

LE MINISTÈRE D'EDUCATION NATIONALE
L'UNIVERSITÉ "VALAHIA" TARGOVISTE

ANNALES

D'UNIVERSITÉ "VALAHIA" TARGOVISTE

SECTION
d'Archéologie et d'Histoire

Tome I

Targoviste
6/1999

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Some considerations on the Greek influence during the 17th century

Radu STATE*

This subject is obviously one of the most intensely presented by modern Romanian historiography.

From the very beginning of 20th Century, historians like C-tin Dissescu, George M. Ionescu, C-tin V. Obedeau¹ have tackle the important problem of the relations between Greeks and Walachians, for the period best known as "prephanariot". Nicolae Iorga² and the after second world war historians³ have also worked out various hypothesis and theories about Greek influence in Walachia.

Our attention in this study is to try to better establish the role of the Greeks in the political life of Walachia during the 17th Century; for that we consider that it will be necessary to present some preliminary informations about main events in the South-Eastern Europe, which affected the Greek entity in the Ottoman Empire.

Starting with the second part of 16th Century one can notice an increasing of the Ottoman Empire suzerainty materialized in the direct nomination of the dependent princes, by the Sultan. As we well know how comps they were, the Ottoman high office, we can presume the pretenders for the reign tried to buy the throne; the money necessary for that were given by the Greek merchants, who came then with the prince for obtainning economical and political advantages.⁴

That seemed to be a normal situation before Lepanto battle (1571), when in the entire Empire started a wave of intolerance which forced the post-Byzantine Greek world (and not only it's tops-the arhonts, with an continuos endangered existence), to find a better condition outside the Empire.⁵

Greek elements coming to Walachia were merchants and aristocrats, from Fanar. The first Fanariots practiced commerce a lot, obtaining concessions of the imperial revenues increasing their richness, and as a result of this they gradually influenced, during the second part of 17th Century, even the imperial political life and implicitly, the others, from Walachia.⁶

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Actually the Greek presence is obvious since 16th Century, so that the prince Radu Paisie was forced to give a document (anact) to the natives of Transylvania merchants, for their own protection. The Greek's penetration would become massive in 17th Century, as we can see from the many notices and informations provided by Nicolae Stoicescu;⁷ so that, if during the 16th Century we can find out only 10 great boyars in the Prince's Council, in the 17th Century they are over 40; however they never overtake the number of Walachian boyars (with one single exception during the reign of Radu Mircea, when five out of nine were Greeks).

In our opinion this fact isn't so pointing out, like is the position they occupied in these Prince's Councils so that for the first three decades of the 17th Century the all *vistier* of Walachia are Greeks, and for the first twenty years the same Century the position of great *ban* was also occupied by the Greeks. For the almost entire Century for the position of great *postelnic* are also nominated Greeks only (1616-1654; 1674-1678; 1684-1700).

On the other hand, another phenomenon that we can notice is the decreasing roll of the Prince's Council, because of the new favorites of the prince,⁸ which often were also originally Greeks.

One eloquent example is the boyar Dumitrache Cantacuzino, who named by the Radu Mihnea and Alexandru Coconul "*vlastelinul*", and the first adviser of theirs reign⁹, although he held only the position of great *vistier*, which in fact weren't the first position in the Council.

We think that one can talk about an important domination of the Greeks in Walachian political life until Matei Basarab reign; with one single exception, the reign of Radu Serban (1602-1611) when political power was divided between Greeks represented by Leca Racota – great *postelnic*, and also by Nica from Corcova – great *vistiernic*, and the Walachian Buzescu family.

After 1611 all the evidences prove that the Greeks succeeded to monopolize the political life, "*Letopisetul Cantacuzinesc*" and Radu Popescu's chronicle emphasize this reality: the Walachian boyars "had a council to kill Radu Voda, because he encircle them with a multitude of Greeks from Tarigrad and Rumele". When Alexandru Voda came to the power sent by the Ottoman Empire he brought a lot of Greeks with him, who added to the number of Greeks, resulted in a multitude of them...".¹⁰

It is also an interesting fact to notice that: for the reign of Matei Basarab (1632-1654), a choice of the Walachian boyars to counteract the Greek nobility, the importance of Levant's nobility hasn't decreasing at all: Alexeanu Ghiorma was still a great *ban* (1645-1655), C-tin Cantacuzino – great *postelnic* (1632-1654), and Ghinea Tucala Bratananu – great *vistiernic* (1651-1653).

The essential difference between Greek merchants and Greek aristocrats consisted in the certitude that the latter had a quick access to any position in the Council.

We have mentioned until now only the first generation of Greek nobility who came in Romanian Principalities, but the second generation was already changing, trying to be more Walachian", even by contracting marriages with Walachian local boyar's daughters to defeat the native nobility's adversity: so that C-tin Cantacuzino marry Elena, Radu Serban's daughter, and so his children became even leaders of the native boyars group.

At the end of the Century Serban Cantacuzino and C-tin Brâncoveanu were recognized for their effort to encourage native boyars occupying important positions in the Council: Vergo was reprezentives Walachia to the Ottoman Empire, Caramanliu Dumitrascu was a great *portar* and great *postelnic* (1688-1704, Socotianu Statie a great *vistiernic* (1683-1685).

The important role of the Greek elements in Walachian history during the 17th Century was possible because the formation of the Walachian princes; Radu Mihnea for example grew up at the monastery iviron in Athos mountain, and his wife – Argyra was a Greek woman; Alexandru Ilias, the nephew of Petru Rares was educated at Constantinopole, and was also under the influence of a Greek priest; Leon Tomsa and Radu Leon adopted a characteristic Greek life style.

As a conclusion we can say that the destiny of Walachia in the 17th Century was taken in theirs hands by the Greeks, especially from the political and financial point of view. Therefore we can name "phanariot" the whole 18th Century, we can also say without reservation that 17th Century was certainly a "prephanariot" one too.

Notes:

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3. Ionascu, Ion – "*L'influence des Grecs des Principautés Roumaines dans la vie politique de ces pays*", in Symposium. L'epoque phanariote, Thesaloniki, 1974; Pippidi Andrei – "*Byzantine political tradition in*

- Walachia, on 16th – 17th Century*", Bucharest, 1983; Idem – "*L'idée impériale byzantine*", in *Byzantina*, 1971, vol. III;
4. Ionascu, Ion – *Op. cit.*, p. 217;
 5. Pippidi Andrei – *Op. cit.*, p. 53;
 6. Ionascu, Ion – *Op. cit.*, p. 217;
 7. Stoicescu, Nicolae – "*A dictionary of the great positions in the Prince's Council in Walachia and Moldavia 16th – 17th Century*", Bucharest;
 8. Georgescu, Valentin – *Op. cit.*, p. 145;
 9. *Documents about Roumanian's History*, B, vol. IV, Bucharest, 1954, p. 288, 392-393;
 10. Popescu, Radu vornicul – "*The histories of the princes of Valahia*", ed. Greceanu, Bucharest, 1963, p. 87; *Letopisetul Canatacuzinesc* – "*The histories of the princes of Walachia*", ed. Greceanu, Bucharest, 1963, p. 87;
 11. Iorga, Nicoleta – "*Roumains et Grecs ...*", p. 42.

Glossary

- *vistier* – Member of the Prince's Council occupied with the collecting of the country's states;
- *ban* – Member of the Council, leader of the province of Oltenia – the western part of Walachia;
- *postelnic* – the Boyar taking care of the prince's badroom;
- *vlastelin* – A Serbian term, naming members of the high nobility with political and military functions; this term was addopted in Walachia in 14th Century, meaning the first adviser of the prince;
- *portar* – Master of ceremonies in Walachia and Moldavia;
- *Letopiset Cantacuzinesc* – A well-known chronicle about Walachian history during the Cantacuzini's office.