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Cross-Cultural Genealogies

Wallachian Pretenders and Their Rhetoric of Birthright in the 16th Century

In 1583, a new lord ascended the throne of Wallachia. He styled himself Peter, the second by this name, but soon his subjects gave him a sobriquet, Peter the Earring, alluding to his Westernized courtly outfit, especially to his pearl earring¹. As a man in his late thirties, Peter probably had only a vague memory of the realm he had left when he was just a child. Son of the ruling lord of Wallachia, an Ottoman tributary state, Peter was sent to Istanbul as a princely hostage. After his father's sudden and suspicious death, Peter joined the ranks of a dozen Wallachian princes living in semi-captivity in the Ottoman Empire. For more than 15 years, he was transferred from one place to another; from Rhodes he went to Karaman, then to Cyprus, to Damascus, to Aleppo and to Konya. In 1571, when he was twenty-six, Peter made his first attempt to gain his father's throne. He failed miserably and, after spending just a few days in Wallachia, he fled to Transylvania, and afterwards to Poland, running away from the Sultan's anger. A few years later he was looking for shelter in Vienna and, from there, he moved to Genoa. Making use of his imperial connections, he headed for Rome, where he gained papal support. The pope recommended Peter to the Dukes of Ferrara and Savoy and advised the wandering pretender to cross the Alps and to seek his fortune at the French court. The king's good relations with the Ottoman Empire would help Peter to make amends with the Sultan and, with some luck, would ease his way to the throne. From Paris, Peter sent messages to the Spanish King, to the English Queen and to the Duke of

1 The chancery formula "Peter, the second by this name" is attested by two documents preserved at the Romanian National Historical Archives, available online at Arhiva Medievală a României (henceforth AMR), digital identifier numbers BU-F-00684–1245 and BU-F-00684–1278. For a Romanian translation of both documents see Documente privind istoria României. B. Țara Românească (hereafter DIR-B), veacul XVI, vol. 5 (1581–1590), ed. Ion Ionașcu et al., București 1953, no. 187, pp. 175f. and no. 195, pp. 182f. The sobriquet *the Earring* (*Cercel* in Romanian) is documented by a princely chancery document as early as 1609, see DIR-B, veacul XVII, vol. 1, no. 339, pp. 375f. Around the same time, one of Peter's sons, Dumitrașcu, a pretender that lived in captivity in Marienburg, used the same sobriquet as an identifier, signing his letter *Cercellus* in Latin and *Τζεργτζέλος* in Greek, see Nicolae Iorga, Un pretendent la tronul muntean-Dumitrașcu vodă Cercel, București 1900, pp. 8f. Peter's pearl earring is prominently displayed on his mural portrait at the Căluu monastery, painted around 1595, see Carmen L. Dumitrescu, Pictura murală din Țara Românească în veacul al XVI-lea, București 1978, pp. 64f.

Lorraine. Finally, all these intense diplomatic efforts paid off: due to the tenacious interventions of the French ambassador, the Ottoman Sultan complied with Henry III's request and summoned the Wallachian pretender to Istanbul. Peter travelled to Venice, where he gave a speech in front of the Senate, and entered the Ottoman Empire through Ragusa. He spent the next three years in Istanbul lobbying and buying his way up to the throne. Finally, in September 1583, Peter saw his dream come true: he arrived in Wallachia as the ruling lord. It was a short-lived triumph, as the Wallachian aristocracy resisted this strangely looking and eccentrically behaving prince. Merely a year and a half later, the Sultan replaced him. For a brief moment, Peter weighted the option of another exile, but he decided to return to Istanbul and to have another try at the throne. A few years later, his second career as a pretender ended abruptly. If we are to believe the rumours being circulated in the Constantinopolitan patriarchal circles, one of his Wallachian rivals arranged for his murder. In order to see the corpse with his own eyes, he asked for Peter's skin to be peeled off, stuffed with hay, and sent to him in Wallachia². Except for this last, horrifying episode, most of the above-mentioned biographical details that make Peter's life such a compelling narrative, worthy of a Hollywood movie, originate from his own writings. Peter left behind him a consistent trail of memoirs and letters justifying his claims to the throne of Wallachia. There is hardly any major European court that hasn't received such a self-narrative, from the Ottoman Sultan to the Queen of England, from the German Emperor to the Pope, from the Senate of Venice to the King of France, or from the Chancellor of Poland to the Duke of Savoy³.

The central piece in Peter's self-narratives was his princely identity and his birthright. The key question he had to provide a satisfactory answer for wherever he would look for shelter and support was *Who are you?* This same interrogation acquired, nonetheless, a very different meaning, if asked in the Ottoman Empire or in Western Europe. Within the Ottoman Empire, the legitimacy of any Wallachian pretender rested exclusively on his paternity. Any male descendent of a former lord, whether legitimate or not, was entitled to make a bid for the throne. The closest parallel is the Mongol rule of succession, from which the Wallachian one most probably derived. Anyone who claimed to be of princely bone—both Mongols and Wallachians were using the metonymy of the bone, instead of that of the blood—

2 At least this is the story accounted by a familiar of the Constantinopolitan patriarchal circles when interrogated in Poland, see Nicolae Iorga, *Nichifor Dascălul exarh patriarhal și legăturile lui cu țările noastre (1580–1599)*, București 1905, p. 16.

3 For Peter's wanderings and his plethora of memoranda see his most recent biography, written by Cristian Luca, *Petru Cercel un domn umanist în Țara Românească*, București 2000 (Colecția Domnitori și voievozi, serie nouă), pp. 40–66.

inevitably became a contender for the throne⁴. A late Wallachian chronicle accounts that, in order to save his life, an alleged brother of Peter the Earring had to dismiss publicly the rumours of his origins by bringing witnesses to testify that he was not of 'princely bone'⁵. Obviously, the opposite case, of someone actually claiming a royal ancestry, is more frequently documented. Such a claim was authenticated by oral testimonies on the pretender's paternity provided either by members of the princely family or by Wallachian aristocrats. Around the time when Peter the Earring staked his claims, in the 1570s and 1580s, at least two other pretenders to the throne of Wallachia lost their lives in Istanbul, after their alleged relatives failed to recognize them. In 1577 a certain Bernardo Rosso convinced six Wallachian nobles to testify that he was the son of Basarab, "member of the most noble house of Wallachia"⁶. When proved to be a fraud, he was executed and the false witnesses were sent to the galleys. Some years later, in 1588, another pretender, a certain Michael, arrived in Istanbul claiming to be of 'princely bone'. His alleged grandmother, a former lady of Wallachia living in Aleppo, was brought to Istanbul and she exposed Michael as an impostor. The fraudulent pretender was subsequently beheaded⁷. One could argue that Peter the Earring himself was similarly tested in Istanbul, albeit informally, when the

4 The Mongol clan-status relationship of 'white-bone' also influenced the Russian political tradition of *mestnichestvo*, see Donald Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols. Cross-Cultural Influences on the Steppe Frontier 1304–1589*, Cambridge 2002, p. 104. The Wallachian metonymy of the princely bone might have also been influenced by the Old Testament formula "of one's bones" (Genesis 29:14 1; Chronicles 11:1). For the metonymy of blood see Anita Guerreau-Jalabert, *Flesh and Blood in Medieval Language about Kinship*, in: Christopher H. Johnson et al. (Eds.), *Blood and Kinship. Matter for Metaphor from Ancient Rome to the Present*, New York/Oxford 2013, pp. 61–82.

5 The Wallachian chronicler Radu Popescu accounts how Michael, Peter's alleged brother, needed saint Nicholas' miraculous intervention and the testimony of twelve nobles to clear himself of the suspicion of being of 'princely bone'; see Radu Popescu, *Istoriile domnilor Țării Românești*, ed. Constantin Grecescu, București 1963 (*Croniclele medievale ale României* 4), pp. 69 f. However, when the political circumstances changed, Michael reneged on his oath, claimed to be of princely descent and climbed to the throne.

6 The story of this unlikely Wallachian pretender is told by a Perote, Benetto di Gagliano, in a letter sent to a Venetian nun, Marioara Valarga, which followed closely the Wallachian affairs, as her sister, Ecaterina Salvaresso, was married to the ruling lord: "uno medicho Rosso, ditto Bernardo, che domandava la signoria di Velachia ... l'ano messo in galia, con altri Velachi 6, che ano testificatto che lui è fillio di Basaraba, che è la piú nobile caxa di Velachia". The letter was published by Nicolae Iorga, *Contribuțiuni la istoria Munteniei*, București 1896, p. 22.

7 I am grateful to Nagy Pienaru who let me read his translations of the Ottoman documents related to this affair, which are going to be published in one of his forthcoming studies.

Ottomans arranged for a meeting between him and his elder brother⁸. Fortunately for him, the Wallachian prince recognized Peter as his sibling and, thus, confirmed his legitimacy. All these inquests into the Wallachian pretenders' claims share the same common trait: they do not go beyond one generation. The birthright to the throne rested exclusively on the princely blood/bone of a pretender's father. When addressed to a Wallachian pretender in the Ottoman Empire, the question *Who are you?* simply meant *Who was your father?*

However, in the different cultural context of sixteenth-century Western Europe, the same interrogation acquired a more complex meaning. In Renaissance Europe, princes did not exist per se, but as members of dynasties whose prestigious lineages could be traced back for centuries, sometimes even back to founding figures from biblical or classical tradition⁹. Naturally, the Wallachian wandering pretenders, who claimed to be legitimate members of the Christian family of princes and who did not shy away from calling Western kings their 'cousins'¹⁰, were sometimes required to provide a genealogical pedigree of their royal blood. Most of them failed utterly. When faced with a genealogical inquiry at the English court from no other than Lord Burghley himself, Peter the Earring had trouble

8 The meeting of the two brothers is described by Franco Sivori, one of Peter's courtiers that followed him into Wallachia, in: Ștefan Pascu, Petru Cercel și Țara Românească la sfârșitul secolului al XVI-lea, Sibiu 1944, pp. 166 f. According to a letter sent by the French ambassador in Istanbul, Peter's legitimacy was challenged and mocked at by the grand vizier: "que ce Prince, qui se présenteoit de la part de Vostre Majesté n'estoit le vray et légitime Prince de la Valacque ... que bien qu'il fut fils de Petrasco, il ne ouvoit ester légitime d'autant que ledit Petrasco avoit ordinairement dix et douze concubines", in: Documente privitoare la istoria românilor culese de Eudoxiu de Hurmuzaki (henceforth Hurmuzaki), vol. I, supplement 1, ed. Grigore G. Tocilescu/Alexandru Odobescu, București 1886, no. 92, p. 49.

9 See for instance the studies on the Florentine genealogists by Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, on the Franks, the Troyans and the kings of France by Ewa Kociszewska and on Noah, Brutus of Troy and king James I by Sara Trevisan in the collective volume by Sara Trevisan, (Ed.), *Mythical Ancestry in World Cultures, 1400–1800*, Turnhout 2018 (Cursor Mundi 35).

10 In an Italian memorandum addressed to Henry III of France, Peter was stressing his birthright with the following words: "io nato vero Principe christiano et legittimo herede della provincia di grand' Valachia", see Nicolae Iorga (Ed.), *Acte si fragmente cu privire la istoria românilor adunate din depozitele de manuscrise ale Apusului*, vol. I, București 1895, vol. I, pp. 29 f. In the letter of recommendation sent to the Doge of Venice, Henry III referred to Peter as to "le prince de la grande Valaquie Pierre Demetrio, notre tres-cher cousin et bon amy" in: Hurmuzaki, vol. III/1, București 1880, appendice, no. 1, p. 437 f. The same idea is conveyed by Peter in a letter to the Duke of Ferrara with the use of a comparison: if a ship sank, the sailors lament to other sailors, while the merchants look for help from other merchants, therefore, when facing adversity, a prince turns for comfort to other princes, see Hurmuzaki, vol. XI, București 1900, no. 158, pp. 98 f.

naming his great-grandfather¹¹. Moreover, when asked the name of the dynasty he was part of, he hesitated, referring either to the *Demetrians* or to the *Marsia* (both dynastic names are puzzling for modern scholars of Wallachia). Obviously, Peter tried his best to come up with a genealogy to support his claims, but he lacked both knowledge and skills to do so properly. In contrast to the prominent role ascribed to his father in his own self-narratives, Peter did not usually invoke genealogical or dynastic arguments to support his claims. He made no exception among the dozens of sixteenth-century Wallachian pretenders, as they all seem to have been extremely clumsy at elaborating persuasive genealogies, even fictional ones.

This chapter looks for an explanation of the Wallachian princes' genealogical maladroitness, by analysing the discursive strategies used in conveying their claims to different audiences. The Wallachian pretenders provide an excellent case-study for exploring cultural translation in Renaissance Europe, as they had to adapt their discourses to a variety of audiences. The two-folded structure of the chapter parallels the double audience the pretenders were addressing: the Wallachian socio-political elite within the Ottoman Empire and the Western European prospective supporters and benefactors. The first section of the chapter looks into the legitimizing concept of prince of 'royal bone', arguing that the traditional Wallachian kingship lacked time-depth and might be most aptly described as un-historical. In the second part, the focus shifts towards the genealogical narratives devised by pretenders for Western European audiences, as it analyses the main rhetorical strategies used for constructing a dynastic identity. My main contention is that the rather awkward genealogical attempts made by the sixteenth-century Wallachian pretenders were mainly due to the difficulties of cross-culturally translating a horizontally-spread dynastic knowledge into a vertically-arranged genealogical structure.

I The Wallachian House of Princes: Kingship and Kinship

In recent years, the idea of 'dynasty' has been intensely problematized, as scholars have questioned the historical awareness of the concept in the Middle Ages and the

11 A manuscript dating from the spring of 1580, preserved amongst the Cecil Papers at Hatfield House, includes a sketch of the family tree of Peter, drawn by Lord Burghley's own hand. This genealogical sketch was edited and discussed by Andrei Pippidi, *O genealogie a lui Petru Cercel*, in: Marian Coman et. al. (Eds.), *Andrei Pippidi, mai puțin cunoscut. Studii adunate de foștii săi elevi cu prilejul împlinirii vârstei de 70 de ani*, Iași 2018, pp. 201–205.

Renaissance¹². This revisionist approach left untouched some dynasties, while convincingly deconstructed others. The criticism usually started with the dynastic name itself: The Angevin Plantagenets never called themselves as such, the Riurikid ancestry of the Russian *kniaz*i was a sixteenth-century construct, while the term Tudor was rarely used in Renaissance England¹³. The extension of the critique from the usage of a dynastic name to the actual existence of the concept was a far more difficult step to take. Although, in medieval Europe, the term “dynasty” was used primarily, if not exclusively, in the context of Egyptian history, people did speak about lineages, houses or families¹⁴. Unsurprisingly, the medieval and Renaissance ‘dynasties’ that survived best scholarly criticism are those substantiated by abundant evidence of a genealogical pattern of thought. Consequently, kingships that gave a lesser role to genealogical discourse, such as the Merovingians, were placed at the opposite end of the spectrum, as a fluid assemblage of people rather than a proper ‘dynasty’. As Ian Wood persuasively argued, “being a Merovingian was a matter of perception rather than biology”, as the family was rather a political construct than a biological unit¹⁵. Placed on such a scale, the sixteenth-century Wallachian kingship bears closer resemblance to the early-medieval Merovingians than to the Renaissance Habsburgs, despite the latter being its contemporaries. The Wallachian lineage of lords was a fluid, permeable and loosely structured political construct, with a mutable name, which lacked a genealogical backbone.

Genealogies as a distinct genre did not exist in sixteenth-century Wallachia, but their absence should be viewed in the larger framework of a generally low interest in historical writing. The Wallachian scribes active in several lay chanceries,

12 See for instance Robert Bartlett, *Blood Royal. Dynastic Politics in Medieval Europe*, Cambridge 2020 (The James Lydon Lectures in Medieval History and Culture), pp. 283–289; and Dušan Zupka, *Medieval Dynasties in Medieval Studies. A Historiographic Contribution*, in: *Forum Historiae* 13 (2019), pp. 89–101.

13 For the use of the surname Plantagenet only starting with 1448, see Bartlett, *Blood Royal*, pp. 283f.; for the Riurikids see Donald Ostrowski, *Was there a Riurikid Dynasty in Early Rus’?*, in: *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 52 (2018), pp. 30–49; while for the Tudors see the critique by Cliff Davies, *Tudor. What’s in a Name?*, *History* 97 (2012), pp. 24–42.

14 See Jean-Marie Moeglin, *Les dynasties princières allemandes et la notion de Maison à la fin du Moyen Age*, in: *Actes des congrès de la Société des historiens médiévistes de l’enseignement supérieur public* 23 (1992), pp. 137–154.

15 See Ian Wood, *Deconstructing the Merovingian Family*, in: Richard Corradini/Max Diesenberger/Helmut Reimitz (Eds.), *The construction of Communities in the Early Middle Ages. Texts, Resources and Artefacts*, Leiden 2003 (The Transformation of the Roman World, 12), pp. 149–171. A similar argument was made for the Central-European medieval dynasties by Zupka, *Medieval Dynasties*, p. 101.

of which the most important was the princely one, and monastic scriptoria wrote thousands of charters and letters (mostly in Slavonic, but also in Turkish, Latin, Hungarian, German and Romanian) and copied dozens of south-Slavonic biblical, liturgical, juridical or hagiographical manuscripts. Nonetheless, until the late sixteenth century, they wrote no histories, annals or chronicles of their own¹⁶. The scribes of the Wallachian princely chancery, who acted as trustees of the court's official memory, transmitted the remembrance of former lords with the help of an oral, vernacular and continuously shaped tradition. At its centre it was a stock of regnal names and sobriquets that served as mnemonic devices for remembering the past¹⁷. In late sixteenth-century Wallachia, nobody recalled the degree of kinship between the different lords that had ruled a century earlier¹⁸. But the chancery scribes knew that Vlad *the Impaler* ruled before Vlad *the Young* who had ruled before Vlad *the Drowned* and so on and so forth¹⁹. Most importantly, they also knew that all previous and current lords of Wallachia belonged to the same house.

The idea of a Wallachian princely house is embodied in a diplomatic formula that found its way into the charters in the early fifteenth century: "Whomever God will choose to become lord of Wallachia, either from my own descendants and from my own relatives, or from another lineage"²⁰. The Slavonic formula makes

16 The oldest manuscripts of Wallachian chronicles date only from the second half of the 17th century. The chronology of the earliest historical writings in Wallachia is highly controversial, as some historians argued for the 1630s – see Petre P. Panaitescu, *Începuturile istoriografiei în Țara Românească*, in: *Studii și Materiale de Istorie Medie* 5 (1962), pp. 195–256 – while others, rather implausibly, suggested a date as early as the 1520s – see Pavel Chihaia, *De la Negru Vodă la Neagoe Basarab. Interferențe literar-artistice în cultura românească a evului de mijloc*, București 1976. More convincingly, Ștefan Andreescu proposed a date around 1570s, closer to the moment of the first documented Wallachian court chronicle, written by the great chancellor, see Ștefan Andreescu, *Istoria românilor. Cronicari, misionari, ctitori* (sec. XV–XVII), Cluj 2007, pp. 34–72. The chronicle was lost, but it was read and used by a contemporary Silesian historian in 1597, see Dan Simonescu, *Cronica lui Baltasar Walther despre Mihai Viteazul în raport cu cronicile interne contemporane*, in: *Studii și Materiale de Istorie Medie* 3 (1959), pp. 7–99.

17 See Marian Coman, *Naming and the Making of Historical Memory. The Politics of Princely Sobriquets in the Wallachian Chancery of the Sixteenth Century*, in: Ovidiu Olar/Konrad Petrovsky (Eds.), *Writing History in Ottoman Europe (15th–18th Century)*, 2022 [forthcoming].

18 The sole exception is the filiation included in the *intitulatio* and thus conveyed to the future generations through the princely charters. On this formula, see the discussion below.

19 Most significantly, in two generations' time, a mocking sobriquet was losing its initial connotations and was becoming a simple distinctive epithet; see Coman, *Naming*.

20 See *Documenta Romaniae Historica. B. Țara Românească* (hereafter DRH-B), ed. Petre P. Panaitescu/Damaschin Mioc, București 1966, vol. 1, no. 21, pp. 50–52. This formula was most likely borrowed from the earlier Bulgarian chancery, see Ivan Biliarsky, *La transmission et la légitimation*

a clear distinction between a ruling lord's direct descendants—the word used is *плодъ* meaning “fruit” or “offspring”—his collateral “kinsfolk”, *сръдоболя*, and a distinct “lineage”, *плема*. However, the meaning of the Wallachian concept of “lineage” (*плема*) is quite difficult to grasp, as there are only two types of sixteenth-century sources that could throw some light onto this matter: the shortened genealogies inserted in the princely charters, mostly in the titulature, and the painted galleries of rulers' portraits²¹. Both of these sources point to a rather fluid lineage conception that lacked genealogical depth.

The name of the ruling lord's father was an important part of the *intitulatio* as early as the beginning of the fifteenth century. Its legitimizing purpose is obvious and there is a telling symmetry between the introductory formula of a charter that mentions the ruling prince's filiation “Alexander, son of Mircea” or “Vladislav, son of Dan” and the closing phrase, quoted above, that refers to the future lords of the realm²². In order to underline the continuity within the same princely lineage, the name of a prince's father is ubiquitous in the Wallachian charters, usually preceded by magnificent epithets, such as “the great” or “the kind”²³. When a pretender wanted to emphasize even more his birthright, he also took the regnal name of his father, as in “Vlad, son of the great lord Vlad”, in “Basarab, son of the good lord Basarab” or in “Vladislav, son of the very kind and good lord Vladislav”²⁴. Thus, in the first decades of the sixteenth century, no fewer than three lords took the same regnal name of Radu, pretending to be offspring of “the great and very kind lord Radu”²⁵. Correspondingly, when someone wanted to contest a pretender's or a ruling lord's legitimacy, they casted doubts over his sonship. The Wallachian nobles that rejected Mircea's claims in 1481 smeared his mother's reputation, label-

du pouvoir des derniers souverains bulgares de la dynastie des Assénides (1323–1396), in: Marie-Hélène Blanchet/Raúl Estangüi Gómez (Eds.), *Le monde byzantine du XIIIe au XVe siècle anciennes ou Nouvelles formes d'impérialité*, Paris 2021 (Collège de France – CNRS. Centre de Recherche d'Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance, Travaux et Mémoires 25/1), pp. 89–131.

²¹ Most importantly, in sixteenth-century Wallachia the vertical genealogies, both written and painted, are completely absent. They were quite popular in the neighbouring Serbia where the founding figures of Saint Simeon and Saint Sava shaped the Nemanjićs as a sacred dynasty. For a taxonomy of the late medieval Serbian genealogies, including the distinction between horizontal and vertical genealogies, see Marija Vasiljević, *Imagining the Ruler's Genealogy in Medieval Serbia*, in: *Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes* 55 (2017), pp. 73–88.

²² DRH-B, vol. 1, no. 71, p. 132 and no. 113, pp. 196f.

²³ DRH-B, vol. 1, no. 120, pp. 205f. and no. 260, pp. 420f.

²⁴ DRH-B, vol. 1, no. 256, p. 415f. and no. 157, p. 260; DRH-B, vol. 2, no. 237, pp. 444f.

²⁵ DRH-B, vol. 2, no. 228, pp. 430f.; vol. 3, no. 15, pp. 22f.; vol. 4, no. 11, pp. 13f.

ling her as a “notorious whore” and, implicitly, questioned his paternity²⁶. In 1512, the new ruler of Wallachia was opposed by some of the nobles of the realm, on the grounds that his father was not a former lord, as he claimed, but merely a cavalryman²⁷. Peter the Earring’s father was rumoured to have been a Jew from Thessaloniki²⁸, while his alleged brother, Michael, was scolded for his mean origins²⁹. In contrast to the pervasive figure of the father, the more distant ancestors were rarely referred to, both in the legitimizing claims and in the disqualifying allegations. Evidently, for those who challenged a certain pretender or lord, it made sense to target his birthright by focusing on his father. However, more surprisingly is the princes’ own lack of interest regarding their grandfathers and great-grandfathers. Despite the numerous references to the former rulers in the Wallachian princely charters—generically called lords, kings or emperors³⁰—the chancery scribes rarely bothered to trace a genealogical connection between the ruling lord and his predecessors.

In contrast to the ubiquitous presence of the paternal legitimizing figure, the references to a ruling lord’s grandfather are considerably rarer. More importantly, when called upon, the memory of the grandfather was meant to compensate for a certain lack of legitimacy. The first Wallachian lord that included in the *intitulatio* his grandfather’s name was Alexander (1568–1577). He had good reasons to do so, as sixty years had passed from the very brief reign of Alexander’s father, Mircea, who had ruled over Wallachia for only two or three months in the autumn of 1509³¹. Mircea lost the throne and failed to gain it back, despite having spent the rest of his life trying. Obviously, Alexander thought that his father’s status as

26 For an analysis of this peculiar letter, see Marian Coman/Ovidiu Cristea, A Late Fifteenth Century Controversy on the Moldavian-Wallachian Frontier. An Incident Analysis, in: Martyn Rady/Alexandru Simon (Eds.), *Government and Law in Medieval Moldavia, Transylvania and Wallachia*, London 2013 (Studies in Russia and Eastern Europe 11), pp. 101–119.

27 See Mustafa Mehmed, Două documente turcești despre Neagoe Basarab, in: *Studii. Revista de Istorie* 21 (1968), pp. 921–930.

28 The rumour was mentioned by the Habsburg agent in Constantinople, see Hurmuzaki, III/1, no. 115, pp. 130 f. For the different contemporary gossips on Peter’s origins, see Petre P. Panaitescu, *Originea lui Petru Cercel*, in: *Arhiva pentru Știința și Reforma Socială* 2 (1936), pp. 1042–1045.

29 See Petre P. Panaitescu, *Mihai Viteazul*, București 2002, pp. 21–24. This edition of the 1936 monograph, prepared by Cristian Bobicescu, also includes Panaitescu’s reply to Iorga’s criticism with regard to Michael’s alleged princely origins, pp. 283–296.

30 The mentioning of the emperors among the Wallachians’ lord predecessors was sometimes over-interpreted as a claim to an ‘imperial Byzantine heritage’. Most likely, it only referred to the biblical model of kingship, see Andrei Pippidi, *Tradiția politică bizantină în țările române în secolele XVI–XVIII*, București, 2001 (Istorie – opere fundamentale), pp. 34–38.

31 For Mihnea’s and Mircea’s reigns, see Alexandru Lapedatu, *Mihnea cel Rău și ungurii, 1508–1510*, in: *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie Națională din Cluj* 1 (1921–1922), pp. 46–76.

a short-lived lord of Wallachia was a liability. Therefore, he turned to his grandfather to strengthen his own legitimacy, entitling himself “son of the great and very kind lord Mircea, grandson³² of lord Mihnea”³³. A few decades later, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, another pretender called upon his grandfather when staking his claims to the throne of Wallachia. The Wallachian nobleman Radu Șerban proclaimed himself to be the grandson of a former lord, who had by then been dead for eighty years. His *intitulatio* entirely overlooks the filiation, but regularly mentions the name of his grandfather: “Radu, grandson of the very kind and late lord Basarab”³⁴. This change caused some confusion among the chancery scribes, as one of them miswrote the formula and entitled Radu, rather confusingly, “son of the great and very kind grandson of lord Basarab”³⁵. In these cases, the grandfather acted as a substitute figure for a father whose status and reputation failed to bring the much-sought legitimacy.

If the references to the ruling lord’s grandfather are rather erratic and circumstantial, the ones to their great-grandfathers are truly exceptional. There are more than 3.000 extant Wallachian charters and letters until the end of the sixteenth century, which include hundreds of references to the previous lords of Wallachia. Nevertheless, not once did the ruling princes trace back their lineage more than two generations. Occasionally, a Wallachian lord’s charter might refer to his “great-grandfather” (предѣдъ), but the term did not imply a specific degree of kinship, but rather a vague family connection. In these cases, the Slavonic term should be better translated generically as “ancestor” rather than specifically as “great-grandfather”³⁶. Four consecutive ruling lords of Wallachia called upon “our

³² The Slavonic word used for “grandson” is an adaptation of the Greek word ἀνεψιός, see for instance DRH-B, vol. 7, no. 17, pp. 25–27. The same word was used in the only once documented *intitulatio* of Alexander’s son, Mihnea, with regard to his paternal uncle that became lord of Moldavia. For the charter see AMR, digital identifier number BU-F-00684–1302, also commented by Ștefan Andreescu, *Restitutio Daciae. Relațiile politice dintre Țara Românească, Moldova și Transilvania în răstimpul, vol 2: 1601–1659*, București 1989, p. 41.

³³ Alexander used consistently this *intitulatio*, starting with his first documents issued in the summer of 1568, see DRH-B, vol. 7 and vol. 8. The direct formula “grandson of...” alternates with the circumlocutory one “son of...son of...”.

³⁴ See DIR-B, veacul XVII, vol. 1, ed. I. Ionașcu et al., București 1951, no. 79, pp. 66 f., sometimes with the variant “grandson of the late lord, the elder Basarab” (no. 93, pp. 79–82) or “grandson of the elder and the very kind late lord Basarab” (no. 135, p. 131).

³⁵ Ibid., no. 144, pp. 141 f.

³⁶ With regard to the genealogical vocabulary of the Moldavian medieval charters, Ștefan S. Gorcei insightfully remarked that while the terms referring to horizontal family relations (parents, siblings, cousins, uncles and aunts) are consistently used by the chancery scribes, those denoting vertical connections into the past (such as grandparents or great-grandparents) are far more im-

great-grandfather Mircea” between 1507 and 1512³⁷. Only two were Mircea’s actual grandsons, while the third was his great-grandson and the fourth was even more distantly related to him. In 1523, a Wallachian lord’s ancestor is successively identified within the same charter, just a few lines apart, as “my great-grandfather” (предѣдъ) and “my grandfather” (дѣдъ)³⁸. Actually, the very same term, предѣдъ, was used both for one’s great-grandfather as well as for the first ancestor of humankind, Adam³⁹, or in generic expressions such as “my lordships’s fathers and grandfathers” (деді и предеді господства ми)⁴⁰. The same terminological indifference persisted even a century later, when another lord of Wallachia referred to his most famed predecessor, whose regnal name he had taken, either as his grandfather or as his great-grandfather⁴¹. The terminological ambiguity of the genealogical vocabulary used by the Wallachian scribes mirrors a certain lack of interest in tracing back a specific lineage more than one or two generations⁴².

As they descended deeper into the past, the Wallachian rulers blended into a generic category, suggestively labelled “the holy late forefathers of my lordship” (свѣтопочивших родителъ господства ми)⁴³. This revered group of God-appointed rulers included not only recent historical figures, but also biblical ones, not only previous lords of Wallachia, but also of other realms. The Old Testament kings, the

precisely employed, see Ștefan S. Gorovei, Începuturi genealogice, in: *Studii și Materiale de Istorie Medie* 36 (2018), pp. 59–100, here p. 70f.

37 DRH-B, vol. 2, no. 51, pp. 108–110 (Radu the Great), no. 60, pp. 129–131 (Mihnea the Evil), no. 81, pp. 171–173 (Vlad the Young) and no. 105, pp. 208–215 (Neagoe Basarab).

38 DRH-B, vol. 2, no. 219, pp. 419–421. In some other charters issued by the same lord, Vladislav III was referring to the same predecessor as to his father. Most likely, Vladislav III was actually the grandson of Vladislav II, see Constantin Rezachevici, *Cronologia critică a domnilor din Țara Românească și Moldova*, vol. 1: Secolele XIV–XVI, București 2001, p. 160.

39 For the use of the term предѣдъ in connection to Adam, see DRH-B., vol. 11, no. 333, pp. 458f., and no. 335, pp. 461f.

40 See Documente nouă privitoare la relațiile Țării Românești cu Sibiul, ed. Silviu Dragomir, in: *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie Națională din Cluj* 4 (1926–1927), pp. 3–79, hier pp. 46–48.

41 In two charters issued in the same year, 1639, Matei Basarab referred to his ancestor, Neagoe Basarab, either as “предѣдъ” or to his “дѣдъ”, see DRH-B, vol. 27, no. 41, pp. 50–52, and no. 171, pp. 219–224. For Matei’s legitimizing strategies, see Liviu M. Ilie, *Schimbararea dinastică și succesiunea la tron în Țara Românească. Studiu de caz – Matei Basarab*, Craiova 2013, pp. 95–128; and Daniel Ursprung, *Herrschaftslegitimation zwischen Tradition und Innovation. Repräsentation und Inszenierung von Herrschaft in der rumänischen Geschichte in der Vormoderne und bei Ceaușescu*, Kronstadt 2007, pp. 55–133.

42 Similarly, when referring to their future descendants, the lords of Wallachia were equally short-sighted, looking forward just one generation, as in the chancery formula “as long as I and my sons will live”, see Liviu M. Ilie, “În viața domniei mele ...”. O veche formulă de cancelarie a Țării Românești din veacul al XV-lea, in: *Revista istorică*, 29 (2018), pp. 475–516.

43 DRH-B, vol. 2, no. 242, pp. 454–457.

Serbian despots or the Moldavian lords merged together with the former rulers of Wallachia into this vaguely-defined category of “holy late forefathers”. This generic group is also represented in the sixteenth-century Wallachian painted galleries of rulers, both lay and monastic. The most spectacular is the Argeş monastic gallery, painted in the 1520s, but to which new portraits of rulers continued to be added for several decades afterwards⁴⁴. The gallery also includes the historical portraits of Lazăr of Serbia and Mircea of Wallachia, who lived more than a century prior and served as models of Christian sovereigns. Most significantly, the painted gallery suggests no genealogical connection between the different rulers, except for the obvious father-son relationship⁴⁵. Similarly, the now lost gallery of portraits from the princely court of Bucharest seems also to have included a portrait of Stephen of Moldavia⁴⁶. Obviously, the marriages of several sixteenth-century Wallachian lords with Serbian and Moldavian princesses played a pivotal role in adding these historical figures to the symbolic group of “forefathers”⁴⁷. Significantly, no effort was made to connect the ruling lords of Wallachia genealogically with their predecessors. The Wallachian house of princes set its roots not in a specific, local, historical lineage, but rather in a generic Christian kingship⁴⁸.

Romanian scholars commonly refer to the late medieval Wallachian kingship as to the “Basarab dynasty”. The name itself is mentioned by sources, although infrequently, which is not unusual as medieval ruling houses generally did not need surnames⁴⁹. In a couple of charters issued in the 1430s, there is a vague reference to “our ancestors, the Basarabs”, which seems to point to the first lord by this name, viewed by modern scholars as the founder of Wallachia in the early four-

44 See the expository catalogue by Emanuela Cernea/Lucreția Pătrășcanu (Eds.), *Mărturii. Frescele Mănăstirii Argeşului*. Catalog expozițional, București 2012.

45 The ruling lord was depicted either alone, or accompanied by the designated heir or even by his wife and all of his children.

46 His portrait was described by the Polish chronicler Maciej Strykowski who visited the Bucharest court in 1574–1575, see Maciej Strykowski, *Kronika polska, litewska, żmódzka i wszystkiej Rusi*, vol. 2, ed. Mikołaj Malinowski, Warszawa 1846, p. 320. For Strykowski, see also Oleksii Rudenko's article in this volume.

47 See Ștefan Andreescu, *Alianțe dinastice ale domnilor Țării Românești (secolele XIV–XVI)*, in: Idem, *Fragmente de istorie medievală*, Brăila 2019, pp. 7–20.

48 For the mixed legitimacy of grace and birthright see Radu Păun, ‘Elu de la matrice de ma mère’. Pouvoir et prédestination aux XVI^e–XVII^e siècles, in: Idem/Ivan Biliarsky (Eds.), *The Biblical Models of Power and Law/Les modèles bibliques du pouvoir et du droit*, Frankfurt am Main 2008 (Rechtshistorische Reihe 366), pp. 225–270.

49 See Bartlett, *Blood Royal*, p. 286.

teenth century⁵⁰. But Basarab was first and foremost a regnal name, adopted by several lords of Wallachia, and not a surname. As this regnal name became increasingly popular towards the end of the fifteenth century, the memory of the first Basarabs slowly faded away. By mid-sixteenth century, the princely chancery scribes remembered only three former lords of Wallachia by the name of Basarab: the Old, the Young and the most famous of them, who needed no sobriquet⁵¹. All three ruled over Wallachia from the 1470s to the 1520s. As for the first two Basarabs, the early fourteenth and the mid-fifteenth century ones, they had been forgotten and were to be rediscovered by modern scholars only centuries later⁵². In the late 1570s, Basarab was both a regnal name and a surname of a Wallachian house that an informed observer considered to be “the most noble one of realm”⁵³. It was only in the seventeenth century that the term of Basarab gradually turned into a proper dynastic surname. This conversion served a very specific political purpose: to enforce the rights of local Wallachian pretenders to the throne and to deny the claims raised by other (self-proclaimed) Christian-Ottoman princes, mainly Moldavians or Greeks⁵⁴. Most significantly, when such non-Wallachian princes climbed for the first time to the throne, in the early 1590s, they made no attempt to justify genealogically their rule.

The ascent of two consecutive princes of Moldavian origin to the throne of Wallachia, Stephen (1591–1592) and Alexander (1592–1593), points to a princely house of Wallachia more permeable and less clearly defined than a traditional ‘dynasty’. Both Stephen and Alexander had been entrusted with the throne of Walla-

50 Petre S. Năsturel/Constantin Bălan, Hrisovul lui Alexandru Aldea pentru mănăstirea Bolintin (1433), in: *Revista Istorică* 3 (1992), pp. 477–488; and Petronel Zahariuc, Patru documente inedite din secolul al XV-lea privitoare la istoria Țării Românești, in: *Studii și Materiale de Istorie Medie* 26 (2008), pp. 163–176.

51 For a detailed discussion, see Coman, *Naming*.

52 At the end of the eighteenth century, the boyar and historian Michael Cantacuzino was surprised to find the name of the Basarab in some Serbian and Hungarian chronicles and realised that he must be the first Basarab placed at the beginning of the liturgical memorial from the Câmpulung monastery, see Mihai Cantacuzino, *Istoria politică și geografică a Țerei Românești de la cea mai veche a sa întemeiere până la anul 1774, data mai întâiu în limba grecească la anul 1806 de Frații Tunusli*, ed. George Sion, București 1863, p. 127f. As for Basarab II, he gained his place on the list of the Wallachian rulers only in the twentieth century.

53 See footnote 6.

54 Some scholars place this change at the beginning of the 17th century, during Radu Șerban’s reign – see Constantin Rezachevici, *Cum a apărut numele dinastic Basarab și când l-a adoptat Matei vodă*, in: *Analele Universității din Craiova. Seria Istorie* 10 (2005), pp. 7–28; idem, *Când apare familia domnească a Basarabilor?*, in: Alexandru Zub/Venera Achim/Nagy Pienaru (Eds.), *Națiunea română. Idealuri și realități istorice*. Acad. Cornelia Bodea la 90 de ani, București 2006, pp. 172–189 -, while other emphasise the importance of Matei Basarab’s ascension in the 1630’s – see footnote 41.

chia by the Ottoman Sultan and both emphasised their princely origin. Their birth-right to the throne rested on their status, as they were of ‘princely bone’, and the fact that their fathers ruled over a principality other than Wallachia did not seem to have been a liability. Continuing the local chancery tradition, Stephen styled himself “son of the great and very kind lord John”, while Alexander also called upon his namesake grandfather, entitling himself “the son of the great and very kind and very merciful, the late lord Bogdan, and grandson of the elder and late lord Alexander of the principality of Moldavia”⁵⁵. John, Bogdan and Alexander had been lords of Moldavia, but their descendants felt perfectly entitled to claim a different throne, that of Wallachia. Most importantly, none of their Wallachian subjects opposed them on the grounds of their lineage. Tellingly, none of the late seventeenth-century Wallachian chroniclers specifically identified these lords as “Moldavians”⁵⁶. Their princely status sufficed to justify their claims, as their kingship was more important than their kinship.

To conclude, it seems that the sixteenth-century Wallachian kingship system lacked genealogical memory, had no real historical depth and was mainly horizontally stretched. A Wallachian prince knew very well who his uncles and cousins were, but was at a loss when asked about his great-grandfather. Their actual genealogical knowledge seldom stretched back more than two or three generations. Such a conception of kingship, although far from unique⁵⁷, was rather uncommon for that time, as the genealogical model came to structure the dynastic thinking in most of Western and Central Europe. As a result, when addressing an audience acquainted with the language of genealogy, the Wallachian princes were facing a thorny challenge: to shape their horizontally-spread dynastic knowledge into a vertically-arranged genealogical structure.

55 AMR, digital identifier number BU-F-00684–1498, with a Romanian translation in DIR-B, veacul XVI, vol. VI, no. 70, pp. 61f.

56 Virgil Cădea, *Letopiseșul Țării Românești (1292–1664) în versiunea arabă a lui Macarie Zaim*, in: *Studii. Revista de Istorie* 23 (1970), pp. 673–692, here pp. 688f.; *Istoria Țării Românești (1290–1690)*. Letopiseșul Cantacuzinesc, ed. Constantin Grecescu/Dan Simonescu, București 1960 (*Croniclele medievale ale României* 3), p. 54; and Popescu, *Istoriile domnilor*, pp. 67f.

57 There are some similarities, but also significant differences between the Wallachian concept of kingship and the Bulgarian one. Both emphasized that the ascension to the throne ultimately reflected God’s will manifested through the charisma of a family, see Biliarsky, *La transmission*, pp. 106–110. However, unlike the Wallachian case, the Bulgarian dynasticism seems better structured, see Dmitry I. Polyvyanny, *Dynasticity in the Second Bulgarian Tsardom and its Manifestations in Medieval History Writing*, in: *Studia Ceranea* 9 (2019), pp. 351–365.

II Devising Dynasties and Sketching Genealogies: Wallachian Princes and Western Audiences

There are only a handful of sixteenth-century Wallachian princely genealogies and they were all produced outside the realm, at the request and for the benefit of a Western audience. Some of them were fabricated by reigning lords (Mihnea the Renegade), some by pretenders (Peter the Earring, Stephen Bogdan) and some by persons boasting their princely blood without making a claim for the throne (Nicolaus Olahus or Ladislaus Drakula)⁵⁸. Most significantly, the vast majority of Wallachian pretenders did not bring any genealogical support to their claims, except for the simple assertion of their father's status that proved they were of 'princely bone'⁵⁹. The improvised lineages of the Wallachian wandering princes had been drafted throughout the whole of Europe, from Brussels to Prague and from Venice to London. Their format varied, according to their specific purpose and intended audience. Most were simple genealogical references inserted in a variety of texts, such as letters, memoranda, nobility diplomas, and even funeral or dedicatory inscriptions. Only a few could be arguably included in the actual genre of genealogies. Among these exceptions, there are two genealogical trees drafted at the request of Nicolaus Olahus, a Hungarian humanist of Wallachian princely blood, one of which annotated by his hand (Fig. 1)⁶⁰. The genealogical diagrams

58 For Mihnea's genealogy see Nicolae Iorga, *Ospiti romeni in Venetia (1570–1610)*, Bucarest 1932, p. 178. For Peter the Earring's lineage, see idem, *Rătăcirile în Apus ale unui pretendent român, Ioan Bogdan, în secolul al XVI-lea*, in: *Analele Academiei Române, Memoriile Secțiunii Istorice* 8 (1928), pp. 283–300, and Pippidi, *O genealogie*, pp. 202 f. For Stephen Bogdan see Laura J. Coulter, *The Involvement of the English Crown and its Embassy in Constantinople with Pretenders to the Throne of the Principality of Moldavia between 1583 and 1620*, doctoral dissertation (University of London) 1993. For Olahus's genealogical inquiries see the recent study by Emőke R. Szilágyi/Nagy Levente, *Câteva date noi despre genealogia familiei Olahus, Hunyadi și Dracula (Vlad Țepeș)*, in: *Studii și Materiale de Istorie Medie* 40 (2022), pp. 125–164. For Ladislaus Drakula see Paul Binder, *Une famille noble roumaine de Transylvanie: les Drakula de Sintești*, in: *Revue Roumaine d'Histoire* 27 (1988), pp. 301–314.

59 "From the blood of Basarab, the former lord of Wallachia" (*ex sanguine Bassarabi quondam Despotae Valachiae*) or "the legitimate and natural son of Barbu Neagoe, former lord of Wallachia" (*Barbuli Nagorae quondam Transalpinæ Principis filium legitimum et naturalem*) in Hurmuzaki II/1, no. 511, p. 545 and no. 530, pp. 560 f. For more examples, see Nicolae Iorga, *Pretendenți domnești din veacul al XVI-lea*, in: *Analele Academiei Române, Memoriile Secțiunii Istorice* 19 (1897), pp. 193–268.

60 These genealogical sketches were recently discovered by Emőke R. Szilágyi and Nagy Levente and are to be published in their study, *Genealogia familiei Olahus*. I am extremely grateful to both authors for not only generously sharing their unpublished manuscript with me, but also for help-

were structured chronologically from left to right and comprised four generations. When Lord Burghley was trying to make sense of Peter the Earring's lineage in order to decide if he was worthy of his support, he arranged the Wallachian princely family tree from top to bottom, also following four generations (Fig. 2)⁶¹. A decade later, the same format was used by an adventurous Moldavian-Wallachian pretender who sent his genealogy to the elector-prince of Brandenburg, tracing back his lineage only to his grandparents⁶². Despite all their differences, these ad hoc genealogical attempts share a few common traits: (1) they were historically short-sighted, as most of them went back only two, maximum three, generations; (2) they were using a variety of volatile names to label their dynastic identities (Dans, Drakulas, Demetrians, Marsia, Corvinus, Despots or Palaiologos); sometimes the same self-proclaimed Wallachian prince was undecided with regard to his own dynastic sobriquet; (3) their genealogical rhetoric was rather clumsy and unpersuasive when it came to substantiating a pretender's rights to the throne of Wallachia.

Nicolaus Olahus seems to have been the first member of the Wallachian house of princes that tried to arrange his family lineage according to some sort of genealogical scheme. His family inquiries started in the 1520s, when Olahus asked his father about the degree of kinship between him and the former lord of Wallachia, Mihnea⁶³. However, the father-son correspondence focused less on the family's genealogy, traced back only one generation, and more on the family's properties in Wallachia⁶⁴. A decade later, while in Brussels in the service of Mary of Habsburg, Olahus turned to the scholarly authority of Pius II to clarify the reasons of the seemingly never-ending struggles for the Wallachian throne. In mid-fifteenth century, Pius was explaining the Wallachian political instability by the existence of two opposing factions, that of the Dans (*factio Danorum*) and that of the Drakulas (*factio Dragularum*)⁶⁵. Olahus took over this dual strife, but converted it into a dy-

ing me to obtain a digital image of the *Genealogia Nicolai Olahi* from the Hungarian National Archives.

61 The genealogy was published by Pippidi, O genealogie, p. 202. I am grateful to Sarah Whale (Archives Department, Hatfield House), for her help in providing me with a digital image.

62 The genealogy was published by Alexandru Papiu-Ilarian (Ed.), *Tesauru de monumente istorice pentru Romania*, vol. 3, Bucuresci 1864, p. 46.

63 The letter was edited by Emőke R. Szilágyi, Oláh István levele fiához, Miklóshoz. Egy régi magyar nyelvemlék 1520-ból, in: *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 125 (2021), pp. 210–225.

64 See the discussion in Szilágyi/Nagy, *Genealogia familiei Olahus*.

65 Pius was clearly referring to political parties and not to dynasties or families, as he used the precisely same word to describe the Guelph-Ghibelline or the Burgundian-Armagnac rivalries. The description of Wallachian politics was part of Pius's *Cosmographia*, printed in 1501, see the

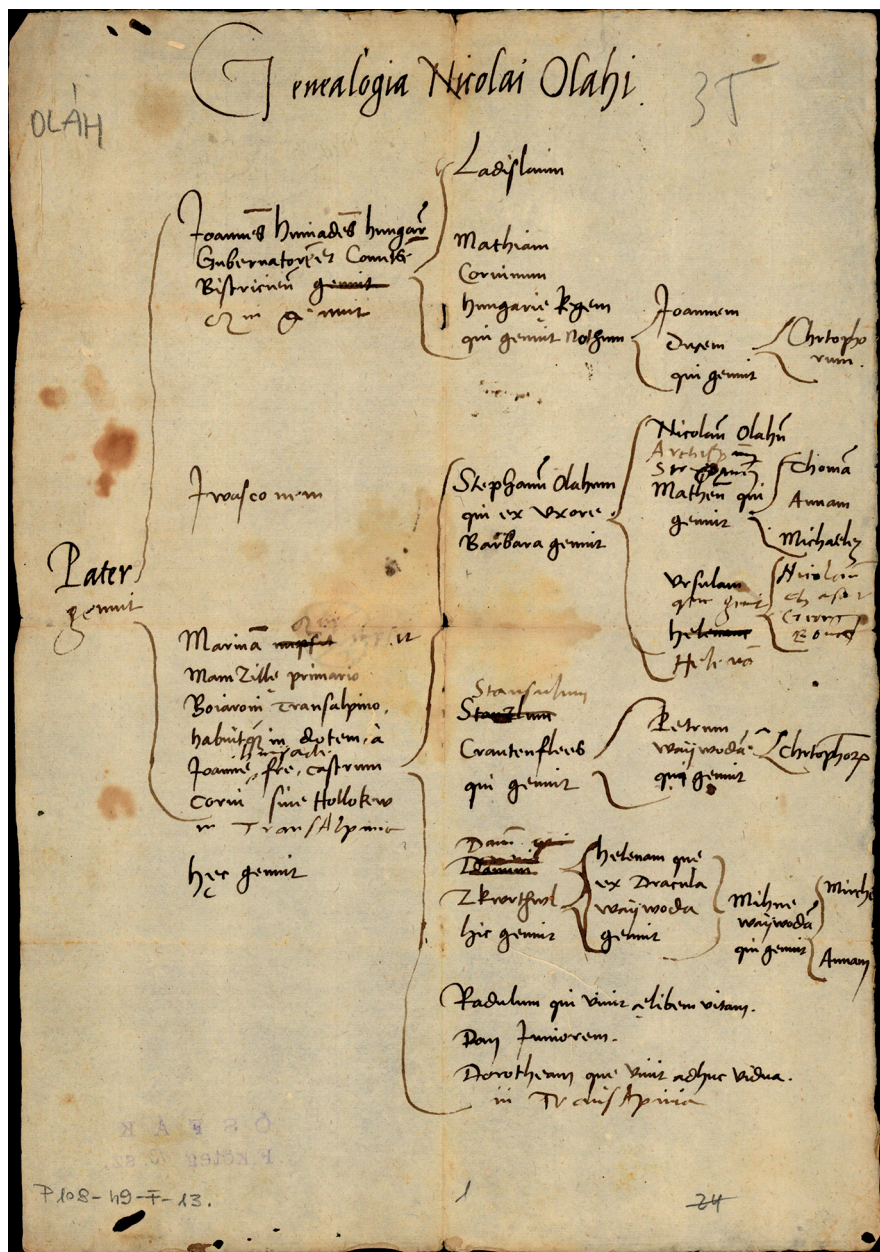


Fig. 1: Nicolaus Olahus's genealogy annotated by his hand. Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára P 108 Rep. 49. Fasc. F. No. 13. Reproduced with permission of the Hungarian National Archives.

nastic fratricide one, turning the Dans and the Drakulas into two branches of the same family (*duae fuerunt familiae, in initio ex eadem domo ortae*)⁶⁶. Olahus specified that his father was as a descendent of Drakula (*ex sanguine Drakwla*)⁶⁷, while his kinfolk, Mihnea, was born in the rivalling branch (*ex Danorum natus gente*)⁶⁸. However, after he returned to Habsburg Hungary and became a chancellor, a bishop and an archbishop, Olahus abandoned the Dans/Drakulas genealogical distinction. Instead, he intensified his efforts to link the Olahus family to the mid-fifteenth century leading Hungarian military and political figure of John Hunyadi⁶⁹. Thus, Olahus's genealogical trees from the 1550s start either with John Hunyadi or with his unnamed father (generically labelled *pater*) and comprise more than twenty family members spread over four generations, two preceding and one succeeding that of Olahus. The changes in Olahus's genealogical approach might have been partially determined by the existence of another Hungarian noble family of a Wallachian princely descent that was already using the sobriquet *Drakula* as a surname⁷⁰. A Ladislaus Drakula was writing from Prague to Olahus in 1543, claiming that both of their fathers were the sons of the infamous Vlad Drakula (the Impaler)⁷¹. Some of the genealogical information on Nicolaus Olahus and Ladislaus Drakula found its way into their Hungarian nobility diplomas, suggesting an attempt to improve their social status by capitalizing on their princely Wallachian origins⁷². The inconsistencies of these lineages are due

Latin original and a Romanian translation in *Călători străini despre țările române*, vol. 1, ed. Maria Holban, București 1968, pp. 471–474.

66 The passage was included in Olahus's *Hungaria*, see Nicolaus Olahus, *Opere*, vol. I: *Hungaria și Chronicon*, ed. Maria Capoianu, București 2002, pp. 134 f.

67 “Memini ego patrem meum, qui erat ortus ex sanguine Drakwla, vaivodae Valachiae”, Olahus mentions this in a letter to his Humanist friend Cornelius Scepperus, last edited in Nicolaus Olahus, *Epistulae*, pars I, 1523–1533, ed. Emőke R. Szilágyi, Budapest 2018 (*Bibliotheca Scriptorum Medii Recentisque Aevorum. Series Nova* 19), p. 427 f.

68 See Olahus, *Opere*, vol. I, p. 136 f.

69 See Szilágyi/Nagy, *Genealogia familiei Olahus*. The recently discovered genealogies invalidate Constantin Rezachevici's hypothesis that Nicolaus Olahus downplayed his family connections with Hunyadi, see Constantin Rezachevici, Matiaș Corvin și înruderile sale prin alianță cu neamul domnesc al lui Basarab I din Țara Românească, in: *Argesis* 17 (2008), pp. 99–105, here p. 100.

70 See Binder, *Une famille noble roumaine*, p. 302.

71 Drakula's cruelty was explicitly mentioned in the letter: “Vlad vaida, sive Dracula, tres filios habuit, quorum unus fuit Myhne vaida, secundus vero pater vestrae Illustrissimae domini, tertius autem pater meus, nomine Ludovicus Dracula vaida. Et quia nimis crudelis fuit, eam ob rem a boieris trucidatus fuit”. Szilágyi/Nagy, *Genealogia familiei Olahus*, p. 137.

72 See Alexandru Tonk, *Diplomele de înnobilitare ale lui Nicolaus Olahus*, in: *Revista Arhivelor* 12 (1969), pp. 13–31; and Binder, *Une famille noble roumaine*. Around the same time, another Wallachian prince that found refuge in Hungary, Blasius, was compiling a short Latin autobiography,

both to deficient knowledge, as well as to different genealogical agendas. While living in the Habsburg Low Countries, Nicolaus Olahus played with the idea of presenting himself as a descendant of Drakula, but after he had returned to Hungary he decided to emphasise his kinship with John Hunyadi and with his son, Matthias Corvinus, the former king of Hungary. Most importantly, Nicolaus Olahus and his family informants (including, seemingly, the reigning lord of Wallachia)⁷³, were neither able, nor interested, in tracing back their lineage further than two generations. They were debating who their grandparents were, but did not seem to have any idea who their great-grandparents might have been.

All genealogies produced by sixteenth-century Wallachian acknowledged or self-proclaimed princes were having the same limited chronological horizon. The most ambitious lineages had been those put forward independently by the archivists Peter the Earring and Mihnea the Renegade. Both lineages went back for three generations, up to the same great-grandfather, Radu, who had reigned over Wallachia at the beginning of the sixteenth century⁷⁴. Incidentally, Peter was right, while Mihnea was wrong, as he completely overlooked his grandfather and as he wrongly identified his great-great-grandfather with Radu; a rather surprising inaccuracy considering that his great-great-grandfather was no other than Vlad the Impaler/Drakula. Significantly, both in the 1540s and 1550s, as well as in the 1580s and 1590s, the grandsons tended to use their grandfather's regnal name or sobriquet as a family surname. Thus, a generation later, the Drakulas became the Mihneas⁷⁵.

highlighting his princely origins, but without tracing his lineage beyond his father's generation, see Nicolae Edroiu, Bălaș Munteanu (Havasely), fiul domnului Țării Românești Vlad Vintilă de la Slătina, in: *Arhiva Genealogică*, 3.3–4 (1996), pp. 137–144.

⁷³ The last genealogy produced for Nicolaus Olahus was written by his secretary, Liszthy János, in the 1550's. The secretary specifies that it was based on the information provided by Peter, the lord of Wallachia (*ex relatione Petri Olah, vaivode Transalpinensis*), see Szilágyi/Nagy, *Genealogia familiei Olahus*. Tellingly, Liszthy János transferred Nicolaus Olahus's family sobriquet to the reigning lord, naming him *Petrus Olahus*.

⁷⁴ In Venice, most specifically in the Murano monastery, there is a dedicatory inscription comprising Mihnea's lineage, at that time the reigning lord of Wallachia, celebrating his patronage (his aunt was living in the monastery): "e Corvina regia familia, Alexandri filius, Mihnae nepos, Raduli principium pronepos", in Iorga, *Ospiti romeni*, p. 178.

⁷⁵ The Drakulas that moved to Transylvania preserved this sobriquet up to the middle of the 17th century. However, in Wallachia, the last prince that claimed to be a descendent of Vlad the Impaler/Dracula was Vlad the Young in 1511, who mentioned him as "his uncle", in DRH-B, vol. 2, no. 83, pp. 175–178. His great-grandson, Alexander, paid no particular attention to the historical memory of Vlad, and in one of his charters, issued in 1574, he even referred to him by the injurious sobriquet "the Impaler", see DRH-B, vol. 7, no. 171, pp. 228 f. Rather puzzling, one of Alexander's rivals that had a bid for the throne in the same year, 1574, was mockingly referred to as "Draculina", at

As far as the dynastic name goes, the pretenders to the throne of Wallachia resorted to two main genealogical strategies, each with multiple subvariants. The first was to prune the family tree to such an extent as to remain a sole legitimate pretender to the throne. The second was to boost one's claims by including as many Christian-Ottoman dynasties as possible into the genealogy. Each option had its own benefits and drawbacks. In the first case, the pretender presented himself, rather modestly, but credibly, as a Wallachian prince. In the second one, he boasted a far more impressive, but less plausible, Wallachian-Moldavian-Serbian-Greek princely origin. For the first strategy, the best example is Peter the Ear-ring who branded himself the sole legitimate heir of the Demetrian/Marsia dynasty⁷⁶. According to Lord Burghley's genealogical sketch, Peter was the firstborn legitimate son of a firstborn legitimate son from the first marriage of a Wallachian ruler. Obviously, the pretender was trying to apply the Western notion of primogeniture to the Wallachian dynastic politics, in order to narrow down the princely house to a single branch and to strengthen his own claims.

The second genealogical strategy was assumed by Stephen Bogdan, who claimed to be a member of an alleged Moldavian dynasty, that "of the Despotes, auncient Governors of that Province", which in their turn descended "from the auncient famelie of Paleologies, sometymes Emperours of Constantinople"⁷⁷. Although his father ruled only over Moldavia during an ephemeral reign, Stephen Bogdan chased both the thrones of Wallachia and Moldavia, and for a short while he was even named Lord of Wallachia by the Sultan⁷⁸. By shifting his dynastic identity from a local Wallachian one to a larger Ottoman-Christian one—we would be tempted to say post-Byzantine—he was trying to arouse the Western courts' interest. The genealogy submitted by Stephen Bogdan to the Brandenburg court reveals a hesitant and maladroit effort to extend his birthright to reign over Wallachia⁷⁹. Thus, Stephen Bogdan was claiming not only that his mother was a Paleologa, but also that his aunt was a former Queen of Wallachia. However, even if his other two

least according to the Polish traveler Maciej Strykowski who saw his head exposed on one of Bucharest's gates, see Strykowski, *Kronika polska*, vol. 2, p. 320.

⁷⁶ "Familia Demetrii principis Valachiae, olim vocata Marsia", in Pippidi, *O genealogie*, p. 202.

⁷⁷ See Acts of the Privy Council of England, vol. 32 (1601–1604). New Series, ed. John R. Dasent, London 1907, pp. 407–409; and Coulter, *Involvement*, p. 260. For the so-called Moldavian Despots family, see Ștefan S. Gorovei, *Descendența domnească a Movileștilor. Observații și argumente noi*, in: Ovidiu Cristea/Petronel Zahariuc/Gheorghe Lazăr (Eds.), *Aut viam inveniam aut faciam*. In honorem Ștefan Andreescu, Iași 2012, pp. 226–238.

⁷⁸ See Simonescu, *Cronica*, p. 68.

⁷⁹ See Papiu-Ilarian (Ed.), *Tesaurus*, vol. 3, p. 46.

male cousins had died without an heir, as he emphasised, it is not clear how this genealogy could have entitled him to claim the Wallachian throne⁸⁰.

The merging of several local dynasties into a large Christian-Ottoman princely family also echoes the steady integration of different European provinces, including those of the tributary states of Wallachia, Moldavia and Transylvania, into the Ottoman Empire⁸¹. As Istanbul's growing force of attraction slowly eroded the regional identities, a process no one knew whether and when it would end, the pretenders came to understand the benefits of chasing more than one throne at a time. Thus, a pretender to the throne of Wallachia could and often did assume the bigger, but also the more ambiguous role of a Christian-Ottoman prince. In the best suited words of such a pretender, he was no longer a Wallachian, Moldavian, Serbian or Greek prince, an offspring of some local house, but an offspring of *casa di Levante*⁸². Rather ironically, as the Western wandering pretenders were trying to emphasise their Levantine connections, the princes most integrated into the Ottoman networks of power were playing the opposite card. As one might expect, the dynastic claims seem to have had a compensatory function. The family of the ruling lord of Wallachia, Mihnea, tried to strengthen their genealogical prestige by associating themselves with the Hungarian royal family of Corvinus. Both Mihnea and his uncle Peter styled themselves as descendants of the Corvinus family, in two inscriptions from Venice and Tyrol⁸³. Mihnea later converted to Islam and became an important Ottoman political player, but his son, Radu,

⁸⁰ Towards the end of a long and tumultuous life as a pretender, Stephen Bogdan converted to Islam and envisaged a union of the two principalities, Moldavia and Wallachia, under his rule, as a Paleologian-Despot prince turned Turk, see Hurmuzaki, IV/2, no. 356, p. 338.

⁸¹ The first Wallachian prince ascended the Moldavian throne in 1574; 17 years later, in 1591, the tide turned around and the first Moldavian prince came to rule Wallachia. In 1580, a little-known Wallachian prince, Blasius, was asking the sultan for the throne of Transylvania. For the Ottoman tributary states see Gábor Kármán/Lovro Kunčević, (Eds.), *The European Tributary States of the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Leiden 2013 (*The Ottoman Empire and its Heritage* 53).

⁸² This was the title assumed by a wandering pretender in a letter sent to the Genoese Senate in the 1560s, see Andrei Pippidi, *Fables, bagatelles et impertinences. Autour de certaines généalogies Byzantines des XVIe–XVIIIe siècles*, in: *Études byzantines et post-byzantines* 1 (1979), p. 269–305, here p. 275.

⁸³ For Mihnea's lineage, see above footnote 70. His uncle Peter the Lamé, a Wallachian-born prince, who ruled over Moldavia, died and was buried in Tyrol in 1594 with the following dynastic epitaph: "Ioanni Petro, Vaivodae Moldaviae, ex Corvina Mhinistarum [Iorga suggests a misspelling of the *Mihneas* family sobriquet] Valachiae principum", see Hurmuzaki, XI, no. 595, p. 451.

who reigned successively over Wallachia and Moldavia at the beginning of the seventeenth century, continued to place emphasis on the alleged Corvinus lineage⁸⁴.

Nevertheless, despite their different dynastic-name strategies, no actual genealogies were produced to endorse all these kinship claims. No explicit lineage was devised to connect Mihnea to the Corvini, nor Stephen Bogdan to the Palaio-logoi. The Wallachian princes still had a long way to go in learning how to endorse their dynastic claims with the use of genealogy. Emerging from a culture that had a different conception of kingship and kinship, they were struggling to learn how to reason genealogically. When playing the game of genealogy, the Wallachian pretenders were at a significant disadvantage, as they had first to turn their knowledge into a whole new different configuration and to convey it by using a completely new language. Moreover, the limited historical knowledge with regard to their own ancestry ultimately crippled their genealogical attempts. To make things worse, the Wallachian princes had soon to compete for the Western audiences' compassion and support with a crowd of rival adventurers, some of whom far more skilled in fabricating genealogies.

Epilogue

In 1558, a pretender, known as Jacob Heracles Basil Despot, had his genealogy printed in the Transylvanian Saxon town of Kronstadt (Braşov), under the fanciful title: *Arbor illustrissimae Heraclidarum familiae, quae et Diasorina, Basilica ac Despotica vocatur*⁸⁵. Unlike the Wallachian pretenders' sketchy lineages, this was a fully-fledged genealogy. According to this impressive family tree, Despot was a member of the Heraklides dynasty, founded by the Homeric hero Triptolemus. Among his ancestors one could count Polycrates, the ancient tyrant of Samos, more than a few Byzantine emperors, several Serbian despots from the Branković family, and a few Moldavian and Wallachian princes and princesses. With such a lineage, one could lay claims to almost any province of Ottoman Europe and Despot imagined himself ruler of a miscellaneous Aegean-Moldavian-Wallachian polity, as he self-styled "Dei Gratia Despotas Sami, Doridos, Moldaue, Pari et cetera-

⁸⁴ For Radu's genealogical pretences, see Andreescu, *Restitutio Daciae*, vol. 2, p. 41, and Valentin Constantinov, *Țara Moldovei și Țara Românească în timpul domniilor lui Radu Mihnea*, Iași 2007 (Historica 41).

⁸⁵ The genealogical tree was edited in *Deux vies de Jacques Basilicos*, ed. by Émile Legrand, Paris, 1889 (Collection de documents concernant l'histoire politique et littéraire de la Grèce médiévale et moderne 1), pp. 60–62; see also Gheorghe Pungă, *Cu privire la arborele genealogic al lui Despot vodă*, in: *Arhiva genealogică* 2 (1995), pp. 23–38.

rum insularum princeps, Terarum Valachie Dominus et legitimus heres”⁸⁶. A Western-educated adventurer of a Greek origin, Despot was a fugitive from France, where he had left behind his university studies at Montpellier, a wife, a murder and a conviction in absentia. By posing as an exiled Christian prince, cast away by the Ottomans, he managed to impress emperor Charles V⁸⁷. Once he set eyes on the Moldavian and Wallachian thrones, Despot continued to refine and to expand his fictional genealogy, until it grew to the proportions and shape of the 1558 printed form. Three years later, in 1561, Despot was climbing on the throne of Moldavia, but he fell short in his attempt to enforce his own candidate to reign over Wallachia⁸⁸. When compared to his rival pretenders, Despot was obviously excelling at the game of genealogy. His success, although ephemeral, was partially due to his ability to constantly refashion his identity with the help of genealogy. This adventurer, who claimed to descend from a Greek mythological hero, had the means and knowledge to overcome any genealogical challenge. When competing with such genealogical savvy contenders, the Wallachian princes were at a serious disadvantage.

Unlike some of the other “oriental adventurers” in Renaissance Europe⁸⁹, who were able to substantiate their credentials by fabricating intricate and persuasive lineages⁹⁰, the Wallachian pretenders did not master the language of genealogy. Their conception of kingship, defined both by the grace of God and by the right of birth, was rather deficient when it came to historical awareness and genealogical knowledge. Descendants of ‘princely blood/bone’, they were used to viewing themselves as members of a living kinship group. When crossing cultures, they were asked to change their perception of themselves and to position their princely birthright into a complex web of ancestry. It would take Wallachian princes and pretenders a really long time to learn how to reason genealogically.

⁸⁶ This is the title used by Despot in a 1560 letter to the Kronstadt Saxons, see Hurmuzaki XV/1, no. 1031, p. 560.

⁸⁷ See Andronikos Falangas, Jacques Vassilikos-Despote (Despot Vodă). Un Grec, voïévode de Moldavie. À la lumière des sources narratives roumaines des XVI^e et XVII^e siècles, Bucarest 2009.

⁸⁸ For Despot’s plans with regard to Wallachia, see Andreescu, *Restitutio Daciae*, vol. 1, pp. 146–157.

⁸⁹ See Nicolae Iorga, *Aventuriers orientaux en France au XVI^e siècle*, in: *Bulletin de la section historique de l’Académie Roumaine* 17 (1930), pp. 1–22. For the sixteenth century as an ‘age of impostors’, see Miriam Eliav-Feldon, *Renaissance Impostors and Proofs of Identity*, Basingstoke 2012.

⁹⁰ See for instance the impressive genealogies produced by the members of the Constantinian Order of Saint George, who boasted imperial Byzantine origins, in Pippidi, *Fables*, pp. 272–274.

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