

## ABOUT BRÂNCOVEANU'S DEATH

Until recently I still had conserved some doubts on the uncertain terms of the narratives about what happened in Constantinople on August 26 (August 15 according to the Orthodox calendar) 1714. Only two witnesses of the execution of Constantine Brâncoveanu and his four sons have mentioned the pardon offered on the condition of abjuration and the proud refusal of the Turkish proposal<sup>1</sup>. Everybody knows that the scene was a widespread and basic motif which served as a kernel of the regenerative forces of the Romanians. From the chronicles, this subject evolved to a folk-story chanted by ambulant singers. The Church has seized it and used it as the main argument for a canonization which included the whole family and even a boyar, their relative, who was beheaded along with them. While my own reservations were discreetly expressed, my former pupil and colleague Radu Păun went further, concluding that the story was a legend, cultivated by the Church for strengthening the loyalty to the Christian and Byzantine heritage<sup>2</sup>.

Dapontes and Synadinos were until now the sources that could confirm the usage to remit the death penalty when a Christian agreed to convert to Islam. A Bulgarian historian has recently studied hundreds of documents about conversions to Islam, but none, it seems, made in such dramatic circumstances<sup>3</sup>. I found now new confirmations of that privilege conceded to the Christians who were led to the block. It is the case of an Armenian martyr, Gomidas Kumurdjian. "The execution was upheld and, *as was customary*, their judge offered to remit the penalty to any who should accept Islam. Of the nine [condemned to death], eight weakened"<sup>4</sup>. Gomidas alone refused. This happened on 4 November 1707, only seven years before Brâncoveanu's miserable end. The accounts of the two ambassadors who were present and recorded the attempt of one of the young princes to save his life are thus proved to be true reports of the attitudes of son and father.

<sup>1</sup> Andrei Pippidi, *La mort à Constantinople : héritage byzantin ou naissance d'une légende*, Etudes byzantines et post-byzantines, V, Bucharest, Editura Academiei Române, 2006, pp. 471–496.

<sup>2</sup> Radu Păun, « *Pour la loi des ancêtres* » : sources bibliques et traditions littéraires des récits sur la mort de Constantin Brancovan, *Les cultes des saints souverains et des saints guerriers et l'idéologie du pouvoir en Europe Centrale et Orientale*, éd. par Ivan Biliarsky et Radu G. Păun, Bucarest, New Europe College, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Anton Minkov, *Conversion to Islam in the Balkans. "Kisve Bahasi" Petitions and Ottoman Social Life, 1670-1730*, Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Charles A. Frazee, *Catholics and Sultans. The Church and the Ottoman Empire, 1453–1923*, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p.183, who cites H.Riondel, *Une page tragique de l'histoire religieuse du Levant. Le Bienheureux Gomidas de Constantinople, prêtre arménien et martyr*, Paris, 1929.

Another instance can be found in one of the first Greek authors to compile a history of the Ottomans, Theodore Spandounes or Spandugnino. He was writing in the first half of the sixteenth century and among the events he recounts is the fall of Trebizond in 1461. The tragic fate of the imperial family of the Grand Komnenoi could not be missing from that highly self-serving work: Helena, the wife of the last emperor, was the sister of the chronicler's grandfather (*'sorella di mio avo materno'*, for which the editor, Donald M. Nicol, gives the bad translation 'sister of my mother's grandfather')<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, Theodore, being proud of such relatives, was able to know the details of the gory story which he tells in the following passage. Two years after the capitulation of Trebizond, a time that David Komnenos, his wife and children, had spent as prisoners in the town of Serres, Mehmed II decided to murder them and invoked the pretext of intercepted (faked) letters from Rome, falsely indicating that the captive was informed about a project of crusade against the Turks. David was then brought in chains to Constantinople, where the sultan 'announced to them that they would all die if they refused to become Turks and renounce their Christian faith. When he heard this, David comforted his sons and committed them to holy martyrdom. He and seven of his sons were decapitated. The eighth being but three years of age, was made a Turk together with his sister'. About these survivors and about their descendants, Spandounes gives enough details to show that the family was still affected by the trauma of that atrocity. Is it not exactly the same scenario as for the execution of Constantine Brancoveanu and of his sons? Curiously enough, the editor did not observe the coincidence, but hesitated to believe the story, under the temptation of that skepticism which we have been trained to consider indispensable to the good method<sup>6</sup>.

The same Spandounes supplies us with another episode of the campaigns led by Mehmed II that might help us to understand the Ottoman thinking on such situations. The facts happened in 1475, when the Turks took the Genoese port of Kaffa. 'The sultan then learnt that the prince of Gothia had murdered his elder brother and usurped his place. So he sent his Beylerbey, his captain-general on land, to make war on the said prince. An agreement was reached to the effect that his person and property were safe. But in the end Mehmed had him brought in Constantinople and decapitated, telling him that he had broken his agreement. He made one of the King's little sons a Turk; and I saw him still alive when I was last in Constantinople'<sup>7</sup>. This means the conversion to Islam had been the price for being spared, so the last Assanis Palaiologos of that Crimean branch survived till 1509. Though, in a note, D.M.Nicol complained that 'the prince of Gothia is hard

<sup>5</sup> Theodore Spandounes, *On the Origin of the Ottoman Emperors*, translated and edited by Donald M. Nicol, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 40–41.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 92, note 78.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

to identify<sup>8</sup>, this was the title of the princes of Mangoup. Isaac had been killed by his brother Alexander, who had attempted to defend his fortress with the Moldavian soldiers sent by his brother-in-law Stephen the Great. Obviously, the delusion that had served at Trebizond was reenacted at Mangoup. The scene of Alexander's death suggests two things: traditionally, the sultan was expected to make Muslims, but, by luring to conversion the youngest scions of a Christian dynasty, he also managed to complete the destruction of that nest of enemies.

In truth, the information thus provided enlightens enough the 1714 circumstances. On both sides, for the victims as well as for the executioners, the line of conduct was established since the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Faithful to his Byzantine legacy, Constantine of Wallachia could not behave otherwise than David of Trebizond.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 88, note 59.