

ASPECTS OF THE IMAGINARY OF THE ROMANIAN PRINCIPALITIES IN THE STORIES OF THE BRITISH TRAVELERS OF THE 18TH CENTURY

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Abstract: *The present study aims to be a resynthesis of some of the most important pieces of memoir and travel literature of the 18th century, used as historical source that is essential for the understanding an epoch. Located in a geographical and historical meeting area of the political and economic interests of the European and extra-European empires, Walachia, Moldavia and Transylvania aroused the complex interests of the Great Powers, including, of course, the British Empire. The validity of this fact is supported by the remaining diplomatic reports that can be found in the diplomatic archives, by memoirs (today of an undeniable historical value), and by other memorialistic writings of numerous travelers, including those coming from the Anglo-Saxon space. The information of the utmost importance provided by these writings (the diplomatic reports also being included here) reconstruct not only historical and ethnographic realities, but also anthropological and economic history ones.*

Keywords: Romanian Principalities, foreign travelers, ethnography, memoirs

1. Introduction

The travel sources, more precisely the writings that can be considered travel literature, contain a variety of information that helps capturing the characteristics, the customs and the particularities that individualized the Vlachs. The theme of the presentation, that of the image of the Principalities in the historical literature of the eighteenth century is a border one in the analytical investigation and in that of the imaginary, as it not only combines the primary interest of historians, but it also determines investigations and the academic interest of sociologists, ethnographers, anthropologists or diplomats. [1]

By the early eighteenth century, almost all the journeys undertaken by personalities of that time in the Romanian Principalities, in Transylvania too, had

pragmatic, political, military or religious motivations. However, the eighteenth century, the beginning of the Enlightenment, brings with it the travel for information, which leads to an increase in the number of descriptions regarding the Romanian territory. There is a growing number of scientific writings, as well as travel memoirs that bring information to the Westerners about "exotic" realms from the "Far East" of Europe.

2. Defining a national image

In defining the national images, a particularly important role was played by the human presences with their physical and moral characteristics, the cultural references, the lifestyle, the food preferences, the clothing. Furthermore, the defining of the national images is also

determined by the great geographical distance between the two countries, because the longer the distance, the more positive the picture, because it is devoid of conflicts generated by neighborhood.

Naturally, reports are not similar in terms of the information regarding the world of the Romanian Principalities and they are not similar in terms of the attitude of the authors, of their ability to receive and analyze the reality, which is surprising for most of them. Nevertheless, judged in a discerning way, in their connection and, at the same time, compared with other contemporary sources, these reports/accounts of the foreign travelers in the eighteenth century give us a picture full of lights and shadows of the manner in which the "others" recorded the world of the territory inhabited by the Vlachs. [2]

3. The correspondence and travel stories of John Petty

One of the foreign travelers to the Principality of Transylvania, in the eighteenth century, was the Englishman John Petty, from a noble family (his rank was that of a knight) and one of his cousins, William Petty, was one of the chief British liberal politicians.

The correspondence and travel stories of John Petty are important today from at least two perspectives: they point out, on the one hand, the extraordinarily high insecurity of the land and of the roads linking Wallachia and Transylvania because of the numerous and extremely bold actions of thieves and, on the other hand, they capture the splendor of the natural environment. His journey in itself brings to the attention of the exegetes of those times a "fashion" to investigate certain parts of Europe that appeared to the people living in England as edge areas of Empires and that were very little known and even completely unknown to many of them.

4. The writings of Edmund Chishull

The chaplain and aide to Lord Paget,

who was part of the suite of the former ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, Edmund Chishull, also leaves in the documents of the time a few important notations about the situation of the Protestants in Transylvania (about the situation of the Protestant churches too) in the context of the Jesuit offensive to regain the positions of Catholicism in the historical provinces ruled by the Habsburg Empire.

The observations of chaplain Chishull regarding the presence of the Romanian language in the Orthodox rite in Wallachia are also very important, but he also notices the elements that are present in the Orthodox processions like the "superstitions" of the inhabitants of Wallachia, explainable, in his view, due to a certain archaic nature or even to a certain "backwardness" of the inhabitants of this country. His comments highlight aspects related to the organization of the Orthodox monastic life, emphasizing especially the order that characterized the monasteries (he insists here on the image of the Cotroceni monastery and on that of the monks' cells, as well as on that of the wonderful landscape around it). The author also made some considerations on the way in which Romanians presented themselves as descendants of the Romans, the argument used by the English traveler, taken from the locals, being that of the Latin language as a fundamental layer. The chaplain analyzed the mural paintings of the Orthodox churches and the external depictions of Hell or of the Devil appeared to him as "superstitious representations" that were not allowed to other Greek rite churches, in other historical places. The architectural church heritage appears equally contrasting, the monasteries and the places of worship in villages being majestically built and painted.

The descriptive testimonies are equally relevant, of course at first impression, in regard to the natural resources that characterized Wallachia, but he notices the demographic and urbanistic

deficit of many rural areas surrounding Bucharest and even the appearance of Oriental fair that the capital itself had: "the whole province is luxuriantly rich, abounding with woods and pastures, but thinly inhabited, and that in caves and huts rather than houses. Its chief income proceeds from wax, honey, hides, horses, the mines of salt, and custom on some places of the Danube" [3].

The traveler also makes public and political observations representing a synthetic but true image of the institution of the prince, the boyars' elite, and the socio-economic status of the rural population, evidently all these presented in light of the power relations between the entities mentioned before: "the lands of the province are intirely in the hands of the Prince and barons, the rest, who are rustics, being all either slaves or servants, whose persons or service are at the disposal of several nobles, on whom they depend." [4] The mentioned dependence is part of a complex historical reality, that of the total annihilation of peasant property, the reality referred to here is that of the villages of enslaved labourers without economic means and whose social status was conditioned by the degree of servitude to the great secular or ecclesiastical owner.

The observations related to the urban contrasts found in Bucharest (which looked very much like a fair) are present, the insistence being on the magnificence of the prince's palaces or those of the high officials, in comparison with the squalid dwellings, which the foreign traveler had noticed especially in the marginal areas of Bucharest and even in the areas at the entrance of the town: "Bucurest is a large stragling town of a very peculiar make, the outward parts very mean, consisting of houses the greater part of which is underground like our cellars and covered over at the top with straw or bark of trees. The better of houses are about the palace of the prince which are covered with handsome wooden tiles, the walls built of

substantial stone and the yards and gardens always very wide enclosed with intire trunks of oaks, set as near as possible to each other. The streets appear like a continued bridge, being floored from side to side with many planks [5], ten yards long, and as many inches thick; which work, however expensive it may seem, is continued thro all the buildings of the place for the extent of some miles together. The sight of the whole is agreeable at a distance by reason of the several houses of the nobility, the palace of the Prince and the number of churches and convents "[6]

The journey of the Anglican clergyman continued to the border area between Wallachia and Transylvania, reaching the village of Rucăr, which he mentioned as a transition area between the two historical provinces, the habitat of this village on the Dâmbovița Valley being one that defined the settlements of the Romanians: "This village is considerably large, consisting of houses all of the Wallachian fashion, that is built round with trees laid even upon one another, covered with a high and steep roof, consisting of wooden tiles, and within having no funnel or chimney to convey the smoke, but open only in several parts of the roof to supply that defect" [7].

The valences of this information summarize not only the related historical information, but they bring to the attention of ethnologists key data regarding the eighteenth-century Romanian architecture as well as testimonies on how archaic communities used natural resources to make their houses. Considerations on the riches of the soil are filled with positive comments regarding the Wallachian wines.

The journey to Transylvania offers Edmund Chishull and the high ranking guest, ambassador Paget, the opportunity to come into contact with the imperial authorities that ruled Brasov, Bran and Fagaras. It was the German population dominant in these urban settlements that drew the attention of chaplain Edmund Crishull who also showed

much interest in the Lutheranism, the religious denomination that was dominant in the towns inhabited by Saxons, in the South of Transylvania. His testimonies make several diplomatic references to the fate of the Transylvanian Protestants during a time when the Catholic Church made serious efforts to regain the ground lost due to the Reformation, in Transylvania having the support of Hapsburg authorities.

Another important diplomat who left important accounts about Wallachia and Transylvania was Lord Pagett, mediator of the Peace of Karlowitz (1699) and ambassador of Great Britain to the Ottoman Empire between 1693 and 1701. He was received with special protocol by Prince Constantin Brancoveanu, who, together with High Steward Cantacuzino, organized for Paget's return to England a royal feast where the Anglo-Saxon guest was saluted with guns.

5. Elizabeth Craven's A Journey through the Crimea to Constantinople...

An important personality of the English aristocracy who traveled to the principalities was Lady Elizabeth Craven [8], an author of musical dramas and comedies, who enjoyed travelling and writing memoirs. One of her most important writings, *A Journey through the Crimea to Constantinople in a series of letters*, relates even the European tour she made during her journey through the Balkans, Wallachia [9], which was under Phanariot rule, and through Transylvania, which was being governed at the time by Samuel von Brukenthal, whose artistic values and art collections she admired during her passing through Sibiu. [10]

Lady Craven also had the opportunity to meet Joseph II who was on an imperial visit in the capital of the province.

As far as the political relations of Wallachia are concerned, Elisabeth Craven presents some political realities that summarize its subordination relations with the Porte during the Phanariot reigns:

"Wallachia pays the Porte a tribute of four hundred purses yearly, exclusive of grain, wool and many thousand sheep. Shepherds pay an annual tribute beside, of eighty thousand skins of the cattle, with butter, cheese, and tallow.

If the grain fails from Egipt, this country is obliged to supply the deficiency at Constantinople – Still I affirm that upon earth, Sir, all things superior in their nature, either animate or inanimate, are taxed cruelly – This beautiful country, the soil and the climate of which makes every produce luxuriant is by the hand of fate under a power which extorts unmercifully from the natives, through the necessities of the Porte, if not by the rapine of the Princes and presses plenty from her source, driving often the wretched Wallaques to fly into the mountains, where, at least for a time they avoid the cruelties they find from a tyrannical government (...)." [11]

From the point of view of the historical-economic realities, the comments of the traveller refer to the profile of Wallachia as agrarian country that was influenced by the interests of the Ottoman Empire. The economic importance of resources that these countries were providing the Ottoman with in the eighteenth century is evident.

6. Consul William Wilkinson's accounts

The end of the eighteenth century marked an accentuated process of transition of the Romanian Principalities from the Phanariot social and cultural background to a timid modernization and Europeanization. This fact can be clearly distinguished from the testimonies of the personalities of British origin, temporarily present on the Romanian territory. [12] A more unusual aspect that a British traveler accounted is connected to the worldly pulse of the Romanian society, more precisely the manner in which the local elites related to this issue. [13] The English Consul William Wilkinson who worked for several years in the Principalities captures the emerging

influence of the balls in the boyars' guest halls in Bucharest and Iasi, and in particular the presence of Western dances, even that of the English music.[14] The travel stories underline even the interest that the boyars from Iasi and Bucharest manifested for bringing teachers from the more advanced Europe to teach them the dances of high society. In order to impress their foreign guests; even the last Phanariot rulers organized balls with games and dances.

7. Conclusions

The accounts stories/ travel memories started to gain more and more ground in that period of time. They belong to authors who tried to satisfy – to the extent of their training and of their intellectual aptitudes — the demands of a

growing number of people avid for instructive, yet easy readings, about regions that were considered unusual at that time, even exotic.

Far from being exhaustive, our study utilizes a first and essential category of historical sources – the ones published in the series entitled *Călători străini despre Țările Române*, supervised in a flawless academic manner by the team coordinated by Maria Holban and Paul Cernovodeanu. Obviously, the historiographical excursus can continue in the direction of the imaginary construct for the nineteenth century in the complexity of the writings of the British travelers, temporarily passing through the historical area of the Principalities, but essential as witnesses of an era..

References

- [1] See *Pe urmele trecutului. Profesorului Nicolae Edroiu la 70 de ani* (coord. Susana Andea, Ioan –Aurel Pop) Academia Română – Centrul de Studii Transilvane, Cluj-Napoca, 2009, passim; also see Ștefan Ștefănescu, *Țările Române în secolul al XVIII-lea. Crize politice și fenomene demografice* în volumul *Pe urmele trecutului. Profesorului Nicolae Edroiu la 70 de ani* (coord. Susana Andea, Ioan –Aurel Pop) Academia Română – Centrul de Studii Transilvane, Cluj-Napoca, 2009, pp. 385-389. For the model of the research methodology also see Klaus Heitman, *Imaginea românilor în spațiul lingvistic german*, Polirom, Iași, 2014, passim.
- [2] *Călători străini despre Țările Române* (ed. Maria Holban, M. M. Alexandrescu-Dersca Bulgaru, Paul Cernovodeanu), X/1, Editura Academiei Române, București, 2000, p. 666-672; also see N. Iorga, *A History of Anglo-Roumanian Relations*, București, 1931, passim. Iorga's work proposes an important informational series regarding the English travellers through the Romanian principalities in the 18th century and the manner in which they “discover” the anthropological and historical space of these states.
- [3]. Chishull, Edmund, *Travels in Turkey and back to England*, Printed by W. Bowyer, London, MDCCXLVII p. 82, https://books.google.ro/books?id=_7R7RJatIdEC&printsec=frontcover&hl=ro&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=snippet&q=wax&f=false. 31.03.2016
- [4] *Idem*, p. 82
- [5] Massive boards made of hard wood and used as construction material. The specifications of the author make reference, probably, to an archaic system of ensuring the street pavement in the capital of Wallachia
- [6] Chishull, Edmund, *Travels in Turkey and back to England*, Printed by W. Bowyer, London, MDCCXLVII p. 82, https://books.google.ro/books?id=_7R7RJatIdEC&printsec=frontcover&hl=ro&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=snippet&q=wax&f=false 31.03.2016 The observations of Chishull are very relevant to the current ethnographic research, as he makes concrete technical indications regarding the urban habitat of the capital of Wallachia, his text being equally suggestive with regard to the specificity of the habitat of the rural areas he passed through during his voyage]

- [7]. Chishull, Edmund, *Travels in Turkey and back to England*, Printed by W. Bowyer, London, MDCCXLVII p. 84, https://books.google.ro/books?id=_7R7RJatIdEC&printsec=frontcover&hl=ro&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=snippet&q=wax&f=false 31.03.2016
- [8] Lady Elisabeth Berkeley was born in 1750, being the third child of the Earl of Berkeley. At the age of 17, she married William Craven, who later became lord Craven. The two spouses separated in 1780 after 13 years of marriage despite the fact they had six children. After the separation, the authoress continued to have her husband's name even after she settled at the Court of Ansbach (in 1786) of the a nephew of Frederic II of Prussia, Christian Friedrich Karl-Alexander, Margrave of Brandenburg-Ansbach, duke of Prussia and Count of Sayn, stating that she would be considered a sister of his (1786), see *Călători străini despre Țările Române, volumul X, partea I*, editor in charge Maria Holban, colab. M.M. Alexandrescu, Dersca Bulgaru, Paul Cernovodeanu (editor in charge), Editura Academiei Române, București, 2000, p. 714.
- [9] „The supper was served in a more European manner than I should have imagined; a table upon legs, and chairs to sit on were things I did not expect. The Prince sat at the end of the table, his wife on one side, and I on the other. Mr V - was likewise invited, and sat at my left – Several women sat down to supper with us. The Princess had nine females behind her chair to wait upon her - several silver things, evidently the produce of England, were set upon the table, such as salt-sellers, cruets, etc. etc. but there were four candlesticks that seemed to be made of alabaster, set with flowers composed of small rubies and emeralds, that were very beautiful”. The quotation we have selected depicts in a very relevant manner a sequence of cultural, social sequence of imaginary from the daily life of the boyar elites in the Principalities at the end of the 18th century. See *A Journey Through the Crimea to Constantinople: In a Series of Letters from the Right Honorable Elizabeth Lady Craven Craven to His Serene Highness the Margrave of Bandenbourg, Anspach and Bareith*, London, Printed for G.G.J. and J. Robinson, Pater Noster Row, MDCCLXXXIX, p. 311 https://books.google.ro/books?oe=UTF-8&redir_esc=y&q=dinner+was+served&id=YOEGAAAAQAAJ&hl=ro&output=text#v=onepage&q=Mr%20V&f=false 31.03.2016
- [10] These were to be used in the description of her journey, which was meant to confer her a triumphant image the moment she would settle at the Court of Anspach as elective sister of the Margrave Christian Friedrich whom she would marry after the death of her husband and that of his wife, in 1791.
- [11] *A Journey Through the Crimea to Constantinople: In a Series of Letters from the Right Honorable Elizabeth Lady Craven Craven to His Serene Highness the Margrave of Bandenbourg, Anspach and Bareith*, London, Printed for G.G.J. and J. Robinson, Pater Noster Row, MDCCLXXXIX, p. 311 https://books.google.ro/books?oe=UTF-8&redir_esc=y&q=dinner+was+served&id=YOEGAAAAQAAJ&hl=ro&output=text#v=onepage&q=Mr%20V&f=false 31.03.2016
- [12] Ștefan Lemny, *Sensibilitate și istorie în secolul XVIII românesc*, București, 1990, p. 56
- [13] Adrian-Silvan Ionescu, *Balurile din secolul al XIX-lea*, București, Fundația Culturală D'ale Bucureștilor, 1997, p. 56
- [14] William Wilkinson, *Relațiile despre Principatele Țării Românești și Moldovei*, în *Călători străini*, coord. Maria Holban, I, (1801-1821), pp. 640-641.