind, significant for understanding the Hesychast ascent, taken from the words of the prince: “The mind is an imperishable treasure and wealth, which should never be spent. The pure mind ascends above the heavens and presents the righteousness of the soul and body before the almighty emperor. The mind is the life of friends and the reconciliation of brothers. The alert mind is a better and more honest friend to emperors and lords than all their wealth and riches. A wise man rules over many people, but a foolish and mindless man loses many people [...] as the prophet says: “Honour wisdom, that you may reign forever.”³⁰

Neagoe's *humanism* bears the mark of Byzantine culture: a particular vision of daily life, of prayer and meditation on sacred texts, together with the administrative concerns of the state, the family and the Church. For him, “man has a cosmic dignity as a being created” by God; therefore, the only principle of relating to others is Christian love. The earth is the space for initiation into the things of eternity, and life is the time of salvation. Thus, Neagoe's humanism is different from secular humanism. The human condition “becomes a condition of tragic meaning”; Neagoe is an initiated humanist, a Christian humanist, whose roots are found in Holy Scripture and the Church Fathers. He would never accept Machiavelli's principles; rebellion and murder are incompatible with the Christian vision. And, as is well known, Neagoe did not wage wars; he sought to resolve conflicts diplomatically.³¹

Viewed from the perspective of a *dogmatic* treatise, it has been noted that Neagoe's concluding exposition, i.e. “the last things”, constitutes “chapters with which modern dogmatic treatises also conclude”.³² Taken further, deepened and expanded, the analysis of the work reveals not only in “the last things”, but throughout, a true Romanian treatise on dogmatics.³³

In this regard, two essential features of Neagoe's work should be emphasised: first, that, succinctly or *in extenso*, all the chapters of dogmatics are found in *the Teachings*; and second, that the entire content is genuinely Orthodox, not because Neagoe was unfamiliar with Catholicism, the

unity of the book, its plan and its purpose are his indisputable contribution. V. Dr. Antonie PLĂMĂDEALĂ, *Teachers of Romanian Thought and Feeling*, p. 41.

²⁹ C. NOICA, *op. cit.*, pp. 15 sq.

³⁰ *Învățăturile*, *ed. cit.*, pp. 338-339.

³¹ Archimandrite Iuvenalie IONASCU, *Neagoe Basarab – principe isihast*, Curtea de Argeș, Dacpress Publishing House, 2005. See: <http://www.pitesti.ro/centrul-cultural/arhiva/arges/august2004/pag21.htm>

³² Dan ZAMFIRESCU, *Studies and Research on Old Romanian Literature*, Bucharest, 1967, p. 141.

³³ Antonie PLĂMĂDEALĂ, *Teachers of Romanian Thought and Feeling*, p. 49.



movements that preceded the Reformation, and Bogomilism – which was popular especially south of the Danube, but also in our country – but because he was a staunch Orthodox Christian and thought along the lines of the purest, oldest, and deepest Eastern theology. He often referred to “heretics,” and then his tone suddenly became polemical,³⁴ although he did not mention them, probably considering them well known. In general, his teaching is more expository.³⁵

Much has been written and said about the not only ascetic content of the Teachings, but even about the author's Hesychast vision, since practical life and mystical life coexist in the same experience of the Hesychast. It is true that, to a certain extent, these follow one another: there is an active, painful phase, called ascetic, and one of peace, tranquillity and contemplation, called mystical. But in the experience of Hesychast life, man cannot know when the ascetic phase has ended and the mystical one has begun. Sometimes man finds the joy and peace of communion with God, experiences the other world, but does not cease his ascetic struggle. Because the latter continuously supports the former.

This specifically Hesychast vision is found in Neagoe's book. At first glance, the incompatibility of the prince's historical-political life and his Hesychast experience seems insurmountable. In fact, this is precisely the mystery of his Hesychast experience: Hesychasm in the world. And this is the doctrine of St. Gregory of Sinai and the experience of his contemporary, Patriarch Callistratus.³⁶ This is also the source of the spiritual tension in this book. Otherwise, it would be difficult to understand the meaning of the prayers and homilies that abound in the text and which emphasise not only the observance of God's commandments, but also the possibility of practising hesychasm in the secular world of the prince's court. This aspect has not been understood by many exegetes of the book, who consider it lacking in narrative continuity and doctrinal demonstration. Neagoe's work is a book of historical and political reflections of great ideological and textual complexity and, at the same time, a manual for Hesychast training, initiation and, therefore, normative.³⁷

The Guide to the Teachings is the Eastern contemporary of several notable humanists and utopians. In his initiation, he amalgamates various sources of wisdom, biblical and patristic, popular and apocryphal. Alongside a specific lyrical tension, natural in the concrete context offered by the moulding of an exemplary prince, the particular prescriptions with which this early *Bildungsgeschichte* (“history of education”) operates also favour the involvement in the discourse of an undoubted *philosophical* propensity. Neagoe constantly praises “the mind”, “the pure mind”, “thinking with one's own mind” (the mind was given to us “so that we may think for ourselves what is good”), “prudence,” “calculation,” “judgement” (“speech and teaching” have their purpose “for judgement and for love and for mercy”). Personal and clear thinking must guide moral behaviour. The idea is undoubtedly humanistic and perhaps even Renaissance, although configured theologically.³⁸

³⁴ “Let us not be deceived, brothers, and follow the fables and lies of heretics, as they gossip, and do not believe that God came down to earth and was both God and man but say that he did not truly appear (but was an illusion). And we should believe with all our hearts and confess, not with some opinion, but with all certainty, how they appeared in the world [...]. V. *ed. cit.*, p. 221.

³⁵ Regarding *the Sources of Faith*, Neagoe recommends: “Let us read the Holy Scriptures and consider them, for God has said that in them we shall have eternal life.” He himself is an avid reader of the Holy Scriptures, as well as of the Holy Fathers, from whom he quotes with particular competence. See Antonie PLĂMĂDEALĂ, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

³⁶ Archimandrite Iuvenalie IONASCU, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

³⁷ *Ibid.* See also: Dan ZAMFIRESCU, *Brilliant Expression of Ancient Romanian Civilisation*, in “Argeş”, August 1967.

³⁸ Ion IANOȘI, *A History of Romanian Philosophy*, pp. 16 sq. Its explicit philosophical openness is also revealed by a significant passage. We choose a famous one from the second part, chapter X: “Aristotle the philosopher spoke to



In conclusion, the value of this work of ancient Romanian literature is of paramount importance, representing in many respects a pioneering work, placing its author, alongside Dimitrie Cantemir, among the creators of culture at a European level. Thus, the study of Byzantine or Slavic parenetic literature shows that, “in the entire field of Eastern political thought, Neagoe Basarab's *Teachings* represent the first work in which, with rigorous logic and surprisingly novel ideas, not only the theory but also the technique of modern authoritarian monarchy is developed, as it first appeared systematised in the West by Machiavelli. [...] In *the Teachings*, we find for the first time clearly formulated the idea of the need for a single authority, intended to put an end to feudal anarchy.”³⁹

Meditating on fragility and instability, Neagoe does not project human hopes into a transcendent space; on the contrary, he advocates the full mobilisation of human energies in order to achieve perfection, but here, on earth. This is, in fact, the great lesson of his book. The perfection he proposes refers to lasting values, as opposed to perishable ones; riches of all kinds, gold and silver cannot ensure man's salvation, which is why the author's attention is firmly focused on *judgement*, a sound mind and other good deeds.

What Cantemir's *Divan* will portray as a dispute between the wise man and the world is foreshadowed here in the soul-body alternative, which speaks to the separation between the perishable values of existence and the perennial values of the spirit. The choice of the latter must win the support of all people: emperors and boyars, empresses and noblewomen, old people and children. Every man, Neagoe emphasises, must “clothe his mind in imperial robes, adorn it with a crown, and sit in a high and illuminated carriage”.⁴⁰

From a *rhetorical* point of view, it has been said that despite borrowing passages from the writings he uses, Neagoe's skill of eloquence and his cadence of great rhetorical vibration cannot be denied, especially when he speaks of the fragility of life interrupted by death.⁴¹

Alexander the emperor and said: 'Emperor Alexander, with what did you conquer the whole world?' And Alexander said: 'Since you ask me, listen and I will tell you. O Aristotle, I conquered the whole world with only three things: first, with truthful and steadfast words. Second, with righteous judgment. And third, with an outstretched and merciful hand, for I did not gather wealth, but I showed mercy to my servants and armies. Therefore, because of the mercy I showed them, they did not spare their lives, but laid down their heads before me. With these things I conquered the whole world.' And with these words Alexander the emperor conquered Aristotle the philosopher, and Aristotle said that only with these three things can a man conquer the whole world. Thus, the practical outcome of the teaching proves Alexander's primacy in relation to Aristotle; on the other hand, the succession of ideas attributed to Alexander confirms the priority of the ideal-moral and philosophical plan! V. *Ibidem*, p. 17.

³⁹ Dan ZAMFIRESCU, *Contributions to the History of Old Romanian Literature*, p. 93. “Woe to that lord who gives his honour to another, woe to that country ruled by many.”

⁴⁰ “Behold, you now do the opposite and foolishly adorn the city, that is, the body, with many kinds of clothes, while you leave the emperor, that is, the mind, bound to drag itself towards passions and foolish and beastly things. But you do not consider that you have been called to the wedding, and that the wedding was God's, and you do not consider that in his chambers they want all souls dressed in bright clothes and adorned with gold brocade.” *The Teachings*, ed. cit., p. 195. Cf. Doina CURTICĂPEANU, *The Horizons of Life in Old Romanian Literature*, p. 31.

⁴¹ “O, great need and hardship! Where is the beauty of the face now? Behold, it has blackened. Where is the blush of the cheeks and the red lips? Behold, they have faded. Where is the twinkle of the eyes and their sight? Behold, they have melted away. Where is the beautiful, combed hair? Behold, it has fallen. Where are the smooth necks? Behold, they have broken. Where is the quick and clear tongue? Behold, it has fallen silent. Where are the white and beautiful hands? Behold, they are unbound.” V. Al. PIRU, *History of Romanian Literature from its Origins to 1830*, Scientific and Encyclopaedic Publishing House, Bucharest, 1977, p. 36.

Here is another passage on the theme of *fortuna labilis* from Neagoe Basarab's prayer “at the departure of the soul”: “Tell me now, wretched souls, where is our dominion? Where are our sons and daughters? Where are the warm baths



The value and influence that *the Teachings* exerted in the periods immediately following are evident from the special reception that this parenetic work enjoyed in the 17th century, at the beginning and end of the interval, during the reigns of Matei Basarab and, later, Constantin Brâncoveanu. Antim Ivireanul was probably familiar with them, as he wrote advice for Prince Ștefan Cantacuzino in 1715.⁴²

The great conciseness of style, the frequency of metaphors and allegories, the sententious manner and the grave lyricism of certain fragments demonstrate that *the Teachings* are not merely a moral, religious and political guide. They represent a profound meditation on the human condition and an important landmark for the study of Romanian thought and culture since the 16th century.

2. A GRANDIOSE PRINCELY FOUNDATION: THE CATHEDRAL OF CURTEA DE ARGEȘ

The second building of universal significance in Romanian culture, belonging to Saint Voivode Neagoe Basarab, is the monumental artistic creation embodied by the church of the Monastery of Curtea de Argeș. Historically speaking, on 15 August 1517, Ecumenical Patriarch Teolipt, accompanied by four metropolitans from the “Turkocracy” and all the abbots of Athos, led by Serbian protos Gavriil, came to consecrate the Monastery of Curtea de Argeș, which is the most sumptuous post-Byzantine religious monument in the Orthodox world. This is because, in addition to its artistic success, it symbolised the unique condition of Romanian land in the south-east, which had been invaded by the Asian empire, with the Christian space in the north thus remaining forever unsubjected to Islamic law.⁴³

The voievodal foundation was built in the first half of the 16th century, on the site of an older one, in the “capital city” of Wallachia in the 14th and 15th centuries, Curtea de Argeș, in the northern part, formerly known as “the Flămânzești estate”, or as the ballad says “Meșterul Manole”: “Up on Argeș,/Through the hornbeam forest,/Through the hazel forest.../Down on Argeș,/On the beautiful bank”.⁴⁴

The church became the family crypt of its founder, with the following people buried here: Neagoe Vodă and Lady Despina, Radu de la Afumați and his wife Ruxandra, her sister Stana, married to Ștefăniță Vodă of Moldavia, and three other children of Neagoe, who died at a young age. Made of stone, marble and mosaic, richly decorated by the famous painter Dobromir (1526),

and the fulfilment of our bodily desires? (...) Where is the gold and silver of this world, wretched soul?” *Teachings, ed. cit.*, p. 340.

⁴² Nicolae Bălcescu mentions them as the primary documentary source in his study *Military Power and Military Art from the Founding of the Principality of Wallachia to the Present*. In 1843, Ioan Eclesiarhul published the first Romanian version of *The Teachings*, of which nine manuscript copies are known today. The text, preserved in fragments, of the Slavonic original, published in 1904 in St. Petersburg by P.A. Lavrov after the unique manuscript discovered in Sofia, appears much later, edited successively by P. P. Panaitescu in 1959 (Slavonic text and translation) and, in 1970, by G. Mihăilă, Florica Moisil and Dan Zamfirescu (with a new translation of the Slavonic version by G. Mihăilă). The Greek version, edited by Vasile Grecu after the manuscript found at the Dionisiu monastery on Mount Athos, appeared in Bucharest in 1942, accompanied by a Romanian translation of the text. V. Rodica ȘUIU, *op. cit.*, p. 471.

⁴³ And becoming the oasis and source of semi-millennial resistance for all of Christendom, including those forced not to ring bells under penalty of death, and not to build churches larger than a Turk on horseback. Dan ZAMFIRESCU, *Reasons for the canonisation of Neagoe Basarab*. See note 2.

⁴⁴ *Romanian folk ballads*, III, Publishing House for Literature, 1964, p. 15.



the church of the Argeş Monastery is considered not only the most beautiful church on Romanian soil, but also one of the masterpieces of universal art.⁴⁵

A creation born of deep faith, the Argeş Monastery Church impresses with its proportions and ornamental vestments. The fame of the monument has attracted numerous Romanian and foreign travellers who, fascinated by the beauty, grandeur and perfection of the building, have competed in praising it. The monastery is “a source of wonder and is unrivalled among the monasteries in this country” (*Paul of Alep*); “the first in Romania” (*Alexandru Pelimon*); “a true Saint Sophia of the mountains” (*W. Derblich*) and “to sum it all up in a single word, this church is a jewel” (*Paul of Alep*). Neagoe Basarab's cathedral is not only a sublime place of worship, but also a work of art of anonymous literature, the legend of “Master Manole”, in whose interpretation creation means sacrifice, self-giving, patience, meticulousness in polishing and raising the stone, combining colours and bringing words to life. Aware that “no creator can enter universality except through the gate of his own national culture, that no creator can enter eternity except by bearing the seal of his time on his shoulders,” Neagoe Basarab “squeezed the blood from his heart [...] and spared no expense” to build and decorate this church.⁴⁶

In Romanian historiography, debates have naturally arisen regarding the dating of the old monastery in Curtea de Argeş and its first documented founder. Thus, based on tradition, preserved in folk songs, which mention *Negru Vodă* and which historians identify as Basarab the Founder, and on the monastery's memorial list compiled in the 18th century, based on earlier, much older ones, which begin with “Io Basarab voivode, Io Alexandru voivode. Io Radul voivode star (the elder!), Io Neagoe voivode founder I gospodja ego (and his lady!) Despina...”⁴⁷, Professor Constantin C. Giurescu concludes that “the first founder – because the memorial lists usually begin with the one who founded the original place – is Basarab, the founder of the country.” He built the monastery where Iachint would establish his residence. The second founder was Mircea the Elder, whose image was painted on the founder's painting in the “demolished and unfortified” place found by Neagoe. The third founder was this last voivode himself. And because the church he built surpassed in beauty and splendour not only the previous church it replaced, but also everything that had been built in the country until then, the emphasis fell on him, leaving “the two previous founders in the shadows”⁴⁸.

⁴⁵ Pr. Prof. Dr. Mircea PĂCURARIU, *History of the Romanian Orthodox Church*, vol. 1, 2nd ed., IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1991, p. 565. It should be noted that Neagoe Basarab also founded other churches and monasteries in Wallachia, including: the *Metropolitan Church in Târgoviște*, the *Church of St. George* in the same city, and the *Ostrovul Hermitage in Călimănești*. He also painted the churches of the monasteries of *Dealul Mare*, and *Glavacioc*, and rebuilt the large church in *Snagov* and the one in *Tismana*. He reinforced the older deeds of donation for all of them. V. *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ Daniel GLIGORE, *Neagoe Basarab, Prince devoted to serving God and the Romanian people*, in the magazine “Argeş”, July 2008. See: http://www.centrul-cultural-pitesti.ro/index.php?option=com_content&task

⁴⁷ Constantin C. GIURESCU, *The Founding of the Metropolis of Ungrovlahia*, in “BOR”, no. 7-10/1959, p. 690; Aurelian SACERDOȚEANU, *The Memorial Book of the Argeş Monastery*, in “BOR”, no. 3-4/1965, pp. 297-330.

⁴⁸ Constantin C. GIURESCU, *op. cit.*, p. 690. Recently, Pavel Chihaiia, revisiting the issue of the construction of the old Argeş Monastery, analysed the votive portraits in the church of Neagoe Basarab's monastery based on the sketches made by the painter G. Tătărăscu in 1860, taken before the restoration by A. Lecomte du Noüy in 1875-1885, as well as the two coats of arms, the heraldic symbols of Vlad Dracul and Neagoe Basarab, which had been embedded during the time of Matei Basarab, on the occasion of the monastery's repair around 1640, above the entrance gate, in the bell tower, and concludes that the old Argeş Monastery, the seat of the cathedral of the first Metropolis of Wallachia, was built by Voivode Vlad Dracul (1436-1442; 1443-1446), and the document issued by him on 2 August 1439 at Curtea de Argeş can be linked to the consecration of the Metropolitan Church. Pavel Chihaiia states that Vlad Dracul was the founder of the church, as well as of the surrounding wall and the bell tower, and his foundation housed the Metropolis, which until



For the church built by Neagoe, the people created a legend with mythical and, therefore, liturgical motifs: the Argeş Monastery. The master builder is Manole, who builds the most beautiful monastery ever seen, at the command of Prince Neagoe. *Manole's* name is symbolic: it comes from *Emanuel*. Therefore, the church prefigures the world, the Christian nations, and the “master craftsman” is Christ Himself. The church is the earthly, historical face of the city of God, of the Kingdom of Heaven. Just as the church was built at Neagoe's command, so too is the Kingdom of Heaven, made up of believers who are saved, fulfilled through the teaching work of the Christian prince.⁴⁹

The transition from outside to inside the church has *anthropological* and *spiritual* significance. “Halfway up, the church is surrounded by a stone belt twisted from three branches of vine,” writes Gavril Protul.⁵⁰ The same belt frames the door. The stone belt symbolises the virginity of the Church, which forever gives birth to sons for the Kingdom of God. But it also symbolises the soul, which must conceive virtues and, therefore, Christ in the intimacy of the person praying in their heart. The Church becomes “the centre of the world” and “the centre of being,” the tree of life, as a symbol of closeness to God, who speaks incessantly to man, as Neagoe dialogues with Teodosie in *the Teachings*.

According to Gavriil Protul, Neagoe “surrounded the new monastery at Argeş with walls and built many cells for monks inside [...] And in the middle was the divine dwelling, like a tree of life. But not like that one; for from that one our fathers ate the fruit unto death, and from this one (the monastery) they eat the life-giving Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, who sacrifices himself every day for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.”⁵¹

An interesting detail (like so many others) in the painting is that on the side facing the interior of the narthex, that is, towards the community of monks and believers, ascetic saints were painted, “heroes” of the unseen war, Hesychast saints. Among them were Varlaam and Ioasaf, from whose novel Neagoe often quotes. They are an exhortation to the faithful, monks or not, to continue, on the path to perfection, the unseen war, following the model of the Hesychast saints. Towards the tombs, the icons represented martyr soldiers fighting against the enemies of the faith.

These holy martyrs were directed towards the exit of the church, as if they wanted to continue the fight outside the monastery, in the country and in the world. Such imagery evokes not only a chronicle of Christian Wallachia, but also a conception of life, a *Weltanschauung* of society and the era, which we find in the book of *Teachings*. It is a balance between hieraticism and dynamism, between the ascetic ideal and active participation in tumultuous life.

then had been based in the Church of St. Nicholas Domnesc, which had become too small at that time due to the large number of graves. Later, after the reign of Basarab the Younger, known as Țepeluș (1477-1482), Vlad Dracul's church fell into ruin. Research into internal documents led the author to conclude that the first seat of the Metropolis in Curtea de Argeş was founded by Vlad Dracul, who, in the autumn of 1446, was beheaded together with his son, Mircea, in Târgșor by Vladislav II (1447-1456), son of Dan II, as a result of internal struggles between the descendants of the ruling families: the Dănești (descendants of Dan I) and the Drăculești (descendants of Mircea the Elder 1386-1418, brother of Dan I). V. Pavel CHIHAIA, *Some data on the votive portraits in Neagoe's Church in Curtea de Argeş*, in “Mitropolia Olteniei”, no. 7-9/1962, pp. 449-472; Idem, *Deux armoiries sculptées, appartenant aux voivodes Vlad Dracul et Neagoe Basarab*, in *Revue roumaine de l'art*, no. 1/1964, pp. 151-167;

⁴⁹ Archimandrite Iuvenalie IONASCU, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

⁵⁰ In: *The Life and Times of His Holiness Our Father Nifon, Patriarch of Tsarigrad*. See note 2.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*



Between these two extremes, hieratic and dynamic, human life unfolds, as we see in *the Teachings*.⁵² In the same relationship, we must see both the figure of the monk and that of the prince, which, according to some, are irreconcilable. In fact, they are two different but not antagonistic vocations.

The Argeş Monastery fulfilled, among other things, a role that is perhaps less emphasised by specialists, namely a *patriotic* one, represented by the mobilisation of the conscience of the people and the country in the face of the Turkish danger. The coat of arms that Vlad Dracul had placed on the façade of the bell tower of the old Metropolitan Church, consisting of a dragon stuck in the back and head of a roaring lion, representing the Turks, was the materialisation of an idea: sustained resistance against the Turks in full expansion. During divine services in the Metropolitan Church, the country's leaders had before their eyes this battle standard of a country that was still free. Neagoe Basarab, building his new church on the ruins of the old one, placed his coat of arms on the new bell tower, continuing the political idea of his predecessor. His symbol was still the dragon, but this time it represented the demonic force of evil (as in the Orthodox iconography of Saint George), targeting the Turks, who threatened Christianity. The dragon is defeated and pierced by a fabulous animal with a horn on its forehead (a goat), a symbol of the Greek world, according to Alexandria, where the goat defeats the ram, here replaced by the dragon, recalling the symbolic passage from Daniel's prophecy (7:1-27).⁵³

It is rightly said that the monastery was not built by chance in Argeş, because on the site where it was to be built there was still the old church of the Metropolis of Wallachia, which now remained – after the metropolitan had moved his residence to Târgovişte, next to the seat of the reign – “demolished and unfortified”. However, recent research shows that this old church had been, in Vlad Dracul's time, the centre from which propaganda was spread for a crusade that was now, after almost a century, seen as a foreshadowing of the anti-Ottoman struggle that was about to begin.⁵⁴

The Curtea de Argeş Monastery is and remains the most perfectly constructed monument in Wallachia, and its elevation at Curtea de Argeş is a unique event in our medieval history. Artists who later built the most beautiful churches of the 17th and 18th centuries in Wallachia were inspired by its model, but they did not achieve the perfection of their model.

The beauty of the carved and painted decorations, the riches with which it was endowed, all these revealed the power, wealth, taste and generosity of its founder, increasing his prestige among his contemporaries and immortalising his memory among his descendants. It was and remains the most valuable historical and artistic monument, capable of bringing Romanians out of artistic anonymity and placing them among the peoples who create original works of great artistic value, unique in the world.

⁵² Archimandrite Iuvenalie IONAŞCU, *op. cit.*, p. 41. Observing the description of the church, masterfully made by Gavriil Protul, Prof. Adriana Miteşcu revisits and analyses the significance of the “house”, the dwelling place of God among men. In fact, the cathedral and the book explain the same reality of the city of God, in a liturgical-anthropological vision, as symbols of God's dwelling in man. It is about God's creation, restoration and salvation through Christ, actualised in history in individuals and communities, among Christian nations. V. Adriana MITESCU, *Come Vivere E Praticare L'esichia: Libro Di Insegnamento Del Principe Romeno Neagoe Basarab per Suo Figlio Tedosio*, Bulzoni editore, 1993, p. 54, apud *Ibidem*, p. 42.

⁵³ Pavel CHIHAIA, *Deux armoiries sculptées, appartenant aux voivodes...*, p. 157. The symbol embedded on the bell tower of the monastery, whose consecration was attended by the Patriarch of Constantinople himself and many representatives of the Greek Church, was appropriate to the cause of continuing the fight against the Turks and the confidence in the victory of the Orthodox Christian world, whose shield was now the Romanian Principalities.

⁵⁴ Emil LĂZĂRESCU, *Biserica Mănăstirii Argeşului*, Meridiane Publishing House, Bucharest, 1967, p. 91.



CONCLUSION

A complex personality of Romanian culture and spirituality, Neagoe Basarab marked Romanian history and space from both perspectives in an almost unique way (taking into account his premature death). He made a glorious entry into eternity through this miraculous pendant, represented by the two cathedrals: *The Teachings* to his son Theodosie – the first creation of universal value in Romanian literature, a true “political, pedagogical, philosophical and encyclopaedic testament”, and the masterpiece of Eastern Neo-Byzantine art: the Church of the Curtea de Argeş Monastery.

For his era, the faithful Lord Neagoe became a symbol of times of cultural and spiritual effervescence, in a context in which the Byzantine world was going through a major crisis, with Constantinople under Ottoman rule for almost seven decades. That is why Manuil of Corinth called him “Most High, Most Brilliant, Most Pious and Most Orthodox Lord Ioane Neagoe, Voivode and Emperor and Autocrat of all Ungrovlahia”⁵⁵ and compared him to Solomon and Justinian. Through Neagoe, Wallachia “became the centre of the Orthodox world and the protector of Byzantine civilisation. Neagoe Basarab is the purest image of the monarch by divine grace, protector and defender of the Eastern Church ... He considers himself the rightful heir to imperial traditions and, in this capacity, assumes the role of protector of the Orthodox Church and successor to the emperors of Byzantium. His entire reign is animated by this thought, all his deeds spring from this consciousness.”⁵⁶

B. P. Haşdeu, the discoverer and first herald of Neagoe Basarab's greatness, gave us, in 1880, the most comprehensive characterisation of the miracle he performed for the Romanian people: “Neagoe Basarab, this Marcus Aurelius of Wallachia, prince, artist and philosopher, who makes us look with amazement at the short interval between 1512 and 1521 as an exceptional era of peace and culture in the midst of a dark storm lasting several centuries.”⁵⁷

Thus, Neagoe Basarab's personality made a strong impression throughout the Byzantine world at the beginning of the 16th century, both culturally and politically and ecclesiastically, Neagoe expressing the typos of the Byzantine Christian prince, the basileus, the monarch protector of all Christians suffering under Turkish rule. At the same time, Neagoe established diplomatic relations with the Catholic West and European humanist culture, while remaining a symbol of Romanian culture deeply marked by Hesychasm.⁵⁸

His vision of the principality and its mission, influenced by Hesychasm, was original. His conception of monarchy was theological, Neagoe considering power to be “divine in essence”. In him, the Hesychast and the humanist came together in a happy and almost miraculous way, in opposition to the contemporary Western Machiavellian spirit. Therefore, we can say that the work of Saint Voivode Neagoe Basarab contains a message not only for his era, since it represents a paradigm that is still valid today, and his *teachings* are a lesson in moral and spiritual elevation, a lesson in existential behaviour and human dignity for all times.

⁵⁵ MANUIL of Corinth, “Grand Ritor of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, to Neagoe Basarab”, cf. *Commemorative Volume*, Sibiu, 1938, p. 269, apud Daniel GLIGORE, *Neagoe Basarab – Ruler devoted to the service of God and the Romanian People*. See note 46.

⁵⁶ Ion D. SANDU, *Neagoe Basarab, defender and supporter of Orthodoxy*, Sibiu, 1938, pp. 277-279.

⁵⁷ B.P. HAŞDEU, *The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab*, in “The Historical Archive of Romania,” vol. I, part two, Bucharest, 1865, pp. 112, 122; apud Dan ZAMFIRESCU, *Reasons for the Canonisation of Neagoe Basarab*. See note 2.

⁵⁸ Iuvenalie IONAŞCU, *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 6.



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ICOANA CREDINTEI

Icon of Faith. International Journal of Interdisciplinary Religious Studies

IFIJISR- IISSN 2501-3386; ISSN-L 2393-137X| <https://doi.org/10.26520/icoana>

Frequency: 2 issues/year, with possible supplementary issues.

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IFIJISR, is a journal published and promoted at international level by IFIASA in collaboration with members of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology and Education Sciences, "Valahia" University, Târgoviște. Icon of Faith is a Scientific, Open Access journal, with the main aim to promote a high level of Christian Theology in an intercultural context.

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Publisher: IFIASA® Ideas Forum International Academic and Scientific Association.