

KITÂBIYAT / BOOK REVIEWS

Georg Captivus Septemcastrensis,

Tratat despre obiceiurile, ceremoniile și infamia turcilor, traducere din limba latină de Ioana Costa, studiu introductiv de Constantin Erbiceanu [Treatise on the Customs, Ceremonies, and Infamy of the Turks, translated from Latin by Ioana Costa, with an Introduction by Constantin Erbiceanu],
Bucharest: Humanitas – Fundația Culturală Erbiceanu, 2017, 185 pp.,
ISBN 978-973-50-5864-7.

November 2017 witnessed the release of an unusual publication for a major Romanian publishing house: a fifteenth-century captivity account and treatise on Islam and the Ottoman Empire. Its author, known as Georg Captivus Septemcastrensis, or more commonly as Georgius de Hungaria/George of Hungary, was born in 1442 or 1443 in Romos (Rumes, Romosz), Transylvania. In 1438, while a student in Sebeș (Mühlbach, Szászebes) he was captured by invading Ottoman troops, aided by the prince of Wallachia, Vlad II, father of the more famous Vlad III the Impaler, and taken into slavery. After twenty years of captivity in the Ottoman Empire, Georgius managed to return to Christian lands. He became a Dominican friar and eventually died in Rome in 1502. In 1481 he published a treatise in Latin, entitled *Tractatus de moribus, conditionibus et nequicia Turcorum*, which is now available in Romanian for the first time. This edition also includes a translation of Martin Luther's preface to the 1530 German edition (pp. 171-177), through which the editors wish to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

Appreciations and condemnations of Islam, hints of the author's possible conversion, and his attempts to escape captivity are among the most noteworthy aspects of the *Treatise*. Apart from the narrative accounts and descriptions of Ottoman/Muslim institutions, the book is mostly a theological work, aiming to prove Christianity's superiority over the "temptations" of Islam – to which Georgius actually succumbed at some point during his captivity. Readers will surely find the *Treatise* to be a stimulating discourse. Since Georgius' work has become the subject of numerous studies, this review will deal with the critical apparatus of the present Romanian edition.

Ioana Costa did an excellent job in translating the original Latin text into Romanian, from the 1993 critical edition by Reinhard Klockow¹, succeeding to keep a clear phrase in the often complicated and difficult expositions of the author. The translator also gives occasional explanations regarding some Latin terms, or Biblical references. Other footnotes, mainly concerning historical information and the Turkish terms used by Georgius, are given by an uncredited editor. They are accurate and certainly useful in reading the *Treatise*, but unfortunately one does not know whom to thank for.

An Introduction (pp. 5-29), penned by Constantin Erbiceanu, prefaces the main text. It offers information on the life of Georgius and his *Treatise*, a graphic description of the Ottoman conquest of Otranto, and a bibliography. The author fails to cite the rich and recent literature on Georgius de Hungaria and his work, mentioning two articles from the 1930's and 50's (p. 6), which are not subsequently listed in the Bibliography (pp. 28-29). In fact, this latter section offers only three titles, which are not dedicated to the subject, but to general issues regarding Transylvania, the Dominican order, and to the relations between Matthias Corvinus and Friedrich III. This is one of the major shortcomings of the present edition, leaving readers with the impression that little scholarly work has touched the subject so far. However, as Albrecht Classen has shown in a recent work², Georgius de Hungaria and his *Treatise* are quite well studied by specialists. Despite the claim that Romanian historians (the Introduction's author names Cantemir and Iorga)

1 Georgius de Hungaria, *Tractatus de moribus, conditionibus et nequicia Turcorum /Traktat über die Sitten, die Lebensverhältnisse und die Arglist der Türken*, ed. Reinhard Klockow (Vienna – Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 1993).

2 Albrecht Classen, "George of Hungary", *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History*, Vol. 7: *Central and Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and South America (1500–1600)*, David Thomas et al. (eds.) (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2015), 36-40.

have not examined this work, as recent as 2008 a Romanian scholar published a paper on the topic, although from a theological standpoint³.

Apart from mentioning the book's first printed edition from 1481 (p. 26), Luther's translation of 1530, and Klockow's critical edition (Translator's Note, p. 35), no other editions or manuscripts are mentioned in this current publication. Interested readers can find a proper list in Classen's aforesaid entry.

The first Romanian edition of Georgius de Hungaria's *Treatise* is unfortunately marked by some uncalled-for nationalist remarks. While translator Costa chose the German rendering ("Georg") of the author's Latin name ("Georgius"), probably due to his affiliation to the Transylvanian-Saxon culture, Erbiceanu employs the Romanian form "George" in his Introduction. This, of course, would not be a serious issue in itself, as even English texts often adapt the author's name, but the use of different spellings in the same edition strikes the eye. Furthermore, the author takes a wild guess on Georgius' ethnicity, implying that "we might as well presume he was Romanian" (p. 7). It is just speculation since his sole argument in support of this hypothesis is the multi-ethnic character of Transylvania, regarding which the Introduction's author erroneously states that "at that time was under the rule of John Hunyadi" (p. 7). Georgius was born in 1422/3, and taken prisoner to the Ottoman Empire in 1438, whereas Hunyadi became the Voivode of Transylvania only in 1441. Georgius himself dwelled neither on his ethnicity nor his mother tongue. In addition to Latin toponyms, he also employs both German and Hungarian ones: "the land beyond the mountains, which is called Seven Castles [*Septem Castra/Septemcastrensis* – translator's note] ... a small citadel or town being named Schebesch by the Hungarians, but Muelenbag, in Teutonic" (p. 39). Only once does he mention a "leader of the Vlachs", Vlad II of Wallachia, who was accompanying the Ottoman army (p. 39). No ethnic affiliation can be deduced from Georgius' text.

Another issue regarding the author's name is the rendering chosen for the title page: Georg Captivus Septemcastrensis. Even though the *Treatise* was published anonymously, today its author almost unanimously known as Georgius de Hungaria, identified as such by later scholars. Probably because the Romanian editors felt that "of Hungary" may be less appealing to the audience, they chose instead to give the author his Latin pseudonym, "the Captive from Transylvania".

3 Răzvan Tatu, "Ex Oriente Lux? Georgius of Hungaria and his Treaty on the Beliefs and Customs of the Turks. Notes on an Apocalyptic Perception of the Other", *International Journal of Humanistic Ideology*, 1/2 (2008): 141-152.

This nationalist approach may as well have some marketing purposes. The author of the Introduction rhetorically asks if “Romania has another bestseller from those times?” and affirms that through this volume the text is finally available to readers from “the country in which the author was born” (p. 15). Somewhat more cautiously, translator Costa calls Georgius’ *Treatise* “the first Romanian incunable”, pointing out that it should be understood “in a loose way... to the author, not the language, nor the place where it was published” (Back cover). Further on, she names this work as an example of “Romanian literature of Latin expression”, along with Dimitrie Cantemir’s *History of the Growth and Decay of the Ottoman Empire*. Designating as “Romanian” a Latin book printed in Rome by a Catholic cleric, most likely of German or Hungarian origin, born and raised in a territory of the Kingdom of Hungary which is nowadays part of Romania, is an overstretch.

Of course, whether German, Hungarian, or even Romanian, Georgius’ ethnicity, as one is tempted to perceive it in the contemporary world, is largely irrelevant to his work or to the historical context in which it was produced. Applying current perceptions of nation, ethnicity, and borders to people and texts from premodern times is misguided. Georgius wrote in a time where “otherness” was perceived primarily through religious perspective, and this is what his *Treatise* is all about. On the other hand, transposing premodern concepts of religious otherness and applying them to modern realities is similarly misguided, with potentially dangerous consequences. Erbiceanu dedicates two pages of his Introduction (pp. 14-15) to a description of the siege and capture of Otranto by the Ottomans in 1480. Even though Georgius never mentions this event, scholars generally accept that the impending Ottoman invasion of the Italian peninsula was likely the impulse that led the Dominican friar to write his account. Erbiceanu’s narrative of the capture of Otranto contains graphic descriptions of the attackers’ atrocities against the conquered population: “the archbishop was beheaded on the altar, his followers slit in half and all the priests killed” (p. 14).

Moreover, a Catholic hagiographic account is taken word by word: “After the blade split his [a martyr’s] skull, his body miraculously remained standing. Only after the beheading of the 800 martyrs, the body collapsed to the ground” (p. 15). There is no reference given for this account, nor for the entire description of the siege of Otranto. Possibly influenced by his personal visit to the city, Erbiceanu uncritically reproduces the story of the Otranto martyrs, without raising any questions about its authenticity. In short, Catholic tradition claims that the victorious Ottomans offered some 800 citizens of Otranto the option to convert to Islam or die, to

which they chose the latter. This would have been contrary to the basic principles of Islam, as well as to the Ottoman practices of conquest. Of course, it does not mean that these principles were strictly observed by the common soldier since there are instances where forced conversions did occur⁴. Even so, recent scholars have criticised the traditional Christian accounts on the Otranto martyrs, arguing that even if the killings did take place, there is no evidence that “conversion was a condition for clemency”⁵, but rather they were more likely normal battle losses or punitive executions. Violence in wartime is not a trait of one religion or the other.

Another strange assertion, which can be interpreted as being Islamophobic, can be found in a footnote (pp. 171-172) penned by the uncredited editor, at the beginning of Martin Luther’s 1530 preface. It tries to draw a line between Luther’s perception of Islam right after the 1529 Ottoman siege of Vienna, the first centenary of the Reformation in 1617, when religious turmoil in Europe would lead to the Thirty Years’ War, and the current 500th anniversary of the Reformation, when “terrorist attacks committed by fanatics brings us on the verge of a new substantial change of Europe”. Singling out Islam to draw a parallel between Georgius’ *Treatise* and today’s terrorist attacks betrays a rather poor (or ill-intentioned) grasp on history, religion, and current social issues.

Welcomed features of this edition are the colour plates, inserted in the middle of the volume, which depict individuals and places relevant to the book, as well as pages from an incunable edition of the *Treatise* currently kept in the “V.A. Urechia” Library in Galați, Romania. Only the representation of the ossuary from the Otranto cathedral seems unnecessary, since it has no direct connection with the text or the author.

Altogether, the first Romanian edition of Georgius de Hungaria’s *Treatise* is a welcomed issue, but one which does not live up to its full potential. A little more time and effort put into research, as well as a more detached approach on behalf of the editors, would have greatly increased this edition’s scholarly value.

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4 See, for example, Tijana Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam. Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011) which even deals with Georgius’ conversion (pp. 58, 73).

5 Nancy Bisaha, *Creating East and West. Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2004), 158.