

Epaminondas I. Stamatiades, Biografiile marilor dragomani (interpreți) greci din imperiul otoman [*The Lives of the Great Greek Dragomans (Interpreters) in the Ottoman Empire*], translation from Greek and translator's foreword by Constantin Erbiceanu, preface by Ioan-Aurel Pop, edition supervised, afterword and notes by Rodica Baconsky and Alina Pelea, Casa Cărții de Știință, Cluj-Napoca, 2016, ISBN 978-606-17-0970-0, 146 pages.

Biografiile marilor dragomani (interpreți) greci din imperiul otoman has been reprinted, over a century after its initial publication, thanks to the efforts of two academics (Rodica Baconsky and Alina Pelea) from the Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca. Erbiceanu's skilful translation dating from 1897 has been modernised for the benefit of the contemporary reader. Notable in this sense is the contribution of several specialists who have facilitated access either to the Greek original (Ebru Diriker from the Department of Translation and Interpretation at the Bogazici University in Istanbul) or to the Romanian text (Bogdan Onofraș), carefully transcribed by Mrs. Gabriela Vaida. Professor Stela Zdrenghia, in her capacity as a Greekophone expert, compared the Greek and the Romanian versions and provided invaluable support to the editors in clarifying problematic passages and making the text accessible to the public.

The book plunges present-day Romanian readers into the universe of the sultan's seraglio between the second half of the 17th century and the beginning of the 19th century. It is a journey that gives an insight into the great dragomans' role in building relationships and settling various conflicts that the Sublime Porte had with other peoples. As interpreters and authors, they left their mark on their age as well as on the next generations. As political personalities, they had an important part to play in the history of the Romanian people, given that most of them were rulers in Moldavia and Wallachia. Epaminondas I. Stamatiades draws a fascinating portrait of their lives, which stays in the readers' minds, crossing the barriers of space and time.

First and foremost, the dragoman was wise, well-read and polyglot, qualities that attracted respect and recognition. For example, due to his linguistic competence and not only, Nicholas Mavrocordatos was said "to resemble his father [...] in the knowledge of many languages, especially of Greek and of the national language, as well as of Latin and Turkish, which he came to master so completely in a relatively short time, without even being sent abroad for this purpose, but while he was living in his parents' home, that the Romans themselves were astonished at how well he spoke Latin, and the Turks their language" (p. 75); he was held in high esteem "not only by ordinary people, but also by important people and even the Emperor" (p. 75). It was not uncommon for the dragomans to be appointed at the head of the Romanian Principalities. They became good or not so good rulers of Moldavia (Alexander Mavrocordatos, Constantine Alexander Ypsilantis) and/or Wallachia (Nicholas Mavrocordatos, Gregory Ghica, Alexander Ypsilantis, Constantine Alexander Ypsilantis, Alexander Nicholas Soutzos). Sometimes, they were so influential that they occupied political positions generally open only to the Ottomans. Michael Soutzos was highly regarded by the Sultan Mahmut, who, "upon setting up a secret State Council, which, under his rule, would judge and take all the decisions that were then sent to the council of ministers for implementation, appointed Michael to be the eighth councillor, and bestowed upon him the same honours that the other seven Ottoman councillors enjoyed" (p. 120).

Well-versed in debates and excellent diplomats, these interpreters made an essential contribution to the resolution of certain conflicts and the signing of certain treaties. For example, Alexander Mavrocordatos mediated the signing of the Karlowitz Peace Treaty; John Mavrocordatos participated in the peace discussions of Passarowitz, and Alexander Constantine Mourouzi was instrumental in "signing the peace treaty that ended the bloody war between the Turks and the Russo-Austrians" (p. 105).

The mastery of several languages allowed the dragomans to be not only interpreters, but also translators, as can be seen from various books in Greek (*An Endeavour to Write about Mores and the Spirit of Peoples. The Century of Louis XIV* and *The History of the Spanish Conspiracy against Venice*, by Nicolas Caradja) or in Turkish (Constantine Alexander Ypsilantis translated Vauban's books).

Their scholarly concerns resulted in books of reference written in Latin, Greek or Turkish, in the fields of medicine, linguistics, law, history and philosophy. Some of these books were printed abroad (Italy, Belgium, Germany) and were translated into several languages. Alexander Mavrocordatos authored a rare specialised study on the circulation of blood, *De instrumento respirationis et circulatione sanguinis*, which apparently earned him the reputation of a magician among the Turks, who were unable to understand it. His son, who followed in his footsteps, wrote *On Sermons, Parallel Views on Holy and General Archaeology, Dialogue about the Soul, Various Frontismata (Reflections)*, a treaty about the Ottoman Empire and a study titled *On the Old and the New Dacia*. Some of his writings (*On Sermons*) were considered fundamental to Hellenic philology (p. 81), while others remained in manuscript form only. Nicolas Caradja composed a *French Grammar, Successful Learning*, as well as a prose work, *On the Customs of the Sublime Porte*, and Alexander Ypsilantis, while he was the ruler of Wallachia, edited a codex mostly on the basis of Greek laws (p. 98).

The dragomans often dedicated their knowledge to a patriotic cause: the revival of the Greek people. These men had to serve the Sublime Porte, but they never forgot their origin, and managed, many a time by deceit, to harness all the energies necessary for the regeneration of modern Greece. Because their fate was shaped by fleeting interests and friendships, they often met with tragic ends: exile, decapitation, death by poisoning.

In spite of the dragomans' flaws, present-day interpreters and translators should see in them "illustrious predecessors [...] who are still intellectual role-models" (p. 139), as Rodica Baconsky and Alina Pelea point out. This brings us to the question of the relevance of their editorial project in the context of our third millennium. We could list a number of reasons why this book makes a compelling and useful read, but we will confine ourselves to three, which are in fact interrelated.

First, by its very nature, translation is a point of convergence for several disciplines. The history of translation is tightly bound up with the history of peoples, great empires, cultures, religions, and literatures.

Second, by focusing on a particular category of interpreters, i.e. the dragomans, the book “casts light on an entire age, it urges us to reflect” (Pop, p. 7), so as to gain better knowledge of epochs long gone and a finer understanding of an “entire universe, quasi-unknown in the West and even in Romania” (Pop, p. 7). Paradoxically, the dragomans “connected or reconnected us [...] with Western Europe, with the civilised world, with the Enlightenment and enlightened absolutism”, opening up our world to cultural confluences and setting “a foundation stone in the process of bringing closer the two halves of our continent” (Pop, pp. 10-11).

Third, given the universals of interpretation, the intellectual profile of the interpreter has changed very little over time. Just like the dragomans, contemporary translators are, in the editors’ words, “exceptional users of their mother tongue, subtle connoisseurs of the languages they work with and of the world they live in, people who are always open-minded and ready to exert their ‘power’ from behind the orator” (Baconsky and Pelea, p. 134).

If Constantin Erbiceanu directed his translation at historians, Rodica Baconsky and Alina Pelea bring it to the attention of readers with a passion for translation and interpretation. The moderate “actualisation” of the text and its rich paratext, based on specialised bibliography, turn this work into a point of reference in the history of translation and interpretation, within the space marked by the former borders of the Ottoman Empire.

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