

MICHAEL THE BRAVE AND HIS IMAGE IN CONTEMPORARY ROMANIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

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During the last two centuries, the image of Michael the Brave continued to fascinate the Romanian spirituality. Michael the Brave has not only penetrated into the consciousness of historians, but also that of the entire people as a national hero. He is the subject of numerous treatises, monographs, encyclopedia entries, as well as poems, short stories, novels, music, fine arts, cinematography, etc. Long ago he became a national symbol for the Romanian people, just as Peter the Great is for the Russians or Louis XIV for the French.

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The image of the Prince was complex because of the different cultural codes of perception and because of the various periods in which he was perceived. Each generation has felt the necessity to rewrite the history of Michael the Brave and to understand his actions according to its own sensibilities, to the dominant aspiration and ideals of a certain moment in history. Because of these different cultural codes and times, the image of Prince did not remain the same in the European and Romanian public memory. Despite this fact, the last two centuries created several elements of continuity which have made of Michael the Brave both a Romanian hero and national symbol.

During his own lifetime, and for a short time after his death (the end of the XVI-th century and the beginning of XVII-th century), the Romanian Prince was considered as a defender of Christianity, as a fighter against the Turkish Infidels, full of glory and fame. In Rome, in 1600, a *dario* (newspaper) wrote with admiration: "If there ever existed in the world a prince worthy of glory for the heroical feats that he has accomplished, this would be lord Michael, Prince of the Romanians." The internal chronicles of Wallachia from the XVII-th century praised the bravery and wisdom of the Prince, his gorgeous physique, and compared him with Achilles and Bellisarios. A single internal source from the XVII-th century, namely the *Romanian Chronicle of George Brankovitch*, underlines the Romanian (and not the Christian) significance of

Michael the Brave's feats: "Ruling with worthy bravery, [he] widened the power of the Romanian nation, and with happiness His Majesty mastered all three [Romanian] countries, namely Transylvania, Moldavia, and Wallachia..."

In the XVIII-th century, when the three empires – Turkish, Habsburg, and Russian – fought for control of the Romanian countries and when the modern movement of national liberation was not yet strong, interest in the reign of Michael the Brave did not surpass, in general, the scientific domain. Even the Enlightenment generation of the *Transylvanian School* (S. Micu, G. Șincai) limited itself to record correctly the facts from the 1593-1601 period, without finding special significance in them other than those related to the courage and bravery of Prince in the anti-Ottoman struggle.

It was at the beginning of the XIX-th century, when interest in the reign of Michael the Brave was revived. His epoch and his personality were reexamined. The explanation for this must be found the ideas of Romanticism and Nationalism which animated this century. For the Romanians, in the political field, these ideas led to the struggle for regaining the complete independence of the Romanian lands and for the creation of the modern national state. The success of this struggle depended upon a suitable ideology, which had to animate the spirits of the people and to bring them energy and courage. The idea of Daco-Romania was built on some important historic records. History, language, literature, folklore, fine arts, etc., all were called upon to support the struggle for unity and independence. The most important example drawn from history was, obviously, Michael the Brave. What did he succeed in doing during his short reign if not precisely the achievement of independence and of the union of the Romanian lands? If he succeeded to do that in 1600, it would be much easier for his successors to accomplish the same thing after more than two centuries had passed. That is why during this time scholars began to vigorously investigate historical sources, and to write studies, articles, and monographs about Michael the Brave and his time. Damaschin Bojincă, Aaron Florian, Mihail Kogălniceanu, August Treboniu Laurian, Alexandru Papiu Ilarian, Nicolae Bălcescu and others have dedicated memorable pages to the reign of this great Prince. Among all of them, Nicolae Bălcescu, himself a sort of "Mazzini of Romanians," elaborated, in the style of a romantic historian, the first and most important (in the nineteenth century) monograph about the epoch of Michael the Brave, entitled significantly *The Romanians under Prince Michael the Brave*. In this book, the main accent is not put on the idea of defending the Christianity, but on the role consciously assumed by the hero as a fighter for Romanian national liberty and unity. Even the titles of the first and fourth chapters – *National Liberty* and, respectively, *National Unity* – demonstrate the aim of author, namely to arouse the ambitions of his contemporaries with a view to fulfilling the Romanian ideals of the XIX-th century. In this book Nicolae Bălcescu applied the precepts of Romanticism, which considered history to be the teacher of life (*historia magistra vitae*), and which offered examples to follow for the present (especially drawn from the Middle

Ages). Michael the Brave is represented here mainly as a personality of the nineteenth century, conscious of his national duty. The author analyses his hero according to the qualities and deficiencies of the romantic generation; he criticizes Michael because he relied too much on his army and not enough on the people, and because, instead of giving freedom to the peasants, he transformed them into serfs. It was very clear that, by following the exceptional example of this Prince, while at the same time avoiding his mistakes, the Romanian people could move towards the creation of *modern Romania*. Thus, Bălcescu's book had both a scientific and political role; it stimulated the continuation of historical research and contributed towards the consolidation of the Romanian national consciousness.

The end of nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twenty century mark a new period – the most complex and rich – in Romanian historiography. It was only natural that investigations on the reign of Michael the Brave became more and more important. This happened first of all for scientific reasons (related to the critical methods of positivism), but also because of political and national interests (which led to the union of all the Romanian lands in a single nation-state in 1918). Starting with Alexander D. Xenopol, there is not any important Romanian historian who has not considered, in one way or another, the reign of Michael the Brave. The old monograph of Bălcescu (unfinished) was followed by others, among which three are especially important, namely the works of I.D. Sirbu (also unfinished), Nicolae Iorga, and P.P. Panaitescu. It was also during this period that the epoch of Michael the Brave was integrated in the general histories of the Romanians written by Xenopol, Iorga, and C.C. Giurescu. In hundreds of other special works or studies, many authors have tried to illuminate different aspects of this subject. The outstanding or critical questions were numerous and varied: the origins of the Prince and his family, the beginnings of his reign in Wallachia, his participation in the anti-Ottoman alliance, the nature of his wars against the Turks and their consequences for Western Europe, the Balkans, and for the Romanians, the social and economic policies of Michael the Brave, etc. But most of the discussion was focused on the union of the three Romanian countries, accomplished for a brief moment in 1600. Scholars looked for answers to some very important questions related to this unique moment in medieval Romanian history: a) why did Prince Michael decide to take control of Transylvania and Moldavia? b) what was the nature of the political union of the three Romanian countries in 1600? Evidently, depending on the answers given to these questions (as well as others), the personality of the great Prince appears differently and sometimes contradictory.

For example, for the critical school and for the European vision of A.D. Xenopol, it was normal to rectify the romantic image of Michael the Brave created by Bălcescu. Xenopol considered that the union of the three countries was made for some political, military, and strategic reasons, and not with the goal of bringing all the Romanian people together into one state. Michael the

Brave crossed the mountains "to defend his reign" against Andrew Bathory, the prince of Transylvania and against Ieremia Movilă, the prince of Moldavia, who allied with Bathory and the Poles, all of whom were inclined towards cooperation with the Ottoman Empire. In fact, Xenopol considers that for Michael the Brave a "Byzantine strategy" would have been preferable to the "Dacian strategy" he adopted because he could have regained for Christianity the crown of Byzantium and he would have become "the emperor of Constantinople" (as a contemporary source said). Despite this, Xenopol recognized the existence of a medieval consciousness of Romanian unity, and considered Michael the Brave one of its principal spokesmen: "...The political union of the Romanian countries... is the proudest glory of Michael the Brave, a star which, kindled by him in the past, will shine forever in the future of the Romanian people, and whose light will always be blended with the image of Michael." Xenopol himself, in 1915, wrote *The History of Michael the Brave* to prepare the spirit and will of the people for the Great Union which was on the horizon.

Even the conception of Nicolae Iorga (the greatest Romanian historian) concerning the union of 1600 did not remain the same during his long career. In 1901, he published *The History of Michael the Brave for the Romanian People*, and, in 1935, in two volumes, *The History of Michael the Brave*. He also analyzed the same subject in the fifth volume of his monumental synthesis, *The History of the Romanians*. At the beginning, Iorga held that ideas of Romanian political unity "cannot be discovered before the XVIII-th century and that "Michael the Brave marked an extraordinary moment, which was not adequate for the development of our position, or for the progress of our ideas." During the Middle Ages, the great historian stated, there only existed a "Christian Orthodox consciousness," and not a "national consciousness." After the great act of national union in 1918, Iorga held a lecture in Iași entitled "The Idea of Romanian Dacia." He said here that "the Romanian national idea is six hundred years old, not since its beginning, but since the first political act accomplished in its name." According to this new vision of Iorga, the Romanian princes understood the Emperor Trajan's message about Roman Dacia, and this Dacia was recreated that same month by the flashing sword of Michael the Brave. This conception of *restitutio Daciae* (the reconstituted Dacia), of scholarly and political origins, is bound up in Iorga's vision with other, much more profound ideas, relating to the meaning of the nation: "The name, *The Romanian Countries*, formerly had a sense which many people have forgotten and some of them never understood; it meant the whole land inhabited by Romanians, from an ethnographical point of view." Long ago, said Iorga, the Romanian Countries, namely the whole territory inhabited by Romanians, "were divided into two reigns and, close by, an area under foreign domination." It was not difficult for recent investigations to find new evidence to support this idea: the first independent Romanian state assumed, at the same time with its name, the aspiration to reconstitute the unity of the nation with the same name. And so, Michael the Brave appears as a stage in the process of the

achievement of this aspiration for unity. In the fifth volume of his *The History of the Romanians*, in a European context, Iorga emphasizes the personality of Michael the Brave as being situated between Romanian traditions and contemporary European ideas. Michael was considered here as a result of a modern consciousness, as a prince in the Dacian meaning, a meaning which came from Renaissance ideas, adapted to the Romanian sense of history. P.P. Panaitescu, a critical and lucid historian, is an example of consistency concerning his vision of the epoch and personality of Michael the Brave. From his monograph entitled *Michael the Brave*, published in 1936, to his study of Romanian political unification during the feudal epoch, which appeared in 1960, he agreed, in general, with the point of view of Xenopol. Panaitescu pointed out that Michael took as a guide the political idea of unity in the Crusade. And thus, in 1599-1600, the prince reestablished this unity of the Christian League, because Transylvania and Moldavia had strayed from the anti-Ottoman bloc. Michael the Brave created a political and military union, but not a centralized state. Panaitescu, contrary to the romanticist historians, established that the prince could not look for support from the peasantry because he was a member of the nobility – the single class which held the economic power. These ideas from 1936 were retained by Panaitescu in 1960 as well, but with some Marxist-Stalinist additions; for example, the political union had to be accomplished only after the development of capitalist relations and the formation of a single national market. But despite the new ideological framework, Panaitescu recognized and demonstrated the existence in the Middle Ages of the Romanian ethnic sentiments of solidarity. He admitted the new significance which the union of 1600 had for modern times, namely as a symbol and a stimulus for national unity. The historian correctly pointed out that Michael the Brave failed not because his social and national policy or because his military mistakes, but because of the absence of a strong economic basis inside the country and because of the strength of foreign imperialism outside.

Dimitrie Onciul accepted the existence of a medieval national consciousness, but he concluded that the union of 1600 was merely the result of Michael's word and not the product of a modern national conception.

Gheorghe I. Brătianu, one of the most important Romanian historians related to the *Annales* school, expressed a very realistic conception. In his opinion, Michael was not consciousness of the idea of unity, but his action was "the first political act towards Romanian unity." It is not possible to find the basis of the union from 1600 in the medieval system of suzerainty relations (as Panaitescu tried to prove). The explanation of the political union, said Brătianu, is the need for obtaining the unity of local forces, a necessity of the Romanians for their own defence because of the lack of substantial help from [Western] Christian Europe. From this necessity for defence, was formed Romanian medieval unity, to which Michael the Brave added a political aspect during the early Modern Age.

The historian Ioan Lupaş considered that Michael the Brave was not guided in the beginning by thoughts of national political Romanian unity, nor by a desire for Balkan emancipation, but in the end he began to move consciously towards these ideals. Many contemporaries of Michael, said Lupaş, considered him to be capable of restoring "the Christian Empire of Eastern Europe" and to achieve the national Romanian ideal. Lupaş particularly puts accent on the Christian meaning of Michael's actions.

After the second World War, communism changed not only the history of Eastern Europe, but also historical writing. In Romania, despite the Soviet occupation, the period from 1944 to 1948 did not bring spectacular changes in the field of historiography as the most important old directions of investigation were continued. The turning point was in 1948, by the re-organization, in a Stalinist style, of the Romanian Academy, of the education system, of the churches, and by the removal from the universities of many great professors and scholars (isolating, imprisoning or even killing them). The period from 1948 to 1960 was the worst in Romanian historiography. The history of Michael the Brave was neglected because the Romanian national symbols had to be ignored and put aside to make way for "the light of proletarian internationalism."

After 1960, together with the regaining of a certain degree of national dignity and a certain amount of independence from Moscow, the Romanian historical research tried to continue the great inter-war tradition. Thus, great historians such as Andrei Ōtetea, S. Dragomir, Mihail Berzea, David Prodan, and others began publishing many books and articles. The reign of Michael the Brave again became an important subject for historical investigations. One of the most realistic analyses of the union of 1599-1600 was made by professor David Prodan in his work *Supplex Libellus Valachorum*. This great Romanian historian, a symbol of the intellectual resistance under the former dictatorship, intended to explain not the reasons for the union of the three Romanian countries, but the significance of this action for Transylvania. Using some remarkable documentary sources, Prodan proved that both the estates of Transylvania and the Romanian masses were conscious in 1599-1600 of the national meaning of the unification achieved by Michael. In 1599-1600, the possibility existed for the submissive Romanian people of Transylvania to become a *political nation* and thus join the Romanians of Moldavia and Wallachia. Transylvania could have become Romanian in a political sense, that is why the masters of the country considered the action of Michael to be of great danger and that is why they adopted harsh anti-Romanian measures. On the other hand, Romanians considered the entry of Michael the Brave in Transylvania as a blessing and a hope for the future: "The union of the three countries under a Romanian ruler proved to be possible[...]. The idea of Romanian rule would, step by step, take an important place in the Romanian consciousness, and, finally, Michael and his political union became the active symbol of national unity."

After 1960 many important works concerning the social basis of Michael's reign, his relations with the nobility [the boyars], his military power, the peasantry, the diplomatic apparatus, the fame of the Prince in Europe, about the Prince's seal and unified coat of arms, about the political thinking and the foreign affairs of the Prince, etc. have been published. Ștefan Andreescu has published an important book [two volumes] on the history of the idea of *Restitutio Daciae* between 1526 and 1659. The author has proved the long existence of the political idea of an alliance or union of the three Romanian countries.

Starting with the period from 1971 to 1975, when history was again partly transformed into an instrument of the communist system, the reign of Michael the Brave also began to be used for the purposes of party propaganda. In some political books, the union of 1600 was presented as an "expression of the will of all Romanians," as a manifestation of the role of the people in history or as an example of "the role of personalities who identify themselves with the aspiration of the masses." The union of Michael the Brave had to be a stimulus for the unity of the people around the party and the leader. Fortunately, true historians, with few exceptions, did not accept to write such articles and books. The most important part of Romanian historiography remained decent and dignified, despite the difficulties and hardships that this implied.

In any case, the history of Michael the Brave has always been considered by the Romanian great historians as one of the most important moments of the Romanian past. All Romanian historians have regarded Michael as a Romanian national symbol, both in 1599-1600, and later. Undoubtedly, despite the desire for objectivity, each epoch (and each generation) has understood the remarkable personality of this Prince according to its own ideals, and has exaggerated some aspects or criticized decisions and attitudes which in 1593-1601 were quite normal. For all that, the XX-th century has brought the richest historical documentation concerning Michael the Brave and has elaborated the most complex image of his epoch.

Michael the Brave has penetrated into the consciousness of the Romanian people as George Washington has in the American mentality or as Napoleon in the French mentality. Panaitescu said about Michael the Brave: "he is the culminating point of our history, side by side with Stephen the Great and King Ferdinand." Iorga, with his great literary talent, drew a memorable portrait of the Prince: "After 1600, any Romanian could not imagine the Union without his giant personality, without his sword or his axe raised towards the sky of justice, without his face [illuminated] by a pure and perfect tragic poem." Naturally, in his double position as defender of Christian Europe and unifier of the Romanian territories, Michael the Brave has penetrated into popular culture and fascinated the minds of the people. This is the reason I have tried to remember him here, as a Romanian national symbol.