THE LIBRARY OF THE MAVROCORDAT FAMILY- A EUROPEAN CULTURAL LANDMARK IN THE 18th CENTURY

Adina Mihaela (BARBU) CHIRIMBU
"Spiru Haret" University

Abstract**:** *Owners of one of the richest libraries in the 18th century, Nicolae Mavrocordat and later his son Constantin Mavrocordat turned Bucharest into a European landmark on the cultural map of the 18th century.Encyclopedic personalities and culture lovers on the one hand and owing a fabulous fortune on the other hand, the two princes managed to gather one of the most precious book collections in the 18th century Europe, a collection desired and hunted by prominent personalities such as the king of France or the Pope.*

Key words: *18th century cultural map, European landmark, library of Mavrocordat family.*

From among the libraries of the 18th century the one belonging to the princely family of the Mavrocordatos is the most outstanding, not surpassed in value and size by any other book collection in the epoch. Created by Alexander Mavrocordatos the Exaporite, great counsellor (dragoman) of the Ottoman Empire and one of the most remarkable cultural personalities of the 17th century, the library was permanently enriched by his son, Nicholas and grandson, Constantine, both of them princes of the two Romanian Provinces of Moldavia and Muntenia, passionate book collectors and lovers of rare and old volumes and manuscripts (MIHORDEA, 1940:359).

Due to his intense preoccupation for enriching his library, Nicholas Mavrocordatos came to be known among his cultivated contemporaries as a highly experienced and passionate book collectors; the result of his efforts was that in 1730, when he died his son Constantine inherited one of the most spectacular book collections in Europe, both in terms of size and financial value (DIMA DRĂGAN, 1973:171).

Besides the books and manuscripts inherited from his father, Nicholas Mavrocordats also took over many volumes belonging to the princely libraries of Constantin Brancoveanu and of the Cantacuzines, after their tragic deaths. However, most of the books representing the pride of his collection where purchased by himself. For this purpose Nicholas had a rich and long-lasting correspondence with literary agents and cultural personalities in west European countries. Most of the letters were exchanged with the humanist philosopher Jean Le Clerc from Amsterdam and with the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Wake. With their help the prince managed to include in his library volumes belonging to the Greek and Latin classical writers, dictionaries, religious texts all of them printed in the great European cultural centres: Paris, Amsterdam, Oxford, Venice, Anvers, Leipzig. His library also included modern authors in the epoch such as Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, John Locke. His own writings, philosophical thinking and ideas prove this deep double influence of the antique classical authors on the one hand and of the contemporary philosophers on the other hand.

Although his library could not be preserved in its original form because of the historical circumstances, we have knowledge about its content due to a catalogue

BDD-A5820 © 2010 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 07:51:35 UTC)

discovered in Iassy and mentioned by Nicolae Iorga in his studies dedicated to the library of the Mavrocordatos. Iorga also refers to the „bogatul material nou pe care, ocupându-se de căutarea în Orient a manuscriptelor vechi pentru Biblioteca Regală din Paris, l-a strâns şi l-a publicat, directorul departamentului respectiv din această bibliotecă, astăzi Biblioteca Naţională, d. Henri Omont, în "Missions archeologiques françaises en Orient aux XVII et XVIII siècles, documents publiés par H. Omont, Paris, 1912" (IORGA 1926:2). Among the sources used for purchasing books and manuscripts for the French royal library Omont mentions the Mavrocordatos' collection which was of a particular interest for the French diplomats and politicians due to its content.

In a letter addressed to the minister Bignon, a French diplomat in Constantinople, de Bonnac admits that the phanariot prince of Muntenia was a fearful competitor; due to his huge fortune and passion for books the prince had a virtually illumined capacity of purchasing all the valuable and rare books and manuscripts: „Le prince de Valachie – de Bonnac writes – a acheté ce qu'il y avoit de plus curieux en livres et en manuscrits dans l'empire ottoman sans regarder au prix" (IORGA, p.459).

In his correspondence with de Sevin, another Frenchman interested by rare books, the minister Bignon advises him to pay a visit to the phanariot prince in order to study the catalogue of his library and ask for gifts if there are double copies of certain books or at least to be allowed to copy the most precious and rare pieces of the library. As he knew the practice in such situations, Bignon suggests that de Sevin should also make an offer to the prince in order to convince him to accept their proposition: „Ce que la renommée nous apporte de son ardeur et de ses connoissances en fait de livres, il pourroit être touché du plaisir d'enrichir la Bibliothèque de Roy, ou son nom deviendroit à jamais mémorable et célèbre et où le dépôt est bien plus en securité qu'il ne pourroit estre dans le pays que ce savant prince habite et qui n'est que trop exposé aux plus fréquens et aux plus teribles ravages de la guèrre" (*ibidem* pp. 467-468).

However, de Sevin' mission is not successful as the prince of Muntenia is not interested in his offer. His practically illumined financial capacity enables him to everything that is worth buying on the book market : „son argent et son credit luy ont ouvert les portes de tous les monastères, et je sçais de bonne part qu-il a visité le mont Athos à plusieurs reprises " (IORGA 1926: 4).

The value of the library is also demonstrated by the French royal representatives' efforts to obtain certain volumes and manuscripts from Nicholas Mavrocordatos ; they advised their own king to send the phanariot prince a number of gifts, for example some volumes by Hardouin who was considered one of the most outstanding French scientists of the time. The effects of this intense courtship were soon visible: the king of France received a precious present from Nicholas Mavrocordatos, a volume by Damaschim from the 7th century, worth its own weight in gold.

For his book purchases Mavrocordatos used "Catalogus universalis librorum" and "Catalogue des livres nouveaux" edited in Amsterdam between 1713 şi 1720 as well as other general book catalogues, printed in the Hague, Leipzig, Hambourg, Wien, Hanover, some of them still keeping the notes made by the prince himself on their pages.

"Istoria românilor" (History of the Romanians) edited by the Romanian Academy mentions that the study of Nicholas Mavrocordatos ' correspondence reveals that he spent 20, 000 scuds in two years for purchasing rare Turkish, Arab and Persian manuscripts (*ibidem* p.779).

During his lifetime Mavrocordatos had two catalogues written for his library ; one of them from 1723 contained an enumeration of 625 books that the prince had

BDD-A5820 © 2010 Universitatea din Piteşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 07:51:35 UTC)

offered to the Vacaresti Monastery : 405 Greek authors and 220 Latin, Italian and French authors. A second catalogue contained an enumeration of the books offered to his son so that he could have his own library ; therefore, at the age of 14 the young prince Constantine had a collection of 237 valuable titles among which prevailed the history ones : the works of Dio Cassius published in Paris in 1599, Herodotus printed in Leyden in 1715, Plutarh printed in Basel in 1542 and 1560, a History of India and the Brahmans printed in London, in 1688, the History of the European States by Samuel de Pufendorf published in Frankfurt in 1700, Tacitus' Annals edited in Venice in 1708.

A third catalogue was drafted after Nicholas' death in 1730, for the French Royal Library, containing a number of 162 titles.

Due to these catalogues we know that among the most valuable pieces of the library there was a Copt Bible from the 3rd century, a History of Poland written by Martin Cromer and published in Basel in 1571, a compilation of chronicles referring to the Ottoman Empire by Nicolaus Reusner published in Leipzig in 1596, the works of Niccolo Machiavelli published in the Haga in 1726.

The legend born in the epoch among the literary agents regarding the real value and size of the Mavroicordatos' library contained even theft accusations, generated by Nicholas's refusal to allow access to his library and its catalogues. In 1730, a few months before the prince's death Claude de Fourmont, a literary agent who had repeatedly tried to obtain a catalogue of the library was writing to de Sevin : „ Je savais déjà que le prince de Valachie avoit rassemblé un grand nombre de manuscrits ; il a fouillé à son aise dans le Mont Athos. Mais, croyez-moi, il ne s'est pas contenté des copies ; bien des originaux ont été enlevés. C'est une des raisons pour lesquelles il ne veut pas communiquer le catalogue de sa bibliothèque ; il apprehende que les vols ne soient decouverts. " (IORGA, 1926: 7).

After Nicholas' sudden death in September 1730 a part of the library was sold in Constantinople for paying back some debts but most of the treasure – books, manuscripts and medals – was inherited by his son Constantine.

This moment was considered perfect by the literary agents for purchasing the library of the Mavrocordatos family but the young prince Constantine refused to sell it, which proved to be a wise decision as many years later the value of the library helped him to buy back his freedom and throne. Although he did not follow his father's literary tradition, this new representative of the Mavrocordatos on the thrones of Moldavia and Muntenia inherited his love for books.

De Villeneuve, the French ambassador in Constantinople in 1731 noticed the new prince's desire and determination not to sell the library of his family: „le jeune prince est déterminé à ne pas s'en defaire" (*ibide:* 8), although even the British monarch, the Pope or the Austrian-Hungarian Emperor would have been willing to buy it

However, in 1758, Constantine was forced to give up his literary treasure. Imprisoned for debts in Constantinople he had to sell his library in order to buy his freedom and take back his throne. Only a small part of the library remained to his descendents and a precious volume, by Boileau was owned by Nicolae Iorga a century and a half later - a proof of a legendary literary treasure which placed the Romanian Provinces on the cultural map of the 18th century Europe.

BDD-A5820 © 2010 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 07:51:35 UTC)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Buluță, Gh., *Civilizația bibliotecilor*, Ed. Enciclopedică, Bucureşti, 1998
Buluță, Gh., *Scurtă istorie a bibliotecilor din România*, Ed. Academiei, Bucuresti, 2000
Cardaş, Gh., *Biblioteci vechi româneşti*, în "Boabe de grâu", nr.10, 1930
Caratașu, M., *Ştiri noi privitoare la biblioteca Mitropoliei din Bucureşti în secolul al XVIII-lea*, în SCB 13, 1974
Dima-Drăgan, C., *Biblioteci umaniste româneşti*, Bucureşti, 1974
Giurăscu, C-tin., *Istoria românilor. Partea a II-a. Dela moartea lui Mihai Viteazul până la sfârşitul epocei fanariote (1601 – 1821)*, Fundația Regală pentru Literatură şi Artă, Bucureşti, 1946
Iorga, N., *Vechile biblioteci româneşt sau ce se citea odinioară în țările noastre*, in "Floarea darurilor", nr.2, 15 ianuarie 1907
Iorga, N., *Ştiri nouă despre biblioteca Mavrocordaților şi despre viața muntenească în timpul lui Constantin Vodă-Mavrocordat*, conferință susținută la Academia Română la 23 aprilie 1926
Iorga, N., *Documentele Cantacuzinilor*, Bucureşti
Istoria românilor, vol. VI, *Românii între Europa clasică şi Europa luminilor* (1711 – 1821), lucrare colectivă editat de Academia Română, Editura Enciclopedică, Bucureşti, 2002
Mihordea, V., *Biblioteca domnească a Mavrocordaților. Contribuții la istoricul ei*, in Analele Academiei Române Memoriile Secțiunii Istorice, seria 3, vol. 22,, 1940
Papacostea-Danielopolu, D.,Demeny, L., *Carte şi tipar în societatea românească şi sud-est europeană (secolele XVII-XIX)*, Bucureşti, 1985.

BDD-A5820 © 2010 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 07:51:35 UTC)