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History of Romanian Culture) and *Interpretări românești* (Romanian Interpretations)

Neagu Djuvara, *O scurtă istorie ilustrată a românilor* (A Brief Illustrated History of Romanians) 267

Abstract

Keywords: institution, boyar class, historiography, chroniclers, Romanticism, Positivism, “The New Historical School”

The dissertation entitled *Instituția boierimii, până la începutul secolului al XVII-lea, în viziunea istoriografiei românești* [Boyers as an Institution until the Beginning of the Seventeenth Century, as Reflected by Romanian Historiography] follows the development of the aristocratic (boyar) class throughout the Romanian Middle Ages as it was approached in the national historiography during the various stages and trends that marked historical writing in Romanian culture.

The study is structured according to six chapters: *The Self-image of the Medieval Boyar Class, The Vision of the Romantic School on the Boyar Class, Positivism and the “Critical School”, Approaches on the Institution of the Boyar Class, “The New Historical School” and the Boyar Class, Approaches of the Boyar Class in the Historiography of the Totalitarian Period, The Return to Democracy. The Institution of the Boyar Class According to the Post-revolutionary Historiography, an Introduction, Conclusions, Bibliography, and Appendices* that include the most significant texts that dwell on the boyar class as an institution signed by historians such as Dimitrie Cantemir, Nicolae Iorga, C. C. Giurescu, P. P. Panaitescu, and Neagu Djuvara.

During the Middle Ages the boyar class represented the elite of feudal society in Walachia and Moldavia, involved in the foundation of these states and having a major contribution to their institutional organization. The economic basis of boyar power, as everywhere in Medieval Europe, consisted of land ownership. Such domains covered a large part of the territory of these states and boyars competed with the Church in this respect. Due to their military role, very significant in early and classical feudalism, they can be identified with the so-called “bellatores” of Western European society and through this Romanian feudalism takes over general European characteristics. Nevertheless, certain differences emerged due to the different development contexts of the western and eastern parts of the European continent.

The present historiographic initiative aims at stressing the manner in which the institution of the boyar class was reflected in historical writing during the different stages of Romanian historical thought, from medieval annals and chronicles until contemporary historiography. In order to understand correctly the opinions and theories connected to the issue of the boyar class, one must place them in the history of the time when they were expressed, thus contextualizing the entire historiographic initiative.

Boyar-chroniclers who wrote the fifteenth-seventeenth century annals and chronicles painted a unilateral, self-image of the boyar class; often, their entire effort of presenting historical deeds turned into a *pro domo* appeal in favor of a social category aware of its place and role in the society of its time. As representatives of princely will, some of the era’s scholars presented the official ideology through which the princes

aimed at establishing their authority over the great boyars and at transmitting a message of power and stability. “Objectivity”, as much as it existed in those times, was established through the writings of the great Moldavian chroniclers Grigore Ureche and Miron Costin and became a firmly expressed dimension of Grand Pantler Constantin Cantacuzino’s historical writing (Walachia). On the contrary, his homologues in the activity of historical issues, the “Walachian chroniclers”, illustrate the purest subjectivity and their works became corrosive pamphlets against their political adversaries and panegyrics for those whom they admired.

The self-image of the boyar class underwent a significant development according to author and era. It started with the self-reconciled attitude reflected in the earliest court chronicles and then developed into the historiography with vindictive accents of the Walachians and into Miron Costin and Dimitrie Cantemir’s grave, somber, and pessimistic interrogations of Baroque inspiration.

The historiography of court annals expressed the interests of the princes, and viewed the world and historical facts as an unfolding of the divine plan, a reproduction of “the city of God”, implemented in a manner full of imperfections. The conflict between good and evil could be translated, according to the mentality of the first chroniclers, as a confrontation between Christians and “the pagan languages”, a test imposed and arbitrated by God. It was the glorious period of medieval Romanian statehood and the princes legitimized the divine character of their power through the victory against the “non-believers” and through the erection of holy churches in gratitude for the divine protection. During this period, the boyars were depicted as main supporters of the voivodes, as the political and military elite of society, generously rewarded for their fidelity. The punitive acts of the princes against the traitorous boyars are recorded as something natural in an era in which cruelty had pedagogical virtues and was aimed at inhibiting one’s adversaries. Under this respect, *Invățaturile lui Neagoe Basarab* [Neagoe Basarab’s Teachings] are an exception, as they are a plea for a ruler’s moderation and restraint. This moralizing writing, of great literary and philosophical value, illustrates a Renaissance mentality, according to which man gains new value and suffering and fear are no longer absolutely necessary to princely authority, but persuasion and kindness should prevail.

With the great chroniclers: Grigore Ureche, Miron Costin, and Ion Neculce, the boyars became emancipated from the tutelage of the princes and started to display consistent, stylistically more diverse critical attitudes. As specialists have previously noted, the era’s historiography presents the new class of boyars, elevated to rank through offices and commercial activities, largely of Levantine origin, that replaced to a large degree the old category of feudal lords that played its role in the formation of the Romanian states. The regime of Ottoman domination became suffocating in the end of the sixteenth century, threatening to transform the two Danubian principalities in pashaliks. Mihai Viteazul’s deed proved to be, unfortunately, an isolated episode in the historical development placed under the mark of decline. The new historical conditions had an impact on the works of the chroniclers through an obvious pessimism and the undissimulated nostalgia for the glorious past. In order to encourage their contemporaries in attitude and action, the chroniclers offered as example Stephen the Great’s personality, whom the seventeenth-century chroniclers have masterly portrayed.

Since they were among the great boyars, Ureche, Costin, and Neculce supported a political regime favorable to their own class, largely modeled upon the example of the noble regime in neighboring Poland. Their works had a strong memorialistic character and were based, to a large degree, on their experience as holders of important state offices. Miron Costin was the most cultivated and elevated in thought; he also had the Baroque-like pessimism of man adapting to the context of his time, a tumultuous and dangerous era. Taking refuge in the past and in culture was presented as a palliative, an intellectual consolation for being unable to act due to hostile history.

It was precisely this lethargy of resignation that Dimitrie Cantemir, the scholarly prince, experienced; he was a modern spirit, who illustrated the concept of “uomo universale” in Romanian culture. His works pleaded for absolute monarchy that had remarkable results on a European scale and supported the hereditary principle of succession to the throne instead of the elective one that had become so corrupt due to Turkish interference in the appointment of the princes. In the same time, Cantemir expressed a suspicious attitude towards the class of great boyar due to his modest origin and his experience in Constantinople where he was several times the victim of boyars’ intrigues.

Mihail Kogălniceanu and Nicolae Bălcescu, great personalities of nineteenth-century Romanian culture, represent Romanticism in historiography. The 1848 ideology, of Romantic origin, was strongly militant, mobilizing, expressing an absolute confidence in the regenerative forces of the nation. Along this line of historical thought, in the spirit of social pedagogy, one can also place the ideas of the two above mentioned historians on the formation of the boyar class, on the place and role that this social structure played during the feudal period. They both favored the theory of conquest, taken over from Western European Romantic historiography; the theory states that there was an inner conquista through which a category of warriors supported by the princely power occupied through force the lands of the free peasants and formed a military and landowner aristocracy, the class of boyars of the Romanian Middle Ages. Kogălniceanu focuses on the military character of the boyar class institution, believing that the large domains appeared through the conquerors’ desire to reward their knights and to render them faithful, while Bălcescu insists on the economic factor in the formation of large land ownership, characteristic to the separation of boyars from the large mass of free peasants. One must note that the conquest theory does not refer to possible foreign, outside elements, but invokes an inner process of social differentiation inside the Romanian society after the formation of the feudal states and with the decisive contribution of the rulers.

A. D. Xenopol marks the transition of Romanian historiography from romantic attitudes to the positivist-type approaches. He is the author of the first significant synthesis work on national history and a philosopher of history appreciated in the entire Europe in the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. The historian from Iași supported the idea that the boyar class, as the elite of the Romanian society emerged before the formation of the feudal states and that its early days are connected to land ownership and not to offices; the latter was, according to him, a subsequent stage that coincided with institutional organization of the Romanian states under the control of the princes. In the beginning, the boyar class secured its position in society through the two fundamental, founding attributions of its members who were

landowners and the main fighters of the feudal state. Later on, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they also held important offices and this became prevalent in the definition of their status as boyars.

The Positivist trend was expressed in Romanian historiography by the “Critical School” consisting of Dimitrie Onciul, Ioan Bogdan, and Constantin Giurescu. Stressing the value of written sources, representatives of Positivism attempted to confer history a status as close as possible to that of the exact sciences and excluded all Romantic exaltation and exaggeration from historical interpretation. The result was a factual presentation focusing on factual arguments that can be demonstrated through documents.

D. Onciul only indirectly dealt with the institution of the boyar class, by discussing the early state formations (knezates and voivodeships) as the main forms of organization of Romanians during the Early Middle Ages. The above mentioned historian claims that the southern Slavs had a strong influence on the formation and names of these institutions, just as they did on the taking over of Slavonic culture. On the other hand, Ioan Bogdan demonstrates in his studies that the ancient Romanian institutions adopted Slavic names but employed them for a background consisting of Romanian realities, many of which dated from before the settlement of the Slavs. For Constantin Giurescu, the boyar status was organically linked to land ownership and the other characteristics came about later on and in direct relation to their status as owners of large feudal domains. This opinion was also supported by I. C. Filliti, educated in law, who saw the origins of property in the different development of land ownership, in ancient times, i.e. peasants owning land together and boyars having strictly delimited possessions.

Nicolae Iorga is unique through his opinions on the boyar class institution in the history of Romanians. The historian believed that the Romanian Middle Ages was exclusively peasant-like, with collective ownership over land inherited from ancient times. According to him, the so-called “romanii populare” (Latin-speaking communities), in fact unions of village communities, can be placed at the foundation of social organization after the Roman retreat and they ensured the continuity of Romanic elements throughout the entire Migration period. N. Iorga argued that the free, warrior peasants had a significant contribution to the formation of the Romanian states outside the Carpathian Arch and to their defense against outer aggression. The historian believed that it was only in the sixteenth century that peasant property became dislocated following repeated and abusive donations that the princes bestowed on persons from their entourage. The peasant class lost its freedom and became subdued, while the early social solidarity was replaced by severed contradictions that would weakened the defensive power against the Ottoman threat. According to Iorga, the boyar class was formed relatively late and its genesis lay in the attribution of offices and pertaining domains, through the good will of the rulers. The theory of “a people of peasants” that Iorga supported throughout his life, could not lead to another conclusion on the institution of the boyar class than what he argued in *Istoria românilor în chipuri și icoane* (The History of Romanians in Portraits and Icons), in the chapter entitled *Rostul boierimii noastre* (The Role of Our Boyar Class): “The boyar class is not among our most ancient institutions, neither among those born from our soul.”

P. P. Panaitescu was a significant representative of the *Romanian Historical Periodical*, a renown Slavist and historian of old Romanian culture, among the most distinguished chronicle editors of our historiography. With a predilection for polemics,

Panaitelescu supported the Slavic origin of the boyar class in the territory inhabited by the Romanians. His arguments are of philological, cultural, and comparative nature, the latter mainly in connection to the birth of nobility in Western Europe following the Germanic conquests. The historian significantly nuanced his opinions during the final stages of his activity when he masterly dealt with the development of peasant communities in Walachia and Moldavia inside which he has identified obvious phenomena of differentiation in wealth and social status. In his last work, of a testamentary nature, *Introducere la istoria culturii românești* (Introduction to the History of Romanian Culture), Panaitelescu chose to support the idea of the mixed character of the autochthonous boyar class which was created due to differentiation processes inside the peasant communities unions and through the contribution of Slavic elements settled among the locals.

C. C. Giurescu, P. P. Panaitelescu's colleague of generation and historical thought, completely shared the theory that places the birth of the boyar class in the Slavic conquest of Dacian-Roman communities north of the Danube. His arguments, also encountered in the works of other historians sharing similar views, envisaged the content of the word "rumân" as general term for a category of non-free peasants, especially in Walachia, the use of terms such as knezates and voivodeships for the most ancient Romanian-Slavic political formations in the beginning of the Romanian Middle Ages, the adoption of Slavonic language in Church and the princely chancellery under the pressure of the dominating Slavic element. C. C. Giurescu believed that, at least in part, the toponyms and hydronyms are of Slavic origin and that these names date from the period when the Slavs had imposed themselves over the Latin-speaking autochthons but were unable to avoid being assimilated in time by the locals, as things happened in Western Europe with the conquering Germans who were assimilated by the Romanic-speaking populations that were more numerous and culturally more developed. On the end of Romanian ethnogenesis, he noted that "the subdued had conquered the masters, the once-conquered were now the conquerors and this time forever, without the defeated having a chance to take their revenge" (C. C. Giurescu).

The establishment of Communist Totalitarianism in Romania in the end of the Second World War dramatically changed the coordinates of Romanian society, including those of historiography and of the entire culture. The historical science was abusively attached to party propaganda and had to submit to Marxist-Leninist conditioning in the interpretation and the methodology of approaching historical facts. The great historians were denied publication or were imprisoned, while the institutional research structure was destroyed and replaced with organizations of Soviet inspiration. "Class struggle" became the panacea of every historical development, while the astral moments of the Romanian past were Slavicized or Russified, according to historical context and era. Mihail Roller and his *Istorie a RPR* (History of the RPR) soon became landmarks of the new historiographical approach, also on the institution of the boyar class regarded as a component of "the exploitation of the working classes" and dealt with infinite reserve. The role of the Slavs in the genesis of feudal structures was continuously stressed, besides the local component separated from the village community unions' structures.

After the retreat of the Soviet Army from Romania in 1958, one notes a process of de-Stalinization, also visible on the level of historical writing. Some big specialists were reintegrated in active life and the ideologizing of the facts of the past was largely given

up. The academic treatise *Istoria României* (History of Romania), in four volumes, published between 1960 and 1964, marked this change and the return to professional, scientific history. The boyar class was approached as a fundamental component of Romanian society during the Middle Ages and the genesis of this social structure was placed during the changes that unfolded on the level of territorial village unions, through the accumulation of private property goods and the transformation of certain offices, initially elective, into hereditary and prestige attributions. The interpretative line developed in the treatise *Istoria României* was continued, with due nuances, by most synthesis works published until 1989.

The fall of the Communist regime after the December 1989 Revolution allowed Romanian society to return to democracy and to the values of our culture from before the totalitarian era. Historiography has rebuilt its institutional foundations with the aid of the Romanian Academy and has started a recuperating effort meant to cover research areas and topics ignored or forbidden during the Communist period. Academic contacts with the Western World were also renewed in order to maintain Romanian historical thinking connected to the novelties in the field and to gain a much wider interpretative and methodological horizon.

The boyar class institution benefited from terminological and approach clarifications in works published over the last two decades. The entire post-revolutionary historiographical effort was synthesized in the treatise *Istoria românilor* (History of Romanians) published by the Romanian Academy in nine volumes, in which the science of history has included all recent discoveries, including those that allow us to place the origins of the boyar class in the changes that took place over time inside the village communities, through the elevation of “knezi” (judges) to a higher social status than the rest of the common members of the communities.

The most recent accomplishment that supports this approach and brings new arguments in favor of an autochthonous, knezial origin of the boyar institution is the synthesis work published by historians from Cluj entitled *Istoria României. Compendiu* (History of Romania. Compendium), coordinated by Ioan-Aurel Pop and Ioan Bolovan. The institutional and social history, including that of the boyar class, is analyzed by comparison to other European areas, with the adding of required terminological and interpretative clarifications, very significant for future research.

In conclusion, the present initiative aimed at presenting the image of the boyar institution as the issue was reflected in Romanian historiography, from medieval annals to contemporary historiography, with a special focus on the genesis of the boyar class, so much debated and controversial throughout the different historiographic stages and trends.

Keywords: institution, boyar class, historiography, chroniclers, Romanticism, Positivism, “The New Historical School”