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DIMITRIE CANTEMIR

A CHAMPION OF MEDIEVAL ROMANIAN POLITICS AND CULTURE

With the collapse of the Byzantine Empire in 1453 and of the final resistance of the Paleologi in the years which followed, Turkish expansion began to make its way towards Europe. A huge number of forces was sacrificed in order to stop this threat, but the heaviest toll was paid by the Romanian people.

During the second half of the seventeenth century, the power of the Ottoman Empire began to decline in comparison with its earlier greatness. Meanwhile, certain states were making a bid for omnipotency, ceaselessly changing the configuration of the map of Europe. The unity of the German states was destroyed and thus Austria was given the opportunity to impose its authority and menace not only the Ottoman Empire but also the liberty of the states of South-Eastern Europe. Poland was weakened by its long war with Sweden and its own peasant uprisings and this gave the Turks a chance to start fighting Austria too. They based their endeavour on the political disagreements between the Austrians, the French, and the English, the latter being concerned about the fate of their trade with the Ottoman Empire.

The Turkish campaigns come to an end with the memorable defeat at the gates of Vienna (1683), and formation of the Holy League achieved a relative limitation of Ottoman expansion. But the international political situation was highly unfavourable to the Romanian Principalities. Thus, proving their imperialistic tendencies, the Austrians annexed Transylvania—a very old Romanian territory—threatening to share with Poland the other two Principalities, Moldavia and Wallachia, caught between two particularly strong forces—Austria and the Ottoman Empire—the Romanian Principalities implemented a very clever policy and managed to maintain their integrity. This is the only way to understand Șerban Cantacuzino or Constantin Brâncoveanu, who had real and profoundly patriotic aims, although their political intentions were marked by apparent indecisiveness. They understood that the only way to maintain independence was wisely to use the power of the two Titans, making them fight each other and weaken their forces.

Apart from their own resourcefulness, the only hope left for the Romanian rulers was Russia, a highly respectable European power at that time. Secret contacts and hidden messengers kept the Romanians and the Russians in touch, each country playing its own part in building up a common front against Turkish, Austrian, and Polish annexation.

Particularly during Tzar Peter's reign, Russia experienced intense economic, political, and cultural development, which caused all sorts of problems for other countries. Aiming at the territories conquered by the Turks, to strike a blow at their maritime hegemony and to weaken the Ottoman Empire, Russia engaged in a series of battles in the course of which success favoured the two sides in turns. This policy aroused the expectations of the Balkan nations that were ruled or menaced by the Moslems. In order to conceal its political interests, Russia pretended to be the liberator of Christianity from Mussulman domination, while Moscow arrogated to itself the prerogatives of "the third Rome". Russia's adherence to the Holy League increased the Balkan expectations. Meanwhile, Russia became a valuable cultural hotbed providing a counter balance to Europe in this respect.

In this European political context, both the Moldavians' and the Muntenians' attitude became increasingly pro-Russian, a fact which alarmed the Turks and induced them to following a particularly cautious policy, selecting the heads of the Romanian Principalities from among those people upon whom they could rely with certainty. At the same time, by supporting political plots, bribery, and overthrows, the Turks tried to destabilise the Romanian states in order freely to exercise their suzerainty. Thus, by ceaselessly increasing tribute, asking for more and more gifts, and raising the price demanded for the throne from one ruler to the next and speeding up their turnover, the Turks managed to sharpen the discord between the political parties and the boyars, between the latter and the court, and between the boyars, the court, and the mobs.

Apart from the international political situation, which was unstable enough, Europe also witnessed varied cultural development. Western Europe with its ancient cultural centers of Paris, London, Rome, Padua (Padova), Vienna, and Buda; Greece, which continued the culture of the Byzantine Empire, interweaving its own culture with that of the Ottomans; followed by Kiev, Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other Russian centers: all these formed the framework for the development of very powerful outlooks and ideological trends. On the cultural level the connections between the East and the West were strengthened by religious propaganda. In an endeavour to obtain not only political but also spiritual hegemony in the Eastern world and South-

Eastern Europe, the West used the support offered by the Pope and the Protestant Church. Catholic, Calvinist and Lutheran propaganda, based on powerful material resources, invaded the East and the states situated between the Carpathians and the Balkans to the prejudice of the Orthodox faith, which was holding out with great difficulty against the systematic Turkish offensive.

The end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth witnessed a series of more or less voluntary conversions to Catholicism or Protestantism. This occurred with the Romanians, the Ruthenians, and some others, while the Orthodox Church—represented at that time by Greeks, Serbians, Bulgarians, Romanians, and Russians—was trying to organize a common front under Russian tutelage both in order to survive and inhibit Western religious influence. In some cases, religious problems were only a cover for the political, economic and commercial interests of certain states, Tzarist Russia, France, Italy, and Austria being cases in point. The Greek world, centred on Constantinople, witnessed powerful cultural movements, which generally had a religious structure and were intended to defend Orthodoxy. Brilliant representatives, such as Cyril Lucaris, Theofilos Koridalefs, Ioan Cariofil, Dositheos and others played a prominent part in this fight, to which they sometimes fell victim themselves. The Greek Academy of Fanar rivalled many Western Renaissance and Humanist universities. Besides theology, it taught the humanities and social and applied sciences. At the same time, although the Turks were the exponents of an eclectic culture, it was nonetheless a relatively advanced culture for the period. Mathematics and geometry, history, classical, oriental and European Languages, music were amongst the subjects included in the curricula of Ottoman Schools. They were attended not only by Turks but also by princes, and the sons of boyars and high officials from all over the Empire and from countries with which the Porte maintained relations.

In spite of the social and political hostilities, the Romanian Principalities witnessed the development of number of schools, in which well-known cultural personalities were active. Fired by social and political principles, through their works the great majority of them helped to affirm the independence policy of the Romanian states. The Romanian chroniclers inaugurated a golden era in the history of Romanian culture in general and in Romanian historiography in particular. Most of them—educated in well-known and traditional university centers, such as Padua, Vienna, Constantinople, Lwow, Kiev and so on—were the agents of the progressive ideas and concepts of their time, the pioneers of modern culture in the Romanian Principalities.

Nevertheless they may not be considered as cosmopolitans, for they concentrated all their intellectual and spiritual forces on their own unpretentious small countries, trying to adapt the advanced ideology of their time to the conditions and needs that were specific to these areas. Most of the Romanian Chroniclers, and above all Constantin Cantacuzino, Grigore Ureche, Miron Costin, and Ion Neculce, were pre-eminently humanists, tireless champions the Renaissance spirit in these parts. They took over and then developed the elements that were already building in the people's minds, and added their own thoughts to the nucleus of awareness accumulated this way. They were not able to perceive the motivating forces of social progress, nor did they popularize social reform or the overthrow of existing production relations, but clad their thinking in conservative ideology. But with its profound implications on a political and a national level, Romanian ideology was no longer unfruitful. With a better understanding of the actual situation of the Romanian people, the ideologists, and particularly the chroniclers, fought to avert the manifold dangers that were threatening, using the appropriate and specific weapons of progressive-minded ideologists of all times. Thus, they militated to strengthen the masses' political awareness, and their consciousness of a national language and spiritual unity. They were the first to take over the traditions that were deeply rooted in the mass consciousness, traditions that were verified through their own angle of vision and afterwards integrated into the national culture.

By ideologically substantiating the Romanians' rights to their own boundaries and awakening the nation's patriotic feeling, the chroniclers thought that they had found the strongest support against any hostile invasion. They also endeavoured to strengthen relations with the economically, strategically, politically, and culturally developed European countries.

It is from this point of view that one must try to understand Dimitrie Cantemir and Constantin Cantacuzino, who wrote for western academies and other institutions, Miron Costin, who dedicated part of his work to the powerful Jan Sobieski of Poland, and Cantemir and Milescu, who also wrote about Tzar Peter the Great.

Using the simple means available to them, the Romanian humanists kept the political world informed of the existence of a couple of small countries, hardly visible on the map of Europe, but inhabited by a people possessing endless spiritual potential and determined, whatever the cost, to forge its own path through history. In this way, the Romanian humanists and chroniclers hoped to draw the attention of "Christian" Europe to necessity of building impenetrable wall on the Danube against the Ottoman threat.

Humanism promotes culture as the supreme means of rising above the conditions of human and social existence. It is only through culture and science that man is able to develop his personality, to break the chains of his social dependence; and on a broader level, the raising of the masses' cultural level will implicitly lead to absolute national independence. Science, as an expression of reason, is what defines the human condition, otherwise human beings are no more than "dumb animals and beasts", as Grigore Ureche says, because "it is only knowledge that distinguishes man from a beast or wild animal". According to Miron Costin, "It is knowledge that gives birth to science". He considers that "there is no more beautiful and useful pastime in life than reading"; to wish one's own experience lends heartfelt agreement.

This is the context within which, in the second half of the seventeenth century, Dimitrie Cantemir appeared on the cultural, political, and social scene.

Born on 26 October 1673, the son of a boyar and future prince named Constantin Cantemir, who was to appear as a character in one of his son's works, he was familiar from his childhood with Moldavian court life, political plots, warring social relations, abundance, and poverty. One of the first teachers to guide the boy's steps towards the world of science was the well-known philosopher and physician Ieremia Cacavelas, who was to influence Cantemir's later education. When his father had been ruling for three years, Dimitrie was sent as hostage in his brother Antioh's place.

A new period began in the life of the prince's young son. He became better acquainted with the backstage aspects of political fighting, and met statesmen and cultural personalities of the age. He also did his utmost to store up as much knowledge as possible, helped by the libraries of Constantinople, renowned teachers, and every kind of school.

Cantemir's circle of friends belonging to the high society of the Turkish capital grew daily larger, for his brilliance made him welcome everywhere. He remained in Constantinople for twenty-two years, with only brief visits to Moldavia. Throughout this long period he was the constant target of the intrigues of Constantin Brâncoveanu, the Wallachian ruler, and was fortunate not to lose his life.

Cantemir learned some European and oriental languages, as well as Turkish, and his studies included history, medicine, music, and religion. His broad and varied education allowed him to amass an important documentary archive, upon the basis of which he produced some writings of doubtless scientific value.

As the relations between the Turks and the Russians worsened, new

prospects opened up before the young Moldavian. Always conscious of his origins and his country, he was awaiting an opportunity to carry out the plans he had been secretly making, being fully acquainted with the essence of Ottoman politics.

He formed closer connections with the Russian embassy in Constantinople without raising Turkish suspicions. The change in the political life of the Ottoman Empire decided the Turkish officials to focus their attention on the Romanian principalities as a link between the two great powers. Consequently, they attached much importance to their choice of princes to occupy the thrones of Moldavia and Wallachia, while at the same time supporting court plots and the princes' overthrow. In this way they intended to weaken the power of the two small Danubian countries and thus to perpetuate their own suzerainty. The troubled period at the beginning of the eighteenth century decided the Turks to select Dimitrie Cantemir as the best man to accede to the throne of Moldavia after Nicolae Mavrocordat's banishment. Cantemir enjoyed the Turks' confidence as a man who had been brought up in the imperial court and proved his attachment to it taking an interest in the history of the Empire as well as in its political problems at various stages. At the same time, his interest in cultural problems, particularly theoretical ones, was another good reason for the Turks to trust him. He was the man they needed, detached from reality (at least, so they thought), ignorant of the actual situation of his own country, and at the same time a faithful servant of Turkish power.

These were the reasons that led the Turks to appoint Dimitrie Cantemir ruler of Moldavia on 23 November 1710, although he was the only one who had not offered the Turks the usual substantial presents they claimed as their right on such occasions and nor had he asked for the appointment, thus convincing the Turks that he was politically uninvolved.

In his new position, Cantemir gave evidence of a keen political sense. In the first few months of his rule, he managed to centralize his power, to dissolve almost completely the political groups of the large boyar families with voivodal pretensions, and to ensure his dynastic succession. At the same time, he cautiously steered the politics of the Moldavian state towards new courses, different from the pro-Turkish ones. Ensuring the ruling majority's support, Cantemir strengthened his links with the Russian government, whose head was Tsar Peter the Great. Moldavia's new political directions were intended to cast off the Turkish yoke, while their initiator's name is inscribed on the list of our country's greatest patriots. The Treaty of Lutzk concluded

with the Tzar's government on 13 April 1711 was one of the first to be directed at Moldavia's independence.

The tragic outcome of the Battle of Stănileşti the on 11 July 1711 meant the of a short but promising reign and at the same time placed an obstacle in the way of achieving our people's most sacred ideal. The young prince sadly accepted his unhappy political fate and left, for ever, the beloved country he had served so loyally. But he was still optimistic: the power of the Tzarist state—organized in accordance with Peter the Great's political principles—made him hope that some day he would return as the saviour of his people.

Recent historical research has revealed that Cantemir was fired by the national ideal of independence for all Romanians Moldavians, Wallachians, and Transylvanians. In order to achieve this noble aim, he saw an imperative need that the Romanian people, —divided into small states and provinces by cruel history—, should be united.

Dimitrie Cantemir's political plans were not mere abstract and Theological elaborations, but were as far possible rooted in actual fact. This is why he sent out his spies to get acquainted with the political and social realities of Transylvania, which was occupied by Austrians, and of Moldavia and Wallachia, which were under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Porte. He also received Romanian delegates who chandestinely travelled to Russia in order to inform him developments in the Principalities and to seek assistance. Enthusiastic about the Romanians' endeavours, he did his best to help them achieve their ideals. He used his influence over the Tzar to convince him of the need to establish a common front with the Romanians in order to cast off the Austrian and Ottoman yoke. At the same time, as one who, during his twenty—two years in Constantinople, had become well acquainted with the political and military forces of the Sublime Porte, as well as with its ability to maintain its supremacy in the balance of international power, Dimitrie Cantemir put his old notes and scrupulously collected data in order and produced a work of indisputable cultural value. The first historical treatise to go beyond the traditional bounds of the presentation of material in the form of a chronological sequence the dry and impartial presentation of historical facts without any attempt to penetrate the meaning and causality of historical phenomena. *The History of the Rise and Fall of the Ottoman Empire*, the autograph manuscript of which has recently been discovered in Harvard University Library, was the first ideological and scientific substantiation of the wars against Ottomans. It was not a dialectical interpretation of social problems, but an approach to history's development. Like his contemporary, the Italian historian Giambattista Vico, Dimitrie Cantemir was a promoter

of “historical cycles”. Apart from this minor fact, the wandering Romanian prince meant to encourage both Russian and European circles to attempt to prove that the Ottoman Porte could no longer maintain its strategic hegemony, as its power had begun to decline. The same political reasons, which were specific to his age, led Dimitrie Cantemir to offer a doctrinal substantiation of the Orthodox faith. This was an endeavour shared by Eastern Church writers in general, and it meant to halt the eastward and south-eastward spread of Romano-Catholic and Protestant propaganda while at the same time strengthening resistance to the Mussulmans.

Like many of his progressive contemporaries, Dimitrie Cantemir considered that the only safe way to resolve the astringent international and European oppositions was to turn the whole of South-Eastern Europe into an united front, ideologically strengthened by a communion of political, social, economic, and religions interests. It was on this ground that Cantemir published some writings that were highly appreciated at the time: *The Hidden Image of Sacred Science*, *Dark Spots in the Catechism*, *The Divan*, and *Metaphysics*.

The Romanian people stand out in South-Eastern Europe by virtue of their origins, age, continuity, capacities, and the force of their destiny. When faced with historical adversity, the Romanians never lost their presence of mind and, indeed, hardened themselves to brave the centuries ahead. Many a time did they prove their bravery in battles for their own survival, while at the same time acting as a barrier to all invasion of Europe. This entitled Cantemir to assert that his people stand side by side with the great powers in their fight for a common cause. In support of this contention, he wrote a valuable work: *The Chronicle of the Romanian Moldo-Wallachians' Age*. In order to provide an ideological motivation for the fact that the antagonistic circles and groups in the Principalities had to be reconciled, the young prince drew on his own experience to write *The Hieroglyphic History* and *The Life of Constantin Cantemir*.

As the hidden beauties of Moldavia, its traditions, its organizations, and all the other manifestations of the continuity of the Romanian presence in these landers could not fail to strike achord in the heart of such a perfect patriot, he also wrote his wonderful *Descriptio Moldaviae*.

Al though he may give the impression of dealing with matters of a general nature, Dimitrie Cantemir focused directly on the actual social and political realities of the Moldavia of his time. His aim was to change the status quo created by Moldavia's internal and external political crisis, and he used sym-

bolic language to criticize the state of things in Moldavia, hoping there by to improve it.

Dimitrie Cantemir's whole mentality and activity were characterised by a profound patriotism that was ceaselessly nourished by his love for the people and the country to which he belonged.

Dimitrie Cantemir may be considered the first Romanian philosopher to assert himself in a cultural context by the impetuosity of his genuine ideas and the authenticity of his solutions to social and gnosiological problems. His merit becomes even greater if one takes into consideration the fact that he was trained and worked in a troubled and inconsistent social environment, at a period when scholasticism was flourishing and dialectics were beginning to tempt many minds.

In his early works, such as *The Divan*, *Locca obscura*, and *Logocis*, he is inclined to accept various scholastic principles in an approach gnosiological problems—a big step forward for Orthodox Christian thinking—whereas in his mature works, such as *The Chronicle of the Romanian Moldo-Wallachians' Age*, *The Hieroglyphic History*, *Sacrosanctae*, and *Monanchiarum Phisica Examinatio*, philosophy proves to be his main concern.

In Dimitrie Cantemir's conception, God is the creator of the world and the providence itself, but this does not exclusively condition the individual's social life. Man retains within himself the "datum absolut", as the seed of memory which is reflected within his conscience; but beyond this, he has plenary powers of discernment and action. Cantemir does not understand this as "free will" in the religious sense of the term, but as liberty strictly conditioned by social and human interrelations. Human conscience itself is not only the absolute seminal element, but also an expression of social existence. The divine inspires but does not condition the human; there is one unique truth, and this is attained experimentally, not ecstatically.

Sacrosanctae defines the boundaries of science and theology, both of which are distinct domains of gnosiological investigation. Without adopting an arbitrary attitude to either side, Cantemir manages to define these domains using only knowledge and research methods adapted to specific necessities and circumstances.

Although a series of contradictions are evident in his thinking, as far as anthropology is concerned, Cantemir pays his tribute to Christian conceptions. Any phenomenon is due to a primordial cause of its existence and has an aim towards which it is supposed to aspire by virtue of a clearly defined rule that is only partially known. The essence of existence lie in God, the deity, the

origin (not in a pantheistic sense) of all other forms of material and spiritual existence. Thus, Cantemir followed the way opened by the ecclesiastical writers and priests, a way far from an acceptance of existence in Hegel's sense. As a form of existence, any being is unique; it shares a common origin with all other beings, but has an aim of its own, which is clearly defined. As a rational being, man operates—within the whole complex of problems linked to his existence—in a characteristic way, specific to his ontological condition. His destiny is no longer conditioned by the laws of Providence or determined by divine science, but—on the strength of his mind—man may be the author of his own destiny. This was a reaction against the predestinarianism of the up and coming Western Protestantism and at the same time a new way of expressing humanist principles.

Having sinned, man lost the prerogative of “*posse non mori*” and was obliged to accept new ontological conditions. Thus, the purity of the germinal absolute that had previously existed within him survived only as spontaneous outbreaks in the form of “illumination”, “inspiration”, “calling”, which are still do not suffice to give a satisfactory answer to all existential and social problems. But within the framework of creation, man has a special mission by virtue of which he claims to be complete, a concept which is synonymous with reinstatement in the conditions of his primordial existence. This completeness, reinstatement, salvation requires constant preparation, an endless struggle to denigrate and annihilate evil and sin and to cultivate goodness and virtues. Thus ethics is motivated in Cantemir's conception. Morality has two distinct sources: the human and the divine. Moral principles of divine origin are intercepted by Revelation, that is in Biblical form, while human principles are expressions of man's faculty of reasoning, the result of experiences, relations, and social conscience. The former hint at the general aspects of social existence—which are always valid, whereas the latter hint at the particular aspects, that are specific to different zones and epochs. Both are, however, subject to constant evolution: the divine through a continuous, profound study and understanding and the human through acceptance and change.

Moral principles are prerequisites for human completion. But they are valid only within a social framework. Man accomplishes his ontological task insofar as he is in a position to be useful to his social environment and to influence it positively. Dimitrie Cantemir took over some of the ideas of the early Fathers of Christianity. This precluded the individual's seclusion from society, together with subjectivity and particularism. Man could reach the divine essence in human terms. This was an important step forward in the humanist thinking of the time. Man was again the focus of attention. Every-

thing came from him and was meant for him. Anthropocentrism was gaining ground and it is to the Romanian philosopher's credit that he contributed to the acceptance of this major doctrine. In this way, men were recognized as naturally equal, and social distinctions shown to be nothing but anomalies, perversions of the true moral law.

Dimitrie Cantemir was the first to apply—as for he could these noble humanitarian principles. Thus, one can understand his love for the masses and the oppressed as well as his hatred for the exploiting class he considered to be a collection of “predatory wild beasts”. Cantemir was also the first to give an ideological motivation to the peasants' uprising, which he saw as vital to restore the moral order. His social position, certain major and decisive political interests, and a much too short reign prevented Cantemir from putting his progressive concept into practice. But humanist principles are sometimes utopian and incapable of achieving a revolutionary transformation of social existence. But it was the first time that the masses and especially the Romanian peasantry had received the direct attention of scholar such as Dimitrie Cantemir, who saw the working peasantry as the main economic and strategic material foundation of the national struggle against the Turks. He saw that neglect of this class leads to the neglect of national political interests themselves.

A circumstantial analysis of the relations between the social classes, and of the part played by the state and its head in the life of a country, with direct reference to the concrete realities of the Romanian people, as well as an extensive study of the international political conflicts, reveal Dimitrie Cantemir as an outstanding figure in the cultural and political life of eighteenth-century Europe.

Dimitrie Cantemir's concept of history developed within the general context of European historical ideology. It is thus that one must consider his theory concerning the origin, evolution, and decay of political systems and the succession of empires and dominant forces as a cyclical phenomenon, a general, circular, cosmic, motion. This sort of conception led to an idealistic social determinism, inadequate for real social and historical evolution.

History plays an indisputable part in the life of any people, serving a textbook for the nation, an essential element wherein every people is able to recognize its own identity. But the Moldavians, who were able to make use of Cantemir's endeavours, were counseled not to boast of their toil and the plod of their forefathers and to clearly understand it as their duty to achieve their fulfilment and to understand that it is better to die in all sincerity than unworthy of one's noble and manly nature.

With a better understanding than anyone else of the actual situation of the Romanian people, Dimitrie Cantemir asserted and proved that the viability of a people does not rest solely on its historical age, nor on the extent of its borders, but is defined by the level of its culture and civilization, by its contribution to human progress. In order for a country and people to achieve respectability, Cantemir believed that virtue and unlimited probity should go hand in hand with knowledge and worthiness, these being the only virtues able to turn cruel and unworthy habits into good ones, to convert “barbarians into Hellenes and pagans into Romans”.

Dimitrie Cantemir’s conception of the historian’s role in the life of a society and within the context of history itself is interesting and highly original. He considers that true historians—those who relate historical facts as really are—are on a par with those who make history and struggled to perform valuable deeds; their pens are forged together with the heroes’ weapons and and feats, for the heroes’ names would otherwise be long covered with dust.

As Pompiliu Teodor says with Dimitrie Cantemir, Romanian Historiography attains the level of European historical methodology. All his work, but especially *The Chronicle of the Romanian Moldo-Wallachians’ Age*, shows him to be a fiery champion for the Romanians’ political and social rights, for their unity, their Latin character, and their continuity in Dacia. Cantemir, the most outstanding figure in seventeenth—and eighteenth—century Romanian historiography, to quote Nicolae Iorga, was not only a philosopher and a historian, but also a philosopher of history.

In 1985 we celebrated the 275th anniversary of Dimitrie Cantemir’s accession to the throne of Moldavia. His was a short and tormented reign, but he proved wisdom superior to brutality and gave hope to all those who longed for civilization as well as to all the oppressed. But if Cantemir’s political reign was short and failed to achieve its aim, his reign in the spheres of philosophy and historiography still continues. His work and fame have surpassed the boundaries of Romania, and the himself has become one of our people’s most valuable representatives in the international sphere. At a national level, Cantemir stands alongside Bălcescu, Kogălniceanu, Hașdeu, Iorga, and Xenopol, all of them great names in Romanian historiography and indefatigable champions for the fulfilment of the major ideals of the Romanian people.

As one of his exegetists has said, he was a “uomo universale” of the Romanian Renaissance, at a cross-roads of European history.