

SAINT NEAGOE BASARAB

THE DIARY OF SAINT PLATONIDA



BY DIACONEȘTI MONASTERY, ROMANIA

SAINT NEAGOE BASARAB

The Diary of Saint Platonida

Written and translated by Diaconești Monastery



Uncut Mountain Press

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1 of 3 original icons from Ostrov Monastery (mentioned on p. 298):
 “Descent from the Cross”, ca. 1522,
 Collection of National Museum of Art in Bucharest.

NOTE ON THE PRESENT WORK

THIS BOOK IS NOT purely a historical work, nor is it a piece of literary fiction, and it is certainly not a hagiography. Instead, it is a blend that draws from each of these genres.

It may be regarded as a historical work to the extent that it traces the chronological course of the Romanian Voivode¹ Neagoe Basarab's reign as recorded—albeit with the usual disputes—in two primary sources: *The Cantacuzino Chronicle*² and *The Life of Saint Niphon*³ by Gavriil the Protos⁴ of Mount Athos, along with other documents and scholarly studies.

The literary fiction aspect concerns the narrative style used: there are no available biographical records of Nun Platonida, formerly Princess Despina of Wallachia. The “diary” format was chosen for its capacity to offer a more varied stylistic approach, avoiding the inevitable monotony of traditional historical narratives. This

1 Ruler of a Romanian state. “Voivode” is a princely title and carries with it the functions of a military governorship. —ENGLISH ED.

2 *The Cantacuzino Chronicle* is a significant 17th-century chronicle of Wallachia, attributed to the Cantacuzino family, which offers a comprehensive account of political and social events from 1669 to 1716, but also covering a broader period, extending back to around 1200 BC.

3 Saint Niphon of Constantinople (+1508). [Also referred to as “Father,” and “Patriarch” throughout the text. —ENGLISH ED.]

4 The administrative leader of Mount Athos' monastic community.

[Ka-pro-shu] of “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University in Iași [Iashih] for his detailed review of the text from a historical perspective, which played a crucial role in our decision to publish. Lastly, we are deeply appreciative of Mr. Marcel Petrișor [Peh-tree-shor], who, out of his great respect for our monastery, generously agreed to write the book’s preface.

May the efforts of all who have contributed their hearts to this work bear lasting fruit!

THE SISTERHOOD OF DIACONEȘTI MONASTERY

*July 12, 2012,
during the feast of the Holy Icon Prodromitsa of Mount Athos*



Lid of wooden box showing Prince Neagoe Basarab and his immediate family in adoration of the Virgin Blachernitissa, 1512–1521, Wallachia, modern Romania, now in the collection of Saint Catherine Monastery on Mount Sinai.

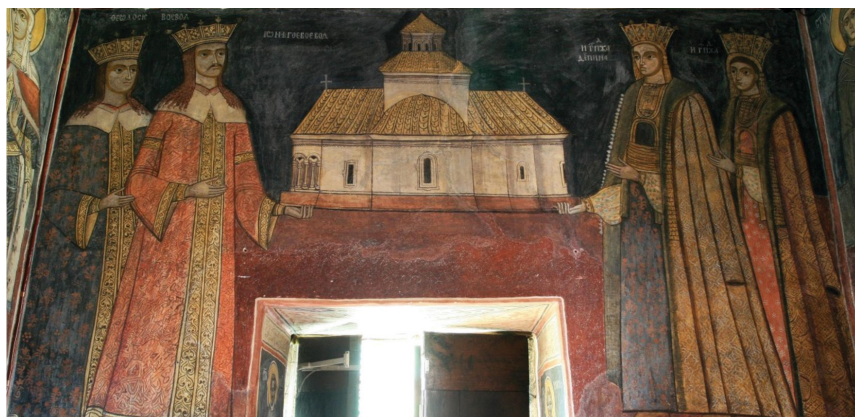


Ostrov Monastery House

On December 22, 1838, the cells and administrative buildings were destroyed by a fire, and were rebuilt on the old foundations in 1940. Extensive restorations were carried out in 1940, 1956–1957 and 1962–1963.



Belltower mosaic icon, depicting the Holy Voivode Neagoe Basarab and his wife, Lady Despina (as Nun Platonida), on either side of the Theotokos.



Fresco, Holy Monastery of Ostrov

Neagoe Basarab with his son Teodosie of Wallachia, his wife Despina Branković, and an uncertain daughter of the couple who offers the model of the church (most accepted interpretation being Stana Basarab).

FOREWORD TO THE ROMANIAN EDITION

Dear Reader,

The book you hold in your hands, whether you intend to read it thoroughly or merely browse through it, is more than a mere history of a distinguished Wallachian ruling family—the family of the Christian Voivode Neagoe Basarab (1512-1521), who is now honored as a saint and commemorated on September 26. Rather, it draws inspiration from our first—and indeed, our only—book of teachings on the Christian principles of governing a nation and guiding its people, ensuring they fulfill their purpose in this life and attain salvation in the world to come.

Written in the same spirit and following the model of *Neagoe Basarab's Teachings to His Son Theodosius*, as well as other Eastern texts with similar educational purposes—such as Basil the Macedonian's advices to his son Leon, Constantine Porphyrogenitus' instructions to his son Romanos, Vladimir Monomakh's counsel to his sons, Euthymius of Tarnovo's *Panegyric of Saint Constantine the Great*, and Constantine of Kostenets' *Life of Stefan Lazarević*—the writings of Nun Platonida (formerly known as Lady Despina Militsa, who passed away in 1554) not only embody the devotion and grace of the Orthodox nuns at the Holy Monastery of Diaconești in the Trotuș [Troh-toosh] Valley but also provide a masterful literary portrayal

SAINT PLATONIDA'S DIARY

ON THE 15TH DAY OF SEPTEMBER, IN THE YEAR 1551,
AT THE OSTROV HERMITAGE:

*What is man, that Thou art mindful of him? Or the son of man,
that Thou visitest him? Thou hast made him a little lower than the
angels; with glory and honour hast Thou crowned him . . .*⁷

TODAY MARKS THIRTY years since our good ruler and God's servant, Neagoe Basarab, departed from this evanescent life, leaving behind a valley of pain to join the eternal heavenly abodes. May God rest his soul, along with the souls of our children: Theodosius, Peter, John, Angelina, Ruxandra, and nun Sophronia!

As evening descends, retracing my steps to my cell after the Vespers, I seized pen and paper to unburden my heart for the edification of our descendants. Joy and tears, fulfilment and sorrow, glory and bitter defeats . . .

Today, with all my offspring interred before me, *my days like a shadow have declined, and I like grass am withered*.⁸ I could not endure the light of day above me if the radiant countenance of His Majesty

7 Psalm 8:4-5.

8 Psalm 101:11.

ON THE 20TH DAY OF SEPTEMBER, IN THE YEAR 1551:

*On Thee have I been made fast from the womb;
from my mother's womb Thou art my protector. In Thee
continually is my singing of praise . . .*¹³

THE EARLIEST MEMORIES OF my childhood harken back to Serbian lands, where I first glimpsed the light of day and received the Grace of Holy Baptism. My father, Despot Jovan Branković, ruled over the Serbs in those days. I was nurtured at the Court in Srem by erudite tutors versed not only in all sciences but chiefly in the sagacity of our righteous Faith¹⁴ and the *teachings* of the Holy Bible.

Serbia, humbled by the Turkish yoke, bore the heavy burden of misfortune after the dire Battle of 1389 at Kosovo. There, my great-grandfather, glorious Tsar Lazarus, suffered defeat at the hands of the Ottomans on the Kosovo Plain. Our affliction began then, a choice willingly made, esteeming the Kingdom of Heaven above earthly glory. A Serbian adage arose then: “Defeats bring more wisdom than victory, and earthly glory is useless in the hour of Judgment.”

My childhood at the Serbian Court was accompanied by tales of despots recounted ere bedtime, and whispered hymns extolling the courage and piety of Tsar Lazarus. The defeat at Kosovo garnered greater reverence than any triumph. Subtly instilled in us was the belief that each son born to a Serbian lineage bore one duty only: of being an heir to Tsar Lazarus’ suffering.

Even unto this day, the memory of the Battle of Kosovo endures, narrated to me in the evenings of my infancy:

Two formidable armies clashed. One, fiercely defending its land and Faith, confronted the other, driven by the relentless ambition to conquer, prey, and subdue. Sultan Murad I led his crowd of Janissaries and spahees,¹⁵ while Tsar Lazarus rallied the entire army of the Serbian Land. Before the impending battle, he

13 Psalm 70:6.

14 The term pertains to the Orthodox Faith, derived from the Greek roots ‘orthos,’ meaning ‘straight’ or ‘right,’ and ‘doxa,’ meaning ‘opinion’.

15 Ottoman aristocratic cavalrymen.

decree that their merchants were restricted to trading solely in the three major Wallachian towns: Târgoviște, Câmpulung, and Târgșor, under the vigilant supervision of the royal guards.



ON THE 1ST DAY OF JUNE, IN THE YEAR 1552:

UPON THIS DAY, the celebration of Saint Justin the Martyr and Philosopher, a missive reached me from Kyr Dobromir, the painter with golden hands. He declared the completion of the icon I commissioned. Praise be to God! It now must undergo a period of drying, followed by the meticulous application of wax and resins.

Few rival Kyr Dobromir in the realm of icon painting. His creations echo those crafted in the Byzantine Courts of Macedonia, Constantinople, or Srem. This virtuoso became a providential boon to us, particularly aiding in the restoration of monasteries after Voivode Neagoe's ascension to the throne. Kyr Dobromir, along with his four diligent apprentices, adorned Wallachia with the splendour of their artistry. His divine talent breathed celestial beauty into our sacred spaces, proving invaluable, especially in the establishment of Curtea de Argeș.

As the dawn of my existence unfolds, I reminisce about those radiant days . . .

“How beloved are Thy dwellings, O Lord of hosts; my soul longeth and fainteth for the courts of the Lord.”¹¹² . . .

In 1513, Voivode Neagoe initiated the construction of the Argeș Monastery. The pursuit of inspiration for this monumental endeavour marked the commencement. He yearned for the Church of the Dormition to embody unparalleled beauty, assembling a cadre of premier stonemasons—Wallachians, Georgians, Armenians. Initially, he requested them to envision the construction plan to the best of their abilities. Then, the lord personally selected the

¹¹² Psalm 83:1.

Neagoe, ever delighted, would commence recounting the life of the holy martyr: "Once there was a pagan emperor named Trajan, who had a beautiful small daughter with shining eyes and a kind gaze, called Drosis. She had a golden heart . . ."

Angelina, eager to participate, would interject, "Dad, last time you said she had a heart entirely golden!" Neagoe, with a smile, would concur and proceed: "Close to the palace lived five prudent virgins leading a life of prayer. They would visit the places where martyrs died, anoint their bodies, and shroud them in white, pure linen."

"Dear father, is it true that if we lived in those times, we could have given them some of those beautiful linen cloths used by Mother and Granny Neaga?" "Yes, my dear child! Saint Drosis had the exact same thought. One day, she took her most expensive dress, and as the watchmen slept, she presented it to the five virgins to cover the bodies of the martyrs."

Angelina would burst with joy, resembling a small silver bell. "Just like me! I do the same, father! I wait for maid Călțuna to fall asleep, and when she starts snoring, I slowly come to you!"

Thus, the life of Saint Drosis wove itself into the musings and innocence of Angelina's heart. When Neagoe reached the point where the five virgins suffered martyrdom, Angelina would grow sombre, yearning to join them in death, echoing the desires of Saint Drosis.

"One day when the guards were asleep, Saint Drosis proceeded to the copper furnace where Christians were martyred. But on her way, she realized she was not baptised and decided to immerse herself three times in a nearby river." "Dad, thank goodness I am baptised!" Angelina exclaimed, her eyelids growing heavy. Prince Neagoe would tighten his embrace and continue in a softer voice: "After the baptism, she prayed: 'Lord, may your Will be done with me!' And just then, God took her soul along with the five virgins to His wedding chambers."

Angelina would conclude the story, nearly asleep, "And she now rejoices in Heaven with the Groom Christ..."

IN THE YEAR 1556,
ADDITION BY
METROPOLITAN ANANIA
OF WALLACHIA:

Here concludes the chronicle inscribed by the hand of the much-afflicted Nun Platonida, Lady Despina Militsa of Wallachia, during the final years of her sojourn at the Ostrov Hermitage. She breathed her last on January 30th, 1554, at Sibiu, succumbing to the plague, and there she was interred. By the benevolence of God, her remains were transported from Sibiu and laid to rest in the sanctified grounds at Argeş, alongside the mortal remains of Lord Neagoe Basarab, in the annum 1556.

Her daughters, too, came to their final rest. Princess Stanca, at first betrothed to Voivode Ştefăniţă of Moldavia, found their union clouded by his stern and fiery nature. Fate took a grim turn when Voivode Ştefăniţă succumbed to poisoning orchestrated by the nobility, prompting Lady Stanca's return to her maternal home. Shortly thereafter, she embraced the quiet life of the cloister, assuming the name Nun Sophronia. She departed this world prematurely and was laid to rest by her grieving mother in the hallowed halls of the church at Argeş.

Princess Ruxandra, she of extraordinary beauty, became the consort of Voivode Radu of Afumaţi [A-fu-ma-tzih], scion of the departed Voivode Radu the Great. Following his demise and



It is extraordinary to meet, in an Orthodox Saint, both the grandeur of a royal court and the ascetic life of a princess-turned-nun. In the diary of Saint Platonida (+1554), the Lady Despina Militsa in the world, and the life of her husband Lord Saint Neagoe Basarab, such a rarity is revealed in a most intimate way. These are exemplary Christians, characterized by the extreme humility and overflowing love which one admires in a ruler and which characterizes the life of saints.

This text is “not...purely a historical work, nor is it a piece of literary fiction, nor simply hagiography. Instead, it is a blend that draws from each of these genres” (from the Note on the Present Work).

With the many reflections, emotions, lessons, inspirations, and adventures found within these pages, enjoyment and enrichment will be the fruit given to every type of reader. The Holy Monastery of Diaconești has written “a masterful literary portrayal of the era in which the venerated voivode and his esteemed wife lived” (from the Foreword).



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