

**THE STORY OF THE COURTSHIP  
OF CATHERINE “THE CIRCASSIAN”,  
THE SECOND WIFE OF THE PRINCE VASILE LUPU**

**Lilia Zabolotnaia Pavel**

Institute of History, State and Law of the  
Moldavian Academy of Sciences  
lilia\_zabolotnaia2000@yahoo.com

***Rezumat:** Articolul de față prezintă episodul celei de-a doua căsătorii a voievodului moldovean Vasile Lupu cu Ecaterina, de origine circasiană, înrudită cu hanul tătar. De o frumusețe ieșită din comun, Ecaterina a jucat un rol de seamă atât în viața personală a domnului moldovean, dar s-a făcut remarcată și prin calitățile sale politice și diplomatice. Autorul a acordat o atenție deosebită izvoarelor de epocă, precum mărturiile lui Miron Costin sau ale misionarului italian Niccolo Barsi, care ar fi asistat la sosirea Ecaterinei din Crimeea în Moldova.*

***Résumé:** L'article ci-joint présente l'épisode du second mariage du prince régnant moldave, Vasile Lupu avec Ecaterina, d'origine circassienne et apparentée avec le khan tatar. Extrêmement belle, Ecaterina a joué un rôle important dans la vie personnelle du voïvode moldave; elle s'est remarquée, aussi, par ses qualités politiques et diplomatiques. L'auteur a accordé une attention tout à fait particulière aux sources d'époque, comme les témoignages de Miron Costin ou du missionnaire italien Niccolo Barsi, qui aurait assisté à son arrivée de Crimée en Moldavie.*

***Abstract:** This article presents the episode of the second marriage of Moldavian prince Vasile Lupu (1634-1653) with Catherine, of Circassian descent, a relative of the Crimea Tatar khan. An extraordinary beauty, Catherine played an important role in the personal life of Vasile Lupu and had noticeable political and diplomatic skills. The author has paid special attention to historical sources, especially to Miron Costin's chronicle and Niccolo Barsi's (Italian traveler) testimony, who had witnessed the arrival of Catherine from the Crimea into Moldavia.*

**Keywords:** Catherine, Vasile Lupu, Tudosca, Moldavia, courtship, politics, diplomacy

It is well known that the Circassian women were famous for their extraordinary beauty, which made them the most enviable wives. In the most unassailable ways, one would not argue that beauty has always been a precious commodity, but the Circassian women did not only uphold that quality, but also wisdom and good

household administration skills. Since their early childhood, the Circassian girls, coming from the highest social layers, were educated in the most distinctive conduct for the future family life. The marital union to a Circassian lady had evidently its political significance, as it would provide the country political, diplomatic and military stability, hence the appreciation of a Circassian wife.

During the mid XVII<sup>th</sup> century the Moldavian Kingdom found itself in a complex tangle of interstate and geopolitical interests of Poland, Russia and Turkey. Additionally it was passing through a tense diplomatically-speaking period with its neighbors: Wallachia on one hand, and the Cossacks on the other. The political line of the Moldavian king Vasile Lupu who ruled almost two decades from 1633 until 1654, went down in history as a period of profound transition, particularly in terms of culture as it frayed a deep though-out strategic character. Thereby, concluding a marital contract with a lady, even though from a relatively little-known family, but with blood ties with the Crimean Khan (Vasile Lupu), had its own meticulous interests, mainly dominated by a strong political motivation. Nevertheless, if one follows the information of the sources of the era, it was this circumstantial union that has proved to be the basis of an extraordinary family filled with love and understanding.

Through out this paper one is to be presented with an attempt of exposition of a Circassian-girl life story, who became the wife of a Moldavian ruler and played a major role, not only in his personal life (influencing the fates of his daughters) but also by proving to be a great philanthropist and patron of the Moldavian monasteries and churches. In addition, she has showed important political and diplomatic skills in time of crisis, in the absence of her son and husband.

In terms of historiographical depiction of the issue being studied, it is worth mentioning that it has not gone beyond the scope of the researchers, especially in Romania. One of the first scientists, who have devoted his work to the historical research of the Romanian principalities women, was Nicolae Iorga<sup>1</sup>. Fractionary, but still mentioned in his writings, was the fact that the “second wife of Vasile Lupu, Circassian by birth, closely related to the Tatar khan, had a christian name, Ecaterina, and was extraordinarily beautiful”<sup>2</sup>.

In 1928, the monograph of the famous Romanian historic Oltea Nistor was published, *A Circassian lady on the Moldavian throne*, and since it represented a bibliographical writing directly devoted to Catherine, it has become a rarity which our

<sup>1</sup> Nicolae Iorga, *Viața femeilor în trecutul românesc* [*Life of Women in the Romanian Past*], Vălenii de Munte, 1910; Idem, *Femeile în viața neamului nostru* [*Women in the life of our people*], Vălenii de Munte, 1911; Idem, *Scrisori de femei* [*Women letters*], Vălenii de Munte, 1932; Idem, *Portretele doamnelor române* [*The portraits of Romanian Women*], București, 1937; Idem, *Istoria românilor în chipuri și icoane* [*The History of romanians in Faces and Icons*], Editura Humanitas (retipărită), București, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Nicolae Iorga, *op. cit.*, 1910, p. 33-34; Idem, *op. cit.*, 1992, , p. 46.

scientific team was not able to work with. In 1933, the first chapter of the work of Constantin Gane has appeared, devoted to the Moldavian royalty wives and daughters until the beginning of the XVIII-th century. It mostly depicts, in a scientific way, the marital union of Vasile Lupu and Catherine. In 1938, the Romanian researchers C. I. Andreescu and C. A. Stoide, in a monographic work devoted to Vasile Lupu's son *Ștefăniță Lupu*, lord of Moldova (1659-1661), contains a detailed record on Catherine's private life. Among the contemporary Romanian writers, are worth mentioning the following: Sorin Eftimie, C. G. Toderașcu. The Moldavian historians have also treated the issue on the marital union with Circassian girl.

Nevertheless, from the one's point of view, the historical contemporary literature on the marriage of Vasile Lupu and Catherine, has proved to be lightly superficial and most definitely incomplete, as one is not able to find answers to all our questions, mainly, what sort of political interest did Vasile Lupu pursue, when concluding the marital contract. The “marital consult” has been sent after her shortly after the death of his first wife. In addition, what is up most intriguing, is that fact that, as it results from the sources of the age, her candidature was sought upon, even during the lifetime of his first wife. Further, one might definitely question the issue of the sultan's approval (mainly the reason of it). This kind of decision was requested when there were marital alliances with the European royalties at stake, whereas the Circassians were subjects of the Turkish Sultan.

### Courtship

In order to find any potential answers to the questions, one will attempt to reproduce the events in a chronological order. The last mention of the first family is to be found, in the Slavonic language, scripted on the entrance of the Church of Three Saints, 6/16 May 1639 on the occasion of its construction closure. Next to the Prince Vasile Lupu, all family members are mentioned – his first wife Tudosca (Kostea Buchok Boyer's daughter) and three of his children: his son Ioan and two daughters, Maria and Ruxandra<sup>3</sup>. Further information on the family is to be found in records of Miron Costin “*his Ioan was sick and Vasile Lupu sent him to Tsarigrad for a cure, but nothing helped and he died very young soon after his first wife Tudosca did too...After the death of his first wife, the king sent a Katarzhi in the land of*

---

<sup>3</sup> Constantin I. Andreescu, Constantin A. Stoide, *Ștefăniță Lupu, domn al Moldovei 1659-1661* [Ștefăniță Lupu, ruler of Moldavia 1659-1661], Bucharest, Foundation of the King Carol I, 1938, p. 27. (А Яцимирский, *Славянская и русская летописи румынских библиотек* [Slavic and Russian chronicle of Romanian libraries], СПб., 1905, c. 310).

Circassia to bring him a wife to marry, the daughter of the Mirza, with whom he lived until the end of his days<sup>4</sup>.

References as with regards to the fact that the king did not even mourn after the death of his wife, provided by Enaki Katarzhi, have been also confirmed by other sources, as he sent immediately after her death a “*marital embassy*” to “*fetch*” him a wife.

Particularly one is to mention an Italian missionary, the monk Nicolo Barsay, who is said to have actually eye witnessed how Catherine has been brought from Crimea to Moldova. He has illustrated her journey in details, in a bright and almost highly emotional manner in the chapter of his paperwork called “*The Return 1639*”, meanwhile he has been in Crimea in Bakhchisarai. One might bring forward a fragment of his memories, which in fact constitutes a priceless source of the era, mainly since it directly touches our topic: “*I am unbelievably lucky to have met the Moldavian royal missionary (Enaki Katarzhi), who took the young beautiful Circassian lady to the Moldavian prince. The ambassador had the Khan's empowerment to look through the entire Circassian kingdom for the right wife (Catherine), who would be of unknown beauty. After the Ambassador had paid 1000 ducats to his father, 500 ducats to the mother, and 1000 to the khan (at that time it was the Tatar Khan Behadir Gere (1638-1642) who ruled Crimea, - LZ), he came with her in Bakhchisarai, where I was as well. August 19, 1639 with Khan's permission, the entire cortege of 150 Tatars and 60 Moldavians, went toward the fortress Ochakov ...where we stopped to eat and rest...at 2 in Morning a “kihaya” (the court clerk), from Pasha of Silistra (Nasuh Hussein (1638-1640) ) had approached the Moldavian ambassador and asked for the circassian princess for his Master. The Moldavian ambassador answered that he cannot give her away, as she has been personally confined to him by the Khan himself and he would not bear humiliation... Kihay, being a wise man, asked for 3 or 4 of the best Moldavian and Tatar representatives to accompany him to the Pasha ...So did it happen, 3 or 4 Moldavian representatives from the cortege came along with the kihay...and they said that the lady was confided to them by the Crimean Khan himself and she was designated to be the Moldavian prince's wife. Pasha was extremely surprised by the fact that the Moldavian Christian prince is to marry a Muslim girl. The Moldavian ambassador answered that she is a Christian as well. At that point pasha declared that he will personally send a special embassy to the Khan in order to certify the statements; until then the representatives would be retained. Returning the next morning the ambassadors asked the Circassian lady to move from the carriage into a two-wheel driver, so that she would be hidden from the Turks. But they still found her, along with her slave who, herself was also no*

<sup>4</sup> Miron Costin, *Letopisețul Țării Moldovei de la Aaron-vodă încoace (1595-1675)* [*The Chronic of Moldavia from Aaron voivode*] in *Letopisețul Țării Moldovei*, Chișinău, 1990, p. 189.

less beautiful than her lady, and her brother, who looked like “the child of the Gods”...The circassian lady was crying and wailing along with her brother, who deeply sympathized his sister as he acknowledged the troubles that await her...Pasha had deeply and madly fallen in love with her...trying to sought her recognition of the Muslim faith, but the girl poignantly denied it by eating pork in front of his eyes. Meanwhile, the Moldavian ambassadors reached the news and the events to their ruler. The Moldavian prince had immediately asked for help from the sultan and the Khan. After a certain amount of time, the ambassador came back from the Khan demanding the instant release of the Circassian girl as, besides the fact that she was a Christian, she was personally confined to them by him (the Khan.) At the same time the Moldavian ambassador brought another 3000 ducats to the Pasha (sic!)...but he would still not let her go...until the sultan's messenger arrived and pointed the fact that she is his Master's subject and that she is to be the wife of the Moldavian prince. Pasha realized that he will not get to marry the circassian girl and asked for another 200 ducats, so that September 6 the embassy has continued his journey to Dniester»<sup>5</sup>.

The Italian missionary Nicolo Barcy had detached from the cortege somewhere near the contemporary city Bender and had headed in the opposite direction towards the city of Mogilev, which explains the interruption of his narration. Nevertheless this piece gives us fair illustration of the events, allowing one its analysis to the extent of a reasonable conclusion.

One is to mention that the firmly established opinion in the historical literature that this marriage would be random has no valuable justification. The trivial statement that Vasile Lupu has chosen the second wife due to her beauty as his first one was not so, does not hold any criticism<sup>6</sup>. As a counter argument one may bring forward the rapidly evolving events, which were both fixed and circumstantial. As mentioned above, the first wife was still alive during the period of May 1639. The exact date of Tudosca's decease is unknown (whether it was at the beginning of summer or the end of spring). It is also unknown whether Vasile Lupu has held the 40 day mourning period after her death. However it is fairly certain that that summer the Moldavian ambassadorial cortege has departed in the search of the second wife, as on August 19, 1639 the ambassadors have already complied with all the courtship requests (at the level of the Moldavian royal requests) and were coming back. September 28 after numerous twists and turns on the road, the cortege has arrived with the bride in the Moldavian capital, Iasi. The level of organization and the promptitude with which

<sup>5</sup> Niccolo Barsi, *Întoarcerea. 1639* [The return. 1639] in *Călători străini despre Țările Române* [Foreign travelers about the Romanian Countries], Vol. V, edited by Maria Holban, M. M. Alexandrescu - Dersca Bulgaru, Paul Cernovodeanu, Scientific Publishing House, Bucharest, 1973, p. 86-89.

<sup>6</sup> Constantin Gane, *Trecute vieți de doamne și domnițe* [Bygone lives of queens and princesses], Vol. 1, Chișinău, “Universitas” Printing House, 1991, p. 207.

everything has been accomplished, confirms the fact that it has been planned in advance.

In analyzing the sources of the era, it results that information on the bride's origins or her family stays unknown. Statements of chronicle and missionaries evidence the fact that she was of noble birth solely, since the Crimean Khan himself stoop up for her. Her name, or the name of her parents, even the name of her younger brother who accompanied her are alien. The name of “*Catherine*” is mentioned in the paperwork of the era as her Christian name, as it is highly possible that she was obliged to change to the christian faith in order for the marital alliance to happen. In addition, she was accompanied by a great cortege- 150 Tatars and three times less Moldavians – 60 people, who were to be sustained and provided with meals along the journey.

Another worth mentioning fact is the price of the bride. In the Muslim community, at the conclusion of the marital contract (copies of which have to be handed to the both parties), the groom had to establish in a mandatory order the financial contribution of his family to the wedding ceremony<sup>7</sup>. In other words, the Moldavian cortege has met all the marital requests according to the Muslim customs and tradition (the groom had to pay a certain “*redemption*” to the bride's family). In addition to the payment to the family, one is to also emphasize the fact the Moldavian king paid another retribution to the Crimean Khan, in order to get his approval. Subsequently, when resolving the conflict with Pasha of Silistra who retained the bride, the Moldavian embassy has also fulfilled the financial commitment. It is no less significant the redemption of the brides. For example, the father of the bride and the Khan Behadir Girai have each received 1000 ducats, her mother two times less – 500 ducats, and pasha – 3000 (two times more than the parents of the bride). In one's opinion, as with regards to the price of redemption it is undoubtedly that it could have been established without any preliminary discussion, since the girl was not courted, she was taken to bed wed. Furthermore, the conditions of the engagement were not discussed as the price that was paid was for the girl to be the Moldavian king's wife. Above all, she was accompanied by a rather large delegation, who was to attend the official marital ceremony in order to advise later on the parents, relatives and the Crimean Khan. Therefore, the embassy was fully equipped with gifts and a certain amount of money in order to fulfill the requirements of the Muslim customs, and very well informed about the Muslim behavioral formalities.

There is scant evidence about the wedding and the beautiful bride Catherine „*de rare belleze*”<sup>8</sup> but one is certain about the fact that she, her brother and her maid

<sup>7</sup> Рафаэла Льюис, *Османская Турция. Быт, религия, культура* [Ottoman Turkey. Life, religion, culture], Москва, Центрополиграф, 2004, с. 118-119.

<sup>8</sup> Nicolae Iorga, *Studii și documente cu privire la istoria românilor* [Studies and documents regarding the History of Romanians], IV. *Legăturile principatelor române cu Ardealul. De*

were lodged in a separate residence, especially built for her<sup>9</sup>. It is most likely that she was greeted with great splendour, since the event was of a major political importance (the bride of the Moldavian prince himself). In addition, according to Moldavian traditions, the hospitality of foreign guests represented a particular ritual that was too accomplished according to well established protocol and etiquette of the era. The delegation was met by a special escort even at the border crossing in Moldova, which consisted of boyars and senior government military officials. On the entrance in the capital they were met by the Moldavian prince himself. Further, one is to state the fact that Vasile Lupu is known through history as one of the finest and luxury-lover rulers, in terms of clothing, furniture and jewelry. Naturally, for the arrival of his wife, money was not saved and she has been honored with numerous pre-wedding gifts and with the most distinguished reception.

There is no evidence of the wedding festivities, except a mentioning of it being in 1640. But this is where questions arise: why the hurry to haul the wedding to the winter period? The bride has arrived in late September, which basically is period of the Moldavian weddings. One may assume that the priests have opposed this hasty marriage, asking Vasile Lupu to hold at least half of the mourning for the death of his wife (the husband was to hold the mourning for a year at the time). The funeral ceremony has been depicted by Dimitrie Cantemir in his work “*Description of Moldova*”, in the chapter entitled “*On the funeral traditions in Moldova*” “*The Moldavians bury the defuncts according to well-established religious practices...The mourning is worn on differently...They (the Moldavians) go to the grave every Sunday during the first year after the death*”<sup>10</sup>. Hence the decision of Vasile Lupu not to marry Catherine immediately after her arrival. Nevertheless, it is a hypothetical perspective and in no way assertive, as the real reasons stay unknown due to lack of historical sources.

Summing up all the above, it is safe to say that the marriage between Vasile Lupu and Catherine was far from accidental. As the era sources attest, all the details have been thought of. Almost immediately after the death of his wife, Vasile Lupu sends the ambassadorial cortege to get his second wife, hence not respecting even the basic mourning traditions. One may also assume that government and political interests were high above emotions. Vasile Lupu was an ambitious, far-sighted politician and a brilliant strategist. His plan was to expand the Moldavian

---

*la 1601 la 1699* [The connections of the Romanian principalities with Transylvania. From 1601 to 1699], Editura Ministerului de Instrucție, București, 1902, p. CXXVII.

<sup>9</sup> Ioan Caproșu, *Documente privitoare la istoria orașului Iași* [Documents Regarding the City of Iași], vol. II, Acte interne [Internal Documents], (1661-1690), Iași, Editura „Dosoftei”, 2000, p. 100 (nr. 105).

<sup>10</sup> Dimitrie Cantemir, *Descrierea Moldovei* [Description of Moldavia], Chișinău, 1998, p. 170-171.

borders. He prepared his only son Ioan for the future throne of Valachia. However, his plans crashed after the death of his son and he remained with no male heir. Vasile Lupu was well aware that he had to resolve promptly the dynastic crisis. He needed a young wife, strong and healthy, able to give birth to his heirs. The choice fell on Catherine, the Circassian girl. How and under which circumstances this choice has been made, remains an unsolved mystery. Unfortunately, one does not dispose of sources that could give a reliable answer to this question. At the same time, one does not deny the well-known and hackneyed point of view of the historical literature, that this “marriage encountered a political context, the Moldavian-Tatar mutual support in the political, military and economic spheres”<sup>11</sup>.

Fortunately, enough sources about Catherine have survived, both written and visual, which allows one to visualize as with regards to her looks and her positions in life, as a wife, mother and step-mother. However this a different matter of study.

---

<sup>11</sup> Ciprian-Gică Toderășcu, *Ecaterina Cerchez, soția lui Vasile Lupu* [Cerchez Catherine, the wife of Vasile Lupu], in “Elanul”, no. 104, 2010, p. 7.