

The Epoch of Matthew Basarab and Its Significance in the South-East European Context

მათეუს ბასარაბის ეპოქა და მისი მნიშვნელობა სამხრეთ-აღმოსავლეთ ევროპის კონტექსტში

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Abstract: This study presents the most important cultural-religious achievements produced during the reign of Matei Basarab, who reigned in Wallachia between 1632 and 1654. The long reign of Matei Basarab was an era of religious fervour and cultural development. It was he who made a major contribution to replacing the Slavonic language with Romanian in official, religious and civil life. He introduced the first written legislation: the *Pravila* (printed at the Govora Monastery, 1640), as well as the *Pravila Îndreptarea legii* (Târgovişte, 1652). Matthias Basarab also built dozens of churches from the ground up, as well as rebuilding many others, both in the country and outside – on Mount Athos (in 1645, he paid the taxes for the entire Holy Mountain), and on the territory of present-day Bulgaria, in Vidin and Şistov. The last part of the study therefore examines his role as a protector of south-eastern European culture and as a supporter of Orthodoxy, who was an assiduous advocate of both the unaltered preservation of Orthodox tradition and the promotion of a Christian European civilisation. In this way, the era of Matei Basarab exemplifies historian Nicolae Iorga’s paradigm of “Byzantium after Byzantium”.

Key words: Matei Basarab, Romanian Orthodox Church, Byzantium after Byzantium

ალინ კატოიუ

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აბსტრაქტი: ნაშრომში მიმოხილულია ყველაზე მნიშვნელოვან კულტურულ-რელიგიურ მიღწევები, რომლებიც განხორციელდა მათეუს ბასარაბის მმართველობის პერიოდში. ის ვლახეთს 1632-1654 წლებში მართავდა. მათეუს ბასარაბის ხანგრძლივი მმართველობა იყო რელიგიური აღორძინებისა და კულტურული განვითარების ეპოქა. სწორედ მისი მეშვეობით მოხდა სლავური ენის ჩანაცვლება რუმინულით ოფიციალურ,

რელიგიურ და სამოქალაქო ცხოვრებაში. მან შემოიღო პირველი წერილობითი კანონმდებლობა: *Pravila* (დაბეჭდილი გოვორას მონასტერში, 1640) და *Pravila Îndreptarea legii* (ტირგოვიშტე, 1652). მათეუს ბასარაბმა აგრეთვე ააშენა ათეულობით ახალი ეკლესია და მრავალი სხვა აღადგინა როგორც ქვეყნის შიგნით, ასევე მის ფარგლებს გარეთ – ათონის მთაზე (1645 წელს გადაიხადა მთლიანი წმინდა მთის გადასახადები) და თანამედროვე ბულგარეთის ტერიტორიაზე, ვიდინსა და შისტოვში. შესაბამისად, კვლევის ბოლო ნაწილი ანალიზებს მის როლს სამხრეთ-აღმოსავლეთ ევროპის კულტურის დამცველად და მართლმადიდებლობის მხარდამჭერად, რომელიც აქტიურად იცავდა როგორც მართლმადიდებლური ტრადიციის უცვლელად შენარჩუნებას, ასევე ქრისტიანული ევროპული ცივილიზაციის განვითარებასაც უწყობდა ხელს. ამგვარად, მათეუს ბასარაბის ეპოქა სრულად გამოხატავს ისტორიკოს ნიკოლაე იორგას მიერ ჩამოყალიბებულ კონცეფციას – „ბიზანტია ბიზანტიის შემდეგ“.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: მათეუს ბასარაბი, რუმინეთის მართლმადიდებელი ეკლესია, ბიზანტია ბიზანტიის შემდეგ

Introduction. Taking into consideration that words can take us closer and at the same time farther from the essence of words, Lucian Boia pointed to the fact that even the word *history* can be confusing. It presents the “curious trait of having the same name as its object of study” (Boia 2022: 11). In other words, history has the mission of rebuilding history. That way, *image* gets confused with *reality*. As a consequence, the past means legitimacy and justification, without it we cannot be sure of anything; on the other hand, history presents to us an illusion, because it is too massive to be confined between the walls of a library, it cannot fit between the covers of a book. Then, how can history be revived? In which manner can it be brought to the present? Only through a selection process, the author assures us. Still, it is a thoroughly selective process because “we select, of course, but not anything and anyhow. We choose the important elements, the most representative and meaningful. The history that we produce is a lot smaller than real history, but they are very much alike. It is the big history reduced to scale, its synthetic replica” (Boia 2022: 12).

The present study is this type of a selection process. The premise of this analysis is that the era of Matei Basarab, who reigned in Țara Românească between 1632-1656, exemplifies historian Nicolae Iorga's paradigm of "Byzantium after Byzantium" (Iorga 2002: 5). His theory was that the Romanian culture and civilisation are profoundly influenced by the Byzantium civilisation. For Iorga, Byzantium represents a continuity of the late, ancient world and its survival in the modern world, even after the fall of Constantinopol (1453). This way, there is a real

Byzantium (330- 1453) and an ideal Byzantium that expands until the beginning of the 19th century. The Byzantine continuity can be observed from three points of view: politics, civilisation and human.

On the other hand, other historians underlined the fact that the Romanian countries were part of the Byzantium Commonwealth that Dimitri Obolensky once talked about, stressing the interest of both parties (Obolensky 2002: 5). That way, once they were free from the Hungarian domination – Valahia in 1330, Moldova in 1365 –, Romanian rulers got enough power, ambition, independence and wealth that made them want to grow their prestige in the country and their status with the exterior by cementing their relations with the Empire: “they were not allowed to take example in the past Eastern European rulers’ behaviour in order to know that the first step towards the wanted path was getting a Church organisation subordinated to Byzantium” (Obolensky 2002: 284). On the other hand, there are at least three main reasons why the Byzantines were interested in the Romanian countries: 1) commerce; 2) the ambition of the Patriarch to consolidate and expand the hegemony in Eastern Europe; and most of all, 3) military, taking into account the wish to stop the Turkish threat- and Valahia, and in a small measure, Moldova, through their relations with the neighbouring country, Transilvania, were able to take an active role in the Buda crusades (Obolensky 2002: 285).

Synthesizing, the long reign of Matei Basarab was an era of religious fervour and cultural development. He had a major contribution in replacing Slavonic language with Romanian language in the official, religious and civil life. He introduced the first written law *Pravila* (printed at Govora monastery in 1640) (Dură, 1990: 58-79; Mititelu, 2012: 23-56), and also *Îndreptarea legii* (Târgoviște, 1652) (Dură, 2011: 25-48; Mititelu 2014: 56-89). Furthermore, Matei Basarab built a few dozens of churches, rebuild some other, in the country but also on the Athos Mountain (in 1645, he paid the taxes for the entire Holy Mountain), and present Bulgaria, in Vidin and Șistov.

In the following, we will present Matei Basarab’s role as protector of South- East European culture and defender of Orthodoxy, who fought assiduously to keep the Orthodox tradition unaltered and to promote a Cristian European civilization.

Matei Basarab- founder of churches and promoter of religious culture

It is said that Matei Basarab is the biggest founder of churches of the Romanians (Panaitescu 1976: 167-168; Costache 2010: 75). His accomplishments were in part due to the gentry that supported him, as they saw him as *a man of the country*. The

chronicler, Miron Costin, pointed to this aspect when he made an ampler characterization of the ruler, saying that he is the “happy man that rules over all the people in that country” (Costin 1958: 97). The same chronicler said that he is “a good ruler”. His qualities are a good judgement, perseverance, he was appreciated by the gentry, paying the tribute and fulfilling the Ottomans orders, mediating between the Ottomans and the Christian world, his persistence in reducing the tribute and taking care of the country, his opposition towards the Ottoman abuse, his lack of greed, maintaining peace (even for short periods of time). Therefore, a “good ruler” was one that had all “things settled”, being a good manager, ensuring the wealth of the country. He was also a founder, he was faithful, a good soldier, defender of the gentry, kind and wise. (It is the synthesis based upon the aspirations of Miron Costin, the chronicler) (Manea 2005).

His ruling, of over two decades, is remembered as an era of peace and internal stability for Țara Românească. Of course, this status was achieved through the payment of a big tribute, this being the result of his diplomatic affairs. Anyhow, even in the beginning of his reign, he exempted monasteries from paying taxes. That way, he made sure that he would have the support of the Church in his future endeavours, support that was going to double the civil authority.

The list of churches, monasteries that Matei Basarab rebuilt, restaured and built in Țara Românească is long. Some researchers talk about 43 churches and monasteries in the cities and the villages of the country (Stoicescu 1982: 57). Nicolae Stoicescu affirmed: “there is almost no old foundation that has not been repaired or rebuilt, depending on the case, and we can firmly say that the entire country is like a massive building site in which all of the old monuments were given new clothing” (Stoicescu 1988: 223; Teodorescu 2012).

Still, the ruler did not forget about the Romanians that inhabited other countries. He built a church at Porcești, in Sibiu, Soveja monastery in Moldova, and three other places of worship on Bulgarian soil, next to the Danube, like the ones in Vidin and Svištov.

We also have to remember that some of his foundations were real citadels, with fortifications (especially those along the Danube, those from Moldova and the ones near București).

At the same time, there are also important his foundations at the Athos Mountain. With the help of his donations, were restaured and embellished the following monasteries: Xenofon, Dionisiu, Hilandar, Simonopetra, Pantocrator, Russikon, etc.

A very important subject for the ruler was the legislative sistem. With this in mind, it was published in 1652 the manuscript *Îndreptarea legii*, which settled a great deal

of legal aspects. Even the submission of some of the big monasteries towards Athos did not escape his attention: starting with 1639, Matei Basarab prohibited this; the interdiction sanctioned 22 monasteries (until 1641, their number will grow to 39). The consequence of this act was a better management of the riches in the country, which were better stipulated than before.

The European importance of Matei Basarab's era – research study, his diplomatic affairs

The beginning of the 17th century marked the ending of the *warrior rulers* and the start of the diplomatic period, of political, marital and personal negotiations with the political leaders of the time (Bădulescu 2017: 125-132). The Romanian countries were at the crossing of the interests of three empires (Ottoman, Habsburgic and Czarist), based on heterogeneous and antagonical religious structures and the reason why Romanian leaders tried to preserve their faith through skillful relationing (military, diplomatic and religious) with them. Concerning the mission of the Romanian Orthodoxy, it can be observed that, internally it was an “era of cultural enrichment, triumph of the national language, and affirmation of some cultural personalities” (Sîrbu 1992: 7). Mihai Eminescu defined this century as “the most patriotic epoch of our history” (Eminescu 1941: 295).

The content of four letters written by Pope Inocentius the 10th and directed to Vasile Lupu of Moldova and Matei Basarab of Țara Românească, attest to the fact that besides the external political collaboration between the two countries and the Papal State there were also some positive religious rapports. In Traian Diaconescu's opinion, the external mission of the Romanian Orthodoxy of the 17th century meets some progress between the two “heralds of ecumenism” and anticipates “our European integration” (Diaconescu 2007: 113).

The historian Ioan Sîrbu appreciated the fact that Matei Basarab “managed to reestablish the prestige of Țara Românească since the time of Neagoe Basarab, as a spiritual and political ruling force of Orthodox Christianity” (Sîrbu 1992: 7). The correspondence of Pope Inocentius the 10th and Matei Basarab reflects much more cordial and close relations than the ones that he had with Vasile Lupu; this demonstrates the constant efforts of the Orthodox Church from Țara Românească in getting closer to the Roman- Catholic Church. It should be noted that Neagoe Basarab had asked the Pope a few decades earlier to initiate the union of the two Churches.

In the *Epistle of Pope Inocentius, the 10th to Matei Basarab* (May 20th, 1646) “it is revealed, in a laudable way, the favor and good faith “of the Wallachian leader “towards the orders of the religious men” from the Orders Saint Francis Minorits and Saint Bernard Minorits. He had accepted “the judgement of all controversies about the tasks of the bishops, the established norms of the” Pope “following the law indication, following the given decree” in the interior conflicts of the monks’ orders (Diaconescu 2007: 116). In the following letter, (May 16th, 1647) the Pontiff sovereign asks the ruler to peacefully apply the “established agreement” through “our authority from Fide Propaganda” and to assign the Târgoviște monastery to the “order of conventual minorits”. The Protectionism and the Romanian political interventions in applying the decisions of a super- nationalistic Church were considered “services” to which the Pope responded with “affection and adjustment, given the circumstances” (Diaconescu 2007: 117). Pope Inocentius the 10th will leave both factions of minorits monks in the care of the Romanian ruler’s judgement: “because you help and take care of them, they have all been allotted to you, so they can be more tranquil in the spiritual care of Latin Catholics” (Diaconescu 2007: 118).

Matei Basarab created a “diplomatic apparatus” (Sîrbu 1992: 9) consisting of educated men, whose external political mission which superposed the missionary objectives of the Romanian Orthodoxy. As a part of the fight to free the Orthodox people from the Balkans, Matei Basarab will take advantage of the weakness of the Ottoman Empire involved in the war with Persia and will lead peace talks with the Christian powers: the German Empire, the Polish Kingdom, the Venetian Republic and the Russian Empire, hoping to make alliances that will help him. The Orthodox Church from Țara Românească will take part in an active way at the diplomatic efforts of the ruler through correspondence, church translators, symbolic donations of holy relics and bookish efforts, and research of theological orthodox sources.

Matei Basarab’s relationship with Transilvania gets better with the help of the Orthodox Church, which will organize a punctilious visit. The Habsburgic Imperial Court writes to the Wallachian ruler and the Ipek patriarch to recruit mercenaries in order to fight against the Turks (Sîrbu 1992: 47). Prince Rackozy receives “The Transalpine Archbishop”, escorted by the highlander noblemen, at Alba Iulia on May 7th, 1636. The peace talks materialized in a “strong alliance” in which the princes “promised to protect and support each other against Lupu and the Turks’ attacks (Sîrbu 1992: 93). The relations between Moldova, Țara Românească and Transilvania were constantly strained by the territorial ambitions of Vasile Lupu (who demanded Țara Românească and Transilvania) and the lack of trust that the prince of Transilvania showed to the ruler of Țara Românească, which, in a report

commissioned by the Roman-Catholic archbishop of Gran, was considered „heretical” (Sîrbu 1992: 106-108).

The external mission of the Church was often intermediated by laic orthodox diplomats. A very good example is the return of Petru Deodat, friend of Matei Basarab, from the diplomatic mission to the Pontiff sovereign, in January 1652. The bishop of Prizren, Francisc Soimirovič, accompanied him, on the road home, through Germany, Hungary and Transilvania; “Matei Basarab used him in political missions”, and he brought “the news from the Pope about the imminent coalition against the heathens.” Upon the arrival, the ruler receives the bishop with “the highest honors, accepting the gifts and relics sent by the Sacred Congregation..., laying them out in a church as a true Christian, for them to be worshipped.” The respect shown to the Roman Pontiff, as seen in the correspondence, did not lack “hidden political thoughts”.

The ruler’s ardour for Orthodoxy is also reflected in his efforts to rediscover written sources of the orthodox faith at the urge and under the guidance of the metropolitan bishop Ștefan. Their collaboration led to the search of the patristic, liturgical and dogmatic manuscripts in the Holy Land. His abhorrence towards the moral and dogmatic laxity of the orthodox patriarch of Constantinopol, Chiril Lukaris, who relied either on the Protestants or on the Catholics”, determined them to ask for the blessing of the patriarch of Jerusalem in order to start the translation (Sîrbu 1992: 154).

Conclusions. Within the country, Matei Basarab supported the Romanian Orthodoxy mission by expanding the network of monasteries and churches (built or restored), the printing activity (he founded printing presses and a “paper mill” in Râmnicu Vâlcea) and translating church literature (canonical, liturgical and spiritual) from Slavic, Greek and Latin into Romanian. The literary Romanian language, cristalized in the Middle Ages was enriched by the new word creations (poetical and liturgical) inspired from the ancient language, the true “stylistic matrix” of the Romanian spiritual values (Blaga 1969: 105-117; Stăniloae 1997: 7-15).

“The main feature of Matei Basarab’s political thinking – Ion Sîrbu wrote – was a reach to history, to the country’s tradition. ... Another person that will do this, brilliantly, will be Constantin Brâncoveanu ... If Neagoe Basarab has been his model in culture development, Mihai Viteazul served as an elevating example in defending freedom ... Matei Vodă Basarab was granted the title *of master and ruler of these Dacian countries*” (Sîrbu 1992: 9). The unionist political ambitions of Matei Basarab were doubled by the wish to unite Romanians into one religious structure,

under the guidance of the Metropolitan Bishop of Țara Românească. At the same time, he was concerned with the consolidation of interorthodox relations, in order to manifest a unique consciousness regarding the Church that is, “one, holy, ecumenical and apostolical”.

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