

THE CULTURAL-RELIGIOUS CONTEXT OF THE 17TH CENTURY IN THE ROMANIAN ENVIRONMENT

It is the 500th anniversary of the passing of the Wallachian Ruler Neagoe Basarab to the Lord, which is why it is appropriate to revive the essential aspect of the cultural-theological creation of the ruler, recently canonized by our Church. To understand the context in which his teachings to his son Theodosius were written, it is necessary to briefly characterise the 17th century, which was marked by several events of cultural significance for religious literature. The beginning of this century is marked by *Neagoe Basarab's Teachings to his son Theodosius*, and the end is marked by the *Divan or the wise man's quarrel with the world*, which belongs to another ruler, this time from

Moldavia – Dimitrie Cantemir. According to specialists, these two writings belong to the same literary area, which for the lexical and expressive area of today also refers to a certain type of ethical and theological leadership corresponding to a theocentrically oriented society. If we consider that this century is marked by a series of confessions of faith, both in our environment through the Synod of Iassy of 1642 and the Confession of Petru Movilă, and in the Pan-Orthodox environment through the Confessions of Metrophanes Kritopoulos of Alexandria (1625), Cyril Lukaris (1629) and Dositheus II of Jerusalem (1672), we can say that we are in a period in which the East was forced to achieve a definition of identity, an area of confession of faith. It is therefore in this context that we should consider the work mentioned and the work of Neagoe Basarab.

Church literature is a distinct category of literary creation, rooted in the sacred content and spiritual teachings of clergy. It is a form of cultural expression with a specific purpose: to serve ecclesial objectives and enrich the religious life of the community. Although sometimes overlooked in treatises on literary history, Church literature cannot be ignored because it makes a significant contribution to the development of the Romanian language and culture. Despite its apparent limitations in terms of thematic



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diversity, Church literature should not be excluded from the study of literary history. The literary works of the clergy provide a unique perspective on faith and traditions, offering a window into the spiritual world and the fundamental values of Romanian society throughout the ages. This form of literary creation thus becomes an essential part of the cultural heritage, influencing and being influenced by other literary genres.

Essentially, Church literature can be analysed in the light of five distinct categories. The first of these consists of the Sacred Books, especially texts such as the Book of Psalms, the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles of the Apostles. These works not only reflect the fundamental teachings of the Christian faith but are also essential sources of inspiration for other writers and intellectuals. The second category of church literature comprises the Homilies, books of sermons for religious services. These works cover a wide range of subjects, from interpretations of the texts of the Gospels to presentations of the lives of saints. They are not only sources of spiritual inspiration but also ways of strengthening the religious community through teaching and guidance. A special category of church literature is made up of the lives of martyred saints and ascetic works, known as *Manaion* and *Paterikon*. These were read during various religious ceremonies and were a way of preserving and passing on spiritual traditions. Books of worship, prayer books and hymn books are another important sphere, playing a vital role in the conduct of services and manifestations of faith. Finally, Church literature also includes books of a dogmatic and didactic nature, as well as sermons intended for the burial of priests and lay believers. These works offer a profound understanding of Christian theology and morality, having a substantial influence on religious and philosophical thought in the Romanian cultural context.

During the reign of Matthew Basarab (1632-1654), Slavic culture suffered a significant decline, mainly due to the disappearance of Slavic cultural centres under Turkish rule south of the Danube. This phenomenon affected the number of Slavic-speaking intellectuals and Slavic language schools in Romania, contributing to the decline in the use of the Slavic language. In the second half of the 17th century, Romanian clergy faced a crucial choice between preserving the Slavic tradition and adopting religious services in the national language. Metropolitan Stephen, at the end of the reign of Matthew Basarab, adopted a conciliatory approach, publishing bilingual books to reconcile the Slavonic tradition with local needs. The *Homiliary*, published at Govora in 1642, was one of the first books of homilies, translated by Udriște Năsturel from Russian into Romanian. In the same year, Meletius Melchizedek

published teachings translated from Greek, dealing with themes such as the law of love and the Decalogue.

Thus, this century was marked by extensive actions of instruction and education of the Romanian people through religious literature, with conscious efforts to introduce the Romanian language to the Church. The pioneers of this process were religious leaders such as Metropolitan Varlaam, Miron Costin and Udriște Năsturel. Varlaam wrote works such as *Leastvița (The Ladder) of John the Climacus* and the *Romanian Book of Teachings* (1643), and Năsturel translated *O Podrajanii Jesus Hristu* (1647), the famous medieval work *Imitatio Cristi* attributed to Thomas de Kempis. Simion Ștefan published *the New Testament* (1688) and *Psalms* (1651) in Bălgrad, and Miron Costin was among the initiators of Romanian lyricism with his poem “The Life of the World”, highlighting philosophical themes.

Metropolitan Dosoftei of Moldavia played a key role in the reform of the Romanian language in religious worship in the 17th century. By publishing a verse translation of the Psalter (1673) and other liturgical works, Dosoftei showed off his linguistic and artistic skills. Nicolae Milescu, a contemporary of Miron Costin and Dosoftei, was an outstanding personality, contributing to cultural diversity. The *Bible from Bucharest* (1688), the first complete printing of the Holy Scriptures in Romanian by the Greceanu brothers, had a significant impact on the development of the Romanian language.

At the same time, non-religious literature of the 17th century maintained links with the religious context, exemplified by the novel “Alexandria”, which, while telling the story of Alexander the Great, brings a religious perspective to life. Works such as “The Flower of Virtue”, “The Psychologist” and “The Life of St. Basil the New” contributed to the diversity and depth of Romanian culture of the period. Thus, religious leaders and intellectuals played a crucial role in reconciling Slavic culture with local needs, marking a significant transitional period in the evolution of Romanian literature.

Without paying attention to this ecclesiastical literature, we could not fully understand major works of Romanian literature, such as “The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab”, a literary monument in Slavonic, or “The Life of the World” written by Miron Costin, and Dimitrie Cantemir’s “Divan”. These works are not only expressions of faith, but also cornerstones of Romanian culture and identity, representing significant contributions to the country’s literary and spiritual landscape.

The present volume is the proceedings of the conference entitled “Neagoe Basarab. 500 years since his entry into the eternal kingdom – a model of sowing the Scriptures” held on 14 December 2021 at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, “Babeş-Bolyai” University of Cluj-Napoca, under the auspices of the *ROOTS (Romanian Orthodox Old Testament Studies)* project which aims to highlight the Eastern interpretation of the Holy Scriptures and to enhance how this type of understanding of the revealed message is materialized in the Romanian environment. In this volume, we have proposed to highlight how the ruler Neagoe Basarab assumed the content of the Old Testament in his attempt to provide his son Theodosius with the necessary guidelines for assuming an ethical and theological way of leading his subjects.