The church of the Dragomirna monastery, erected in 1609 by the scholarly metropolitan bishop Anastase Crimca, and the «Trei Ierarhi» church in Jassy erected in 1639 by the prince Vasile Lupu are undoubtedly amongst the most representative works of art which mark the beginning of late Renaissance, happily linked with the traditional Romanian architecture and with oriental decorative art, in the early 17th century in Moldavian art.

Between these two landmarks of Moldavian culture and architecture, the Renaissance fine arts were also to flourish in the Moldavian cultural and artistic heritage springing from the same source: the west, the Romanian land (the myoritic space), the Orient. An example of excellent workmanship was a gold medallion, the unique piece known under the name of Nikoara’s thaler. Nikoara was a Minister of Justice (great Vornik) in Northern Moldavia (the eastern part of Romania, between the Carpathian Mountains up to the Dniester river, the Black Sea and the Danube Delta) during the reign of Radu Mihnea (1616-1619 and 1623-1626), and a Minister of War (hatman) during the reign of his brother-in-law Miron Barnovski-Moghila (1626-1629 and 1633).

The odyssey of this Romanian medallion began at the foot of the Moldavian Carpathians, then went on across Europe, Constantinople, Nürnberg and then St. Petersburg during the reign of Czar Peter the Great, where it has remained until today. In the last two and a half centuries, as it is natural, the thaler was the object of more or less incomplete studies in the Russian and Soviet historical and numismatic literature, and to a lower degree in the Romanian one.

The medallion is hand-engraved in a piece of cast gold, with a diameter of 48.5 mm and a weight of 64.0348 grams. On the obverse there is the effigy of St. Nicholas in bishop’s clothes and around it
Jesus Christ and the Holy Virgin, with adequate inscriptions. On the reverse there is an inscription in Slavonic which gave rise to much controversy between specialists of Slavonic language and historians, when they tried to decipher it.

Fig. 1. The Romanian medallion-thaler of the Minister of Justice (Great Voron) Nikoara in Northern-Moldavia. 1616-1626. Gold.

The pictures of this medallion come from the following sources. Figure 1 is the drawing made by baron S. de Chaudoir, helped by Krug, member of the St. Petersburg Imperial Academy of Sciences, where the piece was kept in the collection. The drawing was published in 1836-1837 (1). Figure 2 is the drawing at page 69 in a coin-album found in the Saltikov-Sedrin public library in Leningrad (18, Sadovaia Street) whose duplicate, with explanations in Russian and German, is also found in the numismatic department library of the Hermitage museum in Leningrad (2). This drawing was made when the piece was in count I.V. Brius's collection (1670-1735), a Russian general and field-marshal, a renowned statesman and scientist, one of the closest advisers of Czar Peter the Great, during his travels across the Netherlands as well as in Petersburg. According to his will, part of the rich collections of manuscripts, tools, coins, medals and other rare pieces collected by I.V. Brius, were


(2) I. G. Spasskii, Olcherki po istorii russkoi numizmatiki, in Trudy gosudarstvennogo istoricheskogo muzeja, XXV/1, Moscow, 1955, p. 34-108.
transferred to the collections of the Imperial Academy of Sciences (3).

Fig. 2. Page 69 of the album in the Saltikov-Schedrin public Library (Leningrad).

The notes in the album (fig. 2) seem to be the first attempts to identify the piece. At the top of the page is written «Old gold cast medal. Received from Nürnberg, Germany, by the field marshal and Knight I.V. Brius 1723, with a weight of 18 tchervonets (i.e. 61.2 grams). Struck in the year 7001, that is 1493 A.D., for the great prince Ivan Vasilievitch, who gave it to his daughter Theodosia.» Under the drawing on the left, an attempt was made to transcribe cursively the Slavonic inscription on the reverse of the medal (which is difficult to translate, but the writer insists that the Great Vornik Nikolai and his wife Theodosia lived in 7001, that is 1493 A.D.); then follows a note stating that the medal from field marshal I.V. Brius's cabinet has a Turkish control mark, thus concluding that it passed through Constantinople, finally there follows a summary from the text of a Russian chronicle, specifying that «A lady by the name of Theodosia was mentioned in the chronicle of Var-laam Palitzin, as being great prince's Ivan Vasilievitch's daughter, married to Basil Danilovitch, prince of Holm, and that she lived to

(3) Bol'shaja Sovetska'ja Entsiklopedi'ja, VI/2, Moskva, 1951, p. 190-191.
a venerable age». I. G. Spasskiī, the well-known Soviet numismatist, published in 1955 a study (4) in which he reminded in short of the historians A. V. Oreshtnikov, A. A. Kunik, N. I. Petrov, who at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th convincingly proved that this Thaler was part of Romanian culture and that it could not be attributed to the period of Czar Ivan III; he also emphasizes the merit of I. I. Reichels, Russian historian and collector from Petersburg, who only in 1840 doubted that the piece was Russian and made the assumption that it was part of the Southern Slavs' culture.

Concluding that it was of no consequence if research carried out in Russia wrongly attributed the piece to Russian history, the author I. G. Spasskiī in 1955 presented in extenso this monument of Romanian medieval art in the voluminous paper entitled: « Attempts regarding the history of Russian numismatics » (5), appending the photograph from picture 2 with the confused enough subtitle: Wallachian Thaler.

Baron S. de Chaudoir, in a book published in 1836-1837 in St. Petersburg and Paris (6) on pages 113-114, part A, chapter 5, describes the medal in the same way as the anonymous researcher who wrote the notes to fig. 2, bringing a few different elements namely that he read the year 7005 (i.e. 1497 A.D.) and that the piece weighed 15 zolotniks and 1 dole (i.e. 64.0348 grams).

The Romanian historical publications took part in this dispute only in 1883, when they gave an account on the debate on April 19, 1882 in the Historical and philological department of Sciences in St. Petersburg with the subject « On the Moldavian origin of the so-called golden Thaler of the Russian prince Holmski ». The report was delivered by A. A. Kunik, member of the Russian Academy, assisted by the Romanian historian P. A. Sîrcu, which was also taking part in that scientific meeting (7). Pointing out that Chaudoir had deciphered the inscription on the reverse both incompletely

(4) I. G. Spasskiī, Otcherki po istorii russkoi numizmatiki, in Trudy gosudarstvennogo istoricheskogo muzeja, XXV/1, Moscow, 1955 p. 34-108.
(5) Otcherki po istorii russkoi numizmatiki.
(7) Revista pentru Istorie, Arheologie și Filologie, I/1 Bucharest, 1883, p. 243-246.
and wrongly, A. A. Kunik deciphered it in the following way (transcribed by me with Latin characters):

+ NIKORE VEL DVORNIK GORNEI
   ZEMLE STVORI EDIN TA-
   LER ZLAT Ė SE LANTZ ZLAT
   I PODAROVA KNEGINIA
   SVOA TODOSIA:

that is in English «Nikoara, the great Vornik (Minister of Justice) of the mountainous country had a golden Thaler made with a golden chain and gave it to his Lady Theodosia». Further on, the two historians A.A. Kunik and P.A. Sîrcu gave a few more detailed explanations. Thus: Nikoara is the name used in Moldavia, instead of Nicolae (Nicholas) and, we add, that this explains the effigy of St. Nicholas i.e. Sf. Nicolae, on the obverse of the medal-coin; Vel is the abbreviated form for Velikij (slavonic word meaning great); Gornaja Zemlija, that is the mountainous country, was the name of the Northern part of the Romanian principality Moldavia; Knegina, meaning the prince's wife, was a phrase also used in Moldavia, though rarely, only by the aristocrats. Later on, in 1921, Constantin Moisil, the distinguished Romanian numismatist, carried on this controversy without bringing any new elements (8).

As regard the initiators of this issue, the Moldo-Romanian high official Nikoara (or Nikoritsa, a diminutive) and his wife Theodosia, are the founders of the Nikoritsa church on the Tatarasi hill in Jassy (Romania), with the patron saint of St. John-the-New, built of stone and brick in 1627, in a glade, where tradition tells that the procession with St. John's relics stopped on its way from Cetatea Alba (in the Dniester Delta) to Suceava (in Bukovina).

Nowadays the church is at nr. 1, Nikoritsa Street. On the inscription on the altar (Sanctuary) of Nikoritsa church, transcribed in Latin characters later on, the founders are thus mentioned: Prince Miron Barnovski and his lady Elisabeth, prince Constantine and his Lady Catherine, Nikoara the Minister of War (hatman), Theodosia, and others, about 50 names follow.

The Moldavian nobleman Nikoara (or Nikoritsa) is mentioned in many documents and chronicles of the time as holding various high positions. Thus, the chronicler Miron Costin mentioned that Nikoritsa, the provost marshal (armash) took part in the battle at Cornul lui Sas, on the river Prut, in 1612, together with Stephen Tomsa (9) and between 1629-1633, under the name Nikoritsa or Nekoritsa, the Minister of War (hatman), he accompanied prince Miron Barnovski-Moghila in his exile to Poland. During the reign of Alexandru the Young (Coconul), Nikoara tried to come back to Moldavia, passing through Toporăuți. During Miron Barnovski’s reign he held the high position of Minister of War in Moldavia. On the documents (10) we find him constantly mentioned between 1617-1624 during the reign of Radu Vodă-Mihnea (1616-1619; 1623-1626), under the title Nicoara, Northern Moldavia’s Minister of Justice. Together with other high officials, he was a witness to the signing of some charter

(9) Miron Costin, Opere, Bucharest, 1958, p. 60, 95.
at the court in Jassy, as it was recorded: "I, voivode Radu and my beloved son voivode Alexander and our noblemen, Dumitru Jora ... through his loyalty PANAMA NIKOARA VELIKOGO DVORNIKA GORNEI ZEMI ... (transcribed by me with Latin characters), that is in English: nobleman NIKOARA, northern Moldavia's Minister of Justice (great vornik) ...

At the Romanian Academy we can see another original document in Slavonic (Seals, no. 285) with Moldavia's seal in which prince Miron Barnovski-Moghila renews the donations made by the hatman Nikoara and by his wife to their church Nikoritsa, which begins thus:

« 7137 (1629) April 28 Jassy »
Prince Miron Moghila Barnovschi voivode renews to the monastery St. John-the-New in Tatarasi, on the outskirts of Jassy, dedicated to Jerusalem, several villages, parts of villages, mills, ponds, gipsy bondsmen, presented by Nikoara, the Minister of Justice, and by Theodosia, his wife. »

In this charter we find again the name cneaghina (for wife, a name which we find again on the thaler), this:

« To our faithful and honest nobleman Nicoara, hatman and párca­lab (chief magistrate) of Suceava we have bestowed on him and his cneaghina, Theodosia, their rightful donation ».

According to this document, as well as others which followed, one can see how boundless estates and other possessions situated all over Moldavia, from the region of Hotin as far as Galatz, were donated to the church of Nicoritsa and became a source of income for the church administration in Jerusalem, until 1864, when they were secularized by the prince A. I. Cuza of Romania, principally for the peasants.

As regards the use of Slavonic on Nicoara's Thaler, as well as on other Romanian medieval official documents in Moldavia and Valachia and Dobrudja, we should mention that only between 1653-1692 the replacement of the Slavonic by Romanian was beginning in offices, in deeds and in petitions, and that the period when Slavonic was used in Romanian writing (but not in speech) in the Romanian principalities North of the Danube, respectively when Latin was used in the writing and in the church (but also, not in speech) in Transylvania and Banat belongs to our own history, and did not change the Dacian-Roman character of the people. The documents quoted that the Romanian golden Thaler was probably struck during the reign of Rady Vodă Mihnea, that is 1616-1626, in my opinion.
The name of thaler was given to large silver coin, artistically wrought, which were struck for the first time by Archduke Sigismund of Tyrol, then in Romania in 1518. The Joachimsthaler of Bohemia had a weight of 26.39 grams silver (11). Between 1493-1495 and until the beginning of the 17th century, the Thaler was not known as a coin in the principalities of the Eastern Slavs or Southern Slavs. That is the reason why in 1840, I. I. Reichel was of the opinion that Nicoara’s medal-coin could not be attributed to the princes mentioned by Chaudoir in 1836-37 or by the anonymous chronicler who described the thaler which was in field-marshal I. V. Brius’s coin collection.

In the Romanian principalities, the thalers were struck and widely used in Transylvania, beginning with the 16th century, while in Moldavia, prince Despot Vodă (1561-1563) struck the first Moldavian silver thalers (12), in 1562 and 1565, taking his inspiration from the coin-striking technology of Prussia, where he travelled before becoming Moldavia’s ruler (13). In the period when Nicoara’s golden medal-coin, weighing 64 grams, was struck in Moldavia, thalers were made only of silver in Transylvania, according the European practice; the thalers struck for ex. by the prince of Transylvania Gabriel Bethlen (1613-1629), therefore contemporary with Nicoara, weighed 28.60 grams silver.

A very important fact emerges, namely that the intrinsic value of Nicoara’s medal-thaler represented 18 golden Transylvanian ducats of the same period. Therefore the name of thaler inscribed on this controversial piece was wrong, and should be considered in the sense of a valuable piece, of a valuable gift given to his wife on a special occasion in family life or official position. However, the piece was introduced in the history of numismatics, nolens-volens, from the 18th century up to the 20th, with the inscribed name thaler.

The medallion we studied represents a witness to the skill of Moldavian hand engravers in working precious metals (14).

(11) V. V. Zvarițch, Numizmatitcheski Slovnik, Lvov, 1972, p. 122.
(14) Adolf Resch, Siebenbürgische Münzen und Medaillen, Sibiu, 1901, p. 90.
The hand engraving of effigies and inscriptions, as well as parallel lines and punctiform ornaments which was performed with regularity and great delicacy on both sides of the medallion-coin, is shown in fig. 1 and 2. It is doubtless that the work was done by artisans at the Moldavian monasteries of Neamț (15) or perhaps Voronets or Humor. Even today the engraved book-covers and religious objects arouse the admiration of art lovers visiting Moldavian museums, as well as the British Museum, in London.

A letter dated Leningrad, March 13, 1975, brings the latest information about the odyssey of Nicoara’s Romanian thaler. In 1930 the collections of the former Russian Imperial Academy of Sciences were taken over by the numismatic department of the Hermitage museum in Leningrad (16). Probably, this unique monument of the Romanian art in late Renaissance, in gold, having a particular value for the culture of the Romanian people, made by anonymous engravers of Northern Moldavia, is kept in the museum fund, a treasure in actual fact inaccessible to the foreign specialists, or to the public at large.

It is not without interest to make a few retrospective remarks, about the high officials economic conditions prevailing at the beginning of the 17th century in the Romanian principalities.

From the documents of the period we find out that Nicoara the provost marshal took part in the battle of Cornul lui Sas, after which the prince had is enemy noblemen caught and executed and their estates confiscated. The provost marshal’s (armash’s) main income was formed by the tax called in Moldavia «ciubote» (boots), similar to that which used to exist in the countries of Western Europe, a tax which was paid by a citizen punished by the prince when the offence required the presence of the provost marshal, who went on foot to the spot when the punishment was inflicted. As minister of Justice (great vornik), Nicoara supervised the prince’s court, having the right to administer justice to its whole staff. The circuit of the great vornik extended over the whole country. He

(16) I. G. Spasskiĭ, Correspondence to a scientist in Kishinda, V. P. Coroban, 13 March 1975. Since June 1940 the former Romanian province of Bessarabia and the northern-half of Bukovina, as well as Snake-Island in front of the Danube Delta, are annexed to the USSR.
also had the right to pass sentence of death (17). During the prince’s absence, the great vornik commanded the army also getting the position of Minister of war (hatman). It is easy to understand that in such conditions, the income of the provost marshal (armash), these great vornik, then hatman, Nicoara, allowed him, at probably short intervals of time, to have this 64 grams golden thaler struck which has remained an unique monument of Renaissance art in Moldavia, to have the church built on the Tătarasi hills in Jassy (which it seems also aroused the envy of his brother-in-law, the prince Miron Barnovski-Moghila), and to donate a huge fortune to this monastery (18).

CONCLUSIONS

1. The so-called Nicoara’s golden Romanian Thaler, hand-engraved between 1616-1626 by an anonymous Romanian artist from Northern Moldavia, part of the Romanian principality of Moldavia, entered the history of numismatics through the writings of famous numismatists, like Baron S. de Chaudoir (France), I. I. Reichel and A. A. Kunik (Russia) P. A. Sîrcu and C. Moisil (Romania) and I. G. Spasskiï (USSR).

2. This wonderful masterpiece of Romanian late Renaissance, synthesis of Byzantine and European arts, belongs without doubt to Romanian art and medallistic and not to Russian numismatics (as some authors wrote erroneously).

3. The coins and medals belong to the history of the peoples who created the historical subjects engraved in metal, irrespective of the language of the inscriptions (19).

4. The documents in archives, libraries and museums, the coins and medals as well as the monuments of medieval art, including Romanian churches, represent rich sources of research into Romania’s history. Perseverence, competence and moral integrity are necessary.

(18) The medallion-coin, as artistic piece, was also discussed by the author in the numismatic section of the 15th International Congress of Historical Sciences in Bucharest, 12th August 1980.