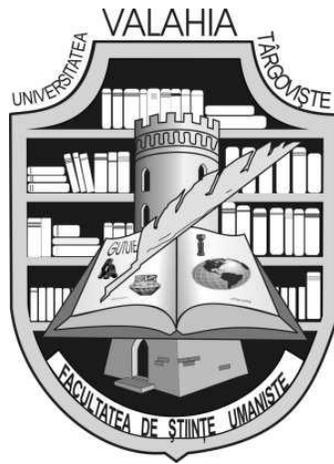


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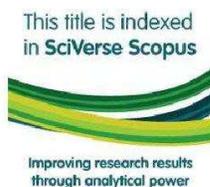
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Basarab I at the Beginnings of Wallachia. An Attempt to Recompose the Moment of His Takeover of Power

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Abstract: The beginnings of the Wallachian mediaeval state remain an unwritten page in mediaeval history. The absence of relevant documents apt to set a chronology, to confirm the moment that the first voivode, Basarab I, came into power, prompted the Romanian researchers to formulate viewpoints which could only be partially accepted in the scientific world. Our contribution is to try and arrange the facts logically so as to unravel the complicated file of the Romanian state genesis. In approaching the moment, two aspects of the research must be considered. The first refers to identifying, as accurately as possible, the first Wallachian voivode, which is necessary to formulate general considerations on the period during which he might have assumed power in the sub-Carpathian territories. The other aspect has to do with the entire external political context, with the moment of maximum expansion of the Golden Horde Khanate, under Nogai's command, when the area was probably ruled by an intercessor of the fierce Tatar prince. The respite following Nogai's assassination marked the beginning of the unification process south of the Carpathians, which we do not exactly know whether it was initiated under voivode Basarab or it was just completed by him. The dynastic crisis of Hungary, along with the Transylvanian attempts to break away from its trusteeship, also favoured the process of territorial unification south of the Carpathians. Therefore, even though Wallachia and its leader Basarab I were first mentioned in a 1324 diploma, we may assume that the first Romanian mediaeval state was already formed at the beginning of the third decade of the 14th century.

Key-words: Golden Horde, Banate of Severin, great voivode, Hungary, Basarab I.

The first three decades of the 14th century were of utmost importance in the emergence and consolidation of Romanian statehood. Furthermore, the final moment, of the military conflict, represented by Hungary's campaign in the territory south of the Carpathians, in the autumn of 1330, was a military success which sanctioned the international recognition of Wallachia as a state.

The reasons for the early Hungarian-Wallachian conflict should be sought in the first part of the 13th century, in the colonisation policy initiated by the kingdom, impeded and even interrupted by the great Mongolian invasion. The Hungarian military force decimated by the Mongols in 1241 could no longer efficiently provide the defence of marginal areas, even

though Hungary was not willing to abandon its positions in the European East.

It was under these circumstances that King Béla IV turned his eyes to the outer Carpathian area where he thought he should set a crusader force, St. John's Order. The act of colonisation mentions that here there were small politico-territorial formations and by subordinating them Hungary was hoping to pave the way to the subdual of Vidin, the gate to Bulgaria, as well (I.-A. Pop, 2011, p. 31).

Therefore, the 1247 Diploma of the Joannites is an important indicator of the unrealistic claims over the areas bordering the Kingdom of Hungary. A typical example is precisely Cumania included by the issuer of the document, King Béla IV, in the initial title: *Bela dei*

gratia Hungarie, Dalmatie, Chroatie, Ramae, Servie, Lodomerie, Cumanicqe rex, in perpetuum”*. There is a huge contradiction between the title and the references to Cumania in the diploma. According to the provisions of the document, it was conceded to the Knights Hospitaller for a period of 25 years without any economic claims with the firm promise that the kingdom would take part in the consolidation and fortification of the area. In fact, we may understand that the Hungarian rule over the region was an entreaty not a certainty.

The installation of the authority of the Golden Horde, a nomad state which had emerged after the great invasion of 1241 and rapidly strengthened its power over eastern parts of the European continent, put an end to Hungary’s claims, initially over Cumania and, gradually, in the glorious years of Prince Nogai, over some territories on the right bank of the Olt river. The assertion, on the Bulgarian throne, of boyar Gheorghe Terter (1280) and the launch of the campaign against Hungary (1285) had direct consequences on the balance of forces in the Romanian outer Carpathian area. The only enclave, the Banate of Severin, would also disappear from the Hungarian administrative system around 1291**, in the context of the formation of pre-state entities south of the Carpathians.

The lack of documented information throws any attempt to reconstruct the last stage of the emergence of the first Romanian mediaeval state to the realm of suppositions. That is why we can only record the attestation of the first voivode, Basarab I, and of his country in a late diploma from 1324***. Whatever happened in a previous period is however impossible to state with precision. At what moment did Basarab instate his absolute power, in what context and by what means did he accomplish the unification of the existing formations, did anyone grant him the attributes of power, is he the direct successor of Thocomerius or perhaps of the legendary Negru Vodă? All continue to remain enigmas of history and can get only answers that are part of a natural causality of things. A complete or partial solution could only come from the discovery of new sources, be they written, archaeological or of any other nature, which unfortunately are long in coming. Therefore, our mission is to bring up controversial elements as well as those which have been attested by documents hoping that this antithesis will entail new ideas regarding the last stage of the emergence of the first Romanian mediaeval state.

At the institutional level, we know that political unification was completed through the recognition of Basarab’s title of “*great voivode*”, which was recorded

as such on the graffiti found at St. Nicholas’ Church of Curtea de Argeş, the second princely necropolis of the country (D. Onciul, 1968, p.327). The disappearance of all the other Wallachian voivodes is an undeniable argument of the superiority of this position and especially of its evolution towards the status of sovereignty (Ş. Papacostea, 1993, p. 169).

According to historians, the favourable framework for the state development was defined by the disappearance of the Tatar influence, following Nogai’s death in 1299. This opinion, thoroughly discussed by P.P. Panaitescu and published in a posthumous work (P. P. Panaitescu, 1969, p. 308), was later taken over by the Romanian historiography. It strengthened the idea of a Tatar protectorate which encompassed the territories south of the Carpathians and the Vidin area supporting the removal of the kingdom, during the last decade of the 13th century, from the Severin area. Obviously, one may wonder who was ruling, as an intercessor, the south Carpathian region when Nogai was assassinated at Khan Toqta’s command. Without launching an endless debate on Negru Vodă and the role he played in the emergence of Wallachia, we have to accept the fact that this area was, at that particular time, no more than a protectorate of the fierce Tatar prince. In terms of the longstanding reign, it seems hard to accept that, behind this character, we might find Basarab himself, who was at the dawn of his youth. However, recent studies have shown that Basarab might have departed this life around the age of 65 or even 70. The argument relies on the analysis of the age of his daughter, Theodora, wife of the Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Alexander (A. Ioniță, B. Kelemen, A. Simon, 2014, p. 9). Naturally, the conclusions fall under the expected margin of error due to the lack of documents.

A starting point in the extensive analysis of the inception of the outer Carpathian statehood is the identification of the power centre of the local formation which, at the end of the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th, was in a relationship of subordination with the mighty emir of Isaccea, Nogai. The diploma of the Knights Hospitaller’s settlement, issued towards the middle of the 13th century, divided the south-Carpathian area into two territorial units delimited by the Olt river. Their subsequent evolution, however, does not appear to be unitary. Thus, on the right bank of the Olt, there are no politico-military centres and archaeology has only provided evasive answers regarding their location. In contrast, late chronicles and archaeological excavations indicate, on the left of the Olt, two important centres which could have assumed this role in the final stage of state accomplishment: Argeş and Câmpulung.

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In Letopisețul Cantacuzinesc (the Cantacuzino Chronicle), a late source from the 18th century, passed on to this day, things are clearly stated: “*Iar când au fost cursul anilor de la Adam 6798, fiind în Țara Ungurească un voievod ce l-a chemat Radu Negru voievod... pogorându-se pre apa Dâmboviții, început-au face țară noao. Întâi au făcut orașul ce-i zic Câmpul Lung... De acolo au descălecat la Argeș și iar au făcut oraș mare...*” (which roughly translates as “in the year 6798 from Adam, there was a voivode in the Țara Ungurească whose name was Radu Negru... going down the Dâmbovița river, he set out to make a new country. First he built the town they call Câmpul Lung... From there he dismounted at Argeș and he made another great town...”) ****. Basically, the text relates the emergence of the two centres to the crossing of the Carpathians by the legendary figure Negru Vodă. Beyond the legend, one may assert that this is a proof of how important Câmpulung and Argeș were in the late 13th century and early 14th.

Archaeological research provides a significantly altered image as regards the tradition preserved in chronicles. It is no less true that no systematic excavations have been undertaken in urban centres from Wallachia due to the present-day street network, lack of funds and interest. Thus, most of the investigations conducted in old city centres have been mainly carried out for rescue purposes, hence the conclusions drawn are only partial (L. Rădvan, 2011, p. 135). Faced with such shortcomings, archaeological research has nevertheless managed to confirm the uninterrupted habitation in the area surrounding the princely court of Argeș throughout the entire period of the 13th century (N. Constantinescu, 1984, p. 102). At Câmpulung, excavations conducted during the restoration of the Catholic church of St. Jacob revealed the existence of an earlier church from the latter part of the 13th century in which the tombstone of count Laurențiu was identified (Ș. Balș, 1969, p. 14; E. Lăzărescu, 1975, p. 112). However, archaeological investigations failed to attest, by means of certain data, the existence of the princely court before the 14th century, because the 13th-century horizon inside the voivodal enclosure is confined only to a pavement made of river stones (Gh. I. Cantacuzino, 2011, p. 46).

Obviously, they could be, for shorter or longer periods of time, centres of power subordinated or not to the authority of the Horde and existing evidence seems to be sufficient to advance the idea that the area lying on the left bank of the Olt had enough force to complete the

political and territorial unification under the command of a personage that is difficult to reveal.

20th-century historiography remained encapsulated in 1310 as a starting year of Basarab's reign relying on Pietro Luccari's late chronicle. Here, he speaks about the commission of his ancestor, Nicolo Luccari, to the Prince of Wallachia, Vlaicu voivode, and mentions: “*Negro Voevoda din natione Ungaro padre di Vlaico nel 1310*”****. The chronicler's mistake is obvious, for Vlaicu, the third voivode of Wallachia, was not Basarab's son but his grandson. The year stirred the imagination of Romanian historiography that believed Negru Vodă and Basarab were one and the same historical character (C. Rezachevici, 2001, p. 67).

Starting from the date of death, a determination of the age leads, in the absence of sources, to doubtful conclusions which, nevertheless, reinforce the above assumption, namely that Basarab might have been in power at the beginning of the second decade of the 14th century, either leading a great voivodeship or still fighting to gain full power.

Thus, if the first voivode of Wallachia had died around the age of 70, as stated by recent studies approaching the issue (A. Ioniță, B. Kelemen, A. Simon, 2014, p. 10), he would have been born around 1282-1283, hence he was 28 in 1310, precisely the age of maturity that might have allowed him to take over the power and accomplish the territorial unification in the area south of the Carpathians. Had he been born at a date closer to that of the King of Hungary, Charles Robert of Anjou, certified in 1288, he would have passed away around the age of 64-65 and may have been at least 20 years old when he gained the power.

Despite the progress of the last century, recomposing the coming into power of prince Basarab is faced with serious difficulties caused, on the one hand, by the parsimony of sources and, on the other, by permanently relating to the moment that the Banate of Severin broke free from the Hungarian authority. Therefore, one may assume that the loss of the Banate of Severin was equivalent to the coming of this territory under the rule of the newly-formed state in the area. The attempt at Romanian history of the Saxon Johann Filstich, written in 1728, comes somewhat as a continuation of this idea. It is mentioned here that the Romanians “*...și-au făcut sălașuri nu departe de Dunăre, lângă Turnu Severin, de unde se lățiră mereu în lung și în lat...Iar în această vreme, asemenea transilvănenilor cunoșteau drept domni mai mari peste ei pe craii Ungariei...*” (i.e. the Romanians “made their

abodes not far from the Danube, near Turnu Severin, and spread from here everywhere... In the meantime, just like the Transylvanians, they recognised the kings of Hungary as rulers”). ***** We find it hard to believe and accept, given his longstanding rule that Basarab would have managed to assert himself as the head of a voivodeship, which already reunited territories on both sides of the Olt, before 1310-1315. It all starts from the false assumption, from our point of view, which gave Basarab two decades to complete the consolidation of the state.

It becomes hard to imagine, after the favourable situation created following Nogai's death and the Hungarian dynastic crisis, that the whole role of the political and territorial unification should have been played solely by Basarab. We have no documentary information or archaeological evidence to indicate that Basarab I achieved the territorial unification by force of arms. It seems rather more plausible that the reins of power should have been handed over naturally from father to son. Indeed, Thocomerius appears in only one document, of 1332*** without having been assigned a political function. However, his merely being mentioned turns Basarab into a well-known figure of the age, who played a significant part in these territories (D. Căprăroiu, 2008, p. 51). It is not inconceivable that we have before us the unifier of the politico-territorial structures on both sides of the Olt. The power vacuum created after Nogai's death and doubled by the dynastic crisis in Hungary facilitated considerably the action that could be now initiated at Thocomerius' prompting.

In keeping with the subjective judgements, it is not excluded either that Basarab and Negru Vodă should have ruled at the same time, the former on the right side of the Olt and the latter concentrating his power in the area of Muntenia.

As regards the international context, the completion of the politico-territorial unification south of the Carpathians occurred somewhere between 1308 and 1315, at a moment when Transylvania, the bridge to the outer Carpathian regions, had totally escaped Hungary's control. An extremely important source, *Descrierea Europei Orientale* ('Description of Eastern Europe') briefly described it as follows: "*dividitur enim Ungaria in duas partes, videlicet in partem transilvanam et in partem danubialem*"*****. The events of 1307-1308 are, in turn, relevant. Transylvania's involvement in the fight for power in Hungary, the confiscation of the Hungarian holy crown and the imprisonment of a major pretender to the royal throne, Otto of Bavaria (T. Sălăgean, 2010, p. 119), marks the status of political

autonomy of the intra-Carpathian voivodeship.

It was now that, through the emergence of the already existing political structures, the great voivodeship of Wallachia was born, supported or not by the powerful Transylvanian prince, Ladislau Kán, who was interested in the emergence of a new force in the territories that, at one moment, had been under the Hungarian sphere of influence. In this context, the imprisonment of the pretender Otto of Bavaria takes on a particular significance. The mention of the Wallachian land "*Wallachen Land*" in the German verse chronicle of Ottokar of Styria was largely debated in the Romanian historiography. The escape of Otto of Bavaria to Halician Russia entailed the placement of this structure in pre-state Moldavia, which was in its immediate vicinity (C. Cihodaru, 1960, p.66; A. Armbruster, 1972, p. 464; P. Parasca, 2013, p. 501).

We cannot share this view that relies only on the geographical factor. As the renowned historian Șerban Papacostea noted, the German chronicle recorded the existence of a voivodal Romanian country with which Ladislau Kán's Transylvania maintained diplomatic relations and which can be found, at that particular time, only south of the Carpathians (Ș. Papacostea, 1993, p. 170). Furthermore, as a mere assumption, Wallachia's domination could have spread, in its early years, towards Moldavia as well, where it came into contact with the hegemony area of the Knyazate of Halych.

The chronicler Naum Râmniceanu, whose account written around 1800 was strongly influenced by the works of Miron Costin and Ban Mihai Cantacuzino, adds up to this image by emphasising that a member of the Basarab family joined the voivode of Transylvania and perhaps it was in this manner that Basarab, with the support of Serbia as well, managed to gain full power from Radu Negru who, according to some, was his brother (Ș. Bezdechi, 1944). As a matter of fact, the idea of the two characters being related by blood proved a tempting assumption to historiography (G. D. Florescu, D. Pleșia, 1970, p. 39) especially as it justified the ancestry of the legendary Negru Vodă expressed by some 16th-17th-century princes.

When initiating the process of territorial recovery, Hungary focused mainly on Transylvania, particularly since restoring the domination over the intra-Carpathian voivodeship also opened the prospect of recovering the territories south of the Carpathians, where Basarab I had succeeded in incorporating the already-existing formations into a single political organism: Wallachia.

The offensive was launched in 1311 against the most fervent contestant of the royal power, the

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nobleman Matthew Csák who, though not captured, had to find refuge in the Transylvanian voivodeship (T. Sălăgean, 2003, p. 328). Therefore, we believe, Transylvania became, in the early 14th century, the last bastion of the dissatisfactions accumulated against the Angevine crown, a touchstone for the new ruling dynasty of Hungary.

The first real success was to be gained by King Charles Robert of Anjou only in 1315 when he succeeded in removing voivode Ladislau Kán of Transylvania from his office, after a period in which there had been successive attempts to limit all his prerogatives in the voivodeship. The moment also marks the establishment of relations with Wallachia where Hungary's first success is recorded by the installation, the same year, of a royal castellan at Hațeg. The measure meant, as well noted by the literature in the field, the strengthening of the left flank, i.e. of the Wallachian voivodeship (S. Iosipescu, 2013, p. 113). Going further, we may assume that the Kingdom took the evolution of state structures south of the Carpathians very seriously and sought to secure a territory that could be claimed based on an earlier domination, which, in the case of Litovoi's voivodeship, was stated in the diploma granted by Hungary to the Knights Hospitaller in 1247.

This may be considered the onset of the Hungarian-Wallachian relations, especially since documentary sources report a longer period of development. Consequently, we know that Martin, count of Sălaj, was rewarded for carrying our messages several times to voivode Basarab. The sovereign of Hungary himself recalled the faithful missions he had undertaken, which indicates that a certain time had passed between the moment of his re-investiture and his diplomatic and military achievements. We assume that the start of negotiations has to do with the definitive integration of Transylvania into the Hungarian structures, which occurred, according to documentary sources, in 1322, when the last bastion, the city of Deva, was occupied.

As the historian Maria Holban (Maria Holban, 1981, p. 97) noted several decades ago, the issue of domination over the Banate of Severin remains the key to the inception of the Wallachian state. In this context, the beginning of Basarab's full power in Wallachia seems to be connected to the appointment of a reliable person of the king's, Dionysius Szécsi, as castellan of Jdioara. From here, the Hungarian noble was supposed to manage the control over the Timiș-Cerna corridor, which was at the confluence of Serbian, Bulgarian and now Wallachian interests. The Romanian research insisted that the western part, with the Mehadia fortress,

was in the possession of Basarab I from 1316 to 1322 (M. Holban, 1981, p. 98). In March 1322, the same Dionysius, the King's man, was promoted at Mehadia, which meant that Hungary had again focused its power on a portion of Severin. The role of Mehadia Citadel and of the castellan Dionysius is well emphasised in a 1329 document which partly confirms such a chronology of events: "*in castro nostro Noghmyhald vocato, in confinio existente, contra Bulgaros, Bazarab woyuodam Transalpinum, regie Rascic scismaticum, ymo et Tartaros, fines regni nostri ubi et unitatem orthodoxe fidei continue hostiliter invadentes*"***.

As regards our analysis, the document is important because it confirms the existence of the voivode Basarab I and of Wallachia before 1322. The moment coincides with one of the numerous missions on which the count of Sălaj was sent to negotiate the good-neighbourliness with Basarab's country, given that the latter had lost a strategic point. Charles Robert of Anjou needed to consolidate his power both inside the kingdom and in the marginal territories, and therefore, it was not a favourable moment to start a military conflict with the new state from beyond the Carpathians. At the same time, one cannot negate the assumption that count Martin's negotiations should have been carried out throughout the entire period of 1316-1322 and the cession of a part of Severin should have been only the direct result of these talks stretching over a half of a decade.

Consequently, both documentary sources and historical conclusions seem to point out to the fact that Wallachia had completed the process of state formation around the second decade of the 14th century. The role played by Basarab in the emergence of the new political structure is however shrouded in mystery. Historical logic and some of the documentary sources urge us to believe that he was, in an early stage, the leader of formations reunited on the right side of the Olt, where Severin played a significant part. Who ruled the political structures left of the Olt, how and when the two territorial units actually merged are still questions that remain unanswered and represent the missing link preventing the unravelling of the final stages of the Wallachian state formation.

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