

*How Constantine Plattris, the English Czech of Constantinople,
Came to be Confused with Peter Payne*

Vladimir Agrigoroaei

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My paper draws on two unpublished articles that I wrote back-to-back last December and January, when Elizabeth Solopova announced that she was going to organise this conference on Peter Payne. I had been waiting for a long time for the right moment to settle this question. And I think this is the perfect time to do it.

The first article looks at the confusion between Constantine Plattris and Peter Payne. The second one examines an alleged Romanian Waldensian Hussite called John the Vlach. To correct a century of mistaken interpretations, I must go back to the original sources. And for Constantine Plattris, only five sources provide information:

The first is a group of Byzantine records, which will be discussed in detail by Ana Maria Gînsac. They mention the arrival in Constantinople of one “Constantine Plattris [*Κωνσταντῖνος Πλάτρινς*], also known as the English Czech [*Τζέσης Ἀγγλικός*], humble and unworthy priest of Christ.” Constantine was linked to Moldavia and to Hungarians.

The second source is a note written by Gennadios Scholarios himself in a manuscript now kept in Paris. The note appears at the end of a list of condemnations of the Union between the Greek and Roman Churches. Scholarios writes that there were four Greek condemnations, and that the fourth took place “when master Constantine the Englishman arrived” [*ὅτε ἤλθεν ὁ μαγίστερ Κωνσταντῖνος ὁ Ἰγκλίνος*].

The third source are the records of the Lower Consistory of Prague. They describe the Profession of Faith that Constantine brought from Constantinople. And in a letter dated September, the Consistory calls him a “master and doctor, cherished friend in Jesus Christ, our helper and envoy.” In a second letter of archbishop John, dated November, Constantine is called “master and doctor, our faithful friend in Christ and collaborator,” but the word “envoy” is no longer used. These records show that Constantine was not necessarily the envoy of the Czech. They also suggest that he had a university education, but they do not tell us where he studied.

The fourth source is the Latin poem written by Ubertino Pusculo after the fall of Constantinople. He had seen Constantine and described him in great detail: a frightening figure, a “monster of a man” and a “ravenous wolf.” According to Ubertino, Constantine wore a shaggy fleece, went bareheaded, and kept his long, tangled hair over his shoulders. Ubertino also gives information about the interpreter: a man going by the name of Frangoulis.

The fifth and final source is a letter written in November the same year by Peter Csipser, the Catholic bishop of Baia in Moldavia, to the Pope. In this letter, the bishop mentions a man called “Constantine the Roman.” This man claimed to be a former canon of St. John Lateran.

According to the bishop, Constantine was preaching Hussitism. However, the letter says nothing about any connection with England or Prague.

So, was Constantine an “English Czech,” or was he from Rome?

And what does “English Czech” actually mean?

Since Constantine had spent time among Hungarians and came from Moldavia, where there was a Hussite community, it is possible that “Czech” meant “Hussite.” He was also a master and a doctor. We looked for him in the records of Oxford and Prague, but found nothing. This raises a question: was he really a master and a doctor?

Several things in his story do not fit together. Perhaps the strangest is the connection with Rome. The bishop of Baia says that Constantine had been a canon of St. John Lateran. At that time, the canons serving there belonged to the Order of Saint Augustine. They had come from Lucca and served at the Lateran between 1438 and 1455. Yet this may simply mean that Constantine had once belonged to that order. If so, this could be his only connection with Rome.

Nevertheless, there are other possibilities. Perhaps Constantine invented this Roman background to make himself more convincing to the Catholics of Moldavia. Perhaps the bishop of Baia misunderstood or exaggerated the information. Or perhaps Constantine was not telling the truth on other occasions. The story is so confusing that it is impossible to know exactly who he was.

If we accept all the sources as reliable, one possible reconstruction is this: Constantine was an educated Englishman who had once been an Augustinian canon (perhaps in Rome). Disappointed with the Roman Church, he travelled east and reached Moldavia, where he lived in a Hussite community. This could have been in any of the towns inhabited by Hungarian- or German-speakers.

When he arrived in Constantinople, wearing his sheepskin coat, he probably looked like anyone from Moldavia. And the idea of an alliance between the Hussites and the Greeks may have been his own project, reflecting the realities of Moldavia, where the Hussites sought help from the Romanian Orthodox majority against a Catholic minority.

This explains why, when he reached Prague, the Utraquists did not seem to know him. They tried to continue the discussions in an official way, but before anything could come of it, Constantinople fell to the Ottomans.

Permutations between these pieces of information can lead to other reconstructions as well. Still, two things are clear. First, Moldavia was connected to Hungary, Hungary to Bohemia, and Bohemia was connected to England. An Englishman could have travelled to Moldavia and joined the local Hussite community. Second, Constantine Platrius was not Peter Payne. And this is where the academic hullabaloo begins.

To understand how the story became so distorted in modern scholarship, we need to look at how the confusion grew. In 1857, František Palacký published a translation of the letters of the Lower Consistory of Prague. At that stage, he read *Constantinus Angelicus*, not *Anglicus*. As a result, he thought Constantine was a Greek.

In 1840, Václav Hanka questioned this reading. He pointed out that some copies had *Anglicus* instead of *Angelicus*. And because he could not identify the man, Hanka suggested that he might have been the brother of the famous English Hussite: Peter Payne, who had settled in Prague. We should remember that this was the nineteenth century, when scholars often made conflateions of this type.

Karl von Höfler went even further. In 1866, he claimed that Constantine was Peter Payne himself. Another scholar, Ivan Palmov, showed that this was unlikely. In 1888, Palmov published the Greek documents of Iași. He argued that Constantine was a different person, an independent traveller acting on his own. Nevertheless, the idea continued to grow.

František Michálek Bartoš gradually built the eastern legend of Peter Payne. In 1915, in a footnote, Bartoš noted that the Profession of Faith mentioned many nations and he believed that these peoples reflected the network of contacts maintained by Peter Payne. Bartoš noticed that Payne disappeared from the sources for several years after the Synod of Kutná Hora in 1443. This absence seemed to leave time for a journey to the East.

Not everyone agreed. In 1918, Rudolf Urbánek rejected Bartoš's theory. The same year, Milada Paulová published on Hussites and Constantinople. She also rejected the idea that Peter Payne had travelled there. But Bartoš continued to defend his theory. In a study published in 1921, he argued that Payne had fled to Moldavia and then travelled to Constantinople as an official envoy. According to Bartoš, Peter Payne converted to Orthodoxy in Constantinople, was baptised under the name Constantine, and then returned to Prague carrying the Greek Profession of Faith.

In 1953, Milada Paulová again rejected the Peter Payne theory when she published a paper in French. Bartoš replied in 1956. He refused to abandon Peter Payne. Only in 1963 and 1964, in studies published in English, Bartoš finally gave up. Yet he was still unwilling to accept Constantine as a historical figure. Instead, he proposed a new candidate: Matthew Engliš of Hnátice. Almost nothing was known about Matthew. Still, Bartoš turned him into a Czech scholar who had studied in Prague, read Wycliffite texts, visited Kraków in 1424, and attended the Council of Basel. According to this new theory, Matthew (not Constantine) was the real envoy. He supposedly travelled to Constantinople, converted to Orthodoxy, received the name Constantine at baptism, and then carried the Profession of Faith back to Prague.

František Šmahel dismissed this theory as complete nonsense, but Bartoš remained in the scholarly literature. In 1971, William Cook included it in a dissertation defended at Cornell University. In 1974, Dănuț Manu even imagined that Peter Payne was travelling under the name Matthew of Hnátice. By this point, there were so many identities involved that the scholar forgot who was supposed to be who.

This brings us to the two articles published by Robin Baker in 2006 and 2007. At first, Baker was not interested in Peter Payne. His main focus was the Hungarian Hussite Bible, particularly a manuscript copied in Troțuș, in Moldavia, which contains a calendar with two unusual English saints. Baker argued that Peter Payne lived in Troțuș during the gaps in his biography. I will not discuss this text, since Ágnes Korondi will examine it in detail. However, one point is important for our story. Baker drew attention to the letter written by the bishop of Baia, although he could not explain why Constantine claimed a connection with Rome.

This is where Dan Ioan Mureșan, building directly on Baker (and treating him as the leading authority on the subject), developed a larger interpretation in 2008. According to him, Peter Payne travelled to Constantinople, where he was examined by Gennadios Scholarios and converted to Orthodoxy, becoming a *Ρωμαῖος* (that is, *Romanus*). In this interpretation, the word *Romanus* does not mean someone from Rome. Instead, it means a subject of the Byzantine Empire, the “Second Rome.” Mureșan argued that, after returning to Moldavia, Peter Payne acted as an official representative of the Patriarch. This would explain the name *Constantinus Romanus* found in the bishop’s letter. According to this reconstruction, Peter Payne united the Orthodox and Hussites in Moldavia against Metropolitan Joachim, who supported the Union of Florence.

So, as you can see, I do not expect that my study will bring the controversy to an end. I am certain that Peter Payne will continue to travel to Constantinople, to be baptised himself as Constantine, and to wear the shaggy sheepskin of Moldavian Hussites. Because Peter Payne no longer belongs to history. He has become part of the collective imagination, where he lives in a surreal tale of his own.

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