

# **Bucharest as an European cultural landmark. The birth of an European modern metropola**

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**Abstract.** *The present-day Bucharest is the result of many centuries of growth and transformations. From among them, the 18th century is of a special importance as it is the time when the emerging city becomes a European cultural landmark. The purpose of the present paper is to gather together and to analyse comparatively and in relation those aspects, events, that turned Bucharest into a cosmopolite metropola, situated at the border of two worlds, the Oriental and the Occidental ones, in a key moment of our history, the dawn of modernity.*

**Keywords:** phanariot epoch, emerging infrastructure, church, guilds, Princely Academy.

The phanariot period is unanimously recognized as one of the least fortunate epochs of the Romanian history. Covering more than one century (1711-1821), it is characterized by the foreign rule exercised by the Ottoman Empire by means of their Greek representatives on the Romanian territory, the phanariot princes.

From the political point of view, the phanariot period is certainly a drawback, as the relative independence of the Romanian provinces is diminished, the national army is also reduced, and the rulers, with a few exceptions, are – and consequently act as – nothing more than mere employes of the Sultan. They bought the princely thrones with very large sums of money

However, economically speaking the situation is less dark than the one at the political level. The 18th century is the period when the Romanian Provinces finally leave behind the late Middle Ages situation characterizing its economic and political life. The number of employed civil servants increases as well as the number of merchants bringing products from all over Europe, traders producing goods and selling services. The guilds of traders and merchants become powerful and impose their position especially in the capitals of the two provinces, Bucharest and Iassy.

At the end of the 17th century, Bucharest is still a medieval settlement, but the century to come will change its face profoundly, turning it until the end of Enlightenment, into a cosmopolitan space, inhabited by a variety of people of different nationalities and cultures whose mark is still to be discovered by the traveller or by the curious residents in its old centre.

The rule of Constantin Brâncoveanu at the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries had already brought about a changes and modernization initiatives, as nothing seemed to be too expensive when it came about the beauty of a dwelling or of a church for Brancoveanu. The number of buildings raised in Bucharest during his rule, and often at his initiative and on his expenses is impressive. The ruler increases and redecorates the Princely Court, re-designs the gardens of the Court and hires a team of gardeners to take care of them. He builds imposing dwellings in many other locations in the present day old centre of the city, for his children, and a magnificent – and famous over centuries – palace at Mogosoaia for his son Stefan. Most of the churches built by Brancoveanu can still be admired in the contemporary city.

Therefore, the settlement that Nicolae Mavrocordat, the first phanariot prince on the thrones of the Romanian Provinces finds when he is appointed ruler of The Romanian Country is one rich in majestic buildings and with an incipient infrastructure, but still tributary to feudalism from the point of view of the social structure and occupation of its inhabitants.

The future capital of Romania develops in a fast rhythm during the 18th century and it becomes an important economic and cultural centre on the map of Eastern Europe.

Everybody wants to live in Bucharest: country boyards try to obtain more or less important jobs at the princely court. All that matters is the position at the Court (*dregatoria*) which is most often treated as a means of acquiring wealth and eventually acceding to an even higher position. Both the Romanian and the Greek aristocracy buy their 'dregatorie' and in their turn, sell favors and lower jobs. Therefore corruption will become one of the main characteristics of the epoch.

However, although it is true that, taken globally, the political situation of the two Romanian provinces is worse<sup>1</sup>, as far as the economic and cultural life of their two capitals is concerned, the 18th century is undoubtedly a flourishing period. The ranks and importance of the boyards came to be directly influenced by the jobs they had at the princely court, jobs that became, along the century more numerous and varied. Everybody wanted to move to the capital and to be as close to the prince as possible. An illustrative example is that of Craiova's *ban*, who preferred to delagate his power to a deputy ruler in order to move to Bucharest.

The number of Bucharest's inhabitants increases steadily all along the 18th century, and so do their economic needs. The direct and rapid consequence is that the guilds of merchants and traders become bigger, richer and more diversified. They occupy whole streets in the emerging city, which come to be known from the name of their activity (*Șelari*, *Blănari*) or from the place they come from (*Gabroveni*, *Lipscani*).

As expected, the steady economic development of the city during the whole phanariot epoch triggers a cultural development as well. The number of churches founded by the princes themselves or by the members of the aristocracy, by the the guilds or individual merchants or traders is impressive and remarked by all the foreign travellers to the Romanian territories.

The Academy from Bucharest will rival the similar institutions from all over Europe and its beneficiaries are not only young boyards and princes but also sons of enriched merchants and traders from the whole South-East Europe. The importance of this higher education institution, its status of a centre generating and dissemination Romanian and Greek culture becomes even more obvious if place it in the context of C-tin Giurescu's remark that Ellada itself did not have any similar instituion.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> One should not ignore the fact that the situation of the two Romanian provinces could have been even worse, and its's Alexandru Mavrocordat, the future prince Nicolae's father who prevented turning of the Romanian territories into Ottoman province. The sultan's intention was to change the regime of Moldavia and The Romanian Country but Alexandru Mavrocordat, his private and much trusted counselor managed to convince him to partial freedom of the provinces, whose thrones he wanted for his sons. History proved that he was successful in his intention.

<sup>2</sup> Giurescu C., *Istoria românilor*, partea a II-a, București, Fundația regală pentru știință și artă, 1946, p. 783.

The Princely Academy from Bucharest benefits from the academic support of the Jerusalem Patriarch, Hrisant Notaras, an outstanding cultural personality of his time, with a vast classical and religious culture, whose personality is connected both to the Brancoveanu and to the Mavrocordat families<sup>3</sup>.

In 1707 the Princely Academy from Bucharest had three professors with a yearly salary, who taught logics, metaphysics and psychology, physics and astronomy, rhetorics, grammar and spelling.<sup>4</sup> It is not a surprise that the authors studied are predominantly Greeks: Xenofon, Plutarh, Tucidide, Socrate, Demostene, Esop, Sofocle, Euripide, Pitagora. The exact sciences are taught using the handbooks conceived by very influent scientists in the epoch: Teofil Corydaleu, Gherasim Vlahos.

The success of the Academy from Bucharest will lead, towards the end of the 18th century to the founding of numerous other similar schools, of course at a smaller scale, in the province towns of the country<sup>5</sup>.

The presence of the Princely Academy in Bucharest and of a number of printing houses represent an important stage in the process of institutionalization and passage to modernism of the Romanian culture<sup>6</sup>.

In the 18th century we became masters of the Greek culture and of orthodoxy, a privilege which meant that we had assumed all the duties and prestige, all the influence and hegemonic position of the Byzantine emperors (*“noi deveniserăm patroni ai culturii grecești cum deveniserăm patroni ai ortodoxiei prin aceea că asupra noastră trecuseră toate datoriile în același timp cu tot prestigiul, toată influența și toată situația de hegemonie a împăraților Bizanțului.”*<sup>7</sup>)

In this context, Bucharest becomes one of the most outstanding centres of economic and cultural activity in the region. The Princely Academy from Bucharest is a point of interest for all the Phanariot rulers who periodically reorganize and modernize it, endowing it with new buildings, valuable books for its highly representative book collection and attracting the most enlightened minds to teach in the capital of the Romanian Country.

The Princely Academy attracts students from all over the oriental part of Europe. This tendency should be placed in the larger context generated by the fall of Constantinople two centuries and a half earlier. Many learned men of the

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<sup>3</sup> *Istoria României*, vol. VI, lucrare colectivă editată de Academia Română, București, Editura Enciclopedică, 2002, p. 737.

<sup>4</sup> Giurescu C., *Istoria Bucureștilor*, București, Editura Vremea, 2009, p. 196.

<sup>5</sup> Camariano-Cioran A., *Les Academies princieres de Bucharest et de Iassy et leurs professeurs*, Thessalonique, Institute for Balkan Studies, 1974, p. 50.

<sup>6</sup> Bărbulescu M., Deletant D., Hitchins K., Papacostea S. Pompiliu T., *Istoria României*, București, Grupul Editorial Corint, 2007, p. 225.

<sup>7</sup> Iorga N., *Istoria românilor prin călători*, București, Editura Eminescu, 1981, p. 301.

Christian Orient found shelter and support in the Romanian provinces, whose capitals become increasingly recognized cultural centres in the Orient and South-Eastern European Region.

The population of Bucharest becomes gradually more educated and an aspect which characterizes the 18<sup>th</sup> century is the emergence of valuable laic libraries. From this point of view, the illustrious Mavrocordat family made Bucharest known all over Occidental Europe due to their fabulous library.

Bucharest became a destination for the letters sent by the secretaries of the French king and the Archbishop of Canterbury. Not only them, but also the representatives of the Vatican were also interested in learning information about the huge and valuable library of the Mavrocordats. They desired to obtain copies of the library's catalogue but the first phanariot prince refused to make it public for many years. He preferred to offer gifts to the destinataries of his correspondence and to exchange books with them.

18<sup>th</sup> century Bucharest did not only host the richest private library in Oriental Europe, it was also the place where the largest monastery in South-Eastern Europe was built, the Văcărești Monastery, an architectural treasure whose fabulous riches and majesty were known in the whole Orthodox world.

In spite of its darker side – wars, pest, fires – the century of the Enlightenment was a time of glory for the largest city of the Romanian Country; it was the time when Bucharest turned into a cosmopolite metropola, situated at the border of two worlds, the Oriental and the Occidental ones, in a key moment of our history, the dawn of modernity.

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