

POETRY AS HISTORICAL ARGUMENT: OVID IN CANTEMIR

Ioana COSTA*

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Rezumat: Dimitrie Cantemir menționează în repetate rânduri, în lucrările sale compuse în limba latină (e.g. *De antiquis et hodiernis Moldaviae nominibus, Historia Moldo-Vlachica, Descriptio Moldaviae*), versurile ovidiene 4.9.75-78 din *Epistulae ex Ponto*, în contextul discuției privind originea neamului său. Citatele sunt interesante deopotrivă prin relevanța/irelevanța lor ca argumente istorice și prin statutul de tradiție indirectă.

Abstract: Dimitrie Cantemir repeatedly mentions in his Latin works (e.g. *De antiquis et hodiernis Moldaviae nominibus, Historia Moldo-Vlachica, Descriptio Moldaviae*) the verses 4.9.75-78 of Ovid's *Epistulae ex Ponto*, aiming to emphasize ancient arguments related to the origin of his people. The quotations are relevant both from the standpoint of their value as historical arguments and as indirect text transmission.

In the works written in Latin on Romanian history (*De antiquis et hodiernis Moldaviae nominibus, Historia Moldo-Vlachica, Descriptio Moldaviae*), Dimitrie Cantemir unsurprisingly approaches the topic of the origin of his people. Either from the standpoint of ethnonyms, place names or ethogenesis, the poet exiled in Tomi during the first decades of the first Christian century is a milestone in the bibliography quoted by Cantemir and in his own opinion that is attentively articulated. The main references to Ovid's poetry are to be subsumed to four directions: the episode related with general Flaccus, the name of the place he was exiled to (*Tomoi*), the name *Bassarabia*, the geographical evidence that seems to commemorate the poet (*Lacul Ovidului*, „The Lake of Ovid”).

* Ioana COSTA: University of Bucharest, str. Edgar Quinet 5-7, e-mail: ioana.costa@lils.unibuc.ro.

1. Flaccus

The elucidation of the ethnonym throughout the episode built around the general Flaccus is included in *De antiquis nominibus* at page 146 of the manuscript. The debate is generated by the historian mentioned in the text of Cantemir as Eneas Sylvius: he is Enea Silvio Bartolomeo Piccolomini (in Latin: *Aeneas Silvius Bartholomeus*), pope from 1458 to 1464, under the name Pius the Second.

The enactment of this argument is from the very beginning bounded by two details: the historian Piccolomini is inscribed among „those from ancient times” (*ex antiquioribus*) and is referred to as *delusus* („deceived”). While the first hint is unbiased (although a span of only two and a half centuries can’t wholly support the term *antiquus* that embraces both a recent and a distant past, even belonging to antiquity, mostly if used – as in this passage – in the reinforced form of a comparative, *antiquior*), the second one explicitly highlights Cantemir’s standpoint: *Ovidii Nasonis videtur delusus carminibus (nec enim illi patet alia ratio)*, „he seems to have been deceived by the poems of Ovidius Naso (as there is no other obvious argument)”.

Mentioning the poetic source as historical testimony implies a validation throughout the authority of Ovid. It is, nevertheless, counterbalanced by an extended analysis of the passage belonging to *Epistulae ex Ponto*, followed by an investigation of the Roman history, in search of that Flaccus thought by Piccolomini to be the eponym hero of the so called „Flacci”, *id est* „Daci”, and of their country, „Flaccia”, *id est* „Dacia”.

The four Ovidian verses are problematical from the standpoint of textual criticism, marked by the weakness of indirect tradition, without being compensated by the advantages that this type of textual transmission could offer. Starting from this quotation (which is recurrent in Cantemir’s works), Florentina Nicolae considers that the author – highly scrupulous in quoting the sources he investigated, mentioned with the necessary editorial data, including pages – seems to be not in the possession of the Ovidian work, as he does not expose the editorial data¹. The reasoning is convincing, although we might note that the customary quotation of ancient works does not include (besides some peculiar cases, mentioned as such) references to a specific edition, maintaining only the traditional division in chapters, paragraphs, verses and their customary numbering, in order to be found easily in any of the editions.

A major doubt regarding the direct contact of Cantemir with the work of Ovid is nevertheless brought by the generic reference: in *De antiquis nominibus*, f. 146 (ms), he speaks about the „penultimate elegy” (*huius Flacci mentionem facit Ovidius in paenultima elegia de Ponto*). The elegy mentioned here by Cantemir, dedicated to Graecinus, belongs indeed to the last book of *Ex Ponto* (the fourth book), but it is not the penultimate one, being the IXth from an entirety of XVI elegies. In *Historia Moldo-Vlachica*, p. 26 (ms), Cantemir quotes the same passage, with a correct reference, *id est* the IXth, without any concern regarding the position in the work, but erroneously considering it to belong to the Vth book: *citat deinde carmina Ovidii ex Lib(ro) 5, Elegia 9: „Praefuit his, Graecine”, et c(etera)*.

¹ NICOLAE 2015, p. 205-216.

The four verses (75-78) repeatedly quoted by Cantemir display three readings that differ from the direct ovidian tradition:

A. The third verse (4.9.77) includes in Cantemir's manuscripts (*De antiquis nominibus*, f. 146, and *Historia Moldo-Vlachica*, p. 11) the term „Masas” versus „Mysas”.

B. Both in *De antiquis nominibus* (f. 146) and in *Historia Moldo-Vlachica* (p. 11), the second verse (76) includes „ferax” („fertile”) versus „ferox” („ferocious”).

C. Similarly, the passage *De antiquis nominibus* p. 146 incorporates the term „tenuit” („preserved”) versus „terrui” („frightened”); on the other side, the corresponding quotation in *Historia Moldo-Vlachica* (p. 11) reflects the direct ovidian tradition („terrui”).

In these two works, Cantemir employs the ovidian quotation and the related fragment of Piccolomini as basis for reasoning against this interpretation that he rejects with arguments taken from the Roman history. The reasoning leads to an opinion clearly stated: Piccolomini is a „clumsy interpreter” [of Ovid], *huius [...] sinister interpres* (*De antiquis*, p. 146), who „brought, too recklessly, an invalid argument” (*nimis leve invalidum nactus est argumentum*). In *De antiquis*, the research is subsumed to a generic observation, supported by celebrated examples: “the Roman general, when submitting to the Roman authority some famous country or people, used not to give them their own names, but to receive as a surname the name of the region, as the Scipions: after conquering Africa and, respectively, Asia, they were endowed by the senate – as tribute and gratitude – the surnames „The Asian” and, respectively, „The African” (*Romanis ducibus consuetum erat, si aliquod imperium, aut famosam gentem Romano Imperio armis subegissent, non suum nomen regionibus impertire, sed eum illius regionis nomen appellativum suscipere, ut videre est in Scipionibus, unus Africæ, alter Asiæ subactores, unde huic nomen Asiatico, alteri Africano a senatu decoris et honoris gratia acie impetrarunt*). Cantemir carries on in a sort of *reductio ad absurdum*: „Be that Flaccus provided his own name for the region of Dacia: then why this name did not survive? After this Fulvius Flaccus, Dacia and the Dacians retained their previous names, until the reign of Trajan: Fulvius Flaccus, nevertheless, lived some three centuries before Traian”. (*Sed esto Flaccum suum nomen regioni Daciæ dedisse, quare tamen non retinuit; nam post Flaccum istum Fulvium Dacia, et Daci suum antiquum nomen retinuerunt, usque ad tempora Traiani, vixit autem Flaccus ille Fulvius ante Traianum, tribus circiter saeculis.*) The preservation of name, as „Daci”, is attested by the Latin documents: „The Dacians were preserving their name for three full centuries – this is obvious from the fact that none of the authors says that Trajan took his army against the Flaccians, but against the Dacians”. (*Dacos tamen per hæc integra tria sæcula nomen retinuisse manifestum est ex eo, quod nemo scriptorum referat Traianum contra Flaccos, sed contra Dacos.*)

From this point forward, the demonstration proceeds with the series of Roman characters bearing the name „Flaccus”: „As there were many Roman generals bearing the name of this family, as much as censors, in order to avoid the supposition that existed another Flaccus, in more recent times than the one we mentioned, we are about to list, as in a catalogue, all we were able to find in the historical works”. (*Sed cum multi fuerint Romanorum sub huius familiae nomine duces,*

et censores, ne quis alium fuisse recentiorem Flaccum <ducat>, quam hunc, quem nos attulimus, omnes quos ex historicis colligere potuimus, quasi ex catalogo recensebimus.)

The list includes no less than nine names, beginning with Valerius Flaccus: „The first one bearing this name was Valerius Flaccus, the colleague of censor Cato, in 182 before Christ [...], when Scipio Africanus died. He is mentioned by Titus Livius.” The second one is Fulvius Flaccus („whom I have already said that Ovid mentioned”, *quem Ovidium citasse diximus*), censor in 172 BC. The historical note is expanded with a portrait extracted from the work of Titus Livius (42.3). The other seven characters are: Valerius Flaccus, consul, general in an expedition in Asia, killed while being proconsul, *vide* Titus Livius (*Periocha* at book 82) and Plutarch (*Sulla* 23); C. Norbanus Flaccus, the colleague of censor L. Cornelius Scipio Asiaticus, in 81 BC (Plutarch, *Sulla* 27); Verrius Flaccus, the preceptor of Gaius and Licinius (a statue in Praeneste commemorated him, *vide* Suetonius, *De grammaticis et rhetoribus*, 17.4); Norbanus Flaccus, colleague of consul Drusus Caesar, son of Tiberius (*vide* Tacitus, *Annals*, 1.55); Pomponius Flaccus Graecinus, colleague of consul Caelius Rufus in 17 AD, mentioned by Ovid in *Ex Ponto* 4.9; Pomponius Flaccus, a character that Cantemir reluctantly identified („it is not clear if is the same or a different one”, *sive idem, sive alter non accurate patet*), governor of Syria as a result of his convivial capacity of „drinking for two whole days with emperor Tiberius Caesar” (Suetonius, *Tiberius* 42.3); finally, Avilius Flaccus, prefect of Egypt, mentioned by Iosephus Flavius (18.10) and Eusebius („Ecclesiastical History”, 2.5).

Cantemir concludes the series of these nine „Flacci” that preceded Trajan („all those bearing the name Flaccus mentioned by the historians”) in a straightforward note: „the Dacians could not possibly receive the name «Flaccians» since they were preserving the same ancestral and old name during Trajan’s time, in other words, until he – after defeating their king Decebal, in two consecutive battles and after their people had been scattered and banished from those places – settled the Roman army and a great mass of Roman citizens in the entire Dacia” (the final part of p. 146).

The reasoning is re-enacted in a simplified form in *Historia Moldo-Vlachica*, at pages 7, 9, 11, 13 and 25-26. At p. 7 is mentioned the ovidian character („from Ovid’s poems is obvious that Valerius Flaccus had a war with the Getae living on the strand of Danube and defeated them”); at p. 9 brings again the argument of ovidian testimony: „it is obvious from Ovid’s poems that the Dacians – or, you may say, the Getae – were completely controlling the southern strand of the Danube not since the time of Augustus [...], but had already submitted many centuries before the entire Mysia and they were fought and defeated by the troops of Lucius Valerius Flaccus”. At p. 11, he offers some more details, including a reference to Aeneas Sylvius: „... the general name of Getae was used for a long time by the Romans, since, long before Augustus, Lucius Flaccus (the same person as Fulvius Flaccus at Aeneas Sylvius; Fulvius Flaccus lived 132 years before our Lord, the Saviour: *vide* Calvisius, at this year, and Onuphrius, in the same place), as historians say, had a war against the Getae, not against the Dacians; this is very accurately stated by Ovid, in his poems” – and this is the place where he inserts the four verses taken from Ovid. At p. 13, we can read

against the entire reasoning, briefly: „We find out from Ovidius Naso, as stated before, that the first expedition of Romans against the Getae was led by the consul Flaccus (either he was Lucius, Valerius or Fulvius, as written by the authors that disagree on this matter), the colleague of consul Scipio (*vide* Aeneas Sylvius, Orichovius, Calvisius), 132 years before the birth of our Lord Jesus and about as many years before Augustus Caesar; after the Getae from both Mysias were banished and the Alans were appeased, he established Danube as border of the Roman Empire”.

Finally, at p. 25-26, Cantemir returns to the ethnonym „Flacci” in an abundant bibliographical array. „We are going to present now the opinions of those who consider that the name is indeed Roman, as origin, but does not come from the colonies established by Trajan in Dacia, but dating from the times when the Romans extended their domination over the regions of Dacia, under the command of either Lucius Valerius, or Fulvius Valerius Flaccus (they give both these names), many centuries before Trajan and even before Augustus Caesar, after the Getae were defeated and the Romans lived there”. Sarnicius, *Polonus historicus*, considers the equivalence of the terms „Valachus” and „Flaccus” a sign of vanity: „the Valachians, given the similitude of the name, took into possession this name and boasted about being descendants of that Flaccus (or, more plausible, of the Romans following Flaccus) who led his victorious army against the Getae”; the origin of this error is, in Cantemir’s opinion, either envy, or ignorance (*utrum invidia, an ignorantia duce*). Against this opinion wrote the most reliable historians (*gravissimi [...] historici*), who stated that it was an obvious injustice (*manifesta iniuria*), generated by Aeneas Sylvius, Pope Pius the Second („History of Europe”, 2nd chapter). He is contested by Bonfinius and Leunclavius – „correctly” (*et merito quidem*) says Cantemir, who carries on with substantial quotations (Bonfinius, 2nd decade, book 7th; Leunclavius, *Pandecte*, under *iflak*). On the contrary, Aeneas Sylvius is followed by Orichovius. The final paragraph of the 8th chapter (p. 26) introduces „Ureka, the Moldavian historian”: Cantemir supposedly considers that exactly from the preface of „Annals” (*„Annales” Vrekae historici Moldavi*) Sarnicius would have taken the information regarding the ethnonym „Flacci”. The entire passage is a research throughout the sources: „Sarnicius did not read Aeneas Sylvius, or Bonfinius, or Leunclavius, who rejects the former, otherwise he would not have accused the Valachians of such immense vanity”. The next chapter (9th, 1st book), „On the opinion of those who totally reject that the Valachians stemmed from the Romans”, re-enacts the reasoning of Sarnicius, to whom he subordinates the opinion of Ioannes Zamyskius, letting the reader to judge by himself: „As Sarnicius speaks minutely and, in supporting his opinion, acts more like a dialectician than as a historian – or, to speak directly, more like a sophist² –, in our endeavour to be brief, we shall expose only his words, for both of them. And the reader, appeased in his impartial thought, will be able to judge easily regarding the consistency or inconsistency of the author, starting from his words that contradict each other and invalidate each other”. The quotation offered by Cantemir belongs to the 3rd book, 1st chapter: „«The poet

² *non historici, sed dialectici, vel confidentius dicendo, sophisticus potius munere fungatur...*

Ovid speaks about a certain Flaccus, prefect of the Roman troops, who was serving in the Roman army» (he reveals himself as ignorant, not knowing the old and famous Roman family of Flacci, with so many consuls); later on, he quotes Ovid's verses belonging to the 5th book, 9th elegy: «Graecinus was their commander» etc." Cantemir comes back to the commented quotation: „«Eutropius tells us, in the 8th book, that, after the Dacian troops were destroyed, emperor Trajan designed that region as a province and adjoined it to the Roman Empire, either driven by its richness, or planning to pay the soldiers from its resources.» After indicating the data taken from Eutropius, he begins again to boil his old cabbage, but in an almost unsuitable way, when stating: «As for the fact that the Valachians boast to stem from Flaccus, a prince» (what an unsuitable term for those times!) «of the Romans, this is not entirely their phantasy (here he seems more merciful), but they really have a reason, as poet Ovid mentions it in his poem, as stated before. Nevertheless, in the times of Augustus, this Flaccus» (let's indulge him, from the standpoint of universal history, though he is a fortuitous insertion in the history of the Valachians, knowing that during the reign of Augustus lived not the Flaccus who defeated the Getae, but Graecinus Flaccus, from the same family, a former consul, to whom Ovid himself had sent his poems written on the shore of the Pontus, asking him to mediate on his behalf, in order to be called back from the exile by Augustus) «was still in Mysia Inferior, with his army, and the Romans could not yet enter this region».

2. Tomoi

The remaining three ovidian references found in the works written by Cantemir in Latin are of far lesser extent: there are three place names („Tomoi", „Bassarabia" and *Lacul Ovidului*, „The Lake of Ovid") and they belong naturally to *Descriptio Moldaviae*.

Tomoi is discussed (historically and etymologically) in the paragraph on Ager Ciliensis (p. 63 ms C, p. 36 ms B, p. 21 ms A):

Sarnicius claims (doubtfully, *dubius contendit*) that „Lycostomon" (here Cantemir remarks an incorrect spelling, instead of *Lytrostomon* or *Lythostroton*) is *Tomoi*, the city that was famous on the basis of Ovid's exile" (*civitatem illam Ovidii Nasonis exilio claram*). Driven by the reference to Ovid, Cantemir expands the topic, in a scholarly account of his own point of view:

„Nevertheless, we are going to state audaciously our own opinion, as being reasonably well acquainted with these regions. If that «Tomoi», famous for the exile of Ovid, the poet, is one and only one, it can not be that placed on the map, in «Description of Old Mysia», in the middle of the region, on the river Naxius: the historians, mentioning this city, clearly have a different opinion. Firstly, Ovid himself says that he has been exiled on Sarmatic soil: «My bones are to be hidden by the Sarmatic soil». Consequently, the city of Tomoi was in Sarmatia. The same poet describes the rivers of Sarmatia, precisely Tyras and Boristhenes – and there is no one incapable of understanding how far away are these from Naxius of Mysia. The fact is strengthened by the epitaph carved in stone, revealed by Stanislaus Sarnicius: he tells us that a Polish nobleman found and read, near the Isak village (incorrectly written as Asak), a stone bearing this inscription:

«Here rests the poet, whom the anger of the enraged Caesar
Augustus forced to leave his ancestral soil.
He often desired, unfortunate man, to perish on the ancestral lands,
But in vain: the fate gave him this place».

The same poet says: «How unhappy I lived among the Bessi and Getae». Hence it is obvious that he had been exiled to Sarmatia, either on Tyras, or on Boristhenes, where was the city of Tomi.”

3. *Bassarabia*

The place name *Bassarabia* is fugitively commented (and offered an etymology) at the p. 62 (ms C, p. 36 ms B, p 12 ms A), in connection with „the ancient name Bessis, ascribed to this region by the ancient geographers and historians”: „It might be presumed that here from stemmed the name *Bassarabia*, as in Ovid, who, weeping, says: «How unhappy I lived among the Bessi and Getae»³”.

4. *Lacul Ovidului* (The Lake of Ovid)

Lacul Ovidului is listed by Cantemir in the final part of the chapter on Moldavian waters (the 3rd chapter of the first part, „Geography”) (p. 26-27 ms C, p. 15-16 ms B, p. 8 ms A):

„The last and most famous of them is the Lake of Ovid, «*Lacul Ovidului*» for the locals, near Akkierman, once Alba Iulia, in *Bassarabia*, famous mostly for the fact that, supposedly, on its shores was forced to live in exile the wellknown Roman poet Ovid”. The information is enlarged by bibliography, with a new quotation from Sarnicius: „This lake is called as such, with the name of poet Ovid, not only by the Moldavians: we can see that even our neighbours, the Poles, agree with that and, in the first place, Sarnicius, in «The Description of Poland»: «The Lake of Ovid, he says, is found between Hypanis – named by some others Axiacus – and Tyras, but is closer to the mouth of river Tyras. There might be seen a wall, bound with lead, heading to the sea for half a mile». [...] The fact that Ovid had been exiled in Sarmatia and the city of Thomoi is attested by his own words, engraved on his funeral monument: «My bones are to be hidden by the Sarmatic soil»; it was read by the Polish scholar in the vicinity of Isak (Sarnicius, 2nd book of *Annals*, 4th chapter, the last one)⁴”.

³ *Hinc forte et Bassarabiae nomen prodiisse, ex Ovidio coniectari licet, qui lamentatus inquit: „Vivere quam miserum est inter Bessosque Getasque”.*

⁴ *Vltimus et celebratissimus est Lacus Ovidii, „Lacul Ovidului” incolis, prope Akkierman, olim Albam Iuliam, in Bassarabia situs, eo nomine potissimum illustris, quod prope hunc notissimus Poeta Romanus Ovidius in exilio degere iussus fuisse dicatur. Hunc lacum non solum Moldavi de nomine Ovidii Poetae ita appellatum tradunt, sed illis Polonos quoque vicinos consentire videmus, et inprimis Sarnicius in „Poloniae descriptione”: „Ovidii, inquit, Lacus inter Hypanim (qui aliis Axiacum est) et Tyratem, sed vicinior ostiis Tyrae. Cernitur ibi murus quidam plumbo compactus, qui in mare medio milliari porrigitur.” Vide plura in sequentibus, Cap(ite) 4. Ovidium in Sarmatiam et Thomos urbem fuisse exulem, ipsius testantur verba: „Ne mea Sarmaticum contegat ossa solum”, ex Epitaphicus Lapis, qui ad villam Isak a Polono lectus est: „Hic situs est vates, quem⁷ diri Caesaris ira/ Augusti patria cedere iussit humo./ Saepe miser voluit*

The occurring of Ovid's name in the historical works written by Cantemir in Latin is circumscribed to the bibliography he used, in a critical manner, with a constant concern to integrate the poetical testimonies into the Roman history. His approach is, consistent with his scholarly perspective, well balanced and unbiased. The final judgement belongs to the reader himself, as Cantemir explicitly states that he is confident in his educated perspicacity: „*Lector vero indifferenti animo tranquillus [...] facile iudicare poterit.*”

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