

ADRIAN IONIȚĂ*
BEATRICE KELEMEN**
ALEXANDRU SIMON***

BETWEEN *NEGRU VODĂ* AND THE BLACK PRINCE
[PRINȚUL NEGRU] OF WALACHIA: GRAVE 10 IN
ST. NICHOLAS PRINCELY CHURCH OF CURTEA DE ARGHEȘ
(Summary)

Keywords: Wallachia, <Nicholas->Alexander, Basarab, Hungary, Louis I of Anjou.

In 1920, the first rulers of Wallachia were still deemed – rather wealthy – peasants that reigned in just and pious manner over lands still uncorrupted by – more modern – stylish vices and aims. A grave completely changed this picture born out of the Romanian political needs of the early 20th century. Almost a century later, the impact of this grave is still far from being exhausted. This is perhaps the greatest and simplest mystery housed by this grave, commonly debated as well as adored. After the end of the Great War (1914–1918) that also brought in 1916 and in 1917 the devastations of the graves of Mircea I *cel Bătrân/cel Mare* (the Elder/the Great) in Cozia and Radu IV *cel Mare* at Dealu, two figures – in particular the former – of paramount importance – both in history as well as in historiography – for Wallachia and Romania, the interest in historical legitimacy increased as the Kingdom of Romania was about to officially become *Grand Romania*. The researches – in the end highly interdisciplinary (even according to modern standards) – conducted at the Princely St. Nicholas Church in Curtea de Argeș were a

* Institutul de Arheologie „Vasile Pârvan” al Academiei Române, București.

** Institutul de Cercetări Interdisciplinare în Bio-Nano Științe, Universitatea „Babeș-Bolyai” din Cluj-Napoca.

*** Centrul de Studii Transilvane al Academiei Române – Filiala Cluj-Napoca; Centrul de Studiere a Populației, Universitatea „Babeș-Bolyai” din Cluj-Napoca.

prime example of these efforts. The most important discovery was – unquestionably – the so-called Grave 10, the only fully preserved – even until the present day – burial in Wallachia of a high ranking medieval political figure. The tomb was attributed to the legendary *Negru Vodă* (known also as Radu *the Black*), (even to) Basarab I, Wladislaw I or Radu I. The new researches initiated – both at the “princely court” and at the “princely church” – almost four decades later at Curtea de Argeș (1967–1973) should have led to more clarity. Instead, they fuelled controversies and confusions in spite of the discovery of an older church – presumed since the 1930s – underneath the extant princely church (commonly dated after 1340, with – at times – emphasis on the 1360s). Because the first church was dated even to the early 1200s (the dating of the so-called Argeș I Church further – and significantly more likely – ranges between the mid 1200s and the early 1300s) and as Grave 10 was increasingly associated with either Wladislaw I (1364 – c. 1377) or Radu I (c. 1377 – c. 1383), little or no connection was established between Argeș I and Grave 10, ascribed to the – since the early 1970s called – Argeș II Church, albeit the fact that the evidence suggested a different approach (already since the Interwar period and especially after the late 1960s and the early 1970s).

The growing speculations and mounting controversies following the discovery of Grave 10 have diverted attention from the primary source: the journal of excavations of Virgiliu Drăghiceanu. Although his researches followed the tradition of “romantic archaeology” and far less with the acerbic analytical manner developed at about the same time by the school of Vasile Pârvan, the value of the information transmitted by Drăghiceanu remains unquestionable. According to his sketch, (more than) apparently overlooked for almost a century, the stratigraphic succession for the disputed Grave 10 was: 1. Boulder pavement III-1827 level (7 cm); 2. Sand (25 cm); 3. Brick pavement II-1750 level (3 cm); 4. The mortar of pavement II (5 cm); 5. Earth (6 cm); 6. The (yellowish) mortar of pavement I (5 cm); 7. The “seal” (i.e. the *pecetia* in the text) of stones above the cover (cap/lid i.e. the *capac*) of the sarcophagus (25 cm); 8. The plate (*capac*) of the sarcophagus (16 cm); 9. Sarcophagus (50 cm); 10. Earth (12 cm); 11. Backwater gravel (20 cm). 12. Foundation (i.e. *temelia*/virgin ground).

In sum: approximately 75 cm consisting from different layers stood on the cover of the sarcophagus, including 3 different pavements and in particular some 25 cm of masonry (consisting of boulder, calcareous tuff, 2 kinds of bricks) underneath the eldest pavement. The “seal” also

contained parts from a broken dome. That dome, “re-used” for Grave 10, had once belonged to the Argeș I Church.

The major shortcoming of Drăghiceanu’s researches was that the foundations of the earlier church remained completely unnoticed. The first church was situated in the naos of the Princely St. Nicholas Church (consequently designated Argeș II Church), more precisely within the central bay and the lateral southern bay. In both churches, Grave 10 was in the right hand part of the naos (the south-western corner of the naos was traditionally the place of honour in any church). It was discovered between the southern pillars of the Argeș II Church (at 1.00 m from the western pillar and at 2.20 m from the eastern one). Grave 10 had a sarcophagus, the only one discovered in the Princely St. Nicholas Church, covered with a plate (possibly the – certainly now lost – tombstone), the so-called (in 1920) *capac*, further covered with a thick layer of masonry that certainly saved it from profanations (Grave 10 is the only intact medieval grave discovered within the walls of the extant St. Nicholas church).

Based on the archaeological evidence, Grave 10 belonged to Argeș I Church, demolished most likely in the 1350s when work on the Argeș II church began shortly. In this case, none of the previous identifications of the deceased laid to rest in Grave 10 can be accepted. A high-ranking – ruling (given also the diadema on the skull of the deceased) male political figure (aged 35 to 45) was buried around the 1350 – in the Argeș I Church, a church unharmed during both the Tartar invasion of 1241 (if the church existed at that time) and – most importantly – during Charles-Robert’s Wallachian campaign of 1330. ¹⁴C dating places his time of death at 1330/1340 ±30, enabling thus to identify him with one of the unnamed sons of Basarab that – according to the king in 1335 – had confronted Charles in 1330.

The religious *Latin* inscriptions of the rings found in Grave 10 might be relevant in this context. One featured an angelic salutation, *AVE MARIA GRACIA PLENA DOMNINUS TE<CUM>*. The other – clearly the most impressive one – was covered with a talismanic inscription taken from the Gospels (Luke IV, 30), † *IESUS AUTEM TRANSIENS PER MEDI <UM ILLORUM IBAT>* and *AL MA*. The latter was eventually read in the early 1920s as *AL(exander)* and *MA(ry)*. Hence the ring was deemed the engagement ring of <Nicholas-> Alexander and (his first wife) Mary, passed on to his son (which would have applied for both Wladislaw I and Radu I). Such a passing-on of the ring seemed from the beginning a “highly personal” and rather implausible interpretation.

Additionally, recent independent scholarly analysis have established that the most likely reading is *AL (V)VA: Alexander (V)Vayouda*.

Rings with *Latin* devotional inscriptions were common among the high ranking feudal – chivalric – elites in 13th–14th century Western Europe. For instance, the devout knight, Edward of Woodstock, best known as the *Black Prince*, Edward III of England’s son, also possessed a ring – of similar style – with the (same) inscription † *IESUS AUTEM TRANSIENS PER MEDI <UM ILLORUM IBAT>*. This was not the case (“custom”) in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. In Wallachia only one additional – yet modest – inscribed ring (discovered at Lerești, near Câmpulung, one – if not the – of the first capitals of emerging Wallachia) can be added to those found in Grave 10 and in Grave 7, the so-called Grave of Nan Udobă (the latter was inscribed *Hilff Goth*). Rather significantly, the only preserved object from the 1200s–1300s (discovered on the territory of future Wallachia) comparable to those in Grave 10 is the late 13th century western princely gold female diadem from Goranu, just east of the Olt.

The inscription on the ring redraws attention upon a dyptich published in the 1923 volume devoted to the discoveries made three years earlier in Curtea de Argeș. In the turmoil of 1711, the dyptich of the princely monastery in Câmpulung, where Basarab († c. 1352) and Nicholas-Alexander († 1364) were buried, contained the following princely succession: (*IGD* and *voivode*): *IGD Basarab Voivode* and his *Lady Margaret*, *IGD Nicholas Voivode*, *IGD Alexander Voivode* and his *Lady Mary*, *IGD Radu Voivode*, *IGD Wladislaw Voivode* and *IGD Radu Voivode*. Only two wives were mentioned: those of Basarab and of Alexander. The first one, Margaret, had clearly been a *Latin* rite Christian. The second one, Mary, was possibly also a *Latin* rite Christian. None of the *Greek* rite wives of Wladislaw I and Radu I was mentioned. And there was a Nicholas and an Alexander placed after Basarab, though the tombstone in Câmpulung, visible throughout time, read Nicholas-Alexander. Some knew prior to the Romanian days of Grave 10 – and they were pious *Greek* rite monks – that there had been a Nicholas (buried in their church) and an Alexander after Basarab. All, except for the last Radu, were erased by the mid 1700s.

The dating of Grave 10, the inscription on the ring and the dyptich “partition” the “dual nature” of Nicholas-Alexander, the only son of Basarab known by name until now. This son was both highly *Latin* and profoundly *Greek*, both natures being supported by apparently irrefutable evidence. Yet (this) Alexander was never once called Nicholas-

Alexander during his lifetime, with the – plausible – exception of a charter, preserved in a – nevertheless curious – copy from 1618, issued by him for the princely church in Câmpulung in the memory of the recently deceased Basarab. Seemingly, until 1370, Nicholas was used in relation to Alexander only on very special occasions connected to (*Greek* rite) rites of passage: in relation to Basarab I's death, in the 1370 variants of the testament of Chariton of Kutlumus, the first Athonite monastery to come under Wallachian patronage, and on Nicholas' own tombstone. Otherwise – mainly in the *Latin* rite environment – his was simply named Alexander.

The reasons behind this double-name continue to elude us. If Nicholas had been added – following a Patriarchal command – in order to reinforce the *Greek* rite belief of Alexander (and/or to emphasize his conversion from the *Latin* rite and implicitly Wallachia's new allegiance), the name should have been inserted in the charters of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople from May 1359, but this was clearly not the case. We are therefore compelled to presume that this son of Basarab was baptized Nicholas because he was probably born around the feast of the saint and Alexander possibly in relation to the marriage of Basarab's daughter, Theodora, to the future Bulgarian tsar John Alexander (c. 1321).

This leaves us with two questions: why Nicholas was used so seldom during his lifetime and why preference was given to Alexander, when it would have been more at hand to use simply Nicholas, his first name after all. Chariton of Kutlumus, future metropolite of Wallachia (1372 – c. 1380) and *protos* of Athos (1375 – c. 1380), was the only one to call him just Nicholas in the second version of his testament (November 1370), less than a decade after Nicholas-Alexander's death (who then completely vanished from the third and last form of the testament from 1378). Consequently, we must confront the existence of two Alexander, sons of Basarab. This would not be a medieval novelty (Stephen III of Moldavia had two sons, both heirs to his throne yet under different circumstances, one an illegitimate offspring, and the other a legitimate son; while Voicu of Hunedoara had John/*Iancu*, the famed crusader, and John/*Ivașcu*, his younger brother, and both might have been legitimate offsprings from different marriages).

Nicholas was used to distinguish between the two (sons), as the emphasis was clearly placed on the name of Alexander (in both cases). As the other Alexander, commonly referred to in Papal (1345) or royal Hungarian documents (1355) as Alexander Basarab, passed away before

Nicholas-Alexander assumed full command of Wallachia, turning it towards Byzantium (at some point between February 1355, the last time Alexander Basarab was recorded alive, and May 1359, when the patriarchal charters were issued), there was no further need to distinguish between them on political and ecclesiastical soil. Nicholas-Alexander was called by his full name only in the face of death (Basarab's death, Chariton's death and his own). His mother might have been a Greek rite Christian, where as the mother of the deceased in Grave 10 had Germanic roots as the first DNA tests suggest (that would connect her either to Hungarian noble families, issued from clans immigrated from the German areas, such as the Lackfi family, or to the Saxon communities, such as the one led – in the late 1290s and early 1310s in nearby Câmpulung/Langenau – by count Lawrence). Although in the dyptich of Câmpulung, Nicholas was placed before Alexander, yet without any mention of a wife or of offsprings, hence suggesting that he was older than Alexander, it is difficult to view regard him as older than the deceased in Grave 10, as furthermore the very record of Alexander and his family seems to resemble a “footnote” in the dyptich.

Several questions still surround the grave that should not have been visible in the new triumphant Argeș II Church, yet without harming the deceased. Voislav, *the son of grand Alexander Voivode* (as the inscription on his tombstone read), buried in the Argeș II Church, was most likely the son of the deceased in Grave 10. Elisabeth, *the daughter of Alexander Voivode*, married to Wladislaw, future duke of Oppeln, around 1355, was also probably the child of this deceased. But who was the husband of Clara *de Hungaria, Voivodissa Wlachia* (1360), by 1370 the widow of *Alexander Vayouda in Wlachia*, and the mother of the Bulgarian (of Vidin) and Serbian Tsarinas, Anna and Anca, as well as Wladislaw I's *noverca*? Who was the *David*, featured in a fresco of the Argeș II Church, of *Salomon Wladislaw I*, who painted the new church and was depicted as its donor, while another voivode stood humble and insignificant at the feet of Jesus, of the Virgin Mary and of St. Nicholas (not St. John the Baptist) in the *Déisis* of the Princely church? And when did the deceased in Grave 10 become the *Black Voivode*?

Begotten by the – once Hungarian – Serbian-Bulgarian-Wallachian *triconfinium* (Belgrade – Vidin – Severin), the deceased in Grave 10 was – alike Stephen Dushan of Serbia and John Alexander of Bulgaria (all of approximately the same age) – a product of the entente between Stephen Milutin (King of Serbia), Michael Shishman (at the time only lord over Vidin) and Basarab (rising grand-voivode of Wallachia) in the 1310s, an

entente turned following the marriage between Helena, the sister of John Alexander (Michael Shishman's nephew and Basarab's son-in-law through the former's wedding to Theodora around 1320–1321), and Stephen Dushan (Milutin's grandson) in 1332 into a monarchical regional alliance. King Charles-Robert of Hungary apparently attempted to counteract the alliance by establishing the "Visegrád group" (with John of Bohemia and Casimir III of Poland) first in 1335 (and then in 1339). The compromise reached by – probably – summer 1347 between the sons of Charles-Robert, Louis, and Basarab, Alexander, was intended to serve not only to end the Hungarian-Walachian conflict (by generating Wallachian monarchical statehood and unification under Angevine suzerainty) but also to create political and dynastical connections between the two "rivalling medieval groups".