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FOUNDATION ACT, FAMILY SOLIDARITIES AND POWER STRUCTURES. THE MONASTERY DORMITION OF THEOTOKOS FROM RÂMNICU SĂRAT

-ABSTRACT OF THE PH.D. THESIS -

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INTRODUCTION[*]

The ecclesiastical architecture from the period of Constantin Brâncoveanu's reign (1688-1714) had been the subject for numerous studies, researches and synthesis works which had offered, mainly, a physiognomy specific to several religious monuments from the end of the 17th century. Within this historic-graphical areal, merely for the last three decades there will be regained, partially outlined and revealed, a preoccupation for approaching the theme of the founding acts, from the perspective of the family and power structures which will merge the fields of art history with the history itself.

This rather late structuring of such kind of thematic with its own method was determined by the nature itself of the Romanian medieval sources which are strongly underlining some features concerning the property, power, faith and parsimoniously treating other layers concerning the familial being. Therefore, the historians approaching the problematic of the founding acts from another perspective, at the border between the social, politic and cultural issues, are continuously drawing the attention upon two aspects: 1) the difficulty to define the family and power concepts from the perspective of the foundation act, taking into account the nature of the information acquired from the documentary, juridical, religious and narrative sources; 2) researching such a theme is organically connected to the historical research in itself.

However, despite all these impediments determined by the nature and the content of the sources, as well as by the late structuring of various methodologies, the Romanian historians have contoured new research directions by proposing important renewing features in the study of the founding acts, starting from the study of the family structures and of the politic imagery. Therefore, the church is no longer seen as a *monument*, a monolithic structure which has to be described and inventoried, but conceived as a structure which reunites several actions, gestures, contexts whose representation will presuppose a specific significance, each and every time.

Consequently, the founding act of a monastery becomes both a referential point as well as a communication one, which does not foresee only a connection between the Christian and God. The relationship between the Church and its founder is much more complex as it aims, starting from this religious level, to several symbolical and material elements connecting different individuals to social groups through the communicative function of the recollection of the dead and for the attraction force of the Church as a central place of the communication[1]. This is the reason for which, even if such religious edifices are initiated by spiritual intents or answering to such grounds, mentioned from the very entrance in the Church on the dedication inscriptions carved in the stone above the entrance, or in the votive paintings, occupying or reoccupying a well determined space, adopting, in specific contexts, some planimetric, bearing structure, decorative and iconographical solutions, or granting some donations can structure also other senses together the religious one.

Accordingly, taking into account the political, social and cultural context as well as the typology of the founding acts of the 17th century, we intended to observe, through the means of a punctual analysis, if within the frame of such constructive gesture, we can follow up and structure some competences which can reflect personal aspirations, conceptions upon the family and power structures, as well as the connecting unities.

In this respect, the chosen research theme is bringing up in a dialogue a constructive gesture proved to be unique during Constantin Brâncoveanu's reign (1688-1714): the ex-monastery dedicated to *Dormition of Theotokos* from Râmnicu Sărat, Buzău county, monastery erected between 1689-1696 by the prince Constantin Brâncoveanu together with his uncle, the sword bearer (*spătar*) Mihai Cantacuzino (born 1640 - † 1716).

Bringing up in the discussion such a subject was due to the fact that most of the studies and researches concerning the religious edifices built during the reign of Constantin Brâncoveanu by this prince and by the Cantacuzino family, did not bestow a lot of attention to the ex-monastery dedicated to *Dormition of Theotokos* from Râmnicu Sărat as in the case of other monasteries belonging to the prince Constantin Brâncoveanu or to the sword bearer Mihai Cantacuzino. In the same time, the historians or the clerical representatives who have made researches at the ex-monastery from Râmnicu Sărat have approached the subject in a

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[1] Radu G. PĂUN, *Dévotion et solidarités communautaires dans la principauté de Moldavie au XVIIIe siècle*, in Maria CRĂCIUN, Ovidiu GHITTA (ed.), *Church and Society in Central and Eastern Europe*, Cluj-Napoca, 1998, p. 276.

monographic or descriptive manner, with, sometimes, a non-critical analysis of the sources, which lead to a series of interpretation errors or inadvertences connected to the dedication theme, the construction date of the monastery or the dedication of the monastery of Râmnicu Sărat to the monastery *Schimbarea la Faţă* [The Transfiguration] from Mount Sinai.

Following these two ample guiding lines, the research is aiming to emphasize, along the three chapters, the founding gesture, the imagery of the laic in the religious space of the end 17th century as well as the way in which the family and power structures could succeed to articulate within the religious founding act. In the same time, during the whole research there were pointed out new considerations concerning the monastery dating, the identification of a constructive evolution, regarding the period of dedication of the monastery from Râmnicu Sărat to the monastery *Schimbarea la Fată* [The Transfiguration] from Mount Sinai.

In order to recuperate an individual profile, the analysis had as starting point the study of the monastery from Râmnicu Sărat on several plans, which had in view the location, the particularities of the architectural and iconographical decorations as well as the inventory of the monastery wealth. After creating this fundament, the interest area was extended upon other foundations of the families of Constantin Brâncoveanu and Mihai Cantacuzino, in an attempt to discover different types of constructive and iconographic representations. By identifying such types we intended to observe the manner in which the content is evolving, at what level were the modifications made, which is the context where the change is occurring and if this figurative language is visible and perceivable. In parallel, by studying these types, series and contexts we wanted to observe the following: if the evolution of the architectural rendering elements, the decorative or iconographical elements are reflecting a preoccupation for the content; the way in which the family and power structures, in the way they were defined at the level of the Romanian medieval sources, were rediscovered and structured within the founding act.

In this research we used a lot of varied sources. If the study of the ecclesiastical Wallachian architecture of the 18th century is well contoured in the Romanian historiography and can be completed on the spot, *in situ*, as a part of the churches have preserved the original form and painting[2], the informational stage concerning the destiny and the social relations of some

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[2] Among the examples analyzed at the level of the votive fresco, only the church form Măgureni, Prahova County, is nowadays in state of ruin, therefore the observation of some aspects is based upon the photo clichés published by Teodora Voinescu in her study upon the master painter Pârvu Mutu (Teodora VOINESCU, „Zugravul Pîrvul Mutul şi Şcoala sa", in *Studii şi cercetări de istoria artei*, Bucharest, vol. II, issue 3-4, 1955, p. 133-157)..

families is uneven and is not being emphasized in a wider time span. This is the reason for which we were obligated to resort to a wider ensemble of fragments situated in different contexts, completely different and variable as dimensions, from simple transactions until confessions concerning the cultural education or the moral value of some members within the two studied families.

Having at our disposal a subject with multiple analytical possibilities and such a vast material, the main research methods were the analysis, the correlation, the comparison and the corroboration of all information obtained from different source categories (narrative, documentary, archeological, visual) and the information systematization together with the critic study.

Due to the complexity of such an approach we have called upon the foreign bibliography where the studies devoted to family and power and elite imagology are much better contoured within a reality more clearly expressed at the source level. These synthesis and case studies have constituted into real methodological example, helping us to give consistency and to articulate this research.

Chapter I. The Architectural History and Evolution of the Monastery
Dormition of Theotokos from Râmnicu Sărat (16th – 20th Centuries)

Within this chapter the monastery dedicated to *Dormition of Theotokos* was placed in a geographical, political and architectural (structure and decorations) context of the 17th century.

Framing into a geographical and political context, in the subchapter *The Positioning of the Monastery Dormition of Theotokos* there were also emphasized other functions of the monastery besides the religious one: refuge in case of swift attacks organized by the Bugeac Tartars, supervision of the country Eastern borders, shelter for the merchandisers or the travelers using the commercial connecting roads between Moldavia and Wallachia (one of the roads being in the monastery neighborhood).

In the subchapters *Constructive Stages (16th-20thCenturies]* and *Architecture and Ornamental Plastic Arts of the Monastery Dormition of Theotokos* it was indicated the fact that the monastery of the end of 17th century was not a founding act *ab initio*, but it represented a constructive stage to which will be added a series of modifications all along the 18th and 20th

centuries, especially at the level of annexes, the surrounding walls or the exonarthex and at the narthex church tower. Meanwhile, within the subchapter *Constructive Stages (16th-20thCenturies)* there are brought some contributions concerning: the evolution of the constructive stages at the wooden church dedicated to *Sf. Gheorghe* [Saint George] – church from the late 17th century; the construction period of the monastery dedicated to *Dormition of Theotokos*, period registered in between 1689-1696 according to the documentary sources (the documents from 30th of June and 4th of July 1700, the donation act from 6th of January 1696 belonging to the delegate of the founder to construct the monastery (*ispravnic*), the dedication document of the hermitage of Fundul Cocorăşti from 20th of June 1689 to the monastery of Râmnicu Sărat) and narrative (the chronic of the *logofăt* [first boyard of the Court] Radu Greceanu).

In the subchapter *Architecture and Ornamental Plastic Arts of the Monastery Dormition of Theotokos* it was followed, in a first stage, the architectural and decorative style from the monastery of Râmnicu Sărat and then we went ahead for identifying the architectural landmarks (plans, decorating patterns) to nearly all of the churches erected in the period 1690-1705 by the prince Constantin Brâncoveanu and the members of the Cantacuzino family. In this sense, compared to other constructive periods, we could observe continuity at a planimetric level with slight differences in the positioning of the architectural components as well as an evolution of the stone carved decorations. Consequently, taking over an old architectural vocabulary, with small modifications, developing an ornamental language in its own with a lot of care for the materials used, are all representing the meaningful and continuous preoccupation of the patron for his construction.

In the last subchapter *Dedication of the Monastery Dormition of Theotokos* there are brought new contributions as regarding the period of Râmnicu Sărat monastery dedication to Mount Sinai. Therefore, if the repertory of Sebastian Duicu regarding the ecclesiastic edifices of the Cantacuzino family are representing a first step in clearing out some aspects (e.g.: of the solemnly documents from 30th of June and 4th of July 1700)[3], the present research is proposing the years 1690-1691 as a period when it took place the monastery dedication upon the basis of the presence of a new hegumen of Sinaite origin and during a period when the prince Constantin Brâncoveanu got involved in the juridical issue of nominating the Sinai archbishop.

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[3] Sebastian DUICU, *Edificii eclesiastice cantacuzine din Ţara Românească secolele XVII-XIX. Repertoriu*, PHd Thesis in history, Faculty of History, Philosophy and Geography, University of Craiova (Roumania), 2006, p. 142.

Chapter II. Founders and Their Foundations. Study Upon the Votive Representations of the Church *Dormition of Theotokos*

During the first subchapter *The Votive Image: Methodological Perspectives* there was accomplished a historiographical tour of different approaches of the votive image in the occidental area, in the Byzantium region as well as in the Romanian space.

In addition, we have defined the concepts and their affiliated terminologies concerning the votive scene and we have established patterns, series and evolutions belonging to these types and series. Therefore we could identify a correlation between the votive iconographical content and the political-social context of the second half of the 17th century. Meanwhile, there was accomplished a differentiation between the votive iconographical type from Wallachia and the one belonging to the Moldavian space.

In the second subchapter *The Painter's Team and the Date of the Votive Fresco* there were brought new contributions as regarding the identification of the painters who were decorating the church: Pârvu Mutu (according to the painted inscription from the nave under the image of *Saint Archangel Michael*), the master painter of the Cantacuzino family, and the team headed by Dimitrios Constandinos (according to the inscription painted on the arch of the main doorway of the church), painter who was present to the most important princely foundation. According to the same inscription painted on the arch of the main doorway of the church, discovered in 2008, we were able to date the fresco: 17th of September 1699.

The third subchapter *The Structure of the Votive Painting: Comparative Analysis* is attaining a chronological and thematic *division* determined by four votive structures from the prince foundations and belonging to other members of Cantacuzino family, whose painting, well preserved, was completed by the same two painters who worked for the church of the monastery of Râmnicu Sărat: the church Filipeştii de Pădure, Prahova county (painted in 1692), the church from Măgureni, Prahova county (painted in 1694), both of them painted by Pârvu Mutu, the katholicon of the monastery from Hurezi, Vâlcea county, painted within 1692-1694, the prince Court Church from Târgovişte, Dâmboviţa county, painted in 1698, the last two painted by the team of the greek Constandinos. The purpose of this *division* was to maintain two types of contemporary concepts for the depiction, even if they belonged to the same environment of the

elite: the prince foundation and the one belonging to the Cantacuzino boyars. From the comparative analysis of these votive frescos we have observed a different approaching of the content, determined by the report void-full of the architectural structure. The constant was given by several factors: the ascendance by the presence of the prince's ancestors and of the other family ancestors, the emphasizing of the male members of the Cantacuzino family as of the male and female members in the case of the prince Constantin Brâncoveanu, the character's structuring following a metric scale for ages and sexes.

Subchapter four, *The Relationship Evolution Between Constantin Brâncoveanu and his Cantacuzino uncles from Wallachia*, is representing a preamble for the last chapter of this paper, establishing a general framework for the historical context and the relationships among the two families during the construction period of the monastery until 1707, after two years of the prince's visit in Râmnicu Sărat.

Chapter III. Family Solidarities and Power Structures

In the first part of the chapter we made a tour of the Romanian medieval sources which have revealed the fact that there is a differentiated approach of the subject concerning the family and power, the language affiliated to these two concepts being ambivalent and ambiguous.

In order to disclose the way it was defined and understood the family and the power structures, in the first subchapter *Types and Manifestations* we have analyzed the ways which lead to the development of the families (norms and formation criteria) and we have tried to categorize the manner of defining the authority and power criterion. Meanwhile, in order to perceive the definition of the familial structure at the level of the Romanian medieval sources there were analyzed several notions: *family member* (*rod*), *kindred* (*neam*), *house* (*casă*) and *family*. Consequently we have noticed that, due to the importance given to solidarities and cohabitation, the blood affiliation and the kindred reports seemed to be abstract, and the analyzed lexis of these four notions are denoting a contextual usage with multiple senses. In general, the concepts *family member* (*rod*), *kindred* (*neam*), *house* (*casă*) and *family* are used in order to sign up the individual in a descendent line which can emphasize his adherence to one group.

In the last chapter *Forms and Expressions* it is followed the manner in which the architectural and iconographical representation practices as well as the way in which the family

and power structures are acting, have discovered a suitable place of expression in the *founding act*.

Therefore, we have observed the fact that the setting upon a commercial route, the careful reconstruction and the attention given to the monastery, made this constructive effort visible and perceivable at local level. As well, on iconographical level, there were identified a series of parameters (location, distribution on the mural surface, color, crown, clothes) through which we could highlight: 1) two different genealogical landmarks, but with two interwoven aspects: a political one, by remembering the former princes (a polarization around the inheritance of the older princes belonging to the Basarab family), and a social one, of the family and the kindred; 2) grouping and aligning the characters in a genealogical line which presents the family as a collectivity of descendents with a common ancestor (the family group belonging to a kindred); 3) the family belonging to a structured clan as a collectivity made of descendants on male and feminine descendents of the same ancestor, to whom there are attached the members originating through kinship or by other line of descend; 4) the structuring of the solidarities which are conferring consistency to a group.

Consequently, we have noticed that around an inherited and also build symbolic patrimony, the group is modeling its visual structures and is orienting the representation upon three chronological senses: past, present and future. The solidarity model which was invoked was based upon the kindred and kinship conscience.

Conclusions

The contextual study and the categorization of the monstery *Dormition of Theotokos* from Râmnicu Sărat in a general outline of the 17th century had presented a series of non-linearities which are indicating that the group is adapting the discourse depending the surrounding realities and the memory is "*manipulated*" depending the circumstances and objectives.

Therefore, even if the constructive and iconographical practices are bringing in discussion the deceased people, it aimed for the present and the future families. The need to point out and to emphasize the connections between the two parental groups or the two hierarchic structures is belonging to the desire to outline the cohesion of the group members and to establish the clan position as a component part of a solidarity complex always in competition.

Consequently, in a dynamic and competitive socio-political system, the prince, the figure of authority and power, is no longer represented alone, but in close connection to his ancestors and the present kindred, who are consequently transformed into resources. The continuous increase of the internal and external pressure will amplify the preoccupations to draw nearer some interest groups and to offer a legitimization to these socio-political relations and finalities.

By the architectural/painting image and the associative gesture, the two families will structure a figurative speech, through which the family (domestic group, kindred, community, spiritual bond, blood relationship) and *the power* were emphasized as two components which will sustain themselves since both have had the same interest: to ensure the stability in order to survive. Under the threat of unforeseen situations and of reign instability, the solidarities founded on kinship will remain fundamental. Even in the conditions of multiple fidelities, where the alliance or blood relationships will not offer complete guarantees, without enough power or branches able to offer a steady base for the political element[4], the solidarities could discover, even if only temporarily, the support of different *patronal acts*, phenomena where they could manifest their preoccupation towards the content and the significance of the humanity model called to consolidate the solidarities[5].

In his structure, the religious construction becomes a reference pole, a *symbolic* and *cultural capital* through which is perpetuated and commemorated the authority of the one who

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[4] Radu G. PĂUN, *op. cit.*, p. 276.
[5] Alexandru DUŢU, *Modelul cultural brâncovenesc*, dans *Constantin Brâncoveanu*, volume coordinated by Paul CERNOVODEANU, Florin CONSTANTINIU, Bucharest, 1989, p. 163.

had build it, the architectural *language* and gesture becoming, among another series of social, religious and especially political elements, important reference elements for the local elite and the future generations.