

THE THEME OF FORGIVENESS IN TESTAMENTS AND EPITAPHS IN ROMANIAN COUNTRIES, RZECZPOSPOLITA AND THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE (XVIII CENTURY-EARLY XIX CENTURY)

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Rezumat: *Printre cele mai importante izvoare de cercetare a atitudinilor în fața morții se evidențiază testamentele și epitafurile. Articolul se referă doar la o secvență abordată de aceste izvoare: iertarea creștină, subiect insuficient cercetat în istoriografie. Iertarea creștină – unul dintre principiile de bază ale creștinismului – a fost, deși rar, prezentă în textele testamentelor și epitafurilor. Testatorii sau autorii epitafurilor au vrut să le fie iertate păcatele săvârșite în timpul vieții, adresându-se creștinilor. Rugămintea de iertare se adresa însă în primul rând lui Dumnezeu, în fața căruia urmau să apară și să răspundă pentru faptele lor.*

Abstract: *The testaments and epitaphs stand out among the most important sources of research of attitudes towards the death. In this article we will refer only to a sequence addressed by these sources: Christian forgiveness, a subject insufficiently researched in historiography. Christian forgiveness, one of the basic principles of Christianity, although rare, was presented in the texts of testaments and epitaphs. Testators or the authors of epitaphs addressed to the Christians their will to be forgiven the sins committed during the life. But the request for forgiveness was addressed primarily to God, before whom they should appear and answer for their deeds.*

Résumé: *Parmi les plus importantes sources de recherche des attitudes devant la mort on remarque les testaments et les épitaphes. L'article ci-joint fait référence seulement à une séquence abordée par ces sources: le pardon chrétien, sujet insuffisamment recherché dans l'historiographie. Le pardon chrétien - un des principes de base du christianisme - a été, quoique rarement, présent dans les textes des testaments et des épitaphes. Ceux qui en ont testé ou les auteurs des épitaphes ont voulu obtenir le pardon pour les péchés commis le long de leurs vies, tout en s'adressant à des autres chrétiens. Mais la prière pour obtenir le pardon s'adressait premièrement à Dieu, devant lequel le pécheur devait apparaître et répondre pour ses exploits.*

Keywords: *forgiveness, testaments, epitaphs, Christian, soul, sin.*

Life and death are two opposite poles of human existence¹. Christian Religion

¹ Michael G. Wensing, *Śmierć i przeznaczenie człowieka według Biblii* [Death and Destiny in the Bible], Warszawa: Wydaw. Księży Marianów, 1997.

in its essence treats the problem of death as an extinction of the body and immortality of the soul until "the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes, 12:7). According to a Christian theological doctrine, the death is the payment for sin, the result of transgression of God's commandment by Adam and Eve. (Genesis 2:17).

In historiography, the testaments are classified as ritual of death preparation, a prelude of the funeral ceremony². Pierre Chaunu, who believes that the testament is an undeniable support of the discourse about death, defines it as an act of personal and individual characterization³. Andreea Iancu affirms that the testament preparation is a moment of great solemnity; the testator gives viewers a dress rehearsal before the burial ceremony⁴. The testaments are a real reflection of state of soul of people, who were living with and who were preparing to die, because they confided the vision on life and death, tried to arrange things "of soul"⁵. In the meantime, testators regulate some misunderstandings, give guidance and advice. Nicolae Mihai stipulates that the use of a coherent corpus of testaments and also a long analysis are "important for revealing sensitivity towards death, existing in a community"⁶. The historian "should be careful in determining how much real sensitivity and how much social convention are present in testaments", which is hard to be seized⁷.

Among the numerous components of testaments, the forgiveness represents an important one. The testators, as good Christians, ask forgiveness from those who sinned against them as they forgive everyone or the main prayer of Christianity "Our Father" says: "And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us".⁸ In "Izvodul vieții" from "Chapters of command", in comments on his prayers

² Ildikó Horn, *Testamentele maghiare din Transilvania premodernă* [Hungarian Wills of Pre-modern Transylvania], in *Caiete de antropologie istorică*, [Notebooks for historical anthropology], anul III, nr.1-2, ianuarie-decembrie 2004, p.110.

³ Pierre Chaunu, *La mort à Paris au XVI, XVII, XVIII-e siècles*, Paris, 1978, pp. 219, 233.

⁴ Andreea Iancu, *Blestemul și binecuvântarea părinților (sec. XVIII-XIX)* [Parental Curse and Blessing. XVIII-XIX Centuries], in „Studii și Materiale de Istorie Medie”, vol.XXI, 2003, p. 68.

⁵ Serge Briffauaud, *Le Temps de la source. Testament et méthodologie en l'Histoire des mentalités*, in „Sources. Travaux historique”, nr 11,1987, p.16, apud : Nicolae Mihai, *Sensibilitatea față de moarte în testamentele din Oltenia premodernă și modernă (1700-1870)*, in „Caiete de antropologie istorică”, anul III, nr. 1-2, ian.-dec., 2004, p.121.

⁶ Nicolae Mihai, *Ultimul gest. Atitudini și reprezentări față de moarte în sursele testamentare din Oltenia (1700-1860)* [Last gesture. Attitudes and Representations of Death in Testament Sources of Oltenia (1700-1850)], in *Cum scriem istoria ? Apelul la științe și dezvoltările metodologice contemporane*, (coord. Radu Mârza, Laura Stanciu), Alba –Iulia, Ed. Aeternitas, 2003, p. 284.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ A. Iancu, *Blestemul...*, p.69. Andreea Iancu develops the theme of forgiveness using the acts of the Romanian Countries and uses the work of Antim Ivireanu, namely "Church teaching on the things needed and useful for teaching priests", in A. Ivireanu, *Opere. Didahii* (ed. a II-a), ed. Gabriel Ștrempel, București, 1997, p.327.

and Funeral Sermons, Antim Ivireanul pays attention to the topic of forgiveness: "*And forgive our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.* This pray urges us firstly to forgive the mistakes of our debtors, so God forgives our sins committed all the time, as Matthew in his chapter 6 said: "Leave and it will be left for you"⁹.

Ion Ghinoiu finds that the custom of asking forgiveness on the deathbed has a well-defined role in the popular universe¹⁰. However, as Andreea Iancu and Tomas Spidlik mentioned, God is the true receiver of the prayer for forgiveness. The thoughts on forgiveness are aimed to attract the divine goodwill, because the testators don't address to a specific person, but in general¹¹. Testators are also aware of the sin they committed. For example, **Cassandra**, wife of deceased Balasache, a former seneschal (postelnic) of Moldavia, apologized to all Christians: "*Therefore I leave first of all to my Christian brothers, wholeheartedly complete forgiveness, also asking in turn to be forgiven as a mother who could offend one with the word and then with the doing binding this..*"¹². Firstly, the forgiveness prayer is addressed to God. Thus the boyar (clucer) Dumitrasco Iarali wrote in his will, in 1646: "*... will God the omnipotent wish to call me to Him, I pray for my soul to be received in His unlimited mercy, to forgive the multitude of sins.*"¹³ **Buhușoiaie Zmaragda** wrote on March 22, 1815: "*First, I pray to God to forgive my numerous sins committed as a human in this world. I ask all Christians to forgive me if I trespass against them, and I forgive all who trespassed against me, whatever wrong was done to me.*"¹⁴

The moment of forgiveness is used in some other similar sources. So, in a document from April 10, 1827, the nun Elizaveta who was Teodor Bals' wife, it is mentioned: "*In addition, I pray to big ones and little ones, to sons and daughters, grandchildren, relatives, friends, and to Cathedral of nuns to forgive me wholeheartedly, and I say God forgive all of us, who will be following my decision and not resist it*"¹⁵. The testator also mentions that she will not forgive those who violate the provisions of the will. It is important to note that the passage on forgiveness comes after the curse at the end of the document.

The researcher Andreea Iancu notes that each testament is unique and it is the voice of the one who says goodbye¹⁶. In her opinion the forgiveness is the central

⁹ A. Ivireanu, *Opere*, p.327, 343-353.

¹⁰ I.Ghinoiu, *Lumea de aici, lumea de dincolo* [World of here, the underworld], București, 1999, p.213.

¹¹ Tomaš Špidlik, *Spiritualitatea Răsăritului creștin*, vol.II: *Rugăciunea*, Sibiu, 1998, p.36; A. Iancu, *Blestemul...*, p. 70.

¹² *Documente privitoare la istoria orașului Iași* [Documents concerning the History of the city Iassy], vol. VII, ed. Ioan Caproșu, Iași, 2005, nr. 306, p.402.

¹³ G.Ghibănescu, *Surete și izvoade*, XVI, Iași, 1926, p.76.

¹⁴ A.V. Sava, *Ctitori basarabeni*, in "Arhivele Basarabiei", anul VI, nr.1-4, Chișinău, 1934, p.182.

¹⁵ T. C. Bulat, *Din documentele Mănăstirii Văratec* [From the Documents of Văratec Monastery], in „Arhivele Basarabiei”, anul VIII, ianuarie-martie 1936, p. 79-83.

¹⁶ A.Iancu, *Blestemul...*, p.71.

theme of the message of farewell of the deceased that is addressed to those who accompany him/her on the last road, but not only to them, giving examples from documents of the period. Also she found that the church is "one who introduces the speech of forgiveness either in the mouth of the testator, or in that of the deceased. Each time, however, makes it differently"¹⁷. Antim Ivireanu develops this theme as follows: "To all relatives, all friends, all neighbours and inhabitants of this city and to all acquaintances, turns his humble voice and says: *Me and you, honest and loving, we lived together as long as our God, the Creator wanted. As that, being subject to the human inability not to sin, or with incompetence or with skill, or with the will which by nature is looking for the worst, often could happen to trespass against you in many ways and manners. That is why, as the apostle commands to all of us, saying: Bear one another's burdens, and so you will fulfill the Law of Christ (Galatians 6, verse 2), so am I, with deep devotion, I pray that, seeing the natural human helplessness and weakness, to do good to forgive me, so God will forgive you. I heartily wish a long, peaceable, happy life to you and your relatives, and later, to win the live wreath of goodwill from our merciful God. I wish you that, when God calls each of you from this world to be honoured with a good end and a proper farewell, as you did to me. Again I ask all of you for my forgiveness*". This is what those at rest ask Christians. And us [...] to pray to God for forgiveness and rest the soul of the dead, as the apostle says: "Pray for one another to heal". And in our prayer to say the "Our Father" and then again God rest his soul (April 16 <1> 820)"¹⁸.

The metropolitan vision and interpretation of the theme of forgiveness was clearly expressed. The monk Manasie Curchi of Moldavia, like everybody else, asks for forgiveness, which unfortunately sinned in his earthly life: "*First I pray to our merciful God to forgive my sins I committed as a man in this world. I ask also all Christians, as well as parents against whom I trespassed to forgive me and I forgive everyone who trespassed against me and did bad things, God forgive them.*"¹⁹

The moment of Forgiveness has also been seen in historical sources of early nineteenth century. Thus, in a document from August 15, 1818, the priest Vasile, son of Ionita Ciubotarul mentioned: "First, I pray to our merciful God to forgive my sins I committed as a man in this world"²⁰. Dimitrie Jardan, the magistrate, asks for forgiveness from God in his will as well, from March 20, 1820: "But first I pray to our merciful God to forgive my sins I committed as a man in this world. I beg also all Christians to whom I did wrong to forgive me and everyone will be forgiven by me for any mistakes and wrong things against me"²¹.

The moment of forgiveness is found in wills from all Romanian Countries. The

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p.70.

¹⁸ *Iertăciuni la oameni morți. Cătră toate rudele și alții*, see Iancu A., *Blestemul*, p.69.

¹⁹ *Diata schimonahului Manasie Curchiu, al doilea ctitor al m-rei Curchi*, in „Arhivele Basarabiei”, 1929, nr.3, p.100.

²⁰ L.T. Boga, *Documente basarabene. vol. 3: Testamente și Danii. 1672-1858*. Chișinău : Cartea Românească, 1929, nr. XXVI, p.35.

²¹ *Ibidem*, nr. XXIX, p.38.

historian T. Kinga indicates that some testaments capture an intimate dialogue with Divinity, where the man as a mortal being recognizes a transcendent meaning of his efforts²². Sometimes, after the conclusion of the researcher, this takes the form of a request for forgiveness of sins and known limits. Maria Obedeanu, from Walachia, states: "First of all, I pray to both church and layman part, to be forgiven for all I did wrong and from my side to be all of you forgiven".²³

The issue of forgiveness of sins is attained also in the Sultana's testament from Walachia: "So, first of all, I, as a sinful and guilty in front of everybody, ask for forgiveness from all my relatives and to every man I made any kind of mistakes and I humbly ask all of you to forgive me. I forgive wholeheartedly everyone who trespassed against me, so as our merciful and lover of mankind God will have mercy on me - an unworthy and reproachful servant of His."²⁴

The chancellor Stephen Josica of Transylvania also asks for forgiveness in his testament (1 September 1598), at the same time forgiving everyone: "Those, against whom I have sinned, I pray from the heart to forgive me. I forgive my merciful lord first, the Roman Emperor, whose servant I am and will have to die today without law and against the liberation of the country, then my merciful lord Sigismund Bath, who enslaved me for my honest service, against faith and liberation of his country, and pray to God not to count it as a sin and not to wear the anger upon them. And you Varvara Füzi, my beloved lawful wife (please) if I did something wrong, forgive me"²⁵. We remark that unlike other testators, Stefan was condemned to death and was waiting in prison for his execution.

Andreea Iancu notes that by the solemnity of the last will pronouncement and through the link established by forgiveness between the public and the lead actor of the separation representation, the testament becomes a prelude to the last rite "of transition"²⁶. Analyzing the testaments of Oltenia, Nicolae Mihai observes that although the request of forgiveness from those left alive is one of the fundamental gestures, in the first half of the nineteenth century their frequency decreases in the testaments²⁷. The priests received it as something self-evident for Christian behaviour: "Let God bless and forgive the sins of my Christians."²⁸

The theme of forgiveness is rarely used in Russian testaments. An exception in this respect is the document of Solovtsov Panteleimon, who asks for forgiveness from

²² T. Kinga, *Testamentul...*, p.69.

²³ A.Iancu, *Familie și patrimoniu. Dezmoștenire și adopție în câteva testamente (Bucureștii anilor 1796-1805)*, SMOD, vol. XIII, 1999, p.20-21; Șt. D. Greceanu, *Genealogiile documentate ale familiilor boierești*, vol. II, București, 1916, pp.236-237; citat și de A.Iancu, *Blestemul...*, p.71.

²⁴ A.Iancu, *Blestemul...*, p.71.

²⁵ A. Veress, *Documente privitoare la istoria Ardealului, Moldovei și Țării-Românești*, vol. 5, p. 184-186, nr.114.

²⁶ A. Iancu, *Blestemul...*, p.72.

²⁷ N. Mihai, *Ultimul...*, p.291

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p.291.

all the relatives he riled. He also ask forgiveness from the peasants whom he offended. Meanwhile the testator forgives everyone who did something wrong to him: *"And with whom I argued in my family, and my uncle and brothers, and nephews and their wives, or with outsiders, and if they would like to forgive me and would bless my sinful soul and now and in the future, and them, my lords, God will forgive and bless them all, now and in the future, I, the sinner, am all guilty in front of them, as well as my orphans, that served me, their husbands and wives and widows and children if I ever hurt in my anger, by beating, with or without fault, in front of their wives and widows with violence, virginal depravity, and by my sin I gave them to death, I was wrong in all and I trespassed against them, forgive me a sinner and bless me and my sinful soul now and in the future, and you, my lords, may God bless and forgive you all now and in the future, also my peasants, men or women, that I harmed in my annoyance, with the word, beat and sale, with or without fault, I am all guilty in front of them, forgive me and bless me and my sinful soul now and in the future. So my son Ondrei and his wife and daughter I forgive and bless ..."*²⁹

The theme of Forgiveness is also present in Polish testaments. An example is in the will of May Stanisław, from August 23, 1703: *"God and our Lord has shown loving Christian mercy to me mortal, and also beside my soul persistence (ogarnie) with his mercy. I forgive everyone and all of you till the youngest of my blood relatives of both houses mine and my wife's pray divinely for my soul (breathwestchnienia). And I pray for forgiveness for God's beneficence to be forgiven by everyone if ever with something I upset, offended or humiliated, I speak to the humble ones through this document, to decorate and forgive the offence of **sowicie** - for God to forgive me. I too in front of our Lord God forgive all those who have willingly or unwillingly been offended by me, secretly or for real and from my pure heart. Regarding all my servants, God gave me my power and my leadership, I forgive and*

²⁹ «А с кем у меня бывала брань в моем роду, и с дядею, и с братею, и с племянники и с их женами, или с кем ни буди с чюжими, и оне бы меня пожаловали простили и благословили душу мою грешную и разрешили в сем веку и в будуще м, а их государей моих, во всем Бог простит и благословит в сем веце и в будущем я грешный перед ними во всем виноват, такоже и сирот моих, которые мне служили, мужей их и жен и вдов и детей, чем будет оскорбил во своей кручине, боем, по вине и не по вине, и к женам их и ко вдовам насилством, девственным растленьем, а иных есми грехом своим и смерти предал, согрешил во всем и перед ними виноват простите меня грешного и благословите и разрешите мою грешную душу в сем веце и в будущем, а вас государей моих, во всем Бог простит и благословит в сем веце и в будущем, такоже крестьян моих и крестьянок, чем кого оскорбил в своей кручине, лаею и ударом и продажею, по вине и не по вине, во всем перед ними виноват простите меня и благословите и разрешите и разрешите мою грешную душу в сем веце и в будущем, а вас, государей моих, во всем Бог простит и благословит в сем веце и в будущем. Також и сына своего Ондreja и жену его и дочь прощаю и благословляю...», in *Акты, относящиеся до юридического быта древней России* / изд. Археографическою коммис. под ред. Николая Калачова, 1857, Т. 1, p.558.

if I trespassed against them in front of God I request for forgiveness"³⁰. To God is addressing also Albrecht Dembinskii in his will from May 21, 1720 with the request to be forgiven: "*When I pray to the Divine Majesty to have mercy on my soul and to forgive my sins, I also forgive everyone for being offended and instead I ask each of you for Christian compassion. I forgive all debts of my servants they have at this time, I ask everyone I upset with something, offended, humiliate. I wish now, if I could know, I would decorate each one, I would pray and ask for forgiveness from them in front of God*"³¹. The moment of forgiveness was very important especially for the dying, who wanted to appear before God with the peaceful soul. As an argument for this is the testament made in 1645 by Calea from Walachia. Having three boys and two girls, she leaves all estates to his sons Ivul and Radu, disinheriting his son Demetrius with the reason that in the three years of testator's illness, he did not come to see her. She also asks for forgiveness, adding the curse if someone is trying to dower some estate³².

The theme of forgiveness is present in the epitaphs of Moldavia, Walachia and Transylvania. Thus in the Church of St. Dumitru of Bals, on Iordache Bals' tomb, the great-treasurer writes: "Great-treasurer Iordache Bals, Lupul Bals' son, who was the great chancellor: born in the year 7250 (1742) since the creation of the world, February 12, and died in the year March 23, was placed here, in the tomb underneath this marble, asking everyone to pray to merciful God for the forgiveness of sins"³³. In the same church, on Pulheria³⁴'s tomb, there is a prayer: "... to ask those who see this tomb to pray to God for her forgiveness"³⁵. The theme of forgiveness is present in the epitaphs of the church of St. Dumitru of Bals: "Catargiu Ana, wife of Great Chancellor Constantin Bals, was buried in 1812, July 27, who requests all viewers of this tomb to pray to God for forgiveness of her sins"³⁶.

About career, but also with the request of forgiveness is the following epitaph: "Underneath this stone Manoil Bals rests, servant of God, son of Lupu Bals, Great Chancellor, who was a Vel Spatariu (holder of the royal sword and bludgeon) first, then, passing to Russia and being in military service, became colonel in cavalry, and joined the majority in 1812, January 19, in Iasi, humbly asking all those who read, from the heart to have mercy and speak with soul: May God let him rest in peace, with a righteous to dwell"³⁷.

The theme of forgiveness is not missing either in Polish-Lithuanian epitaphs. In comparison with Romanian and Polish epitaphs, the Russian ones rarely could

³⁰ *Testamenty szlachty krakowskiej XVII-XVIII w. Wybór tekstów źródłowych z lat 1650-1799*, opracowała A. Falniowska-Gradowska, Kraków, 1997, p.52.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p.60.

³² *Catalogul documentelor Țării Românești*, vol.VI; București, 1993, nr. 12, p.25.

³³ Nicolae Iorga, *Inscripții din Bisericile României*, fasc. II, București, Editura Minerva, 1908.

³⁴ Pulheria was the wife of the great-treasurer George Bals.

³⁵ N. Iorga, *op. cit.*

³⁶ *Ibidem*, II, nr. 322-324, p. 122.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, nr. 325, p.122-123.

meet the same theme, where the request to be forgiven is presented. Among them we notice the epitaph at church from Pushkari, on the tomb of Agripina Ivanovna, wife of the priest Fiodor Petrov, who died in 1753. Apart from addressing to the casual passer-by, the "author-dead" prays for the forgiveness of sins to be saved from eternal torments of hell and of Gehenna, case rarely seen in epitaphs: "Who, passing by, wants to read these/ Pray for me a sinner to give a bow to God/ I will be spared the torments of hell/ And does not frighten me eternal Gehenna"³⁸.

In the case of topic of Romanian tombs' inscriptions, beside the epitaph it occurs to be seen as a prayer addressed directly to God, or as a dialogue with the passer-by³⁹. The inscription of 1729, states: "God's servant, Iordachi Cantacuzino, big chancellor: Receive me, God, like that one received on the 11th hour in your vineyard"⁴⁰. On the tomb of Matei Basarab, there is an epitaph in a verse form, addressed to the Christians: "I lay here, Matei, in this cold earth,/ Why I cannot spend good time with you those alive,/ Whoever I was, too praised by all,/ Now lie soulless surrounded with clay./ Just please forgive all my sins and/ Look always over this dark tomb"⁴¹. In the Armenian church from Botosani, the final part of an epitaph is addressed to the readers: "This tomb belongs to a true believer Bolfosul Cristea, Joan's son, a royal merchant, wise, gentle and noble, ever-merciful to poor people; who passed away in 1802, a year after Salvation, in May 25, he asks the passers-by to say the prayer *Our Father* for his sake"⁴².

According to the theologians, to forgive is to follow the path shown by Jesus Christ – to forgive⁴³ "seventy times seven" (Matthew 18, 22). Christian forgiveness – one of the basic principles of Christianity – was rare, but yet present in the texts of wills and epitaphs. The testators wanted to be forgiven for the sins committed during life, in will's texts addressing to Christians to be forgiven. In tomb inscription's texts epitaph's authors in the name of deceased is addressed to the past to be forgiven. But the request for forgiveness was addressed primarily to God, in front of whom they should appear and in front of whom they should answer for their actions. Request for forgiveness was an important component of both wills and epitaphs, that show person's religiosity in the context of the era mentality.

³⁸ „Кто ж, мимо ходя, сию цку хошет читати, Молю за мя грешную поклон Богу дати. Адскаго мучения буду избавлена, И да не устрашит мя вечная геена ”, in Т. Царькова, *Русские стихотворные эпитафии . Источники, Эволюция. Поэтика*. Санкт- Петербург, 1999, p.9.

³⁹ Doru Radoslav, *Sentimentul religios la români. O perspectivă istorică (sec. XVII-XX)*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Dacia, 1997, p. 189.

⁴⁰ N. Iorga, *Inscripții....*, p.9

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p.105

⁴² *Ibidem*, I, p.231

⁴³ N. Fuștei, *Iertarea – o virtute creștină*, în „PROMEMORIA. Revista Institutului de Istorie Socială”, 2011, Volumul I, nr.1-2, p.188.