

Teaching Sinai Module

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Painted Panel with the Mother of God and Wallachian Donors



Painting on a wooden panel

Wallachian workshop

ca. 1515

Gifted to Saint Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai

Brief description

This painted panel shows the Basarab family of Wallachia, consisting of Neagoe Basarab, his wife Milica Despina, and their six children: sons Theodosius, Peter, and John, and daughters Stana, Roxanda, and Anghelina. The family members are divided into two symmetrical groups – the men on the left and the women on the right. The figures are all richly dressed and crowned, and are identified by inscriptions in Church Slavonic. The members of the Basarab family all kneel in prayer in a desolate landscape, and direct their attention toward the heavens where a Virgin Mary with the Christ Child (of the Blachernitissa type) receives their supplications. This painting adorned once the inside of a lid for a box, as suggested by the indentations of the hardware that once attached the lid to the wooden box; two nail holes on each side remain visible.

Visual Analysis Exercise

This teaching exercise is intended to illuminate the value of this panel as a historical and visual source, allowing students to engage in a guided visual analysis that progresses through close looking, analysis of the observed details, and interpretative strategies. *This exercise could be used in an undergraduate course or graduate seminar.*

Close looking exercise: Introduce this panel as an 'unknown' and ask students to take a few minutes to look closely at the image and begin to engage in a formal analysis. They should be able to describe what they see and begin to analyze the formal details of the panel. They will not have concrete knowledge about the historical context, but they can begin to infer from the painted details (e.g. richly dressed royal figures, identified by text, family portrait Christian imagery, etc.).

Interpretation: Next, ask students to come up with 3-5 questions that they each have about the object now that they have closely looked and analyzed its formal features. The questions will likely touch on the broad themes listed below, to which the instructor can provide clarifications:

- The identification of the individual painted on the panel

- o The Wallachia royal family consists of Neagoe Basarab (r. 1512-1521), his wife Milica Despina, and their six children: sons Theodosius, Peter, and John, and daughters Stana, Roxanda, and Anghelina.
- o Around 1505, Neagoe Basarab married Milica Despina of Serbia—a descendant of the houses of Branković and Lazarević—and together they had six children. As the oldest among the sons, Theodosius succeeded his father to the throne on September 15, 1521. Due to his young age at the time, his mother, Milica, acted as regent. Unfortunately, Theodosius died only a few months after taking the crown, in January 1522.
- o Little is known about Neagoe and Milica's other two sons, Peter and John. Together with Anghelina, these three children of the royal couple died young. As for the older daughters, it is known that Stana married Moldavia's prince Stephen IV (r. 1517–1527), and Roxanda married Radu of Afumați, who took control of Wallachia after Theodosius's death (r. 1522–1529), and then she married Radu Paisie (r. 1535–1545, with interruptions).
- Other related images:
 - o In the Sinai image, Neagoe and his family appear together as they do in the [votive mural](#) designed originally for the south wall of the pronaos in the family's mausoleum at Curtea de Argeș (note also the Virgin Blachernitissa type in the top center), and in the lower portion of an icon of 1517 showing Saint Nicholas, which was originally commissioned for the church at Argeș as well. In these examples, Neagoe and his family are richly garbed and divided into two groups, with the men on the left and the women on the right side of the respective compositions. Whereas in the mural the family stands frontally and faces the viewer, the other two examples depict the figures kneeling in supplication and directing their attention toward the Virgin and Child in the heavens above and toward Saint Nicholas, respectively (different contexts).
 - o Moreover, the Sinai panel seems to be the earliest among the family portraits, followed by the mural at Curtea de Argeș in which Theodosius wears the same princely garb as his father, indicating his anticipated succession to the throne, and then by the icon of Saint Nicholas. In the latter, the youngest daughter, Anghelina, is no longer present alongside the family, suggesting that this image was painted after her premature death at a young age. Although the visual evidence is limited, the extant family portraits, when studied together, reveal the sustained interest in such depictions on commissioned objects, changes over time in the family composition and modes of representation, and aspects of the functions of these donations.
- Historical context
 - o Neagoe Basarab ruled the principality of Wallachia – situated to the north of the Danube River and south of the Carpathian Mountains (in modern Romania) – for a brief period (between 1512 and 1521), but his reign was noteworthy. He was a remarkable leader and patron who fostered relations with religious sites and monastic communities from across the Eastern Christian cultural spheres, including Greece, Mount Athos, Jerusalem, and even Mount Sinai. His monetary donations and gifts of precious icons, manuscripts, embroideries, and metalwork continued a long tradition of such investment within and beyond Wallachia among leaders of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. His deeds supported the religious communities, ensured his and his family's remembrance, and carried ideological implications in the post-Byzantine period. Such contacts also facilitated the transfer of ideas, objects, and people across disparate regions of the Eastern Christian cultural spheres, connecting Wallachia to religious centers far beyond, like Sinai.
- Function of object
 - o The object once served as the lid of a wooden box, which arrived at Sinai either with relics, or other precious liturgical objects like manuscripts, textiles, metalwork, etc. those

who opened the wooden box would have first encountered the image of the Wallachian prince alongside his immediate family, kneeling in prayer and directing their attention toward the Virgin and Child. Such an image would have indicated the piety of the patrons, their desire for divine intercession, and hope for eventual salvation. Moreover, the image would have incited prayer and remembrance in perpetuity for the Wallachian princely family among the monastic community at Sinai who received the gifts contained within the box.

- o If the object was a reliquary, then it would have been similar to the one Neagoe gifted to Dionysiou Monastery on Mount Athos for the remains of Saint Niphon around 1515. The Wallachian ruler is similarly depicted in a gesture of supplication to the divine on the inside lid.
- How the objects arrived at Sinai and why
 - o This object likely arrived at Sinai as a devotional gift. We know that Neagoe's support of Sinai likely followed in a longer tradition of Wallachian patronage for which little evidence survives. But we do know that on September 15, 1497, Prince Radu the Great (r. 1495–1508) initiated an annual payment of 5000 aspra (ἄσπρον, pl. ἄσπρα) to Sinai, and 500 aspra to the monk(s) who would come to Wallachia to retrieve the funds. As indicated in the document, this donation was to be continued by his followers. With this act, Radu the Great set the foundation for Wallachian support of Sinai, which Neagoe Basarab continued. Although no document of such monetary gifts survives from Neagoe's time (at least none uncovered to date), the existence of the Sinai wooden panel is telling in many ways.
- Research
 - o Explain to the students that this object is now preserved at Saint Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai, and in digital form in the Sinai Archive at the University of Michigan. There, it was discovered in black-and-white in a folder of 'fragments' and labelled as the 'Adoration of the Virgin Kyriotissa', created in the 18th century and attributed to a Russian cultural context. How these details came to be associated with this object remains a mystery to me. Perhaps the inscriptions in Church Slavonic immediately relegated this object to the Russian sphere for those who attempted to make sense of it.
 - o The panel was first properly identified in 2020 and subsequently analyzed, contextualized, and published in color in 2024.
 - o Ask students to discuss the value of archives (physical and digital) for art historical research, and consider what is gained and lost by accessing the historical source in an archive vs. in real life.

Further Reading

- Sullivan, Alice Isabella. "A New Discovery in the Michigan Sinai Archive." *Visual Resources Collections*, University of Michigan. May 2020.
The initial presentation, brief description, and preliminary historical contextualization of the Sinai panel.
- Sullivan, Alice Isabella. "Neagoe Basarab at Sinai." *Museikon* 5 (2021): 245–48.
The first peer-reviewed publication of the panel that considers the panel alongside other portraits of the Neagoe family.
- Sullivan, Alice Isabella. "[Donors and Donations in Sixteenth-Century Wallachia and Moldavia](#)." in *Orthodoxy on the Move: Mobility, Networks, and Belonging between the 16th and 20th Centuries*, edited by Mihai-D. Grigore, special issue of *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Theologia Orthodoxa (SUBBTO)* 68, no. 1 (2023): 15–46.

Article that analyzes the activities of key donors and their donations from the Danubian principalities to Mount Athos and Mount Sinai, including a discussion of the Sinai panel.

- Sullivan, Alice Isabella. “The Danubian Lands, Mount Athos, and Mount Sinai: Meaningful Connections.” In *Routledge Handbook of Byzantine Visual Culture in the Danube Regions, 1300–1600*, edited by Maria Alessia Rossi and Alice Isabella Sullivan (New York: Routledge, 2024), 154–69.
Handbook chapter that examines the cultural, religious, and artistic connections that extended between Mount Athos, Mount Sinai, and the Danubian principalities during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, outlining ongoing avenues of research.
- Kalavrezou, Ioli. “[The Reliquary of St. Niphon: Relations between Wallachia, Constantinople, and Mt. Athos.](#)” In *The Land Between Two Seas: Art on the Move in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, 1300–1700*, edited by Alina Payne, 239–51. Leiden: Brill, 2022.
Article that describes, analyzes, and contextualizes the reliquary of Saint Niphon that Neagoe Basarab gifted to Dionysiou Monastery on Mount Athos. The Wallachian ruler appears painted on the inside lid of this reliquary akin to his depiction on the Sinai panel.