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USE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST BISTRIȚA MONASTERY –
POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN 16TH CENTURY WALACHIA

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Abstract

This paper analyses the act of violence against Bistrița Monastery inflicted by Mihnea the Evil in the early sixteen century Walachia. The main contention of this study is that this sacrilegious act was embedded in the struggles between the prince and Wallachian noble groups fighting for power and influence. Thus, by devastating the monastery, Mihnea the Evil, prince of the country, was trying to strengthen his own position, while undermining that of the founder of the monastery, namely the powerful Craiovești family. Bistrița monastery was an important symbolical place of power which played an important role in strengthening the religious, social, economic and political position of the ambitious Craiovești boyars, who were in direct conflict with Mihnea the Evil. As a matter of consequence any act of violence directed against the monastery was actually aimed to its founders. A locus of history and legitimacy, any monastery had a significant capital of symbolic power that could be manipulated, destroyed or, on the contrary, restored. The use of violence against them in the 15th – 16th century Walachia is a complex research issue, for it has not only religious connotations, but also significant political ones: the destruction of churches was part of a political discourse. The purpose of our paper is to identify, within the pages of the chronicles and the princely chancellery documents, all the necessary elements which allow us to reconstruct the political princely discourse behind the violent act against a sacred place such as Bistrița.

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Keywords: Bistrița Monastery, Mihnea the Evil, Craiovești family, centers of power, political discourse



1. Introduction

After Radu the Great's death, in April 1508, Mihnea the Evil, Vlad the Impaler's son, seized the throne of Walachia. For almost a century now the dynasty whom he represented, Draculești family, was in political conflict with the dynasty of the Dănești. At mid-15th century, the ever growing influent boyar family of Craiovești intervened in the confrontations between the two rival dynasties, hoping to accede to the throne by political and matrimonial strategies (Coman, 2013). During the fights, they chose to support the Dănești. The conflict was even more fueled by the two sides' external orientations – Mihnea chose a closeness to Hungary, in the attempt of keeping the Ottoman Empire at bay, while the Craiovești had close connections at the Porte. This reality might explain why, right after ascending to the throne, Mihnea started a true persecution of the rival boyars whom he punished rabidly, sending many of them to the executioner, even members of the princely family. Announced in secret, the Craiovești fled south of Danube, seeking for help. Mihnea's wrath boiled over even more fiercely: he demolished their courts and Bistrița Monastery, the foundation of their family, was attacked with cannons, and the monks were killed.

2. Problem Statement

The violent act against the holy place is an episode with multiple significations and the purpose of our paper is to analyze at least some of them. Within the chancellery documents we almost find no mention of this moment at all, concluding thereby that the violent act was not also accompanied by an alienation of any of the monastery's estates. We barely found a small clue, but an important one in our opinion. We are referring to a document given by Vlad Vintilă at 12 February 1533, from Târgoviște, to Bistrița Monastery, attesting the property of the aforementioned holy place over some wind mills on Râul Doamnei, subsequently to repeated judgments. During the process between lord steward Vlaicul and the monastery's monks, the first one presented documents attesting the purchasing of the mills, while the monks "didn't had their documents, because they had lost them, when the Hungarians have despoiled the monastery and cut the monks, that's when the documents have also perished" (DRH, B III, 1975, doc. 149). For us this is an important information, because it refers to a dramatic episode which cannot be but the one from **Mihnea the Evil's times**.

The chronicle of the country, *Letopisetul cantacuzinesc*, presents the "indignity" from point to point: "Seeing that he couldn't harm them, he malevolently burnt their [the Craiovești's] courts and broke their houses [after their fled across Danube]. Their kin who remained and he discovered, he toiled them with many toils; some he even killed and their monastery, which they founded on Bistrița river, he demolished it to the basement and the Church Saint Apostles, which Neagoe had founded he also crushed; even the trees were cut and dug up. ... And to the priests from their villages, he cut all their noses, to the mockery of the church. And he enticed and counseled to burn and kill all the abbots from all the monasteries and many other illnesses he wanted to do" (Mazilu, 2004). "Anonimul Bălenilor" is more laconic: "And prince Mihnea, until his relegation, if the boyars had fled, he sent men to burn their houses; they smashed to the ground not only their home, but also their churches and monasteries and their servants and abbots were disfigured by him and agonized" (Mazilu, 2004).

3. Research Questions

Mihnea the Evil must have been aware of and took upon himself not only the material, but the spiritual consequences of his deeds (Little, 1998). From clerical perspective, being the author of an action which led to the violation of a church, Mihnea must have followed some malevolent will which guided him right before his act. What was the meaning of a violent action against a church? Was it an act directed against the monks themselves, with the purpose of getting some economic benefits from pillaging? Was it a symbolic act of revenge and if so, how could this vengeance functioned? And what was a church after all? It didn't seemed to be an absolute barrier to the exterior world, as it could be desecrated by the humans' bad deeds and thoughts.

4. Purpose of the Study

The importance of Church history in the general study of medieval history has, for some time now, been acknowledged in the western historiography, an accomplishment which had the benefit of a much better understanding of those times, in all their aspects. For the Romanian space, thou, there seems to be a hiatus between the study of political, economic and social medieval realities, and the spiritual one. The realities which are valuable for Occident are also actual for the Romanian space and in our study we wish to bring to light, at least for one particular episode, to start with, the strong connection between the political and religious aspects of life which were interconnected, symbiotic, dependant on each other. Violence against holy places has a particular meaning, for they were not only the houses of God, but also the main places from which the monarch drew their legitimacy and symbolical power. The monasteries were not isolated places for prayer and meditation, they were also important players in the social, economic and political game. The purpose of our study is, apart from analysing a specific historical moment, to bring to day and to the level of western historiography the study of some aspects of medieval Romanian history.

5. Research Methods

During our researches we used the inquiry method, the analysis of original documents such as chancellery acts, published as *Documenta Romaniae Historica*, but also the chronicles from the 16th and 17th centuries. We also had access to the correspondence of the Walachian lords with cities from Transylvania, such as Brasov and Sibiu, but not only. Apart from the study of documents and original letters, we used the comparative method, in other words, where other sources were lacking, we made a comparison with the realities from Central or Eastern Europe, as far as the history of the Church is concerned, realities that must have been actual also for the Romanian space.

6. Findings

The Christians considered that the church was the house of God, and the christening of bodies and consecration of churches as two forms of the same ritual. The only difference was the material to which they reported: the christening was a mystery of flesh, while the consecration was a ritual of stone. The

sanctification, the ritual through which a structure passed from the status of building to the status of church, was composed of certain specific phases: marking of the building from the surrounding space; purification of the building and its shrine of all the impurities and incubus; protecting and defending the newly consecrated space by bringing relics, icons and even objects that were in contact with holy relics, for the medieval men considered that the sacred was contagious. By consecration, the material church became the church of God, His house. The ritual was the one who transformed it from stone building into Christ's "bride". To defile it was, therefore, to commit a sacrilege against His chosen one (Hayes, 2003). Mihnea the Evil's gesture appears, therefore, in a different light. He committed a sacrilege against the house of God, therefore against Him, and not merely against a center of boyar legitimacy.

If we refer to the monastery as being "a center of power" (Wickham, 2001), we have to ask what kind of power and how did it functioned? First if all we have to underline the fact that the religious power has a completely different topography than the secular one: the access to the monastery was wider, more restrained, for the privileged (clerics or founders), or completely restricted. The churches allowed their founders to display their genealogy, in the votive painting, for instance, thus to express their position of power which is therefore also legitimated. The monastery was a discourse terrain on which the social and power relations and reports were clearly exposed. It was in itself a unique source of spiritual power, the gate between the living and the ancestors, all the more so because the latter were often buried in the church. This is the only place where the power of the family which had founded and protected the holy place became sacred itself (Härke, 2001): the monastery allowed its positioning in the midst of the sacred, and this was no small thing in a society which was characterized by a fierce competition for power and legitimacy and by the tight intertwining between sacred and secular.

Bistrița Monastery was a place of spiritual power, first of all because it was also a necropolis and because of the relics kept jealously here (Barbu Craiovescu had brought the relics of ST. Grigorie Decapolitul). Secondly, but not less important, it was a center of political and economic power, because of the territorial capital invested in it and of the incomes and relief from taxations. The connections with the family were very tight, and its possessions were not submitted to the usual inheritance rules, which is why the monasteries have become important players in the complex mechanisms that controlled the land property. They were the only institutions whose capital, symbolic or material, was considered sacred and defended by curses and divine laws.

7. Conclusion

We may conclude that the foundation of Bistrița Monastery consolidated the position of their founders, thus of Craiovești family, to the detriment of their rivals, thus becoming a major objective and a pion in the fight for power. To reduce the phenomenon of church foundations, during the 15th centuries, to the mere religious aspect, would be a completely erroneous understanding of the way in which the society functioned. The foundation of monasteries was altogether a religious and political act. They played an important role during the political conflicts and crisis, the princes found here protection and shelter, here was the source of their legitimacy.

It is in this manner that we have to explain the use of force against the monastic community. This is the context in which we have to understand Mihnea the Evil's desecration gesture against Bistrița

Monastery. It certainly wasn't gratuitous, it was no act of unguided violence, nor was it directed against the abbey in question, pursuing a simple profit. For a long time in the occidental historiography, the nobles' manifestations of emotion was considered a sign of instability, as though this social class was trapped inside an insufficiently evolved stage of cognitive development. The express of feelings and anger wasn't a symptom of emotional instability displayed by the medieval man. In the Romanian space also anger was often manifested publicly and could have been "read" as an answer to a political act from the past, as a political act in itself or a future political act, most of the times expressing the reason why it was provoked. In medieval „public life” the communication could therefore be made through demonstrative behaviours, whose purpose was to transmit a clear message (Althoff, 1998). Expressing anger and wrath is an essential element in the technology of power and each prince used it a certain measure. The acts of violence are not gestures of political irrationality. Violence is not the result of blind fury. It was used in political circumstances, with precise purpose, otherwise many episodes in which it appears might seem, to the contemporaries or to the modern reader, bizarre, comic or incomprehensible (Neacşa (Lupu), 2015).

The motifs beyond Mihnea's defilement act were, at least from his perspective, justified and must be placed within the context of the permanent fights with the Craioveşti family – it was an attempt of consolidating his own political position and to undermine the one of his rivals, on their own territory. Mihnea the Evil denied the legitimacy of his rivals' claims of power, in an opened war. We cannot but ascertain that the iron laws of revenge didn't lose their power at the gate of the church.

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