

Library History. History of Advertising

Constantin Brâncoveanu's library of Hurez in the light of 300 years from his death

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Abstract

The libraries present in time in princely residences, boyars' houses, schools and monasteries have preserved undeniable written evidence about the intellectual preoccupations of the Romanian reigning princes. This is how the passion for books, passed on from generation to generation among the Cantacuzinos, materialized as well in the spiritual preoccupations of Constantin Brâncoveanu, who was brought up by his mother, Stanca Cantacuzino, the daughter of the *postelnic* (Chamberlain) Catacuzino, and by his uncle, the *stolnic* (Seneschal) Constantin Cantacuzino. Thus, he will grow up and shape his personality in the residences of the Cantacuzinos of Filipești (Mărgineni) and Bucharest, where he must have had at hand large and precious book collections coming from the European area. This explains the establishment of the Library of Hurez in the monastic settlement bearing the same name.

Keywords: Brâncoveanu, Library of Hurez, Bucharest Bible

The Wallachian ruler began his reign by means of a very important cultural act for the Romanians, namely the printing of the Bucharest **Bible** (its first complete edition in Romanian, a large work for its time, in large folio format, 2 columns on page, small characters), in just 10 months. It began on November 5, 1687, in the printing shop managed by Mitrofan, and ended in September 1688, the second circulation being ready on November 10, 1688 (in one month).

Brâncoveanu was the “administrator” of this work, a work actually realized with the contribution of Romanian scholars from everywhere. The future reigning prince grew aware of the importance of the reference tools needed for the translation of the Bucharest Bible and created a lexicographic fund comprising, among other essential works: the edition printed in Venice in 1523 of the *Etymologicum magnum, sive thesaurus universae linguae Graecae ex multis variisque autoribus collectus*, also known as the **Greek Lexicon** of Varinus Favorinus; **Biblia Sacra Polyglotta**, appeared between the years 1653-1657 (London, 6 volumes in folio), edited by the great orientalist Walton Bryan, or **Lexicon heptaglotton**, realized by Edmund Castell (collaborator of Bryan in the editing of the polyglot Bible).

The volumes were prepared to be shared to all those able to understand the historical significance referred to in their forewords. The Seneschal himself had asked Constantin Brâncoveanu to send copies in the country to make the change of reign known, which allows us to state that we may probably have in front of our eyes a first *manifesto* distributed for the sake of the creation of the political connections needed for the realization of his reforms.

Constantin Brâncoveanu was interested as well in creating a library sheltered by the Monastery of Hurez, for which he had a room built at the same level as the chapel and the princely rooms. About this library, just one mention has been preserved, dating from the first half of the 18th century (1727), which highlights the existence of a beautiful library: “*eine schone bibliothek*” (1) mentioned by the German scholar C. F. Neickelio.

We can also deduce the importance of this library from the Greek inscription laced over the construction’s door: “*Bibliotecă de hrană dorită sufletului, această casă a cărților îmbie prea înțeleaptă îmbelșugare, în anul 1708*” (namely, *Library of food desired by the soul, this book house invites to richness of wisdom, in the year 1708*), realized by the Archimandrite John. Here, Constantin Brâncoveanu will bring together volumes and manuscripts of various domains, discovered by Alexandru Odobescu in 1861, written in Greek, Latin, Italian, Arab and Georgian. During the following years, a part of the books and manuscripts arrived at the National Library (in 1865), the Library of the Holy Synod of Bucharest (in 1877) and at the National Museum of Antiquities (in 1865 and 1885; at that moment at Hurez Monastery there were still 38 manuscripts and 393 printed books), and at the Library of the Romanian Academy (2) In a Report addressed to the School Inspectorate (Eforia Școalelor) (13 September 1840) it is mentioned that Gheorghe Ioanid had a catalogue of the library of the Hurez Monastery, out of which he had selected over 200 titles that he wanted to transfer to the National Library.

In April 1865, Ion C. Gîrleanu was communicating to the Ministry of Instruction that at Hurez Monastery there were 150 volumes (Byzantine historians, Socrates etc) and was proposing transferring them to the National Library. The first catalogue was drawn up on May 1, 1865 by the reviewer I. Eliade and included 425 manuscripts and printings.

In this catalogue the tomes needed for the divine service had not been recorded. A number of 138 volumes were kept for the National Library (Present in a “List of books chosen from the Catalogue of Hurez Monastery to be brought to the Library of Bucharest” (“*Listă de cărțile alese din Catalogul Monastirei Orezu pentru a se aduce la Bibliotheca din Bucuresci*”). In 1907, N. Iorga selectively publishes the archive of Hurez Monastery, stating that “several series of Church books and others..., all sealed by the princely seal, were entrusted to Ioan”, the first Archimandrite of the Monastery. (3)

For the National Museum of Antiquities several Church books were selected: **Greek Evangel** with golden covers; **Greek Evangel** with silver covers; **Romanian Evangel** [with Cyrillic Characters] given to C. Brâncoveanu by the Tsar Peter the Great; **Small Romanian Evangel** [with Cyrillic Characters], **Evangel**s in velvet binding with corners made of silver or copper.

On December 12, 1876 the Ministry of Public Instruction is informed on the existence of 600 volumes in the precincts of the monastery. A catalogue is drawn up (3 April 1877) including 175 titles described bibliographically and other volumes recorded only numerically (33 Greek, 122 Old Slav, 244 Romanian). A decision is made that the Church volumes shall remain entrusted to the monastery, while the others shall be transferred to the Holy Synod (212 titles; according to Catalogue of the Books of Horez Monastery Library that are to be entrusted to the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Autocephalous Church), with the obligation of creating a library.

The oldest inventory is that of 1740 in which all the Church books were recorded, except for the ones covered in metal considered precious objects meant to be used in the divine service. We can discover the existence of numerous Romanian *Evangel*s, *Apostles' Acts and Letters*, *Octoechos*, *Triodions*, *Euchologions*, *Liturgical Books*, *Psalms Books*, *Horologions*, *Sermon Books*, etc.

In 1692, Constantin Brâncoveanu had an *ex libris* bearing the signs of the princely power, *ex libris* that made it possible to partially reconstitute the library. This seal appears as well on the 1688 Bible, copy referred to by C. Dima-Drăgan. The same seal can be met as well on a copy in the collections of the Library of the Faculty of Letters at the Central University Library of Bucharest. (4)

We can even say that the reigning prince had in mind the organization at Hurez of a cultural complex probably with an intended national library, since he required the five printing houses (Bucharest, Snagov, Buzău, Râmnic, Târgoviște) to send to Hurez what we would now call a copy meant to become part of the legal deposit.

In France there was the model of Gabriel Naudé, “*father of the library science*“, in the service of several cardinals and kings. Up to him, a librarian had formerly been a high official, entrusted exclusively books. Yet, Naudé becomes more than that, namely a *counselor* managing the power of information for the political power. It seems that the Wallachian rulers also became aware of this thing, since some used the services of personal secretaries who also worked as librarians. Such was the case of Constantin Brâncoveanu. (5)

For a while, the task of librarian was fulfilled by Ioan Comnen, the doctor of the princely court, who at a certain moment wrote down: “...*But you have also set up a library worth seeing, spending a lot of money, at the beautiful Hurez Monastery, built by you, and you filled it with various and very useful books...*“ (6) Considering that a

librarian was needed, it means that the fund must have been quite important quantitatively.

In 1694, Constantin Brâncoveanu hired Nicolaus de Porta, born on Chios Island, in a family of Venetian origin. De Porta had been secretary of the ambassador of Holland in Istanbul, being involved in matters that are nowadays called espionage, letter interception and deciphering. He was a very useful character at the Princely Court of Constantin Brâncoveanu, who used him as a secretary and librarian. He became the trusted man of Constantin Cantacuzino, who was head of the diplomatic chancery of the reigning prince, and who entrusted him the task of writing down the catalogue of his library of Mărgineni. Nicolaus de Porta also organized the Library of the Princely Academy of St. Sava, as it is shown in a letter of February 1714 of the Greek teacher Marcus of Cyprus, who was in charge of this settlement and who informed the patriarch of Jerusalem, Hrisant Notara: “*we are beginning to order the books with Signor de Porta*”. (7) After Constantin Brâncoveanu’s death, he continued to work in the service of Ștefan Cantacuzino, for whom he was also serving as a translator. This library will later on become national. (8) Not too much information has been preserved in relation to this library, although it was created at the same time as the school, its starting core being the books left by Constantin Cantacuzino (a part of them, bearing the *ex libris* of the Seneschal can be found at the Library of the Romanian Academy). Brâncoveanu himself, in a letter addressed to the same Hrisant Notara, states that because of the plague the works for the printing press and the library had not been finished.

What did the documentary fund of Hurez contain? Principally theological writings in Greek and Romanian with Cyrillic characters/ Old Slav, printed in Venice, Lvov or Kiev. Mario Ruffini noticed that there were various writings and that the reigning prince proved “*a large culture and opening to the values of human spirituality*”. One can detach the profile of a library at the same time erudite, with a mainly theological component, along with the historical one, yet simultaneously also with a political significance. The library does not seem to have been built randomly, but in order to serve the legitimacy of Power. It is not the collection of a whimsical book-lover, but the library of an ambitious prince, with counselors of adequate value, with interest for the European (Eastern and Western world) and for the political dimension of history. Corneliu Dima Drăgan, partially reconstituting the profile of Brâncoveanu’s collection, observes, in his turn, that it was “*of a great thematic diversity*”: *Glossarium mediae et infimae Latinitatis* (Glossary of Medieval and Late Latin), printed in Paris in the 17th century, under the coordination of the Byzantinologist Charles du Fresne, sieur du Cange; the historical works of the Byzantine emperor John VI Cantacuzino (the imperial descent of the Constantinopolitan Cantacuzinos had roots in the 14th century, in Mihail Șaitanoglu and Andronic); bilingual editions of Origen’s patristic writings: *On First Principles* (Colonia-Köln, 1685); the works of Clement of Alexandria, (Köln, 1688); the works of saint Basil the Great (Paris edition of 1638, in three volumes); the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius of Caesarea, in 3 volumes (Mainz, 1672–1679); the works of Saint Epiphanius of Salamis (Colonie, 1682); the theological discourses (*Opera omnia*) of Saint Gregory of Nazianzus (Paris, 1609); the works of Saint Gregory of Nyssa, in 3 volumes (Paris, 1638); the works of Saint Maximus the Confessor (Paris, 1675); the works of Saint John of Damascus (3 volumes, Paris, 1619) and others.

The library also held a series of literary works of the Antiquity: Homer's *Iliad* (brought from Wien, being translated and checked by Gheorghios Rusiadis), Homer's *Odyssey* (Basel, 1541), Euripides' *Tragedies* (Basel, 1551), Aristophanes' *Comedies* (Venice, 1542), Herodotus' works (Venice, 1502; Printed in Greek by Aldus Manutius). To these, one can add a few works of the Byzantine juridical literature (Justinian's *Pandects*, Romanian Regulations (*Pravilele românești*) and so on), works of geography, philosophy, literature, lexicons, grammars, prayer books and others. Calendars for the years 1693, 1694, 1695, 1699, 1701, 1703 and 1707 are also present. Odobescu noted that "It is useless to try to further explain how these calendars arrived at Hurezu, as it is known that all that remained after Brâncoveanu's house was robbed, when the reigning prince had fallen, came there; among others, the prince's library, which contains to this day the great collection of Byzantine authors printed under Louis XIV by Du Cange and most of the Church Fathers in Greek-Latin editions." (9) Of particular interest is the fact that on the pages of some of these books there are different handwritten observations made by Constantin Brâncoveanu, in Romanian and Greek, with pieces of news concerning his reign. We could even say that we are in front of a sort of "daily notations".

A library separate from that of the reigning prince is that of his son, prince Ștefan Brâncoveanu, remarked even since his youth for his deep love for books. The Library of the Academy in Bucharest and the State Archives of Brașov contain a few books with his *ex libris*.

References

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