

Homo valachicus orientalis

(1716–1859)

BOGDAN BUCUR

IN A LETTER sent to Emperor Leopold I of Habsburg, in Vienna, on 1 October 1688, Count and Field Marshal Federico Veterani (1643–1695) presented some strategic information regarding the province of Oltenia (Lesser Wallachia), where the Austrian troops were billeted. The cities of Craiova, Câmpulung and Pitești resembled villages, as they consisted of nothing more than ramshackle huts and half-dugout shelters. The fields were wasted and barren, and therefore useless for agriculture. There were no bridges over the main rivers (Jiu, Olt, Argeș and Dâmbovița). There were a couple of sparse monasteries in the woods and other secluded places. The villages were extremely scattered. Generally speaking, Oltenia seemed almost deserted.¹ On 27 April 1702, in Bucharest, the vast majority of the population lived in half-dugout shelters, covered with straw and tree bark. The shabby dens in the capital city were even compared to the English cellars.² The city was poorly paved with wooden logs. Only around the palace there were a couple of houses made of stone, although modest in size, covered with shingle, their yards surrounded by oak trunks.³ Apart from a few, otherwise remarkable, cultural and architectural initiatives, this is what the Principality of Wallachia looked like during its best autochthonous government—under Constantin Brâncoveanu (1688–1714)—before the instauration of the Phanariot reign, in 1716.⁴ It can be easily understood that Wallachia had never been any different at any point in the past.

Wallachia belonged, wholly, to the Orient.⁵ It was doubly subordinated to Constantinople: religiously (to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, through its tradition of Eastern Christianity) and politically (to the Sublime Porte, due to the fact that it belonged, as an autonomous principality, to the Ottoman Empire). In a nutshell, the only main notable differences between the Wallachian lifestyle and the Ottoman one were those exclusively related to the religious norms. Apart from those, there were only similarities (in apparel, food, interior decorations). Conversely, until 1829, the only physical and spiritual traces of the West in Wallachia were—apart from the Latin origin of the Romanian language (which is not relevant from the civilizational point of view)—a single Wallachian with European academic studies (the great boyar Constantin Cantacuzino studied at the University of Padua from 1667 to 1668), a single public institute for humanist studies (the Princely Academy of Bucharest, where classes were held in Greek), a few hundreds of Catholics and Protestants (residents in the Wallachian urban areas), a few Europeans settled in Bucharest (which were part of the royal court), a couple of Western books (which circulated mostly in Greek translation), a few hundreds of great Wallachian boyars who