Eastern and Western Cultures in Dimitrie Cantemir's Work

In 1699, the peace of Carlowitz that ended a period of unprecedented crisis marked the beginning of a new era in Ottoman history. The Ottoman attitude which had hitherto been condescending towards the West and its culture began to give way to a respectful curiosity for that culture and its achievements. This was followed by a desire to have a better understanding and knowledge of the West and, most significantly, to discover the secret of its success in the recent wars. This basic change in the Ottoman attitude toward the West was to be the real beginning in Turkey of what later came to be known as the process of Westernization. On the other hand, Eastern mysticism, which allowed for the conception of a unified whole composed of conflicting parts, lifted the barriers between the two different cultures and religions and made it possible for the refined Ottoman upper class to approach Western culture sympathetically.

In 1703, Rami Mehmed Pasha, Ottoman Secretary who was responsible for the conclusion of the treaty of Carlowitz, assumed control of the Ottoman government as Grand Vezir. A man of culture and an advocate of peace, he adopted peace as the basic principle of Ottoman policy. Dimitrie Cantemir (Kantimur),who was then 30 years old, was a close friend of the new Grand Vezir; and he, the Grand Vezir, and the latter's personal advisor, Nefiyoğlu, were the leaders of a new cultural movement which later evolved into the Tulip Era. Cantemir described Nefiyoğlu as an open-minded man who by learning Latin on his own showed a desire to achieve a synthesis of the Eastern and Western cultures in his person. A close friend of this select group was the Chief Dragoman Alexander Maurocordatos, who had played an important part in the conclusion of the peace of Carlowitz. Maurocordatos was educated at the renowned University of Padua, center for exponents of the school of the Greek enlightenment; and he was one of those Greeks who introduced the trend of Neo- Aristotelianism into the intellectual life of Istanbul. This trend not only dominated the shaping of Cantemir's thought, but it also penetrated Ottoman intellectual life. There was, no doubt, a strong affinity between this Neo-Aristotelianism and the atheistic trend which the

foreign observers of the time witnessed in the cosmopolitan-intellectual circles of the Ottoman capital, at the *konak*s of important personages, and at Phanar. Lastly, Ahmed II (1691-1695) and later the Sultan of the Tulip Era, Ahmed III (1703-1730), who showed a deep interest in Cantemir, were protectors and exalted representatives of this milieu.

On the other hand, these first Ottoman contacts with European humanism were soon to bear fruit and show their influence on the Ottoman way of life, world view, and art. In the 18th century the influence of naturalism in Ottoman poetry and miniature painting as well as the strong baroque influence in architecture were not merely coincidental, but they were an outcome of cultural contacts with the West.

Young *Beyzâde* Cantemir, who had come into close contact with the most refined representatives of the Eastern culture at the Ottoman palace, played a dominant role in the meeting of the Eastern and Western cultures. He had come to Istanbul in 1688 at the age of 15 and spent twenty-two years of his life totally immersed in the intellectual life of both the East and the West as these were represented in the Ottoman capital. In his palace at Fethiye (Ulah Sarayi) the finest intellectual and artistic expressions of the two cultures were reconciled within a decor of Ottoman pomp, while in his mansion at Ortaköy Turkish music composed by Cantemir echoed on the waters of the Bosphorus. A disciple of Ahmed Çelebi of Edirne, Cantemir notated Ottoman music for the first time, thereby securing for himself an undisputed position in the history of Turkish music. In short, Cantemir was a product of the cultural and intellectual life of Istanbul as much as he was one of those who gave direction to the new cultural orientation in the Ottoman capital.

In the period following the peace of Carlowitz, Ottomans had already accepted the reality of the decline of their empire, and the question of decline was a subject of heated discussion in the intellectual circles of Istanbul. Cantemir was following this trend when later he devoted a large part of his work to this question and titled his major work on Ottoman history *Incrementa atque decrementa aulae othomanicae* (History of the Growth and Decay of the Ottoman Empire). He also wrote a treatise on the topic of the rise and decline of empires. The anthropomorphic view of state that dominated Cantimir's works had been applied to Ottoman history since the time of Hadji Khalifa (1608-1657). According to Hadji Khalifa, war could have fatal results for empires which had reached "old age." Therefore, empires should avoid wars at this stage of their development. This

concept had formed the basis of Rami Mehmed Pasha's and his followers' peace policy.

Finally, Cantemir was as much an admirer of European culture (of whose historical and philosophical roots he had a remarkable grasp) as he was an excellent connoisseur of Ottoman cultural life. In 1710, when he became the *voivode* of his homeland, Moldavia, ascending the throne of his father, Constantin Cantemir, he dreamt of making his principality independent of the Ottoman Empire. In order to realize this vision and anticipating a Russian victory over the Ottomans, he entered into a secret agreement with Tsar Peter the Great of Russia against the Ottomans. His calculations, however, backfired when Peter was defeated by the Ottomans. Following the treaty of Prut (1711) Cantemir settled in Russia as counselor to Peter and directed his intellectual endeavors to a systemic expression of the knowledge and ideas which he had acquired in the Ottoman Empire. It was during this period, when he felt a deep nostalgia for Istanbul and his life there that he wrote his history of the Ottoman Empire (1714-1716) and a work on Islam and its institutions (*Curanus,* 1719). Until the appearance of J. von Hammer's history, Cantemir's work on the Ottoman Empire was regarded in Europe as the standard work on the subject. At the present time, his first-hand descriptions and accounts of Ottoman life and institutions, of which he had an intimate knowledge, still remain invaluable. However, the translations of his Ottoman history available in Western languages are seriously handicapped by spelling errors. Consequently, a translation from its Latin original of those parts of Cantemir's work which deal with Ottoman institutions as well as a compilation and translation of those passages in *Curanus,* which contain invaluable information on Ottoman religious life and institutions, will definitely fulfill a scholarly need.

In sum, Cantemir's genius in the first stage of his life was a vehicle through which the various facets of Western culture infiltrated Ottoman society, while in the latter part of his life he presented Ottoman culture, which he intimately knew and loved, to Europe. There is no doubt that Dimitrie Cantemir, the father of Romanian humanism and intellectual revival, was one of those rare geniuses who showed a remarkable comprehension of Eastern and Western cultures of his time, and expressed them in a masterly fashion.

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