ROMANIAN LIBRARIES IN OLD TIMES

Laura BĂDESCU
University of Piteşti

Abstract*: The founding of Romanian libraries in old times is considered in relation with some of the distinct features of the cultural environment specific to the era. Starting from aspects connected to the circulation of Romanian books, namely the activity of the printing presses that functioned in the time span from the 16th to the 18th century in the three historical provinces, the author proposes a typology of libraries in the present article, distinguishing between monastic, princely, private and public libraries.*

Key words: *Romanian libraries, old times, typology.*

Libraries of yore, whether monastic, princely, private or, later on, public, bring important data for the defining of the historic, social and cultural environment specific to the Romanian society. The descriptive research of a bibliographical type, along with studies of a philological type have created the prerequisites for the reconstitution of the process and evolution of book reception, in the shaping of a taste for reading depending on the prevalent traits of the collective mentality, arranged in a religious, secular, cultivated or popular register. By examining the catalogues of early libraries we may reconstitute the major prevalent cultural characteristics of book circulation in the three historical provinces. It should be mentioned that it was not only the printed religious books that supported this cultural connection (see Varlaam's *Cazania – Homily*), which circulated in Transylvania in approximately 400 copies, printed or manuscripts), but also the books on ecclesiastical law, such as *Îndereptarea legii* (*Improving the Law*), 1652, and so on. The presence in old catalogues of the books written in Romanian in scriveners' offices or of printing works that were widespread in the country can be considered as one of the factors that contributed to the progress of the idea of nation and language unity of the Romanian people (for instance, the Bruckenthal library stock registers Varlaam's *Cazania*, Iaşi, 1643, as well as *Noul testament de la Bălgrad* – The New Testament From Belgrade, 1648 and *Biblia lui Şerban Cantacuzino* – Şerban Cantacuzino's Bible, Bucharest, 1688).

The specific circumstances of constituting the old libraries may be highlighted by referring to the activity of Romanian printing works which before the 17th century only printed religious books, but also by studying the area of localization of printing presses and printing centers, since the first institutional libraries were founded and developed in those precise areas. The research studies done on Romanian printing have emphasized a series of historic-evolutionary characteristics that may be placed in a determinative relationship with the appearance, dissemination and typology of old libraries. Thus, if during the 16th century printing presses were functioning solely in Walachia and Transylvania, where more than 80 percent of the entire production of Romanian books was printed, in the 17th century, apart from the fact that Moldavia saw the appearance of printing presses in this period too, it must be noted that in Walachia the princely and ecclesiastical patronage contributed to the increase of the number of publications to such a degree that this province became the main centre of cultural

BDD-A5813 © 2010 Universitatea din Piteşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 20:13:00 UTC)

irradiation (Papacostea-Danielopolu). The increase in circulation figures and diversification of book production starting from the 17th century, together with the secularization of printing in the following century allow access to books to ever wider social strata. In fact, the relatively low number of private libraries in the 16th and 17th centuries may be put down to the high cost of books in general. For example, the price of Romanian books varied in 17th century-Transylvania according to format, binding type, etc.; the price of Varlaam's *Cazania* is known to have ranged from 12 to 44 florins, the price of *Noul Testament de la Bălgrad* is evaluated to have ranged between 9 and 25 florins, *Îndereptarea legii* cost 8 dollars and 60 dollars at the most, while the *Biblia de la Bucureşti* cost 25 florins, at a time when the price for a pair of oxen ranged between 12 and 30 florins (Papacostea-Danielopolu). However, it should be mentioned that manuscripts played a cardinal role in the overall cultural environment, as the number of existing manuscripts dating from the 18th century is 10 times as high as the total number of those dating from the previous century (Mircea Vasilescu). Research done on the manuscripts has revealed the favorite titles for readers in those early times, who apparently found manuscripts preferable to the printed books, especially because the former were specialized in the promotion of *pleasurable literature*. The white pages bound at the end of the manuscript are decidedly meant to allow the reader to add certain fragments copied from other books that he will have enjoyed reading, thus facilitating its circulation and the preference for this form of dissemination (Al. Duțu). From this perspective, the relationship instituted in the 18th century between printed matter and manuscript announces, together with other factual categories, the change in mentality regarding the status of the book. Received as a quasi-sacred object through its use at the pulpit, in the 18th century the book will become a public good engaged in the complex process of the Enlightenment. Thus, the printing of books appears as a reflex of the 'demand' that substantially changed the ratios between production and consumption, between reading, oral reception and writing (Mircea Vasilescu).

A general perspective on the formation of Romanian libraries ought to take into account the links between the circulation of books from the West and the East to the Romanian countries. The acquisition of foreign books was a praiseworthy activity carried out almost exclusively by representatives of uppermost social classes or, later, by members of academies and schools that were under ecclesiastical patronage or under the patronage of the central power. Gradually, the book stock diversifies; private libraries appear and are perceived as an instrument of culture, as is adequately illustrated by several prestigious libraries, such as those owned by Matei Corvin, the Mavrocordats, and the Cantacuzinos. The wide range of books in these libraries and their standing at the upper limit of contemporary possibilities of knowledge instill an encyclopedic character and universality, thus setting the stage for the emergence of public libraries. The systematization and organization of the latter as cultural institutions begin through formalized actions that involve staff training and regulations for their proper use. The process that led to the founding of public libraries in Romania is complex and subordinated to the general coordinates of the founding document that establishes these institutions, thus protecting the books from being lost, mishandled or destroyed. The donation of personal libraries by bequest and their transformation into public libraries should be mentioned here as a form of prolongation of the cultural patronage. A fit example here is the Bruckenthal Library, founded as a public library on the basis of the will left by Baron Samuel von Bruckenthal, which stipulated hiring a librarian and administrative staff and paying them wages, as well as access of visitors to

BDD-A5813 © 2010 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 20:13:00 UTC)

the library, picture gallery, collections of minerals, etc., on certain days and at certain hours (Ctin. Ittu).

Monastic Libraries. The First Institutional Libraries. The first library attested in documents on the Romanian space was within the Igriș monastery (Transylvania), founded around the year of 1200, as a branch of the Cistercian abbey from Pontegny, France (C. Dima-Drăgan, *Romanian Humanistic Libraries*).

However, most researchers consider that the first monastic libraries were established during the 14th century in Moldavia (at the monasteries of Neamț, Putna, Bistrița, etc.), in Walachia (at Cozia, Vodița, Tismana, etc.) and in Transylvania (at St Nicholas Church in Șchei).

After the 17th century, the monasteries will also house private libraries (Constantin Brâncoveanu's library in the Horezu monastery, the library owned by the High Steward called Constantin Cantacuzino, at Mărgineni, the library that was the property of the family called Mavrocordat, inside the Văcărești monastery) or libraries that will later become institutional – (as is the case of the stocks of manuscripts and printed matterials that exist within the old Romanian schools). It is thus likely that libraries existed within the schools opened inside the Orthodox monasteries (in Walachia, at Târgoviște, Tismana, Dealu; in Moldavia, at Neamț, Bistrița, Probota, Putna, Voroneț, Moldovița, Humor, etc.; in Transylvania, at Ieud, Peri, Vad, Scorei, Prislop), as well as within Lutheran, Calvinist, Roman Catholic, Reformed schools in Sighișoara, Caransebeș, Hațeg, Turda, Cluj, Odorhei, in Orthodox Episcopal residences (Severin, Argeș, Roman, Rădăuți) or in Catholic Episcopal residences (Milcov, Baia, Siret, Bacău, Oradea, Alba Iulia), and in the metropolitan churches situated in Suceava, Târgoviște, Alba Iulia, etc. The library of the earliest Romanian school from Șchei (Brașov) was attested in 15th-century Transylvania. This is where several confessional schools will appear in the 16th century, among which the Lutheran school established by Johannes Honterus, endowed with a library with catalogues that still exist today. In Moldavia, the activity that took place within *Schola Palatii* (founded around 1400, in Suceava, by Alexandru cel Bun), *Schola Latina* (founded by Despot Heraclit in 1563, at Cotnari), in the Vasilian School (founded by Vasile Lupu in 1640, near the Three Hierarchs Church in Iași), as well as in the Princely Academy (founded by Nicolae Mavrocordat in 1714) implied the existence of libraries. Libraries are noted to have existed in Walachia within the Greek-Latin school from Târgoviște, initially supported by Matei Basarab. Likewise, libraries are attested within the Princely Academy from Sfântul Sava, which was established in 1679 by Șerban Cantacuzino, and within the Princely School near St George monastery, founded at the end of the 17th century by Sword Bearer Mihail Cantacuzino.

The monastic libraries functioned as libraries where books could be borrowed, thus anticipating the appearance of specialized public libraries. To support this statement we have testimonies that confirm the existence of certain instruments that are specific to public libraries, such as the book-loan papers Antim tells us about in *Învățături pentru așăzământul cinstitei mănăstiri a Tuturor Sfinților* (*Teachings For the Establishment of the Holy Monastery of All Saints*): 'All the books that I bequeath to our library, the Greek as well as the Rumanian ones, like I write in the church list, I bequeath with a curse for no one to dare take any one of them and estrange it. And should one be made or forced to take possession of a book, or read from it, or write on it, or look for something therein, without the man who asks for the book signing the slip of paper that he shall return it and he shall do so on the agreed term specified, let them

BDD-A5813 © 2010 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 20:13:00 UTC)

not have the book. And care should be taken to ask that overdue books be returned.' (Antim Ivireanul)

Princely Libraries. The cultural vocation of the great Moldavian or Walachian rulers, often materialized through the support provided to scholarly activity (with everything that such an approach meant, from providing the scriveners' offices with printing presses to supervising the titles and disseminating, through donations, the books issued from under the press, etc.) determined the emergence of the hypothesis of the existence of princely libraries. Based on these considerations, some specialists have surmised the presence of a library at the Court of Stephen the Great, Despot Vodă (Iacob Heraclid the Despot), Petru Șchiopul (his library was transported to Tyrol after he was toppled), Vasile Lupu, Matei Basarab, Miron Barnovschi, and so on. In Transylvania, the cultural model of Matei Corvin's library will be followed by the public libraries instituted in Alba-Iulia, Blaj, Târgu-Mureş or Sibiu. In Walachia, the existence of the library owned by Constantin Brâncoveanu was confirmed in the precinct of the Horezu monastery toward the end of the 17th century. The contents of Constantin Brâncoveanu's library (whose personal secretary and librarian, Nicolaus da Porta, will also accomplish the organization of the library of the Princely Academy in Sfântul Sava) was partially listed, together with the monastery's possessions, in late inventories, dated in 1740, 1791 and 1804 (C. Dima-Drăgan, *Romanian Humanistic Libraries*). Other news regarding the existence of these libraries can be found in book prefaces, marginal notes, bookplates and inscriptions. The library owned by the Mavrocordat family, 'the largest library in South-Eastern Europe, with rich collections of law, medical, scientific papers and books' (J. Bouchard), founded and established by, among others, Ștefan Bergler, Ioan Scarlat, Daniel de Fonseca and, according to some sources, Anton Maria Del Chiaro, was attested not only through internal sources (contemporary catalogues conceived and dated in 1723, 1725, etc.; pages of late inventories, from 1865 and so on), but also through external sources, namely testimonies made by conational or foreign contemporaries (C. Dima-Drăgan, *Romanian Humanistic Libraries*). Little is known about Dimitrie Cantemir's library, and what we know has reached us through the records of scholars or has been provided by the bookplates or notations discovered on books that belonged to him (for instance, the annotation on a Greek-Latin dictionary: 'Ex libris Ioanis Principis Cantemiri Voivodae Principis terrarium Moldavie, 1696' or the annotations made on a copy of *De neamul moldovenilor* (*On Moldavian Kin*).

Private Libraries. The gathering in a single volume of heterogeneous writings, with regard to their content, species and finality may be considered as a primary form of private libraries. This type of books, called *sbornice*, with roots in the old medieval anthologies, were considered by specialists as 'small family libraries' (Ovidiu Papadima), 'portable libraries' (Alexandru Duțu), or 'easy-to-carry libraries' – a common topos prolonged in Europe until the 18th century. The heterogeneous character of these 'sbornice' offers information about the major prevalent features of the collective mentality, arisen from preferences for reading the most different kinds of writing. A differentiation was made between the 'sbornice' that gather texts reflecting a taste for personal reading and the Transylvanian books that have a composite character and circulated during the period of the Enlightenment, with the latter being interpreted as 'the *pot-pourri* that serves the dissemination, aiming to communicate as many elements as possible' (Al. Duțu).

There exist few attestations of private libraries owned by boyars. Most of the opinions favoring the hypothesis that these libraries indeed existed are based on the

BDD-A5813 © 2010 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 20:13:00 UTC)

marginal annotations attesting the owner: 'From the library owned by Miron Costin and his sons, only two Latin manuscripts are left; (…) a fragment of the library of Dosoftei, the Metropolitan Bishop (…): a small hagiographical book published in Venice in 1663, bound together with the anthology of Histories, from 1650, of Matei Cigala from Cyprus' (N. Iorga). The existence of Luca Stroici's library is proven, and this was donated to the Dragomirna monastery near Suceava, through its catalogue, kept in the University Library from Lvov. The existence of the libraries owned by the prelates called Varlaam, Dosoftei, Antim Ivireanul, Sava Brancovici is also attested by partial information.

Nicolaus Olahus, Johannes Honterus and Mihail Halici used to own rich private libraries (the 1674 inventory of the latter's library registered 539 volumes), as well as Gheorghe Şincai. High Steward Constantin Cantacuzino's library was also attested through catalogues, lists, travel notes, etc. A catalogue of the library from Mărgineni, dated in 1839, comprised 263 book titles. Bishop Inochentie Micu-Klein's library, the contents of which was reconstituted on the basis of numerous documents and attestations, the foremost being the inventory written in 1747 (*Inventarium Librorum*, *Balasfalvae in Residentia Ep(isco)pali*, *sub Cameratico*, *et Ep(isco)pali Sigiliis antea habitorum*, *nunc vero Curae*, *ac Custodiae R(everen)d(issi)mi Domini Petri Aaron de Bistra Vicarii Generalis concreditorum*, *adMandatum I(nclyti) Regii Thesaurariatiis Tran(silva)nici per infrascriptos A(nn)o 1747. Die 14-ta Junii Confectum*) lay at the basis of establishing the Library in Blaj, which later became the Central Archdiocesan Library. The inventory registers 283 books, the ownership of which has long been discussed in literature. Data referring to the library of Ioan Budai Deleanu can also be found in an inventory, made in order to auction books, and this library contained at the time of his death a number of 62 books (46 in Latin, 11 in German, 3 in Italian and 2 in French), which attest the interest and preoccupations that the scholar had for the fields of history (11), law (10), literature (10), philology (9), medicine (5), natural sciences (4), rhetoric (4), etc. Little is known about the libraries owned by members of other social categories, especially by merchants and people who traveled throughout the Romanian Countries. Thus, Sonnini de Manoncourt's Library is recorded to have been bought by the Romanian metropolitan bishop by the name of Ignatie, who subsequently donated the books to the Princely Academy from Sfântul Sava monastery in Bucharest. The existence of 51 libraries owned by princes, 10 libraries owned by noblemen, 18 libraries owned by townsfolk, 7 libraries owned by priests and 6 libraries each owned by certain teachers and clerks, respectively, was attested in 17th-century Transylvania (Maria Ursuțiu).

Public Libraries. Public reading was institutionalized in our country in the 19th century, though it was anticipated during the 18th century through the transformation of certain private libraries into public ones. The library bequeathed by bishop Ignác Batthiány, which entered the public circuit in 1798, is attested in Alba-Iulia; likewise, in Târgu Mureş, the book collections gathered by Count Samuel Teleki represented the necessary stock that ensured the opening of the public institution (at the beginning of the 19th century). In the Principalities, the public libraries were established based on the Organic Law (1831) and were developed owing to the stocks of books received from the libraries of certain colleges (see the Library of Sfântul Sava College, etc.) or schools (Central School in Craiova, etc).

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Antim Ivireanul, *Opere* (Works), ediție critică şi studiu introductiv de Gabriel Ştrempel (Critical Edition, With an Introduction by Gabriel Ştrempel), Bucureşti, Editura Minerva, 1972, p.*336*;

BDD-A5813 © 2010 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 20:13:00 UTC)

Bouchard, Jaques, *Nicolae Mavrocordat, Domn şi cărturar al iluminismului timpuriu (1680–1730)* (Nicolae Mavrocordat, Ruler and Scholar During the Beginnings of the Enlightenment), Bucureşti, Editura Omonia, 2006.
Buluță, Gh., *Scurtă istorie a bibliotecilor din România* (Short History of Romanian Libraries), Bucureşti, Editura Enciclopedică, 1998;
Dima-Drăgan, Corneliu, *Un catalog necunoscut al bibliotecii Stolnicului Constantin Cantacuzino* (An Unknown Catalogue in the Library of High Steward Constantin Cantacuzino), în "Revista arhivelor" ("Archive Magazine"), VII, 1964, nr. 2, p. 286-303;
Dima-Drăgan, Corneliu, *Biblioteca unui umanist român – stolnicul Constantin Cantacuzino* (Library of a Romanian Humanist – High Steward Constantin Cantacuzino), 1967;
Dima-Drăgan, Corneliu, *Biblioteci umaniste româneşti - Istoric. Semnificații. Organizare* (Romanian Humanistic Libraries – Historic Perspective. Significations. Organization), Bucureşti, Editura Litera, 1974;
Duțu, Al., *Coordonate ale culturii româneşti în secolul XVIII* (Coordinates of Romanian Culture in the 18th century), Bucureşti, Editura pentru Literatură, 1968;
Iorga, Nicolae, *Vechile biblioteci româneşti – sau ce se citea odinioară în țerile noastre* (Old Romanian Libraries – Or What People Used to Read Formerly in Our Country), în „Floarea darurilor", I, 1907, nr. 2, p. *65-82*;
Iorga, Nicolae, *Pilda bunilor domni români din trecut față de şcoala românească* (The Commendable Example of Good Romanian Rulers of Yore for the Romanian School), în „Analele Academiei Române. Memoriile Secțiunii Istorice" ("Annals of the Romanian Academy. Memories of the Section of History", 1914, seria II, tom 37, p. 77-120;
Ittu, Constantin, *Tainele Bibliotecii Bruckenthal* (Mysteries of the Bruckenthal Library), Editura Universității „Lucian Blaga" din Sibiu, Sibiu, 2005, p 16;
Mitu, Mihai, *Biblioteca lui Ioan Budai Deleanu* (Ioan Budai Deleanu's Library) în vol. *Oameni şi fapte din secolul al XVIII-lea românesc* (People and Actions in 18th-century Romania), Bucureşti, Editura Atos, 1999;
Moldoveanu, Valeriu, *Evoluția biblioteconomiei şi a informării documentare. Bibliotecile şi documentarea în România. Istoric. Organizare actuală* (Evolution of Biblioteconomy and of Documentary Information. Libraries and Documentation in Romania. Historic Perspective. Current Organization), Institutul Național de Informare şi documentare, Bucureşti, 1981;
Papacostea-Danielopolu, Cornelia; Demény, Lidia, *Carte şi tipar în societatea românească şi sud-est europeană (Secolele XVII-XIX)* (Books and Printing in Romanian and South-East European Society – 17th to 19th Centuries), Bucureşti, Editura Eminescu, 1985, p. 117, 119;
Ruffini, Mario, *Biblioteca Stolnicului Constantin Cantacuzino* (Library of High Steward Constantin Cantacuzino), Editura Minerva, Bucuresti 1973;
Ursuțiu, Maria, *Biblioteci particulare şi bibliotecari în Transilvania în secolul al XVII-lea* (Private Libraries and Librarians in 17th-century Transylvania), în „Biblioteca şi cercetarea" ("Library and Research"), VIII, 1984, 244-251;
Mircea Vasilescu, *"Iubite cetitoriule...", Lectură, public şi comunicare în cultura română veche* ("Beloved Reader...", Reading, Public and Communication in Old Romanian Culture), Editura Paralela 45, Piteşti, 2001, p. 58.

BDD-A5813 © 2010 Universitatea din Piteşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 20:13:00 UTC)