

DACIANS, VARANGIANS, VLACHS AND THE GOLDEN BOUGH¹

Lucian Vasile BĂGIU

1 Decembrie 1918 University of Alba Iulia, Romania

e-mail: lucian_bagiu@yahoo.com

Abstract

The essay interprets four parts of Mihai Sadoveanu's 1933 enigmatical novel "The Golden Bough". The Dacian section focuses on the way geographical, historical, ethnical and social guide marks are introduced to define an uncertain moment in history, the late eighth century in the Carpathians. It also introduces the impetus that must have driven the author to do so and continues with an intertextual comparative reading with Eminescu's poem "The Ghosts", particularly on the depiction of the magus and the unexpected reasons behind the author's choice, i. e. the Viking pathway. The Varangians segment highlights all seven occurrences of the Northmen collective personage within the story, with minimal historical contextualization of the 787-797 Byzantium, lying before the awkward discrepancy between the Northerners' enhanced fictional role and the factual inexistence at that particular time and place. The Vlachs fragment presents the six occurrences of "Blacherne" in Sadoveanu's novel, a documented linguistic and historic speculation of two Romanian scholars on the origin of the exonym "Vlach" as having its source in the Greek milieu of the early Eastern Roman Empire, and the role the Vikings might have played in its spreading, thus proposing an unaccounted-for rationale for the Varangians' diegetic significance. "The Golden Bough" division depicts the similarities and the incongruities in comparative readings with Frazer's anthropological approach and with Virgil's Aeneid, suggesting a more adequate analogy with the Egyptian hermetic philosophy. The essay ends up with a brief expounding of Sadoveanu's Masonic status and its likely function in initiating the imaginary Golden Bough.

Keywords: Aeneid; Byzantium; Carpathians; Christianity; Hermetic; Inferno; Mason; Vikings.

Introduction

In 1933, fifty-three year old Mihail Sadoveanu, with seventy volumes already published, at the height of his literary creativity, authors a novel entitled *Creanga de Aur* [The golden bough], baffling the contemporary exegetes to muteness. In the long run timid attempts to interpret the inner meaning of the aesthetic product manifested, as the bewilderment steadily made room for fascination and enchantment, mostly to the common reader. Historical novel, placid love novel, philosophical/esoteric novel were successive approaches in a concentric effort to attain the genuine insight into the meaning of the novel. The following lines propose an innovative perspective that will hopefully shed a few rays of light on the impenetrable edifice. I will (re)interpret from a fresh perspective some of the milestones of the novel (such as the Dacian theme and the meaning of the golden bough) and I shall put forward features ignored so far to the best of our knowledge (such as the Varangians collective personage in relation to the exonym "Vlach"), hypothesizing of Sadoveanu's Masonic status as the impetus that must have driven the author to draw the inner anthropological sense of his aesthetic

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product. For this I shall turn to a detailed reading of the novel and to a interdisciplinary research with revealing information gathered from lesser known linguistic and historical sources. The contrastive approach sums up with proposing an original imaginative interpretation which *may* be congruent with Sadoveanu's sub textual intent.

1. The Dacian

In three of the novel's chapters (the second, the third, and the seventeenth, the last) the diegesis is set in a recondite mountain of the Carpathians, on the territory of the ancient Dacia, nowadays Romania. The exact name and location of the mountain are carefully concealed, for Sadoveanu undoubtedly refers to Kogaionon, the holy mountain of the Geto-Dacians, the place where Zalmoxis secluded himself for three years only to emerge "miraculously" alive, "resurrected", thus convincing his followers of his immortality. Both Strabo and Herodotus provide mention of the happening, the exact location of the mountain, of the cave and of the nearby river being uncertain.

Not much is happening in these chapters, as the author is mostly interested in (re)creating the atmosphere of long time ago of which little if anything is historically recorded. To make it clear that we are at a crossroad Sadoveanu starts his carefully stylistic crafted narration by making a distinction between the way in which "the faithful of old in the Carpathians"² (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 51) are counting the time with reference to Zalmoxis, and the distant valleys where "the world had turned towards a new faith in the year 780 since Christ, the Saviour"³ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 51). In a realm where the main character seems to be nature itself we are introduced to "the aged man of the old faith"⁴ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 51) at the opening of his cave, prepared by his disciples for a ritual meeting with Zalmoxis' priests, among them "Kesarion, the tall, sprightly priest who headed the file"⁵ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 57). The Zalmoxian prophet is performing the secret ceremony somehow already solitary: "It was the ancient sign of the initiated, which in the remote valleys where the waters run smoothly the priests of the new law, Jesus' law, made over the people at the same hour, as they proclaimed the Resurrection"⁶ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 63). And here we find the very plot of the entire novel. The Zalmoxian prophet is very much aware of the new religion, without having any worries. He accepts it wisely, with stoicism, for, to him, there is nothing fundamentally new in the world, just some fresh colour scheme, merely another suitable structure for the people. "For us, however, what is eternal cannot change"⁷ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 67), namely God, which is one. He even accepts and encourages that the Zalmoxian priests down the valleys should become Christian priests, "if that will increase their goodness"⁸ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 67), as they are ultimately serving the same God. At the same time, the Zalmoxian prophet is very much aware that he will last in the cave till the end of his time.

His apparent unique curiosity, or to be more fair, probably his last concern with regards to his people, is to find out, from the very source of this new faith, Byzantium, "if their peoples are happier now and if the priests of the new law have added one jot to wisdom"⁹ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 69). As a matter of fact, with this cleverly disguised approach the old prophet prepares

² Original Romanian text: "credințioșii vechi de la Carpați" (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 50).

³ Original Romanian text: "lumea își întorsese fața către o lege nouă și număra anul 780 de la izbăvitorul Hristos" (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 50).

⁴ Original Romanian text: "bătrânul legii vechi" (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 50).

⁵ Original Romanian text: "Kesarion, monahul cel sprinten și nalt" (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 56).

⁶ Original Romanian text: "Era vechiul semn al inițiatilor, pe care, în văile depărtate, unde se alină apele, la același ceas, preoții legii celei nouă, a lui Isus, îl făceau asupra poporului, vestind Învierea" (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 62).

⁷ Original Romanian text: "Dar pentru noi ceea ce e veșnic nu se poate clăti" (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 66).

⁸ Original Romanian text: "dacă pot fi astfel mai buni" (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 66).

⁹ Original Romanian text: "dacă popoarele lor sunt mai fericite și dacă preoții legii nouă au sporit c-un dram înțelepciunea" (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 68).

the young priest Kesarion Breb for an initiatory itinerary: “My son, the time has come for you as well.”¹⁰ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 69). Reading between the lines, there is absolutely nothing novel that the old prophet would and could have found out sending his young and inexperienced disciple to Byzantium. As for Kesarion Breb, there is everything he should and could have learned from such a defining trial. The protagonist was chosen because he is “the worthiest for sacrifice”¹¹ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 69). It is a ritual initiator sacrifice all the supreme Zalmoxian prophets have undergone before, including the old man speaking, in order “to let loose the secret powers of your inner structure; but such teachings are perilous and can only be acquired at the place where there is that bottomless well through which you can get to the other world.”¹² (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 69). If able to descend through the bottomless well to the other world and come back, Kesarion Breb will become the thirty-third Deceneus, the supreme Zalmoxian priest. For this, the necessary traditional path is the seven years spiritual experience in an unnamed temple in Egypt. And a novelty is added; another necessary experience, that of Byzantium and its Christian faith. When the old prophet says “I want to know its mystery and whether it is a *new* mystery”¹³ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 73), what he actually implies is that Kesarion Breb has to learn about this.

The last practical guidance on the part of the old prophet provides with a few, vague geographical, historical, ethnical and social guide marks for the contemporary reader. He mentions Kesarion Breb should go down the valley to find “a submissive man of the Dacian stock with a strong arm.”¹⁴ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 73). It is the only time within these chapters that Sadoveanu is literally using the word “Dacian” for the ethnic denomination, having otherwise employed a wide range of paraphrases: “old native stock”¹⁵ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 55), “the people of this land”¹⁶ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 59), “the people in the plain”¹⁷ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 65), “the men of the native stock”¹⁸ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 75), “the folds of our mountaineers”¹⁹ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 75), or simply naming the people according to their characteristic occupations: the shepherds, the ploughmen. The way Sadoveanu is naming the inhabitants of the land and the way in which he names the selected Dacian companion of Kesarion Breb arguably implies there were other ethnic groups in the region at the time just as well, something which is historically likely. In the last chapter of the novel, back on the same Dacian realms, the author makes an explicit hint at: “they had come to an agreement with the barbarians and were paying them a tribute”²⁰ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 387).

Further on, the two travellers have to cross the mountain and chose the most suitable way to Ister (Danube River) and from there across to Calatis (an ancient Greek city-fortress on the nowadays Romanian Black Seashore). These vague geographical details suggest they have to cross either the Southern Carpathian Mountains or the Eastern Carpathian Mountains, thus making their starting point and original homeland southern Transylvania. In the last chapter, there are two more exact indications on the geographical area: Kesarion Breb belongs “to the fair-haired stock dwelling below the Om Mountain – the Man Mountain”²¹ (Sadoveanu, 1981,

¹⁰ Original Romanian text: “fiule, a sosit pentru tine ceasul” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 68).

¹¹ Original Romanian text: “mai vrednic ca să te jertfesc” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 68).

¹² Original Romanian text: “să desfaci din tine și puterile cele tainice: dar asemenea învățământ primejdios nu se poate câștiga decât acolo unde este fântâna fără fund, prin care poți străbate pe tărâmul celălalt” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 68).

¹³ Original Romanian text: “Vreau să știu care-i taina ei și dacă este o taină nouă” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 68).

¹⁴ Original Romanian text: “un om ascultător și cu braț tare din neamul dacilor” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 74).

¹⁵ Original Romanian text: “neamuri de vechi pământeni” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 54).

¹⁶ Original Romanian text: “neamurile acestui pământ” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 58).

¹⁷ Original Romanian text: “noroadele de la câmpie” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 64).

¹⁸ Original Romanian text: “pământenii” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 74).

¹⁹ Original Romanian text: “stânile muntenilor noștri” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 74).

²⁰ Original Romanian text: “având bună înțelegere cu barbarii de la câmpie și plătindu-le dajdie” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 386).

²¹ Original Romanian text: “era din neamul oamenilor balani de sub muntele Om” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 386).

p. 387). This made many exegetes believe Sadoveanu is implying the Omu Peak in the Bucegi Mountains of Southern Carpathians.

This is apparently supported by the most precise signal after a few pages. First, one has to take into account the direction: “on that golden morning the two travellers set out northwards, along the hillside”²² (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 389) and it keeps the same course: “The path ran north along the slope between precipices and a great silence”²³ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 393); a wind is blowing from the same cardinal point: “The next day a north wind was blowing in the fir groves”²⁴ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 393). After one day and a half, “The path ran down to a river named Olt”²⁵ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 395). The river is very real and a good part of the 625 kilometres of its flow goes along both Eastern Carpathians and Southern Carpathians in Southern Transylvania. What comes next is crucial: “The same wind was blowing. Their path ran along the glistening stream”²⁶ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 395). Though not completely explicit, the author is implying they were heading in the same direction, northwards, following the course of the river towards its spring. The two travellers at the end of the novel, Kesarion Breb and his servant Constantin, are abandoning the water course to go up towards the recondite mountain after a four-day journey. In this case, considering the starting point an area below the Omu Peak, the location of the recondite mountain becomes highly improbable to be the very same peak, as they moved away five or six days in a row (north, upstream the river Olt, apparently). Thus, the location of Kogaionon could be in the Eastern Carpathian range in Romania, the native lands of Sadoveanu himself.

Back in 780, after having crossed the Carpathians, on their journey, they will pass through the lands where a while ago the Hun barbarians dwelt, which is historically accurate. Nevertheless, at the time of their journey, 780, these places in the planes are once again inhabited by the natives, says the old prophet (which is historically likely), including Kesarion Breb’s stock having its name originating from a wild mammal inhabiting the low rivers. “Breb” is the European beaver, *castor fiber*, which became extinct at the beginning of nineteenth century in Romania, thus inexistent for quite a while at the time Sadoveanu was writing his novel. Apparently, this is why the author insists on the description of the mammal, as many of his readers presumably had no idea otherwise on what he implies (nor would today): “The brooks there are silent and the wild things that bear the name of your stock build flush with the glistening lake waters below the birches round homes which they batter and reinforce with their tales. It is from them that the people of the plain have learnt to build dams and mud huts”²⁷ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 75). A builder, a knowledgeable maker and unspoken teacher is *breb*, a mason in his own way...

In any case, the planes are not the most familiar and trustworthy regions for the travellers as they are advised to stop only at the folds of the familiar mountaineers. Thus, Sadoveanu introduces a suggestion of the traditional theory of the endurance of the natives over such a vast and geographically diverse terrain: the moving of flocks to or from an alpine pasture. At the end of the novel, Sadoveanu comes back to this in an explicit depiction of the

²² Original Romanian text: “Călătorii porniră de-a lungul costișei spre miază-noapte, prin aurul dimineții.” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 388).

²³ Original Romanian text: “Drumul ducea pe costișă și cătră miezul nopții, îndelung, între prăpăstii și tăceri” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 392).

²⁴ Original Romanian text: “A doua zi sună în brădeturi vânt de miazănoapte” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 392).

²⁵ Original Romanian text: “Drumul se înclină în albia apei care se chiamă Olt” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 394).

²⁶ Original Romanian text: “Bătea același vânt. Urmău calea pe lângă lucirea apei” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 394).

²⁷ Original Romanian text: “Acolo pâraiele tac și sălbăticiunile care poartă numele neamului tău își lădesc în luciul lacurilor, sub mesteceni, căsuțe rotunde pe care le bat și le întăresc cu cozile. De la ei au învățat oamenii de la câmp a face iazuri și bordeie.” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 74)

daily reiterated life of Kesarion's six brothers – which is a concise anthropological definition of Romanians through the centuries:

His six brothers were owners of the flocks of those parts and had shepherds and servants at their command. On the grassy plateau named Casele, they had log-houses where the women and children dwelt. The servants that attended to the cattle-sheds and to the stables lived in huts, as was the custom among the mountain people. In late autumn some of the flocks reached as far as the reed-brakes and the low ridges along the banks of the Ister for their winter stay. Masters and servants walked to those places along roads known to them, following the course of the streams.²⁸ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 387)

Once in Calatis, in 780, the travellers have to turn to the service of a Greek sailor to cross the Black and Mediterranean Seas.

The main character present between 780 and 797 in the Carpathian Mountains, in Egypt, in Byzantium, and back in the Carpathian Mountains is the Dacian named Kesarion Breb. Considering that the Dacians have stopped being explicitly attested as an ethnic group under this denomination as early as the fourth century, their appearance in the late eighth century is historically highly improbable. For the apparent historical inadvertence there is a certainty on the impetus that must have driven Mihail Sadoveanu:

I confess I can't make out very well why it should be necessary to prove our exclusive Latin origin and the nobility we derive from our Roman descendance in order to deserve the badge a great people. I would rather rejoice in our Geto-Dacian origin for those old-time Europeans – the Geto-Dacians – enjoyed an excellent reputation among the ancients while praises were not alone meted out to the Romans. For myself, I feel honoured to be descended from the natives who stood under the protection of ancient Burebista.²⁹ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 29)

Historians may well assert that the race of our forebears is descended from Trajan and Rome. Although I consider the language as an important factor of communication, I nevertheless believe that we should seek our origins deeper in the past, when songs and legends clothed the same feelings in different words. I may state that our nation is indeed descended from Rome but more especially from the Carpathians³⁰ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 29).

Having all of these taken into account, to us the most revealing detail is the description of the Dacian magus from the first chapter; the geologist professor Stamatina allegedly encountered this Dacian magus in the recondite mountain of the Carpathians one day in late March, at the vernal equinox a few years back 1926, and he is presumably none-other than the 796 Kesarion Breb at the end of the novel:

²⁸ Original Romanian text: "Șase frați ai lui se aflau stăpâni ai turmelor din acele locuri, având sub ascultarea lor ciobani și argați. Pe plaiul care se chema Casele, aveau așezări durate din bârne, unde stăteau muierile și copiii. Slujitorii, lângă staule și grajduri, trăiau în colibe după rânduiala muntenilor. Unele turme ajungeau la sfârșitul toamnei, pentru iernatic, în stufurile și grindurile Istrului. Și stăpânii și slujitorii umblau până acolo pe drumuri cunoscute, prin marginea apelor." (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 386)

²⁹ Original Romanian text: "Mărturisesc că nu înțeleg tocmai bine de ce e nevoie să se dovedească latinitatea noastră exclusivă și noblețea noastră de la Roma, ca să devenim un mare popor. Aș înclina să mă bucur mai mult de o origine geto-dacică, întrucât acești vechi pământeni, geto-dacii, se bucurau de o reputație excelentă în lumea antică, pe când despre romani nu se poate vorbi numai cu laude. În sfârșit, în ce mă privește, mă simt onorat de a fi coborât din băștinașii care erau sub oblăduirea vechiului nostru Burebista." (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 18)

³⁰ Original Romanian text: "Pot spune istoricii că neamul părinților noștri se trage de la Traian și de la Roma. Socotind limba ca un factor important de comunicare, am totuși încredințarea că trebuie să ne căutăm noi pe noi înșine mai în adânc și mai în trecut, când cântecele și legendele traduceau cu alte vocabule același sentiment. Pot spune că neamul nostru se trage de la Roma, dar mai cu seamă se trage de la Carpați." (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 18)

I reached his seat – a place where three live springs burst forth from below the rock, fretting like the vipers of his undying wisdom and whispering his name in a language other than man’s ever changing speech. And this is what I saw: the ashes of old still lay on the deserted hearth; the hound of the earth bayed deep down beneath; I went in and found him, pale and stately, in his rock-hewn seat. In his right hand he held an ivory staff. Moss had overgrown his tresses and his chest; his beard came down to the ground and his eyelashes to his breast; above him, chasing each other in circles, a white and a black raven flapped their weary wings... “Blind he was, under the burden of this sign of the days and the nights, but the golden figures still twinkled under his vaulted brow, mysteriously recording the time.”³¹ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 89)

What Sadoveanu is doing in 1933 in this fragment is called intertextuality, as he is imitating up to the point of simply copying the lyrics from the 1875 poem *Strigoi* [Ghosts] by the most renowned and revered Romanian poet, the romantic Mihai Eminescu. A predominantly literal translation:

Now he reaches the dark forest, girdling / the old mountain / split with waters bubbling and sparkling / on the black rock. / At a forsaken fireside old grey ashes / linger on the hearth. / In the depth of the forest, barks / the Dog of Earth, / like the legendary ox, lowing, breaking / the silence. / And stiff and pale, an eerie figure sits / on a cairn of rocks; / a priest of old gods, crozier clutched / in cold fingers, / sits as he has sat for centuries, forgotten / even by Death, / the hair on his head and chest overgrown / with moss and lichen, / his eyebrows falling down towards his waist, / his grey beard to the ground. / And he has sat, sightless, motionless, day and night, / his feet firmly fixed now to the rocks, / only his mind / alive still, counting and recounting / the numberless days. / Over his head circle two ravens, one black, / the other white, / flying weary wings.³² (Eminescu, 1980, p. 57-59)

And a more imaginative, figurative translation:

Reaching at last the forest that clothes the rising hills, / Where does a sweet spring murmur, well out from ‘neath a stone, / Where grey with scattered ashes an old hearth stands alone, / Where far off in the forest the earth-hound sounds his tone / And with his distant barking the midnight silence fills. / Upon a rocky ledge, quite stiff and ashen faced, / There sits, with crutch in hand, a priest of pagan creed / For ages sits he thus, by death forgot indeed, / Moss growing on his forehead and on his breast long weed, / His beard reaching to the ground, his eyebrows to his waist. / Blindly thus for ages he sits both day and night, / Until his feet have grown one with the stone at last, / Numbering the days that numberless have passed, / While over him are circling in endless circles vast / Two crows on weary wings, one black, the other white. (Eminescu, 1978)

³¹ Original Romanian text: “am ajuns până la locașul său, într-un loc unde trei izvoare vii saltă de sub piatră zbatându-se ca viperele înțelepciunii celei fără de moarte și murmurându-i numele într-o altă limbă decât cea schimbătoare a oamenilor. Ascultați ce-am văzut. Cenușa veche sta încă în vatra părăsită; lătra în adâncime cățelul pământului; am intrat și l-am găsit palid și semeț în jălțul dăltuit în stâncă. Cu dreapta ținea toiagul de fildeș. Avea mușchi în plete și pe sân; îi ajungea barba la pământ și genele la piept; deasupra-i fâlfăia gonindu-se în roate; *Cu-aripile-ostenite, un alb și-un negru corb...* Sub povara acestui semn al zilelor și-al nopților stătea orb, însă numerele de aur continua să clipească sub bolta frunții lui, scriind misterios timpurile.” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 38)

³² Original Romanian text: “Ajuns-a el la poala de codru-n munții vechi, / Isoară vii murmură și saltă de sub piatră, / Colo cenușa sură în părăsita vatră, / În codri-adânci cățelul pământului tot latră, / Lătrat cu glas de zimbru răsună în urechi. / Pe-un jilț tăiat în stâncă stă țapăn, palid, drept, / Cu cârja lui în mână, preotul cel păgân; / De-un veac el șede astfel - de moarte-uitat, bătrân, / În plete-i crește mușchiul, și mușchi pe a lui sân, / Barba-n pământ i-ajunge și genele la piept... / Așa fel zi și noapte de veacuri el stă orb, / Picioarele lui vechie cu piatra-mpreunate, / El numără în gându-i zile nenumărate, / Și fâlfăie deasupra-i, gonindu-se în roate, / Cu-aripile-ostenite un alb și-un negru corb.” (Eminescu, 1998, p. 67)

Sadoveanu could have easily imagined an original detailed narrative of the Dacian magus, as he was an undisputed master of a plentiful descriptive style, something he resorts to so very often within *The Golden Bough* itself. Had he intended to tacitly pastiche any other Romanian writer picturing an ancient priest, he could have chosen Lucian Blaga for example, with his 1921 poem *The Death of Pan*. But it is obvious Sadoveanu selected Eminescu's poem, and he undoubtedly did so for a reason. The motivation for his option may lie not in the Dacian magus itself, as his copied picture could simply act as a clue, a gateway to distinguish the hidden rationale. And that motivation could be found in the protagonist of Eminescu's poem, the foreign king passing through Danubian Dacian lands, Arald (which, in his manuscripts, he spells Harald, a spelling preferred by the English translation just the same). Even if Eminescu is calling Arald "the King of Avari" (historically these nomadic warriors did indeed distantly rule over the lands of the former Dacia as late as 790), what he actually alludes to, considering the repeated mentioning of Odin as Arald's supreme God, the itinerary of his hero Arald crossing Volga and Dniester rivers, is

the notorious Harald Hafdagár [...] the founder of Norway that, during his warfare, observed the same itinerary Eminescu describes [in the poem]. The figure of this hero-king has made wealthy the romantic literature of France and of Germany. It is interesting that Harald – in the manuscripts Eminescu calls him Harald too as well (ms. B. A. R. 2262, f. 166) – was harmonized in addition by other foreign writers in narrations which take place within our country – *on the Dacian land*, as Eminescu says. The French Lerebours for example wrote in the year 1825 a tragedy entitled *Harald*, where the Nordic king, just as in *The Ghosts*, falls in love with a girl from the regions of the old Dacian countries.³³ (Jura, 1933, p. 21 - our translation)

Most of Eminescu's three-part poem deals indeed with the tragic love story between king Arald and a Dacian princess, Maria, thus a first, superficial layer of its lecture could be confined to an impressive adaptation of previous European gothic writing. However, its essence lies elsewhere. In Eminescu's poem, on the realms of ancient Dacia, Odin dies at the same time with Arald. In this way the significance of the poem goes much further beyond the love story and the ghostly theme. For it is not only Odin dying at the end of the poem. In his desperate attempt to resurrect the lifeless bride-princess Maria, Arald appeals to the help of the Dacian magus of the ancient god Zalmoxis, in a land otherwise strongly Christianized, as the poem makes it ever so clear. Neither Odin nor Zalmoxis will be able to bring back to life what is already dead. In a poem that arguably has the most Christian elements in all of Eminescu's creation, either in explicit images and symbolism or in hidden linguistic adaptation of old religious books narrative style (see Picioruș, 2017), both Norsemen Arald and Dacian Maria, both Odin and Zalmoxis will vanish; or, as Eminescu renders it at the end of the poem, the ghosts of the defunct are forever entombed by the temple's closing gates: "Lost for all eternity within the tomb's constraint" (Eminescu, 1978), whilst the Dacian magus turns to stone, in a posture identical to that of the last Dacian priest discovered in Sadoveanu's novel in the Carpathians a few years back, in 1926:

³³ Original Romanian text: "este vestitul Harald Hafdagár [...] întemeietorul Norvegiei și care pe timpul războaielor pe care le-a purtat, a urmat același drum pe care ni-l descrie Eminescu [în poem]. Figura acestui rege-erou, a îmbogățit întreaga literatură romantică a Franței și a Germaniei. Interesant este că Harald – în manuscrise Eminescu îl numește tot *Harald* (ms. B. A. R. 2262, f. 166) – a mai fost încadrat și de alți scriitori străini în istorisirii care se petrec în cuprinsul țării noastre – *pe-al Daciei pământ*, cum zice Eminescu. Francezul Lerebours de pildă, a scris în anul 1825 o tragedie intitulată *Harald*, în care regele nordic, ca și în *Strigoii*, iubește o fată din locurile vechilor țări dacice." (Jura, 1933, p. 21)

The Seer now lowers his eyebrows, the world fades from / His feet into the granite again
enrooted grow, / Numbering the days that numberless did flow, / Harold in his failing mind
a tale of long ago, / While soaring o'er his head two crows: one black, one white. / Upon
his rocky ledge, upright and ashen faced, / There sits with crutch in hand the priest of pagan
creed. / For ages sits he thus, by death forgot indeed, / Moss growing on his forehead and
on his breast long weed, / His beard reaching to the ground, his eyebrows to his waist.³⁴
(Eminescu, 1978)

As early as 1910, a Romanian scholar named Al. Bogdan noticed the presence of Odin's ravens right round the Dacian magus and that is of little surprise, for in an earlier poem by Eminescu, dating 1872, *Odin și poetul* [Odin and the poet], Odin is identified with Zalmoxis, as the last Dacian king, Decebalus, forever lives among the Gods in Valhalla. The easy explanation usually presented is the long-lasting historical confusion between the Gets and the Goths due to the sixth century Eastern Roman Empire Gothic historian Jordanes. Be that as it may for Eminescu, we believe there is still another rationale for Mihail Sadoveanu's preferred intertextuality in the very first chapter of his novel (it is exactly the lyric with the ravens that Sadoveanu renders evident in his intertextual epic narrative writing, by separating it in a single line and writing it in italics). He deliberately turned to Eminescu's poem for he may have intended to bring together the last Dacian magus and the most famous Norsemen not only because their Gods vanished when facing Christianity, but for another reason yet.

2. The Varangians

Most of the novel's chapters (fourth to sixteenth) cover the plot taking place in Byzantium, 787-793/797. Among others, the novel presents a collective personage little expounded by literary criticism: the Swedish Vikings from the medieval Byzantium. The Varangian Guard was an elite unit of the Byzantine army, composed mainly by Swedish Norsemen. They were first accounted for as serving in the Byzantine army in 874 and the official constitution of the Guard took place in 988. Nevertheless, the elite personal guard of the Byzantine Emperor is already active in Sadoveanu's *The Golden Bough* as early as 787 (at least). Although a completely minor character, in a story where the focus is on the Byzantines and on the Dacians, Mihail Sadoveanu dwells upon it, explicitly mentioning the Varangians no less than seven times. All their occurrences in the diegesis are rendered next, with a minimum of contextualization.

Their early appearance in the novel (Chapter 4) is consistent with the logic of their (later) historical institutional status. The one gazing, alongside the entire population of Byzantium, is the protagonist Kesarion Breb. The narrator is external, omniscient. "Heading the pageantry were great dignitaries who carried the imperial ensigns: the sword, the rod and the globe of gold. Close to the Basilissa, companies of Varangians and Maglabites in gold armour and helmets kept guard with spears and battle axes"³⁵ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 82).

Once introduced, their second explicit occurrence appears much later, Chapter 13 being dedicated almost entirely to them. The Varangians are graphically and minutely described, making use of a humoristic and ironic narrative style. The present article will select some particulars of their copious literary representation.

³⁴ Original Romanian text: "Bătrănu-și pleacă geana și iar rămâne orb, / Picioarele lui vechie cu piatra se-mpreună / El numără în gându-i și anii îi adună, / Ca o poveste-uitată Arald în minte-i sună, / Și peste capu-i zboară un alb și-un negru corb. / Pe jilțul lui de piatră înțepenește drept / Cu cărja lui cea veche preotul cel păgân, / Și veacuri înainte el șede-uitat, bătrân, / În plete-i crește mușchiul și mușchi pe a lui sân, / Barba-n pământ i-ajunge și genele în piept." (Eminescu, 1998, p. 74)

³⁵ Original text: "În fruntea alaiului dregători măreți purtau semnele împărătești: sabia, varga și globul de aur. În preajma Vasilisei, teorii de varangi și maglabiți țineau strajă cu suliți și securi, cu zale și căști de aur". (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 82)

The fragment “During the reign of the Issaurian emperors, the most reliable and most favoured guards were the Varangians”³⁶ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 291) acknowledges the external, omniscient narrator. This assertion poses a crucial, sensitive problem. Mihail Sadoveanu was very much aware, familiar and well informed on the history of the Byzantium Empire depicted in his novel. Much of the information introduced in his story is historically accurate, a testimony he did his best to be persuasive, convincing. The two Emperors, Constantine VI and his mother Irene of Athens were real historical figures, ruling between 780 and 802, the last two Emperors of the Isaurian dynasty. Sadoveanu places the Byzantine section of his story at the heart of their ruling and many of the happenings of the novel render real historical events. And yet in the case of the Varangians the reader is facing a disjointed historical inaccuracy. The Isaurian dynasty started in 717, a moment when there were no Varangians in Constantinople; even if Sadoveanu uses the syntagma “During the reign of the Issaurian emperors” having in mind only the last two Emperors of the dynasty, the characters of his novel, there is still a harsh historical imprecision, as there was no Varangian guard in 787 either. At the end of the 8th century, the first Viking ships reach the Kievan Rus state in the east. And raids in the west, on the British Isles, may have taken place as early as 750, the first significant Viking “achievement” being the plundering of Lindisfarne, on the north-east shore of England, in 793. East or West, the Vikings were simply not historically present in Constantinople when Sadoveanu presents them as a traditional military unit of the Emperor. To consider he did so out of ignorance or for the sake of exoticism simply does not add up. Throughout his close (ostentatious?) depiction of the minor character turned into the collective protagonist of an entire chapter, Sadoveanu proves he was very much familiar with historical, anthropological, geographical and social features of the Varangians.

For their journey back-and-forth Constantinople, he favours the less-likely western route (perhaps because it was a much more familiar mirroring of the seamanship the Vikings were famed for):

And so at such times as the armours were threatened with widowhood, one of the captains got on board an imperial vessel and sailed to the Pillars of Hercules and thence into the big ocean, veering along the shores of Gaul and heading for the seas that more often than not spread under the mist and fog. / It was there – in Daneland and Scandinavia – that the imperial messenger found the bodies that he needed. Among the warriors that still worshiped Odin there were many that dreamt of the southern paradise of the Greek empire.³⁷ (Sadoveanu, 1981, pp. 291-293)

Mihail Sadoveanu indicates the reasons behind such a long endeavour: sweet wine, dark-eyed women, gold galore, steady job as mercenaries irrespective of the figure of the ever-changing Emperor. All in all, the author builds up a vivid, yet stereotypical portrait of the medieval Viking. “These were fair-haired, blue-eyed men that came from the frozen northern regions. Tall, broad-shouldered and always frowning, they fulfilled their task silently and in impeccable order. Their cone-shaped helmets [...]”³⁸ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 291).

³⁶ Original text: “În timpul domniei Isaurienilor, cei mai de credință și mai ocrotiți străjeri stăteau varangii” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 290).

³⁷ Original Romanian text: “Deci, din vreme în vreme, când armurile erau amenințate de văduvie, unul din căpitani se suia într-o corabie împărătească și călătorea către columnele lui Iraelie, ieșind în oceanul cel mare, apoi cotea pe lângă țărml Galiei și intra în mările cele care stau mai mult sub negură. Acolo, la Dania și la Scandinavia, solul împărăției găsea trupurile de care avea nevoie. Între războinicii închinători încă lui Odin, se aflau destui care visau raiul de la miazăzi al împărăției grecești.” (Sadoveanu, 1981, pp. 290-292)

³⁸ Original Romanian text: “Erau bărbați blonzi, cu ochii albaștri, veniți din ținuturile înghețate de la miezul-noptii. Largi în spete, nalți și încruntați, își îndeplineau în tăcere și cu o rânduială neînduplecată slujba. Coifurile lor conice...” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 290)

There are two details of particular interest introduced by Mihail Sadoveanu in his unusual long presentation of the Varangians of 790 Constantinople: their inherent formal Christianization “So the captain measured their height and took them along. As they floated on the waters he taught them to make the sign of the cross and say the name of Jesus and the usual acclamations”³⁹ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 293); and their shadowing, less obvious, but constant imperial power as the series of ever changing brilliant imperial figures never ceased: “for thus the true masters of the Sacred Palace were the Varangian guards”⁴⁰ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 293).

Their most notable action in chapter 13 (and in the entire novel) is taking decisive action in a plot to overturn the ruling of the Empress Irene. Making use of stylistic techniques of irony turned into bantering when alluding to the Varangians’s extreme lack of volubility due to a certain specific lack of deep thinking, Mihail Sadoveanu introduces an absent distant character suggesting the conspiracy: Strategos Lachonodracon, a once celebrated military commander, now living in exile. If needed, this is yet another argument for Sadoveanu’s correct documentation, as the personage was a real historical figure: the distinguished Byzantine general Michael Lakchanodrakon, having served from about 763 under the iconoclast Isaurian Emperor Constantine V as a fanatical perpetrator of persecutions against monks, thus becoming a military governor; and under the Emperor Leon IV he was a successful military commander against the Arabs from 778 to 781. Deposed by the iconophile Empress Irene of Athens in 782 he re-appeared in 790 to help Constantine VI in toppling his mother Irene, with the aid of the Armenian troops. Thus, as a magistros, he took part in the disastrous campaign against the Bulgars in 792, finding his end on the battlefield. All these details of his biography are specified or alluded to by Sadoveanu in his fictional story, with a single inaccuracy: the Varangians as a much needed helping hand. The Varangians are those effectively deposing the Empress Irene interrupting divine service at Saint Sophia. And the Varangians are those braking into the chambers of the terrified Constantine VI acclaiming him as new Emperor, taking care of the formalities as well: “Let the insignia of the Empire be brought”⁴¹ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 307). “I beg you to continue to protect the holy icons”⁴² (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 307) the deposed Empress implores with prevision.

“The true masters of the Sacred Palace”, having secured their position and power, appear in the following two chapters yet again as marginal characters, continuing their formal institutional role and reason, serving as professional bodyguards of the new Emperor. The narrator is external and omniscient: “In the vanguard was a company of Maglabites with spears. Next came the Emperor flanked by Varangians.”⁴³ (Sadoveanu, 1981, pp. 321-323); “The next day, with the Emperor going out to war, there was a great stir in the City. The Varangians ranged themselves staunchly around him; they had on their armour and coats of mail, and changed their weapons”⁴⁴ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 367).

In the last but one chapter, the Varangians have two more appearances. The narrator is a character of the novel (a vague witness): “‘Most enlightened sir’, brother Theodorus of Sakkoution wrote to Kesarion Breb in the year 797, ‘according to your order, we have kept your servant Constantin in our monastery, and now that the appointed time has come, we are

³⁹ Original Romanian text: “Deci căpitanul îi măsură în înălțime și-i lua cu el. Cât pluteau pe apă îi învăța să facă cruce și să rostească numele lui Iisus și aclamațiile consacrate.” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 292)

⁴⁰ Original Romanian text: “căci astfel adevărații stăpâni de la Palatul Sfânt sunt săbiile străjerilor” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 292).

⁴¹ Original Romanian text: “Să se aducă aicea semnele Împărăției!” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 306).

⁴² Original Romanian text: “te rog a urma să ocrotești sfintele icoane” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 306).

⁴³ Original Romanian text: “Drumul îl deschidea o eterie de maglabiți, cu suliiți. Împăratul venea după aceea, între varangi.” (Sadoveanu, 1981, pp. 320-322)

⁴⁴ Original Romanian text: “A doua zi, în Cetate, a fost mare zvon pentru ieșirea Împăratului la război. Varangii s-au alcătuit cu mare strășnicie în juru-i, având pe ei platoșele și zălele și sunând din arme.” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 366)

sending him to you with this missive”⁴⁵ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 375). The monk tells from within the compounds of a monastery on the savage warfare of the Varangians under the command of the Emperor Constantine VI against the Armenian troops loyal to the general Alexios Mosele, blinded by the Emperor (yet again, reflection of real historical figures and events in 792-793): “The common soldiers were ripped open with swords and beaten with maces and their leaders were tied by the Varangians to the tails of the camels and were torn into four pieces”⁴⁶ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 377). Thus, the Varangians exceed their limited ground of a protective bodyguard, having been used as an elite unit or shock troops. Noteworthy is that they were used as such not only in open battle to suppress a military armed rebellion, but, much more revealing, in an almost surrealistic siege and fight against a monastery and its monks:

It was then that a thing happened which could have been easily surmised. Discarding all prayer and humility the Isaurian foamed at the mouth and issued orders to Varangians. The carts with engines of war came up from behind; sixty servants raised the battering rams against the gates and began to batter them, and before long there were swords and spears in the church. They set fire to the cells. They broke into the cellars and the casks were pierced through. The soldiers dragged our saintly father to the Emperor’s feet by the beard. Thus did this saintly man give up the ghost.⁴⁷ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 383)

Here Mihail Sadoveanu is fictionalizing, but not without reason. His Holiness Plato, the monastery Sakkoudion and the happenings of summer 796 he presents so vividly are echoes of the real historical monk, Plato the Studite or Plato of Sakkoudion, founder of the monastery of Sakkoudion on Mount Olympus in Bithynia. He was an iconodule unbending supporter, perhaps most famous for his stand against the iconoclast Emperor Constantine VI in the summer of 796, opposing to the imperial second marriage, even if the second wife was nobody else but Plato’s own niece. His intransigence led to his own imprisonment while his monastic supporters were persecuted and exiled. Ultimately, he died much later, in 814, and was canonized by the Church. Sadoveanu aggrandizes the consequences of the incident simply depicting other similar real historical actions of Constantine VI and of most of the Issaurian dynasty Emperors in their fervour against icons, monks, and monasteries. With a notable exception: Irene of Athens. And the Varangians as a fictitious instrument, of course...

Their last occurrence closes, bitterly ironic, a cycle. They betray the acting Emperor, Constantine VI, deposing him and enthroning another, his mother, the Empress Irene.

A year had gone by since His Holiness had passed away – the time needed for the cycle to conclude – and there was much unrest and commotion at Byzantium. Stavrikios and Eutykhios, the counsellors of the all-glorious Empress, many a night put their heads together, for long conferring with each other. They gave the Varangians, the Maglabites and the Scholarians as many coins as were needed for their love for Constantine to lessen.⁴⁸ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 383)

⁴⁵ Original Romanian text: “Prea luminate Stăpâne, îi scria cuviosul Teodor de la Sakkoudion, în 797, lui Kesarion Breb; după porunca pe care ai lăsat-o, am ținut aici, la noi, pe servul domniei-tale Constantin; iar acum, sosind ora hotărâtă, ți-l trimitem cu această carte.” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 374).

⁴⁶ Original Romanian text: “Oamenii de rând au fost tăiați cu săbiile și bătuți cu buzduganele, iar pe mai-marii lor i-au legat varangii de cozile cămیلelor, rupându-i în patru.” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 376)

⁴⁷ Original Romanian text: “Atunci s-a întâmplat acel lucru care nu era greu să-l bănuiesc. Din rugăciunea și umiliința lui, Isaurianul s-a sculat spumând și a dat poruncă varangilor. Dindărăt au sosit carele cu unelte de război; șaizeci de slujitori au ridicat la porți berbecule și au început a bate. Curând au intrat în biserică săbiile și sulite. La chilii s-a pus foc. Pivnițele au fost sparte și butoaiele sfredelitate. Oștenii au târât de barbă pe preasfințitul nostru părinte la picioarele Împăratului. Astfel și-a dat duhul acest bătrân sfânt.” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 382)

⁴⁸ Original Romanian text: “N-a trecut decât un an de la adormirea prea sfințitului, adică atât cât trebuie ciclului ca să se încheie, și la Bizanț s-a iscat tulburare și vâlvă. Sfetnicii slăvitei Împărătese, Stavrikie și Eftihie, au stat multe nopți frunte

While Irene is kneeling before icons, Constantine is blinded. The narrative double mirroring internal happenings of the diegesis (dethronement/enthronement under the patronage of icons and the ritual brutal blinding of Constantine VI, just as he did with Alexios Mosele), one can notice, yet again, the close mirroring of real historical events: the Emperor Constantine VI was captured, blinded and imprisoned on 19 August 797 by the supporters of his mother, Irene.

Obviously the Varangians are introduced in Sadoveanu's novel as an instrument for perpetrating the will of the Byzantine Emperor, under the auspices of the internal religious confrontation of iconoclasts and iconophiles, with the victory of the latter, a struggle that defined spiritual lines much beyond the imperial borders. For this Mihail Sadoveanu could have used any other military unit which did historically act at the time as personal bodyguards of the Emperor, two of which are repeatedly mentioned by the author, even in an enumeration alongside the Varangians at their last appearance: the Maglabites and the Scholarians. Thus, a natural problem presents itself: why the Varangians?

3. The Vlachs

There is a widespread belief, almost a linguistic consensus, that the word "Vlach", an exonym for naming Romanians, seemingly has a Germanic origin. Nevertheless, there are other views. According to two Romanian scholars, Gherghel (1920) and Popa-Lisseanu (1941), Genesios is the author in whose tenth century work *On the Reign of the Emperors* (Book IV) the word "Blachernae" is mentioned for the very first time, when referring to a sixth century church from Constantinople, The Church of the Virgin from Blachernae neighbourhood:

And so the civil officials who carried out the examination also decreed that henceforth the punishment of the accused, even though it was more of a benefit, was to be the following: on the anniversary of the restoration of Orthodoxy, they were to lead the litany procession with lit candles from the Church of the Virgin at Blachernai. This was enforced for many years, indeed for the rest of their lives, and in the congregation held in the Great Church the heterodox had to endure the condemnation of their own detestable apostasy and the celebration of Orthodoxy. (Genesios, 1998, p. 76)

It was not, by far, an obscure church, as one can find out from *Glossary of Terms, Places, and Peoples* at the end of the Australian edition of the English translation of the tome: "Blachernai: The region comprising the northwestern corner of Constantinople. The Church of the Virgin that stood there, a fifth-century basilica, was the most famous of all the churches to her honor in that existed in the City. See R. Janin, EM, pp. 161-171" (Genesios, 1998, p. 121).

Mihail Sadoveanu uses the word "Blachernes"⁴⁹ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 82) in chapter four, the very first chapter of the Byzantium section of his novel. Once in Byzantium the protagonist Kesarion Breb is walking along its streets getting familiar with its most important palpable achievements. There are ten individual constructions or places the author mentions: the Halkis Palace, the Augustaion forum with the equestrian statue of Justinian, the hippodrome, the Hevdomon and the Blachernes (suburbs or neighbourhoods of Constantinople), the great wall built in the days of Emperor Constantine and of Attila, Saint Sophia, the Seven Towers, the Golden Gate and Valen's aqueduct. Six chapters onwards the author resumes the word, rendering a historical account. After having closed the works of the

lângă frunte ca să se sfătuiască. Au dăruit varangilor și maglabiților și șolarilor atâtea sigle câte trebuiau ca dragostea lor pentru Constantin să se împușineze." (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 382)

⁴⁹ Original Romanian text: "Vlaherne" (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 80).

Second Council of Nicaea (otherwise known as the last of the first seven ecumenical councils), restoring the use and veneration of icons, the bishops have one more extra meeting in the capital city of the Empire, so that the Christ-loving Basilisa, Irene the Empress, could attend as well. “The procession reached the Blacherne Magnaura and the holy bishops went up the marble steps...”⁵⁰ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 213). In this case Sadoveanu names the Palace of Blachernae, an imperial residence in the suburb of Blachernae, built around 500 AD and used for protocol in the ninth century, including for the so-called Eighth Session (23 October 787) of the Second Council of Nicaea. Unknown to Sadoveanu in 1933, proved by Erich Lamberz (2008-2016) in his monumental works, this extra-session was a late ninth century forgery exactly so that it could include the Empress Irene and her son Constantine VI. The passage only shows, one more time, exactly how accurate Sadoveanu was with the documentation available at the time of writing the novel, using a great abundance of historical records, down to detail. Sadoveanu mentions Blacherne Palaces one more time within the chapter, with seemingly no particular reason. Kesarion Breb is walking through the city with the aim of paying a visit to some acquaintances: “Farther on there were carefully tended gardens again and in the distance the Blacherne palaces could be seen in an angle of the rampart.”⁵¹ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 231). Three more chapters and we are back at the residence of his acquaintances, Philaret from Amnia, an occasion for the host to name the Blacherne two more times, in the context of his extreme charity to the poor people waiting outside the walls of the palaces: “To the small gate of Blachernes I have sent the slaves”⁵² (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 313); “I have asked permission for them to slink to the gate of the Blachernes.”⁵³ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 313). In chapter fourteen Blacherne appears for the sixth time. Emperor Constantine VI is acting with extreme cruelty against former friends and close relatives, blinding the general Alexius Moseles with hot red iron, blinding his uncle, monk Nikephoros, by gauging his eyes, cutting off the tongues of his other four uncles, monks Cristophoros, Niketas, Antim and Evdokimos (real historical deeds). The deposed mother-Empress Irene is seemingly inconsolable upon such savagery “the invisible bird proclaimed, flying now to the Seven Towers, now to the Blachernes”⁵⁴ (Sadoveanu, 1981, 343). The text could have worked without these occurrences but, at the same time, they are not ostentatious, as they are simply naming an ordinary reality of Byzantium. Thus, it is debatable whether Sadoveanu introduced the six occurrences for a reason. One should keep in mind that Sadoveanu is usually using his textual suggestions unobtrusively.

The two Romanian scholars, Gherghel and Popa-Lisseanu, present a *speculation* that the word “Blach/Vlach” is a Greek-Roman originating word, in the Eastern Roman Empire, where “Blachernae” was already in use as early as the sixth century.

Citing two German editions of the Greek original text (Bonn, 1834; Munchen, 1897), the Romanian scholar Ilie Gherghel reproduces an explanation seemingly offered by Genesisios on the etymology of “Blachernae”, as a “Scythian” duke called “Blach” having been murdered on that spot in the old times. The author of this article was able to trace the existence of the etymological explanation in the 1834 edition, indeed: “[Blachernae a quodam duce Scytharum Blacherno ibi interfecto nominatae:]” (Genesisios, 1834, p. 85) and, at the same time, the inexistence of the etymological explanation in the 1978 de Gruyter edition and in the 1998

⁵⁰ Original Romanian text: “Alaiul a venit la Magnaura Vlahernelor și sfințiile lor au suit (...) treptele de marmură” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 214).

⁵¹ Original Romanian text: “Pe urmă începeau iarăși grădini îngrijite și se zăreau departe, în unghiul zidului cel mare, Vlahernele” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 230).

⁵² Original Romanian text: “La poarta cea mică a Vlahernelor am trimes robi” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 312).

⁵³ Original Romanian text: “-am cerut învoire să-i lase să se strecoare până la poarta Vlahernelor” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 312).

⁵⁴ Original Romanian text: “dădea de veste pasărea nevăzută zburând când la Cele Șapte Turnuri, când la Vlaherne” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 342).

English translation of the chronicle of Genesisios. Why it was ignored in the twentieth century is unexplainable.

In any case, to Ilie Gherghel, after having read the work of Genesisios, the Suda Lexicon, and other Byzantine works mentioning derivatives of the word “Vlach” as having existed in early Middle Ages (Theophanes, *Cronographia*, Malalas, *Cronographia*, both naming a duke called “Vlach”, either Scythian or Hun), the denomination “Blachernae” (=Vlaherne) of both the neighbourhood and of the Imperial Cathedral from Constantinople *may* have originated from the Vlachs (compounded with “ernos”=offspring) that were already present in the proximity of Constantinople, within a colony, as early as the fifth century, having had come from the “Scythian” lands (Gherghel, 1920, p. 7).

Popa-Lisseanu reinforces the argument of the Greek originating exonym twenty-one years later, citing the work of Genesisios in its 1834 Bonn edition, the work of his Romanian predecessor, Ilie Gherghel, and adding more Byzantine historical records of the word and of the people “Vlach”. Notably, the sixth century Byzantine historian Procopius of Caesarea mentions some one hundred slave-settlers in Sinai, in 536, during the reign of Justinian, coming from a country called Llah. (Popa-Lisseanu, 1941, p. 53). Or Cedrenus, another Byzantine Greek historian, which, in the eleventh century, makes mention of Vlacherichini (=Vlachs on the river Richos) in the years 617-619, thus the very first occurrence of the *people* called Vlachs. They are repeatedly waging war against the Greek city Thessaloniki, either forming an alliance with the Slavs or under the ruling of the Avars. The same people are present in the eighth century, interfering in the inner Byzantine religious battles between the Iconoclasts and the Iconodules. Same Cedrenus mentions that in 976 David (brother of Samuil, ruler of the rebelled Bulgarians) was killed in a specific location by the travelling Vlachs. (Popa-Lisseanu, 1941, pp. 53-54).

One step further, the Romanian scholar Ilie Gherghel suggests that the Varangians (Vikings mostly from modern-day Sweden), as traders, settlers and members of the personal guard of the Byzantine Basileus (Emperor) spread the word “Blach/Vlach” to the Slavic and Germanic speaking tribes/people. He starts from the form “Blokumanaland” (=terra Blachorum) which he found in the works of the Icelandic chronicler Snorri Sturlesson, presenting news about a country of the Vlachs.

That this denomination, collected by the author of the *Edda* probably at the mouth of Normand mercenaries from the Byzantine court, reflects much more ancient times, is easy to understand. And that the Northmen came to meet us so soon finds its reasoning in their early penetration toward Constantinople, going round Europe both by the sea and by the rivers Dvina and Dnieper towards the beacon of the European culture in those ages. (our translation, Gherghel, 1920, p. 12)

There are several Scandinavian written records mentioning “Blakumen” or “Blokumenn”, most famous, perhaps, the rune stone from Gotland raised around 1050 by a Varangian couple in the memory of one of their sons, treacherously murdered by these Blakumen while travelling abroad. Several historians identify these people with the Vlachs (see Pintescu, 2011 for a thorough debate), which is historically and geographically plausible. If so, the hypothesis of Ilie Gherghel is thus supported by historical written records of Varangians actually having used the exonym Vlachs.

There is no doubt that contacts between Varangians and Vlachs existed in Middle Ages, in various circumstances and places, sometimes fighting side by side, sometimes fighting against each other, according to shifting historical contexts. In 971, according to Ioannis Scylitzae, the Varangians of Sveinhalð (Sviatoslav), fighting against the Emperor John I

Tzimiskes, had their troupes encircled in the fortress of Durostorum and were able to survive being supplied with grains by the local sedentary population from the left bank of the Danube, presumably the Vlachs. In 1019 Vlachs (“Blokumenn”) from nowadays Moldova fought against the Varangians on the Alta River, not far from Kiev, helping a local leader. And so on.

At the end of presenting these data one *may* come to accredit the syllogism that “Vlach” was a Greek (Byzantine) originating exonym for naming Romanians and that Varangians having travelled to Constantinople met the population and got acquainted to the exonym which they later spread to Slavs and other Germanic people on their never-ending long journeys.

One cannot know if Mihail Sadoveanu was acquainted in 1933 with the linguistic and historical *speculation* presented by Ilie Gherghel in 1920 (and later defended in 1923 and 1927). But it is *possible* for Mihail Sadoveanu to have introduced this character, the Varangians, improbable temporally in 787 in Byzantium, slipping them down in history, precisely because he may have had knowledge (or, at least, intuition) on their responsibility in re-naming as Vlachs the otherwise scarcely documented Romanians of the Middle Ages.

4. The Golden Bough

The most challenging enterprise is to distinguish Sadoveanu’s mastermind for naming his novel *The Golden Bough*. To this day endless attempts ended with vague inferences. It is far easier to identify the incongruities within apparent resemblances, the lack of congeniality within tempting analogies. The ultimate affinity eludes.

The immediate reflex is to turn to James Frazer’s 1890 *The Golden Bough*. If we are to relate to the ancient Latin ritual which most famously is the starting point for the Scotsman’s comparative study, let us quote it:

In this sacred grove there grew a certain tree round which at any time of the day, and probably far into the night, a grim figure might be seen to prowl. In his hand he carried a drawn sword, and he kept peering warily about him as if at every instant he expected to be set upon by an enemy. He was a priest and a murderer; and the man for whom he looked was sooner or later to murder him and hold the priesthood in his stead. Such was the rule of the sanctuary. A candidate for the priesthood could only succeed to office by slaying the priest, and having slain him, he retained office till he was himself slain by a stronger or a craftier. (...) Within the sanctuary at Nemi grew a certain tree of which no branch might be broken. Only a runaway slave was allowed to break off, if he could, one of its boughs. Success in the attempt entitled him to fight the priest in single combat, and if he slew him he reigned in his stead with the title of King of the Wood (*Rex Nemorensis*). According to the public opinion of the ancients the fateful branch was that Golden Bough which, at the Sibyl’s bidding, Aeneas plucked before he essayed the perilous journey to the world of the dead. (Frazer, 1894, p. 9-10)

It was obvious to all honest exegetes there is nothing at all of this bloody petty ritual in Sadoveanu’s novel. The necessity of a vigorous King of the Wood to be killed whilst still “green” in order to make room for another King of the Wood at the plenitude of his physical strength to take his place simply does not exist. On the contrary, the thirty-second Dacian high priest is most venerated while decrepit due to old age and Kesarion Breb will become the thirty-third Deceneus as a result of a complex spiritual initiatory journey, without any need for a murderous confrontation which would only be thoroughly inappropriate. At the end of the novel, we find the old priest still alive, after having served for fifty-three years, secretly whispering to his successor the final words and professions in the silence of the cave.

If we are to turn to the metaphorical symbolism of Frazer’s exposition, the dying and reviving god, the parallelism could be supported to some extent. Repeatedly, perhaps

ostentatiously, Sadoveanu makes reference to resurrection in various ways. In the first chapter the geologist professor Stamatin allegedly encountered the last Dacian magus in the recondite mountain of the Carpathians a day in late March at the vernal equinox a few years back 1926. In the second chapter, year 780, the Zalmoxian prophet is performing the secret ceremony at about the same time: “It was the ancient sign of the initiated, which in the remote valleys where the waters run smoothly the priests of the new law, Jesus’ law, made over the people at the same hour, as they proclaimed the Resurrection”⁵⁵ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 63). In the last chapter, in the year 796, Kesarion Breb leaves his home in the Dacian lands for the last time presumably just before the autumnal equinox, in mid-September as we are carefully informed. What is even more, “there was no returning from the journey he was now undertaking”⁵⁶ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 387). Significantly, he visits the churchyard and the graves of his forbears before his last ascension to the recondite mountain. All along his journey he is facing cold breath, purple-blue sky, fog, storm, sleet, with a burst of sun towards the end. What Sadoveanu is ever so skilfully suggesting throughout the chapter is that Kesarion Breb is preparing for his own death and for his own entombing in the cave. The very last words of the novel leave no room for misinterpretation: “He raised his arms above them, gazing at them with glazed eyes: he knew he was to be the last servant of the recondite mountain”⁵⁷ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 397). One God is dying, and the only resurrection will be the resurrection of a new God; which, to Sadoveanu, is the same, unique and eternal.

Another luring similarity is with Vergil’s *Aeneid*. And this is mostly because the journey Kesarion Breb is undertaking to Byzantium is undoubtedly a descent into the Inferno, the reputed and cultured Romanian essayist Alexandru Paleologu dealing with the issue in his 1978 tome: “*The Golden Bough*, Sadoveanu’s novel, is a *descensus ad inferos*. Evidently, the Byzantium is the Inferno”⁵⁸ (translation ours, Paleologu, 1978, p. 52). This is voiced explicitly by Sadoveanu again and again all along his novel: “rot crawling with maggots lies beneath the light”⁵⁹ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 83); “the dry things of the earth”⁶⁰ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 91); “In the Byzantium of those days putrescent licentiousness spread such a stench (...) Orgies, double-dealing and brothels gnawed at the world like leprosy”⁶¹ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 117); “the demons” of Byzantium: intrigue, greed for silver, injustice, violence, body rotten to the core⁶² (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 143); “as if the imperial phantoms of the palaces – princes without tongue or head, or with hands or legs amputated, or again those distorted by poison – were returning to the place where they had experienced the delights of debauchery and the cold sweat of death”⁶³ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 211); “Corpses and refuse gave off fumes in the side streets; under rickety sheds men’s wounds festered; the servants of the Great Papias drove poor wretches to prison, prodding them with their spear-heads; pious monks were on the look-out for heretics and were prone to bash their heads in with their staffs and roll them into the dust

⁵⁵ Original Romanian text: “Era vechiul semn al inițiaților, pe care, în văile depărtate, unde se alină apele, la același ceas, preoții legii celei nouă, a lui Isus, îl făceau asupra poporului, vestind Învierea” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 62).

⁵⁶ Original Romanian text: “Se ducea într-o călătorie fără întoarcere” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 386).

⁵⁷ Original Romanian text: “El ridică asupra or brațele, privindu-i cu ochi înghețați și știind că va fi cel din urmă slujitor al muntelui ascuns” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 396).

⁵⁸ Original text: “*Creanga de aur*, romanul lui Sadoveanu, este un *descensus ad inferos*. Evident, Bizațul e Infernul” (Paleologu, 1978, p. 52).

⁵⁹ Original Romanian text: “sub lumină viermiesc putreziciunile” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 82).

⁶⁰ Original Romanian text: “uscăciunile pământului” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 90).

⁶¹ Original Romanian text: “În acea lume a Bizațului hoitul desfrânării împrăștia asemenea miasmă (...) Orgiile, vicleniile și lupanarele rodeau lumea ca o lepră” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 116).

⁶² Original Romanian text: “demonii” Bizațului: zavistie, lăcomiei de argint, nedreptății, silei, putreziciunii trupești (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 142).

⁶³ Original Romanian text: “ca și cum fantomele împărătești ale acelor palate, kezarii fără limbi, ori fără capete, ori schilavi de picioare și mâini, ori cei răsuciți de venin, se înturnau la locul deliciilor desfrâului și sudorilor morții” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 210).

on the edge of the vacant lots for the sake of the true faith and in the name of Christ, the Lord of mercy;”⁶⁴ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 223); “For the fiends of greed, envy and falsehood lord it”⁶⁵ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 253); “The indigent of Byzantium are a numberless host”⁶⁶ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 311); “It was uphill work making one’s way through that beggarly mob”⁶⁷ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 357) Leaving room for no misinterpretation, the title of chapter eleven goes like this: “*Under the resplendent Byzantine purple, things none too sweet-smelling become apparent*”⁶⁸ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 249).

Let us follow exactly how Vergil is resorting to the golden bough in his sixth book of the epic poem.

Seven years after the fall of Troy and wanderings in the Mediterranean, Aeneas finally reaches Italian shores and his first visit is to the oracle Sybil of Cumae. Asking her about the entrance to the underworld Aeneas is informed he has to prove he was chosen by the gods and worthy for such a dangerous journey, for very few people did manage both to enter and to return. This being said, Aeneas performs a proper burial for a recently deceased soldier, of whose death he was otherwise unaware (ritualistically a life tribute is paid), and what comes next is much more challenging and needed: acquiring a protective talisman. Sibyl tells Aeneas:

A certain tree
Hides in obscurest shade a golden bough,
Of pliant stems and many a leaf of gold,
Sacred to Proserpine, infernal Queen.
Far in the grove it hides; in sunless vale
Deep shadows keep it in captivity.
No pilgrim to that underworld can pass
But he who plucks this burgeoned, leafy gold;
For this hath beauteous Proserpine ordained
Her chosen gift to be. Whene’er it is culled,
A branch out-leafing in like golden gleam,
A second wonder-stem, fails not to spring.
Therefore go seek it with uplifted eyes! (Vergil. A. 6. 140-152)

Once again, we are tempted to acknowledge there is very little similarity between the two. One might notice the identical seven years Mediterranean periplus before reaching the shores of Italy, respectively Byzantium; even so, for Kesarion Breb the seven years were more of a spiritual intermission in Egypt, of which almost nothing is divulged. However, if the favoured premise would be that Sadoveanu did indeed start from or relate to Vergil’s *Aeneid*, one may distinguish other parallelisms. Thus, for the oracle Sybil of Cumae a perspicacious – and biased – reading can identify a counterpart in Holy Father Plato, the pious prior of Sakkoudion monastery. “I know you have the gift to see in your waking dreams the Lady to whom we all bow at every moment of our lives”⁶⁹ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 103) informs us the Empress Irene, equivalent to Proserpine herself. She tells Plato, exactly as Proserpine must

⁶⁴ Original Romanian text: “În uliți lăaturalnice fumegau leșuri și gunoaie; sub șandramale se coceau leprele; slujitorii marelui papias mânau cu boldurile sulțiilor oameni sârmani spre închisori; curioși monahi umblau ca să descopere iritici și binevoiau a-i bate cu toiegele în cap, rostogolindu-i în pulbere la marginea medeanurilor, pentru credința cea adevărată și în numele lui Isus, Domnul milei.” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 222)

⁶⁵ Original Romanian text: “stau stăpâni demonii lăcomiei, ai zavistiei, ai minciunii” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 252).

⁶⁶ Original Romanian text: “sărăcimea Bizanțului e o oaste fără număr” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 310).

⁶⁷ Original Romanian text: “Prin atâta calicime era greu de răzbit” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 356).

⁶⁸ Original Romanian text: “Sub strălucirea purperei bizantine se vădesc lucruri nu tocmai bine mirositoare” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 248).

⁶⁹ Original Romanian text: “Știu că ai darul de a vedea, în vis treaz, pe Aceea căreia toți ne închinăm în toate clipele vieții noastre” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 102).

have told Sybil of Cumae, on a chosen gift needed in the Inferno: a wife for Constantine VI from among the virgins of the Empire, so that that future Emperor would amend his wicked ways. “Was father Plato too bold to hope for his strange friend’s advice and support for the common good? ‘Noble sir’, Breb answered, ‘our good words and deeds will yield fruitful a hundredfold at a time when our bodies are nothing but dust. I will consequently give support in everything you bid me do.’”⁷⁰ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 117). The oracle has found its venturesome hero once more.

In Virgil’s *Aeneid* the hero does find the golden bough with the help of a pair of doves:

But, sad at heart with many a doubt and care,
O’erlooks the forest wide; then prays aloud :
“O, that the Golden Bough from this vast grove
Might o’er me shine! For, O Aeolides,
The oracle foretold thy fate, too well!”
Scarce had he spoken, when a pair of doves
Before his very eyes flew down from heaven
To the green turf below; the prince of Troy
Knew them his mother’s birds, and joyful cried,
“O, guide me on, whatever path there be!
In airy travel through the woodland fly,
To where yon rare branch shades the blessed ground.
Fail thou not me, in this my doubtful hour,
O heavenly mother!” So saying, his steps lie stayed,
Close watching whither they should signal give;
The lightly-feeding doves flit on and on,
Ever in easy ken of following eyes,
Till over foul Avernus’ sulphurous throat
Swiftly they lift them through the liquid air,
In silent flight, and find a wished-for rest
On a twy-natured tree, where through green boughs
Flames forth the glowing gold’s contrasted hue.
As in the wintry woodland bare and chill,
Fresh-budded shines the clinging mistletoe,
Whose seed is never from the parent tree
O’er whose round limbs its tawny tendrils twine,—
So shone th’ out-leafing gold within the shade
Of dark holm-oak, and so its tinsel-bract
Rustled in each light breeze. Aeneas grasped
The lingering bough, broke it in eager haste,
And bore it straightway to the Sibyl’s shrine. (Vergil. A. 6. 185-211)

Once Kesarion Breb reaches the destination of his journey as set by Bishop Plato, namely the house of an old friend, Philaret from Amnia (several trials or tests, intellectual and physical, having been successfully surpassed during the journey), the protagonist does find the golden bough in the figure of a sixteen-year old innocent granddaughter, Maria: “«O vision of eternal loveliness!» sighed Kesarion from the depths of his being.”⁷¹ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p.

⁷⁰ Original Romanian text: “Îndrăzneala părintelui Platon fi-va prea mare, nădăduind de la prietenul său străin sfat și sprijin întru cele bune? - O, domnul meu, răspuse Breb, vorbele și faptele noastre bune vor da rod însutit, atunci când trupul nostru nu va mai fi decât pulbere. Îți voi da deci sprijin la tot ce-mi vei porunci” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 116).

⁷¹ Original Romanian text: “«O! vedenie a frumuseții eterne», suspină Kesarion în adâncul ființei sale” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 190).

191). In order to make sure she is the one indeed, a final test is passed: “he drew a small red skin slipper on the upper of which a white heron about to take wing, its crest tilted to one side, was embroidered in silver thread”⁷² (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 191). It fits on her foot. Coincidence (or not), the winged sign is present yet again to make sure the golden bough is indeed found, lingering, ready to be plucked.

The third time the golden bough appears in Vergil’s poem is when Sybil resorts to it to convince the Ferryman, Charon, to allow Aeneas to go further into the Underworld, as Charon was very selective on which souls to make the journey across.

Briefly th’ Amphrysian priestess made reply:
“Not ours, such guile: Fear not! This warrior’s arms
Are innocent. Let Cerberus from his cave
Bay ceaselessly, the bloodless shades to scare;
Let Proserpine immaculately keep
The house and honor of her kinsman King.
Trojan Aeneas, famed for faithful prayer
And victory in arms, descends to seek
His father in this gloomy deep of death.
If loyal goodness move not such as thee,
This branch at least” (she drew it from her breast)
“Thou knowest well.”
Then cooled his wrathful heart;
With silent lips he looked and wondering eyes
Upon that fateful, venerable wand,
Seen only once an age. Shoreward he turned,
And pushed their way his boat of leaden hue. (Vergil. A. 6. 400-417)

Continuing the mirroring, Kesarion does take Maria to Plato first and all of them are facing the guardian of the palace, the Grand Chamberlain Stavrikios, an eunuch whose depiction can act as a parallel to Charon: “dressed in heavy brocade, his pointed nose and keen eyes riveted on that womanly youthfulness”⁷³ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 203); “he bears the imprint of the fox upon his face”⁷⁴ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 255). His rod decides which of the twenty candidates will be granted access to the Palace as future bride-princess. Maria makes herself conspicuous “for she looked like a reflection of the divine splendour of the sunset”⁷⁵ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 203). Advised by Plato, Stavrikios opens the door to the Inferno to the splendid virgin, though she is somehow reluctant: “He struck the mosaic floor with his staff three times and stopped beside her”⁷⁶ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 207). The sign of the cross upon her is not a blessing, but a sentence to death.

The last occurrence of the golden bough in the Latin poem is when Aeneas finally reaches Pluto’s palace and places it on the arch door, a final tribute or rite before stepping into the Elysian Fields:

So spoke Apollo’s aged prophetess.
“Now up and on!” she cried. “Thy task fulfil!

⁷² Original Romanian text: “o încălțare mică de piele roșie, pe fața căreia era cusut cu fir de argint un stârc alb luându-și zborul și învăluindu-și moțul” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 190).

⁷³ Original Romanian text: “în straiul lui greu de brocart ațintindu-și nasul ascuțit și privirile agere înspre acea tinerețe femeiască” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 202).

⁷⁴ Original Romanian text: “are pe obraz pecetea vulpei” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 254).

⁷⁵ Original Romanian text: “văzând asupra ei strălucirea dumnezeiască a asfințitului” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 202).

⁷⁶ Original Romanian text: “Bătu de trei ori cu toiagul în mozaic, oprindu-se lângă ea” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 206).

We must make speed. Behold yon arching doors
Yon walls in furnace of the Cyclops forged!
'T is there we are commanded to lay down
Th' appointed offering." So, side by side,
Swift through the intervening dark they strode,
And, drawing near the portal-arch, made pause.
Aeneas, taking station at the door,
Pure, lustral waters o'er his body threw,
And hung for garland there the Golden Bough.
Now, every rite fulfilled, and tribute due
Paid to the sovereign power of Proserpine,
At last within a land delectable
Their journey lay. (Vergil. A. 6. 628-640)

Requested by Irene (Proserpine), chosen by Plato (Sybil of Cumae), handpicked by Kesarion (Aeneas), accepted by Stavrikios (Charon), Maria fulfils her role to ever last within the confines of the Byzantine Imperial Palace, in what could arguably be looked upon as a twentieth century fabrication of Vergil's *Aeneid*; to a different outcome, though.

No less than five times the author makes it explicit Maria is an offering, a sacrifice turned into a prey, a victim, a martyr. Maria: "Among the lustrous marbles and the cold gold ornaments she felt a stranger removed from her vey self, like an offering in the sad ancient tales"⁷⁷ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 221); her mother: "On the night we first entered the imperial residence this poor child of ours had a premonition that she was to be sacrificed"⁷⁸ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 243); Kesarion to Plato: "the priceless gem you had made over to Byzantium had fallen near a putrefied corpse"⁷⁹ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 255); Kesarion to Stavrikios: "Bishop Plato has given Byzantium a gem of purity through the inspiration of a holy spirit"⁸⁰ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 257); Maria to her husband, the Emperor Constantine VI: "Accept me like a sacrifice and do not reject me"⁸¹ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 271). Maria is the life tribute paid to enter the Underworld, something Kesarion acknowledges tardily with remorse: "I was the messenger who brought over a taintless flower and threw her into a polluted vortex"⁸² (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 355).

The golden bough might have worked for Aeneas, securing his trip to the green Elysian Fields, the happiest of all places, where he finally met the phantom of his father which prophesized to him the great line of descendants and their great deeds, virtually a concise history of the future Roman Empire. There is nothing like that in Kesarion's trip to the Inferno, on the contrary, the entire periplus is a monumental failure, which poses an inconvenient posture on the future Eastern Roman Empire, the Byzantium could provide to Kesarion's kin.

⁷⁷ Original Romanian text: "Între acele marmuri lucii, între acele aururi reci, se simțea străină și depărtată de sine însăși, ca o jertfă din vechi și întristate povești" (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 220).

⁷⁸ Original Romanian text: "Această biată copilă a noastră a avut, din noaptea întâia când am intrat în sălașul împărătesc, o vestire cum că e o jertfă" (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 242).

⁷⁹ Original Romanian text: "acel odor de preț pe care l-ai închinat domnia ta Bizanțului a căzut lângă un leș putred" (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 254).

⁸⁰ Original Romanian text: "Părintele episcop Platon a dăruit Bizanțului un giuvaer al curăției, prin insuflarea unui duh sfânt" (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 256).

⁸¹ Original Romanian text: "Primește ființa mea ca pe o jertfă și nu mă respinge" (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 270).

⁸² Original Romanian text: "eu am fost solul care am adus o floare curată și am aruncat-o într-o volbură prihănită" (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 354).

The golden bough in Vergil's *Aeneid* is *not* identified with mistletoe, something that is clear both in the original Latin text⁸³ and in Dryden's 1697 English translation⁸⁴, for example. To Sadoveanu, the Romanian 1896 translation by George Coșbuc was available, which makes the difference between the golden bough and the mistletoe clear just as well⁸⁵. Thus, no comparative reading with *The Myth of Balder* is seasonable, despite alluring.

Even if Sadoveanu had knowledge about Frazer's golden bough and / or about Vergil's golden bough it is most likely he did *not* relate essentially to them. Not first and foremost. Throughout the novel, Kesarion Breb, the last Dacian high-priest of Zalmoxis, is most uncommonly, oddly referred to as the Egyptian, even by his own people, after he returns to Dacia. Sadoveanu is making a point out of his defining Egyptian spiritual initiation, in so many various ways, up to the point where Kesarion Breb lives in Byzantium in the Egyptian neighbourhood, in a building complex that reproduces the outlines of his recent distinctive experience:

His Holiness Plato found himself in a rotunda where a faint light trickled from above through a roof of green glass. On the walls there were hieroglyphs and paintings. Some of them he knew as he had learnt them in his time. Above a low door between two slender columns he recognized God's eye set between rays of light within the holy letter named Delta.⁸⁶ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 349)

Back home in Dacia, in September 796, while on his final journey towards the recondite mountain to become the last Zalmoxian Deceneus, not only is he referred to as the Egyptian, but a seemingly ordinary conversation is initiated by the servant Constantin: "As I see, even these cranes we hear up above are returning to their own place in Egypt"⁸⁷ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 391). For a proper decoding of the meaning of the golden bough one has to sail back to Egypt⁸⁸.

Sadoveanu is uttering "the golden bough" a single time in his novel, at the very end of chapter fifteen, when virtually all was said and done. This is in the context when Kesarion's repressed love for Maria can finally be acknowledged, as it had been mastered. "We will part now. And this delusion we call our body will also disintegrate. But what is between us now, having been cleared in fire, is a golden bough which will glow within us outside the confines of time."⁸⁹ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 375). At the very end of the first chapter the unknown narrator,

⁸³ "discolor unde auri per ramos aura refulsit. / Quale solet silvis brumali frigore viscum / fronde virere nova, quod non sua seminat arbor, / et croceo fetu teretis circumdare truncos, / talis erat species auri frondentis opaca / ilice, sic leni crepitabat brattea vento." (Vergilius, 1900, A. 6. 204-209)

<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0055%3Abook%3D6%3Acard%3D183>

⁸⁴ "They wing'd their flight aloft; then, stooping low, / Perch'd on the double tree that bears the golden bough. / Thro' the green leafs the glitt'ring shadows glow; / As, on the sacred oak, the wintry mistletoe," (Virgil, 1909) <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/dryden-the-aeneid-dryden-trans>

⁸⁵ "Și pe doritul copac se lasă deodată-amândouă, / Unde prin crengi cenușii străluce mlădița de aur. / Astfel precum, în păduri, prin gerul iernatic e văscul / Verde la frunze pe care n-ar vrea să le aibă copacul, / Și cu roșcatul său rod mlădițele zvelte le-ncinge / Tot de-o făptură era, pe stejarul cel plin de-ntunec, / Aurul verde și-n vânt dau frunzele sunet de-aur." (Vergilius, 1980, p. 196, A. 6. 203-209)

⁸⁶ Original Romanian text: "preasfințitul Platon găsi un loc rotund unde curgea o lumină slabă de deasupra, prin acoperișul de sticlă verde. Pe ziduri erau hieroglife și zugrăveli. Unele îi erau cunoscute, din învățăturile aceluia timp. Cunosc, deasupra unei uși scunde, între două colonne subțiri, ochiul lui Dumnezeu, între raze și în litera sfântă numită Deltha." (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 348)

⁸⁷ Original Romanian text: "Precât văd, și cocoarele acelea care s-aud pe sus se întorc în locul lor, la țara Egiptului" (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 390).

⁸⁸ A future essay shall deal with a comparative reading between Mihail Sadoveanu's *The Golden Bough* and ancient or pre-historical travels to the Other Side, the Underworld, the World of Darkness, such as those of the Egyptian Ra, the Sumerian Enki, and the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh; boats and navigators are of particular interest.

⁸⁹ Original Romanian text: "Iată, ne vom despărți. Se va desface și amăgirea care se numește trup. Dar ceea ce e între noi acum, lămurit în foc, e o creangă de aur care va luci în sine, în afară de timp" (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 374).

an apprentice of the geologist professor Stamatin, has warned us that the manuscript written by the defunct teacher and destined to his disciple (i. e. *The Golden Bough*) “is essentially a love story”⁹⁰ (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 51), a different kind of love.

Conclusions

Mihail Sadoveanu had been initiated into freemasonry in January 1927 and already in 1929 he was an active member of the thirty-three degree of Supreme Council of 33rd and Last Degree of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Romania; the same year he was also Master Mason of the Grand Masonic Lodge of Romania (MLNR). As of 1930 he started a complicated process of unifying all Masonic Lodges from Romania, being Grand Federal Master of United Romanian Freemasonry between 1934 and 1937. Thus, Mihail Sadoveanu had a tremendous masonry experience and status at the moment when he wrote *The Golden Bough*, published in 1933. Echoes of an initiatory wisdom, esoteric, hermetic, of likely Masonic source are manifested (though not entirely comprehensible, of course) in the first chapter of the book, as a guide mark. There the voice belongs to a narrator character, the teacher, whereas the remainder of the doctrine is being concealed within the pages of the novel.

We cogitate upon Mihail Sadoveanu having had cognizance (or at least private belief/conviction), following a tradition of prestigious intellectuals such as Mihai Eminescu, Bogdan Petriceicu Hașdeu, Vasile Pârvan, on the Dacian ethnic origin of the Romanian people; and, in *The Golden Bough* he voiced this awareness in an artistic manner, presenting an access pattern, an initiation for the reader, for the well trained, able and eager neophyte. After all, “the very morphology of this myth, of the Golden Age, speculates on the man’s capacity to idealize the past, to imagine the future and to think little of the present.”⁹¹ (Ivancu, 2016, p. 175 - our translation). Mihail Sadoveanu exhibits (or insinuates) by artistic means the historical falsification enforced, in his view, on the origin of the Romanian people. For this he resorts to numerous ways of expressing: the ritual suggestion in the beginning, the detail unveiling the Eastern Roman Empire as a socio-spiritual inferno (metaphysical when all is told), feigned, pretended, hollow, false, unredeeming in its essence. It was certainly so for the initiated Dacian Deceneus Kesarion Breb, *the thirty-third and the last*, whose name should be properly read by now as Mason King. An Empire which, for all that, was successful in imposing the ethnic re-denomination of the people into Vlach as well as a new faith, Christianity, suppressing an ancestral consciousness.

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⁹⁰ Original Romanian text: “e, în definitiv, o poveste de dragoste” (Sadoveanu, 1981, p. 50).

⁹¹ Original Romanian text: “Însăși morfologia acestui mit al Vârstei de Aur mizează pe capacitatea omului de a idealiza trecutul, de a imagina viitorul și de a desconsidera prezentul.” (Ivancu, 2016, p. 175)

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