

## “THE TEACHINGS OF NEAGOE BASARAB” A MANUAL OF LEADERSHIP AND A MODEL OF DYNAMIC EMBODIMENT OF THE ETERNAL WORD

### Abstract

The work of the Wallachian ruler Neagoe Basarab “The Teachings to his son Theodosius” remains an essential landmark of medieval Romanian culture and spirituality. The writing synthesizes an original vision of Christian teaching with the great models of universal political thought, becoming a manual for future rulers. Its importance is reflected in its overwhelming influence on later Romanian culture, as well as in the timeliness of its perspective on leadership based on enduring values. This study highlights the author’s multiple sources of inspiration, harmoniously integrating biblical, patristic and philosophical traditions in a work that goes beyond medieval political treatises. From a theological perspective, the writing reflects a unified conception of divine revelation, promoting a mystical pedagogy that proposes a model of integral human formation. And the virtues and values enunciated have universal anthropological resonances. Thus, the integral message of N. Basarab’s work is not only a major expression of local political literature but also a permanent invitation to rediscover the Christian ethos that was the basis of European culture. And the recovery of this spiritual paradigm remains indispensable for overcoming the contemporary crisis.

### Keywords

Leadership, Spirituality, Culture, Values, Synthesis



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## Introduction

The literary work of the ruler Neagoe Basarab, founder of impressive monuments such as the Curtea de Argeş Monastery, remains today a representative expression of Romanian medieval spirituality and culture. The “Teachings to his son Theodosius”, written in Slavonic, are a genuine political and moral-religious treatise, dedicated to the training of the future ruler of the Walachia. Integrating biblical and patristic teachings with the great Byzantine and Western political theories in a profoundly original vision, the work is a remarkable synthesis of Christian-Orthodox thought on the art of government. From this perspective, it becomes a key element for understanding Romanian culture and spirituality in the Middle Ages.

The present study analyses the writing of Neagoe Basarab from several angles. Thus, the introductory part presents relevant data about the ruler-reader and his rich religious education, which formed him both in the country and in monasteries on Mount Athos. His enlightened spirit and vast erudition place him in the vanguard of the defenders of Byzantine spirituality in the context of the Ottoman threat. “The Teachings to his son Theodosius” are analysed in terms of content, structure and sources of inspiration. The work highlights, among other things, the topicality of Neagoe Basarab’s conception of the status and responsibilities of the political leader. The second part of the study proposes a spiritual reading perspective that transcends historical contextualization and reveals the universal resonances of the work. From this theological perspective, it reveals itself as a model of the dynamic embodiment of perennial biblical teaching.

In the conception of the ruler of the mountains, the political leader has essential ethical and spiritual duties, so that the prosperity or decline of the country depends directly on his moral orientation. For this reason, Neagoe constantly urged Theodosius to turn his eyes to God’s judgement and mercy. He advises his son to cultivate fundamental Christian virtues such as love, gentleness, patience, mercy, etc., the only way to fulfilment both personally and in the conduct of public affairs. The study concludes that the ruler’s advice is a genuine spiritualised “leadership manual” based on the values revealed in the Holy Scriptures. Thus, the “Teachings to his son Theodosius” remain over the centuries not only a representative work of ancient Romanian literature but also a practical guide of spiritual guidance towards true Christian wisdom.

### **Neagoe Basarab – an educated ruler, fascinated by the hysichia**

Neagoe Basarab, ruler of Wallachia in the first half of the 16th century, is a complex historical figure who is worth learning more about. He belonged to an important noble family from Craiova, the Craiovești family, who gave several kings to Wallachia. Also associated with this noble lineage is Basarab the Younger, Neagoe's elder brother, and his romantic relationship with Neaga. But beyond these family ties, Neagoe Basarab was distinguished by his education. As a young man, he attended schools in Wallachia and elsewhere, studied many languages and was initiated into the mysteries of monastic life on Mount Athos (Chirilă 2022-2023, 10). According to his testimony, his monastic experience in the Athonite monasteries left a deep mark on his personality. This period spent on the Holy Mountain allowed him to acquire a vast religious culture and imbibe the hysichian spirit characteristic of the Eastern monastic world. On his return from his pilgrimages, Neagoe Basarab proved to be a great supporter of the Church. Thus, he continued the tradition of the Craiovești family of financially supporting numerous monasteries in Wallachia and the territory of Athos. One of his most important foundations was the Bistrița Monastery in Oltenia, which he rebuilt and endowed with an impressive library and turned into an important cultural and religious centre of the time. This library today contains books, manuscripts and medieval documents of inestimable value, which provide essential information about the era of Neagoe Basarab.

The prince's links with the Serbian cultural world are also worthy of note. Thus, the Craiovești had close relations with the ruling families of Serbia and supported the Serbian Orthodox monasteries on Mount Athos. It is likely that Neagoe himself began his education in monastic schools in Wallachia and Serbia, and later completed it in his pilgrimages (Briciu 2013, 171-96). What is certain is that he had acquired an impressive culture for his time, mastering Slavonic, Greek, Turkish, Hungarian, Serbian and Latin. This multilateral training enabled him to occupy important positions in court at a young age. Thus, Neagoe Basarab goes down in history as a scholar of his time, with a choice of education in the most prestigious cultural and religious centres of south-eastern Europe. His enlightened spirit led him to support written culture and to leave behind invaluable sources for research into the past. In all this, he prefigures the model of a Renaissance ruler in a medieval world at the crossroads of civilisations.

The education offered by prominent personalities of the culture and spirituality of that time (Niphon, Maxim Brancovici, Macarius and others) marked Neagoe Basarab's entire subsequent activity. They introduced him to the mysteries of the sacred

texts as well as to Orthodox theological literature. Under their guidance, the young future ruler became familiar with the Holy Scriptures, the writings of the Holy Fathers, homilies and panegyrics of the great Christian authors. This solid education in the spirit of the Eastern tradition led Neagoe Basarab to become a great supporter of written religious culture (Minculete 2017, 59). Indeed, the hysichian education he received, his familiarity with the great works of Eastern thought and his efforts to promote Orthodox spirituality in the context of the Ottoman threat placed him in the vanguard of the defenders of Romanian cultural and religious identity.

### **“Teachings to Theodosius” – leadership manual**

*The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to his son Theodosius*, a literary work written in Slavonic (Cartoian 1980, 72), is considered the most important monument of medieval Romanian thought and feeling. It is linked to the ruler Neagoe Basarab, founder of the monastery of Curtea de Argeș and the Metropolis of Târgoviște. The ruler’s writings can be considered a veritable treatise on political theory and the pedagogy of power, intended for his son and heir Theodosius. Through the organic combination of religious and secular, moral and political-administrative dimensions, it becomes an essential reference for understanding medieval Romanian political thought. It is not by chance that the “Teachings to his son Theodosius” exerted an overwhelming influence on subsequent Romanian culture. Even in modern times, Neagoe Basarab’s advice retains its freshness and formative character, applying both to young people preparing to take the reins of political power and to any reader interested in Christian moral teaching. The monumental work of the ruler of the mountains therefore remains for centuries a model of wisdom and balance between matter and spirit, between the power of the world and the values of the Gospel.

Neagoe Basarab’s work dedicated to his son Theodosius is not entirely original but is part of a rich tradition of moral-political writings in medieval universal literature. Thus, the direct model that stood before him was that of the ‘Teachings’ of the Byzantine Emperor Basil I the Macedonian addressed to his son Leon in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. A similar source of inspiration was the advice of Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenites to his successor in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The 11<sup>th</sup>-century writings of the Kievan kingship of Vladimir Monomachus are also in the same literary family. All these works had a strong influence on the political thought of the European Middle Ages, so the “Teachings” of Neagoe Basarab are part of a much broader framework than the Romanian one.

In addition to the sources mentioned, in structuring his text the ruler of the mountains integrated numerous passages from the Holy Scriptures, especially from the historical books of the Old Testament. There are also insertions from Isis monastic literature (e.g. from St Simion the New Theologian), from writings such as “Varlaam și Ioasaf” or “The Physiologist,” very popular at the time. There are also references to Byzantine homiletic and parenetic literature, Neagoe Basarab proved to be a fine connoisseur of great Christian authors such as St John Chrysostom, St Dionysius the Areopagite, etc. (Bobâna 2020, 75).

On the religious teaching side, there are similarities with fundamental texts of Eastern spirituality, such as Philip the Monk’s “Dioptra” or the “Ladder” of St. John the Climacus (Piru 1961, 42). It is precisely this harmonious combination of biblical, patristic and philosophical sources that gives Neagoe Basarab’s writings a synthetic character, revealing the erudition of the ruler-scribe. The use of diverse cultural models, but converging in their Christian essence, makes his literary work go beyond a simple collection of political advice, acquiring a universal spiritual dimension.

From a structural point of view, the “Teachings to his son Theodosius” comprises two distinct parts: one with a religious-moral character and the other with political-administrative recommendations. The first is marked by a strong Orthodox-Christian spirituality, expressing the ruler’s conception of the meaning of life and the virtues necessary for both the ordinary man and the ruler. The second part contains practical advice on the art of leadership, the organisation of the army, judging subjects, maintaining internal order, etc.

Neagoe Basarab’s work dedicated to his heir to the throne expresses an integral conception of the dignity and responsibilities of the political leader. The advice of the ruler of the mountains is based both on Christian teaching revealed in the Holy Scriptures and the lives of the saints, and on the great texts of ancient and medieval wisdom on the art of government. Neagoe Basarab’s writing harmoniously combines love of God, love of nation and people, and respect for his subjects with an awareness of the formative role and personal example that the leader must set for those he leads. He points out to his son that, being in such a high position, his actions and behaviour will inevitably be imitated by others (*Neagoe Basarab’s Teachings* 1970, 259). The ruler therefore has a moral duty to guide his subjects by his way of life towards goodness, truth and virtue. Thus, the message of the “Teachings” reflects a profoundly humanist

political axiology, in line with the great thinkers who have meditated overtime on the relationship between power and morality.

Although originally dedicated to his son Theodosius, Neagoe Basarab's "Teachings" went beyond simple formative writing, becoming a real moral-political guide for all those called to rule Wallachia. Moreover, the wise advice of the ruler of the mountains has today universal resonance, proposing a type of spiritual leadership, based on perennial values. The roots of this alternative managerial perspective to contemporary secular paradigms can be found in the solid religious education received by Neagoe Basarab. His formation was built through meditation on the great Old Testament and New Testament biblical texts, on patristic and hagiographic writings (Mihăilă 1970, 81). That is why his system of political thought is imbued with love, wisdom and respect for true human dignity. Over time, his "Teachings to his son Theodosius" is not only a model of Christian leadership but also an invitation to rediscover modern European spirituality. They propose the revival of the ethos that was at the foundation of the great culture on which the whole construction of the West is based. And this reconnection to our common roots remains indispensable for overcoming the crisis of meaning-affecting the world today.

In Neagoe Basarab's conception, every political leader has fundamental moral and spiritual duties, the first of which is the worship of God. Thus, the ruler must direct his gaze towards divine mercy and justice (*Neagoe Basarab's Teachings* 1970, 125-8), striving to ensure that his actions as a ruler reflect, as far as possible, these supreme virtues. He has a responsibility to ensure the welfare, unity and lawful government of the whole people. To support this view of the leader's status, the author of the "Teachings" cites the example of the biblical kings of Israel. These "servants of the Lord" were meant to keep the Jewish nation in obedience to the will of the Most High, so that the entire history of the Jews was governed by their relationship with God. Neagoe Basarab shows how the prosperity or decline of the Old Testament depended directly on the piousness or impiousness of the kings towards revealed teaching. His message to his son and heir Theodosius is built on these coordinates, as the ruler of the mountains stresses the paramount importance of the spiritual and moral orientation of political leadership, which determines the rise or fall of the whole nation. From this perspective, his literary work remains surprisingly modern.

In the second part of the "Teachings", the ruler insists on the virtues that a good ruler must embody in his relationship with his subjects. Thus, the right attitudes towards

the ruled are kindness, respect, justice, empathy and trust. At the same time, the leader must not detach himself from the people but must be directly involved in their lives, while maintaining the dignity of his superior status. An essential aspect emphasised in Neagoe Basarab's work is the need to forgive and always give new chances to the wrong (*Neagoe Basarab's Teachings* 1970, 255). He also offers numerous tips on the proper way for the ruler to interact with subjects from all walks of life: “O my son and you, brothers, how good it is to always comfort your cowherds and your servants and to always take counsel with them [...]. You shall go with them into a place of silence and shall counsel all counsel, and which shall be better you shall receive into your hearts, and which shall not profit you shall leave. And thou shalt not hinder any man from speaking counsel saying: behold your words are of no use to us.” (*Neagoe Basarab's Teachings* 1970, 267).

Finally, the political leader must make decisions only after consultation with those closest to him, listening to all opinions and choosing with discernment the best solution for the common good. All these practical guidelines are based on the fundamental values that the leader must embody love, gentleness, patience, attentiveness and kindness. The ruler stresses that rewarding evil with evil only increases suffering in the world. On the contrary, anger and envy – as manifestations of selfishness – are serious moral weaknesses that gnaw at the soul of the leader and impair his capacity for clear judgment. This is why Neagoe urges his son to replace these passions with a “peaceful heart”, full of “pure love”, following the model of the Saviour Jesus Christ (*Neagoe Basarab's Teachings* 1970, 315).

Therefore, the work of the ruler of the mountains is an authentic Christian “manual of leadership”, setting out the virtues to be cultivated by those called to such a high position as political leader. And the enduring relevance of these wise counsels proves their profound anthropological resonance. His message thus proposes a return to the cultural and religious foundations on which European civilisation was built as the only way to overcome the contemporary crisis. The virtues, values and principles set out in his writing have a universal resonance and can be successfully transposed from the political sphere to that of human relationships of all times. For example, they can serve as a guideline for the education of the younger generation, whether in the family or at school, since they are aimed at building moral character and not just imparting technical knowledge. The wisdom of Neagoe's teachings therefore goes beyond the historical context in which they were written, providing an indispensable spiritual orientation for today's secularised world. And taking them on board allows us to regain the inner balance so necessary to face

the challenges that come our way. Finally, their application leads to a fulfilled life, crowned with eternal happiness.

### **The dynamics of the eternal Word reflected in the writings/guides of His incarnation**

We examined Neagoe Basarab’s treatise in its main editions and looked at it as a manual, a guide like those written by Erasmus of Rotterdam, Machiavelli, Basil I the Macedonian or Constantine Porphyrogenites. Because of its pedagogical content in matters of faith as well as politics, administration, diplomacy and war, we can consider this work an effective guide to the incarnation of the divine Word.

I believe that for the interpretation and analysis of the “Teachings of Neagoe Basarab” a reading paradigm is necessary that aims to identify the spiritual, spiritual meaning of the word of revelation (St Maximus the Confessor 2017, 63). This idea came to me from Constantin Noica and his lectures on the Romanian soul (Noica 1991, 12-8). Noica speaks of Neagoe’s work without using the term “hysichia”, although he links him to the Ecumenical Patriarch and Nicodemus, representatives of this spiritual direction. However, the philosopher uses the concepts of ‘contemplation’ and ‘interiorisation’ specific to the hysiasmatic movement. In the treatise, we constantly find the exhortation to unceasing prayer, which is also specific to hysiasm. Noica considers that here we have a succinct exposition of the steps that lead Theodosius to contemplation, which he calls “steps of perfection” (Noica 1991, 15). Starting from this interpretation, the academician Alexandru Surdu speaks of a “lay hysiasm” (Surdu 2010, 79), also present in the philocalic spirituality intended not only for monks but also for lay people. Given all this, it is not surprising that Noica calls Neagoe’s work “the first great book of Romanian culture” (Noica 1991, 14). To understand its importance, we can also refer to Dan Zamfirescu’s analyses or to Edgar Papu’s comparative perspective, which highlights the proto-chronic values of the writing (Papu 1977, 20).

My intention is not to respond to the typologies of approach or analytical conclusions referred to. The aim is quite different. I would recommend looking at the parallel column in the edition of Neagoe Basarab’s works, where the scriptural references are given. These show us the equation of the construction of the text, which transcends excessive historical immanentization and introduces the reader to a zone of transcendence. As such, we have an Old Testament text placed in relation and unity of witness with a New Testament text, in line with the type-antitype relationship that



characterizes the two Testaments of fulfilment and perfection (cf. Mt 5:17). Here I wish to emphasize only one aspect: Neagoe Basarab treats Scripture as a unit of witness, beyond the historical morphology of the texts. Although he was writing at a time when the New Testament had not yet been translated into Romanian, he starts from the Slavonic and Greek sources to capture the dynamic dimension of the revealed Word. Analysis of his works therefore requires identifying this unified perspective on Holy Scripture, which transcends the historical letter and values the spiritual meaning of divine revelation.

When I relate to the word of Scripture, I explore two distinct levels: a stasis or *historical status* and a *dynamis status* of the word, i.e. its pneumatic content. I have chosen as my point of reference, the writings of St Athanasius, the text that proclaims that “there is spirit and life” (St. Athanasius the Great 1987, 87-156), because it is the Spirit that gives life. Expanding the horizon of interpretation, we can turn to the contribution of Rev. John Breck in his work entitled “Holy Scripture in the Tradition of the Church”. He points out that, according to hermeneutical principles, the main interpreter is the Holy Spirit (Breck 2003, 70). We thus see that the acquisition of the Spirit is essential to achieve a deep understanding. At the same time, the hysias-tical practice of prayer opens the way to an area of communication and illumination, brought by the Spirit, necessary for understanding this pedagogical content. A point of interest, which I do not develop in detail at present, is recorded in Rev. Stăniloai’s third *Philokalia*, in which reference is made to the texts of St Maximus the Confessor. He speaks of the divine reason for every existence and explains that in natural contemplation, through the union of man with God, man has access to all the spiritual senses of divine reason, freeing himself from limiting constraints and entering the transcendent dimension of the mind which he calls *nous*. Thus, in this manual addressed to Theodosius for becoming a good leader, we find a mirror of knowledge. It gives us an insight into how a man can make this transition to transcendence and enter the dynamism of the divine infinite, experiencing rest in motion, a *shabatization*. This complex concept reveals an interesting aspect of the teachings conveyed in the guide-book intended to guide one towards harmonious co-working with spiritual principles and divine wisdom.

The second aspect that I would like to emphasize is related to the hysias-tic pedagogy present in the work of Neagoe Basarab. As Constantin Noica also notes in his analysis, in the “Teachings to his son Theodosius” there are references to the

steps of unceasing silence and the liberation from thoughts, which are specific to the hysastic spirituality. The universal openness of this religious pedagogy, which the Wallachian ruler applied not only to his son Theodosius but also to his descendants on the throne and the whole of his flock, is thus evident. An eloquent example of this is the sequence of the worship of icons. It refers directly to the iconoclastic struggle and the defenders of the cult of holy images such as St Theodore the Studite or the decisions of the Seventh Ecumenical Council. Thus, Neagoe Basarab remains anchored in the formula of dogmas established by the universal Church. Now, as the Church Fathers say, dogmas are formulas that lead you to the incarnation and living of revealed truth, to a real experience of God. Therefore, the hysastic pedagogy promoted by the ruler has a universal openness, leading to the experience of life in Christ based on Orthodox teaching (Noica 1991, 15). It proposes a path of deification open to all, regardless of social status.

Constantin Noica points out in his analysis that Neagoe Basarab praises the mind. This is important because in the patristic vision, the mind plays an essential role. From an anthropological point of view, it represents our opening towards the transcendent, towards communion with the divine infinite. This is why in Eastern spirituality we often encounter the theme of “emptying the mind”, as in Evagrius, St Ephrem the Syrian, St Isaac the Syrian etc., to reach the “mind of Christ”, as St Paul says. Neagoe Basarab’s praise of the mind is relevant and consistent with the perspective of the patristic tradition. He considers that, although it has certain limitations, the word of Scripture represents an opening of us towards transcendence, towards the unknowable God. This idea is also found in the *Philokalia*, where we are told about the relationship between mind, contemplation and divine reason. The noetic exercise leads to overcoming the individual condition and to union with the Absolute. Neagoe Basarab emphasizes the ordering power of the mind, which is also highlighted in patristic writings. He sets out various models, both positive and negative, showing the importance of humbly taking on the trials of life (Noica 1991, 16).

Examining the content, we discover two distinct aspects of believing and living in God. The first is the theoretical aspect, which highlights the importance of faith and the need to integrate this dimension into the social plane through concrete actions. These actions are designed to overcome conflicts and establish an atmosphere of peace. Looking for biblical sources that support these concepts, we can see that literature of this kind is rooted in Scripture. The Book of Wisdom or the Parables of Solomon provides a model for this, and an analysis of its conclusion reveals principles applicable to

social life. The *Wisdoms of Ben Sirah* also provides relevant lessons, particularly in its last part, from chapter 46 onwards. Extending the analysis to an international level, we can make a comparison with the works of Baltazar Gracian, such as “*The Books of the Perfect Man*” (Gracian 1994). Through this perspective, the literature revealed supports a profound reality: standing in faith and living according to divine principles leads to constructive actions and the establishment of peace in the social sphere. Finally, it can be stressed that this literature conveys an essential truth, also highlighted by a prayer sequence attributed to Calistus the Patriarch. It expresses man’s humility before the wisdom and power of God, recognizing the limitations of the human mind in comparison with the immensity of the Divine Being. At the same time, the prayer highlights the desire to attain the glory and goodness of God, emphasizing the deep connection between faith and the aspiration to divinity: “O most holy hypostatic Word and wisdom and power of God, how shall I praise you Lord, whose Being, and glory is unapproachable? How shall I extol Thy unbounded goodness, I who am human and bear a narrow mind? But I will praise, I will extol what I can reach. Thus, will I come from every side to the sense of Thy glory and goodness, and my soul shall cleave with all power to Thee.” (Calistus Patriarch 1979, 352).

I stop here and want to point out that I have analysed the word of Scripture from the perspective of the *status dynamis* level, focusing on its pneumatic content. In this context, I invoke a reading of the “*Teachings of Neagoe Basarab*”, looking at this theme from a spiritual perspective. This approach reveals that the king himself, known for his authoritarian manifestations, can be perceived, in a bold interpretation, as an Ebed Yahweh within historical existence – a servant of God. This perspective becomes evident in the context in which Neagoe Basarab, faced with his health problems, draws Theodosius’ attention to this dimension. Thus, analysis of the “*Teachings*” from this perspective reveals a spiritual depth and a profound connection to key aspects of the biblical tradition.

### Conclusions

Neagoe Basarab’s work remains an essential expression of Romanian Orthodox spirituality, synthesizing an original vision of Christian teaching with the great models of universal political thought. “*The Teachings to his son Theodosius*” is thus not only an authentic manual for future leaders but also a spiritual guide with universal resonances.

The importance of the writing is reflected both at the national level, through the overwhelming influence exerted on the subsequent Romanian culture, and at the European level, the work being part of the great medieval political-moral treatises. Its remarkable topicality lies in its conception of leadership based on fundamental Christian values, which can represent an alternative to contemporary managerial paradigms.

The present research highlights the multiple sources of inspiration of Neagoe Basarab, from the model of Byzantine imperial teachings to the spirituality of the Philokalia, harmoniously integrating biblical, patristic and philosophical traditions. It is precisely this creative synthesis of the religious and political dimensions that ensures the originality of the work in the context of its era.

From a theological perspective, the writing reflects the ruler's unified conception of divine revelation, going beyond the historical letter of the text to its eternally valid spiritual meaning. The hysiotic pedagogy promoted thus becomes a model of integral human formation, open to all. The virtues and values set forth acquire universal anthropological resonances, constituting a moral guideline valid in any context. Thus, the integral message of Neagoe Basarab's work is not only a major expression of Romanian political literature but also a permanent invitation to rediscover the Christian ethos that was at the foundations of European culture. And the recovery of this spiritual paradigm remains indispensable for overcoming the contemporary crisis.

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