The History Dimension in Dimitrie Cantemir's Work

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It is no secret that Dimitrie Cantemir was interested in sciences, politics, literature, philosophy, music or travelling, being a highly illuminated "spiritus rector" of the medieval era. Our thesis is that history regains its vitality by emerging in a rhetoric of challenge and mystification. For this reason, the truth is searched by all means. His historical works, based on the principle of causality, depict a world seen almost scientifically. Besides the appearance of fiction, we find a solid web of symbols, heraldic, mythology, passion for discovering the unknown, doubled by a powerful narrative talent and erudite style.

Keynotes: medieval chronicles, Age of Enlightment, mystification

1. Introduction

Can we still talk about Cantemir's humanism? The question, far from being just a rhetorical one, leads the way to numerous discussion paths, which stand evidence of the interest in Dimitrie Cantemir's polyvalent work. In general, older historiography works did not admit the existence of Romanian Humanism, thus failing to bring into discussion the problem of Cantemir's Humanism, as such – I. Minea, G. Pascu, Ștefan Ciobanu, Sextil Pușcariu, none of them related the scholar's work to the concept of Humanism.

By promoting a new anthropological, ethical and socio-political view, a new view on the human being, opposed to the Christian medieval one, "the humanists designed an optimistic view on the value and dignity of man, praised man as a free, autonomous creature (Pico della Mirandola), as a creative being, who carries on nature's work or God's work, forging the world of culture (G. Manetti, Campanella)" – Vaida[33].

Romanian humanism follows the general characteristics of European Humanism, but there are also specific characteristics, reflected by social and economic conditions and by a particular type of culture. Among the general characteristics of Romanian Humanism, knowledge of Latin and Greek, an interest for Classic Roman and Greek culture, promoting laic ethics, based on 'reason', as opposed to arbitrariness and nature, enabled the creation of a new way of representing the world. At the same time, by attempting to restore Antic texts, which had reached them in manuscripts distorted by the ignorance of medieval scriveners, Humanists implemented philological criticism, the standing block for the methods of researching historical documents, and then they established "the habit of critical analyses conducted on testimonies, documents, and statements, and the refusal to be led by any other authority than reason", as Vaida[33] says.



Dimitrie Cantemir. Sursă foto: http://www.moldovenii.md/resources/files/photo/e/6/e6f7c3325e3bf4084a54dc256a5dc7ad_691_800.jpg

2. Dimitrie Cantemir's Works

"The Classicism of Romanian scholars would reach its highest point in Dimitrie Cantemir's work, who writes entire books in Latin and Greek, using dozen of Greek, Latin and Byzantine documents in his works; he enriches with notes and new meanings the concept of civilisation" precises Vaida[43].

Nevertheless, with just few exceptions, Romanian historiography is limited to chronologies of rulers, with only vague references to their closer neighbours (with rare exceptions: as in Radu Popescu or Nicolae Costin's case, for example). „None of the Romanian historians, either before, or after Dimitrie Cantemir, had, like he did, the feeling that they were going through a turning point of the world as they knew it", as Țarălungă[68] says.

However, Dimitrie Cantemir's activity as a historian is usually displayed under the form of a comment – "be it an explanation, an argument, a theory, a piece of advice" Țarălungă[69] – regarding a political action, something the author himself admitted in one of the "Prefaces" of the *Hronic* establishing, at the same time, "the scope of a politician's actions, as well as those of a historian, the evolutionist theory which must represent the basis of both endeavours" – Țarălungă[69].

Such a view on world history "which is used to establish the place and significance of the Romanian people from the beginning until his times, characterises Cantemir's activity as a historian compared to all the others who wrote in Romanian, before him or at the same time" – Țarălungă[69]. During the first years of Mehmed the Fourth's reign (1648-1687), Europe was under the influence of Louis the XIV (France, 1643-1715), of Leopold the I (emperor of the Roman Empire, king of Hungary, Bohemia, Croatia etc.,1658-1705, the one who would lead the "Nine year war" against France and the "Spanish Civil War), Philip IV (Spain, 1621-1665) and then Charles II (1665-1700), Alfonse VI (Portugal, 1656-1669), Peter I, Alfonso's brother (1669-1706), The English Parliament (after Charles I was beheaded, 1649-1653; O. Cromwell, the protector of the Republic 1653-1658; Richard Cromwell, 1658-1660; King Charles II, 1660-1685).

Cantemir himself, as the ruler of Moldavia (March–April 1693; 1710-1711), would live in a geopolitical environment filled with wars. In 1710, Cantemir is crowned ruler of Moldavia, with the mission to supervise Brâncoveanu, suspected of being disloyal to the Ottoman Empire; in turn, he signs a treaty with the Russian Empire of Peter the Great. The Russian army, helped by Moldavia, suffers a smashing defeat against the Turks during the battle of Stănilești. As a consequence, Cantemir flees to Russia, where he will spend the rest of his life, absorbed in his intellectual activities.

In *The History of the Rise and Fall of the Ottoman Empire*, written in Latin (*Historia incrementorum atque decrementorum Aulae Othomanicae*, 1714-1716), Cantemir presents the history of the Ottoman Empire and analyses the causes which might have led to its end, focusing on the possibility of oppressed nations to regain their freedom. The book, translated and published in English, French and German was written according to scientific norms: "analysis and criticism of historical documents, balanced argumentation, clear demonstrations" – Cândea[XXVI], which are all aspects of an assumed humanism.

It wasn't the Orient that sparked Cantemir's interest, it was the Ottoman Empire as a political, religious and military power, as "a whole of Oriental culture" – Țarălungă[71]. For Cantemir, the key to

contemporary politics was given by the Ottoman Empire. "This situation of the Ottoman Empire, creates for the rest of Cantemir's historiographical topics a series of determinations which produce different convergence angles of local history towards Ottoman history" – Țarălungă[71].

The overall structure of Ottoman Empire history is supported by a principle belonging to the philosophy of history. This fact allowed Cantemir to divide his work into two sections. The systematization of the fact in *Istoria* is done with the help of important figures such as: J. Vockerodt and Nausios, an Oxford graduate, with good knowledge of essential European works, such as Louys Moréri's dictionary (Grand dictionnaire historique ou Mélange de l'histoire profane et sacrée, 1674).

The chronological method to disclose events, more precisely the names of the sultans leading the Empire, is surprising in two ways: on the one hand, Turkish historiography and, on the other hand, the assimilation of the Romanian historiography of the time. To that effect, Cantemir must have used Tadj el tevarich (The crown of history) written by Hodja Sa'ded-din, the Chronicle of Ali Efendi of Philipopole, an anonymous history called Muhammediye, other Arab and Persian sources, some of which remain unidentified, the books of Husein Hezarfenn (cf. Franz Babinger, „Dimitre Cantemir's Turkish historical sources", in Arhiva românească, t. VII, 1941; Mihai Guboglu, „L'historiographie ottomane des XV^{e}-XVIII^{e} siècles. Bref aperçu", in Revue des études sud-est européennes, t. III, 1-2/1965).

In regards to Romanian historiography, Dimitrie Cantemir analyses Gr. Ureche's *Letopiseț*, with intercalations by Simion Dascălu and Axinte Uricariul, Miron Costin, Nicolae Costin, the Chronicle about Cantacuzino family etc.

Other works which display "the awareness of the historical purpose of his work" – Vita Constantini Cantemiri (1716-1718) or Short story about the extermination of the Brâncoveanu and Cantacuzino families (1717-1718) – show "Cantemir's natural preoccupation to inform foreign political groups about the situation in Romanian Countries".

But the most important book is Hronicul vechimii a romano-moldo-vlahilor... After writing the Latin version of the book, the Romanian version was subject to changes made by Cantemir (1719-1722), who stated that it would have been "a wrongdoing and a shame" – Cantemir[13] to leave „future things known rather by foreigners than our own people" – Cantemir[14]; this is why when he edited the Hronicul „in our Romanian language", he attempted to recover the truth, so that the readers could see in it "their face and status, their old age and the honour of their people, like in a clear mirror". Cantemir "wants first to inform and only then to persuade about the realities and the characteristics of his people, an ancient part of Oriental Europe, capable even under Turkish occupation to defend its autonomy, ideals and institutions" – Cândea[XXVI].

3. Conclusion

Cantemir's activity as a historiographer was completed by that of geographer, archaeologist, ethnographer, and linguist. Cantemir sees how facts change in time and how they unfold in a certain space, at a certain time. The relation between national and universal subordinates all the other issues present in Cantemir's historiography, the most important one being that of tradition-innovation.

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