

Imprecation in Romanian Society – between Social Utility and Political Power Expression (I)

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Abstract

The imprecation is generally understood as a manifestation form of the vicious relationship between individuals. Formulated in the public space, the imprecation communicates to others the need to be respected the own personal will, but also the need for compensation, reparations for disregarding of this will. This study proposes to analyse the acts and documents which were written in the extra-Carpathian Romanian premodernity. Starting from these texts, we focus our approach on the manifestation of imprecation visible form, that are named the “public” or “secular” imprecation. The perspective of study is an interdisciplinary one. But our approach is more extend, as dimension and complexity. From this reason, we propose to separate it: in the first part we analyse the social importance of imprecation and in the second one the role of imprecation to express the political authority. The conclusions of this study reflect two understanding directions: the imprecation remains a “producer of fear” and a “barometer of human and community sensitivity” as well as a social instrument for warning, isolation, and social correction simultaneously. Generally, actioning as an instrument for imposing a judicial decision, the content of imprecation can support also the affirmation of the central political authority, confirming and consolidating its authority.

Keywords: *Political authority; social utility; premodernity; imprecation; judicial will; Romanian society;*

One of the forms of manifestation of the vicious relationship between individuals was represented, and maybe still yet, by the imprecation. Generally, the imprecation manifests itself as a prayer, insult or threat, whereby the divine forces are called against the one who is guilty of committing an injustice or who intends to do it.

If it is formulated in the public space, the imprecation communicates to others the need to be respected the own personal will, but also the need for compensation, reparations for disregarding of this will. Implicitly, it conveys to others about a particular situation which is justified to be respected and preserved by them as the issuer wishes. This perspective is more evidenced in the Romanian premodernity than the modern ages. Our analyse is focused on this period of time.

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Consequently, the presence of the imprecation in the life of individuals and society is approached by researchers from the theological, sociological, legal and judicial, literary and anthropological perspectives. Of course, it is also analysed by historians, although the approach is more interdisciplinary, because it appeals, depending on the direction of their analysis, to either the law sciences, to the field of culture and communication, or to both (Mazilu, 2001; Alexandrache, 2011; Panea, 2000; Radosav, 1997).

Our study maintains this interdisciplinary approach. In order to offer a more specific perspective, it aims to analyse the presence of the imprecation in texts written during the Romanian premodern period in Principates of Moldavia and Wallachia. In this reason, we have analysed the collections of acts and documents which were indicated as references at the final of this study (*Catalogul documentelor*, 1978-1999; *DIR*, 1951; *DRH*, 1953-1957; *DRH*, 1965-2010; *DRH*, 1969-2006).

For a better understanding, we identified the similar formulas and we included them in the generalized forms, expressions, interpretations. This is why for many cited expressions we did not use the specific documents where they were found.

Starting from the analysis of these texts, we will focus our approach on the visible form of imprecation that we named the "public" or "secular" one.

Certainly, in the public space, the religious imprecation is also expressed, in the form of the *anathema* or *excommunication* ("afurisenie"), that we may call the religious form of imprecation. In any case, the „religious imprecations" followed the Byzantine model (Mazilu, 2001, p. 185), being present in legal regulations as the "books of curses", in the most cases. It could only be used by a high-ranking hierarchy, either directly or symbolically, a fact that distances it from the purpose of this study.

Having intention to emphasis especially the public dimension of imprecations, accepted as a analysing instrument of mental collective, our approach is focused on the secular judicial texts. Issued by the administrative apparatus or written from a private initiative, these texts generally contributed to the regulation of family relations, addressing matters such as testamentary succession, church offerings, sale and purchase of property, redemptions, and charitable donations.

This category includes both official acts and documents which are issued by the political central authority and private ones which have connection or not with this authority.

Starting from these acts and documents can be noticed that the imprecations frequently respect the following structure:

a. *Identity data:*

- the sender of the document (in this part are mentioned the name of person who addressed the imprecation and his social position);
- the addressee (it is mentioned the person/group/collective/generation to who the imprecation is directed).

b. *Justification:*

- the commitment;
- the correctness of the wording;
- the entitlement of the one who "puts" the curse, his right to curse.

c. *Content – proper:*

- the decision made by the one who addressed the imprecation;
- the expression of sender own will.

d. *Sanction:*

- the divinity is invoked to act immediately, in this life and as well as in the afterlife, if the sender decision is not respected.

There are many situations that the divine sanction is reinforced by the political authority, represented by the Romanian prince.

Sometimes, the sanction is followed by a threat that is expressed through an oath, which is intended to reinforce the divine sanction. This is the most substantial part of imprecation formula and consequently our attention is directed primarily toward its.

e. *Reinforcement:*

- the mention of the person who wrote the act, as well as the mention of the witnesses; it is mentioned their name and social position.

This component also represents a form of social reinforcement for more credibility, and implicitly to ensure the respect of the sender' will at the collective level.

In order to better understand, we consider necessary to highlight those elements of the premodern Romanian reality that may relate to the specifics of imprecation formulation.

Referring to the realities of Romanian society in the 17th–18th centuries (Platon, 2000; Nicoară, 1998), especially from extra-Carpathian space, we have to mention that it was still dominated by the religious beliefs and sense of insecurity (Cernovodeanu, & Binder, 1993; Nicoară, 2006).

In addition, the influences of the Baroque and of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation are reflected particularly in writings of this historical time (Villari, 2000; Mazilu, 1976; Papacostea, 2001; Alexandrache, 2013).

Therefore, it is expected that the following perspectives on the understanding of reality be present in the Romanian collective mentality, thus justifying the religious aspects (Mazilu, 2006, pp. 74-82) which can be noticed in imprecation formulas:

- the belief in the *performative power of the word* (Evseev, 1997, pp. 51-52), which, possessing strength in itself, could change a situation;
- the conviction that *the divinity, understood as an active presence*, frequently intervenes in the life of the Christian if it is invoked;

- the conviction that *the divine intervention acts as a regulator and non-discriminatory principle*, following the cause-and-effect principle;
- the divine sanction has as result the *separation of the one who can be considered guilty* from others, the “banishment from history” (Mazilu, 2001, p. 106).

As a result, we consider that the imprecation which are contented in the judicial act and documents has a *religious dimension*. This is maybe to enhance the effect of imprecation and ensure its respect by others.

Another aspect of reality is connected to the fact that the access to education, especial read and write knowledge, was still socially and economically restricted. This may explain why the content of imprecations has a strong sense of orality; it seems that imprecations have been written to be read aloud.

Also, it seems that the person who decides to “put an imprecation” either “dictates the decision” or writes it itself, as it is directly addressing to others, making, in this way, the effect more immediate and more convincing. For this reason, we consider that the imprecation has an *oral dimension* too, revealing its form of direct communication toward others, toward the community. This mode of address transcends the temporal limits, preserving its relevance across future generations.

Typical for the premodern society, despite the everyday challenges, there was a preoccupation for the creative expression, bearing the imprint of the creator’s / author’s individuality. For example, the fact that in the formulation of the imprecation can be noticed the inclusion of details seemingly drawn from biblical paragraphs and Orthodox Christian teachings suggests that the imprecation was also a context to be demonstrated the religious knowledge. Using them, the author or signatory (the person who wrote or commissioned the document / act) has opportunity to demonstrate such knowledge and more that, to express how it was internalized and reinterpreted in a personal way.

Certainly, these mentions enforced the official dimension of imprecation, making it more convicted for others. It is possible, of course, that these mentions were formulated either out of a personal need for their expression, from a sincere faith or an innocent type of intellectual snobbery, or perhaps from a genuine desire to provide the spiritual guidance to others.

The fact that their formulation often converges toward similar ideas and “images” even when some stylistic differences exist, may also indicate the writer’s intention to follow an established model, an official pattern, as a necessary component of the act / document. Naturally, the stylistic beauty of “spoken” imprecations, using the words with immediate, expressive, harsh cannot be neglected.

This inclination toward metaphor and vivid expression rendered detail may reflect both the authors’ deep religious sentiment and their specifically literary concerns. Possible, it has been a literary preoccupation expressed by

those who “learned” and “wrote” these acts and documents and, in this way, to be engaged in what we might call a competition of creativity.

Strongly religious conceptions are expressed in terms that evoke a sense of tangibility, thereby intensifying the emotional experience (“to draw out the soul” /”trag sufletul”; “torment” /”chin”; “wretched body” /”trup nenorocit”; “eternal fire” /”focul veșnic”; “dread judgment” /”stașnică judecată”); the terrifying image of Hell made the sanction more convincing etc). A few examples follow:

– *“as Christ Himself commanded and said: Watch and pray, that do not enter into temptation”*

(”după cum însuși Hristos a poruncit și a zis: ”priveghiați și vă rugați, ca să nu intrați în ispită”);

– *“let him be anathema, and with Arius let him dwell together, where the fire is unquenchable and the worms never sleep, forever and ever, amen.”*

(”să fie anathema și cu Arie și cu toți să petreacă la un loc, unde este foc nestis și viermi neadormiți în veci, amin”);

– *“may they (n.n. who respect the act) be honoured and strengthened in their reign in this time and in the age to come their souls be saved (...), but if they do not confirm and renew this charter (...), the Lord God slay their spirit of their mouth and draw out they soul in torment from his wretched body before its time. And be cursed in this time and in the age to come and excommunicated by the Lord God and by the 318 God-bearing Holy Fathers who cursed Arius and his heresy, and be have the same part with Judas and with the Jews who crucified Christ, and as a murderer of saints be subject to judgment and to the eternal fire; and at the dread judgment be opponent Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker, hierarch of Myra in Lycia”*

(”să îi cinstească și să-i întărească în domnia lor în veacul acesta, iar în veacul viitor să mântuiască sufletele lor (...) dacă însă nu vor întări și înnoi această carte (...) aceuia Domnul Dumnezeu să-i omoare duhul gurii sale și înainte de vreme să-i tragă sufletul cu chin din trupul său nenorocit. Și să fie blestemat în veacul acesta și în cel viitor și afurisit de Domnul Dumnezeu și de cei 318 sfinți părinți de Dumnezeu purtători, cari au blestemat pe Arie cu erezia lui și să aibă aceeași parte cu dânsul și cu Iuda și cu Iudeii, care au răstignit pe Hristos și ca ucigaș de sfinți, să fie supus judecății și focului veșnic și la strașnica judecată să-i fie potrivnic însuși sfântul ierarh făcător de minuni Nicolae din Mira Lichiei”);

– *“be crushed by the wrath of Lord God, and be his remembrance perish from the world with a sound, as were with Dathan and Abiram of old world, who dared and rose up against the*

things desired and due by the Living God Lord; and be that he never receives salvation from God Lord, but be cursed and thrice cursed (...) in endless torments, amen."

("pe unul ca acela să-l sfârâme mânia lui Dumnezeu și să-i piară cu sunet pomenirea lui de pe pământ, ca pe Datan și Aviron din vechime, care au încercat și au îndrăznit asupra celor dorite și celor cuvenite lui Dumnezeu cel viu și niciodată să nu primească mântuire de la Dumnezeu și să fie blestemat și de trei ori blestemat (...) în chinurile cele fără de sfârșit, amin.");

– *"whoever would destroy our zeal and annihilate our remembrance, may the wrath of Lord God crush him to dust, and may Lord God destroy all the roots of his remembrance from the earth world ; and before the fearful judgment of Christ may he find himself opposed by the merciless great forerunner and baptizer of Christ, John, together with the countless hosts of holy angels and archangels and the multitude of apostolic and prophetic choirs; and in particular may he find against him the most pure and all-holy Virgin, the Mother of Christ, who has been perfected for the good hope of the Christian faith, and all the saints, and may he have a share with Judas in the endless torments, and with all heretics and destroyers of churches—with Diocletian, Maximilian, Julian, and their kind—and may the curse of Arius, which he himself received from the 318 God-bearing Holy Fathers who were at Nicaea and at the other councils of the holy fathers, descend upon his head, amen."*

("cine ar sfârâma osârdia noastră și ar nimici pomenirea noastră, să-l sfârme mânia lui Dumnezeu mai subțire ca pulberea și să piardă Dumnezeu toată rădăcina pomenirii lui pe pământ, ci și înaintea înfricoșatei judecăți a lui Hristos să-și afle potrivit nemilostiv pe marele înainte mergător și botezător al lui Hristos, Ioan, împreună cu soboarele fără număr ale sfinților îngeri și arhangheli și cu mulțimea cetelor de apostolici și prooroci și în deosebi să aibă pe preacurata și în totul neprihănită Fecioară, Maică a lui Hristos, care s-a săvârșit pentru buna nădejdea creștinească, de asemenea și pe toți sfinții și ca să aibă acela parte cu Iuda în chinurile fără sfârșit și cu tăți ereticii și nimicitorii de biserici, cu Dioclețian și Maximilian și Iulian și cu cei asemenea și blestemul lui Arie pe care singur și l-a primit dela 318 sfinți părinți purtători de Dumnezeu, care au fost la Nicheia și la celelalte soboare ale sfinților părinți să coboare asupra capului lui, amin").

These observations may complete the value of imprecation in the judicial texts with its *aesthetic dimension*, which assures a direct effect on the others, and which completes the character of orality that was mentioned above.

Additionally, it can be noted that, along with the fear of losing the divine support in the Last Judgment and implicitly the fear caused by the torments of Hell, there is also expressed the fear caused by the inheritance of the evil name ("heretic", "cursed", "enemy of the true faith", "destroyer of churches"), the fear of not dying socially, through the dissolution of his family and the deletion of his own presence in history.

The mention of sanction in the analysed judicial texts has represented with similar expressions. This can be explained that the sanction seems to be as a mandatory component in this kind of texts. Obviously, there are documents, shorter, which are centred on the content itself, in which the sanction is present in shorthand forms which greatly reduce the element of the divine sanction, until the disappear of it.

In the texts which we have analysed, the sanction included a set of "bad things" that will be fulfilled in the destiny of the person who does not respect the sender/signatory' will. However, despite the different expressions of the punishments contained in the imprecation formulas, there are unifying elements that allow them to be ordered and included in distinct, simplifying structures, as follows:

- *The loss of divine protection is a punishment for disregarding the sender' will.* This leads to physical death, but implicitly to the death of the soul, because the guilty inheritance of Hell. In this regard, the most frequently expression, appearing in various similar forms, is:

"May the Lord God not protect him, and may his body be scattered here"

("Domnul Dumnezeu să nu-l păzească și să i se risipească aici trupul lui").

- *Divine "unforgiveness" brings with it the most dreadful punishments of the soul.* This must have had a powerful effect on a Christian, since the need to obtain absolution from sin (the soul salvation) was the principal purpose of his life, and such absolution could be granted only by the divinity:

"May he be unforgiven by the Lord God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, and by His most pure Mother, and by the holy (...) and by all the saints who have pleased God."

("să fie neiertat de Domn Dumnezeu, făcătorul și de preacurata lui maică și de sfântul (...) și de toți sfinții care au plăcut lui Dumnezeu").

Often, the mention of the divine unforgiveness is accompanied by the inclusion of the curse:

"And may he be cursed and thrice cursed and anathema, and may he be called to account and give answer before the dreadful judgment of Christ."

("Și să fie blestemat și de trei ori blestemat și anathema și să aibă a da seama și răspuns înaintea cumplitei judecăți a lui Hristos").

Maybe, using this formula, it was expected to be intensified its effect upon the Christian conscience.

- *Divinity itself becomes the source of the curse at the dreadful judgment of Christ.* "Against the guilty one, the saint - to whom the church was dedicated and whose donations have been violated by this guilty person, will stand as an "accuser", or even the Mother of God herself, accompanied by the four Evangelists and the twelve Apostles, and all the saints. Christ Himself becomes the one who curses, and none of the guilty shall be absolved from divine punishment:

"Whoever dares to defy or destroy this mercy and aid (...), whether prince, nobleman, or whoever else he may be, and does not respect this charter of my reign, let him be thrice cursed and excommunicated by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the 318 Holy Fathers who were at Nicaea, and let him have his part with Judas and with Arius and with the other faithless Jews."

("cine se rușinează și rupe și ia aciastă milă și ajutor (...), fie domn, fie boier, sau orice o mai fi și nu caută la acest hrisov al domniei mele, acela să fie de trei ori blestemat și afurisit de stăpânul domnului nostru Iisus Hristos și de 318 sfinți părinți care sunt la Nicheia și să aibă parte de Iuda și cu Arie și cu ceilalți necredincioși Iudei").

- *The association of the guilty with the Betrayers and enemies of Christ, the figures utterly repulsive to any Christian;* it conducts not only to the inheritance of their same destine but also of their negative renown and eternal infamy:

"May his soul be with Judas Iscariot and with the thrice-cursed Arius, and with the other faithless Jews who cried out against the blood of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ, saying, 'Take Him and crucify Him'; may His blood be upon them and upon their children, this is and shall be forever, amen."

("sufletul lui să fie cu Iuda Iscarioteanu și cu de trei ori blestematul Arie, și cu ceilalți necredincioși Iudei, care au strigat asupra sângelui Domnului Dumnezeuului și mântuitorului nostru Iisus Hristos, "ia-l și răstignește-l", sângele lui asupra lor și asupra copiilor lor, aceasta este și <va fi>în veci, amin").

- *Exclusion from the Church, the expulsion from the community of Christians through excommunication and anathematization:*

“Let him be thrice cursed and anathematized by the 318 Holy Fathers who gathered in the city of Nicaea.” (“să fie de trei ori blestemat și anathema de 318 părinți care s-au adunat în cetatea Nicheia”).

As can be noticed, in this part of study is emphasizes the social dimension of the imprecation, relieving in this way the social signification of it and implicitly its social utility.

In the next part, we analysed the aspects of imprecation from the authority perspective, especially of political central authority.

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