

THE TWO CENTURIES OF THE BLAJ BIBLE

At the end of the XVIIIth century, the geographical configuration of Central and Eastern Europe was subject to considerable changes. Under the Habsburg Austrian dynasty the continental empire came victorious out of its century long rivalry with the Turkish empire. In 1699, Emperor Leopold I managed to drive the Turks away from the former territories of the medieval Hungarian kingdom to which Transylvania had also belonged. This province, inhabited by a population whose great majority was made up of Romanians became a crown territory of the Austrian Empire as *principality*, the emperor being great prince of Transylvania, a quality transmitted by hereditary right. Since this status of principality was inherited from the XVIth century, after the fall of the Hungarian Kingdom in 1526, Transylvania managed to maintain its independence under the Hungarian princes of Reformat confession (Calvinists). The empire of Leopold I was, however, a bulwark of Catholicism in Europe, and the emperor himself was a glorious servant of the Catholic Church. Under the new conditions, the confessional poise changed in Transylvania, where the dominance of Calvinism through statal terror came to an end. This terror had been exerted especially on Roumanians, who belonged to the Oriental Orthodox Church, in view of converting them to the Reform. The campaign for calvinizing the Romanians which lasted for 150 years ended in total failure.

One of the serious problems of the new Austrian power in the principality of Transylvania was how to improve the social and confessional status of its Romanian population. As a “majority pertaining to a minority” they were socially disfavoured by the old Hungarian legal system of a quasi-medieval type. Confessionally, they had their old orthodoxy completely ruined in the unequal fight against the Calvinistic Church: debased – as the great Romanian orthodox historian David Prodan put it – to the level of a populist exercise closer to folklore and superstition than to the christian church. The principality’s affiliation to the Empire offered the Romanians a chance of saving their traditional Oriental church from this condition by means of an alliance with the Catholic church, event recorded in historiography as the Union with Rome. Started in 1697 this union was carried into effect in 1700, through the vote of the entire orthodox clergy, not only of Transylvania, but also of the western territories inhabited by Romanians: Banat, as far as Novi Sad, Crişana, Sătmar as far as the Tisa river and Maramureş as far as the Northern Carpathians. This confessional shift was carried into effect by the norms of the 1439 Oecumenical council of Florence, where the assimilation of Oriental Orthodox parishioners into the Catholic church was postulated. The theological ground of the union with Rome consisted in the acceptance by the followers of the Oriental rite of four dogmatic principles that had since 1054 separated the two Christian Churches: 1) the acknowledgement of the Pope in Rome as an “accepted head” of the entire Christian Church; 2) the setting out of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son; 3) the Eucharistic sufficiency of unyeasted (unleavened) bread; 4) the existence of Purgatory. From the point of view of its rite, the churchly life of the Oriental neoconverts remained unchanged. These tolerant conditions were accepted by the Transylvanian Romanians in 1700, just as in the previous decades they had been accepted by the Carpatho-Russians from the northern portion of the Carpathians, another ex-territory of medieval Hungary. Immediate measures were taken in Vienna at the level of ecclesiastical authority and political power to support the union of the Romanians with Rome and improve their social and confessional status as a consequence of the taken step. In 1701, a famous decree of emperor Leopold I, called by historians the *Secunda Leopoldina*, proclaimed the equality in confessional and social rights of the Romanians with the other “nations” in Transylvania, which globally taken, were a minority as compared to them, through favoured by the medieval constitution of the principality. In 1721, through the *Rationi congruit* Bull Pope Innocent XIII confirmed the founding of a Bishopric for the Uniates in Transylvania with its residence at Făgăraş and since 1737 at Blaj. The evolution and success of the Romanian Bishopric united with Rome, with its residence at Blaj fulfilled all the expectations of the founders of the union, foremost of whom was bishop Atanasie Anghel, who hoped for a new destiny of the Romanians in Transylvania after this historic act. The most urgent desideratum was the eradication of the generalized lack of culture of the Romanian people as well as its clergy, an aspect which around 1700 shocked the foreigners acquainted with the situation, as was the silesian chronicler Andreas Freyberger. In 1738, emperor Charles VI made an important donation to the benefit of the Uniat Romanian Church in Transylvania which – among other things – allowed for a systematic education of young Romanians at the Urban College De Propaganda Fide in Rome, as well as at other Catholic educational institutions. The union with Rome meant for Romanians their first entrance into Europe in the modern age through their access to high Western culture. Symptomatic was the invasion of books and ideas towards this “recovered territory in the East”, as the French historian Pierre Chaunu has defined it. In a very short while personal and institutional libraries sprang out of an arid land in a practically dead cultural field, to popularize the religious and lay ideas and knowledge of civilized (especially of Catholic) Europe. The first founders of libraries were bishops Ioan Giurgiu Patachi and Inochentie Micu-Klein, personalities of a solid humanistic culture at the same time.

The consolidation of a new religion for a whole people was a work of duration which required a great effort of will power and a lot of energy. The high education at level acquired by the young Uniates abroad provided human resources for the Greek Catholic Church of Transylvania, as the confession united with Rome was officially called. The generation educated in the West laid the foundations of a Transylvanian culture in its own rights, by applying the experience and various ideas of the West to the Romanian national needs. Thus, after 1750, an essentially new age in the evolution of Romanian culture opened at Blaj through the establishment of national schools and the massive printing of clerical as well as lay books. Bishop Petru Pavel Aron, well-known in all the ruling circles of the Catholic Church, is the symbol of a cultural Renaissance of Oriental rite and the Greek-Catholic Romanian Church, one of the Oriental churches in the Catholic world as it is defined in the *Rationi congruit* bull. This structural synthesis between the Eastern tradition and the Western novelty brought by Catholicism secured to Blaj and the Uniat church a privileged place in the effort of edifying the modern Romanian nation. Its national consciousness was clarified in Transylvania through the popularization of foreign historical sources ascertaining the Romanians as a people who spoke Latin, since they were descendants from and continuers of the Romanized population in Dacia, after its conquest by emperor Traian in 105-106 A.D. Great men of culture trained within the framework of the Uniat Church, such as Samuil Micu, Gheorghe Șincai, Petru Maior and others also influenced in a national sense the course of modern ideas in the other two principalities preeminently inhabited by Romanians: Moldavia and Wallachia in which the Latinity of Romanian culture came up as a leitmotiv. The Roman descent, the unity of language and traditions, the common interests and memory of the same historical events were explored by Transylvanian Uniate authors, who lay that way the ideological bases of the modern Romanian nation and the consciousness of its unity.

Culture and language are the cradle of the Romanian nation. In past centuries, when the Romanians were divided into several "countries" of a medieval type, like other peoples in Europe, the Romanian language originating in Latin was the element which united them: it was their true home, as some great European thinkers, such as Poggio Bracciolini, Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini (Pope Pius II), Nicolaus de Modrusa, Janus Pannonius, Antonio Bonfini and others have observed. The development of philological sciences and the cultivation of the language is the most obvious aspect of the erudite circle called the Transylvanian School. The clerical books directly addressed to the people were the main mechanism in the aggregation of a standard unitary Romanian language. The most important part among these was certainly placed by the Bible. This basic book of the Christian Church was for the first time published in Romanian at Bucharest (Wallachia), in 1688. Two further translations were made at Blaj during the eighteenth century. The first, after the Vulgate text, was translated by the monks of the Order St. Basil the Great, united with Rome, foremost of whom was Petru Pavel Aron. The second was translated after the Septuagint text, between 1783 – 1791, and is a work called by historians *The Blaj Bible*, or Samuil Micu's Bible, where as the Vulgate manuscript has remained unpublished up to the present despite the exquisite quality of the translation. The Septuagint was the traditional Bible of the Romanians, a people of Oriental rite, and as such, of the Greek-Catholics, too. The ones who decided on the choice between the Vulgate and the Septuagint, especially bishop Ioan Bob, were inspired. *The Blaj Bible* was automatically adopted by all Romanians, whether Greek-Catholic, or Orthodox, the latter constituting a majority on the territory of the former Dacia.

The Bible printed at Blaj, as well as the one which remained in a manuscript form, constitute the crowning, climactic point of accumulations in an accelerated rhythm of knowledge and competence in the fields of theology and philology. It was the XVIIIth century that created it together with the Greek-Catholic Church. The real beneficiary was, however, the XIXth century. The Greek-Catholic Bible became the national Bible of all Romanians, their oecumenical Bible. Acknowledging its merits Orthodox Christians reedited it at Sankt Petersburg, in 1819, at Buzău in Wallachia, between 1854 – 1856 and at Sibiu between 1856 – 1858. Thus, *The Blaj Bible* dominated the Romanian Biblical language up to 1900. The national culture of the Romanians was created during the XIXth century. As a basic text read by all Romanians, the Transylvanian Bible had an important contribution to the development and settling of standard Romanian, as it was professed by the classics of Romanian literature. Specialized criticism has proved the influence exerted by this Bible on the works of Mihai Eminescu, the greatest Romanian writer of all times.