

Woodcut as Book Illustration in Moldavia in the 17th to 19th Centuries

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Abstract:

In the activity of conservation restoration of the books printed between the 17th and the 19th centuries, where the front page is often deteriorated or even missing, the illustrations that accompany the text constitute a very important element in dating the respective printing, in locating the typography, etc. Although the engravers preferred to remain anonymous, however many of the engravings that can be found in these books are signed, discreetly by the authors, thus offering us an important instrument that we can use to obtain information necessary to the scientific documentation which accompanies every activity of conservation-restoration of a cultural good. This research wishes to present briefly the activity of the engravers who activated in the region of Moldavia and whose works we were able to find in the books preserved and restored in the laboratory of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology from Iassy.

***Keywords:** printing presses, woodcut, engraving, religious book, the title page*

1. Beginnings of book engravings in Moldavia

Engraving in Moldavia is a part of the art history less studied and known. Even though along the years there have been many publications dedicated to the illustration of old books, most of the researchers focused their research on the text or on the miniature decorating the books and less on engravings.

In fact, in the region of Moldavia there has been a large number of manuscripts (the schools of calligraphy from monasteries such as Neamț, Putna and Dragomirna are famous), and so the necessity of typography occurred later than in the other Romanian provinces, and in the beginning, the printed book imitated the manuscripts both in the shape of letters and in illustrations, frontispieces, initials, vignettes.

The development of book engraving in Moldavia was a consequence of the apparition of typographies in this region. The foundation of the first typography in Moldavia, at the Three Hierarchs Monastery (1642) was the work of ruler Vasile Lupu and of Metropolitan Petru Movilă.

Together with the printing press, the Mitropoly also receives some of the wooden engravings, made by monk Ilia and considered to be among the most beautiful stamps of the editions from Kiev and Lvov between 1639 and 1670 (Stavilă 2008). The engravings of this master illustrate the first book printed in Iassy in 1643 – *Cazania sau Carte românească de învățătură scrisă de Mitropolitul Varlaam (Romanian Book of Teachings written by Metropolitan Varlaam)*.

Cartea românească de învățătură (Romanian Book of Teachings) also called *Cazania by Varlaam*, from 1643, illustrated with xylographs by Ilia Anagnoste, an artist of international reputation, necessitates a special attention. The respective master executes for this book two frames for the title page which embellish differently the two drafts of the same edition and numerous illustrations, 15 of which are signed Ilia or Ilia A., some of them dated in 1641 and 1642.

It is obvious the fact that certain engravings which evoke fragments of the church history from Moldavia were especially conceived for this beautiful product from Iassy. To this respect, we would like to draw your attention on the two frames for the title page, where one can find, among others, Saint John the New of Suceava, as well as an engraving representing Saint Parascheva (figure 1).

In the first variant the title of the book is framed by a xylography in which there are represented: in the upper part, in the centre, Jesus Christ, in the four corners of the frame – the four evangelists in inset portraits, each with a book in his hands and with their evangelical symbols: Matthew (angel), Mark (lion), Luke (calf), John (eagle), on the right of the text Saint Apostle Paul and Saint Parascheva, on the left – Saint Apostle Peter and Saint John the New, and in the lower part, the Three Holy Hierarchs.



Fig 1. The two variants of the title page of the book *Cazania* by Varlaam, engravings by Ilia Anagnoste

The second variant of the title page presents in the upper part an inset portrait of the Three Holy Hierarchs, in the right corner – Saint John the New of Suceava, in the left corner Saint George. On the sides there are stylized columns with vegetal motifs.

In both variants, the customization of each character depending on age, apparel, face expression thoroughly transposed prove the mastership of the engraver. Of course, for other illustrations, such as *Jesus' Entry to Jerusalem*, *Resurrection (Descent to Hell)*, *Pentecost*, *Sunday of All Saints*, *Jesus in the Temple*, *Nativity of Christ*, *The Circumcision of Jesus*, *Theophany*, *Presentation of Jesus at the Temple*, *The Transfiguration*, *The Dormition of the Theotokos*, *Beheading of the Holy and Glorious Prophet Forerunner and Baptist John*, etc, the skilled engraver used creatively several elements found in the Ukrainian or German xylographies. Thus he combines the Byzantine processes with the Western ones.



Fig. 2. *The Nativity of Christ*, Cazania by Varlaam, 1642



Fig. 3. *Beheading of Saint John*, Cazania by Varlaam

The features of the engravings from Cazania are characterized not only by the iconographic originality of the evangelical motifs, but also by the naïve and lumpish expressiveness of the representation, the images being close to the folkloric masterpieces (Tatai-Baltă 1979). This aspect is graphically illustrated by the scene of the *Nativity of Christ* (fig. 2) where the two shepherds are dressed in Moldavian costumes representative for the 17th century and with their natural gestures they express a profound piety towards Baby Jesus or in the scene of the *Beheading of Saint John* (fig. 3), where the headsman is dressed in shirt and traditional trousers and tight-belted with a girdle such as the villagers used to wear at that time, and Salome, Herod and Herodias look like prince and princesses similar to those illustrated in the Moldavian painting (Chiaburu 2010: 36).

The engravings for the frontispieces found in Cazania by Varlaam have the same stylistic peculiarities as the text initials being used the patterns from the manuscripts or the print of the “black and white” image and vice-versa (Stavilă 2009: 99). The incipits, of various sizes, are decorated with vegetal elements, floral motifs that form branches, wreaths, garlands etc. Some of them are not framed, some are composed of braids similar to those in the old Moldavian manuscripts (letter K), others are composed of botanical elements with angels, branches with stylized leaves, etc.

Along the 18th and 19th centuries, Varlaam's book was reprinted 12 times, each edition with consistent changes regarding illustration (Savițchi 2011: 52). The engravings in the books printed at the Holy Three Hierarchs Monastery have obvious Ukrainian influences, with a dark background and in the same time, they preserved a traditional feature, characteristic to the miniature by Anastasie Crimca. The ornament with geometrical motifs was replaced with the vegetal motifs, and the stylizing of the shapes became more pronounced.

After the *Cazania* by Varlaam, in Iassy, *Pravila lui Vasile Lupu* (1646) and the *Liturgy* (1672) illustrated by the engravers Grigore and Sandu are printed. Moreover, according to *Cartea românească de învățătură* we may identify the activity of another engraver that activated in Iassy, Ioan Moldoveanul, which is said to be the same person with Ioan Bacov, that is Ioan from Bacău, a famous engraver that worked in Țara Românească (Chiaburu 2010: 276).

In the second half of the 17th century, a famous engraver was Damaschin Gherbest. Similar to many typographers, Damascin started working in the typographies from Iassy, collaborating with hieromonk Mitrofan to the printing of the *Dumnezeiasca Liturghie (Divine Liturgy)* (1679) and *Psaltire slavo-română (Slavonic-Romanian Psalms)* (1681). He prepared the illustrations for the book *În contra ereziilor (Against Heresies)* (1683), and then he left in Țara Românească, to Bucharest, where he worked at *Evanghelia (Gospel)* from 1682, *Apostolul (Apostle)* and *Evanghelia (Gospel)* from 1683 (Chiaburu 2010: 282).

In 1679 Dosoftei had obtained the support of Nicolae Milescu Spătaru and Ioachim the Patriarch of Moscow, and he is able to buy a new printer for the Holy Three Hierarchs, which is installed by typographer Vasile Stadnițchi from Uniev. Subsequently, this is the place where the works of Dosoftei are printed: *Dumnezeiasca Liturghie (The Divine Liturgy)* (1679), *Molitvenicul dențăles (Euchologion)* (1681) and *Viața sfinților (Life of Saints)* (1682-1686).

Concomitantly with the development of printing and the evolution of the book engraving in the 17th century, the monasteries continue to produce manuscripts, and their decorations could well have influenced the book engravings, miniatures, frontispieces and initials being executed whole-coloured, as we may observe in the late manuscripts by N. Milescu

Spătaru (*Descrierea Chinei – Description of China*) and by Dimitrie Cantemir (*Descrierea Moldovei – Description of Moldavia*, 1705).

In the printings issued in Iassy towards the end of the 17th century (*Dumnezeiasca Liturghie*, 1679; *Psaltirea slavoromână*, 1680; *Viețile Sfinților*, 1686) the elements of the Renaissance ornaments are improved with Baroque forms. The motif that dominates the ornaments of the manuscripts from this period is the grape vine in form of a spiral, that frames the inset portraits of the saints, and the leaves and grapes are used to decorate the frontispieces and the initials that accompany the text (figure 4).



Fig. 4. Psaltire, Iași, 1680

Title page <http://www.tiparituriivechi.ro/document/psaltire-8>

One may observe that in 1682, with the support and efforts of Patriarch Dositei of Jerusalem, a Greek printing is set at Cetățuia

Monastery near Iassy, in which many Greek books were printed, especially to defend Orthodoxy in the Holy Land, attacked by the Catholic missionaries of the time. In that printing from Cetățuia worked Mitrofan, a famous typographer, who will later become the head of the typography from Bucharest. In his workshop Antim Ivireanul also learned to become a typographer.

2. Book illustration in Moldavia in the 18th century

In 1714, during the rule of Nicolae Mavrocordat, on the advice of Patriarch Chrysant Notara of Jerusalem, in Iassy, at Saint Sava Monastery, Academia Domnească was founded together with a Slavonic-Romanian typography and a library. The typography also printed books in Greek and Arabic, starting with 1744, with the support of Patriarch Silvester of Antioch (Tătărucă 1996: 13). This typography functioned until 1821. According to the researches, the typography from Saint Sava Monastery continues the activity of that from Cetățuia Monastery, which was equipped with Greek letter brought from Venice.

The apparition, functioning, for a short period of time, and the sudden and inexplicable disappearance of the typography from Rădăuți (1744-1746) generated many controversies in historiography (Mîrza 2014: 49). Here only 5 books were printed. A special finesse of the art of Moldavian medieval woodcut is characteristic for the typographers-engravers Grigore and Sandu, who print and illustrate here, in 1745, *Ceaslovul (Horologion)*. Two of the engravings that accompany the texts – Jesus Christ at the Last Supper (figure 5 a), The Annunciation (figure 5 b) and with the signatures of both engravers reflect an elegant compositional structure and a peculiar mastership of the technique of woodcut, with four small inset portraits representing Jacob, Basil the Great, John Chrysostom and Gregory, on a dark background and completed with floral ornaments represents a complex composition, balanced, very elaborated.

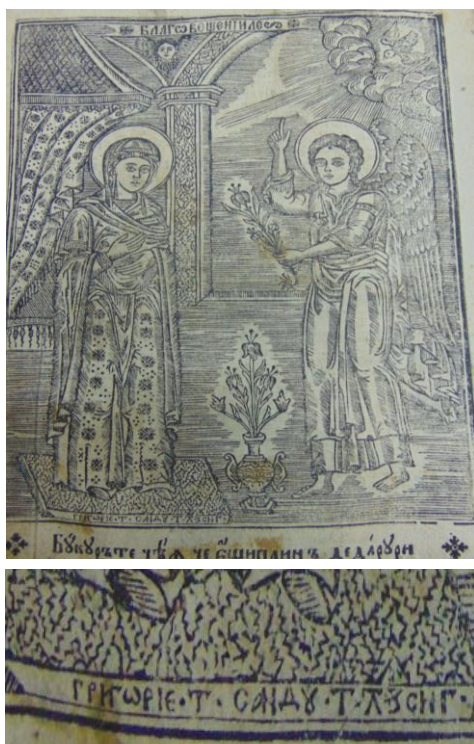


Fig. 5. b. *The Annunciation and the signatures of the two engravers*



Fig. 5. a. *Jesus Christ at the Last Supper and the monograms of the two engravers*

The engraving executed by these two typographers-engravers, Grigorie and Sandu, proves a peculiar mastership of layout and finesse of the drawing, in applying the hachure on the dark and light background (Savițchi 2011: 52).

At the beginning of the 18th, in the book engraving one may observe the predominance of the Baroque ornaments and the elimination of Renaissance elements. In the decoration of the title pages, the borders of the engraving become wider and they frequently use images of flowers and fruits (Stavilă 2009: 102).

The book engraving, in the second half of the 18th century, was marked by the personality of the most representative engraver of the time – Mihail Strilbițchi (often signed as Ierei Mihail, Protoierei Mihail, Popa Mihail), who settles in Iassy in 1750. Starting with 1756, when the engraver accomplishes his first work until 1807/08, he became known as

the author of approximately 200 engravings, including title pages, frontispieces, biblical scenes and images of the evangelists, as well as various vignettes and initials. He often worked with his son, Policarp. Mihail Strilbițchi, although he did not offer any valuable works from an artistic point of view, was one of the most prolific typographers (activating in Iassy, Movilău, Dubăsari, Neamț), translators of religious books and book illustrators.

Mihail Strilbițchi used the technique of wood engraving with shadows and lights. In some of the illustrations, Mihail Strilbițchi was inspired by the surrounding reality or from the folklore. N. Iorga considered him “a Western spirit, admirer of beautiful books, elegantly bided, of plump Raphael’s angels willing to play even with the bishop’s insignia” (Iorga 1968: 215).



Fig. 6. a. Vignette



Fig. 6. b. Blazon and initials of typographer Mihail Strilbițchi
<https://tipariturromanesti.wordpress.com/tag/mihail-strilbitchi/>

Of the 50 titles of books printed in Iassy in the second half of the 18th century, 33 titles were religious and 17 had a laic content (Stavilă 2008: 44). After 1796 Mihail Strilbițchi transfers the typography from Dubăsari to Movilău, where it functions until 1800.

3. The evolution of book illustration in Moldavia in the 19th century

Since abbot Dosoftei Calmuschi knew priest Mihail Strilbițchi, he invited him to Neamț Monastery together with his typography. Hence, in 1805 one of the most important typographical centres in the Romanian environment starts its activity. The first printing issued at Neamț was a Russian-Romanian brochure *Istoria sfintelor icoane și despre autocefalie* (*The history of the holy icons and on autocephaly*) (Moldoveanu 2016).

A major contribution in the activity of this typography is due to Metropolitan Veniamin Costachi who, settled in this monastery for a while, and brought a printing press from the Mitropoly. Abbot Ioan, encouraged by Metropolitan Veniamin Costachi, initiated a vast activity of translation and printing of church literature. The typography was also used by monks from Țara Românească such as Gherontie and Grigorie Dascălul. Their translations from the great patristic literature was printed in Neamț Metropolitan Veniamin. Thus, over 100 books were printed with the blessing of the Metropolitan of Moldavia, and also on his expense, both in Neamț and in Iassy. Hence, Neamț Monastery became the most important printing centre of the time, and N. Iorga names it “the biggest workshop of the Church” (Iorga 1995: 219).

Several names of typographers from Neamț are known, and all of them worked under the guidance of the abbots from that time, among whom we may remark abbot Neoni, the one who supported intensively the typographical activity and, in the same time, the one who sent a large number of books to the bishop of that time Andrei Șaguna, since between 1848 and 1849 the Hungarian revolutionaries led by Kossuth destroyed many church books from the Romanian churches (M. Păcurariu, *Tiparul în Biserica Ortodoxă Română – privire generală*, <http://www.editura-andreiana.ro/produs/tiparul-in-biserica-ortodoxa-romana-privire-general/>).

This school of engravers came into prominence not because of Mihail Strilbițchi, but because of masters Simeon, Ghervasie, Teodosie and Damian, Nicalai and Simeon the novice.

Simeon Ierei worked for the typography from Iassy and then, for 20 years (1808-1829) he worked for the typography of Neamț Monastery. His engravings were borrowed to the typography from Bucharest as well (the *Akatist* from 1823 is illustrated with many of the matrices created by

Simeon). The engravings signed by Simeon Ierei stand out through a peculiar balance, through the attention dedicated to faces, through the fine cutting. The engraver proposes one of the finest wood engraving techniques that may be compared only to the metal engraving. In the same time, Simeon includes the religious text within the composition of the engraving.

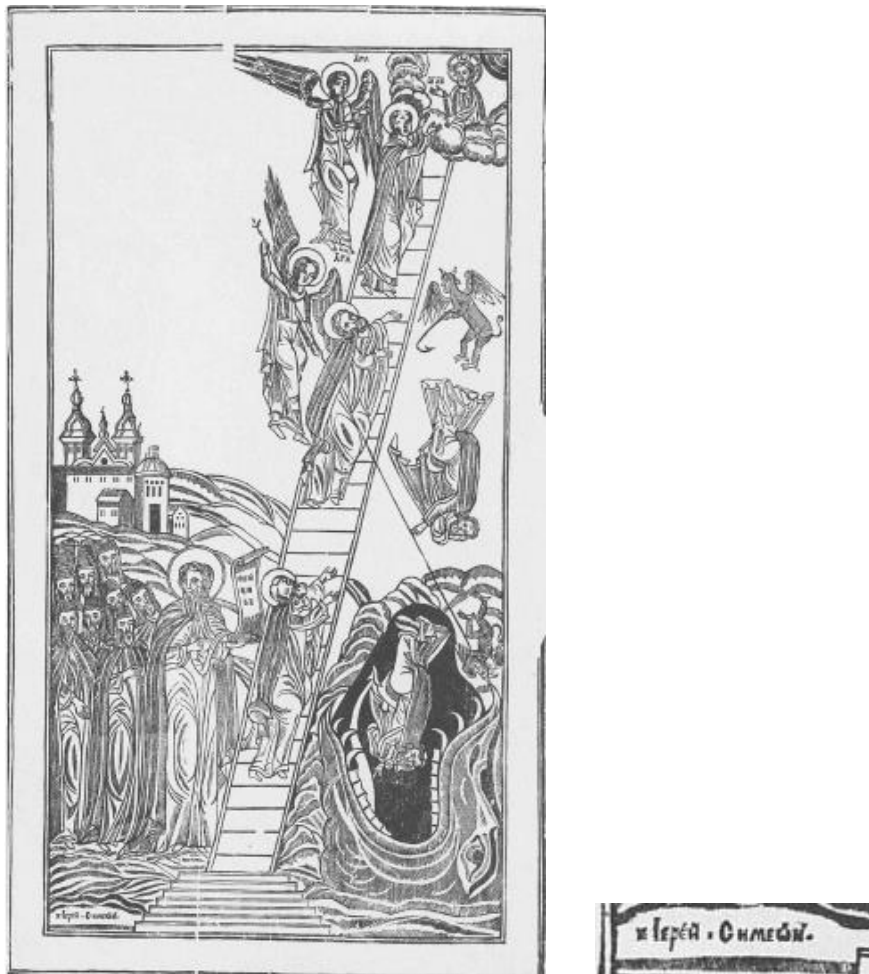


Fig. 7. *The ladder of our father hegumenos of the Saint Monastery of Sinai,* engraving belonging to Simeon Ierei, 1814 and detail with the engraver's signature.

In 1821 the typography from Neamț issues the first *Evangelhie ilustrată* (*Illustrated Gospel*) from the Romanian environment for which worked three typographers: Simion Ierei (Saint Evangelists Matthew, Mark and Luke) and Ghervasie the monk (illustration of the title page, the scene Temptation of Jesus, Transfiguration, etc).

Ghervasie was one of the most talented engravers, his drawing is dynamic, elaborated, his line is rough and full of energy. Ghervasie embellished with engravings the New Testament (1818), one of the most beautiful Romanian books. He worked for the first *Illustrated Gospel*, a monumental printing issued from Neamț in 1821, but also fabricated many of the matrices used, along the years, to engrave books. Of all the scenes we remark *The Mhyrr-bearing Women at the tomb*, *the Holy Trinity*, *the Annunciation*, *The descent from the Cross*, *Mother of God*. Ghervasie posses a fine technique of wood engraving, modifying the perspective of the figures, of gestures and offering consistent rhythm to the composition.

Teodosie the monk worked over 30 years to the illustration of books but also to designing engravings dedicated to multiplying icons. His works are created with care, carefulness, decency and discretion.

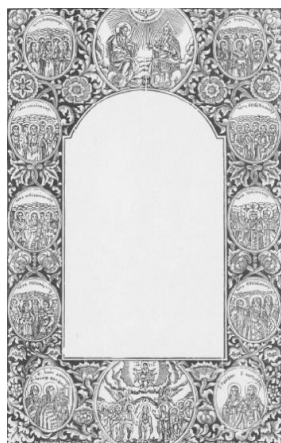


Fig. 8. a. Frame for title page



Fig. 8. b. Title pages of the book Menaion for June, 1846 by Teodosie



Fig. 8. c. Signature of the engraver

printing process for illustrations which uses cuts obtained by photography and engraving on zinc boards) to the decoration of books.

4. Book engravings as icons

The end of the 18th century brought along besides the wood engraving, the paper engraving, spread as icons, many of them being the product of the engravers from Neamț Monastery.

On the existence of the xylography-icon we find out that "...at the end of the 18th century and during almost the entire 19th century we find the isolated engraving, of large dimensions, which spread as icon, in many thousands of copies; coloured (by hand, following the shape lines) or uncoloured" (Savițchi 2011: 53).

The first xylography-icon issued by Neamț Monastery is the *Dormition of the Theotokos* (1821, 160x238 by Ghervasie) (Stavilă 2009: 116), followed by the wood engravings by Teodosie the monk. *Mother of God* engraved on wood in 1827 is followed by the *Ascension of Christ* (1831) and *Saint Emperors Constantine and Helen* (1852). A unique work, of large size, is the *Iconostasis* worked in Neamț in 1821, which repeats the very scenes from the traditional Orthodox iconostasis, signed by Ghervasie.

It is possible that the book engravings could also be used as icons. Nevertheless, being multiplied, the book engraving had a larger spread than paintings, facilitating a more powerful influence on the icons from this period of time. Thus, in the icon prevails a more stressed graphic style and manner, in which the pronounced line of the outline dominates, and the colors receive a secondary role, but without major interventions in the illustrated iconographic types (Stavilă 2009: 99).

5. Features of the book engravings from Moldavia

Engravers from Neamț Monastery used the technique of xylography, using the pear and buxus (brought from the Caucasian woods) wood. The thickness of the plaques was 20-23 mm. The cut made of this type of wood was extremely resistant, allowing a number of imprints between 25.000 and 30.000. Thus, we may explain the use of the same engraving in different books printed in the same shop. The frequent change of materials between typographies was common, as was the use of

older wooden matrices. For example, the illustrations for the *Liturgy* from 1672 and the *Apostle* from 1756, signed by the typographers Grigorie and Sandu use the same matrices. This is also the case of the ornaments produced by M. Strilbițchi for *Prăvilioara*, printed in Iassy in 1784, which were used for several books. The *Penticostarion* printed in Bucharest in 1800 by Stanciul Thomovici and the *Penticostarion* printed in Blaj in 1808 and signed by Petru Râmniceanul contain the same images, a proof that both engravers used an older original.

Although in other typographies of the time, the engraver composed the design, but not always worked on the wooden matrix, this being the duty of the “matrix cutters”, the engravers from Neamț performed the whole process (Racoveanu 1940: 19). As a matter of fact, the engravings from Neamț are characterized by a peculiar roughness, the engraver monks living the teaching of the Church in its most authentic manner. Orthodox iconography, church hymnography and synaxaria of the church books were the only guiding marks. The images they produced had the purpose not only to embellish the text, but also that of creating a commentary in images of the text. Here there are no useless elements, non-canonical or borrowed from other artistic branches.

6. Conclusions

On the territory of Moldavia monasteries were the first centres of culture illumination. One of the settlements that left an important imprint in the field of typographical art is Neamț Monastery. The monks from this spiritual “lavra” produced real masterpieces. The matrices used to ornament and embellish the books were made by the learned monks.

Unfortunately many engravings of the books printed in Neamț Monastery remain anonymous, which may be explained by the fact that the efforts and diligence used to produce them are the result of the canon of obedience. The images are very representative for the text they accompany, and the human faces are in agreement with the iconographic canon.

At the beginning of the 19th century, book engraving remains one of the most developed genres, and in this atmosphere other branches of plastic art occur: the historical painting, the portrait, the landscape, etc. Through the contribution of the hierarchs of the Church from Moldavia as

well as that of the abbots of Neamț Monastery, the typography from Neamț printed many title of church books so useful for the Christian. These may be found until today in the churches from the entire territory of Romania and in Bessarabia as well. The region where these books circulated is rather wide and Neamț Monastery became one of the most remarkable centres of Romanian culture and spirituality.

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