

MONARCHY BY DIVINE RIGHT AS PER THE BOOKS OF KINGS IN “THE TEACHINGS OF NEAGOE BASARAB TO HIS SON THEODOSIUS”

Abstract

The present study aims to address the issue of monarchy by divine right in *The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Theodosius*, which, due to its defining role in the most important work of the Romanian Middle Ages, allows one to observe how Saint Neagoe Basarab bases his teachings on references to the Holy Scriptures and to the Old Testament in particular. Furthermore, the chosen topic allows one to also understand the specific pillars of SlavicByzantine Eastern theological culture which Neagoe Basarab highlights authentically and originally in his remarkable work.



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Introduction

Neagoe Basarab's personality is certainly a surprising one for the culture of the Romanian territories in those days of old in the context of its natural evolution and development throughout the Middle Ages. This was the very reason why, during the last century, preeminent personalities of the Romanian academic world engaged in a heated debate as to the originality of *The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Theodosie*, which they either vehemently challenged (D. Russo 1907, Russo 1910, Panaitescu 1946, Panaitescu 1963, 403-424) or fiercely defended (Mihăilă 1971, Zamfirescu 1973). Once the stage of disputations was overcome, the debate regarding Neagoe Basarab's work occasionally acquired 'proto-chronistic' notes amplified by older and newer researchers' excessive concern with highlighting the humanist-Renaissance facets of *The Teachings*

of Neagoe Basarab (Ivașcu, 1969, Zamfirescu 2012, 241-281). One sought thus to give Neagoe Basarab's personality a 'European dimension' by placing it in exclusive connection with Western cultural standards. This perspective, which appeared to become generalised among people of culture in the latter part of the last century, would be countered by Metropolitan Antonie Plămădeală, who, despite his characteristic discretion as a man of culture of that time, did not however refrain from asserting with all firmness that, if one must speak of Neagoe Basarab's humanism, then it can only be defined as a 'Christian Orthodox humanism' (Plămădeală 1981, 33). Therefore, the present author can but agree with those who hold that the European dimension of Neagoe Basarab's personality must first and foremost be understood and then cultivated about the frameworks provided by the Eastern Orthodox culture, which the wise Romanian ruler successfully represents and pays homage to using a remarkable work for the beginning of the 16th century. Consequently, the present study aims to valorise *The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Theodosius* based on their natural coordinates, which are specific to the Eastern way of thinking. Moreover, the present author holds that this is the only approach that allows one to tackle a cardinal theme of *The Teachings*, namely that of the monarchy by divine right, which provides a broad perspective when it comes to understanding and exploring in depth the theological nature of Neagoe Basarab's work.

Saint Neagoe Basarab's theological culture

Saint Neagoe Basarab's theological culture is *fundamentally biblical*, the Holy Scriptures being the main source for his *Teachings to His Son Theodosius*, in which he proves an extraordinary familiarity with the biblical text proper, which he interprets in the authentic spirit of Eastern Orthodox Church tradition.

The environment in which he acquired this theological culture was initially the family of the Craiovescu boyars, who provided Neagoe with a princely education typical for their time. Neagoe Basarab was born in 1481 or 1482, as the son of Basarab the Younger, also called Țepeluș (1477-1482). However, after the murder of his father following a boyars' plot, Neagoe was raised within the family of Pârveu Craiovescu, who married his mother, Neaga. According to some sources from the era, such as *The Life of Patriarch Nephon* or *The Cantacuzino Chronicles*, paternity is directly attributed to Pârveu Craiovescu (Giurăscu 1979, 227). Be that as it may, the fact is that Neagoe Basarab was considered by the Craiovescu boyars a potential claimant to the Wallachian throne,

which is why he received an exquisite education. From a spiritual point of view, that education would be consolidated at Bistrița Monastery, founded by the Craiovescu boyars, where he had the benefit of an excellent scholarly environment, as proven by the numerous manuscripts and printed books that were discovered much later in the Bistrița Monastery library (Mihăilă 1971, 68-75). Furthermore, his connections with Patriarch Nephon, with Metropolitans Maksim Branković and Macarie, the former printer, with Gabriel, the Protos of Mount Athos (Mihăilă 1971, 80-83) or with Manuel of Corinth (Tanașoca 2012, 364-70) raised the bar of this theological culture to the highest level of the era. Gabriel the Protos' *Life of Saint Nephon* tells us that 'Blessed Nephon empowered him with his teachings so that he might grow and rise in all good works and arise in good fortune and be pleasing to God and to men, all of which later came to pass, aided by the prayers of His Holiness' (*Literatura română veche* 1969, 76-7). The deep culture that Neagoe Basarab exhibits is best reflected, however, by the rich theological literature specific to the Orthodox world that underlies his *Teachings to His Son Theodosie*. Among them there are the Homilies of Saint John Chrysostom, the teachings of Saint Ephrem the Syrian, Saint John's *The Ladder*, Simeon the Monk's *Humility*, Philip the Hermit's *Dioptra*, or the panegyric on Saint Constantine written by Patriarch Euthymius of Tŭrnovo, or folk books such as *Barlaam and Josaphat*, *Melissa*, *Bestiarii* or *Alexandria*, which are used, ingeniously enough, on a wide scale, indicating that the Romanian ruler was well acquainted with them (Mihăilă 1971, 80-1; Zamfirescu 1973, 220-348; Șerbănescu, 288).

The Holy Scriptures in *The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Theodosie*

The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab are the expression of a peak registered by Romanian culture at the beginning of the 16th century and were meant to summarise an entire previous era, which started in the second half of the 15th century and consolidated the old 'civilization of the Liturgy' by affirming within it the word of the Scriptures as rendered through the Slavonic alphabet.

Saint Neagoe Basarab expresses himself in a very convincing manner: 'The teachings of God [...] we hear from the Holy Scriptures' (*The Teachings...*, p. 138, 1971 edition). The Holy Scriptures are the living expression of the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the life-giving word, which Neagoe Basarab uses not only to confess their teachings but mainly to induce others to enter this live dialogue with God by internalising the words of the Scriptures under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In the

spirit of Church Tradition, through the Scriptures, the faithful and righteous are called upon to know the truth, but, most especially, to live by it. In that same spirit, Neagoe Basarab shares with his son Theodosius his advice, supported by numerous references to the books of the Holy Scriptures. Naturally, since it is a book of ‘teachings’ addressed to a future ruler, most of the references are to the books of Kings. Unsurprisingly, these are followed by references to the Book of Psalms, an expression of God’s manifold wisdom, which Neagoe Basarab uses, in the authentic spirit of Eastern tradition, for the spiritual development of his son. Furthermore, his arguments rely on a wide range of Old Testament biblical texts of a historical-theological nature from the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, or Deuteronomy), the Book of Judges or Judith, as well as from prophetic books, such as Isaiah, Joel, Zechariah, or Baruch, and, of course, from the didactic ones, which are particularly useful for his endeavour, such as the Proverbs of Solomon, Job, The Wisdom of Solomon, the Wisdom of Jesus Sirach, or the Book of Tobit.

Neagoe Basarab’s view of the Holy Scriptures is a unitary one, which is why his references to the New Testament are as numerous as the Old Testament ones, occurring regularly following the systematic exposition of ideas. Thus, in addition to the numerous references he makes to the text of the four Gospels, Neagoe Basarab also refers to the Acts of the Apostles, the Pauline epistles (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians) or the catholic epistles (James, 1 Peter). Naturally, wherever the issues tackled by his teachings are of a distinct political, military, diplomatic or protocol-related nature, his invocations of the biblical text are limited. Furthermore, except those extensive excerpts from the books of Kings or the Gospels, references to the biblical text are much more numerous in those sections which are particularly theological and many of said references come via the passages borrowed from patristic literature.

Monarchy by divine right as per the books of Kings in *The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Theodosius*

In the view of the Old Testament, the king rules as an earthly representative of God, his kingship being a mere reflection of the reign of the Heavenly King (Ex 15:18; Num 23:21; Jg 8:23; 1Kg 8:7; 10:19; 12:12). God is and has been king through His representative, who is to fulfil His will, ensuring justice and order, and the obligations established by the covenant with His people, in general. By his quality of son of God

bestowed upon him by the Heavenly Father (Ps 2:7), the king rules in the name of God to secure this filiation which supports his authority and, to a large extent, the dynastic nature of Israelite kingship (2Kgs 7:14-16). The king's sacredness, however, stems from the unction that accompanies his enthronement, which reflects the fact that he was divinely chosen and fulfils the will of God (1Sam 24:6,10; 26:9,11,16,23; 2Sam 1:14-16; 19:21-22; 1Kgs 21:10,13)

Theme-specific typology; Byzantine background

In general, for the Middle Ages, the return to the Old Testament comes naturally when the chosen theme is monarchy, which is explored within the framework of a vast biblical heritage. 'The Old Testament appears to be more in tune with the state of society and the mentalities of the time than the New' (Vauchez 1994, 9).

However, how Neagoe Basarab approaches the issue of monarchy by divine right is typically Eastern. There are two ways in which Byzantine authors related to the models of the Old Testament: *exemplum* and *typos*. *Exemplum* encourages one's efforts to conform to a model, while *typos* postulates that someone extends an established pattern up to the present. Historians favoured the *exemplum* mode, while theologians preferred the *typos*. The choice depended on the writer's education, chosen literary genre or preferred perspective, yet the two modes could also be used simultaneously. However, both groups shared the view that the Old Testament was the root, the baseline and the standard by which the present was measured. After the Constantinian era, considered a model era par excellence and consecrated from the late 4th century onwards by Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Life of Saint Constantine*, the choice of biblical models could be determined by the political context, which could have been positive as well as negative (Rapp 2010, 175-97).

What is interesting is the perspective provided by the biblical models based on which an earthly ruler can arise in the timeless realm of typological identity, one who can claim to be like David, a Christ-like figure, or at least equal to the apostles, like Constantine, just as he can be relegated to the status of failed Old Testament leader. In general, Byzantine emperors were recognized and labelled as genuine rulers through their relation to an Old Testament model which played the same normative role in the political sphere that the New Testament played in the moral sphere (Dagron 2003, 50). The tendency to apply biblical leadership models in Byzantium came from the Church, which was interested in maintaining a framework based on the Christian teachings

of the imperial power (Rapp 2010, 197). Neogoe Basarab fully identifies with this Byzantine perspective – as understood by the Slavic world – of the issue of monarchy by divine right.

The manner of presentation; the structure of the text

Neogoe Basarab’s concept of monarchy by divine right is encountered throughout *The Teachings*, but it is mainly reflected in the first section of the initial part of the book, which G. Mihăilă considers to be a true ‘theology to be used by heads of state’ (Mihăilă 1971, 29) and which lays down the fundamental principles that must lie at the foundation of leading a state.

Thus, the first section opens with an ample discourse of praise to the Heavenly Father, the Creator and Preserver of the World, in Whom resides the ‘royal power’ that is given to His chosen ones, followed, in the second section, by an exposition dedicated to man and his importance in the context of the order of creation and of the divine plan for the salvation of the world. Both sections are intended to theologially substantiate the ruler’s relationship with God and with man, and, of course, the obligations that derive thereof as to the people over whom the ruler has been placed (anointed) to rule justly and humanely (mercifully), according to the Christian teachings.

The third section of the initial part continues with an extensive anthology of biblical readings of a moral-pedagogical nature extracted from the Old and New Testaments, the *Life of Saint Constantine*, the homilies of Saint John Chrysostom or the folk novel *Barlaam and Josaphat*. This anthology, considered to be ‘unique in its way in European paraenetic literature’ (Mihăilă 1971, 30) sets out from the very beginning to highlight its main aim, which is that of affirming the role that history can play in shaping and moulding the character of future leaders: ‘Thus, mark and understand their lives and you shall be wise if you take careful heed [...] And keep away from evil, every one of you, and never cease to strive to do good things well. Therefore, pay heed and see and learn how the beginning of their reign was and how their reign went and how their end was, too’ (Mihăilă 1971, 30).

In what follows, the present paper will dwell only on the extensive Old Testament biblical excerpts that the author resorts to.

The structure of the anthology of Old Testament biblical readings is as follows:

Reading about the sons of Eli

Biblical reading about King Saul

Reading about the history of David

Reading about King Solomon

Reading about King Rehoboam

Reading about King Ahab

Reading about King Hezekiah

The story of the deeds of Emperor Constantine the Great

The biblical episode dedicated to Absalom's rebellion.

The reading on the sons of Eli (1Sam 2-4) starts by pronouncing the following sentence: 'For your foolishness and your unwisdom, know that it shall be taken from you and given to another, who will fulfil the will and commandments of God' (*The Teachings* 138). It is largely under the auspices of this sentence that the examples of rulers in the Books of Kings are presented. The sons of Eli are a negative example in comparison to Eli, their father, or with Samuel the prophet, and other biblical leaders (Gideon, David) who uphold the Law and fulfil the commandments of God, which is why the Lord has 'multiplied the days of their reign', unlike the foolish ones (Solomon, Rehoboam, and Absalom), who 'shortened their lives and their kingdoms perished'. The death of the sons of Eli brings to attention the original sentence once more: 'You see, my beloved son, that not even parents can be of aid...' (p. 141), the negative example of Hophni and Phinehas being followed by those of the sons of Samuel as well (1Sam 7:19).

The biblical reading on King Saul focuses on his being chosen king, which is conditioned by his obedience to divine will, the biblical text serving to reiterate his capacity as God's anointed: 'God has sent me to anoint you king over the Israelites, so now listen to the voice of the Lord: God has anointed you king over his people of Israel and you shall be great among the Lord's men and you shall save them from the hands of their enemies' (1Sam 10:1). Failure to uphold the commandments leads to God 'seeking another king' (*The Teachings* 143). Saul's rising from among the poor is another reason for his fall due to his reckless management of his royal status (*The Teachings* 143). The conclusion that emerges is that one should 'give thanks to God for all that He has given us and to reign with Him and so live' (*The Teachings* 146).

The reading on David's history opens with a very harsh sentence uttered upon him, because, albeit pure in heart when he was summoned by the Lord (*The Teachings* 146), he falls into the sin of fornication and is rebuked by the prophet Nathan. Neagoie Basarab concludes that even the righteous can fall, yet the fear of God helps them repent. David is given once more as an example of repentance when he decides to choose

from among God's three punishments the one through which he takes it upon himself to suffer for the sin committed regarding the census of the people.

The reading on King Solomon initially presents the great king and prophet as a positive example who, instead of wealth and glory, asks God for wisdom, which automatically invites the following sentence: 'Do you see, my son, that God multiplies the days of him who acts according to His will and commandments? But those of him who do not uphold His Law and commandments He lessens and shortens' (*The Teachings* 150). Solomon is a model of a godly king upon whom divine grace is spilt, his prayer at the dedication of the Temple being proof thereof. However, the sins he committed towards the end of his life would impact his descendants; the sons of David, having failed to uphold the Law, would lose the kingdom, a loss illustrated by Jeroboam's rebellion. This leads to the following conclusion: 'let no one deceive himself and hold himself great, a king though he may be, or a ruler [...] for all these are given by God, and God can take them away' (*The Teachings* 155).

The reading on King Rehoboam. Rehoboam is given as a negative example, as he did not heed the counsel of the old and wise, but followed the counsel of the young, the lack of temperance exhibited by the Israelite king led to the division of the kingdom. This biblical episode is used by Neagoe Basarab to cultivate the wisdom and love that his son needs to show to his subjects in an authentic evangelical spirit, according to the example set by Christ: 'And, when passing judgment, pay heed to those counsellors that are good and to those testimonies that are true and faithful. And love all young men as your own and use your words to teach and delight them! Love the old and the young alike, the great and the small, for the love of Christ' (*The Teachings* 158).

The reading on King Ahab. The reference to King Ahab calls attention to the danger of abusing power, which led to the condemnation of both the king and his wife, Jezebel. However, Neagoe Basarab notes Ahab's repentance, although it ultimately fails to exonerate him from his sins, so that both he and his last descendant, Jehoram, end up killed. Jehu, the man who kills Jehoram, also fails to uphold 'the name of God and honour Him and fulfil His will' (*The Teachings* 164).

The reading on King Hezekiah. Hezekiah is characterised as a just and good king, who walked the path of the Lord, as had David, his forefather (*The Teachings* 164). The sieging of Jerusalem by the Assyrian king Sennacherib is an occasion for Neagoe Basarab to highlight steadfast faith and the power of prayer. Since God hears the prayers of those who fear Him (Ps 144:19-20), Hezekiah is delivered. The example of Hezekiah

is employed to illustrate the fact that God can save one from the most arduous situations (for Neagoe Basarab, the Turkish danger was omnipresent). Hezekiah's humility aids him to gain some prolongation to his days. Unfortunately, however, like David, even such a godly king can err before the Lord, as Hezekiah does when he mingles with unbelievers, presenting his treasures to them. Pride and vainglory lead Hezekiah to mingle with heretics, namely with the envoys of the Babylonian king. Neagoe Basarab concludes that, even though King Hezekiah's wrong was small, his foolishness deprived him of God's benefactions.

The story of the deeds of Emperor Constantine the Great. The reading about Emperor Constantine the Great seems, at first glance, to stray from the logic of the previous biblical readings. In fact, to Neagoe Basarab, Constantine the Great is the model Christian emperor par excellence, who embodies the sum of all the virtues of his Old Testament predecessors and is distinguished from them by his being on par with the apostles, a direct follower of Christ. Like the pious Israelite kings of old, Saint Constantine is the exemplary ruler who follows the paths of the Lord, upholds the law and fulfils His will, fights against idolatry and seeks to 'broaden' the faith in the one true God, by strengthening the Church, the New Israel. The role of Saint Constantine and his mother Helen as protectors of the holy places can be regarded typologically and have the gift of reasserting the capacity that Neagoe Basarab assumes himself, namely that of the bearer of the cross in the cultural and ecclesiastical world of the Orthodox East under Turkish dominion.

The reading on Absalom's rebellion concludes the series of Old Testament biblical episodes through which Neagoe Basarab wishes to sketch the ideal portrait of a Christian prince. This reading does not follow the chronological order of events as previously presented. It is, however, intended to reinforce the conclusions previously expressed in the episode dedicated to Saint Constantine the Great. The final readings in the first part of *The Teachings*, the parable of the king's son's wedding, as well as the readings from the folk novel *Barlaam and Josaphat* are merely intended to exemplify that which is presented. Rehoboam's rebellion against David is directed against God's chosen/anointed, while the negative example of Absalom is countered by the example of David, who, like Christ, shows himself full of mercy. Therefore, Neagoe Basarab concludes: 'let no one dare, be they servant, or peasant, or anyone, to try to raise their mind and thoughts, with cunning craft, upon the urging of the devil, against their king and their ruler and master [...]. For the kingdom and rule of kings and rulers,

which is bestowed upon faithful and righteous kings and rulers, is a heavenly kingdom and rule. And the Lord, the Son of God, shall be their king and shall judge the world in righteousness. Therefore, each king or ruler to whom kingdom and rule are given receives them from God, who bestows them upon whomever He will' (*The Teachings*, 187).

Conclusions

Upholding the law, fulfilling the commandments, fearing God, and following the path of the Lord are Old Testament concepts that Neagoe Basarab resorts to build the personality of a future leader according to the biblical archetype. The monarch governs by divine will and conformity with it is the only way to ensure a good and long reign. The monarch, through his unction as the chosen one, is called upon to consecrate his life to the service of God and his fellow men, being the first one expected to uphold the Law and to fulfil the commandments. The governing of the people is to be done in the spirit of justice, but also of mercy and love toward men, whom he is to lead on the realm of faith to attain the heavenly kingdom.

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