

DONORS AND DONATIONS IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY WALLACHIA AND MOLDAVIA*

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ABSTRACT. In the post-Byzantine period, the rulers of the north-Danubian principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia, through their monetary gifts and donations, played central roles in the continuation of religious life within and beyond the borders of their domains. This essay charts the patterns of patronage of two key donors – Neagoe Basarab of Wallachia (r. 1512–1521) and Peter Rareș of Moldavia (r. 1527–1528; 1541–1546) – in order to underscore their piety and the broader implications of their activities. Through the extant textual and material evidence, this study engages with aspects of the desires, collaborations, and effects of patronage from these two important rulers within Wallachia and Moldavia, respectively, and to far-off places like Mount Athos and the monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai. This study reveals a complex web of personal, spiritual, and ideological facets of leadership and identity that shaped a culture of donations and piety rooted in Byzantine models and transformed in local contexts through the desires and ambitions of each individual ruler.

Keywords: Donor, patron, donation, gift, art, traditions, Neagoe Basarab, Peter Rareș, Wallachia, Moldavia, Saint Niphon, Grigore Roșca, Curtea de Argeș, Probota Monastery, Mount Athos, Sinai

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By the early sixteenth century, the principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia – situated to the north of the Danube River and along the southern and eastern slopes of the Carpathian Mountains – had established their political, economic, spiritual, and artistic presence among the dominant powers of Eastern Europe (Fig. 1).¹ The fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the steady advances of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkan Peninsula brought uncertainty and fear, but also a renewed sense of hope and piety among the leaders of these realms. Noble individuals and their deeds reveal most eloquently the struggles and ambitions of the time, but also the deep Orthodoxy that permeated the region. The Eastern Christian values of the rulers and their subjects intensified and took on a local character once Byzantium could no longer serve as a focal point of spirituality. Both Wallachia and Moldavia developed their own senses of identity rooted in a local context that were becoming increasingly networked and connected through the movement of people, objects, and ideas within the principalities and in neighboring lands.



Fig. 1. Map of Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean regions in the early sixteenth century, showing the principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia, Mount Athos, and Saint Catherine Monastery at Mount Sinai (source: Richard Thomson | www.rt-imagery.com)

¹ On Wallachia and Moldavia, see Liviu Pilat and Ovidiu Cristea, *The Ottoman Threat and Crusading on the Eastern Border of Christendom during the 15th Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2018); Alice Isabella Sullivan, *The Eclectic Visual Culture of Medieval Moldavia* (Leiden: Brill, 2023), esp. 28–125.

This study charts and analyzes the patterns of patronage of two key historical figures from the north-Danubian principalities: Neagoe Basarab of Wallachia (r. 1512–1521) and Peter Rareș of Moldavia (r. 1527–1528; 1541–1546).² These two rulers were brothers-in-law; their wives, Milita and Elena, were sisters from the Branković family line. One of Neagoe's daughters later married one of Peter's nephews, and so the familial ties were sustained and complex. In efforts to underscore their humanity and the implications of their activities and donations, this essay tackles aspects of the desires, collaborations, and effects of patronage from these two important rulers both within and beyond the borders of their domains as revealed through the extant textual and material evidence. The sources of analysis consist of documents and inscriptions, as well as objects in various media and monumental building projects. What emerges from the examination of these sources is a complex web of personal, spiritual, and ideological facets of leadership and identity that shaped a culture of donations and piety rooted in Byzantine models, and further transformed in local contexts through the wishes and motivations of each individual ruler.

Neagoe Basarab of Wallachia

In the Wallachian cultural sphere, Neagoe Basarab (r. 1512–1521) is noteworthy for his patronage and ruling ideology.³ Although Neagoe headed the Wallachian state for only nine years – especially in comparison to the lengthy rule of Stephen III of Moldavia (r. 1457–1504), for example – his patronage had far-reaching impact. Gavril (Gabriel) Protu, a Protos⁴ of Mount Athos active in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, recorded the expanse of Neagoe's patronage:

² On patronage in the Middle Ages, see Colum Hourihane, ed., *Patronage: Power and Agency in Medieval Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

³ On Neagoe Basarab, see Virgil Căndea, *Un mare ctitor: Neagoe Basarab, 1512–1521* (Râmnicu Vâlcea: Editura Praxis, 2017); Sebastian-Laurențiu Nazăru, ed., *Sfântul Voievod Neagoe Basarab: Ctitor de biserici și cultură românească* (Bucharest: Cuvântul Vieții, 2012); Mihai-D. Grigore, *Neagoe Basarab – Princeps Christianus: The Semantics of Christianitas in Comparison with Erasmus, Luther and Machiavelli (1513–1523)* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021); Augustine Casiday, "Neagoe Basarab," in *The Orthodox Christian World*, ed. Augustine Casiday (New York: Routledge, 2012), 310–317; Dan Pleșia, "Neagoe Basarab: Originea, familia și o scurtă privire asupra politicii Țării Românești la începutul veacului al XVI-lea (I)," *Studia Valachica: Studii și materiale de istorie și istorie a culturii* 1 (1969): 45–60; idem, "Neagoe Basarab: Originea, familia și o scurtă privire asupra politicii Țării Românești la începutul veacului al XVI-lea (II)," *Studia Valachica: Studii și materiale de istorie și istorie a culturii* 2 (1970): 113–141.

⁴ As a Protos (πρότος), he held a high function and oversaw the monastic communities on Mount Athos.

And the holy fortress of Jerusalem, Sion, which is the mother of churches, was offered gifts and enriched by him [Neagoe Basarab], together with all the churches around it. And the same was true for other monasteries in the East. And on the hill of Misia, the Monastery of Oreisc (Oreșcovița) where the relics of St. Gregory the miracle worker are kept, he built the narthex of the church and covered it with lead, and on the throne with the relics he put a stone roof that he painted and covered in gold. And on the throne with the relics, he put a silk rug, woven with golden thread. And at the succursal of the same monastery, called Menorlina, he built a large house, a place of rest and where all the necessary chores could be done. And in Helles, he enriched the holy Meteora Monasteries with gifts, and many walls he built. Likewise in Petlagoniia, he enriched the Monastery of Trescavit; and in Macedonia he gave alms to the Monastery of Cusnița. And on the hill of Catesca, which is now called Cuceina, he did many things and built other churches, and he fed all the monasteries and built walls there as well as in other place... in Thrace, in Helles, in Ahia, in Elliric, in Cambania, in Elispod, in Misia, in Macedonia, in Tutelia, in Sermie, in Lugdonie, in Patagonia and everything, from east to west and from south to north.⁵

As this passage details, and as the extant material and textual sources confirm, Neagoe extended monetary gifts and donations throughout the Eastern Christian cultural spheres during his reign, from key religious sites in the northern Balkans and Greece, to churches and monasteries from across the Mediterranean, including Jerusalem and Sinai.⁶ A few years after he came to power in 1517, for example, he initiated monetary support to Sosinou Holy Monastery near the village of Ano Parakalamos, Greece.⁷ The Monastery of Treskavec in the Republic of North Macedonia also received support from Neagoe.⁸ The *pomenik* (list of individuals for whom prayers are offered) of the monastery, now preserved in the National Library of Serbia, mentions Neagoe's donations.⁹ In the Serbian cultural sphere,

⁵ Nicolae Iorga, *Byzance après Byzance : Continuation de la vie Byzantine* (Bucharest: Institut des études byzantines, 1935), trans. Laura Treptow as *Byzantium after Byzantium* (Iași: The Center for Romanian Studies, 2000), 134–135.

⁶ For the Sinai connections, see Adrian Marinescu, *Mănăstirea Sf. Ecaterina de la Muntele Sinai și legăturile ei cu Țările Române: Perspectivă istorico-patristică* (Bucharest: Editura Sophia, 2009).

⁷ Virgil Cândea, *Mărturii românești peste hotare* (Bucharest: Editura Biblioteca Bucureștilor, 2011), II: 719.

⁸ Virgil Cândea, *Mărturii românești peste hotare* (Bucharest: Editura Biblioteca Bucureștilor, 2011), III: 222.

⁹ Virgil Cândea, *Mărturii românești peste hotare* (Bucharest: Editura Biblioteca Bucureștilor, 2014), V: 28.

Neagoe and his family extended assistance to Dečani Monastery and Krušedol Monastery, among other religious places, including a phelonion, now in the collection of the National Museum of Belgrade.¹⁰

Neagoe's patronage across Eastern Europe continued a long tradition of relations that involved the Wallachian state and the Serbian realm. It is known that the Greco-Serbian princess Mara Branković (c. 1418–1487) – the third child of the Serbian despot George Branković (r. 1427–1456) – was a donor and diplomat who passed her ktetorship (patronage responsibilities) to Wallachia.¹¹ As the Branković dynasty was declining (the last Balkan capital to fall to the Ottoman Empire was Smederevo, Serbia, in 1456), especially her patronage of key monasteries on Mount Athos – including Hilandar and Saint Paul – was transferred to Wallachia.¹² Neagoe specifically increased this donation to Hilandar to 7000 aspra through a charter issued at Curtea de Argeș and dated 23 August 1517, to name just one example of his proactive policy of patronage toward the Holy Mountain in light of this Serbian connection.¹³ That his wife, Milita Despina, was also a descendant of the Branković family line certainly incited these decisions.¹⁴ The generous deeds, however, contributed to the already established tradition of patronage of Mount Athos from among the Romanian principalities. As early

¹⁰ Cîndea, *Mărturii românești peste hotare*, V: 32, 57, 59.

¹¹ On Mara Branković, see Aleksandar Fotić, "Despina Mara Branković and Hilandar: Between the Desired and the Possible," in *Osam vekova Hilandara: Istorija, duhovni život, književnost, umetnost i arhitektura / Huit siècles du monastère de Hilandar: Histoire, vie spirituelle, littérature, art et architecture; Colloque scientifique international, Octobre 1998* (Belgrade: Balkanološki institut SANU, 2000), 93–100; Mihailo Popović, *Mara Branković: Eine Frau zwischen dem christlichen und dem islamischen Kulturkreis im 15. Jahrhundert* (Mainz: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010); Mihailo Popović, "Shedding New Light on the Ties of Mara Branković to the Holy Mountain of Athos and the Translation of Relics" (paper presented at the Sixth International Hilandar Conference "Medieval Slavic Text and Image in the Cultures of Orthodoxy," the Ohio State University, 19–21 July 2013). See also the chapter on Mara Branković in Donald MacGillivray Nicol, *The Byzantine Lady: Ten Portraits, 1250–1500* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 110–119.

¹² On Mount Athos, see Denise Papachryssanthou, *Ho Athōnikos monachismos: Arches kai organōsē* (Athens: Morphōtiko Hydryma Ethnikēs Trapezēs, 1992); Aleksandar Fotić, *Sveta Gora i Hilandar u Osmanskom carstvu (XV–XVII vek)* (Belgrade: Balkanološki institut SANU, 2000), esp. chap. 1; Elizabeth Zachariadou, "Mount Athos and the Ottomans c. 1350–1550," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Eastern Christianity*, ed. Michael Angold (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 154–168; Averil Cameron, "Mount Athos and the Byzantine World," in *Mount Athos: Microcosm of the Christian East*, ed. Graham Speake and Metropolitan Kallistos Ware (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2012), 11–27; Athanasios A. Karakatsanis, ed., *Treasures of Mount Athos* (Thessaloniki: Ministry of Culture, 1997), esp. 514–521; Graham Speake, *Mount Athos: Renewal in Paradise* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

¹³ Petre P. Panaitescu, et al, eds., *Documenta Romaniae Historica, B, Țara Românească*. Vols. I–IV (Bucharest: Editura Academiei, 1966–1981), II: 304–306.

¹⁴ Around 1505, Neagoe Basarab married Milica Despina of Serbia – a descendant of the houses of Branković and Lazarević – and together they had six children.

as the middle of the fourteenth century, for example, prince Nicholas Alexander (r. c.1344–1352 with Basarab I; 1352–1364 alone) commenced donations to Mount Athos. An initial gift was directed toward Koutloumousiou Monastery.¹⁵ Whereas in this earlier period, the rulers of Wallachia may have favored one or another of the monasteries, at least as the surviving documentary evidence confirms, by the early decades of the sixteenth century Neagoe was making donations to all the monastic communities on the Holy Mountain.¹⁶

Indeed, Neagoe's patronage of Mount Athos was extensive and meaningful, expanding a longer tradition of such support from among the rulers of Wallachia. These acts relate to the importance Mount Athos had acquired among Eastern Christian centers, especially in the late Byzantine and post-Byzantine periods. As Averil Cameron noted, "the status of Mount Athos as a kind of symbol of Byzantium and of Orthodoxy in the minds of Byzantium's satellite and neighboring powers was at its height in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when the Byzantine state itself was fragmented and weak."¹⁷ Although fragmentary, the evidence underlines the importance of Mount Athos in the spiritual and ideological agendas of the north-Danubian leaders. At the Protaton Church in Karyies, an inscription in the naos dated to 1512, and the pomenik, mention Neagoe, his family, and their deeds, while calling for their remembrance.¹⁸ At the monasteries of Saint Paul, Iviron, Pantokrator, Philotheou, Simonopetra, Hilandar, Koutloumousiou, and Xeropotamou, Neagoe contributed toward the restoration and rebuilding of the churches, refectories, cellars, arsanas, and defensive structures, in addition to other general maintenance.¹⁹ Xenophontos Monastery similarly benefited from Neagoe's generosity. Its treasury preserves an epitachelion executed in a Wallachian workshop in the early sixteenth century in gold, silver, and colored silk thread, showing Neagoe and his family as patrons.²⁰ Around 1520, at Vatopedi Monastery, Neagoe restored the monastic buildings, the tower, as well as the church of the Annunciation and the Chapel of the Holy Zone, or belt (ζώνη).²¹ An inventory from 27 May 1596 also mentions vessels for the great myrrh that Neagoe donated to Vatopedi several decades earlier.²²

¹⁵ Petre Ș. Năsturel, "Le Mont Athos et ses premiers contacts avec la principauté de Valachie," *Bulletin de l'Association internationale d'études du sud-est européen* 1, nos. 1–2 (1963) : 32–36; Năsturel, *Le Mont Athos et les Roumains: Recherches sur leurs relations du milieu du xvie siècle à 1654* (Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1986), 39–71.

¹⁶ Năsturel, *Le Mont Athos et les Roumains*, 75–77.

¹⁷ Cameron, "Mount Athos and the Byzantine World," 21.

¹⁸ Căndeia, *Mărturii românești peste hotare*, II: 417, 420.

¹⁹ Căndeia, *Mărturii românești peste hotare*, II: 462–463, 470, 473, 501–502, 519–522, 547, 550, 553, 608.

²⁰ Căndeia, *Mărturii românești peste hotare*, II: 599–600.

²¹ Căndeia, *Mărturii românești peste hotare*, II: 578–579.

²² Căndeia, *Mărturii românești peste hotare*, II: 582.

The Great Lavra on Mount Athos, furthermore, is said to have been rebuilt entirely during Neagoe's time, with his assistance, including the church of Saint Athanasie the Athonite.²³ Several textiles in the collection of the monastery are also a testament to the lavish gifts from Wallachia to this important Athonite locale in the early sixteenth century: a podea from a Wallachian workshop commissioned by Neagoe and another gifted by his wife, Milita Despina, and her mother, Donca.²⁴ These types of donations highlight the focused and prolonged effort to ensure the proper continuation of monastic life on Mount Athos among all the monasteries. This is an aspect of patronage evident in the deeds of most rulers from the north-Danubian principalities, especially in the post-Byzantine period. "No Orthodox people have supported the Holy Mountain more than the Romanians," concluded the Russian theologian Porphyrii Uspenskii more than a century ago in his three-volume publication on the history of Mount Athos.²⁵ In addition to supporting the communities, this patronage carried various spiritual and ideological implications for the figure of the patron, including concerns with piety and remembrance, as well as a continuance of the legacy of Byzantium in a new milieu.

Out of all the Athonite communities, Neagoe has been most closely intertwined with Dionysiou Monastery. The Wallachian ruler sponsored the restoration of the complex, including the church dedicated to Saint John the Baptist, the defense tower, and the aqueduct.²⁶ Around 1515, he gifted the monastery a lavish crystal reliquary with the remains of Saint John the Baptist, Saint John Chrysostom, and the apostle Peter, now part of the collection of the Topkapı Palace Museum in Istanbul.²⁷ But the most intense expression of Neagoe's piety and the cultural connections that he established between Wallachia and Mount Athos are conveyed in the monastery's gilded silver reliquary with most of the remains of Saint Niphon (ca. 1435/40–1508), which Neagoe commissioned around 1515 in a local workshop (Fig. 2).²⁸ This reliquary, as Ioli Kalavrezou explains,

²³ Căndeia, *Mărturii românești peste hotare*, II: 529.

²⁴ Căndeia, *Mărturii românești peste hotare*, II: 546.

²⁵ Porphyrii Uspenskii, *Istoriia Afona*, 3 vols. (Kiev: Tip. Fronckeviča, 1871–1877), III: 334.

²⁶ Căndeia, *Mărturii românești peste hotare*, II: 423–424.

²⁷ Căndeia, *Mărturii românești peste hotare*, V:486.

²⁸ Căndeia, *Mărturii românești peste hotare*, II:433; Ioli Kalavrezou, "The Reliquary of St. Niphon: Relations between Wallachia, Constantinople, and Mt. Athos," in *The Land Between Two Seas: Art on the Move in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, 1300–1700*, ed. Alina Payne (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 239–251.

...is most unusual for this period and possibly is the first to use a church building to house the remains of a saint in the Eastern tradition. What is unusual in this work is the transformation of the 'body' of the church structure into a 'sarcophagus' for the remains of the body of a saint.²⁹



Fig. 2. Reliquary of Saint Niphon, ca. 1515, Dionysiou Monastery, Mount Athos (source: Dionysiou Monastery)

Measuring 42 x 30 x 42 cm, the five-dome design of the reliquary draws visual and symbolic connections between similar church types from across the Christian spheres, including the famed Holy Apostles Church in Constantinople, which served as the burial site for all Byzantine emperors from the time of Justinian (r. 527–565) and through the eleventh century. Other churches

²⁹ Kalavrezou, "The Reliquary of St. Niphon," 247.

emulated the imperial church of the Holy Apostles, such as San Marco in Venice, the Holy Apostles in Thessaloniki, and even Neagoe's church at Curtea de Argeș, which was consecrated in 1517 and designed from the outset to serve as a princely mausoleum for the Wallachian ruling elite (Fig. 3).³⁰



Fig. 3. The monastic church at Curtea de Argeș, 1517, Wallachia, modern Romania (source: Alexandru Baboș Albabos | Wikimedia Commons | <http://bitly.ws/DCbi>)

Not only the form of the reliquary but also its inscriptions speak to the diverse and interconnected spheres of early-sixteenth-century Eastern Europe. The tituli of the many holy figures on the enameled plaques that surround the edifice appear in Church Slavonic, while the dedicatory inscription that encircles the object is written in Greek.³¹ As such, the dedication text may have been particularly crafted with the Athonite monks as the intended audience in mind;

³⁰ On the church at Curtea de Argeș, see: Elisabeta Negrău, "The Structure of the Monastery Church from Curtea de Argeș: A Theological Interpretation," *European Journal of Science and Theology* 6, no. 1 (2010): 59–66; Emil Lăzărescu, *Mănăstirea Argeșului* (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1967).

³¹ "The Greek has many orthographical as well as misconstrued words, which suggests that it was composed by someone who knew some Greek but had little written experience and had mainly learned the language orally." Kalavrezou, "The Reliquary of St. Niphon," 246.

they would have been the ones who regularly read it and remembered the patron and his deeds through the donation. The carefully constructed visual and textual vocabulary for the reliquary of Saint Niphon reflects the position of this important object, the relics, and Neagoe's realm, at the crossroads of Byzantium and the Slavic cultural spheres in the post-Byzantine period, underscoring how past traditions were reimagined in the local contexts under princely patronage. Wallachia, Constantinople, and Mount Athos were thus linked, past and present, through the artistic choices and Neagoe's princely aspirations, as reflected in the reliquary.

Saint Niphon had a profound impact on Neagoe Basarab, warranting his eternal commemoration through such an impressive reliquary. Initially a monk on Mount Athos, Niphon served twice as the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople (1486–1488, 1497–1498) – the most prominent position in the Eastern Christian Church – and lived in Wallachia for a brief period of time at the turn of the sixteenth century. He held the office of metropolitan of Wallachia (1504–1505) during the rule of Radu IV (r. 1495–1508), who recruited him to his domain and then subsequently expelled him due to his interference in governing matters. Saint Niphon arrived in the principality around 1503 and departed in the summer of 1505. He was, therefore, directly tied to the Wallachian realm and served as a figure that further connected Constantinople, Mount Athos, and the north-Danubian principality. During his time in Wallachia, he established a close connection with Neagoe, serving as his mentor and “spiritual father.” Upon his death in 1512, Saint Niphon was buried at Dionysiou Monastery on Mount Athos. Neagoe requested the exhumation of his remains and their return to Wallachia, where Niphon was canonized in a notable ceremony at Curtea de Argeș in 1517.³² The saint's remains subsequently returned to Dionysiou,³³ housed in an impressive and symbolically meaningful reliquary.

The visual vocabulary of the reliquary further connects the Wallachian ruler to Saint Niphon. The inside lid – only visible when the reliquary is open to provide access to the remnants within – shows Neagoe in the presence of Saint Niphon, in an ambiguous setting, approaching the holy man in a gesture of supplication (Fig. 4). Neagoe, dressed in royal, gold-trimmed garments and with his long curly hair falling on his shoulders beneath a large gold crown encrusted with precious stones, is shown in three-quarter view, raising both hands toward the central, saintly figure. Not coming into direct contact with the saint, his gesture implies a perpetual appeal to the holy man. Saint Niphon, in turn, is frontal and

³² Nikos Panou, “Greek-Romanian Symbiotic Patterns in the Early Modern Period: History, Mentalities, Institutions (II),” *The Historical Review / La Revue Historique* 4 (2007): 59–104, esp. 72–75.

³³ Except for the head and the right arm of Saint Niphon, which are now housed at the church of Saint Demetrios in Craiova.

positioned at the center of the composition, slightly larger in scale than Neagoe to emphasize his holy status. He holds a richly bound manuscript in his left hand, and raises his right hand in a blessing gesture toward the Wallachian ruler, as if confirming receipt of his petitions. With a golden halo that accentuates his visage and the episcopal garments that stress his important rank within the Church, Saint Niphon appears Christ-like, and serves as a key intercessory figure between the earthly and heavenly spheres. Neagoe's privileged position within this intimate composition highlights the deep spiritual connection between the two figures, thus linking the Byzantine cultural and spiritual spheres with the Wallachian realm.



Fig. 4. Painting of Neagoe Basarab and Saint Niphon on the inside lid of the reliquary of Saint Niphon, ca. 1515, Dionysiou Monastery, Mount Athos (source: Dionysiou Monastery)

The spiritual intimacy between the two figures is further underscored by the reliquary object itself. When the reliquary is closed, the image on the inside lid comes closest to the holy remains of Saint Niphon, rendering Neagoe's image perpetually honored through this physical proximity and encounter with the holy relics. Saint Niphon's *vita* even refers to Neagoe as "the saint's spiritual child" – a dynamic that is reflected in the painted lid of the reliquary.³⁴

³⁴ Vasile Grecu, ed. and trans., *Viața Sfântului Nifon* (Bucharest: Institutul de Istorie Națională, 1944), 92.

A similar visual scheme is preserved in another image on a wooden panel, which likely also served as the lid of a box (Fig. 5).³⁵ At the center, Neagoe Basarab and his family kneel in supplication before an image of the Virgin Mary with the Christ Child in a heavenly sphere in the upper portion of the composition.³⁶ Divided into two symmetrical groups, the men of the Wallachian princely family kneel on the left, and the women on the right. The left shows Neagoe and his three sons: Theodosius, Peter, and John.³⁷ On the right is his wife, Milica Despina, and their daughters: Stana, Roxanda,³⁸ and Anghelina.³⁹ The distinctive features and garments of the figures, as well as the inscriptions in Church Slavonic above their heads, identify them to the viewers.⁴⁰ Although the setting is once again ambiguous, like the painted panel of the reliquary of Saint Niphon, dark crosses or trees are visible within the scene. These visual elements not only help indicate a perspective in the composition, but also frame and draw attention to the kneeling princely family in the foreground.

³⁵ The image is preserved only in the Sinai Archive at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. The photo was taken in 1958 with 5 x 7 film in black and white. No. 577816, digital file 15asinai02772. Courtesy of the Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expeditions to Mount Sinai. See Alice Isabella Sullivan, "Neagoe Basarab at Sinai," *Museikon* 5 (2021): 245–248; eadem, "A New Discovery in the Michigan Sinai Archive," *Visual Resources Collections, University of Michigan* (May 2020). The panel requires still further study. An analysis of the wood and pigments used in the decoration could provide insight into the origins of its creation, likely in the Wallachian cultural context. Its exact dimensions may help shed light on the functions of the box to which the lid once belonged.

³⁶ The image of the Virgin and Child is that of the Blachernitissa type, also as the Theotokos of Blachernae, which has roots in the icon from the Church of the Blachernae in Constantinople. See Christine Angelidi and Titos Papamastorakis, "Picturing the Spiritual Protector: From Blachernitissa to Hodegetria," in *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, ed. Maria Vassilaki (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 209–224.

³⁷ Theodosius succeeded Neagoe to the throne on 15 September 1521, with his uncle, Preda Craiovescu, serving as regent. Unfortunately, Theodosius died only a few months after taking the crown, in January 1522. Little is known about Neagoe and Milica's other two sons, Peter and John. Together with Anghelina, these three children of the princely couple died young.

³⁸ In Romanian scholarship, Roxanda's name is often given as Ruxandra. The textual sources, however, repeatedly identify her as Roxanda (Роџанда).

³⁹ It is known that Stana married Moldavia's prince Stephen IV (r. 1517–1527), and Roxanda married Radu of Afumați, who took control of Wallachia after Theodosius's death (r. 1522–1529), and then she married Radu Paisie (r. 1535–1545, with interruptions).

⁴⁰ On the votive portraits, see Anastasia Văetiși, "Portretistica votivă a lui Neagoe Basarab," in *Sfântul Voievod Neagoe Basarab: Ctitor de biserici și cultură românească*, ed. Sebastian-Laurențiu Nazăru (Bucharest: Cuvântul Vieții, 2012), 185–230.



Fig. 5. Lid of a wooden box showing Prince Neagoe Basarab and his immediate family, Wallachia, modern Romania, now in the collection of Saint Catherine Monastery on Mount Sinai (source: University of Michigan | Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expeditions to Mount Sinai)

In this image, Neagoe and his family appear together as they do in the votive mural designed originally for the south wall of the pronaos in the family's mausoleum at Curtea de Argeș,⁴¹ and in the lower portion of an icon of 1517 showing Saint Nicholas, which was originally commissioned for the monastic church at Argeș.⁴² In these examples, Neagoe and his family are richly garbed and divided into two groups, with the men on the left and the women on the right side of the respective compositions. Whereas in the mural the family stands frontally and faces the viewer, the other two examples depict the figures kneeling in supplication and directing their attention toward the Virgin and Child in the heavens above and toward Saint Nicholas, respectively. Moreover, the painted panel with the entire family seems to be the earliest dated among the family portraits, followed by the mural from Curtea de Argeș in which Theodosius wears the same princely garb as his father, indicating his succession

⁴¹ The fresco is now in the collection of the National History Museum of Romania, Bucharest. See Emanuela Cernea, ed., *Mărturii: Frescele Mănăstirii Argeșului* (Bucharest: Editural Muzeul Național de Artă al României, 2019), 70–73.

⁴² The icon is now in the collection of the National Museum of Art of Romania, Bucharest, inv. 5872/ 1525. See Alexandru Efremov, *Icoane românești* (Bucharest: Meridiane, 2003), 37–38, and cat. 10, 182; *Arta Țării Românești în secolele XIV–XVI* (Bucharest: Editural Muzeul Național de Artă al României, 2001), 56–57; Arhim. dr. Policarp Chițulescu, “O icoană de la Sfântul Neagoe Basarab și primul muzeu al Patriarhiei Române,” in *Sfântul Voievod Neagoe Basarab: Ctitor de biserică și cultură românească*, ed. Sebastian-Laurențiu Nazăru (Bucharest: Cuvântul Vieții, 2012), 231–239.

to the throne, and then by the icon of Saint Nicholas.⁴³ In the latter, the youngest daughter, Anghelina, is no longer present alongside the family, suggesting that this image was painted after her premature death at a young age. Although the visual evidence is limited, the extant family portraits, when studied together, reveal the sustained interest in such depictions on commissioned objects, changes over time in the family composition and modes of representation, and aspects of the functions of these donations.

In the wooden panel, the Basarab family portrait in the central composition once decorated the inside of the lid, indicated by the indentations of where the hardware once attached the lid to the box; two nail holes on each side remain visible. This object is preserved in the collection of Saint Catherine Monastery at Mount Sinai – one of the oldest still active monastic communities, dating to the sixth century. The monastery benefited from Byzantine imperial support, beginning with emperor Justinian, and developed into an important locus of Eastern Christian spirituality, pilgrimage, and monastic life. Upon its arrival at Sinai, those who opened the wooden box would have first encountered the image of the Wallachian prince alongside his immediate family, kneeling in prayer and directing their attention toward the Virgin and Child. Such an image would have indicated the piety of the patrons, their desire for divine intercession, and hope for eventual salvation. Moreover, the image would have incited prayer and remembrance in perpetuity for the Wallachian princely family among the monastic community at Sinai who received the gifts contained within the box.

Just like his donations to Mount Athos and other Christian centers in the Balkans and around the Mediterranean, Neagoe was connected to Sinai. Although the remaining evidence is scarce, Neagoe extended donations to the Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai, following in a long tradition of such patronage among Wallachian rulers. Indeed, it is known that on 15 September 1497, Radu IV (r. 1495–1508) initiated an annual payment of 5000 aspra (ἄσπρον, pl. ἄσπρα) to Sinai, and 500 aspra to the monk(s) who would come to Wallachia to retrieve the funds.⁴⁴ As indicated in the document, this donation was to be continued by future Wallachian rulers. With this act, Radu IV set the foundation for Wallachian support of Sinai, which Neagoe Basarab surely continued, although no such document survives from his reign. The box to which the lid in question once belonged, however, likely arrived at Sinai either filled with precious icons, manuscripts, and embroideries from Wallachia – some perhaps still preserved in the vast repositories of the monastery – or it could have been a reliquary, akin

⁴³ On Theodosius' reign, see Radu Cârciumar, "The Reign of Teodosie and the 1521 Fights for the Wallachian Throne: Short Considerations," *Annales d'Université "Valahia" Târgoviște, Section d'Archéologie et d'Histoire* 15, no. 1 (2013): 83–88.

⁴⁴ *Documenta Romaniae Historica*, B, I: 453–456.

to those that Neagoe presented to Dionysiou Monastery. Like this Sinai panel with Neagoe and his family, other treasures remain to be discovered in the Sinai collections.⁴⁵

What is certain, however, is that Neagoe's interest in Sinai was continued by his successors, just like his patronage was part of a broader tradition of such support. The evidence reveals that by 18 February 1540, Radu VII Paisie (r. 1535–1545; with interruptions) was promising Sinai an annual donation of 10,000 aspra and 2,000 for the monks coming to Wallachia to retrieve the donation.⁴⁶ A few decades later, the annual amount increased to 15,000 aspra.⁴⁷ Other followers, including individuals of noble rank, supported Sinai as well. A *kivotion* (Eucharistic vessel) from the Wallachian court, commissioned by the Great Komis, Badea Zălbău, Great Dvornik Jupan Coadă, and his sons Jupan Theodosius and Jupan Staiko, is now preserved in the Sinai collections.⁴⁸ It was likely produced in a Transylvanian workshop around 1545. Such examples demonstrate a continuation of patronage that can be reconstructed even in lieu of extensive surviving documentary and physical evidence from the period.

Although he ruled for a relatively short time, Neagoe Basarab was a remarkable leader and patron, who fostered relations with religious sites and monastic communities from across the Eastern Christian cultural spheres, including Greece, Mount Athos, Jerusalem, and even Mount Sinai. His monetary donations and gifts of precious icons, manuscripts, embroideries, and metalwork continued a long tradition of such investment within and beyond Wallachia among leaders of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. His deeds supported the religious communities, ensured his and his family's remembrance, and carried ideological implications in the post-Byzantine period. Similar patterns of patronage and ambitions are evident in the principality of Moldavia around the same time, indicating a broader phenomenon of expressing deep spirituality and facilitating the transfer of ideas, objects, and people across disparate regions of the Eastern Christian cultural spheres.

⁴⁵ To this end, the Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria documentary expeditions to Mount Sinai in the 1950s and 1960s are valuable. The archives are preserved at the University of Michigan and Princeton University and are in the process of being fully digitized and made available on the new open-access website: www.sinaiarchive.org. This project is the recipient of the 2023 Digital Humanities and Multimedia Studies Prize from the Medieval Academy of America.

⁴⁶ *Documenta Romaniae Historica*, B, IV: 114–118.

⁴⁷ *Documenta Romaniae Historica*, B, III: 102–106.

⁴⁸ Elena Ene D-Vasilescu, "Romanian Treasures in the Monastery of St. Catherine, Mount Sinai," *Series Byzantina* 6 (2008): 68; Virgil Căndea, *Mărturii românești peste hotare* (Bucharest: Editura Biblioteca Bucureștilor, 2010), I: 497. The Sinai Archive at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, No. 580152.

Peter Rareș of Moldavia

Like Neagoe Basarab in the Wallachian sphere, the reign of Peter Rareș of Moldavia (r. 1527–1538; 1541–1546) is significant for the cultural transformations and the contacts that he fostered within and beyond the borders of his domain. Peter was the illegitimate son and heir of Stephen III (r. 1457–1504), and so his ambitions to assert his authority over the Moldavian throne were palpable from the outset.⁴⁹ Soon after he took control, Peter designated the church of Saint Nicholas at Probota Monastery, completed in 1530, as his princely mausoleum, just like his father had established Putna Monastery to serve this function (Fig. 6).⁵⁰ With support from Grigore Roșca, the abbot of Probota and Peter's spiritual advisor, the Moldavian ruler's efforts to establish Probota as a new princely mausoleum was contested by the community of monks at Putna, who likely felt threatened by the decision.⁵¹ Peter's determination to establish a new funerary foundation for his own family line, just like his father had done before him at Putna, was meant to solidify his position within the Moldavian ruling elite.⁵² In so doing, Peter elevated the status of Probota to be on par with Putna.⁵³

⁴⁹ On Peter Rareș, see Sullivan, *The Eclectic Visual Culture of Medieval Moldavia*, 7, and select portions of Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6; Ion Ursu, *Die auswärtige Politik des Peter Rareș, Fürst von Moldau (1527–1538)* (Vienna: Carl Konegen, 1908); idem, *Petru Rareș: Domn al Moldovei de la 20 ian. 1527 până la 14 sept. 1538 și din feb. 1541 până la 3 sept. 1546* (Bucharest: Convorbiri Literare, 1923); Dumitru Almaș, *Petru Voievod Rareș* (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1970); Leon Șimanschi, ed., *Petru Rareș* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei, 1978); Ștefan S. Gorovei, *Petru Rareș* (Bucharest: Editura Militară, 1982); Maria Magdalena Székely, *Sfetnicii lui Petru Rareș: Studiu prosopografic* (Iași: Editura Universității "Alexandru Ioan Cuza," 2002).

⁵⁰ Alice Isabella Sullivan, "The Reach of the Gothic: Monastic Architecture and the Intersection of Traditions in Eastern Europe," in *The Worlds of Villard de Honnecourt: The Portfolio, Medieval Technology, and Gothic Monuments*, ed. George Brooks and Maile S. Hutterer (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 543–582. For the dedicatory inscription at Probota, see Nicolae Iorga, ed., *Inscripții din bisericele României* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1905), I: 56.

⁵¹ See *Holy Putna Monastery 1466–2016: 550 Years Since the Laying of the Foundational Stone* (Putna: Editura "Mitropolit Iacov Putneanul," 2016); English translation of *Sfânta Mănăstire Putna* (Putna: Editura "Mitropolit Iacov Putneanul," 2010), 55 (my translation of Ștefan S. Gorovei's contribution to the volume), and n. 66 citing Ioan Caproșu, ed., *Documenta Romaniae Historica, A. Moldova (1546–1570)* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei, 2008), VI: 557.

⁵² See Maria Crăciun, "Burial and Piety in Comparative Perspective: Moldavia, 15th and 16th Century," in *Studii Istorice: Omagiu Profesorului Camil Mureșanu la împlinirea vârstei de 70 de ani*, ed. Nicolae Edroiu (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universității Clujeană, 1998), 119.

⁵³ Peter buried his wife Maria in the pronaos of Putna in the summer of 1529; her burial was the last princely grave in Stephen's mausoleum.



Fig. 6. Church of Saint Nicholas, 1530, Probotă Monastery, Moldavia, modern Romania (source: A. I. Sullivan)

Little can be gleaned about Stephen's church at Putna from the building's current appearance, due to its numerous later transformations and additions, but Peter's church at Probotă has experienced fewer changes, and so its structure is revealing.⁵⁴ One notable facet of Probotă is how it reveals the developments in building methods and church decorations that are characteristic of Peter's patronage in the early decades of the sixteenth century. Whereas Stephen's churches were generally small in scale and consisted mainly of a triconch naos and a pronaos – as evident at the church of the Holy Cross at Pătrăuți Monastery, for example⁵⁵ – Peter's churches were more complex in form and decorative programs. Like Probotă, they consisted of a triconch naos, burial chamber, pronaos, and exonarthex. Single doorways lead from one space to the next, the windows get

⁵⁴ Sullivan, "The Reach of the Gothic: Monastic Architecture and the Intersection of Traditions in Eastern Europe," 549–560; 571–577.

⁵⁵ On Pătrăuți, see Alice Isabella Sullivan, Vladimir Ivanovici, and Gabriel-Dinu Herea, "Space, Image, Light: Toward an Understanding of Moldavian Architecture in the Fifteenth Century," *Gesta* 60, no. 1 (2021): 81–100, with further bibliography.

increasingly smaller as one approaches the altar area, and the rooms are of different heights, thus controlling the experience and surprising those who progress through the interior. The theatricalization of the sacred experience inside the churches is thus manipulated so that the faithful are awe-inspired and struck by the grandeur and spiritual aura of the naos upon stepping inside it for the celebrations of the liturgy.⁵⁶ The conception of the Moldavian churches of this period differs from that of other neighboring regions, indicating a local adaptation and transformation of church building techniques in this Carpathian principality under Peter's direct control. Moreover, whereas Neagoe's mausoleum at Curtea de Argeș recalled the church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople, Peter's princely mausoleum at Probota Monastery transformed a local, Moldavian visual idiom.⁵⁷

The images painted on the interior and exterior walls of the church at Probota further accentuated the sacred experience. From the scenes of the Last Judgment on the west wall of the exonarthex, to those of the Menologium wrapping in registers around the inner walls of the pronaos and burial chamber, to Christological and Mariological cycles on the inner walls of the naos and altar areas, the Moldavian churches, including Probota, overwhelmed the senses. But this spiritual preparation was most prominently marked within the structure of the church by the presence of the burial chamber at the very heart of the building. At Probota, the burial room features the graves of Peter, his wife, Elena (Jelena Branković, d. 1552, and sister of Milita Despina of Wallachia), and their son Stephen VI (d. 1552) lining the central corridor leading to the naos.⁵⁸ The graves are marked by rectangular stone slabs with geometric and floral designs that surround carved dedicatory inscriptions. These texts were designed to direct viewer reception, encouraging mental and physical circumambulation of the graves. Peter's grave carries the following inscription in Church Slavonic: "This is the grave of the devout servant of God ... John Peter voivode, son of the old Stephen voivode, who passed on to the eternal dwelling; his eternal remembrance."⁵⁹ As Stephen's illegitimate son, Peter was deeply concerned with his family line and his right to rule. As such, church burials during his reign gained a new architectural and visual vocabulary closely interwoven with

⁵⁶ On the structuring of the sacred spaces in the Moldavian churches, see Sullivan, *The Eclectic Visual Culture of Medieval Moldavia*, esp. Chapters 4 and 5.

⁵⁷ On the transformations of the Moldavian visual idiom, and their implications, see Alice Isabella Sullivan, "A Post-Byzantine Visual Idiom in Moldavian Art and Architecture," in *Afterlife of Byzantine Monuments in Post-Byzantine Times, special issue Études Byzantines et Post-Byzantines III (X)*, ed. Elena Boeck (Bucharest: Romanian Academy, 2021), 57–82.

⁵⁸ Voica Maria Pușcașu, "Lespezele funerare de la Mănăstirea Probota," *Arhiva genealogică* 3 (1996): 255–268.

⁵⁹ Iorga, ed., *Inscripții din bisericele României*, I: 56–57.

Peter's dynastic concerns and his desire to be perpetually remembered. Indeed, the Moldavian princes took great care of the monastic churches, which were designated to serve as "the gate through which Moldavia's princes and their families passed to the Kingdom of Heavens."⁶⁰ By the time of Peter's rule in the third decade of the sixteenth century, the burial chamber had become an integral component of Moldavian monastic churches, built regardless of whether burials were imminently expected for that space. Peter's princely mausoleum at Probota was meant to complement Stephen's at Putna, serving, in turn, as a model for how future rulers of Moldavia should fashion their places of eternal rest and remembrance for generations.⁶¹

Peter's presence within his mausoleum at Probota is also indicated by his votive mural, which adorns the west wall of the naos, to the south of the entrance into the burial chamber (Fig. 7). The painting shows Peter, his wife Elena, and their children, presenting a model of the church to Christ in heaven via the intercessory role of Saint Nicholas, to whom the church at Probota is dedicated. As Christine Peters observes, in the Moldavian context, the preference for "the saintly mediatory figure commending the donor to Christ enthroned suggests a greater emphasis on the cult of the saints and on Christ as person and sacrament."⁶² Moreover, most of the figures present in the votive painting at Probota are the very individuals buried in the funerary chamber directly beyond the naos. As such, the votive painting at Probota would have signaled to the faithful, once they crossed the threshold into the space of the burial chamber, to keep the significant individuals under whose patronage the monastic establishment was built – especially Peter as the key patron – in their prayers.

Just as the faithful faced reminders of the patron through the votive mural and the passage through the burial chamber, the clergy in the altar area regularly cast their eyes upon a revelatory inscription carved in the proskomidiniche.⁶³ The text calls for Peter's eternal remembrance alongside members of his family line, including his father:

⁶⁰ Liviu Pilat, *Între Roma și Bizanț: Societate și putere în Moldova (secolele xiv–xvi)* (Iași: Editura Universității "Alexandru Ioan Cuza," 2008), 375.

⁶¹ In addition to Probota, Peter's other churches with funerary rooms include the katholika at Humor and Moldovița. By the 1530s, it was well established that all of the monastic foundations where a member of the ruling elite was to be buried had to have a funerary chamber at the center of the church building.

⁶² Christine Peters, "The Relationship Between the Human and the Divine: Towards a Context for Votive Images in Mural Painting in Moldavia and Wallachia," *Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes* 32, no. 1–2 (1994): 41.

⁶³ See also Sullivan, *The Eclectic Visual Culture of Medieval Moldavia*, 156–158, and Fig. 3.13.

Remember, God, the souls of your servants John Stephen voivode and his son John Peter voivode, and his [Stephen's] mother, Maria, and his wife, Maria, and their children, and his [Peter's] wife, Elena, and their children, and Maria and Ana [Peter's sisters]. Remember, God, the soul of your servant, hieromonk kyr Grigore [Roșca] hegumenos.⁶⁴



Fig. 7. Votive mural showing Peter, his wife Elena, and their children, west wall of naos, Church of Saint Nicholas, Proboata Monastery, Moldavia, modern Romania (source: A. I. Sullivan)

⁶⁴ Iorga, ed., *Inscripții din bisericile României*, I: 57.

Such an inscription was intended for clergymen, who would celebrate the Divine Liturgy at this site long after the donor and his family had died. The desire for commemoration through texts and images stresses the importance for the church founders and patrons to be perpetually present and remembered by all individuals who gaze upon their inscriptions, images, or places of burial and are thus reminded of their names and deeds.

The lines of text in the altar of Probota also reveal Peter's concern with his lineage, as does another votive painting in the naos of the church of the Descent of the Holy Spirit at Dobrovăț (Fig. 8). The mural was created with Peter's support, presumably shortly after he took the throne, as the inscription in Church Slavonic in the upper-left corner of the mural reads:

The devout and lover of Christ John Peter voivode, through God's grace prince of the land of Moldavia, son of the old Stephen voivode, inscribed and embellished this church dedicated to the Descent of the Holy Spirit, in the monastery at Dobrovăț, in the year 703 ... month ...⁶⁵

The damage makes it difficult to confirm, but the date could have ranged from 1527 (7035) to 1531 (7039), thus falling within the initial years of Peter's rule in Moldavia. The mural depicts three of the monastery's primary patrons, Peter Rareș (on the right), closest to Christ; his father, Stephen III (on the left); and Stephen's legitimate heir, Bogdan III (in the center).⁶⁶ All three men wear richly brocaded and embroidered attire, as well as jewel-encrusted golden crowns. What is noteworthy about this votive portrait is that it does not show Peter along with his wife and children, as seen at Probota and elsewhere. Rather, the image presents Peter as Stephen's descendent. Although he is an illegitimate son, Peter is depicted in scale and through the rich garb on par with Stephen's legitimate heir, Bogdan III.

⁶⁵ Iorga, ed., *Inscripții din bisericile României*, II: 206.

⁶⁶ Elena Firea, "Conceptie dinastică în tablourile votive ale lui Petru Rareș," *Ars Transsilvaniae* 14–15 (2004): 143–161.



Fig. 8. Votive mural of Peter Rareș, Bogdan III, and Stephen III, 1527–1531, west wall of naos, church of the Descent of the Holy Spirit, Dobrovăț Monastery, Moldavia, modern Romania (source: A. I. Sullivan)

Peter leads the majestic trio in the votive mural at Dobrovăț, holding the model of the church he helped refurbish before the enthroned Christ. In contrast to other Moldavian votive images, the intercessory figure is omitted here, thus emphasizing the direct interaction between the earthly ruler and Christ. Since the church at Dobrovăț was dedicated not to a saint but to the Descent of the Holy Spirit – which lacks an explicit figural means of representation – the absence of an intercessory figure in the votive painting may be explained by the church's dedication. Nevertheless, the iconography stands in sharp contrast to other contemporary votive images, underscoring Peter's desires to establish his direct lineage through some of Moldavia's greatest leaders.

Peter's patronage of Dobrovăț follows a familial Moldavian tradition. In a document issued in Suceava on 7 October 1503, Stephen III outlines his wishes for the future ktetors of his monastery at Dobrovăț:

And after us, whoever is prince of our country, either from among our children or our people or whoever God chooses to be the leader of this land, Moldavia, that individual should not ruin our donations and our efforts, but to strengthen and continue them.⁶⁷

Peter's contributions thus aligned with his father's requests, Bogdan III's deeds at the site, and served as a model for Moldavia's future leaders to continue to protect and endow the monastic complex. This practice of patronage, moreover, aligns with the themes of dynastic lineage that are evident in key facets of the architecture and iconographic cycles of the Moldavian churches, including the votive murals, the various inscriptions, and the presence of the burial chamber at the center of the monastic churches.

Proclaiming dynastic legitimacy, however, is only one function of the votive murals and burial chambers in the Moldavian churches. These images and spaces transform the building into a site of perpetual remembrance through prayer and ritual of the deceased and of the patron – a concern central to donors throughout the Middle Ages. The site of burial reminded the faithful of the interred patron and his immediate family while also continually reminding the clergy of their spiritual obligations to the living and the dead. As such, the Moldavian funerary room presented a site for commemoration. Preserving memory, especially through liturgical ritual, was evidently of utmost concern to Moldavia's rulers. This was manifested in the design and decoration of the churches, but also through the gifts and donations extended to other sites, local and more distant, in efforts to ensure the ongoing remembrance and eventual salvation of the patrons.

Especially after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Moldavian patronage of both local and Athonite monasteries intensified, as revealed by the building projects, the monetary donations, and the array of manuscripts, icons, metalwork, and textiles gifted to select sites. Monk Isaiah from Hilandar Monastery even wrote in 1489 that Zographou Monastery was, in fact, "built by Stephen of Moldavia."⁶⁸ This did not mean that Stephen oversaw the initial construction of the site but, rather, that he served as its new ktetor, based on an initial familial ownership and his choice. This appellation of ktetor thus designated Stephen and his heirs as protectors of Orthodoxy in their own domain and beyond and, perhaps most

⁶⁷ *Documenta Romaniae Historica*, B, III: 526–530; Nicolae N. Pușcașu and Voica Maria Pușcașu, *Mănăstirea Dobrovățului: Monografie arheologică și istorică* (Putna: Editura Mitropolit Iacov Putneanul, 2012), 144–146.

⁶⁸ Năsturel, *Le Mont Athos et les Roumains*, 183, n. 25; Teodor Bodoșog and Florin Șindrilăru, *Ajutoarele românești la mănăstirile din Sfântul Munte Athos* (Pitești: Paralela 45, 2003), 218; Angela Zubco, *Biserica în Țara Românească și Moldova în secolele XIV–XVII: Relațiile cu Muntele Athos* (Chișinău: Pontos, 2001), 116.

importantly, rendered them akin to the Byzantine emperors who first took on this special role.

Stephen was an avid patron within and beyond Moldavia, including of the monasteries on Mount Athos and Saint Catherine Monastery at Mount Sinai, despite little evidence for the latter.⁶⁹ His heirs similarly engaged in acts of artistic and architectural patronage, but it was not until Peter took the throne in 1527 that we begin to see a renewed interest in such activities both in Moldavia and abroad. Like his father, Peter served as a patron of numerous Athonite monasteries. The Protaton pomenik lists him among the sponsors of the church, as does the one from Zographou.⁷⁰ To Karakalou Monastery, Peter directed funds for the rebuilding of the monastery's tower in 1534 and the restoration of the entire complex beginning in 1535.⁷¹ A document issued in 1536 by Sultan Süleyman I accorded Peter the right to restore the monastery, noting that, in the past, this site was in the care of the Moldavian ruler.⁷² Peter may have also been responsible for the patronage of a luxurious silver cover for a Tetraevangelion completed in 1462 and gifted to Esphigmenou Monastery in the north, near Hilandar.⁷³ This donation likely occurred after the fire of 1533 as an attempt to renew the institution's liturgical books and objects needed for the celebration of the liturgy.

Xeropotamou Monastery also received from Peter a richly executed and embellished Tetraevangelion (Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. Slav. 2).⁷⁴ The colophon on fol. 164v, at the conclusion of the Gospel of Mark, states the date of completion, 21 November 1534, as well as the strong desires of the patron to endow this luxurious manuscript to the Athonite monastery:

Through God's grace, the instruction of the Son, and the action of the Holy Spirit, I, John Peter voivode, the servant of my master Jesus Christ, through God's grace prince of the land of Moldavia, burning with desire and with immense love for all things divine, requested the writing of this Tetraevangelion. And I completed it and gifted it to Xeropotamou Monastery,

⁶⁹ A panagiarion of ca. 1500 from a Moldavian workshop is now in the Sinai collection. See Căndeia, *Mărturii românești peste hotare*, II: 65. On Moldavia and Mount Athos, see Alice Isabella Sullivan, "The Athonite Patronage of Stephen III of Moldavia, 1457–1504," *Speculum* 94, no. 1 (2019): 1–46. See also Radu G. Păun, "Mount Athos and the Byzantine-Slavic Tradition in Wallachia and Moldavia after the Fall of Constantinople," in *The Balkans and the Byzantine World Before and After the Captures of Constantinople, 1204 and 1453*, ed. Vlada Stanković (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 117–163.

⁷⁰ Căndeia, *Mărturii românești peste hotare*, II: 638.

⁷¹ Căndeia, *Mărturii românești peste hotare*, II: 513.

⁷² Căndeia, *Mărturii românești peste hotare*, II: 514.

⁷³ Căndeia, *Mărturii românești peste hotare*, II: 446.

⁷⁴ Căndeia, *Mărturii românești peste hotare*, II: 77.

dedicated to the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste. And if anyone will ever try to remove it from there, or strip it of its silver [cover], may he be damned in this world and the next one. In the year 7043 [1534], month November, day 21.⁷⁵

This colophon also offers an example of the kind of spiritual sanctions such dedicatory inscriptions often included. Peter's commissions, especially the manuscripts he sponsored, often conclude with a curse. The text follows a long medieval tradition, demonstrating the patron's appreciation for the work created, as well as their efforts to protect it in perpetuity.

Like Neagoe Basarab of Wallachia, Peter extended donations to Dionysiou Monastery, thus following in a familial tradition of patronage. An inscription from 1547/48 (7056) at Dionysiou reveals that Peter and his wife, Elena, rebuilt and painted the church and the refectory of the monastery.⁷⁶ Peter and his family even appear in a votive mural in the interior of the church. In addition, the Moldavian prince and his wife gifted two epitachelia executed in gold thread and colored silks in Moldavian workshops.⁷⁷ Dionysiou also received from the Moldavian princely family an epitaphios completed on 15 January 1545 (Fig. 9).⁷⁸ The collection of the monastery also preserves a wooden icon stand with inlaid bone decorations – characteristic of Venetian woodwork – that dates to the time of Peter's patronage and could be another of his impressive gifts to Dionysiou (Fig. 10).⁷⁹ Much more remains to be determined about the extent of his patronage, or how his deeds compared to those of Neagoe, for example, based on surviving evidence and close analysis of visual and textual sources.

⁷⁵ Ioan Caproșu and Elena Chiaburu, eds., *Însemnări de pe manuscrise și cărți vechi din Țara Moldovei* (Iași: Demiurg, 2008), 51–52.

⁷⁶ Căndea, *Mărturii românești peste hotare*, II: 424; Năsturel, *Le Mont Athos et les Roumains*, 151–161.

⁷⁷ Căndea, *Mărturii românești peste hotare*, II: 434.

⁷⁸ Căndea, *Mărturii românești peste hotare*, II: 434.

⁷⁹ Karakatsanis, ed., *Treasures of Mount Athos*, 369–370.

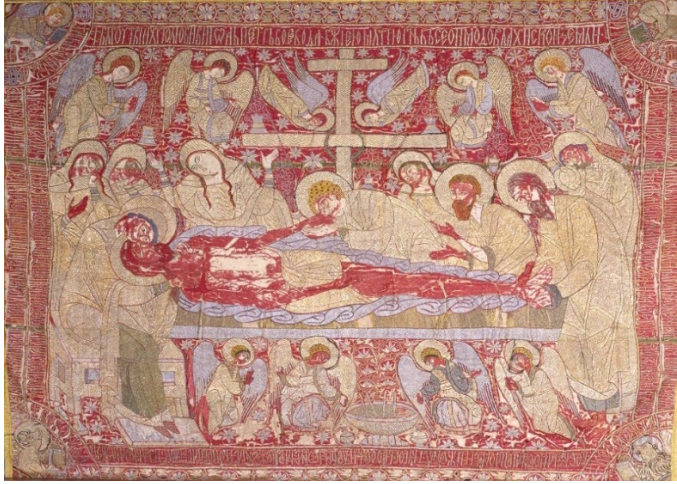


Fig. 9. Epitaphios with gold and silver thread gifted by Peter Rareş and his family to Dionysiou Monastery on 15 January 1545 (source: Dionysiou Monastery)



Fig. 10. Wooden icon stand with inlaid bone decoration, 1547, Dionysiou Monastery, Mount Athos (source: Dionysiou Monastery)

Conclusions

Donors and their donations profoundly impacted the cultural, spiritual, and artistic landscapes of Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean basin in the late medieval and post-Byzantine periods, as the examples of Neagoe Basarab of Wallachia and Peter Rareș of Moldavia demonstrate in this study. As evident through their deeds, these two rulers continued and transformed a tradition of patronage of key religious sites within and beyond the borders of their respective realms, serving, in turn, as examples to their heirs. As such, examining the textual and material evidence in a broader context of patronage can yield richer insights than just limiting the research to a particular time, figure, or place. The patronage of these two individuals, therefore, was impacted by their relationships with family members and spiritual mentors – Saint Niphon in the case of Neagoe and Grigore Roșca for Peter – who spiritually guided and informed their decisions to commission art, initiate endowments, and support particular sites. As such, it is important to acknowledge that no single individual should be considered responsible for any given creation at this time. All output was the result of prolonged collaborations that negotiated between the desires of the patron, the learned guidance of their mentors and advocates, the abilities of artists, and the availability of materials and resources. The picture that emerges is complex and can yield exciting insights into donors and their donations, as well as the transfer of knowledge across large distances at this time through the movement of people, objects, and ideas.

In addition to following a tradition of patronage and reflecting the compromises that unfolded in local contexts, the deeds of Neagoe and Peter reflect their humanity, personal piety, and ideological concerns with rulership. Through their gifts and donations, the rulers of the north-Danubian principalities demonstrated their concerns with creativity and visual expression, as well as ensured their commemoration among the communities of the faithful who received their gifts. Their remembrance in the afterlife was a key impetus behind such efforts. But perhaps more importantly, the donations confirmed that these Eastern Christian rulers followed in the footsteps of the Byzantine emperors who had been notable patrons, including of the key monastic communities on Mount Athos and at the Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai. Byzantium's legacy, both directly and indirectly, played a key role in shaping the cultural, religious, and political life of Eastern European regions before and especially after 1453.⁸⁰ The imperial model was thus transformed in Wallachia and Moldavia at various moments in the post-Byzantine period, through the deeds of key rulers,

⁸⁰ Nicolae Iorga, *Byzantium after Byzantium*.

as the two principalities adapted Byzantine cultural, artistic, and ideological traditions in their own local contexts.⁸¹ The legacy of Byzantium endured, as did the Orthodoxy of the people. Yet it was the people who made the decisions in the end, and their donations speak as much to the breadth of patronage as to the humanity, piety, and ambitions of the donors themselves.

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⁸¹ See Zachary Chitwood, Mihai-D. Grigore, "Byzantinisches Stiftungswesen ohne byzantinischen Staat: Die Entwicklung der byzantinisch-orthodoxen Stiftungskultur von 1204 bis zu den Fürsten der Walachei im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert," in *Byzanz und seine europäischen Nachbarn. Politische Interdependenzen und kulturelle Missverständnisse*, ed. Lüdger Körntgen, et al (Mainz: RGZM, 2020), 91–102.

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