

# **T**he itineraries prior to the ascension to the throne of Matei Basarab

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## **Abstract**

The reign continues to have a central role in the political world in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Wallachia; the numerous documents, the detailed descriptions or the internal and external narrations are a proof of this. An important figure of this period was Matei Basarab (1632-1654), one of the most appreciated princes of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the South Carpathian space. Besides his accomplishments as a prince, both internally and externally, it is interesting to watch his journeys before the actual rise to the power. The study proposes to observe and analyze these itineraries, how much he travels, why he travels and how these routes affect the way the reign develops afterwards.

**Key words:** itineraries, Wallachia, Matei Basarab, reign, ascension to the throne.

Aga Matei or Matei Basarab (1632-1654), as he was known after the occupancy of the throne, was the son of Danciu, the dvornik of Brîncoveni, who was the son of Vîlsan of Caracal and of Maria, the daughter of Cala of Brîncoveni. Matei Basarab, from a patrilineal point of view, had the right to claim the throne. (Stoicescu, 1988). On the paternal line he was related to the family of Craiovescu, his descent giving him the right to occupy the throne of Wallachia. He was born most likely in 1588, according to the chronicler George Kraus, who, describing the battle of Finta, says that „Matei Vodă was a 65 year old man [...]” [Matei vodă era un bărbat de 65 de ani [...]]” (Duzinchevici, Reus-Mîrza, 1965: 159).

We find some of the first information about Matei in a document dated February 12, 1598, where he appears as „Matei the seneschal”

[Matei postelnicul], along with his parents and with his brother, Barbu, document that has to be viewed with a dose of suspicion, because Matei would have been 10 years old if we were to consider the sayings of the chronicler from Ardeal (Mioc & Ștefănescu, 1975). Besides, it is a well-known fact that the sons of the nobles had this honorary title (Stoicescu, 1988). From the point of view of the position occupied, we find in a charter from May 19, 1608 that he is referred to as „Mateiu the cupbearer” [Mateiu paharnic] (Ionașcu et al., 1951: 313). Following the chronological thread, we find the son of Danciu again at the coronation of Gavrilaş Movilă as prince of Wallachia, where he is amongst the signatories of the peace treaty, in its early form, along with Gabriel Bethlen, as the cupbearer (Iorga, 1988). As a support to the affirmation above we can use the sigillography. On a seal we can see Matei Basarab sitting on a throne, with a staff in his right hand, and with his left hand open, with the palm facing outwards, right in front of the chest, an impersonal and solemn gesture. There is also a seal from when he was the aga (Documente privind istoria României, 1956).

In between 1608 and 1629 Matei Basarab is very often found as a witness in different documents about Oltenia along with different other boyars from Oltenia, but living on his estate in Brâncoveni, as a country nobleman (Stoicescu, 1971). As a witness he traveled to the throne, both in Târgoviște and in Bucharest, where he is recorded in the royal charters. Much more complex was his route as an eyewitness, boundary setter or as a seller or buyer of villages or properties. Summarizing his itinerary, according to internal documents, we can say that he has traveled through Doeștii, Stoinești, Foleștii de Jos (the current county of Vâlcea), Bălteni (the current Ilfov County), Odobești (the current Dâmbovița County), Mușetești (the current Argeș County), Crăceni (most likely in the current Călărași County), Slăvitești (the current Teleorman County), Balota, Piraia (the current Mehedinți County), Plosca, Tosura de Jos, Potloge, Jegălia, Urichești, Bucviciori (the current Dolj County) Chisăroaia, Murgeni, Rusinești, Mogoșești, Crușov and Zorilești (the current Olt County). During the second reign of Alexandru Iliăș, Matei is mentioned as the aga, position he had until 1630, as we can see in a charter from March 23, 1628, when the future prince received the village of Odobești (Mioc, 1969a).

During the reign of Leon Tomșa (1629-1632) he received the position of prefect (ispravnic) of the most south-eastern county of Oltenia (Sârbu, 2005), the chronicle states that he was „the sub prefect

of tributes in the county of Romanai” [zapciu de dăjdi în județul Romanaiilor] (Ștrempel, 1994: 8), because „it was an estate from Brîncovenii village[...]" [era de moșie din satul Brîncovenii] (Grecescu, Simonescu, 1960: 95). The impossibility of paying the taxes determined many boyars to leave the country and go to Transylvania, through Vulcan gorge (Câdea et al., 2003).

Along with the other boyars, they were settled in Hațeg for a period of time; Matei Basarab confirms this in a charter from May 20, 1643: „during the time when i was wandering in Hațeg, on the Bărbat Micleuș River” [pe vremea cînd am fost domnia mea în pribegie la Hațeg, pe Riul Bărbat Micleuș] (Mioc, Caracaș, Bălan, 1974: 371). There is an inversion of words in this document; Matei was actually staying at the Bărbat River (in Hunedoara County, in the Hațeg depression). In his chronicle, Georg Kraus adds an interesting detail according to which „aga Matei [...] spent some years in Transylvania, at Hațeg and in Sebeșul Săsesc” [aga Matei [...] petrecuse cîțiva ani în Transylvania, la Hațeg și la Sebeșul Săsesc ] (Duzinchevici, Reus-Mîrza, 1965: 87). The wanderers were welcomed in Transylvania by the son of Gabriel Bethlen (the captain of Oradea city) and by his son-in-law, the count Zólyomi. With Zólyomi, in the spring of the year 1631, the wanderers participated in the campaign against the imperial armies – the representatives of the interests of Caterina the widow, the widow of Bethlen Gábor – fighting Rákamaz, on Tisa (somewhere in the East of the Hungary of today) (Sârbu, 2005).

In this period, Leon Tomșa was anxious because of the wanderers. Therefore three times he writes charters for the ceasing of abuses, provides warranties for the expulsion of the „Greeks” from the country and proclaims general amnesty. Despite the invitations to peace, the prince was aware that there was the danger of the entering in the country of the group of boyars. Besides, there was a rumor that the wanderers will enter the country through multiple points. In reality, the wanderers were coming through the same place through which they left the country, through Vulcan gorge. The forth peace delegate, logofăt Radu from Desa, sent by Leon Tomșa, finds them at Târgul Jiului. Leon Tomșa sends a small contingent which was defeated at Ungureni. (Grecescu, Simonescu, 1960: 97) Location wise, Ungureni is a village from the former Romanai County (Sârbu, 2005). On August 23, 1631, as the internal chronicles also suggest, the two armies, the one of the prince and the one of the wanderers, fought, battle mentioned in a charter from September 5, 1631 from which we find out that „Matei aga [...] rose up against my royal highness as a

prince, with an army from Transylvania and with a war. And he came and battled my Royal Highness on the lowland of the vineyards of Bucharest [...] [Matei aga [...] s-a ridicat asupra domniei mele în chip de domn, cu oaste din Țara Ungurească și cu război. Si a venit de s-a bătut cu domnia mea în șesul viilor orașului București [...]] (Mioc, 1969b: 435-436).

Along with the boyars that got away from the fight, Matei aga “ran to the other side of Olt and locked themselves up in the Tismana monastery [...]” [au fugit preste Olt și s-au închis la mănăstirea Tismana] for three days (Ștrempel, 1994: 10). A small army sent by Leon Tomșa, led by his brother-in-law, tried to defeat the rebellious boyars, but to no end. After the retreat of the armies, the boyars „exited the monastery, went to the village, in Izvarna, in Mehedinți county, at the house of Stoica Uncheașul, who advised him, therefore Matei aga [...] crossed the mountain to Transylvania, stopping at Caravan Sebeș” [au eșit din mănăstire, de au mers în sat în Izvarna, în județul Mehedinților, la casa Stoicăi Uncheașul carele i-au fost povață, de l-au suit într-un munte pre aga Matei [...] trecând muntele în Țara Ungurească, asezându-se la Caravan Sebeș] (Ștrempel, 1994: 10).

Here the wanderers realized that this move was a hasty move and without outside help they will not survive. In this context, Leon Tomșa requests the return of the rebellious boyars, request fulfilled by a series of boyars, amongst whom Aslan, made great governor. Therefore Matei Basarab remains the protagonist of this movement. During these times, besides the help provided by Gheorghe Rákóczi through the entreaties made in front of the Ottoman Empire against Leon Tomșa, the wanderers receive help from Abaza, pasha of Silistra, help most likely facilitated by the money offered. He moves his residency to Silistra at Nikopol to be closer to the fugitives (Sârbu, 2005).

To assure Matei Basarab of his help, the pasha sends his intimate friend, Ignatie Sîrbu the priest, as we can read in an internal chronicle: „And immediately he sent to him Ignatie Sîrbul from Nikopol, the priest, to come and be prince of the country with the pasha’s support. And they met with him at Făgăraș” [Și îndată au trimis la el pre popa Ignatie Sîrbul den Necopoe, ca să vie să fie domn țării cu voia pașii. Și s-au împreunat cu el la Făgăraș] (Grecescu, Simonescu, 1960: 99). Therefore, in the itinerary previous to the rise to the power, there is the mention of a stopover of Matei Basarab in Făgăraș, as well as the meet up with Ignatie the priest. In the

meantime, in Constantinople, the dismissal from office of Leon Tomşa was decided. Under these circumstances, Matei will leave to Wallachia on August 2/12, with the support of the boyars from the land of Haţeg, with mercenaries offered by the Transylvanian price, and especially with soldiers hired from the Lugoj-Caransebeş region. He is latter on greeted by the bey of Orşova "in Cornu village, on turkish owned land" [la sat la Cornu, pre locul turcesc] (Grecescu & Simonescu, 1960: 100) who lends him some money, after which he goes on to Walachia through the land of Cloşani, stopping over at Prejna (Balta village, Mehedinţi county) (Câdea et al., 2003). It is important to mention that the village the chronicle talks about is actually Cornea, situated aproximately equally far from Caransebeş and Orşova, village that was then under the Turkish territorial division of Orşova. The itinerary selected by Matei Basarab is an unusual one, because after leaving the Turkish territorial division of Orşova, the wanderers return to Transylvania and cross the mountain Domogled (near Băile Herculane), which was the border between Oltenia and the Turkish territorial division of Orşova. So, he chooses the most difficult and illogical route (Secuiu, 2016).

In the meantime, the Ottoman Empire had decided that the throne be occupied by Radu Iliaş, decision with which the boyars and the whole country on the other side of the Olt did not agree. Thus, after meeting up and discussing, the boyars elected Matei Basarab, somewhere in Mehedinţi (Secuiu, 2016) and „ they took Matei aga forcibly, who had not even arrived home, and they took him to Mehmet Abaza the pasha, in Nikopol town” [au luat pre Matei aga cu sila, neajuns la casa lui, de l-au dus la Mehmet Abaza paşa, la cetatea din Necopoe] (Grecescu, Simonescu, 1960: 100).

Thus on September 17, Matei was leaving the Nikopol town, on the Danube and installed himself on the throne in Bucharest without any opposition, three days later exactly in the moment in which Radu Iliaş, the prince selected by the ottomans, left Constantinople (Stoicescu, 1988). The fight for the royal throne was far from being solved; a new battle awaited Matei Basarab. On October 20, Radu Iliaş and Matei Basarab fought near Bucharest, the wanderer from Brâncoveni being the winner. Now there was the challenge of gaining his reign at Constantinople. Firstly, on November 15/25 at „Ruş” (Roşiori de Vede of today, Teleorman County), Matei Basarab had a meet up with Abaza pasha where he fulfilled his monetary duties (Sârbu, 2005). Returned to the throne in Bucharest, Matei leaves on December 26, 1632, accompanied by a spectacular cortege for

Constantinople, where he arrived on January 5, 1633. Although he was assured of success by the pasha of Nikopol, aga of Brâncoveni had to stay for 6 weeks in the capital of the Empire. Only on February 18/28 he got the reign from the hands of Murad the 4<sup>th</sup>, leaving the capital, and entering triumphant in Bucharest 3 weeks later (Sârbu).

As it can be observed in the presentation above, the future prince of Walachia traveled quite a lot, in the country, as well as outside the country (Transylvania and less in the Ottoman Empire). Why did he travel, though? There are a few different types of trails. There are *routes traveled in the interest of the governors*, and the *route as a witness*. Another category could be the *routes of safety* (the road as a wanderer), that intertwine with those of *war*, but also with those *for the economy* - the observing of the organizing of the economy of the principality of Transylvania in the time he spent in the inter-Carpathian space - (Stoicescu, 1988). Another itinerary is the *route of obtaining the reign*. Matei Basarab was an elected prince, first by the boyars from the country, and later in Istanbul when he obtained the confirmation of the reign. This is special because the number of princes elected by the boyars in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was very small. *The routes of entering the country* are an interesting point in the travels of Matei Basarab. There are some opinions related to this; Matei Basarab prefers to pass through Banat and then Orșova, in order to not compromise the prince of Ardeal, avoiding the mistake from 1631 when the wanderers went to Oltenia from Ardeal; The route through Banat allowed the recruiting of troops and the avoidance of guarded gorges from the north of Oltenia. Another opinion is related to the wish to contact the pashas from around Wallachia, to gather the partisans from Oltenia, in order to not repeat the mistakes from the 1631 campaign (Secuiu, 2016).

In what way these itineraries influence the later reign of Matei Basarab? The most important things that can be said about this aspect have as a target the relations with the prince of Ardeal, Gheorghe Rákóczi I, but also with his son Gheorghe Rákóczi II. Matei Basarab was faithful to the policies regarding Transylvania, relations which were highlighted before the rise to the power. Another important thing to mention is the relationship he had with Abaza pasha, pasha of Silistra, which was very important in the moment of winning the reign, the pasha being a mediator between Matei and the Ottoman Empire. Although he was executed a few years later, the relationship with Abaza pasha was a relation skillfully used by Matei Basarab.

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