

CONSTANTIN GORDON

CREATING HYMNOGRAPHY IN TODAY'S ROMANIA

THE OFFICE OF SAINT BRÂNCOVEANU

Constantin Brâncoveanu, Prince of Wallachia, and his sons and counsellor, Ianache Văcărescu, were martyred in Constantinople in 1714. They were canonized by the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church in 1992, and are now celebrated on 16 August.

There are three versions of the office for these saints: the first was written by monk Silvestru Florescu, in 1940. The second was brought into existence in 2007 by deacon Cornel Constantin Coman, who created both text and melody. The idiomela are his own compositions, while the canon and the stichera prosomia follow today's Byzantine musical models from the Thessaloniki area. A committee within the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church edited the third office of the Saints, in 2014. This version is a mixture of the previous two variants, with a few changes.

In my paper, I will show how the hymnography dedicated to these neomartyrs came into existence and developed. I will discuss the characteristics of these three variants, as well as the reasons behind their emergence. My research, besides analysing the literary and musical texts, also incorporates both an interview with the hymnographer Cornel Constantin Coman and a discussion with some members of the Synod's Committee. Before proceeding, I will briefly give an outline of the Saints' martyrdom.

THE MARTYRDOM OF BRÂNCOVEANU

Between 1688 and 1714, Constantin Brâncoveanu was Prince of Wallachia, one of the two Romanian principalities under Ottoman suzerainty. The written histories pictured him as a good ruler, a great founder and benefactor of churches, as well as a supporter of culture.¹ Following a political conspiracy, Brâncoveanu was deposed from his throne, arrested and escorted to Constantinople together with his sons and his counsellor.

Imprisoned and tortured for six months, they were then brought before Sultan Ahmed III to be executed. However, they were offered the choice of giving up the Christian faith and converting to Islam in exchange for their lives. Refusing to comply, they were all beheaded. What is worth mentioning about

1 For details of his life and martyrdom see Sebastian Lurențiu Nazăru, *Martiriul Brâncovenilor – o analiză a surselor istorice*, București: Cuvântul Vieții 2014, and Nomikos Michael Vaporis, *Witnesses for Christ. Orthodox Christian Neomartyrs of the Ottoman Period 1437–1860*, Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press 2000, 155–157.

this event is the cruelty displayed by the Sultan in forcing the father to watch his own innocent children being murdered. Chronicles, diplomatic letters and journals recounted the scene with high consternation, and the way the execution was carried out “fait raisonner bien du monde”, as *Le Mercure Galant* wrote at the time.²

Due to his refusal to embrace the Islamic religion, Constantin Brâncoveanu's death was considered martyrdom shortly after his death in 1714. In the 1990s, Petru Năsturel discovered a Greek Canon dedicated to Brâncoveanu,³ written by Kallinikos of Heraclea, future Patriarch of Constantinople (1726), who witnessed the martyrdom in Constantinople. However, only four troparia were preserved.



Illustration 1. Martiriul Sfinților Brâncoveni
Icon by Elena Murariu ©

The bodies, thrown into the sea, were collected by some Christian fishermen and buried in a church of the island of Halki – a church founded by Brâncoveanu. Six years later, in 1720, a part of the relics were brought to Wallachia and secretly reburied in the church of St George in Bucharest, where they remain today.

The Brâncoveanu family were perceived

by the Romanian people as saints, and therefore both popular and literary poems, as well as religious hymns were dedicated to them. Their early service, however, was mainly used in the monasteries and churches established by Constantin or his family. In 1992, the Holy Synod of the Romanian Patriarchate decided on their official canonization.

1. THE 1942 VERSION OF HIEROMONK SILVESTRU

The birth of the first office took place in the most imposing monastery founded by Constantin Brâncoveanu, named Hurezi, which was meant to be his family's necropolis. Two of the nuns who lived there in the early 1940s, named Elpida and Agapia, asked their brother, Hieromonk Silvestru Florescu from the Frăsinei Monastery, to write hymns for the service for Brâncoveanu.

2 L. Baidaff, “La mort de Constantin Brâncoveanu et la presse européenne (1714)”, *Revue Historique du sud-est européen*, 1–3 (1929), 65.

3 Petru Ș. Năsturel, “O mărturie grecească despre mucenicia lui Vodă Brâncoveanu”, *Verbum*, VI-VII (1995–1996), 289–291.

He finished the work in 1942. The office was handwritten into a scrapbook and later published the Hurezi Monastery, after 1992. The latter's format, resembling the standard Romanian Menaion, suggests that it was meant to be integrated in the official Menaion. Important information about the office is provided by a footnote to this printed edition: the name of the hymnographer, the year of the composition and the typika instructions for the feast day. I based my study on this particular printed version.

Particularly known as a great gerondas and a hesychast, Hieromonk Silvestru had been granted the gift of the Jesus Prayer, and he lived a life of asceticism.⁴ In addition, certain evidence – such as the testimony of one of the contemporary monks in Frăsinei monastery – revealed that Hieromonk Silvestru also wrote certain prayers: “he composed canons, services of the saints whose relics are found in the monastery: the Holy Hierarch Calinic, St Tryphon”.⁵

THE MAKING OF THE OFFICE

The office of Brâncoveanu is integrated in the rubrics for the day of 16 August, together with the hymns for the Afterfeast of the Dormition of the Mother of God, and the service of the Mandyllion.

The following compositions are dedicated to the Brâncoveanu saints: five stichera kekragaria, four stichera of the Lite, doxastikon, three aposticha, apolytikion, two kathismata, megalynaria, kathismata after the Polyeleos, sticheron after Psalm 50, canon, kontakion, oikos, two exapostilaria, five stichera of the Lauds and doxastikon. The hymns were composed in a free metrical structure. It is known that the majority of Byzantine chants bear metrical and melodic resemblance to a prototype chant. As Theodosios Grammatikos describes it,⁶

4 See Arhimandrit Ioanichie Bălan, *Patericul românesc*, Mănăstirea Sihăstria 2005, 679.

5 A. Păunoiu, “Athosul românesc din pădurile de frasin”, *Ziarul Lumina*, 8 May 2010.

6 Ioannis Arvanitis, “The Rhythmical and Metrical Structure of the Byzantine Heirmoi and Stichera as a Means to and as a Result of a New Rhythmical Interpretation of the Byzantine Chant”, *Acta Musicae Byzantinae*, vol. 6, Gabriela Ocneanu (ed.), Iași: Centrul de studii bizantine 2003, 14.

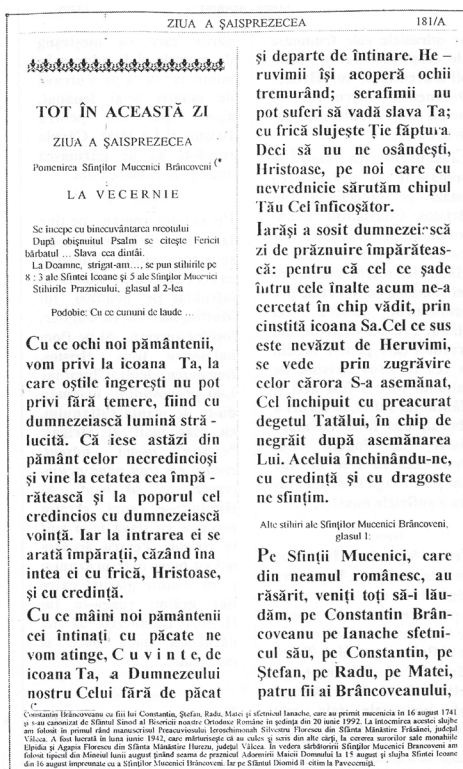


Illustration 2. First edition of the office (1992)