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Epaminonda I. Stamatiade,
BIOGRAFIILE MARILOR DRAGOMANI (INTERPRETI) GRECI DIN IMPERIUL OTOMAN,
[The lives of the Greek great 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,
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This is a republication of a translation of the *Βιογραφίαι των Ελλήνων μεγάλων διερμηνέων του οθωμανικού κράτους* (Biographies of the Greek grand dragomans of the Ottoman Empire). Written by the Greek historian – who had roots on the island of Samos – Epaminondas I. Stamatiadis and published in 1865 (2nd edition, 1873), it was translated by the Romanian medievalist and Neohellenist Constantin Erbiceanu (1838–1913), a professor of religious history and dean of the Bucharest Theological Faculty, as well as a vice-president of the Romanian Academy. This new edition consists of the original Romanian translation with a revised spelling. It is supplemented by a new introduction, as well as historical and linguistic annotations, for which the Romanian editors consulted with an expert on modern Greece.

What purpose did the 1897 translation of the pamphlet into Romanian serve? According to the book's editors,[1] Erbiceanu was not an admirer of the Phanariot period, but rather an objective observer and commentator as evidenced by his strict approach in his work *Cronicari greci care au scris despre români în epoca fanariotă* (Greek chroniclers who wrote about Romanians during the Phanariot era [Bucharest 1888, reprinted 2003]). When he took on the translation, his purpose was to restore the Phanariots' reputation in the Romanian Principalities, the land that had welcomed them, where "they were able to think freely, get an education, and carry out their renaissance" (15). This statement seemingly exonerates the Phanariot period, which, according to other Romanian scholars, such as Alexandru D. Xenopol, left a bitter memory among the Romanian people,

[1] See, also, Rodica Baconsky and Alina Pelea, "Quand 'dire c'est faire' au royaume de l'interpretation: Une page d'histoire", *Discours en présence: hommage à Liana Pop*, ed. Anamaria Curea, Cristiana Papahagi, Monica Fekete, Sanda Moraru and Veronica Manole, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2015 pp. 387–402.

who regard it as their history's darkest period, solely excepting the shift that took place towards French education and culture.

In his book, Stamatiadis sheds light on the roots of the Romanians and on the controversial history of the Phanariot families, something virtually unknown in Romania today. The tale begins with the fall of Constantinople and the needs of the Sublime Porte, which led to certain accommodations: Since the Ottomans were not permitted to learn foreign languages, the Porte employed for its diplomatic relations the services of Jews and renegade Latins, as well as those of the educated, multilingual Greeks of the Phanar, the famous Constantinoplean district. This forced the Greek officials of the Porte to conform to the external rules and regulations imposed by the Islamic world. However, they retained their beliefs and sentiments, the memory of classical Greece, their humanistic values and their religion. The position of interpreter changed in 1661, when it was assumed by the accomplished Panagiotis Nikousios, who was granted special privileges. From then on, as grand dragoman, the chief interpreter became indispensable to any negotiations, held a distinct position in the protocol, translated, offered solutions and made decisions. An elite, yet dangerous position, it was inherited from father to son. With Nikolaos Mavrokordatos, son of Grand Dragoman Alexandros Mavrokordatos, the "ex aporriton" (confidential advisor), the Phanariots' tenure as princes of the Danubian Principalities (1701–1821) began. Thus, indigenous Romanians were deprived of the right to govern their countries, while the Phanariot rulers sought to secure privileges for and enrich their nation, subject to the not always benevolent dispositions of their Ottoman masters.

A question that is often raised is whether the Phanariots were Greek patriots or traitors, since they "collaborated" with the Ottoman authorities. As always, the truth is somewhere in the middle. A knowledge of the biographies of these interpreters allows us to fathom the essence of "Greek ethnicity", to understand the spirit of its preservation. Apart from any compromises with the new reality, Greece, no longer the Greece of Pericles, or that of Justinian or Manuel Comnenus, although transformed by the successive changes, was a profound and constant reality in the Phanariot world. At the same time, the Phanariots maintained a close relationship with Romania during Ottoman rule (1711–1821), while also associating with Western Europe, the civilised world, the Lumières movement and enlightened despotism. These dragoman-gentlemen were skilled in letters and the arts, keen book readers and had innovative ideas. For these arguments alone, the book deserves to be recognised.

Apart from the historical controversy, the Romanian translation is also of linguistic interest. Reflecting its time period, it is Latinised and uses certain neologisms with which a contemporary reader will not be familiar. It contains ecclesiastical terms, Slavic, Greek or Turkish words denoting offices or official garments, and French and Italian terms of the period. Additionally, there are inconsistencies in the syntax and rendition of the lofty style of the

original. The book not only proves that the profession of interpreter has existed since the seventeenth century (we know it existed since antiquity), but shows that its profile has not changed dramatically over the centuries. The dragomans of the period knew up to five or six Eastern and Western languages, something not uncommon today. The difference is that the level of their encyclopaedic knowledge – and occasionally expertise, if they studied at Western universities, such as Padua, as did Alexandros Mavrokordatos, who wrote a dissertation on blood circulation – cultivation and consequent influence was greater than today. Moreover, loyalty to the sovereign was very important: "A word to the wise is sufficient" was a motto of Phanariot society. The interpreter's profession has evolved nowadays and is no longer based on personality or a relationship with a master but rather on the progress of society and technology, while it is taught in schools and is no longer associated with any kind of birthright but with a specific code of ethics.

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