

DIMITRIE'S ETHICAL HERITAGE: A LIFE LIVED MEANINGFULLY BETWEEN REALITY AND FICTION

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Abstract: Dimitrie Cantemir was a Romanian leader who, due to his joint merits as a highly esteemed politician of his time and as an artist, has earned himself an indisputable place of unique value in the annals of time. His personality is thus equally acclaimed on synchronic and on diachronic level. This, no doubt, can be ascribed to his highly intuitive, sensible and justice-loving personality. Yet, apart from being greatly admired for his remarkable social-political and artistic accomplishments, Dimitrie Cantemir has something special to be remembered for: his semi-fictional nature, which, to the day, remains shrouded in a mythical aura. His exquisiteness may be accounted for by the prince's double ancestry. His innovative genius and artistic nature came in maternal lineage, an independent and cultivated spirit herself, who defied and baffled contemporary conventions with her experimental initiatives. In addition to this, Dimitrie inherited the love of justice and that of his nation from his father, Constantin, an audacious fighter for the safety and well-being of his people. This article proposes a brief examination of the double nature of Dimitrie Cantemir's personality, which has marked his entire endeavor: his diplomatic activity as Prince of Moldova and, to an equal extent, his writings, fictional or of a different nature.

Keywords: Dimitrie Cantemir, fictional character, heritage, encyclopedic spirit of Enlightenment.

Opening remarks

The history of Dimitrie's life, (Demetrius) son of Constantin Cantemir, is full of effervescent, spectacular events, which places the protagonist closer to the realm of fiction, of fairytale rather than to that of reality and generally accepted ordinariness or conformity. Integral part of a situational complex that is characteristic of such conditions, the *wondrous* tale of Dimitrie's life has entered universality.

The son begotten with 'luck on his palm' was also mandated to pay a price for this privilege irrevocably. Nevertheless, Dimitrie proved fully capable to potentiate this gift superbly and, by the power of his select nature, he ennobled it.

Dimitrie Cantemir sees daylight on an October day, more precisely, 26, year of grace 1673, in a family that by then had already acceded to high nobility, to the throne even – in 1685 Constantin Cantemir, Dimitrie's father, was invested by the Turkish sultan as Prince of Moldova. To be born with a silver spoon in one's mouth is, from the outset, an undeniable advantage, and Dimitrie soon came to realize that this privilege was not supposed to be exercised to personal satisfaction and benefit but that it was a commission rather, one that he was expected to carry out to the benefit of others. He understood from a very early age that his position in society was one of huge implications and all along his life he trustworthily and dedicatedly committed himself to ensure the welfare of his people and gain international recognition for his country.

His intelligence was potentiated by moral excellence, two valuable gifts which he inherited from his mother, Ana Bantăș. A woman with a keen eye for everything that meant access to knowledge and artistic refinement, she spared no effort to see that her son would benefit from the finest instruction, a necessary prerequisite a future scholar and prince.

In the paternal line, the Cantemir family is of Tartar extraction, the recorded name of their ancestor being initially (K)han Temir. He settled down in Moldova during the reign of Prince Ștefan cel Mare (Ștefan the Great) (1457-1504). He became a Christian, was baptized Teodor [Cantemir]¹ and married a local woman, Maria, thus setting the basis of a long parentage, the Cantemir dynasty.

The life of Constantin Cantemir, full of episodes one would rather associate with fantasy and fiction than with substance and hard fact, played a determinant role in the shaping of the character of Dimitrie, his younger son. Of Constantin's two sons, Dimitrie seems to have been more affected, by the magicity of his father's heroic exploits, many initiated by or involving incidents of the most astonishing nature. This element of the "spectacular", of the "unique", in terms of facts witnessed or experienced directly and, perhaps above all these, in terms of *actions accomplished* had accompanied Dimitrie throughout his life and crystallised into artistic creation. His special temperament was a combination of avid inquisitiveness intense sensitivity, fine and subtle astuteness. In a selective way, his mind and spirit were permanently open to all of life's teachings and he appropriated only what was apposite for his nature. As this huge amount of heterogeneous knowledge he had accumulated over time was not meant to be kept unknown, he decided to commit most of his conceptions and feelings to paper. By the power of his complex nature, he wrote scientific treaties, fiction and composed music, a motley of encyclopedic erudition, reverberating in a specific way the spirit of his time, the period of Enlightenment.

The peculiar blend between political skills and writerly excellence had gained him twofold international recognition. He mastered successfully the art of diplomacy as well as that of the written word. The influence of the father's accomplishments had such a strong effect on the son that he considered them worth acknowledging and applied this model to everything he did, irrespective of the domain of undertaking. This is how Dimitrie understood his errand and how he contributed to the forging of a nation's identity and the consolidation of its reputation.

All Dimitrie Cantemir had accomplished, beginning with his early years of scholarship – when he avidly absorbed everything available in terms of knowledge – and successively all along his entire adulthood, everything implied hard and passionate work fueled by a fine intellect, by an acute sense of justice and, last but not least, by a huge love and respect for man and country alike as one indissoluble unit.

Restless and excited, crisscrossing time and space only to ultimately find his well-deserved place in universality, Dimitrie had a life-share only the chosen few are granted. Whatever the father had managed to cut out for himself from life and from his time with the blade of his sword, the son had taken over, had polished, perfected and raised to higher rates with the sharp blade of his own weapon, his intellect. Without a doubt, Constantin had offered his followers the example of an outstanding life, an example which Dimitrie would later honour through his exquisite performance. Thus, he would take charge of, as his rightful legacy, the enthralling spectacularity of his father's exploits. This magical equipment was eventually to shape his personality as leading-edge model ruler and an avid seeker of knowledge, of beauty and of justice, a figure that perfectly fit in with the historical temporal-spatial context in which he lived. In this way, he is remembered as a *real* person, certified by history as Prince Dimitrie Cantemir, politician and head of state, maker of history. Also, he became known as a creator

¹ Source: <http://www.unibuc.ro/CLASSICA/Xenopol-vol4/cap18.pdf>, p. 344.

of fictional spaces and situations where he felt at home and with which he identified. Through his fiction and by identifying with its substance, he became *fictional* himself.

Not only does this entwining of elements render Dimitrie special among his contemporaries, but it also makes him unique in the history of his own nation.

Two parents, two lines of heritage, one excellence

From his mother, Ana Bantăș, an educated woman of refined taste and a lover of discipline and of virtue, Dimitrie had inherited the sense of morality and the love of books. Although he would lose her at a very early age, for Dimitrie, his mother would always remain a high spirit, the parent whose teachings had guided her child to act unfailingly and exclusively in the name of truth, of knowledge and of beauty. Like her, Dimitrie would avidly seek to reach the profound understanding of existence, to do the right thing not to his own benefit but for collective good, to love the land and his people unconditionally and to try to ensure their progress and permanency in time.

Ana Bantăș was on all accounts a truly impressive, modern and noble woman. Her ‘modernity’ lay in her endeavours, all making her to wish herself different from the rest. Knowingly or not, she strove to exceed the limits of gender-related social conventions, initially as a daughter and then, at maturity, as a wife and a mother. She studied because she understood that knowledge opens up incredible perspectives, which is exactly what she meant to instill in her children: the capacity to see beyond the often empty patterns imposed by conventions. Her ambitions found fertile ground mostly in Dimitrie, who seemed to have been destined to fructify these lofty gifts of spirit in that he very soon came to understand the true implications of his mother’s purposefulness. He inherited her love of art, music being one of his childhood passions which he would seek to develop all his life². He evokes her image in his biography of his father, Constantin, “[...] Ana, a worthy woman to be praised above all the women of that age, skilled with the best education, very accomplished and vigilant in household chores (and, all that should be added in praise of a woman of true virtue).”³

So, Dimitrie was born to be a man of knowledge, a fervent seeker of information, which he put to use to uplift, first and foremost, the life conditions of his people. His love of education, of culture in general, urged Dimitrie to look for possibilities that can bring about his country’s prosperity in ways other than through warfare.

With such an endowment it was easy for him to adhere to the spirit of the European Enlightenment and to participate actively in the promotion of science and of art and, through these, of peace and cooperation between nations. These all contributed to the shaping of the “enlightened monarch” (anticipating to a certain extent the Habsburg patron of the arts and culture, Joseph II), who, despite the short duration of his monarchy and its fragmentation, has imprinted to a considerable extent the culture and the mentality of his time. Like the sovereign of the House of Habsburg, Cantemir was the supporter of a progressive type of monarchy, seeking to repress the retrograde influence of the rapacious and unscrupulous boyars.

Dimitrie was also a great humanist. He loved his people whom he wanted prosperous and emancipated. He understood to accomplish this not by ruling *over* them but *for* them and to represent them with dignity in Europe.

² While away at studies in Istanbul, he wrote *The Book of Music*, a treatise on music in Turkish (*Kitab-i-musiki*).

³ *Viața lui Constantin Cantemir, zis cel Bătrân Domnul Moldovei, autor Dimitrie Cantemir, domnul Moldovei, după manuscrisul autorului* (p.10), <https://archive.org/stream/ViataLuiConstantinCantemir/ViataLuiConstantinCantemir-DimitrieCantemir#page/n3/mode/2up>.

His philosophical work, the first Romanian treatise of this kind, *The Divan or the Wise Man's Parley with the World or the Judgement of the Soul with the Body* (1698) bears testimony to this. In this work transpires the idea that man can only progress if he has attained the appropriate level of spirituality and when he has freed himself from the shackles of materiality, ideas also promoted by the universal philosophical and religious teachings.

Brief though it was, the time Dimitrie had spent in the company of his mother had been decisive as far as the erudition and sense of morality of the future leader are concerned, his propensity towards study, towards the appreciation of art and of value in general.

Equipped like this and fortunate to benefit from the right conditions to potentiate his talents, Dimitrie's future was foreseeable: he was to become an encyclopedic spirit in the true sense of the word and by this, a successful representative of his blood line and of his nation. With him, the Cantemir name has raised to dignity.

He enjoyed the privilege of having had access to all valuable information through diverse channels. Such was the period of 'apprenticeship' in the Turkish-Ottoman Empire, an immensely offering environment in terms of erudition due to the valuable assets of knowledge of all kind. He potentiated every single moment of the 12 years of 'apprenticeship' through the investigation of the world's mysteries and through self-discovery. By his father's will, the future prince would spend there the most important years of his formation – decisive and seminal years.

What Dimitrie had received on paternal line became solid and durable building block for the politician, strategist and ruler in the making. He became a man of valor in that he had the pluck to fight his way and stand his ground in both the European and the Ottoman social environments and political circles. He made his voice heard and earned respect and confidence. His success was granted mainly by his sophistication and acumen. His formation, a combination of Ottoman culture – a polymorphic treasure of ancient wisdom – and of European sophistication – the sine qua non condition for anyone to claim true erudition within this geographical space – had contributed immensely to the building up of his personality and had gained him access before many of the significant monarchs of his time.

Following in his father's footsteps, he grew up to be a brave man and a ruler truthful to his nation's creed. That is why, although he had acquired most of his artistic and scientific expertise in the Ottoman cradle of culture, Dimitrie Cantemir, in his quality of Prince of Moldova, would seek another alliance, one which was consistent with his own religious configuration, Orthodoxy. In this respect, Dimitrie will engage his strategic expertise wisely and fairly to fight for the security of his Christian people. Not for a single moment had he doffed his parental faith. This is a good enough explanation, yet not the only one, for his decision to adhere to the principles of Orthodoxy promoted unrelentingly by the Russian Empire under Tsar Peter I (1682-1725) and not to embrace Islamism, the religion of his country of education. The Tsar will recognize Dimitrie's worth and will sign a treaty with him whose terms stipulated that Cantemir was obliged to support the Russians in their war against the Turks. Also, the Tsar asked Dimitrie to write a scholarly treatise in defense of Orthodoxy as opposed to Islamism by highlighting the latter's non-veridicality. The defense of Christianity implied therefore the open declaration that the Islamic religion was false. Dimitrie exposed this point of view in an ample work entitled *Curanus or The System of the Mohammedan Religion*, printed in Russian in 1722 in Saint Petersburg.

All the facets of Dimitrie's personality, the polymath, the prince whose nature was incompatible with everything involving scheming and unscrupulousness that often characterise political activity, reflected his keen interest in lofty existential issues such as art and the scrutiny of the absolute. These attributes are depicted in his encrypted, avant-garde novel, *The Hieroglyphic History (Historia*

Hieroglyphica) (1705). This fable in prose and masterly allegory is extremely difficult to circumscribe to a specific novelistic genre as it contains elements of all. The text encrypts an authentic Dimitrie, the noble man and the profound philosopher, whose ardent wish was to acknowledge the truth about an epoch. In order to better accomplish this, he stripped his words of any embellishment that could obscure the purpose of the message. *The History* speaks of his vision of reality, the reality of a particular moment in time. He had scrutinized that specific age but also glimpsed into others. This interesting initiative had singled him out and set him somewhat in contrast with the society in which he lived. The *singularity* of this Romanian ruler is the singularity of his fictional avatar, the Unicorn. With a mentality of a convinced pacifist and of a man of true moral standards, Dimitrie was snubbed and also feared by the supporters of a social and political status quo that was systematically eaten from within and distorted by petty and malignant rules.

On paternal line, Dimitrie's major legacy is, therefore, valiancy and the love of his nation. He was, as was his father, consistent with his principles, principles that implied the pursuit of his people's safety. The father's fight with himself and with the world around him to maintain his dignity unstained and integral was not an easy one. His actions and his faith are recorded by Dimitrie in a biography that he wrote in his memory and which is entitled *Vita Constantini Cantemyrii (The Life of Constantin Cantemir)*. It would be easy to think that Dimitrie writes praisingly about his father merely out of consuetude or, more likely, because he wished to glorify him as son. Yet, when we think of what Dimitrie was actually like, how much he loved truth and straightforwardness, then we fan doubt away and accept the document as absolutely veridical. It is the testimony about the exploits of a fighter for his country as they were recounted to Dimitrie by his father himself and by other people who had witnesses them. It probably is the picaresque character of Constantin's life that renders him *fictional, fabulous*, as only characters in books, oversized by our fantasy, are allowed to be, but if we think that such exploits were fairly common at that time, we start to accept them as well as the protagonist's actual existence as hard fact. The aura of fantastic, of myth and legend, however, lingers on. So much so that it stretches over and shrouds Dimitrie's individuality too, rendering him *unreal*.

In his biography of his father, Dimitrie's intention is to depict real facts, to present a real person not a spectacular 'livresque' character. For this, he is careful to record the evidences in a direct and very simple way, with no grandiloquence whatsoever to burden the text and make it sound artificial and untruthful. Thus, he recounts how his father, Constantin, while still quite young, has earned his fame as a result of his faith, honesty and mettle: "At that time [n.b. 1627], it happened that between the Poles and the Swedish there was never-ending warfare, with repeated skirmish in which Constantin, still young by then, had well proved to the Poles his manliness and assiduity. In this way, he gained great fame before the king and before the great hetman Sobieski and not long afterwards was rewarded with the rank of captain in the lightly-armed army (which consisted of Moldovans). In this job, he served the Polish king faithfully and with rectitude for 17 full years."⁴

These are, undoubtedly, all human characteristics but they are used to portray fictional characters as well. The duality *real-unreal*, or *true or fictional* that accompanies and characterizes both Cantemir the father and Cantemir the son, is what confers upon these historical figures a special aura that renders them valuable both nationally and universally.

A lover of truth and of harmony, Dimitrie welcomes the fellowship of those of a nature similar to his own. We read about his fictional kith and kin in the *Hieroglyphic History*. The partnership with

⁴ *Viața lui Constantin Cantemir, zis cel Bătrân Domnul Moldovei, autor Dimitrie Cantemir, domnul Moldovei, după manuscrisul autorului* (p.4), <https://archive.org/stream/ViataLuiConstantinCantemir/ViataLuiConstantinCantemir-DimitrieCantemir#page/n3/mode/2up>.

‘dwellers-of-the-high,’ such as the Hawk is, is inspirational and elevating, confirming Dimitrie’s own noble quest of the sublime. “The Unicorn, [...] was flamed with the ardour of truth and spoke of the woes he saw would befall justice, readily understood and not drawing out any further talk, he thanked the Hawk for not having concealed the whole truth about him, and in this fashion he said: “after the oaths which for love and friendship between us thou hast made from the sole inclination of thy heart, henceforth I am beholden to name thee brother.”⁵

Once his warfare duties are completed, Constantin returns home, but other obligations shorten his stay. We find him in action, defending his country, this time in Țara Românească (by then, The Romanian Principality) at the court of Prince Grigore Ghica. His faithfulness and rectitude gain the Prince’s respect and confidence to such extent that he decides to welcome Constantin in his family by marrying him to one of his nieces. He enjoys the sympathy and confidence of the Prince and that of the whole court for a long time: “He lived in great respect, loved by both the Prince and the boyars.”⁶ His fair judgement earn him the Tartars’ appreciation too, who trust his decisions and abide them without questioning any of his resolutions.

After the death of his first wife, he marries anew and thus increases his wealth and consolidates his reputation. However, after a short while, he loses his second wife too. His third marriage, to Ana, lasts longer, and two sons, Antioh and Dimitrie, are born from this union.

Constantin has yet another chance to prove that he is a principled man. Under the new Prince, he uses his strategic skills to settle things and to ensure the peace. For this, the Prince will come to respect Constantin greatly. He is invested as *annonae praefectus* (great quartermaster).

Constantin’s ability to learn languages, inherited by Dimitrie, facilitates his access to the Ottoman Empire as translator and royal emissary. Impressed by his courage and ingenuity, the Turkish potentates foresee his great future, presumably as ruler of Moldavia. Constantin’s sole wish is, none the less, to serve his own country faithfully and justly.

His reputation had always preceded him and his meritorious feats took him to almost legendary heights. Wherever he went, he enjoyed royal trust and admiration as well that of the common people. In 1674 Prince of Moldova is appointed Dimitrie (“Dumitrașcu”) Cantacuzino, a noble Greek from Constantinople. Constantin, as expected, wins his admiration too and receive from him, among administrative and financial favours, one of particular significance. As token of appreciation, the Prince offers to baptize Constantin’s second son with his own name, Dimitrie.

Constantin’s destiny, however, was strewn with wondrous events, so hard to believe that the real, flesh and blood person, is rather perceived as legendary, even as unreal.

Due to another turn of situation, Constantin finds himself in yet another quandary. Political scheming and treachery has been a constant activity at the time and Prince Cantacuzino falls for the gossiping and the malevolent behavior of the boyars and changes his attitude towards Constantin, his proven loyal subject. “As it happens with all the noble-hearted, virtue was begrudged by the rotten-hearted, as in the case of our Cantemir, whose virtue was the object of persecutions inflicted against him through abuse and unfair gossip.”⁷ This kind of situation Dimitrie, the Unicorn, laments in his *Hieroglyphic History*: “Oh, piteous thing impenetrable to human reckoning, how is it that divine providence allows the

⁵ Translation of *The Hieroglyphic History*, Alistair Ian Blyth, <https://dialognaporoge.blogspot.ro/2009/04/hieroglyphic-history.html>.

⁶ Ibidem. p. 6.

⁷ *Viața lui Constantin Cantemir, zis cel Bătrân Domnul Moldovei, autor Dimitrie Cantemir, domnul Moldovei, după manuscrisul autorului*, <https://archive.org/stream/ViataLuiConstantinCantemir/ViataLuiConstantinCantemir-DimitrieCantemir#page/n3/mode/2up>. p. 10.

righteous to be tormented by cunning traps and suffers the pure to fall into the snare of the defiled?”⁸ He starts to doubt Constantin and decides to eliminate him from his court.

Many years later, Dimitrie, the chronicler, makes record of this situation and defends his father’s reputation in two ways. On the one hand, he makes note of this father’s honourable efforts by depicting them in his book and, secondly, as head of state, he proves that the Cantemir family is upright and straightforward. “[...] that he is well aware that Constantin’s faithfulness had been acknowledged in many a place and in many a time, and that he is not one of those fickle and mindless people who are unable to engineer whatever is appropriate and whatever ensures their safety.”⁹

Despite the fact that Constantin was confronted with dire circumstances throughout his entire life, he managed to surmount many obstacles even when they seemed downright impossible to overcome. Whenever duty called, Constantin, very much like Dimitrie later, engaged all his efforts to answer it promptly and with dignity. He put behind him all snags. He treated with leniency the hatred of the princes under whose reign he had served, the envy of the selfish boyars, who could not accept the idea that someone can be truly dedicated to his nation’s interests and put them before their own good and safety.

Constantin and Dimitrie were two such political and historical, maybe even human paradoxes. For this, their real figures have entered legend not as villains but as heroes who have bestowed prestige on their nation. Valuable people who lived their lives meaningfully. The meaningfulness of their social role is the key element of the motivation that makes their circumscribing within one sphere or another, of reality or of fantasy, probably less important. Yet, we have to admit that the *fantastic* attribute is enriching in that it adds a touch of spectacular to their historical, and, therefore, assumed *real* portraits.

Conclusion

Dimitrie, son of Constantin Cantemir, was a man who lived, ruled, fought and died, for real. He was therefore a real person recorded by history. He was also a man who wrote about his world vision. This was special. This gift of his ushered him in another world, one of fantasy and of infinite possibilities. Due to this part of his self, the creative one, he became a fictional character himself.

When Constantin and Dimitrie were not the fabulous, magical Unicorns, who could intrigue the reader by capturing and enlivening their imagination, they were human beings with their good parts and with their bad parts, like the rest of us. However, what set them apart from most of their contemporaries, from the people among whom they lived, was the awareness of their mission. They knew very well where their responsibility lay. And, in addition to, or better said, in support of this awareness, they had stamina, they had valor. The welfare and the supremacy they sought were their people’s first and foremost, and never, or hardly ever, their own. It was this trace of character that Dimitrie was fortunate to inherit from both his father and his mother. A twofold heritage. This is where all the magic lies: Dimitrie was born with a double blessing: to be a leader and to be an artist. Or, just an artist, one who became the ruler whose sword was the pen, whose helmet was his intelligence and whose breast plate was his mettle and the love of his nation.

Incredible though it may seem, these two men of significance in and to our history, Constantin and Dimitrie Cantemir, with all their Tartaric lineage, were everything our nation has ever needed:

⁸ Translation of *The Hieroglyphic History*, Alistair Ian Blyth, <https://dialognaporoge.blogspot.ro/2009/04/hieroglyphic-history.html>

⁹ Dimitrie Cantemir, *Viata lui Constantin Cantemir*, http://cantemir.asm.md/files/u1/viata_lui_constantin_cantemir.pdf, p.32 (free translation).

honest and people-loving rulers, equally true to themselves and to their mission. For this, they had never hesitated to nip in the bud the evil that may have hampered their noble enterprise and devoted their entire energy, putting their life at stake, to write a chapter of history that would be admired and followed by the posterity.

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