THE "CAROL I" MOSQUE IN CONSTANȚA

Emil Țîrcomnicu[169]

ABSTRACT

On May 31/June 13, 1913, in Constanța, King Carol I and Queen Elisabeth inaugurated the "Melik" Mosque (Melik = royal), located on Independenței Street. In honor of the King, it also bears his name and is therefore often referred to as the Carol I Mosque. The mosque was built between 1910 and 1913 to commemorate the granting to the Aromanians living in the Ottoman Empire of the right to freely use the Romanian language in schools and churches. These rights were granted through an imperial decree (iradea) issued by Sultan Abdul Hamid II on May 9/22, 1905. The decree was announced through its publication in the newspapers of Constantinople on May 10, 1905, Romania's National Day. The iradea recognizing the Romanian nationality within the Ottoman Empire caused considerable excitement among Romanians at the time, as demonstrated by the contemporary press. The foundation stone of the mosque was laid on June 25, 1910, and by the autumn of 1912 the construction was nearly complete. The mosque was built on the site of an older mosque dating from 1823. The construction cost 400,000 lei. The designs were conceived by architect Victor Stephănescu, an advocate of the Neo-Romanian architectural style, while the building was constructed by engineer G. Neculcea using reinforced concrete for its structure. The mosque was equipped with radiators and an electrical installation. It also received gifts from Sultan Mehmed V, including carpets, pieces of furniture, and two silver candlesticks, all valued at 100,000 lei.

Keywords: Constanța Mosque, Aromanians, Turks, cultural rights.

1. THE OPPORTUNITY

The oldest information regarding the Romanian government's intention to build a Mosque for the Muslims of Constanța was found by me in the newspaper *Adevărul* of February 28/March 13, 1905, in which the situation of the Turkish minority was weighed, as reciprocity, against the situation of Romanians in the Ottoman Empire and the rights that Romania was requesting on their behalf. Therefore, two months before the obtaining of the Ottoman Iradea of May 10, 1905, the construction of the Mosque was being discussed as an element in the negotiations between Romania and the Ottoman Empire.

[169] Senior Researcher, "C. Brăiloiu" Institute of Ethnography and Folklore, E-mail contact: emil.tircomnu@gmail.com.

> "It is said that the future budget of the Ministry of Religious Affairs will also provide a sum of nearly 100,000 lei in order to build a Turkish mosque in Constanța, for the Muslim population of that city. By building this mosque, the government wishes to provide yet another proof of the tolerance enjoyed by the Muslim population of Romania. This decision by the government appears to be connected with the imminent resolution of the issue of the Romanians living in Macedonia"[170].

On May 13, 1905, three days after the publication of the Ottoman Iradea recognizing the Romanian nationality within the Ottoman Empire, the representative in Constantinople, Al. Em. Lahovary, announced

> "that the Romanian government, out of gratitude for the Sultan's continued goodwill toward the Kutzo-Wallachians, had decided to build a monumental mosque in Constanța"[171]

as a piece of news that appeared in the newspaper *Neuigkeits-Welt-Blatt*, Vienna[172].

Four years later, newspapers from 1909 announced the intention to build a mosque in Constanța:

> "It is known that following an imperial Iradea issued in 1905, by which the former Sultan Abdul Hamid II recognized the Romanian nationality in Turkey, the Romanian government, in order to express its satisfaction, decided to build a large mosque in Constanța. A sum of 120,000 lei had been allocated for this construction, to which another 80,000 lei was subsequently added. The Ministry of Religious Affairs commissioned Mr. architect V. Ștefănescu with preparing the plans for the mosque. The plans are ready, and the new mosque will be put under construction immediately after the demolition of the old one, which has been permitted to continue operating until after the end of the Ramadan celebrations. It is believed that His Majesty the King, who will soon visit Constanța on the occasion of the silos' inauguration, will attend the laying of the foundation stone of the new mosque"[173].

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[170] „Se spune că prin viitorul budget al ministerului cultelor se va prevede și o sumă de aproape 100.000 lei spre a clădi o moschee turcească la Constanța, pentru populațiunea musulmană din acel oraș. Prin clădirea acestei moschee, guvernul voește să dea încă o dovadă de toleranță de care se bucură populațiunea musulmană din România. Hotărârea aceasta a guvernului pare a fi în legătură cu apropiata rezolvare a chestiei românilor din Macedonia", in *Adevărul*, February 28, 1905, Year XVIII, No. 5588, p. 3.

[171] „că guvernul român, din recunoștință pentru bunăvoința continuă a sultanului față de kuțovalahi, a decis să construiască o moschee monumentală la Constanța", Dated according to the New Style, May 27, 1905, No. 121, p. 4.

[172] *Ibidem*.

[173] „Se știe că în urma unei iradele imperiale dată în anul 1905 prin care fostul sultan Abdul Hamid II recunoștea naționalitatea română din Turcia, guvernul român, pentru a-și exprima satisfacerea sa, a hotărât construirea unei mari moschee la Constanța. Pentru această construcție fusese destinată o sumă de 120.000 lei, la care s-a mai adăugat încă 80.000 lei. Cu facerea planurilor moscheii a fost însărcinat de către ministerul de culte, d-l arhitect V. Ștefănescu. Planurile sunt gata și noua moschee va fi pusă în construcție imediat după dărâmarea celei vechi care a fost îngăduită să mai funcționeze încă până după sfârșitul serbărilor Ramadanului. Se crede că M. S. Regele care va vizita în curând Constanța cu ocazia inaugurării silozurilor, va asista la punerea pietrei fundamentale a noii moschei", See the newspapers *Voința Națională*, September 18, 1909, Year XXVI, No. 7261, p. 2, and *Ungaria*, October 13, 1909, Year III, No. 190, p. 6.

On July 28, 1909, the newspaper *Dimineața* (Year VI, no. 1951, p. 3) announced that

> "The Administration of the Church Fund is announcing an auction for contracting the construction of the mosque in the city of Constanța. A separate bid will be made for the demolition of the old mosque and the leveling of the land"[174].

2. THE CONSTRUCTION

On June 25/July 8, 1910, the foundation stone was laid for the future Mosque, in the presence of the Minister of Education Spiru Haret and the Turkish Minister in Bucharest, Sefa Bey. On this occasion, Mufti Hafiz-Rifat-efendi delivered the following speech:

> "Mr. Minister, Honored Assembly,
>
> First of all, we are duty-bound to offer pious thanks to the Almighty, who has deemed us worthy today to witness this magnificent solemnity, namely the laying of the foundation stone of a mosque, a place of prayer for Muslim believers, which will be a noble monument of the country, worthy of this historic locality which, in days of distress, served as an eternal refuge for the immortal poet Ovid, one of the great Roman figures. This new mosque under construction is being built on the site of an old mosque, which had its origins in the year 1823, during the reign of Sultan Mahmut. At that time, the commander of the city of Constanța was the late Hafaz Hussein Pasha, a deeply religious man. His sense of piety prompted him to build the former mosque here, on these foundations, at his own expense, and it was dedicated to the Sultan of that time, Mahmut, in his capacity as Grand Caliph and, at the same time, his August Sovereign. However, the old 'Sultan-Mahmut' mosque was no longer commensurate with modern Constanța. Since it was known that this mosque was situated precisely in the city's principal district, it was a moral duty for the Muslim community of the municipality to have a monumental mosque of its own. Today's religious celebration therefore also constitutes an important historical moment, for the document, written in Turkish and Romanian, which is being laid in the foundation, will remind future generations that here, on the shores of the Black Sea, upon the ruins of ancient Tomis, where beautiful Constanța now flourishes, under the glorious reign of the wise and Great Captain, His Majesty King Carol I, this holy place is being erected at the expense of the Romanian State, and thus an even stronger and everlasting bond of brotherhood and affection is being cemented between the Romanians and Muslims of Dobrogea, children of the same homeland. Furthermore, gentlemen, the provision of the Muslim community of Constanța with such a magnificent mosque by the Romanian government itself will cause the hearts of Muslim believers even in the most distant corners of the globe to rejoice, because it demonstrates to all how much hospitality, goodwill, and parental affection are enjoyed here in Romania by the children of the country, regardless of their ethnic origin or religion. In the past and under exceptional circumstances, a weak current of emigration had formed among the Muslim population of Dobrogea; nevertheless, the Romanian government quickly put an end to that current, for, as always, it distinguished itself through excellent and well-considered administrative measures, respecting the language, faith, and

[174] „Administrația Cassei Bisericei publică licitație pentru darea în întreprindere a construcțiunei moscheei din orașul Constanța. Pentru dărâmarea vechei moschei și nivelarea terenului se va face ofertă deosebită", in The newspaper *Dimineața*, July 28, 1909, Year VI, No. 1951, p. 3.

customs of each group, granting all equally the benefits of an equal administration of justice, and alleviating as much as possible the suffering of the weak. Today, following the example of the great voivodes of the past, our great voivode, King Carol I, assisted by the wisdom of his patriotic counselors, for the glory of the country, in addition to the many newly built churches, is having the old religious and historical monuments, which for the most part constitute the pride of Romania, repaired and beautified. Today's beginning of the construction of this noble mosque is yet another testimony that His Majesty King Carol I, together with his High Government, worthy and faithful successors to the virtues of their ancestors, does not forget to include among the long list of newly built houses of God those belonging to other faiths as well. With a refined nature and full of nobility, the Romanian man, here at the gates of the Orient, demonstrates to the world that, while respecting everyone's faith, he himself has the right to be respected. Today's Romania, raised up here through the bravery of her sons, through school and church, beacons of light and civilization, employing gentleness and legality, will surely fulfill her lofty mission of remaining in the future at the forefront of the other small Balkan states. We Muslims of Dobrogea, lovers of our good homeland, Romania, respectful followers of the Holy Quran, which teaches us continuous work, enlightenment through learning, and honor, must show through our deeds that we are worthy of the sacrifices that the country makes for us in this direction. Let us fully understand the high and beneficent protection of our beloved Sovereign and His Government and, filled with gratitude and veneration, thanking everyone and especially the current Minister of Religious Affairs and Education, to whom we owe a warm contribution toward the rearing of this grandiose mosque, let us cry out with all our hearts and with complete sincerity: Long live Romania, Long live His Majesty King Carol I, Long live Her Majesty the Queen, Long live the Romanian Dynasty!"[175].

[175] „Domnule ministru, Onorată Adunare,

În primul rând, datori suntem a înălța pioase mulțumiri Celui A-Tot-Puternic, că ne învrednicește astăzi să asistăm la această măreață solemnitate, adică la punerea pietrei fundamentale a unei moschee, locaș de rugăciuni al credincioșilor musulmani și care locaș va fi un falnic monument al țărei, demn de această localitate istorică care în zile do restriște a servit de azil nemuritorului poet Ovidiu una din măreţele figuri romane. Această nouă moschee în construcţiune se clădește pe urmele unei vechi geamii, care și-a luat începutul în anul 1823 pe timpul domniei Sultanului Mahmut. Pe acea vreme era pe aci, comandant, al orașului Constanța, răposatul Hafaz Hussein Paşa, un om foarte religios. Sentimentul său de pietate l-a determinat ca aci pe aceste temelii, cu propria sa cheltuială, să ridice fosta geamie, și a fost dedicată Sultanului de pe atunci Mahmut, în calitate de Mare Calif și în acelaș timp Augustul său stăpan. Însă vechea geamie «Sultan-Mahmut» nu mai era la înălțimea Constanței moderne, știut fiind că această geamie e situată tocmai în cartierul principal al orașului, era o îndatorire morală pentru comunitatea musulmană din localitate, ca să-și aibe și dânsa o monumentală geamie. Serbarea religioasă de astăzi constitue dar și un important moment istoric, căci punerea în temelie a documentului, scris în limba turcă și română, va aminti generațiunilor viitoare că aci, pe malul Mărei Negre, pe ruinele vechiului Tomis și unde astăzi înfloreşte frumoasa Constanța, sub domnia glorioasă a înțeleptului și Marelui Căpitan, Maiestatea Sa Regele Carol I, se ridică cu cheltuiala Statului român, acest sfânt locaș și astfel se cimentează și mai mult și pentru totdeauna o puternică frăție și dragoste între românii și musulmanii din Dobrogea, fii ai aceleași patrii. Ceva mai mult, domnilor, înzestrarea comuuității musulmane din Constanța cu o moschee atât de măreață de către însuși guvernul român, va face să tresalte de bucurie inimile credincioșilor musulmani chiar din cele mai îndepărtate unghiuri ale globului pământesc, pentru că se arată tuturor de câtă largă ospitalitate, bunăvoință și dragoste părintească se bucură aci în Romania, fii țărei, fie dansii de ori ce neam și de ori ce religie. Pe timpuri și în mod excepțional, se formase un slab curent de emigrare în elementul musulman, din Dobrogea, totuși guvernul român a curmat repede acel curent, căci ca întotdeauna s-a ilustrat prin excelență cu măsuri de administrație bine chibzuite, respectând fiecărui element limba, credința și obiceiurile, impărtășindu-i pe toți în mod egal de binefacerile unei egale împărțiri de dreptate și indulcind pe cât posibil suferințele celor slabi. Astăzi, după pilda voevozilor mari din trecut, marele nostru voevod, Regele Carol I, ajutat de luminile patrioților săi sfetnici, spre mărirea țarei, pe lângă multe biserici clădite din nou, face a se repara și înfrumuseța monumentele

At the beginning of 1912, the sum of 80,000 lei was additionally allocated to the budget of the Church Fund for the "completion of the mosque in Constanța, furnishings, and enclosure"[176].

On May 21, 1912, during their visit to Constanța, King Carol I, accompanied by Prince Nicolae, after attending the religious service at the Cathedral held on the occasion of the feast of Saints Constantine and Helena, also stopped by the Mosque, which was in the final stage of construction[177].



Fig. 1 – The "King Carol I" Mosque in Constanța[178].

The newspapers announced that Sultan Muhamed IV had gifted the future Mosque a carpet of great value[179].

vechi religioase şi istorice, care în mare parte fac fala României. Începutul de astăzi al înălţării acestei falnici moschee, este încă o mărturie că Maiestatea Sa Regele Carol I cu Înaltul Său guvern, vrednici şi fideli următori ai virtuţilor strămoşeşti, nu uită a cuprinde în lunga nomenclatură a locaşelor Dumnezeeşti din nou zidite şi pe acelea de altă credinţă. Cu o fire aleasă şi plin de nobleţă, Românul aci la porţile Orientului, dovedeşte lumei că El, respectând credinţa fiecăruia are şi dânsul dreptul şi că trebue să fie respectat. România de astăzi ridicată aci, prin vitejia fiilor ei, prin şcoală şi biserică, făclii de lumină şi civilizaţie, uzând de blandeţe şi legalitate, cu siguranţă va îndeplini înalta ei menire de a fi şi pe viitor în fruntea celorlalte mici state balcanice. Noi musulmanii din Dobrogea, iubitori ai bunei noastre patrii, România, respectuoşi ascultători ai Sfantului Coran, care ne învaţă munca continuă lumină prin invăţătură şi cinste să ne arătăm şi prin fapte că suntem demni de sacrifiile ce ţara face pentru noi în această direcţiune. Să ne dăm bine seama de protecţia înaltă şi binefăcătoare a iubitului nostru Suveran şi a guvernului Său şi, plini de recunoştinţă şi veneraţie, mulţumind tuturor şi în special actualului ministru al cultelor şi instrucţiunei, căruia îi datorăm întru ridicarea acestei grandioase moschee, un călduros concurs, să strigăm din tot sufletul şi cu toată sinceritatea: Trăiască Romania, Trăiască Maiestatea Sa Regele Carol I, Trăiască Majestatea Sa Regina, Trăiască Dinastia Română", See the newspapers *Universul*, June 28, 1910, Year XXVIII, No. 174, p. 3, and *Conservatorul*, June 29, 1910, Year X, No. 140, p. 2.

[176] See the newspaper *Dimineața*, January 20, 1912, Year IX, No. 2828, p. 3.

[177] See the newspaper *Universul*, May 24, 1912, Year XXX, No. 140, p. 5.

[178] *Universul*, 1935, 11B-1659414755, p. 8.

[179] See the newspaper *Evenimentul*, June 28, 1912, Year XX, No. 97, p. 3.

In the autumn of 1912, the construction had been completed and the inauguration was awaited, as shown by the article in the newspaper *Dimineața*[180], which reported that the inauguration was expected.

Only in the following year, on May 31/June 13, 1913, in Constanța, did King Carol I and Queen Elisabeth inaugurate the "Melik" Mosque, which, in honor of the King, also bears his name and is therefore often called the Carol I Mosque.

The construction of the Mosque cost 400,000 lei. The plans were drawn up by architect Victor Stephănescu, who favored the Neo-Romanian style. In fact, Victor Stephănescu had Aromanian origins, being the son of composer Georghe Stephănescu and the grandson of merchant Mihail Hagi Stephan. The construction was carried out by engineer G. Neculcea, with reinforced concrete being used in its structure. The Mosque was equipped with radiators and an electrical installation. The inventor Gogu Constantinescu also worked on the dome, using thin reinforced concrete shells for the first time for the vault's construction.

Architect Victor Stephănescu made several research trips to the Muslim world, to Cairo, Constantinople, Baghdad, and Bursa.

To welcome King Carol I, His Excellency Mahmud Essad Effendi, Minister of Cadastral Affairs and special envoy of the Sultan, and His Excellency Seffa Bey, Minister of Turkey in Bucharest, came to Constanța. The two were accompanied by the mayor of Constanța, Mircea Solacolu. The consuls of Turkey, Italy, Germany, and France were present at the inauguration. The carpets in the Mosque and two large silver candlesticks had been received as gifts from the Sultan and were worth 100,000 lei[181].

The Turkish Minister of Cadastral Affairs received from King Carol I, on the occasion of the inauguration of the Mosque, the Order of the Star, his three companions received the rank of Knight, and the Mufti of Constanța acquired the rank of Commander[182].



Fig. 2 – The interior of the mosque[183].

[180] September 4, 1912, Year IX, No. 3054, p. 1.

[181] See the newspaper *Gazeta Ilustrată*, June 15, 1913, Year II, No. 27, pp. 9–10, the newspaper *Conservatorul*, June 4, 1913, Year XIII, No. 119, p. 3, and the newspaper *Dimineața*, June 2, 1913, Year X, No. 3320, p. 1.

[182] See the newspaper *Universul*, June 3, 1913.

[183] *Universul*, 1935, 11B-1659414755, p. 8.

The speech of the Minister of Cadastral Affairs, Essad Effendi, the Sultan's envoy, was the following:

> "Your Majesty, the assignment given to me by His Majesty the Sultan to represent Him at this solemnity is a great honor for me; Your Majesty's high goodwill in presiding over the inauguration of this mosque constitutes, moreover, a spiritual consolation both for my August Sovereign and for the Muslim population everywhere, for whereas until today in all the regions inhabited by Turks mosques are being demolished, here, in Your Majesty's country, new and beautiful houses of prayer are being built. The greatest conqueror of his time can only be he who is able to win the hearts of his subjects. Your Majesty is the conqueror of the hearts of Your people, and for this reason the Turks of Dobrogea feel fortunate that they can live under Your Majesty's aegis. My Lord, I am the spokesman of Islam, and, in its name, I lay at Your Majesty's feet its homage of respect and wish you many long and happy years, together with the entire Dynasty"[184].

His Excellency, Seffa Bey, continued:

> "Your Majesties have today given new proof of the affection you bear toward the Muslim population of Dobrogea. His Majesty the Sultan and my government are pleased with the honor you do them by attending the inauguration of the mosque"[185].

> "His Majesty the King, in reply, asks His Excellency Mahmud Essad Effendi, Minister of Cadastral Affairs, upon going to Constantinople, to convey to His Majesty the Sultan the friendship He bears toward Him, assuring Him at the same time of the sympathy He has for the Muslim nation. He wishes prosperity to the Turkish Empire in the future, wishing that it may become what it once was"[186].

The Mufti of the city of Constanța, Afuz Kemal Effendi, expressed his thanks for the beautiful words spoken by the King[187].

King Carol I wished to specify, at the end, that the personnel involved in maintaining the Mosque was to be financed by the Romanian state.

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[184] „Sire, însărcinarea ce mi-a dat-o M. S. Sultanul de a-L reprezenta la această solemnitate este o mare cinste pentru mine, înalta bunăvoință a M. Voastre de a prezida inaugurarea acestei moschei, constituie, de altfel, o alinare sufletească atât penru Augustul meu Suveran cât și pentru populația musulmană de pretutindeni, căci de unde până astăzi în toate părțile locuite de turci se dărâmă moscheele, aici, în țara M. Voastre, se ridică noi și frumoase localuri de rugăciune. Cel mai mare cuceritor al timpului nu poate fi decât acela ce poate câștiga inimile supușilor săi. M. Voastră sunteți cuceritorii inimilor poporului Vostru și de aceea turcii din Dobrogea se simt fericiți că pot trăi sub egida M. Voastre. Sire, sunt interpretul Islamismului și, în numele lui, depun la picioarele M. Voastre omagiile sale de respect și vă urez să trăiți ani mulți și fericiți, cu întreaga Dinastie.", The speech is taken from the newspaper *Conservatorul*, June 4, 1913, Year XIII, No. 119, p. 3.

[185] „Majestățile Voastre au dat azi o nouă dovadă de afecțiunea ce o poartă elementului musulman din Dobrogea. M. Sa Sultanul și guvernul meu se simt satisfăcuți de onoarea ce le faceți asistând la inaugurarea moscheii", in *Ibidem*.

[186] „M. S. Regele răspunzând roagă pe Exc. Sa Mahmud Eșad Effendi, ministru Cadastrelor ca, ducându-se la Constantinopol, să exprime M. S. Sultanul amiciția ce-i poartă, asigurându-l totodată și de simpatia ce are pentru națiunea musulmană. Urează prosperitate imperiului turcesc în viitor, dorindu-i să devie ceea cea fost odinioară", in *Ibidem*.

[187] *Ibidem*.

Subsequently, on June 2, King Carol I made another visit to the Mosque, in order to inquire once again about what still remained to be done for the completion of the Mosque. In the evening, he organised a banquet in honor of the Turkish delegation. With this occasion, the Turkish delegation presented Mayor M. Solacolu with the Order of Osmanieh in the rank of Officer, and engineer Niculcea and architect Victor Stephănescu with the Order of the Medjidie in the rank of Commander[188].

Seven days later, in the newspaper *Românul* of Arad[189], the message of Sultan Mehmed V addressed to King Carol I was published:

> "I thank Your Majesty for having wished to personally inaugurate the mosque which Your Majesty has erected in Constanța. It is a new proof of the great goodwill which Your Majesty has never ceased to show toward your faithful Ottoman subjects. From the bottom of my heart, I offer sincere wishes of happiness and prosperity for the Romanian Muslims and for the entire Romanian nation, under the august reign of Your Majesty, which I wish to be of very long duration. I also present to Her Majesty the Queen an expression of the wishes for happiness which I extend to her. – Mehmed V"[190].

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[188] See the newspaper *Dimineața*, June 4, 1913, Year X, No. 3322, p. 2.

[189] Year III, No. 123, June 7/20, 1913, p. 7.

[190] „Mulțămesc M. Voastre de a fi ținut să inaugureze în persoană moscheea pe care M. Voastră a ridicat-o la Constanța. E o nouă dovadă de multă bunăvoință pe care Al. Voastră nu a încetat să o arate față de credincioșii săi supuși otomani. Fac din toată inima urări sincere de fericire și prosperitate pentru musulmanii români și pentru întreaga națiune română, sub augusta domnie a M. Voastre, care doresc să fie de foarte lungă durată. Prezint de asemenea M. Sale Reginei expresiunea urărilor de fericire pe care i le fac. – Mehmed V", in the newspaper *Românul*, June 7/20, 1913, Year III, No. 123.