

## “THE TEACHINGS OF NEAGOE BASARAB TO HIS SON THEODOSIUS” – A HISTORIOGRAPHIC RETROSPECTIVE

### Abstract

On the commemoration of five centuries after the death of Romanian Ruling Prince Neagoe Basarab (1512-1521), one of the most important representatives of cultural resistance on Romanian territory in the Middle Ages, the author of the present paper shines a light on the history, context and influences of his masterpiece, *The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Theodosius*. Thus, the paper highlights Neagoe Basarab’s prophetic side, how his writings bring education to his people or the influences of authors like Basil I the Macedonian or Constantine Porphyrogenites on his style and ideas. At the same time, due attention is given to the influence of his work of patristic voices such as St John Chrysostom, Dionysius the Areopagite, John Climacus or mystical authors such as *Varlaam și Iosafat*, to his way of thinking, and the metamorphosis of his ideas. Furthermore, potential influences such as the one of Machiavelli and his chief work, *The Prince*, are also brought to attention in the paper, emphasising that there are voices that persist in the claim that the Italian author may have influenced Neagoe Basarab’s activity. The paper concludes, among other things, that, through his work, Neagoe Basarab managed to pave the way for Humanist culture on Romanian territory.



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## Introduction

The present work initially set out to conduct a historiographic evaluation of the reception of *The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to his son Theodosius*, a work viewed by the author of the paper as fundamental to Slavic-language Romanian culture in the Middle Ages. Unfortunately, the pandemic precluded access to all the sources and editions related to the topic of the present research. As for the communist era, it is fitting to mention here that the work in question was obscured during that period, so a search into the catalogues of the major libraries, commentaries and analyses included, will reveal a mere 15 titles dedicated to that topic throughout the entire last century (Plămădeală 1969, 215-62; Bocancea 1998/1999, 146-9; Cădă 2012; Fîru, 28-36; Florea 2012; Grecu 2007; Grecu 1939; Grecu 1941; *Învățăături ale lui Neagoe Basarab*, 2003; Gabriela 2020; Popa 2010, 65-70; Tofan 2003, 35-9; Toma 1943; Turtoi 1976, 29-32; Zamfirescu 1973). A quantitative assessment of the text thus suggests that it was quite poorly received and insufficiently known. Unfortunately, however, due to the impossibility of accessing all the sources, such an assessment is not entirely possible at the moment either. Nevertheless, the information that was accessible allows for the deduction that the work has been insufficiently capitalised on by historiographic research so far and that the editions dedicated to it are quantitatively deficient.

Thus, the 2020 edition of *The Teachings*, published by the Romanian Academy, constitutes a noteworthy editorial event, as it reproduces in part the edition published by Roza Vânturilor publishing house in 1994, which is a well-executed text. Sadly, however, one cannot help but note its high price, which renders it inaccessible to the public and is bound to prevent it from becoming a part of most readers' libraries. The present author therefore holds that a pocket edition would have been much more appropriate, even without the introductory study, as such an edition would certainly have contributed not only to putting Neagoe Basarab back into circulation among the reading public, but also to stimulating and, at the same time, inciting the masses to critically analyse him and his ideas.

Given that a historiographic evaluation is not possible in the current context, and, besides, for the above-mentioned reasons, such an approach would not reveal much to the reader, being rather a disappointing undertaking, the author would like to highlight a few aspects regarding the context in which the work in question was elaborated, while also discussing its sources of inspiration and other elements.

### **The Context Surrounding the Appearance of *The Teachings***

*The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Theodosius*, as already shown, constitutes a representative work of Slavic language (Neagoe 1971, 53) Romanian culture, whose influence extends upon the European Middle Ages and beyond. It was written in the above-mentioned language, and it generated controversy as to its paternity and authenticity, as works of its sort were already present in the cultural environment of the time, it was translated into Greek fairly shortly after its appearance, in 1645, by Manuel of Corinth, which says a lot about its reception and the interest it aroused in the cultural sphere of the era, while also indicating the excellent quality of relations with the Greeks, who drew benefits from the Wallachian and Moldavian rulers. Thus, the latter provided support to places of relevance to Eastern spirituality, such as Holy Mount Athos or the Holy Land, while some of them, such as Petru Rareș, even fancied themselves as liberators of Constantinople, at times taking concrete action in pursuit of that goal. Economic interests, alongside spiritual matters, played a part when it came to the initiative to translate this book into a language of wide circulation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which often rivalled Latin and enjoyed a wide cultural scope.

Whilst, indeed, the Romanian translation appeared somewhat later, the context and development of the language must also be taken into consideration. A small historiographic assessment in terms of quantity reveals that, up to the present, the Romanian Academy Library has preserved seven manuscripts containing translations of the text. All of them date back to the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, which shows that it was nevertheless met with interest and was welcomed in that era, as it was used in both royal courts and the boyar households and constituted a topmost source in the educational process, due to its rich didactic qualities.

As for the context it was written in, it is worth mentioning that the end of the era of Stephen the Great brought about the onset of a new era in the Romanian Countries, one defined not by the fight for continuance, as had been the case before, not by wars intended to ensure the preservation, or, whenever necessary, to impose the independence of these countries, but by a form of resistance through culture and spirituality. One ought not to forget that Neagoe Basarab is the founder of Curtea de Argeș Monastery (Andronescu 2002; Băbeanu 1942; Bădescu 1915) and is one of the many rulers who were part of that resistance up until the onset of the Phanariot reign. During that era, the status of Christian became a form of identity and would, at the same time, become a component of Romanian specificity in the Middle Ages. Rulers themselves would come

to see themselves as small Maecenas, especially when receiving the visit of a Patriarch, who would request their help. Therefore, they would try to become educated and rise to the standards of their time, which is why certain culturally resonant ideas would make their way here as well. It is difficult to say to what extent Neagoe Basarab had access to Erasmus of Rotterdam, but one may assume that the ideas found in works known in the era, such as Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, were not entirely unfamiliar to him (Giulea 2021, 33). Furthermore, he is certain to have had access to certain writings from the East as well, which may well have influenced the above-mentioned Italian writer, too, and which most likely served to inspire the Wallachian prince. Texts such as *The Teachings of Basil the Macedonian to His Son Leo*, dating from the 9<sup>th</sup> century, or *The Teachings of Constantine Porphyrogenitus to His Son* (Porphyrogenites 1971), dated to a century later, which, some historians have even stated at one point, was the main source of inspiration for the Wallachian ruler, who allegedly even plagiarised it, can certainly be listed among the sources in this category. Even the historiographic discourse of the communist era, which was not eminently proto-chronic, proffered the notion that the text in question was a pastiche of the Eastern Roman emperor’s text. However, the author finds this unlikely in a society whose plagiarism standards differed from today, but which was rather a space where ideas circulated and their paternity was less strictly guarded, the priority being a shared interest in promoting fundamental values.

As for sources of inspiration, one is compelled to point out that the most important references employed in the Wallachian ruler’s work are the Holy Scriptures. As expected, he uses them assiduously, intensely quoting passages from books of the Old and New Testaments, some of historical relevance, others of theological, literary or poetic value, and providing either comparisons or arguments in support of certain ideas. Neagoe Basarab thus aimed, on the one hand, to mark himself as a Christian prince, who embraced that role in a society where Ottoman influence was on the rise, and, on the other hand, to emphasise the fact that such a quality served as an identity at the time, while also being of primordial relevance for his reign, the context he was in, and the message he sought to convey.

Furthermore, works such as *Alexandria, Barlaam and Josaphat* (*Vieața sfinților* 1904; Mazilu 1981), the patristic works of St. John Chrysostom and of St. Dionysius the Areopagite, Philippus Solitarius’s *Dioptra*, and *The Ladder* by St. John Climacus are extensively quoted reference works, Neagoe Basarab often specifying the origin of the ideas, since the above-mentioned authors were counted among the foremost names of

the culture, theology and spirituality of the time and the prince is a Christian, whose message does nothing but interpret the sacred text practically and testify to how the teachings of Christ the Saviour can be applied in political life. Up until the emergence of civil law, the very laws of the country would be based on religion and Christian rules (*pravilo*) would go hand in hand with civil law.

Nevertheless, beyond all these potential, claimed, or real influences, it is certain that *The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Theodosius* constitute a veritable synthesis of Romanian ethical and political thinking and foreshadow topics that would later be tackled by the humanists of the region. Through this work, humanism, which would come with an important set of values, would gradually make its way into the Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic area, as the book anticipates themes that would be intensely discussed in subsequent works and featured redundantly therein, as well as topics that would be further developed within them. This book enabled the ruler to educate his son, by passing onto him a series of potentially useful principles to apply during his reign, to impose certain principles of social ethics and, at the same time, to educate his boyars, elevating society and raising social awareness.

Written in a language that pays tribute to the customs of the time, the work, however, avoids becoming overwhelmingly entrapped by philosophy, although one may note influences of this field in the author’s life and thinking.

### Concluding Remarks

As the present study has striven to show, *The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Theodosius* make for a complex work, representative of Romanian historiography, philology and theology alike, with multiple and pioneering facets. Beyond its sociocultural relevance – as it was originally conceived as a text intended to educate the son who would succeed him to the throne, as well as the boyars and the people, while also emphasising the relevance of certain sociocultural principles – the work, influenced, as shown, by the Holy Scriptures, patristic authors, hesychastic texts, as well as by later Byzantine and Slavic chronicles – which partly explains why it would enjoy such a widespread reception in different cultural contexts and be translated into Greek – provides an ethical and political view which, albeit original, does not step outside the boundaries of religious medieval thinking. At the same time, through this book, the author manages to pave the way for the ingress of humanism into Romanian culture (Duțu 1974, 17). Unfortunately, as this paper has attempted to show, to this day,

this work has not yet been sufficiently capitalised on, nor has it received its due attention from critics and historiographers. Furthermore, its analyses have often included aspects which were either unverified or taken out of context, which caused the Wallachian ruler to be pursued by the accusation of plagiarism or lack of originality so that his work ended up either shoved to the outskirts of history or ranked among worthless compilations.

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