

CONSTANTIN BRÂNCOVEANU: THE PORTRAIT OF THE MARTYR-PRINCE IN CONTEMPORARY CHRONICLES

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Abstract. This paper attempts to create a vivid and accurate image of the Wallachian prince, out of several contemporary chronicles, most of which are biased, one way or another. Brâncoveanu emerges from them as a vigorous and complex personality, which accounts for his rich literary legacy, in rhymed chronicles and folklore productions.

Keywords: Brâncoveanu, Brâncovenesc style (architecture), Bucharest Bible, patronage, martyrdom.

Constantin Brâncoveanu stands as an emblematic figure in Romania's history. The twenty-six years of his reign in Wallachia – between October 28th, 1688 and March 24th, 1714 – were a time of relative political stability, when the first exploratory contacts were initiated with the Western world, they were also a period of great cultural efflorescence, especially in architecture and printing, which made historians call it “Brâncoveanu's age”.

His fall from avowed, yet perhaps hypocritically undesired, prominence, into disgrace and death, has all the constituents of a *de casibus* tragedy, a fate that many rulers of the Danubian Principalities (Moldavia, Wallachia and Transylvania) shared, at the turn of eighteenth century. The countries were subjected to the Ottoman Empire, whose power was in decline (as illustrated by the failed siege of Vienna, of 1683), due to internal hindrances (corruption among high and low officials, the struggle for power and influence, often orchestrated from inside the imperial harem, the instability of positions within the system of administration, and of decision-making, etc.) and to military confrontations, particularly with Austria and Russia, each of them attempting to enlarge its hinterland at the expense of its southern neighbor that was now weak and frail.

Constantin, the son of Papa Brâncoveanu, a *boyar* [noble] from the Romanâți County [west of Bucharest, between the Danube and the Olt river], and nephew of Matei Basarab-*Voyvod*, descended from an old noble family, and rose to the position of Grand *Spathar* [commander of the army] and Grand *logothete*, during the rule of his uncle, Șerban Cantacuzino (1678-1688), better known for his taking part in the Ottomans' campaign that ended in their defeat at the Battle of Vienna (however acting as a subversive defender of those under siege, on this occasion), and for commissioning the printing of the Bible (known as the *Bucharest Bible* or *Șerban's Bible*), the first complete Romania version of the *Book of Books*, and a major monument to European humanist culture, which, however, appeared posthumously, in 1688. In his quality as *logothete* [head of the prince's secretary office], Brâncoveanu was “*ispravnic de carte*” i.e. a proxy editor of the book for the prince, coordinating and surveying the activity of the “team” of “*diortositori*” i.e. translators and correctors, including, among others, such scholars as the brothers Radu and Șerban Greceanu. At the somewhat unexpected death of Șerban Cantacuzino--of which his own brother, Constantin Cantacuzino, himself a learned man and author of an unfinished, yet scientifically promising *Istorie a Țării Românești* [*History of Wallachia*], may have not been entirely innocent--, and in order to prevent the undesired interference of the Great Porte, the great *boyars* of the country gathered in a council and decided to choose Constantin, the Grand *logothete*, who was only thirty-four years old, as their *voyvod*:

The boyars had no other choice but to confer among themselves and, in the end, they chose from among themselves, *jupan* [title given to persons of high rank or position] Constantin

Brâncoveanu, the Grand *logothete*, to be their Lord, as they knew he was a wise man and came from a princely line. (AC, 229)

This is how Radu Greceanu describes the same moment, in his official chronicle:

... that the crown was put on his head was only God's will, no maneuverings or gifts of money got him into power, only God's will, and from the same divine impulse did all the people, from all over the country, all the boyars, plead with him, and although much against his own will, they put on his shoulders the task of ruling of this Christian people, and of being their lord and master... (GI, 641)

It is interesting to compare Greceanu's account with the version of the same events as described by the anonymous author, in his "History":

Having chosen *logothete* Constantin Brâncoveanu, to be their ruler, the *boyars* went from the princely court to the Metropolitan Cathedral, where *voyvods* are anointed; as soon as they gathered their military, they sent a *boyar* to go and fetch Constantin Brâncoveanu, the *logothete*, from the court, because he had remained there...

As soon as he arrived [at the cathedral] they told him: *Logothete*, we all want you to be our prince.

He said: Why would I wish the crown, when I am master over my own household? I do not need to be your *voyvod*. To this they replied: We beg you not allow other bad or mad people to ruin the country, be our Lord!

And they took him by his hands and pushed him from behind. (ABR, 676-677)

Brâncoveanu's answer to their request shows both **determination** and **wisdom**:

Look, I have listened to your supplication, I have left my rest and all my estates, and more against my will you have made me your Prince. Now it is time that you show your allegiance to us, that you loyally and faithfully serve us and fulfill our biddings, without questioning any of them, and we promise that we shall dispense justice to you and all the country. (ACC, 229)

Soon, confirmation came from the Great Khan of the Tartars and from the Pasha of Dobrudja, both of whom had considerable influence on local politics. Two weeks later, the Great Porte send him the *kaftan*, the official symbol of investiture. However, his acceptance as *voyvod* of Wallachia by the Ottomans had hung on the knife's edge, as chronicler Radu Popescu, who he had no interest in eulogizing Brâncoveanu, tells us,

The Turks hearing these, got very angry because the Romanians had crowned their ruler without their knowledge. (...), only good luck, money and letters from the *serasker-pasha* eased his way to power. (PC, 758)

One of his earliest diplomatic maneuvers was to send a new mission to *Beci* (Vienna), led by his cousin, Preda Pârscoveanu, to continue the negotiations that his predecessor, Șerban Cantacuzino had started, and to convey, with the Habsburgs, the new terms of Wallachia's participation in the Holy League's war against the Ottomans. It is no surprise, then, that he showed much respect and consideration for the widow of the late *voyvod*, who was also his aunt, and her family. Says the Cantacuzins' chronicler:

Other widows had remained poor after their husband's death, however Constantin-*voyvod* would not leave her at the mercy of fate, but held her in great esteem. He did not want the widow of the late prince to wander from house to house, instead he allowed her to live peacefully together with her children in her own household, and to preserve her estates too. (ACC, 232)

When Brâncoveanu began his rule, the Balkans were in turmoil. The Austrians were closing on Belgrade, they had occupied Vidin, Niš, and parts of the Banat region, and were ever more present in Transylvania, from where they made frequent incursions into Wallachia, the first under General Heissler, in 1689. About the end of his reign, the Russians had expanded westward and southward and had replaced Poland as the Porte's main contender along the Nistru and the Bug rivers. As early as 1703, the Prince entered into negotiations with the Russians, his main emissary being David Corbea, a scholar from Braşov, i.e. Kronstadt [Transylvania]. Then, upon the 1710 Russian intervention in Moldova, he took steps to negotiate an anti-Ottoman alliance with Russia of Peter the Great. In 1711, at the battle of Stănileşti, on the banks of the Prut river [in Moldavia], Toma Cantacuzino, the *voyvod*'s cousin and commander of the Wallachia cavalry, together with several *boyars*, fled to the Russian and Moldavian camp. This action, and the fact the Wallachian prince had failed to provide immediate military assistance to the Turkish and Tartar forces, as was his obligation, made the Ottomans suspicious as to his real intentions.

The image that contemporary chronicles project of the Wallachian prince is ultimately rather a multifaceted one, although they almost completely deprive his portrait of its physical elements. Nonetheless, its moral and political features, heavily colored by the authors' partisan attitudes, amply compensate for their absence.

Chronologically, the first significant document is the *Istoria Țării Româneşti, de când au descălecat pravoslavincii creştini* [The History of Wallachia since its Foundation by Orthodox Christians], also known as the *Letopiseşul cantacuzinesc* [The Cantacuzin Chronicle], elaborated in 1690, a bulky historical document, whose author, according to most specialists, Stoica Ludescu, who styles himself as "an old servant" of the Cantacuzins, integrated an earlier chronographic corpus into it, and subtly transformed the original material so as to defend the interests of the great *boyar* family. The second is *Cronica Bălenilor* [The Băleni Family Chronicle], anonymously written at the beginning of the 18th century, as part of a larger text known as *Istoriile domniilor Țării Româneşti* [Histories of Wallachia's Rulers]. To these, we may add the so-called Brâncoveanu's chronicles – *Începătura învăţăturii vieţii luminatului şi preacreştinului domn al Țării Româneşti, Io[an] Constantin Brâncoveanu Basarab voevod* [The Early Days of the Rule of the Illuminated and Christian Prince of Wallachia, Ioan Constantin Brâncoveanu Basarab Voyvod], written by *logothete* Radu Greceanu, and commissioned by the Wallachian prince, and *Istoria Țării Româneşti de la octombrie 1688 până martie 1717* [The History of Wallachia from October 1688 to March 1717], composed by an "independent" anonymous. In the first decades of the 18th century, *Cronica lui Nicolae Mavrocordat* [The Chronicle of Nicolas Mavrocordatos], was compiled by an anonymous author, who, according to Dan Horia Mazilu (see *Cronicari munteni* [Wallachian Chroniclers, XXVI-XXVII]), may have been Radu Popescu, Grand *Vornik* [head of the Princely Council], under the Phanariot prince. In 1724, the chronicler took the holy orders, as Rafail.

The authors of these chronicles are highly subjective, they are either laudatory to Brâncoveanu or derogatory to him, which is understandable in the context of the great *boyars*' and of Mavrocordatos' attitudes to him. Except for *The Chronicle of Nicolas Mavrocordatos* and, to a certain extent, the *Băleni Family Chronicle*, most texts are favorable to the *voyvod*, and irrespective of their partisanship, summon up a poignant and rather a complex portrait of him. They primarily focus upon the ruler, the politician, the administrator, the benefactor, even upon... the reformer. The figure that emerges from their pages is also that of a man in flesh and blood: he suffers from common diseases (a swelling, for example), like everyone else, has good or bad moments, occasionally faces terrible personal tragedy (the death of his elderly daughter Maria at *Țarigrad* [Constantinople], following an outbreak of plague), fears for his life, when asked unexpectedly to pay personal homage to the sultan, only a few days after receiving the lifetime confirmation for his rule, yet actually experiences the joys and excitements of a long reign and of a large family.

A **synthetic-characterization, with succinct elements of physical and moral portrait** appears in the *Brâncoveanu's Anonymous*:

Fortune shone on him, he was rich, handsome, well-built, his conversation was pleasant, he was intelligent, and had many relatives, sons, daughters, sons-in-law, daughters-in-law too, he was highly esteemed for his magnanimity and for his ruling... (ABR, 736)

Radu Greceanu, the “official historiographer” naturally draws a fuller portrait – in political, moral and intellectual – of his protagonist. In his crafty hands, Dan Horia Mazilu notes (*Cronicari munteni*, 914-915), “Brâncoveanu’s personality gradually grows from the actions he initiates, from his own or other people’s replies, from his lively personal remarks and reflections, and from highly dramatic sidelights that the chronicler sprinkles his narrative with, only rarely from the narrator’s static descriptions.”

Brâncoveanu understands the complexity of the international situation, in the context of the intense rivalry between the Austrians and the Ottomans over territories in the immediate vicinity of the Danubian Principality, and he handles it **diplomatically**: “he decided to be friendly to both sides, so that the country [Wallachia] should not be endangered” (ABR, 688). In truth, he is aware of the Ottomans’ power, but deliberately chooses to act for a rapprochement to the Western Christian powers. When *ağa* [chief of the police force] Bălăceanu, the rebel son-in-law of Șerban Cantacuzino, wants to return back home from exile, Brâncoveanu confides to him that

at that time, the Turk[s] and the Tartar[s] were still strong, but when time would come for him, as a Christian, to give assistance to another Christian, the Prince said that he would do whatever stands in his power to assist the Christians, the Germans [Austrians], only in due time... (ABR, 684)

In 1702, possibly at his own request, and on the recommendation of the Porte, the English envoy, “Milord Paghet, a man of about 60 years of age, or more” (GI, 520), on his way home [England], spend a few days as a special guest of Brâncoveanu-*voivod*. On this occasion, the Prince displayed a considerable amount of **tact and diplomacy** to promote a positive image of himself, of the country, and to honor his visitor:

When His Highness was at his seat [in the capital], an order came from the Sultan commanding him to accommodate the envoy of England, who had served at the Great Porte for some years, and through whose mediation the Turk[s] and the German[s] had made peace; a great and wise man, he had conducted well the affairs of the Great Porte. On his way back to his country, he expressed his desire to visit Wallachia, so that he might see the country and relax too. (GI, 517-518)

Later on, in the evening, as a token of his high esteem, and in order to follow the orders the Sultan had given him, His Highness, Constantin-*voivod* had a face to face conversation with the envoy, without a retinue. (GI, 518)

Moreover, after Paget sent four members of his delegation, his brother included, to thank the prince for the great honor bestowed upon him, Constantin invited him over once more and

placed the envoy on the princely throne, while he sat on a bed, and conversed with his guest at length, and then invited him to dinner. (...) They also fired guns, and drank to each other’s health and got drunk, both he and his *boyars* (although no one had been forced to). (GI, 519-520)

Edmund Chishull, a remarkable scientist and epigraphist was among those who accompanied William Paget on his journey back home. He had long conversations with Constantin Cantacuzino, humanist scholar and Master of the Prince’s Household, about the origins of the Romanian language and of the Romanian people, as well as about the unity of Romanians from the three Danubian Principalities.

The Wallachian prince was under the obligation to comply with the requests of the suzerain power, to respond quickly to the habitually abusive requirements of the Sublime Porte, yet, often he **chose to use delaying tactics**:

Faced with the tyrannical orders of the Turks, the Prince had no other choice but dally them for a while. (GI, 472)

Nor did His Highness obey the emperor's [sultan's] order, this time. (GI, 513)

...then they moved to Albești, where they stood for several days, and the prince worked hard for the benefit of the people and the country, for he did not only administer it efficiently, but also contributed generous sums of money to pay the country's growing dues to the Turks. Knowing that the country was poor, while the pagans' demands were huge and unbearable, *His Highness give a large sum of money* from his own house, to fulfill the insatiable greed of the Turks, for the benefit of the people, for the country's welfare, and good administration, *as no other ruler had done before*. (GI, 580-581, emphasis added)

In the context of the events that preceded the battle at Stănilești of 1711, he acts as **mediator between the Turks and the Russians**: "...the Vezier allowed His Highness to arbitrate as a Christian with the Christians, so that they may renew the peace between their empires... (GI, 581). In 1697, he sent Grand *komis* [head of the princely stables] Gheorghe Castriotul to Moscow, to assure Peter the Great that, in case of a Russian intervention in the Balkans, he would be on the tsar's side. However his messenger was received rather coldly mostly due to the presence at the tsar's court of Dimitrie Cantemir, Brâncoveanu's bitter enemy. When, in a surprise movement, and just a few weeks before the Ottoman and the Russian armies were to clash on the Prut river, Toma Cantacuzino, commander of the Wallachian fled to the Russian camp, a maneuver which brought great prejudice to him, Brâncoveanu cautiously decided to remain in waiting.

Contemporary chroniclers also portray him as **a good political leader that takes wise administrative decisions and who is strongly patriotic, capable of self-sacrifice** in times of duress:

In spite of all these [calamities that afflicted Wallachia] our Christian Prince administered his country wisely and spared it from further troubles, in true Christian spirit. He also did what was in his power to defend it against the exorbitant tribute the pagans had imposed (...), although he had earlier paid with his own money the country's dues, once more, he had 50 purses of his own money sent [to Constantinople] (...), so that nothing should afflict the country. (GI, 598)

Although "**an astute, gentle and tolerant**" leader (ABR, 715), Brâncoveanu could also be **ruthless, even cruel to his foes, and those who conspired against him**. Thus, for instance, he gives orders that the head of *ağa* Bălăceanu, who had plotted against him, be carried on a pole throughout Bucharest, on Saint Mary's Day, simply because the wretched victim had boasted earlier that, on that day, he would enter the capital as victor. *Paharnik* [princely cupbearer] Dumitrașcu, connived with Staicu, his Moldavian counterpart, to depose him from power. Once caught, he had them both imprisoned in the same cell "because they had schemed together against the prince, and so God fulfilled their wish..." (ABR, 702). However, he is rather lenient to the intrusions of those around him, especially when one of his close relatives is found guilty of wrongdoing, such as *kliučer* [provider of the princely court] Constantin Știrbei, whom he pardons over and over again (see ABR, 717-719).

Brâncoveanu, **as the generous patron of building, and protector of religious life**, is an iconic, defining attribute of the *voivod*:

Leaving Hurezi [monastery], he went to the wooden monastery and, from there, to the Argeș monastery, which His Highness had enlarged with additional buildings, had given them alms and had endowed their churches with many rich gifts. (GI, 474)

With reference to Saint George's monastery in Bucharest, which Brâncoveanu re-founded, the chronicle reads:

...out of religious zeal (...) His Highness had this monastery built from the ground up, as anyone can see, it is a fine and magnificent edifice; he had it adorned with beautiful wall-paintings and a wonderful iconostasis decorated with skillfully-crafted icons, he also had it floored with marble, as no one had done before. (GI, 662)

On the occasion of the crowning of Thököly as Prince of Transylvania, at Cristian, near Sibiu, the Wallachian prince proved his **oratorical talents**:

Then His Highness, Constantin-*voivod*, who is well-gifted in all areas, expressed his great joy at the Prince's ascension, with God's assistance, to the throne, and delivered an eloquent speech in the latter's honor, wishing him good luck and a long and prosperous reign, and he uttered other flattering words too. (GI, 446)

From Greceanu's account we can get some sense of the man as **bon viveur**:

The next day the [Hungarian] Prince gave a lavish banquet in honor of His Highness, Constantin-*voivod*, in the village of Cristian (...), and they had a good time until late at night (GI, 446).

He enjoyed feasting and having a good time, at the weddings of his *boyars*, or at the weddings of his own daughters and sons, when time came for them to marry; he was so happy as if he had been born under the luckiest stars in the heavens. (ABR, 736)

His love of nature, quiet countryside life, and long outdoor walks had always been with him. He would often call at the numerous monasteries along the road to Târgoviște, which he had founded. Writes the anonymous chronicler:

...he went to his own village, at Obilești, where there was a large pond, suitable for long walks in spring, and where, on numerous occasions His Highness would say: in summer we shall travel from Obilești to Bucharest, from there to Mogoșoaia, then to Potlogi, and from there to Târgoviște; in autumn we shall go to the vineyards, wherever we'll be in the mood to go to. (ABR, 724)

In his own chronicle, Radu Greceanu confirms this particular feature of the prince's personality, but he cannot keep from maliciously alluding to the *voivod's* immense fortune:

Once these troubles were over, and his relations with the Porte were no longer strained, and understanding that he should no longer fear of being dethroned, Constantin-*voivod* enjoyed himself and relished the prospects life held out to him; his power increased, and his estates enlarged beyond his wildest dreams (no one had ever been richer than him since the beginnings of this country); with nothing to worry about, he spent a lot of time visiting villages and vineyards at picking-time, and hunting. (PC, 768)

The Prince seems to have been **extremely fortunate**, and **lived an affluent life**:

God gave him health and strength, blessed him with many daughters and sons, with riches, mansions, palaces, villages, vineyards, ponds, with a long reign and he abounded in all good things that one can only dream of. (PC, 774)

Nor were his qualities as **fiscal administrator** less estimable:

Summoning the Divan [Council], His Highness consulted with all the *boyars* about taxes and about the country's needs, how and in what way he could reduce the burden of taxation on the people so that they may live a normal life.

His Highness, together with his *boyars*, wisely decided a fiscal code be devised so that everyone should know what his yearly dues were, collecting less from the needy and the afflicted, and more from the privileged and affluent.

However, calculating the tribute the country had previously paid, he decided to lower it, and pay it in four installments. The good order and administration of the country was widely acknowledged, and the people were deeply grateful to His Highness, for the arrangements were of great benefit to them. (GI, 513)

Summoned to Adrianople, as a result of some intrigues, to pay homage to the Sultan and, thus, to have his investiture reconfirmed, Brâncoveanu was however forced to increase of the *harach*, i.e. the Principality's yearly tribute to the Ottomans, but after counseling with the *boyars* that accompanied him there, he demanded the Sublime Porte that "other indemnities, *mukarrer* [money obligation for the renewal of investiture], *hizmet* (customs tax), *bumbașir* [taxes] and many others be abolished..." (GI, 644).

Other chronicles – those commissioned by his adversaries, and in particular the one commissioned by Nicolas Mavrocordatos, who followed him on the throne of Wallachia, and who obviously needed a flagrant example for his own favorable portrayal as *voivod* –, emphasize, by contrast, the major moral flaws of Brâncoveanu. In these documents, the prince is often depicted as **malicious** and **vengeful**,

Brâncoveanu was full of hidden hatred. So, when he acceded to the throne, bristling with rage, the Prince had Cârstea [the Chamberlain, with whom he had quarreled] killed. He may also have been behind the poisoning of his own son-in-law, "for some misunderstanding with [him]"... (PC, 768),

as **tyrannical** and **avaricious**, worth of present and future curses,

After he was released from Odriu [Adrianopole] and came back to the country [Wallachia], he completely changed his character, became wicked and cruel, levied heavy taxes on *boyars*, on monasteries and on the poor people... (PC, 769)
... during his life and rule, Constantin-*voivod* performed no act of kindness worth praising, rather he was cursed for many wrongdoings, and his descendants were under curse too. He was very covetous and this is how posterity recalls him... (PCV, 774),

or as **acquisitive**, yet ... **reformist**,

He was very greedy, and changed, for no good reason, the country's time-honored traditions that our ancestors had put considerable intelligence and effort to establish. (PC, 774)

By and large, Radu Popescu's mainly complains about the Prince's doubling the tribute the country paid to the Great Porte. The same chronicler describes, in more detail, the *voivod*'s equivocal attitude to the Turks and the Russians, illustrative, it seems, of a certain diplomatic vision (see PC, 771). He writes a detailed account of Brâncoveanu's dramatic fall. While his obvious hate toward the Cantacuzins is understandable since, in his opinion, they were behind the plot that brought the Prince's demise, the deep regret he feels about him seems somewhat unnatural for the official panegyrist of Mavrocordatos-*voivod*, and as one who had directly suffered at the hand of the late-ruler (see PC, 771-774).

A short time after his tragic end, the literary destiny of Brâncoveanu began. It first materialized in the rhymed-chronicle known as *Istoria lui Constantin vodă Brâncoveanu* [*History of Constantin-voivod Brâncoveanu*]. It does not narrate, as expected, his life and reign, instead the narrative focuses on the dramatic conditions of the deposition and the execution of the ill-starred prince. The widely-circulated chronicle afterward disseminated into folklore productions, into ballads, folk drama and carols (see Simonescu 1967, 57 sqq). Thus, this exemplary personality of Romanian history entered the world of legend and became a mythic figure.

Bibliography and Abbreviations

AB – Anonimul Bălenilor [The Băleni Anonymous]. *Cronica Bălenilor* [The Chronicle of the Băleni Family] (in *Istoriile domnilor Țării Românești*), in *Academia Română, Fundația Națională pentru Știință și Artă, Cronicari munteni* [Wallachian Chroniclers], *Selecția textelor, studiu introductiv, note, comentarii și glosar de Dan Horia Mazilu*, Editura Fundației Naționale pentru Știință și Artă, Univers Enciclopedic, Bucharest, 2004: 237-402. Print.

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