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**SECULAR WISDOM TEXTS – MONASTIC SPIRITUALITY AND
ZOOMORPHIC ARETOLOGY IN THE MIRRORS OF PRINCES**

At first sight the *Treatise on Duties* of Nicholas Mavrokordatos may be viewed as a reflection of a previous work which marked the wisdom literature produced in the Danubian principalities at the beginning of the XVI century, the *Instructions* of the Wallachian prince Neagoe Bassarab, addressed to his son Theodosius. The exhortatory nature of this work and its importance in the education of the candidates to the throne of the Principalities leads us to believe that it was used to legitimize the ascension to the throne of the princely heirs of Moldavia and Wallachia. Bassarab's *Instructions* to his son were copied for Stefan Cantacuzenus, the successor of Constantin Brancovan to the Wallachian throne. Upon his accession to the throne of Moldavia, Nicholas Mavrokordatos, true to established tradition, ordered a new copy of the *Instructions* to be transcribed by the officer of his chancellery, Radu Lupescu.

The similarities found in both of the above works are repeated in three architectural complexes in which the same diachronic model of the legitimation of a ruling dynasty is followed through texts of the genre "mirrors of princes". The concept and construction of the monastic complex in Curtea de Arges by Neagoe Bassarab, a similar complex realized by Constantin Brancovan in Hurez and another foundation of similar scope undertaken by Nicholas Mavrokordatos in Vacaresti attest to the willingness of the creators of these monastic foundations to perpetuate and renew a cultural tradition which is used as a means of legitimation of the dynastic claims of each particular family ruling the Danubian principalities.

This tradition of founding monastic establishments and endowing them with privileges is of an ancient Byzantine origin. What is particular in the cases we mentioned above is that this association with monastic institutions and practices is not only limited to architectural creations but is also extended to the creation of literary works associated with monastic personalities. The relationship of another scion of the Moldavian princely families, that of Dimitri Cantemir, to the Athonite monk Jeremias Cacavelas and his influence in the composition and translation into modern Greek of his exhortatory work *Divanul*, is well known to the students of the period in question. Similar conditions apply to Neagoe Bassarab and his literary and spiritual association with another Athonite monastic, Manuel Corinthios, in the composition of his "fürstenspiegel" *Instructions*.

The new element that is brought into play with the *Treatise on Duties* of Nicholas Mavrokordatos is that this association with monastic personalities is not operative in his literary creations. As a result of this departure from the popular basis of monastic literary creations his work gains in classical, philosophical, juridical, and theological importance. In spite of the similarities between Bassarab's *Instructions* and Mavrokordatos's *Treatise on Duties*, the latter work excludes all the popular elements that are integrated in a natural way in Bassarab's *Instructions*. The references to *Physiologus*, to *Barlaam and Josaphat*, or to the *Romance of Alexander the Great* that are found in the *Instructions*, endow it

with several medieval traits that are absent from Mavrokordatos's work, which clearly belongs to the modern period, emulating the numerous treatises *On Duties*, so frequent in the period in question, as epitomized by the synonymous work of Samuel Pufendorf.

The themes borrowed from mythology and from folkloric traditions, which are so abundant in the popular sophiological literature of the Middle Ages, are totally absent in Mavrokordatos's work. It is for this reason that his work stands out from so many previous works of similar sophiological nature which had been cultivated in the Danubian principalities, such as the various *Floarea darurilor*, *Fiore di virtu*, clearly inspired from the imaginary universe of the *Physiologus* and of the *Aesopic fables*. These collections had also influenced the creation of another popular genre of sophiological writings, the innumerable *Bestiaria* produced abundantly in the Middle Ages, thriving in zoomorphic aretology and treatises on passions, a domain clearly monopolized by the popular sophiological writings.

We may distinguish two great branches bifurcating from the solid trunk of the tree of wisdom, the "arbor sapientiæ" of the "de regimine principum" genre. The first main branch has innumerable small upshots, ramifications which are multiplied by the rich sap of the tree nurtured by philosophy, ethics, theology, the Scriptures, jurisprudence, political theories. The fruits hanging from these branches have grown thanks to graftings which are going back to the Mesopotamian wisdom literatures, to the wisdom books of the Old Testament, to the neo-pythagorean treatises on kingship of the hellenistic period, to the Aristotelian works on Ethics, to the ethical treatises of Isocrates, Plutarch and the Stoics, to the catechetical school of Alexandria, to the theological synthesis of the Cappadocian Fathers of the Church, to the other great synthesis of neoplatonism and the Areopagetic writings, which subsequently creates a new theological school in the writings of Maximus the Confessor, which in turn ends in endless upshots known as "philocalias, chrestomathies, exhortatory alphabets, florilegia, blostman", such as the one composed by Alfred the Great, "fioretti, polyanthea", and the numerous treatises on the art of governing, the "de regimine principum" genre produced throughout the Middle Ages at the Byzantine court.

The fruits of the other great branch are multiplied grace to their graft by the popular and folkloric traditions, nurtured by the mythological and pagan vestiges of the collective memory of the people. It is here that all the myths from an undefinable and misty past derive their life giving sap through which they survive in fables, fairy tales, imaginary hagiologies, stories with heroes and fairies, fantastical animals representing virtues, sophiological riddles and logogriphs, proverbs and aretological tales. The notion that this tree of wisdom is cultivated in the primordial garden of Eden is attested by several early and medieval Fathers of the Church, beginning with Ambrosius, who likens the four rivers of Paradise to the four Platonic virtues of prudence, wisdom, valour and justice. It is thanks to the virtues that this "arbor sapientiæ" is nurtured and produces all kinds of horticultural delights in this setting of "hortus deliciarum, jardin de plaisance, Pneumatikos leimon, kipos chariton, pratum spirituale", which are taking a concrete form in the numerous "fiore di virtu, rosetta, viridaria, arbores" sophiological collections that

are cultivated in the allegorical monastic gardens of both the eastern and western Christendom.

The virtues promulgated in this sophiological genre are a mixture of both ascetic and popular virtues, at times even of a secular tenor, such as good manners, civility, sincerity in professional transactions, mixed with exhortations to fasting, prayer, vigils, sleeping on the ground, humility, almsgiving, practised invariably by Orthodox Christians irrespective of their social position. In this instance, a great role is played by *Physiologus*, since it offers a model for the zoomorphic type of a gamut of virtues and vices practised in the animal kingdom. Moreover, the point that *Physiologus* serves as a prototype to all subsequent *Bestiaria* must be stressed, because it is mainly through these popular collections of animal stories that the models of virtues are propagated on the popular consciousness.

As late as the end of the 17th century, the popular novel, such as collections of animal stories, the *Reinecke Fuchs*, *Reinaert de Vos*, or *Roman de Renart* in the West, the *Stephanites and Ichnelates*, the *Physiologus*, the *Aesopic fables* or the *Poulologos* stories in the East, propagated exclusively by the monastic centres, offer a viable substitute for the as yet unknown genre of the novel. This contributes to the creation of a particular type of osmosis between the monastic and the secular classes, between clergy and laity, totally absent from western Christendom, mainly because of the clericalistic nature of the representatives of the ecclesiastical realm in the West. Alexander Dutu named this unique phenomenon of the interrelationship between sacred and profane literary genres particular to Orthodoxy, “culture commune”. A unique cultural phenomenon indeed, especially when one bears in mind that both currents penetrate each other to such an extent that it is not difficult to detect the monastic origins of popular culture that in turn creates the basis of popular literary genres.

In this way, popular works circulating among the lay people can be reconstructed from a manuscript tradition originating in the monastic centres of the Orthodox world, especially from Mount Athos, and thence disseminated to the Moldavian and Wallachian monasteries from the monks who were “translating” them on the soil of the Orthodox Danubian principalities. The case of Paisius Velitchkovsky, a monk of Ukranian origin who, after his 17 years stay in Athos, comes to Wallachia in 1763 and settles in the monastery of Dragomirna with a treasure trove of manuscripts, in order to translate them into church Slavonic, with his team of monks originating from all the Balkan countries, is indicative of the ancient methods of settlement in the Orthodox soil of Moldowallachia of itinerant monks who found a refuge in this deeply Orthodox territory.

Through a similar investigative method we can trace to the 16th century and even earlier the manuscripts of *Physiologus* and ascribe their translation in demotic, that is, the language spoken and understood by the common people, to the monk Damascenus Stoudites, who presented his translation to the learned court of Michael Cantacuzenus in Anchialos by the Black Sea, in a manuscript form sometime between 1560-1570. The text was quite popular and was circulating widely in a manuscript form before its publication in 1643 in Venice. The “Anthi ton chariton”, or “Fiore di virtu”, were also circulating in a manuscript form, as well as the text in demotic Greek of the Fables of

Aesopus, translated by George the Aetolian, who was active at the same time as Damascenus Stouditis and was perambulating in the courts of the Orthodox magnates of the principalities. Both scholars found themselves at the same time in Anchialos, at the court of Michael Cantacuzenus, and George the Aetolian composed three poetic compositions in honour of three members of the Cantacuzenus family. Nevertheless, he reserved the more important part of his literary creation for the court of the prince of Moldavia and Wallachia, Peter the Lambe, with the translation in demotic Greek of the Fables of Aesopus.

There are indisputable accounts alleging to the origins of the Greek manuscript of the *Floarea darurilor*, that was brought as a manuscript from Mount Athos to Wallachia from its first editor of the work, Constantine Saracenus, *paharnic* at the court of Constantin Bassarab, to whom he dedicated the first edition of his work, edited by the monk Philotheus of Athos, published in 1700.

The constraints of space do not allow us to elaborate further. The main purport of our thesis is that the monastic spirituality contributed greatly in consolidating the popular tenor of the sophiological writings, which continued to be produced on a popular level, with the various secular “Chrestoethias”, a compendium of civil behavior, well into the 19th century, originating in the monastic centres. It is of some usefulness to be reminded of the fact that the last “Chrestoethia” of any importance, was written by Nicodemus the Hagiorite and published in Venice in 1804. Mavrokordatos, by founding his work on the solid scholarly and classical tradition, liberated the sophiological writings from their popular, monastic and mythical content and opened the way for the classical elaboration of the theory on duties, endowing the genre with a new spirit of modernity, which, paradoxically, was relying on ancient and classical learning in order to address a contemporary issue preoccupying the pre-Enlightenment societies of Europe.