Some aspects of Byzantine influence on the relationship between church and state in Wallachia during the 16th century (A cultural perspective)

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ANNALS of the University of Bucharest
Philosophy Series

Vol. LXI, no. 2, 2012
pp. 77 – 86.
SOME ASPECTS OF BYZANTINE INFLUENCE ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHURCH AND STATE IN WALLACHIA DURING THE 16TH CENTURY (A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE)

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Abstract

In this article we are going to analyze how the medieval political power in the Romanian provinces made use of the Byzantine influences in order to articulate a certain model of political leader. We will use for this purpose not only texts but also some other cultural products such as religious references, examples of churches and holy icons.

Keywords: Byzantine influence, voivode, church, political power, religious power, Medieval Ages, cultural mentalities.

In 2007, when Romania and Bulgaria were admitted to the European Union, a large number of polls were conducted in our country. There was a question in one of these polls asking respondents which historical and political figure is in their opinion the best political leader Romania has ever had? The great majority of the answers referred to the voivode Stephen the Great (1457-1504). This provides very strong evidence for the power of the collective mentalities and the historical memory of a nation.

Taking into account this aspect, our purpose is to point out some characteristics of the Romanian medieval relationship between the political and the religious power, between the voivode and the metropolitan bishop. In our opinion these aspects actually manifested not only in medieval times, but their influences could be also traceable even in modern times and nowadays. Taking into account the great deal of research needed for such analysis, we’ll restrict our analysis only to the medieval times in one of the Romanian medieval states – Wallachia.²

If in 2007 the best model of political leader in Romania still was a medieval voivode, it seems useful to try to identify the fundamental

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² Some of these ideas were already mentioned in our book: Métamorphoses de la Symbolique voïévodale, Études des mythes politiques dans la littérature roumaine des XVIe et XVIIe siècles, Editions Universitaires Européennes, Saarbrücken, Germany, 2010, pp. 113-233.
characteristics of such a leader in order to reveal this archetypal model in the Romanian collective mentality.

Stephen the Great was the warrior voivode archetype, very brave, fighting for his country and people. He was also a model of right judgment, promoting a spirit of equality and respect for the law. A lot of legends revealing these characteristics were mentioned by chronicles and retold afterwards in numerous sources with as many variations. That’s how a sort of folkloric corpus of poetic works was created, generating thus the imaginary archetype. In fact, in accordance with his imaginary projection, Stephen has all the fundamental features thought necessary, in Romanian mentality, to be a good and faithful political leader: a real, brave, warrior, fighting for his country against the Turks and Tatars and a good and correct judge who, through his judgments, helps poor people to regain their rights and dignity. However, these characteristics are not the only ones a sovereign should have. In fact, the model of the complete political leader is articulated through a complex process of integration of the characteristics of some major rulers of our countries in medieval times.

A contemporary of Stephen the Great, Neagoe Basarab was the ruler of Wallachia between 1512-1521. He embodied all those specific characteristics of a wise and cultivated leader. By his most significant actions, he embodied this side of a complete personality.

Some Biographical Data

Neagoe Basarab belonged to the family of the first voivodes of Wallachia, founded by Basarab I. In the same time, he married Militza Brancovici, a member of an aristocratic Serbian family, descendant of the Palaeologus family, one of the most important imperial families in the Byzantine Empire in the last three centuries of its existence. The Brancovici family had the title of Despotatos, one of the most important aristocratic ranks in the Byzantine hierarchy. Thus, Neagoe Basarab was highly motivated to consider himself as a continuator of a long aristocratic tradition – a local tradition reinforce by an imperial one.

He was also highly educated as he had as tutor the Patriarch of Constantinople, Niphon II. We have to mention that Niphon II played a significant role in the organization of the Orthodox Church especially in the Balkans region. He also contributed to the expansion of the religious movement of hesychasm. This ascetic religious movement was founded by Gregory Palamas during the 14th century and then it rapidly spread out over the entire

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Byzantine Empire. In the same century, Gregory of Sinai founded some important hesychast monasteries in the Balkans such as Paroreia, Kelifarevo, Tarnovo. At the beginning of the 15th century, their existence stimulated the foundation of new Romanian monasteries: Bistriţa, Neamţ. Neagoe Basarab stayed in Bistriţa for a while in his youth and then continued to visit occasionally the monastery.

One of the most important religious personalities of those times was the Metropolitan bishop Euthymius of Tarnovo who gained notoriety for his religious commentaries and homilies. He was a promoter of the Hesychastic belief. He also wrote a commentary on *Vita Constantini* written by Eusebius of Caesarea during the 4th century. Euthymius’ intention was to revive the archetype of the good Christian king dedicated to his Church and people in accordance with the model of Constantine the Great. This approach was extremely necessary in a period of hard times for the Christians especially in the mid 15th century when the Byzantine Empire crumbled and finally was defeated and Constantinople was conquered by the Ottomans.

We have to mention that, in the Byzantine tradition, founded by Constantine the Great, the emperor played an important role in the State-Church relationship, as he had major responsibilities in regard to the religious life of the Church. He was called an *isapostolos* (equal to the Apostles) and *bishop from outside the church life* (bishop belonging to the laity). These two characteristics seem to have significantly influenced Neagoe Basarab’s conception of his role as we shall try to prove in the following pages.

**Words and Meanings**

As certain researchers have already proved⁴, some Romanian voivodes used two Byzantine words having a very important meaning in the context of the post-Byzantine era, dominated by the Ottoman conquests in the region. These words were *basileia* and *autokrator*.

*Basileia* designated the Byzantine Empire as territory and it also meant political power, political capacity for governing a *basileia* (a state, an empire). The Byzantine emperor was a *basileus*.

*Autokrator* was the *basileus* as his power was not dependent on any other superior authority; he was considered (since Constantine the Great) God’s “lieutenant” in this world. This meant that the emperor had a certain authority even over the ecclesiastical matters. He was the one who summoned the Synods of the Church and had the right to choose between the candidates for the highest

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position in the ecclesiastical hierarchy – the Patriarch of Constantinople. After the iconoclastic religious movement, resulting in the defeat of the iconoclasts, the Church of Constantinople succeeded in imposing its right to complete authority over any problem of dogma and increased its role in the religious life but the Byzantine emperors kept their right to choose the Patriarch till the end of the Empire, in 1453. According to the Byzantine documents, the relation between political and religious power is usually defined as a *symphonia* namely equal responsibilities and authority, the Church and the Patriarch having the responsibility to watch over the religious life while the emperor was supposed to ensure the protection of the Church and of the people all over the Empire.⁵

It is quite interesting to observe that many of the Romanian voivodes of the 16th century used the terms *autokrator* and even *basileia* in their official documents. Researchers consider this apparent misuse of the terms as a way of expressing a certain consciousness of the fact that, after the defeat of the Byzantine Empire, the Christian Balkan kings considered themselves the heirs of the former Christian Empire and of its cultural and religious tradition. In fact, the Patriarchate of Constantinople survived and kept imposing its religious authority in the region in competition with the Catholic authority. The formula used in the official documents by the Byzantine emperors was as follows: *En Christo to theo pistos basileus kai autokrator Romaion* (elected and anointed *basileus* by God Himself and *autokrator* of the Romans⁶). Vladislav, one of the first voivodes of Wallachia (during the first half of the 14th century) called himself in the official documents: *megas voyevodas en Christo to theo pistos autentes kai autokrator pases Oungrovlachias* (elected and anointed great voivode and *autokrator* of the entire territory of Ungrovlachia). The term *Autokrator* is translated here in Latin with the meaning of *plenarius possessor, dominus.*⁷ It is interesting to mention that this formula was also used by Mircea the Old, Stephan the Great – who also used the term *basileia* for his kingdom – and by some voivodes of the 16th century.

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⁶ Initially, the Byzantine Empire was the Roman Christian Empire organized by Constantine the Great who established its capital at Constantinople in 330. According to the official documents the Byzantines kept this formula till the defeat of Constantinople in 1453. Justinian the Great uses this formula at the beginning of the Juridical corpus: *Ruling through the God’s authority the Empire granted to us by His Celestial Grace and Greatness, we are triumphant in wars, we cultivate the arts of peace and defend the Empire*, in G. Dagron, *Empereur et prêtre (Emperor and Priest)*, PUF, Paris, 1996, p. 156.

In the official documents of the Romanian voivode there is a *theophore* mention *Io* which precedes the voivode’s name and which seems to be the shortened form of *Ioanes* (John the Baptist) who was considered to be the Forerunner (*Prodromos*), the one who prophesied the coming of Jesus Christ; John the Baptist was also called God’s “lieutenant”.

Taking into consideration all these details we appreciate that the Romanian voivodes were perfectly aware of their political model – Constantine the Great and his Byzantine successors – and they also borrowed certain political meanings of the official *formulae* even though their kingdoms were not at all similar to the Byzantine Empire.

**Neagoe’s Works and Their Contribution to the Wise Voivode’s Profile**

Neagoe Basarab built churches and decorated them with an impressive attention to detail and artistic harmony. He is usually considered a “crowned scholar” as he is also the author of a parenetic text, *Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to his Son Theodosius*. The parenesis is a literary species with the aim of educating the young princes, preparing them for their future political position. This literary species has its roots in ancient texts such as Plato’s *Republic* or *The Laws*. The tradition was inherited by the Byzantines. Certain emperors wrote such texts for their sons: Leon VI the Philosopher, John VI Cantacuzene, and Manuel II Palaeologus. The most famous writings are the works of Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos, during the 10th century, especially *The Book of Ceremonies.*

**Neagoe’s Readings – His Library**

Neagoe Basarab’s *Teachings* were written at almost the same time as Machiavelli’s *Prince*. However, the *Teachings* are the expression of a consolidated medieval Byzantine tradition; they are not a product of the Renaissance political emancipation. They include a lot of common themes in such texts (*mirroirs des princes*). There are some evident influences of the hesychastic attitude originated from Euthymius of Tarnovo’s texts. Euthymius’ works were copied at the end of the 15th century at some Romanian monasteries such as Bistrița, Neamț and Putna.

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8 *Io, Stephen the Great* (for instance). See *Dictionary, Medieval Institutions in the Romanian Countries*, p. 301.
11 Some of the Byzantine Emperors were strongly influenced by the hesychastic movement among them we can mention John VI Cantacuzene and Manuel II Palaeologus or the Bulgarian Tsar Simeonov.
There are researchers who tried to discover which texts and authors had most influenced Neagoe’s writing. In the second half of the 19th century, Al. Odobescu discovered at Bistriţa Monastery 300 volumes. 80 of them were written in Slavonic language and had been brought by Neagoe’s family from the Serbian territories and the monasteries of Mount Athos. Here are some names: John Chrysostom, Basil of Caesarea, Macarius of Egypt, and Ephraim of Syria. Neagoe “is not only a diligent pupil and reader who wants to get knowledge of the Christian dogmas, he is a researcher too, searching for ideas and arguments which he uses in order to write his own work” said Nicolae Iorga.

Neagoe was deeply impressed by John Chrysostom’s rhetoric style. He also used religious texts such as The Lives of the Saints and the Synaxarium, especially the texts for the months of February and September. The text written by the first hesychast Patriarch, Callistes, On penitence and humility, as well as the writing of Ephraim of Syria, On humility, and a volume containing the four Gospels and an Introduction (Predoslovy) written by Theophilactos, the archbishop of Ohrid (Albany), were identified as sources used by Neagoe in his writings. There is also an anthology of ancient philosophical texts including fragments from Plato, Aristotle, Pythagora and some other Ancient philosophers. This anthology was very well known in the Byzantine world under the title Melissa. It was copied by a Byzantine monk, Anton who finished it on November 23, 1518 as it is mentioned at the very end of the manuscript.

There were also Byzantine legal texts such as: some of Justinian jurisprudential corpus, a text written in the 14th century by Mathew Blastaris, Syntagma, and also some Serbian legal texts such as the Zakonikon of Stephen Dusan. This interesting library included also a number of historical Byzantine chronicles written by George Hammartolos after 1453, or a Chronography written by the Patriarch Nikephoros. There were also some popular texts such as the already mentioned Lives of the Saints where Neagoe found the legend of Barlaam and Ioasaph and The Physiologus or The Alexandria, as well as the already mentioned Panegirikon dedicated by Euthymius of Tarnovo to the Saints Constantine and Helen. According to the researchers, Neagoe visited Constantinople at least once.

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Taking into consideration all these aspects we can try to reveal some influences of the voivode – metropolitan bishop relationship in some of Neagoe’s writings.

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13 Nicolae Iorga, Bizaț după Bizaț (Byzantium after Byzantium), Ed. Enciclopedică Română, București, 1972, pp. 76-80.

Basarab’s cultural contributions. We refer especially to the church he built and decorated – the church of Curtea de Argeș Monastery – and to some chapters of his Teachings. In the dedication inscription written on the Southern wall of the church of Curtea de Argeș, the voivode stated that he was the founder of the church and called himself basileus. It is evident that he took into consideration voievodal origin and also his wife’s kinship with the Palaeologus imperial family.

On the other side, in the second part of his Teachings, there is a second chapter containing a kind of oratio addressed to the Patriarchs and other high priests on a special occasion: the sanctification of the church dated August 15th, when the Orthodox Church celebrates the Ascension of the Virgin Mary. We have to mention that delivering such oratio on various religious occasions was a traditional event at the Byzantine Court. During the most important religious events concerning the life of Jesus Christ, the emperor was supposed to deliver his own oratio in Saint Sophia. The topic chosen by Neagoe for his oratio concerns the saint icons and the religious duties that a good and faithful king should fulfill and also his strong desire to obey the divine authority, to fear God and also to prove his deep love for Him. Neagoe adopted in this situation the position of the “outside bishop”.

The third chapter of the second part of his Teachings also contains an oratio addressed to all high-ranking ecclesiastical personalities present at the consecration of the monastery. Neagoe used the occasion to re-inhume the bones of his mother and three of his children already dead at that moment of his life. The text should be considered very “modern”, expressing a high humanism that suggests a certain interest in the Renaissance ideas. He compares his mother with the Mother of Jesus, Saint Mary and develops a very sensitive discourse on the difficulties that a mother has to go through in order to see her child becoming a young and strong man. This very courageous comparison would be also used later by his wife, Militza Brancovici, who ordered a saint icon representing Saint Mary holding the body of her son, Jesus Christ, after the descent from the Cross. What is really amazing is that, in the same image, there is another mother holding the body of his dead son in her arms. This sad mother is Militza Brancovici herself and her son Theodosius, who was supposed to become voivode after his father’s death. The iconographical representation of a sad event of the life of a human being other than a saint was not something usual. Researchers suggested two possible explanations: Militza Brancovici was a member of an imperial Byzantine family thus she had the right to be iconographically represented and the second explanation refers to the humanist vision proper to the developing Renaissance movement that began to influence the countries of the Eastern Europe even if they were fiercely fighting against

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15 J. Kalvrezou, Imperial Ceremonies and the Cult of Relics at the Byzantine Court in Byzantine Court Culture, Harvard University Press, Harvard, USA, 1997, pp. 135-176.
the Ottomans. Even in these circumstances, the strongest feeling was to defend the orthodox traditions which were endangered and not to encourage “modernist” thoughts as those promoted by the Renaissance.

In the same second part of his Teachings, Neagoe wrote a final chapter entitled When the souls leaves (the body). It is, in our opinion, the most beautiful medieval text in the Romanian literature. Neagoe is living his last moments. He is addressing his Court asking to be forgiven and to take care of his family after his disappearance. Then he leaves his family reminding them of the good moments that they lived together and the regret that he will not be able to attend his daughters’ wedding. Then he leaves the entire material world and all that is in nature. He praises God for the forgiveness of all the faults and sins committed during his lifetime. Finally he addresses his soul, then God asking
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for His grace. “My soul does not have any other hope than Your great mercy, please Lord save my soul, my Christ! ...My soul hopes and believes in Your infinite mercy, You, oh, Lord, are a God full of mercy and You said to all the sinners: *Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out.* I, a miserable and unworthy of You, I run to You, my Lord. Do not treat me as the large number of my sins deserve but according to the immensity of Your mercy.” In our opinion, this text is not simply a repentance text, but also the expression of a profound meditation on the human condition and glorification of the human being, this impressive creation of God. “I am Your creation and Your house, do not leave me in the arms of the devil” he says. This chapter could be interpreted not only from a religious point of view, but it could also be considered from a modern perspective given by the humanistic vision of the Renaissance exemplified above.

There is another text, the *Life of the Patriarch Niphon II* written by Gabriel Protos, the superior of the Mount Athos monasteries between 1517-1521. He took part in the consecration of Curtea de Argeș Monastery and the inauguration of the new residence of the Metropolitan bishop of Ungrovlachia founded by the same Neagoe Basarab. On this occasion, Neagoe organized the visit of the relics of Saint Niphon of Mount Athos to Cămpulung. The visit of one saint’s relics on some special religious occasions was also a Byzantine tradition.

The text written by Gabriel Protos is a hagiographic narration of the life of Saint Niphon. However, it became a panegyric of Neagoe. The model is again Eusebius of Caesarea – *Vita Constantini* and the *oratio* delivered by Eusebius on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of Constantine’s reign as Emperor of the Christian Roman Empire, in 336. This text written by Gabriel Protos proves once again the preoccupation with consolidating the image of the political leader within the Balkans region according to the archetype of Constantine the Great during a period in which the Ottoman Empire had already conquered Constantinople and was planning to expand, adding parts of the Northern and Western Europe. The hagiographic text becomes rapidly a historical chronicle of Wallachia. Neagoe’s portrait is drawn in bright colours: he is a courageous, wise and good diplomat.

There is also another text dating from the same period. It was written by Maximos Trivalis, a Court poet. It is a poem dedicated to Neagoe who is characterized as a patron of the arts. The researchers mention also another anonymous text, *Ekteny for the Voyvod Neagoe Basarab*. In these two texts the voivode is considered the equal of the Byzantine emperors. It is certainly an exaggeration but we could not exclude a certain preoccupation and consciousness

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of the cultural necessity to maintain the Byzantine tradition. The preservation of this tradition was a form of manifesting one’s Christian identity and belonging to a long praxis in contrast to the newcomers who were Muslims and belonged to another cultural background.

In this article we tried to prove that, at the beginning of the 16th century, concurrently to the archetype of the warrior voivode, fair but tough, another archetype of voivode emerged in the cultural mentality of the Romanian people – the figure of the wise and cultivated voivode, dedicated to religious life, the foundation of nice and elegant churches and love and glorification of the human being.

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