

Melchizedek Stefanescu and the Foundation of the Romanian Academic Society

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Abstract: The foundation of a high authority, which could have been able to offer support to the formation of the national identity and to the assertion of the Romanian culture, was one of the necessities which arose during the time of modern Romania. The Romanian scholars were in need of an institution where the cultural and ideological concerns of the nation would be represented. Their aims were achieved when the major cultural personalities of the time took initiative and founded the Romanian Academic Society (1866), which later became the Romanian Academy. One of the scholars who contributed to the establishment of the Academic Society was Melchizedek Stefanescu. His work was an important one, along with the work of other important cultural personalities such as Rosetti, V.A. Urechia, M. Kogalniceanu, I.H. Radulescu, Ion Ghica and Al.Odobescu.

Keywords: academic; cultural; personality; Romanian; institution

The Romanian efforts, made in order to constitute a cultural and scientific authority accessible to all Romanians, were increased during the reign of Alexandru Ioan Cuza. These efforts were fulfilled on the 1st / 13th of April 1866, when, at the initiative of C.A. Rosetti, who was minister of Public Instruction at that moment, the Royal Lieutenancy enacted the foundation of the Romanian Literary Society, which later became the Romanian Academy. With its foundation the dreams of an entire generation of scholars were being materialized.

These scholars were the ones who fought for the establishing within the Romanian Principalities, of an Academy, which would be similar to those already existent in Europe, at the time. Although the ideal of establishing this important authority was older, the preoccupation of founding a truly academic society had been emphasised in the first half of the 19th century, which was also known as the “nationalities century”. This new society represented the voice of the nation, members from the entire Romanian realm were assigned as members of the Academy, but also two

Macedo-Romanian members. Among these, in September 1870, at the proposal of V.A. Urechia, Melchisedec Stefanescu was chosen bishop of the Lower Danube.

The first meeting of the society was held during the summer of 1867 (6th/18th August). At the meeting, the members of the Literary Society attended, together with many personalities, such as Melchisedec, as bishop of the Lower Danube. Shortly after (24th August/5th September), the name of the society changed into The Romanian Academic Society. Its first president was Ion Heliade Radulescu. The society was initially divided between the literary section and the historical section. Starting from 1872 a third section was added, that of natural science. This cultural authority included personalities such as Mihail Kogalniceanu, Ion Ghica, Alexandru Odobescu etc. Starting from 1869, "The Annals of the Romanian Academic Society" were being published. The publication of Dimitrie Cantemir's work was initiated, and in 1876 the first volume, belonging to the external document collection, was released. This first volume was signed by Eudoxiu Hurmuzaki, its initiator. Along with the historical activity of the society, where Melchisedec was remarked, a philological activity was added. However, the philological activity was dominated by Latin tendencies.

Melchisedec Stefanescu, starting from the time he was performing as a teacher, inspector and rector of the seminary, remarked himself due to his scholarly training. These cultural preoccupations were not randomly chosen within the life and actions of Melchisedec. His biography presents him as a complex personality, with a proper education.

The Romanian Literary Academy, founded on the 1st/13th of April 1866, a society which became known as The Romanian Academy, in 1879, accepted Melchisedec Stefanescu as a member, together with other important personalities.

Melchisedec was chosen as a member of the Romanian Academic Society during the meeting held on the 10th/22nd of September 1870. On the 5th/17th of October, Melchisedec thanked the "honourable Society", for choosing him among the permanent members. On 2nd/14th of August 1872, Melchisedec withdrew his membership, suggesting he had health problems. However, the real reason why he withdrew his membership remains unknown. He was not the only one to act in such a manner. At the ordinary session of the Romanian Academy from the 23rd of May 1879, the decision of calling back the members who resigned was taken. These members were V. Alecsandri, T. Maiorescu and M. Stefanescu.

During a meeting of the Academy, held in September 1879, along with V. Alecsandri, Melchisedec asked the authors of religious handbooks, to draft them according to a series of educational principles, in an accessible and grammatically correct language. In 1880, during the meeting of the Academy, he actively participated to discussions regarding orthographical rules, and on the 6th/18th of February 1881, the highly-educated bishop offered the society, three Moldovian charters, which were written in Slavonic.

While visiting Cernauti and other places in Bucovina, he noticed that the metropolitan, Silvestru Moraru, was in possession of the “Tetraevanghelul”, which was written by Nicodim in 1473 and given as a gift to the Great Monastery of Humor, by Stephen the Great. On one of the pages of this manuscript, an authentic portrait of Stephen the Great can be seen. This discovery made it possible that on the 13th of November 1881, Melchisedec presented to the Academy a report, for debating. This memoir included information about the “Tetraevanghelul”, and it was accompanied by certain exact reproductions, received from the artist Epaminonda Bucevschi. These reproductions demonstrated that the portrait is, without any doubt, that of Stephen the Great. This report was discussed in many meetings of the Academy from November until December 1881 and January 1882. Although B.P. Hasdeu openly stated his doubts, he reconsidered and joined the majority of the members of the Academy. All of them shared bishop Melchisedec’s opinion and conclusions, according to which the portrait belonged to Stephen the Great.

He was elected vice president of the Academy on the 21st of March/2nd of April 1882, along with Titu Maiorescu and P.S. Aurelian. D.A. Sturdza was the president of this Academy.

During other meetings of the Academy, Melchisedec presented reports which highlighted the interest he was showing to the historical monuments belonging to the Church. One of these reports was entitled “Visit to some monasteries and ancient churches from Bucovina.”

Melchisedec offered to the Academy old Moldovian charters, which were kept as collections; he did the same with a series of documents which were discovered during his research. He offered such documents to the Academy believing that they would be well kept under the protection of the prestigious institution.

During the years 1883, 1885 and 1887, he presided over the meetings of the Historical Section of the Academy and actively participated to academic debates on important topics. In 1884 (27th January/8th February), he presented a dissertation which referred to “The life and work of Grigore Tamblac”, and on the 5th/17th of April, when the new leadership of the Academy was voted, he was re-elected vice president, along with N. Quintescu and Emanoil Bacalogu, under the presidency of Ion Ghica.

On the 22nd of November/4th December, bishop Melchisedec offered a Slavonic charter to the Academy, which belonged to Stephen the Great, but also a copy of the Psalter in Verses by I. Pralea. On the 12th/24th of March 1887, he suggested, during a meeting of the Historical Section, that the Romanian Academy should ask the support of the Government to print out nine volumes of the collection of documents entitled “Hurmuzaki”. On the 30th of March/11th of April, he presented “*Didahiile sau predicile mitropolitului Antim Ivireanul*” to the Academy. He recommended this work not only to priests, but also to Seminar students, to serve as a model regarding the clerical issues, the oratorical art and the religious terminology.

Bishop Melchisedec, as an active member of the Romanian Academy, distinguished himself through his intense activity, his high knowledge and patriotic standing. Feeling surrounded by a true family, he wished, as a sign of gratitude to this remarkable institution which received him with wide open doors, to donate his entire book collection and the coin collection he gathered during his lifetime, to the Academy. His bequests were fulfilled after his death.

After bishop’s Melchisedec’s passing, on 16th/28th of May 1892, his trustees began to make an inventory of his book and coin collections. The result was a number of 2511 books, 82 manuscripts and 114 coins, which they immediately sent to Bucharest. Along with the books, manuscripts and coins, at I. Bianu’s request, a few copies of “Melchisedec’s Will” were sent to the Academy. These copies were printed out as a brochure.

He drafted several theological handbooks which are considered classical works within our religious literature.

Regarding his preoccupations for history, Melchisedec has been, together with B.P. Hasdeu, a pioneer in the editing of historical sources: *Chronica Huşilor și a Episcopiei cu asemine numire* (1869); *Chronica Romanului și a Episcopiei de*

Roman (2 vol., 1874-1874). He, also, brought contributions to the history of Romanian culture, most of these works are actually handbooks for school. Melchisedec's intellectual dedication represented a quality, which accompanied him throughout his life.

Everywhere he travelled, because of his passion for the past, Melchisedec searched for and researched documents, he deciphered votive inscriptions, but also, inscriptions of tombstones, he read manuscripts and old printings, notes written on books and different worship objects or he researched old chronicals. To all of these activities we also have to add his study of several works of foreign historians. The entire research he performed was part of the process which preceded the creation of his own works. His visits to different monasteries had as main purpose the study of the archives and libraries belonging to the monasteries.

Melchisedec started his research ever since he was a teacher and inspector at the seminar of Socola, and later on teacher and rector of the seminary of Husi. His research resulted in a large amount of information. His ascent as bishop of the Lower Danube and, later on, as Bishop of Roman, facilitated his access to a large number of archives and important documents. He did his research in libraries, especially those of Bucharest and Iasi and he carried a rich correspondence with different contemporary scholars. From these scholars he asked for information which could help him solve the scholarly problems he was facing. The grand majority of the documents he gathered had been processed and published in several works. Some of these works are really important ones. Due to his passing before the age of seventy years old, a large amount of the documentary material he managed to gather was not published, but was fortunately kept at the Central University Library from Iasi.

Melchisedec's works are as important as the book collection he donated to the Academy. Proof of his intense activity in collecting books is the fact that, after a few years after he came back to the country, he felt the need to draft a catalogue of his personal book collection, entitled "*Registru de cărțile aflătoare în biblioteca Protosinelului Melhisedec, scris de însuși el. 1885, octomvre 1, Socola*". This catalogue is kept at the Academy Library. Since then, he collected many books until his old age. The Academy Library still keeps two copies of this catalogue, obviously, updated by this responsible book lover.

Unfortunately, his intense activity was interrupted by his premature death. At the funeral of bishop Melchisedec (16th/28th 1892), the Academy sent as representatives Gr. Tocilescu, N. Ionescu si Al. Papadopol-Calimah.

On the 18th/30th of March 1894, Ion Kalinderu was reading, during a solemn meeting of the Academy, his reception discourse about Bishop Melchisedec. During this discourse, Kalinderu outlined the character of the priest, teacher, author and political man embodied by the same person, Melchisedec Stefanescu. During the meeting, D.A. Sturdza mentioned a few important moments in the life of bishop Melchisedec: the part the Romanian dignitary played in the works of the ad-hoc Council and in the declaration of the autocephaly of the national church.

Another mentioning of Melchisedec was made by Anton Naum, during the meeting held on the 2nd/14th of April 1894, in “Cuvantul de primire” in the Romanian Academy.

Melchisedec Stefanescu, intellectual cleric, eternal patriot and enlightened scholar, determined the great historian N. Iorga to catalogue him as “the most important cleric educated within the new national environment”.

Melchisedec Stefanescu, will be remembered as one of the enlightened clerics who brought his contribution to the development of the Romanian culture, a patriot which supported the rise of the nation’s prosperity, fighting by all means, until the end of his life, for the maintaining and accomplishment of the national ideals, along with many other personalities belonging to the Romanian modern period.

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