

Political Zoology around 1700: Dimitrie Cantemir's "Hieroglyphic History"

*1700 Yılı Dolaylarında Politik Zooloji:
Dimitri Kantemir'in "Hiyeroglifik Tarih"i*

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Among the various literatures of the Ottoman Empire, Dimitrie Cantemir's allegorical novel *Istoria ieroglifică* stands out as one of the rare examples of non-Turkish literature that would even correspond to the modern understanding of the term¹. While secular literature primarily consisted of chronicles, translations and copies of antique or Byzantine writings as well as popular narratives (fables and stories often based on Biblical Apocrypha) in hand-written miscellanies, most of the textual genres we are used to thinking of when speaking of literature in the sense of *belles-lettres* were entirely missing until the late 18th century. Hence the solitary position occupied by the Dimitrie Cantemir's baroque *roman à clef* with no precursors or successors.

The author Dimitrie Cantemir (1673–1723), a well-known and picturesque figure of the Ottoman period in Southeast European history, grew up and was „educated, lived, and wrote in a quintessentially transitional space where goods, ideas, values, cultural forms, and mentalities shuttled back and forth between Europe and Asia“². His main biographical stages and literary achievements are well known: Born as the second son to the Moldavian hospodar Constantin Cantemir (1685-1693) in 1673,

1 In the sense of individualized author's imaginative writing that is not determined by its use in religious practice or practical teaching.

2 Crețu 2018, 55.

he spent a considerable part of his life, between 1688 and 1710, as political hostage, diplomatic representative of his brother, and pretender to the Moldavian and Wallachian throne. In this period, having enjoyed an exquisite education and profiting from libraries and the select networks of scholars and diplomats in the Ottoman capital, he authored a series of treatises and books in the fields of philosophy and theology in Latin, (possibly) Greek, and Romanian, as well as a widely acclaimed treatise on musicology in Ottoman-Turkish³.

Yet, as widely respected as he was, Cantemir's ambitions were not quenched by his literary and musical creations, but were ultimately oriented towards political recognition. Not only did he strive to succeed his father on the Moldavian throne, but, by virtue of his marriage with Casandra, descendant of the influential Greek-Romanian Cantacuzino family and daughter to the former hospodar Șerban Cantacuzino (r. 1678-1688), Dimitrie felt entitled to the throne of Walachia, then ruled by Constantin Brâncoveanu, the well-proven enemy of the Cantemir clan since his father's reign (r. 1685-1693). In order to settle the incessant and ruinous dispute for the succession to the throne of Moldavia, the leading boyars of both principalities meet in Arnavutköy in 1703. After tough bargaining, the powerful Constantin Brâncoveanu imposed his candidate Mihai Racoviță (r. 1703-1705, 1707-1709) against the wishes of the opposing Cantemir faction. It turned out, however, to be a hapless solution, since his methods of rule provoked widespread resistance and even popular unrest spearheaded by representatives of the lower gentry and free peasant of the country. Thus, only two years later, Racoviță was dethroned again and the Wallachian faction acquiesced to accept Antioh Cantemir (r. 1695-1700 and 1705-1707) as the new hospodar, while Brâncoveanu consented to indemnify his brother Dimitrie for his renunciation to his father's succession by paying for his household in Istanbul. Thus, in 1705 at the age 30, despite having curbed the thrust of his enemies and having secured the Moldavian throne for his brother, Dimitrie was still haunted by the feeling that, in fact, his ambitions remained largely unfulfilled. It is in this period, between May and December 1705, that he wrote the *Hieroglyphic History*, sidelined and frustrated on the shores of the Bosphorus⁴.

3 For his treatise on musicology see Kantemiroğlu, *Kitābu 'ilmi'l-mūsikī 'alā vecchi'l hurūfāt* [The Book of the Science of Music through Letters], ed. Yalçın Tura (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2001); Demetrius Cantemir: The collection of notations, ed. Owen Wright, 1: Text (London: SOAS, 1992), 2: Commentary (Farnham: Ashgate, 2001.). From amongst his philosophical writings, his bilingual Romanian-Greek treatise *Divanul sau Galceava înțeleptului cu Lumea sau Giudețul Trupului cu Sufletul / Κριτήριο του κόσμου με τον σοφόν ή Διάλεξις της ψυχής με το σώμα* [The Divan or The Wise Man's Parley with the World or The Judgement of the Soul with the Body] was printed in Iași in 1698.

4 The text is preserved as a single and unpublished manuscript in the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts, comprising 333 folios, written and illustrated by the author's

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On a superficial level, the book elaborates on this short but intense episode of an unrelenting 'game of thrones' that took place between the northern periphery and the centre of the Ottoman Empire from 1703 to 1705 and that involved a multitude of actors from different regions and social milieus. However, none of these historical events or personae can simply be gathered as such from the "Hieroglyphic History, divided into twelve parts, also with 760 aphorisms beautifully adorned, with a scale revealing the numbers at the beginning, and another one explaining the foreign numbers at the end", so the full title. Instead, we are presented with a lush narrative of ongoing beastly brawls – literally and metaphorically – between the reign of the Lion (Moldavia), populated by quadrupeds, and the reign of the Eagle (Walachia), populated by birds of prey. This epic fight, easily decodable as the antagonism between the two principalities, unfolds before the eyes of the reign of Fish, i.e., the Ottoman Empire, whose individual representatives, however, in defiance of metaphorical coherence, are not rendered as aquatic species, but as wizards.

In a mythical time "before the founding of Babylon," thus the story begins, all animals of the two reigns are convoked to settle the disputes of supremacy and allegiance, of status and order. Instead, the assembly escalates further debates and accusations concerning the nature of specific animals and the resulting political prerogatives. In the end, the Raven (the sinister commander of the birds' reign) manages to win over the high and low-rank creatures (of both reigns alike) to support the Ostrich at the expense of his one-time favorite, the Otter, by means of bribery, persuasion and extortion. His appointment to the governor of the animals' reign, which naturally leaves numerous animals frustrated, has to be confirmed by the Wizards of the City of Lust. Advised by the cunning Giraffe, the Ostrich's supporters manage to do so before the Shrine of Goddess Greed; here is the actual engine room of power located at the center of the City of Lust described in fascinating detail in the third chapter of the book. As the transition of power does not proceed smoothly and as the fear of two dangerous pretenders (namely the Elephant and the upright Unicorn) starts to grow with raptors and predators, they decide to eliminate all opposing animals. While the beasts are wallowing in unheard-of rapacity within their reigns, respectively, their feast is spoiled by the uprising of insects and other critters. At a different site, the Unicorn reveals to the Falcon (an agent of the Raven) the true reasons for the conflict dating back to the time of the Unicorn's father, which is told as a flashback referring us back to the chronological beginning of story. Meanwhile, by the help of wizards and other species who were favorably disposed towards him, the Unicorn manages to escape the hunt of the Raven's stooges. Finally, the latter consents not to encroach anymore on the animals' reign, to have the rather fickle Elephant appointed to governorship and to end the "the 1700 years-long feud" with the Unicorn.

own hand. It was first published in 1883, and numerous editions followed, including two critical editions in 1965 and 1973.

Confronting the reader with an impressive bestiary, Cantemir provides several clues for revealing the true identity of its animal protagonists and the meaning of numerous metaphorical expressions in a glossary at the end of the book. It becomes clear that the boyars of Walachia and Moldavia hide behind the rich inventory of real, mythical and concocted animals. Beyond their different characters, meticulously examined in the large passages of the book, they all turn out to be brutal and merciless, greedy and cunning, treacherous and venal. Thus, for example, the grim Raven turns out to be the powerful Walachian hospodar Constantin Brâncoveanu (r. 1688–1714), the treacherous Cameleon the influential boyar Scarlat Ruset, the Ostrich the Moldavian hospodar Mihai Racoviță, the Otter the latter's predecessor Constantin Duca (r. 1693–1695, 1700–1703,) the hideous but fascinating Giraffe (also called the Camel-Leopard) the famous Dragoman Alexandros Mavrokordatos, while the unreliable Elephant is Dimitrie's brother Antioh Cantemir. The only virtuous character besides his father (the hybrid Leopard-Unicorn, i.e., Constantin Cantemir) is the Unicorn, the animal alter-ego of Dimitrie Cantemir himself, who manages to stand by his moral standards amidst the omnipresent vileness of the political world, epitomized by the City of Lust – Istanbul.

In a way, the *Hieroglyphic History* is Cantemir's most personal and politically delicate oeuvre. More important than the political precautions that might have motivated the sidelined pretender to 'talk through hieroglyphs', the encrypted way of narrating enabled him to relate much more than a succession of events. In fact, when examined closer, the real-life events prove to be nothing more than mere reference points in a labyrinth of reflections on political ethics and the workings of power in the Ottoman Empire around 1700.

Besides Cantemir's relentlessly critical stance, the bleak and enigmatic atmosphere of the book owes much to its composition and intricate stylistics. Thus, the novel begins right in the middle of the story. Through narratives of various characters, previous events are woven into the course of action, which time and again is suspended for the sake of narrative digressions and philosophical reflections. Moreover, rhetorical strategies concealing and revealing are constantly used to lead (or mislead) the reader through the meandering sequence of events, maxims, characterologies or parables. Also, while some animal characters, mythical locations and metaphors are easily decipherable – certainly intended by Cantemir – they remain obscure, if not dissimulated beyond recognition in other instances. Is this a threshold only the initiated reader can pass? Or is it a trap, laid out by the sophisticated author who rejoices at leading us astray? At any rate, literary scholars continue to unravel the many Persian, Turkish, Greek or Western models the novel's imagery and philosophical overlays might have drawn on alongside popular narratives of Romanian origin, while acknowledging Cantemir's original elaboration on this rich cultural tradition. As pointed out by a literary historian, it is in the "Hieroglyphic History" that „authoring and borrowing, textuality and intertextuality, originality and translation or adaptation

characteristically bled into each other".⁵ This cultural intermediacy is also reflected in the peculiar language of the novel. Besides the idiosyncratic use of rhetorical figures that are highly unusual even for contemporary Romanians, the novel's language abounds with neologisms as well as lexical and grammatical calques primarily from Latin and Greek, which, by Cantemir's own account, is supposed to overcome the limitations of his mother tongue – at the price of producing a convoluted and, at times, hardly readable account.

This is certainly one of the reasons why the novel has not been acknowledged beyond a small circle of Romanian literary scholars and continues to remain in the shadow of his later literary achievements after he was granted short-time access to political power. Being appointed *hospodar* of Moldavia at the outbreak of the Russian-Ottoman war in late 1710, several months later Dimitrie Cantemir decided to change sides and defected to Tsar Peter the Great in the aftermath of the Russian defeat of July 1711. A devoted Counselor to the Czar, Dimitrie Cantemir spent the rest of his life in Russia, where he dedicated his energy to the writing of historical works, most notably *Descriptio Moldaviae*, the only book published and acknowledged by the enlightened European readership during his lifetime,⁶ and the much appreciated and widely translated *History of Ottoman Empire*⁷. In contrast to these works, his *Hieroglyphical History*, a unique document of literary political culture of the Ottoman Empire, is still awaiting its discovery by international scholarship.

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5 Crețu 2018, 66.

6 It was printed in Berlin in 1716.

7 The English translation *The History of the Growth and Decay of the Othman Empire* by Nicolas Tindal (London 1734) served as the basis of all other translations until the discovery of the Latin original *Historia incrementorum atque decrementorum aulae othomanicae*. Cantemir's historical-theological examination of „The Religion of the Muhammedans“ (*Книга Система или состояніе мухаммеданскія религіи*, printed in St. Petersburg in 1722) could also be mentioned among his lesser discussed works.

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