

MARRIAGE AMONG 17th - CENTURY BOYAR FAMILIES OF WALLACHIA AND MOLDOVA: BETWEEN CUSTOMARY CONSTRAINTS AND INTEREST

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This study reveals fundamental aspects of marriage within boyar circles in Wallachia and Moldova in the seventeenth century starting from the reality that marriage was the basis of constructing a family. In the Romanian society of the seventeenth century, at the level of social elite, the family played multiple social functions. Being aware of this condition, the boyars were very much concerned and strongly involved in the formation of new families through marriage. Two main categories of factors dominated marriage in boyar circles: customary norms and the social interests of each family. The first category of factors included: the decisive role of the father in the making of the marriage; the question of woman's "purity" at the moment of marriage; proper age; supreme authority of the Church in the "legalization" of marriage. The social interests included: compatibility of social standing between the families of the partners; maintenance/ increase of the wealth of the family; facilitation of upward social and political mobility; continuity of the kindred, etc. Each family sought to combine these elements in an "individual manner", according to its aspirations. In conclusion, in the seventeenth century one can talk about a true "marriage strategy" among boyar families from Wallachia and Moldova.

The first step in the set-up a family was marriage. It represented the major milestone in one's life, the threshold between two worlds, one whose crossing was then considered compulsory¹. The conviction was thus reached that marriage was the only means by which one could become a person in the true sense of the word, be like the next man.

Marriage as main the main family wellspring was defined in *Îndreptarea legii* as "împreunarea bărbatului și a muerii, adecă amestecare, sau amestecare și moștenire întru toată viața lor și omului celui drept apropiiare de Dumnezeu" (the union between man and woman, i.e. combination, or combination and heritage, for their entire lifetime, and due closeness to God)². However, marriage was not confined to personal matters only, it did not represent only the union between a man and a woman. Its significance

¹ A symbolic wedding was held even for the unmarried deceased, the so called "wedding of the dead", with the use of appropriate garments, fir-tree and sometimes even music. Ceterchi 1980, p. 505; for a similar investigation of the theme, see Kligman 1998.

² *Îndreptarea legii* 1652, glava 203, p. 213.

went way beyond that and involved “*comunitatea întregii vieți*” (life as a whole)³. Due to its function of family founder, a new social entity was created by marriage, just like today. The newly established entity conferred the partners entirely new statuses: husband/ wife, son-in-law/ daughter-in-law and brought about new social relationships⁴. It thus made its contribution to the proper course of things in society, reason why the Church kept it under close scrutiny from the very moment the knot was tied⁵.

It is therefore clear that through the institution of marriage the family fulfilled fundamental functions relative to the individual and society. For these very reasons this serious commitment that was marriage was rigorously defined. There were a number of criteria that had to be met to be able to assume, within legal and personal interest boundaries, certain responsibilities brought about by this commitment. What were these criteria that had to be met upon marriage, what was their mechanism and what problems did they give rise to? In this paper we aim to outline a possible answer to these questions.

When it comes to boyar families we can discuss the existence of a real marital policy. The entrance of a young woman in a specific family did not occur randomly. Marriage was contracted only with people of the same social status, or especially with people pertaining to higher social categories⁶. The head of the family, who controlled the entire marriage policy, would never choose for his son or daughter a partner that was socially inferior to them as marriage was above all a business matter. For this reason, it was always pursued to create new alliances and consolidate old ones, create political solidarities and connections⁷ thus protecting the descendants from being excluded from the group or depleted of one or more nobility ranks⁸.

With a well-adjusted marriage strategy, some families managed to produce great *dregători* (high officials) in the 17th century⁹. Such an ascent on the political scene with a sensible increase of power could only be the result of either some personal merit or kinship¹⁰. The cases of ascension to powerful positions by way of family relations were rather numerous and occurred without any notable disruptions ever since the 15th -16th centuries and all the way through the 19th century¹¹.

Disadvantaged by these marital policies were only the young women to be married off. Having no other choice but abide by their father's decision and put it into effect they had to leave their father's house and follow the husband. The situation turned even more tragic when this entrance into the new stage in life was made far away from home and thus with diminished chance of seeing their parents again. They say that upon her wedding with Timuș, Hmelnițki's son, the daughter of Vasile Lupu, the Prince of Moldavia, kept her arms round her mother's neck in a close embrace and shed bitter tears the entire time the Prince discussed with his son-in-law. Because of the great emotional pain she was unable to utter as single word when the time to part came¹². It is

³ Ceterchi 1980, p. 505.

⁴ Grosu 1999, p. 119.

⁵ In this sense, see Barbu 2005, p. 101-115.

⁶ Chirilă 2001, p. 16-17.

⁷ Ghițulescu 2002, p. 91.

⁸ Zach 1994, p. 160.

⁹ This is also the case of Boul Ștefan, the *vistier* Toader's son, who, subsequent to his marriage to Gheroghe Ștefan's sister, becomes great *dregător*. Stoicescu 1971, p. 352.

¹⁰ Gorovei 1994, p. 88.

¹¹ Cernovodeanu 1994, p. 86.

¹² *Călători* V, p. 477-478.

beyond any doubt, however, that the feelings captured in the example above, the separation from the father's home, from the mother's protective arms, was not an experience limited to the higher classes. Depending on the extent to which the young women, once married off, had to live far away from their home, we believe that this feeling could be encountered in the lesser gentry as well.

At the centre of these marital interests, profitable for both families involved, stood the woman. With or without her consent she would become a trade object between the two families. The fate of boyars' daughters was, therefore, not quite a happy one as marriage served the political interests of the parents and, more often than not, was not associated with love. Although the *pravile* (legal regulations) stipulated the freedom to give one's consent when it came to choosing a life mate, this aspect was in fact treated with much indifference. Marriage was then considered to be too important and serious a thing to be left at the free judgement of the children. Consequently, as we have said before, the decision pertained exclusively to the father. The children had no other choice but abide by the choice made by the head of the family because parental disobedience triggered disinheritance¹³.

For the sake of the same principle the Church criticised such actions and parental disobedience was not overlooked. Those finding themselves in such a situation would not be wed in the church until they asked the bishop's pardon and paid for their mistake a certain sum of money¹⁴. Only then would the relationship between the young woman and man cease to be perceived as a catastrophe, a dangerous act, and become thinkable in the eyes of God and the Church.

To be able to establish a family boyars' children needed a special consent from the bishop and the Prince. The bishop's deed was meant to avoid marriage between people who were not allowed to wed under divine and church rules¹⁵. The Prince's consent proves to be necessary as he thus tried to avoid, inasmuch as possible, the constitution of large pressure groups that could have emerged from closer ties between boyar families¹⁶.

Another condition that was equally important in the conclusion of a marriage was related to age. According to the *pravile* the minimum marriage age was 14 – 15 years for males and 12 years for females¹⁷. If up to that age children were not married and fell into sin of the flesh thus losing their sexual purity, the parents were considered to be at fault. At the same time, if the loss of virginity seen as sign of respect for the new family occurred after the age of 12 and 15, respectively, only the person in question was held accountable¹⁸.

Undoubtedly, this age-related facts cannot be extrapolated to the entire society. Relative to the boyar social class in Moldavia, it has been realised that the minimum marriageable age was consistent with the regulations, but there were also increase

¹³ *Îndreptarea legii* 1652, glava 284, p. 276.

¹⁴ *Ivireanul* 1997, p. 355.

¹⁵ *Cantemir* 1973, p. 240.

¹⁶ *Cantemir* 1973, p. 240.

¹⁷ “*Fiesce părinți li se cade feciorilor să'i însoare când se va umplea crescutul lor de 15 ani, iară fata de 12; aceasta iaste leage adeverită...*” (all parents should marry their sons once they reach the age of 15 and their daughters the age of 12 because this is what the law says) Nedelcu 1933, p. 169; „*Blagoslovită iaste vremea logodnei și a nuntei, când iaste bărbatul de 14 ani și muiarea de 12...*” (blessed are the betrothal and the wedding when the man is 14 and the woman 12) *Îndreptarea legii* 1652, glava 173, p. 174.

¹⁸ Nedelcu 1933, p. 170.

tendencies up to 15 years for females and 18 for males¹⁹. In Wallachia the marriage age accepted was higher. We have found out that princess Elina married Constantin Cantacuzino round 1627-1628 when she was 16-17 years of age. Her case is not singular as marriage at that age was a “*modă a vremii*” (a fashion of that time)²⁰.

Staying with the Cantacuzinos, it is relevant to see how the system of matrimonial relations was sealed from generation to generation in this family. The process of choosing a mate centred round claims regarding the image and good name of the family. In the case of Zmaragda, Șerban Cantacuzino's daughter, a long time passed until a husband of good descent was found for her²¹. It was no surprise to us to find out that Andronic Cantacuzino's sons contracted advantageous marriages that earned them significant wealth in the form of non-free villages, *ocine*, vineyards, mills, houses in towns, serfs and gipsies. Thus, they increased their already large estate and became the wealthiest boyars in Moldavia and Wallachia²². Marriage becomes an important business matter to Constantin Cantacuzino, as well. He married Elina, Radu Șerban's daughter, and with her dowry as well as what they purchased together their estate got to comprise as much as 40 whole villages, 15 half villages, *ocine* and another 12 villages scattered in 13 *județe* (counties). Moreover, in the 23 whole villages and 14 half villages, that we know of, they had 2486 serfs and 900 gipsies²³. This well-planned marital strategy helped the Cantacuzinos dominate the political stage until 1716 and remain for the entire 18th century a powerful family with a heavy saying in the country's history²⁴.

Marriages in the Arbore family from Moldavia were also well-pondered. Wealth constituted here an element of continuity passed down from generation to generation. Once he had reached the conviction that his future sons-in-law were well-situated financially Constantin Arbore married off his daughter Elena in Russia and his daughter Maria in the Caucasus²⁵. In Wallachia, in pursuit of the same economic gain and the good name, the daughter of Ivașco Ceparul, the great *armaș*, married Căpitan Balotă²⁶.

The concept of *blagorodia*²⁷ therefore animated and represented the reality of those times, produced passions, generated certain behaviours and, above all, involved a strict marital strategy²⁸. Accordingly, marriage was no longer a family matter but one of the entire kin. The choice for a partner was part of a strategy in which the duty to their kin, the social class they belonged to, the position they occupied had to be taken into account. In the case of women the *blagorodia* was the only personal value added to the name²⁹, fulfilling the same function as the specification of rank for men³⁰. In spite of the

¹⁹ Székely 1997, p. 65.

²⁰ Cantacuzino 1991, p.15.

²¹ Barbu 1994, p. 154.

²² Cantacuzino 1991, p. 9.

²³ Cantacuzino 1991, p. 9-10.

²⁴ „*Cette stratégie matrimoniale bien dirigée aida les Cantacuzino à dominer la scène politique jusqu'en 1716 et à rester tout au long du XVIII^e siècle une famille puissante dont on tient compte à tout moment de l'histoire du pays*”. Vintilă Ghițulescu 2003, p. 126.

²⁵ Lecca 2004, p. 48.

²⁶ Lecca 2004, p. 77.

²⁷ The terms refers to the quality of “*a fi neam bun*” (being a good family). Barbu 1994, p. 145; Barbu 2003, p. 24.

²⁸ Barbu 1994, p. 154.

²⁹ To Ieremia Movilă, the Prince of Moldavia, a source of legitimation was his mother Maria. He was proud of the princely blood this discreet princess had given him. Székely 2000, p. 39.

³⁰ Barbu 1994, p. 153.

fact that women, as depicted by foreign travellers, were excessively beautiful³¹ this detail seems to have been, at least theoretically, insignificant in choosing one's wife. Men were advised that when the time to marry comes they should seek not physical beauty, but the beauty of the soul³² and especially the *blagorodia* of the kin³³. If a woman was aware that she had a less pleasant appearance, she would not step fully confident and holding her head up into a marriage. She could expect her husband to replace her with another woman at any time. On account of this reason their union could be dissolved at any time and by the simplest of procedures³⁴.

At a different level, this set of factors that granted validity to a marriage was completed by an essential prerequisite: the bride's chastity. Independent of their social status, all families had the duty to guard the girl's virtue. This practice was of utmost importance because the immediate consequences of a girl not being found chaste upon marriage were that the blame was put on the family and the young woman was stigmatised³⁵. The 17th-century law codes stipulated as punishments for those found guilty of "*stricarea fecioriei*" (damaging one's virginity) the obligation to provide the victim with a dowry and marry her with her parent's consent. If the girl's parents happened not to approve of the marriage, the girl was to receive only the dowry while the judge decided the defendant's punishment³⁶. According to Paul of Alep, moral misdemeanours were sanctioned by harsh punishments: men were sentenced to life imprisonment whereas women to death by drowning³⁷. From foreign travellers' accounts we also learn that if a girl was found guilty of fornication and had a love child, her hair would be cut short and would be forced to walk around wearing a woman's head covering³⁸. The *pravile* stipulated, quite irrationally we believe, that the parents who found themselves in the embarrassing situation of having a daughter that had gotten "*grea de prunc*" (pregnant) could put her life to an end without "*certare de moarte*" (ever being held accountable for it)³⁹.

This inappropriate sexual behaviour issue can be inferred from several notes. Outraged by the behaviour of certain female characters in Moldavia, Paul of Alep characterised them as anything but bashful and virtuous. He also distinguished them from the Wallachian who seem to have been much more chaste, pure and virtuous⁴⁰. Dimitrie Cantemir, who knew his fellow countrymen very well, noted that fornication was a scarce encounter in Moldavia, except that the young believed that it was not a shameful act to have intercourse, secretly, before marriage and it was actually

³¹ Here is an eloquent case. Following his visit in the regions of Moldavia, Erasmus Henrich Schneider von Weismantel made the following note about the women there "*au părul negru cum e cărbunele, ochii și sprâncenele la fel de negre, iar fața lor este ca laptele și sângele și ochii lor ca rubinele. Pielea de pe tot trupul lor este albă și subțire și la multe din ele află cele mai frumoase mâini*" (their hair is as black as charcoal and so are their eyes and eyebrows, their face is like milk and blood and their eyes like rubies. The skin of their body is white and thin and many of them have most beautiful hands). *Călători VIII*, p. 358.

³² Regarding this issue, see *Învățăturile lui Neagoe Basarab*, p. 243.

³³ Barbu 1994, p. 153

³⁴ The custom was to give the archbishop a cow who would then allow both of them to remarry whomever they wished. *Călători V*, p. 79.

³⁵ Solcan 2005, p. 16.

³⁶ Livadă-Cadeschi 2001-2002, p. 76.

³⁷ *Călători VI*, p. 123.

³⁸ *Călători VIII*, p. 356.

³⁹ Nedelcu 1933, p. 184.

⁴⁰ *Călători VI*, p. 123.

something to be proud of⁴¹. The picture residing in these depictions reflects a difference in mentality between the two geographical regions. In Wallachia both men and women seem to guard themselves from sin whose inexhaustible source is the devil, whereas in Moldavia people's body and soul fall more easily in its hands. But we are wondering, does this evidence reveal a pattern of behaviour extended to the entire society? Let us not hurry to answer this question. We avoid the trap of a generalisation and do not believe that such cases of body desecration, uninhibited behaviour, that in the eyes of the Church could lead to nothing else but the loss of soul⁴², had turned into those people's way of living. People of the 15th-17th centuries were highly religious, generally speaking⁴³. Although they did not go to church regularly⁴⁴, faith had great bearing on the lives of those who did not estrange themselves from the divinity⁴⁵.

Returning to the topic of marriage, we shall focus on another obstacle that would not allow a relationship between a male and a female to evolve: kinship. The notion of kinship referred to relatives by blood, marriage or baptism⁴⁶. Making a clear distinction, as far as possible, between these kin relations, the *pravile* dealt with every case individually into tiniest detail. The reason why they did not overlook this aspect is of a religious nature as mixed blood “*iaste un păcat și o mare greșeală mai rea și mai cumplită decât preacurvia! [...]*” (is a sin and a mistake worse and more awful than fornication)⁴⁷. Only when they were “*slobozi de toate rudeniile*” (free of every kinship relation) was the union of the two “*pre lege și sfântă*” (under law and holy)⁴⁸. Under the law, the sanctions for those who disregarded the warning and did not understand that a marriage between relatives is impure included even the capital punishment⁴⁹.

Another particular aspect was the prohibition of marriage between Orthodox Christians and Christians of other denominations or non-Christians. A marriage could only take place if both parties were Orthodox. If the situation changed after marriage, separation appeared to be an ideal solution. The Christian was allowed to seek and find a compatible mate in terms of religion⁵⁰. However, because the institution of marriage was even back then a religious one, its conclusion before church authorities was considered the most important prerequisite and those who understood its significance would not afford to break it.

Once all the conditions set forth above, and certainly many others, were met the marriage could be concluded leaving for time to decide whether the newly-established family would turn into a *bastion of survival*.

As a conclusion, we can say that the marital strategy of the 17th-century boyars of Wallachia and Moldavia was governed by certain rules. They were imposed by legal practices on the one hand, and certain gains relevant in a family's ascension, on the other hand: the transmission of heritage, kin continuity and the creation of a large network of alliances. Beyond customary and interest-driven constraints, however, marriage fulfilled a complex function. It had to provide individuals with a space

⁴¹ Cantemir 1973, p. 233.

⁴² For more on this issue, see Mihai 2000, p. 243.

⁴³ Țighiliiu 1997, p. 46.

⁴⁴ Solcan 2005, p. 242.

⁴⁵ For more details, see Țighiliiu 1996, p. 860.

⁴⁶ Goody 2003, p. 44.

⁴⁷ *Carte românească* 1646, glava 41, p. 144.

⁴⁸ *Îndreptarea legii* 1652, glava 198, p. 195.

⁴⁹ Livadă-Cadeschi, Vlad 2004, p. 147.

⁵⁰ *Carte românească* 1646, glava 20, p. 115-116.

pervaded by the faith in God, a certain moral behaviour and, last but not least, safety due to the social status.

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Căsătoria în familiile boierești din Țara Românească și Moldova în secolul al XVII-lea. Între constrângeri cutumiare și interes

Rezumat

Studiul pune în evidență aspecte definitorii ale actului căsătoriei în familiile boierești din Țara Românească și Moldova în secolul al XVII-lea, pornind de la realitatea că aceasta, căsătoria, constituia temeiul fundamental al întemeierii unei familii. În societatea românească a secolului al XVII-lea, mai ales la nivelul elitelor sociale, familiei îi reveneau funcțiuni sociale multiple. Conștientizând din plin acest lucru, clasa boierească a vremii era foarte preocupată și puternic implicată în ceea ce privește întemeierea noilor familii prin căsătorie. Căsătoria în familiile boierești se afla sub constrângerea a doi factori principali: normele cutumiare și interesul social al fiecărei familii în parte. Între constrângerile cutumiare amintim: rolul decisiv al tatălui în contractarea căsătoriei; problema „purității” femeii în momentul realizării actului căsătoriei; compatibilitatea confesională; vârsta potrivită; autoritatea supremă a bisericii în „legalizarea” căsătoriei. Între interesele sociale cele mai frecvente amintim: compatibilitatea de stare socială între familiile celor doi tineri căsătoriți; perpetuarea/ sporirea averii familiei; facilitarea ascensiunii sociale și politice; perpetuarea neamului etc. Fiecare căsătorie a căutat să îmbine aceste elemente într-o „cheie personală”, conform propriilor aspirații. În concluzie, în secolul al XVII-lea, se poate vorbi de o adevărată „strategie matrimonială” în familiile boierești din Țara Românească și Moldova.