

# THE PORTRAIT OF A HISTORIAN: GHEORGHE BRANCOVICI

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**Abstract:** *This paper aims at realising a prtrait of the historian, politician, diplomat and man of culture who was Gheorghe Brancovici. He was an interesting man of his time, involved in a lot of events and a writer interested in the history of his nation and also in creating a fake-genealogy. He had a close realtionship with his brother, Sava, who was a bishop, and had a life full of different kinds of events.*

**Keywords:** *chronicle, history, historian, ideal, life.*

Gheorghe Brancovici, the author of "The History of Slovenians", represents an interesting figure of his time, a cultural spirit, but also an adventurer, with a spectacular life and a tragic destiny, creating himself a fake genealogy in the chronicle. The life of the historian can be retraced both from other historians' writings and also from his own work.

Gheorghe Brancovici was born in Ineu, in 1645, as the son of Iovan and Maria. In the Brancovici family there were other three sons and two daughters, Simeon, the elder brother being the noticeable figure because he will become the bishop of Ardeal (by the name of Sava), having the throne in Balgrad (Alba Iulia). Simeon had religious vocation since he was young, so he was sent to his uncle, Longin Brancovici, who was archbishop in Ienopole. In a short time, his father gets sick and dies; two brothers and a sister also pass away and Maria wants Simeon to come back home and get married. Finally, he will follow his vocation of becoming a priest and Gheorghe Rackozy II and Constantin Basarab support him for becoming the bishop of Ardeal.

Being born in a frontier region, Gheorghe has the privilege to speak more languages such as Latin, Romanian, Serbian, Hungarian or Turks. Sava gets his brother close to him, tracks his education, their lives being ingeminated. (Gheorghe was only 11 when his brother became bishop.)

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The political career of the historian starts out early, in 1663, at the age of 18 and his role is that of a translator for prince Mihail Apafi's ambassador at the Ottoman Porte; he will have this job for four years. His stay at Constantinople is useful for the future historian because he meets there the diplomat Panaiot Nicusiu and, through him, the Imperial residents Reminger and Christofer of Kindsberg, known as opponents of the Turks. They wanted to make an alliance with the people who wished to be free from the Turks.

"Besides the fact we do not know where and how Gheorghe lived between 1658 -1663, it is common knowledge that Erdeli suffered in this period because of the Turks. That is why, notices Radonici very well, in these hard times the young Gheorghe got the idea about the power and size of Turkey and later, in the days he was staying at the Porte, this idea was completed with the image about the splendour, the opulence, but also the corruption in Turkey. In these agitated days, when there were so many pretences from the Turks and also from the Austrian people over the Erdeli region, the character of the young and already educated Gheorghe was taking shape. During the conflict between the Ottoman Porte and the emperor, Gheorghe Brancovici starts his diplomatic career (1663). Knowledge of foreign languages, but also the involvement of his brother, Sava II, concur for him to become, when he was still young, the interpreter of the Erdelian ambassador at the Porte and soon enters the Erdelian ambassador's service."<sup>1</sup>

On the 28th of September 1663, Gheorghe Brancovici is proclaimed despot of the Serbian people but this event is kept secret for 20 years. Gheorghe Brancovici is still working for Mihail Apafi who gives him an estate as a present.

In 1688, he takes a trip to Moscow with his brother, Sava's mission being both religious and political. In the chronicle, Gheorghe Brancovici is describing the history of this visit, noticing the pomp and honour they were met with and that accompanied them the whole trip. This pomp is denied by the historian Iovan Radonici; he considers that the great importance of this visit consists in the fact that Gheorghe found out about his brother's ideas.

Although he is continuing his work for Apafi and he is still used in different missions, Gheorghe starts to alienate from his protector through different actions, such as his plans of organizing a Christian Alliance

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolae Iorga, *The works of Gheorghe Brancovici*, Historical Magazine, III, 1917, p. 94

against the Turks with Grigore Ghica (during the winter holidays 1672-1673).

He remains the ambassador of Apafi in Constantinople until 1667, although he plays a double policy. His brother's situation is difficult, he is oppressed by the Calvinists and considered involved in the conspiracy against the prince, because the good relationship between the Brancovici brothers and the heads of the conspiracy - Paul Beldi and Ladislau Csaky was well known. In 1680, the two brothers are arrested, but Gheorghe is released for a sum of money. In the chronicle, he asserts that he was offered to give up his faith for saving himself, but the proposal seemed insulting for him. We could remind about the two trends from the Romanian countries (Nicolae Iorga writes about them) - the old cultural trend based on the Greek Classicism and the new one animated by the time spirit, produced by imitating the forms of Europe's civilization. There is another trend in Ardeal, in the middle of an obedient people where a Romanian word was an extraordinary thing. The priests' situation in Ardeal was difficult, the arrestment of bishop Sava being one of the examples.

Although Gheorghe is trying to persuade his brother to go to Tara Romaneasca, the bishop, old and sick, refuses the proposal but encourages Gheorghe to leave. He will arrive to Udriste Nasturel and Serban Cantacuzino (where he is staying between 1680-1689), who will give him protection and will obtain Sava's freedom. The historian's activity in this period is targeted towards Austria and Russia, Silviu Dragomir making a synthesis of the three goals he had: the freeing of Sava (which takes place too late because he dies shortly after), the beginning of a revenge campaign against prince Mihail Apafi and the rebirth of the old Serbian despotic state helped by Vienna and Serban Cantacuzino. He receives nobiliary titles - in 1683 he becomes a baron and in 1688 - a count. He also had a few moments of hope in seeing his dream come true - the Christians' victory at the siege of Vienna in 1668 and the coming of the imperial army in Tara Romaneasca and Serbia. Besides his political activity, Gheorghe Brancovici also has a historical and literary activity, stimulated by the cultural celebrities he meets: Radu and Udriste Nasturel, Constantin Brancoveanul and Constantin Cantacuzino.

In 1688, the leader of Tara Romaneasca sends him to Vienna to negotiate the way the Romanian army will go on the imperial army's side, but the historian plays a double game, asking for some privileges for the Serbian people, such as keeping their Christian religion and the

recognition of the state's old borders. The Austrians agree in order to keep them close. His play being discovered, Gheorghe is arrested in 1689 in Cladova, the order being given by the commander of the Austrian army, Ludovic de Baden. After his arrest, he is held in Vienna until 1703 and then in Eger for the rest of his life (19th of December 1711).

In Heb, the place of his detention, he leads a life full of needs; all the years of detention he sends letters for being helped. To one of them he does not receive any answer, while others do not arrive where they were supposed to. All the interventions for the count's freedom, all his attempts to prove his innocence are not successful, the count living in detention for 22 years.

The historian had an interesting personality and his consistent efforts for being released are underlined by Iovan Radonici in his book about the count. In spite of the detention regime, he was an important man who wrote an important page in the South - Eastern Europe history in his chronicle.

As we said, Gheorghe Brancovici created himself a fake genealogy, saying that he was the direct successor of the tyrant Gheorghe Brancovici of Smerdia (1427-1456). It is said that he had three sons: Stefan, Lazar and Grigore, the last one having three legitimate sons and an illegitimate one. One of Lazar's sons is Iovan's grandfather. The historian is also asserting his relationship with Mihai Viteazul. The Serbian historian, Ilarion Ruvarat, denies his genealogy, showing that one of the characters does not even exist, being fabrications for supporting the historian's ideas, which are in fact Sava's ideas.

Growing up and being educated by Sava, his beliefs were transferred to Gheorghe. Their ideal was the unity of the Christians against the Turks. Their connections with the Romanian people were very close, Sava being the bishop of Ardeal, of the Romanians in Ardeal, while their family came from Ineu, a region where the Romanian people were predominant. That is why, in his writings, he remembers about the Romanians. Another reason for that is his personal relationship with different men of culture from Tara Romaneasca.

His first writing in the Romanian language is "The History of Slovaks, the Illyricum, the Upper Misii and the lower Misii", published in 1687, when the historian was at Serban Cantacuzino's court. The chronicle follows the pattern of Byzantine chronographs starting the events from the beginning of the world and stopping in 1686. Facts about the Romanian history are also narrated, along with, folkloric elements or legends, which

offer a spectacular mark and also emphasizes the common destiny of Romanians and Serbians. After 1690, when he is in Heb, he rewrites the text and magnifies it, translates it into Serbian language, becoming known as "The history of Gheorghe Brancovici".

The Romanian chronicle includes the religious history from the Great Flood till the creation of the Babylon Tower, the history of the monarchies of Assyria, Persia, Rome, with Byzantium and the history of South-Eastern Europe, a central place being occupied by the Serbians, but also by the Romanians. Regarding the conception of the chronicle, we can notice both a religious and a patriotic element. The divine element has a great influence upon all the events; this conception is due to his belonging to a family of religious people. On the other hand, the patriotic element is due to his wish of identifying himself with the Serbian tyrant; that is why he praises the deeds of his people, sometimes without any real motivation. There are two leaders described in grim colours – Stefan Dusan and Iancu of Hunedoara, who was in an open conflict with the tyrant Gheorghe Brancovici.

The manuscript of the chronicle had a lot of copies, known in different regions of Romania: Muntenia, Oltenia, Moldova, Ardeal and Banat. "The historian's merit consists in the fact that, on the one hand, he writes about the Romanian history using external sources and, on the other hand, he lets the Romanian readers know about the past of their neighbours with whom they are in contact. Information about contemporary history is also added."<sup>2</sup>

He is also interested in the religious literature; there are three translations in Romanian, noticed by Emil Turdeanu in "Revue des etudes slaves". He is translating a "Catechism" important for the orthodox people especially because his brother had been arrested for defending his old religion and this text represents an orthodox answer to the Calvin and Catholic propaganda. He also translates "This book of the Holly Prays" and "For the Real Traveller" which contains different comments about Biblical writings and advice for mankind about the right way for eternal life.

The life and writings of Gheorghe Brancovici were discussed by the Serbian historians; they had different opinions about him; one of them admired his tenacity in proving his family's despotic origin, others contest

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<sup>2</sup> Damaschin Mioc și Marieta Adam – Chiper, *Gheorghe Brancovici – The Romanian Chronicle*, Academiei R.S.R Publishing, Bucharest, 1987, p. 22

him for the same reasons. The most representative historians for the two trends are Ilarion Ruvarat and Iovan Radonici, the latter being the author of a monograph of Gheorghe Brancovici; the title of the book is "Count Gheorghe Brancovici and his time" where he tried to present the count's personality.

The attempt of describing the count's personality is related to his life and writings but also to the historical period he was living in. The historians who deny his affiliation to the Serbian tyrant are S. Novacovici, Laios Taloti and especially Ilarion Ruvarat who considers him not to be a serious person and he does not have any sympathy for him. Liuba Ivanovici answers to Ruvarat's accusations and tries to justify the count's actions. Iovan Radonici is interested in Gheorghe Brancovici's life and writing and he uses different materials, internal and external sources, both Romanian and Serbian chronicles. He managed to configure the historical and political context in which the count lived but also his heredity. The material is used in more writings - "Count Gheorghe Brancovici, the Serbian Tyrant from Buda", "Gheorghe II Brancovici, the Illyricum Tyrant" or in the debate "From the First Siege of Vienna to the Great Migration".

In his comments about the historian's forefathers, Iovan Radonici says they came from Corenici (Hertzevovina); it is considered that in the oral tradition there were some elements about this family tyrant origin and Sava, influenced by these popular elements, told his brother about them. Radonici accuses their mother because, after the death of her husband, she retreated into a monastery, leaving her children. "It is certain that this woman transmitted to their children some unnatural characters especially to Gheorghe who becomes an unhappy, reckless, naive man."<sup>3</sup>

The personality of the count is also explained by his bad company. All his energy is used for proving his despotic origin, and his collapse, according to Radonici, comes not because he was working on his own, but because he did not understand that the emperor had different ideals.

Jelka Regep was also interested in the life and writings of the count, presenting him as an interesting character of his time, whose personality was dominated by antinomies. "Historian and writer, diplomat and politician, Gheorghe Brancovici enforces himself even after 300 years with the erudition of a polyglot and personal ideas for creating a state but at the same time he seems unrealistic, talented, naive, truthful, tending to exaggerate things, to hyperbolize them; he was inventive and with a

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<sup>3</sup> Iovan Radonici, *Count Gheorghe Brancovici and his time*, Belgrad, 1911, p. 86.

changeable nature. He loved glory, he was ambitious, he wanted richness and titles but in the last 20 years he was fighting for proving his innocence. It is understandable why he raised the interest of the contemporaries, but also of the historians. He imposes himself with his life but also with his work".<sup>4</sup>

About his work, Jelka Regep considers that it has to be seen not only as a historical truth but also as literature because he construes a subjective vision about events and people.

In conclusion, count Gheorghe Brancovici represents an important name in the Romanian and Serbian history and culture being claimed by both peoples. The historians discussed his life and personality, approved and disapproved, made comments about his work. "The character" Gheorghe Brancovici is a part of his own chronicle because a great part of it presents the history of his family. He was a man with an interesting life, who wrote about the period he was living in and who had a contribution at developing Romanian historiography.

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<sup>4</sup> Jelka Regep, *Count Gheorghe Brancovici and the oral tradition*, Novi Sad, 1991, p. 102.