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Habitat and population in Oltenia during the 18th – 19th centuries

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Cluj-Napoca

2013

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Keywords: Habitat, demography, geography

Oltenia, transport, administration

Oltenia is one of the oldest and most well-known Romanian historical provinces. This space corresponds to “the first continental, geological land of the Carpathian regions”, the meeting area of the Danube with the mountain which in time developed a series of particularities that individualise it.

Oltenia is a complex regional entity, a civilisation in which the principle of diversity in unity applies. The same opinion is shared by the academician Răzvan Teodorescu who remarked: “Is there a single Oltenia? It is hard to say. I[,] who have written very much about the diverse areas of culture of the Romanian space, have the amendable tendency to speak about a multiple Oltenia... A princely Oltenia – of the Vâlcea; an originally monastic Oltenia – of the Mehedinți; a seigniorial Oltenia – of the Dolj; a profoundly peasant Oltenia – of the Gorj... But you will find in all the other parts of Oltenia mixtures that give the multiple sense of this Romanian space”.

The historical province has created over time its own historical and geographical consciousness, able to be identified as an area with a special traditional distinctiveness. Within the context of the reopening of the discussions concerning the territory’s regionalisation, our work supports the South-West region, a region that mostly overlaps with historical Oltenia.

The present doctoral thesis aimed to research the habitat and population of Oltenia during approximately two centuries, in an inter- and trans-disciplinary manner and as a distinct historical-geographical unit. Therefore it is not just a reconstruction of the forms of habitat, but also a reinterpretation of the already known data from a wider perspective.

The work “Habitat and population in Oltenia during the 18th – 19th centuries” is structured into seven chapters. The first chapter, *Sources and historiography*, presents the sources that were preserved from the pre-modern period and the manner in which they were historiographically capitalised on. The problem of reconstructing the habitat and population in Oltenia is directly related both to the value and the categories of the sources that we have at our disposal and to the numerous contributions provided to us by the general and specialised historiography. Our investigation reflects both the stage of the information that the historical sources supply and the solutions that the issue’s historiography has found over the years.

The administrations that have succeeded each other in Oltenia in the period 1718-1831, namely Austrian, Turkish and Russian, have left important cartographies, conscriptions, testimonies, as well as diplomatic, economic and military documents which offer a large amount of data regarding the economic and military potential of the region.

For a better utilisation of the sources, we have classified them into cartographic sources, conscriptions and inventories; toponymical and onomastic sources; juridical sources; and narrative sources. Amongst these the most complex and rich in information are the cartographic sources (High Steward Constantin Cantacuzino's map – 1700, Fr. Schwantz's *Tabula Valachiae Cisalutanae* – 1722, military engineer Berndt's map – 1723, Luigi Fernando Marsili's map – 1726, the Austrian map of Specht – 1790/1791, the Russian map of 1835, etc.). These comprise both geographical representations and statistical and economic data. These sources lay at the foundation of significant works written from various perspectives: historical, economic, sociological, ethnographical, etc.

The other six chapters centre around the characteristic and defining elements of Oltenia's space: Geography, Institutional structures, Demography, The town, The Village, Communication routes.

The chapter *Oltenia's geography*, having as a starting point the geographical position and the description of the natural environment, presents the region's economic preconditions, as determining elements of the human habitat. Oltenia is a province with natural boundaries – the river Olt in the east, the Meridional Carpathians in the north and west (Lotru Mountains, Vâlsanului Mountains, Parâng Mountains, Godeanu Mountains, Mehedinți Mountains) and the Danube in the south – in which almost all forms of relief are encountered; hence the most diverse ways of manifestation, the specific idiom, the typical temperament and anthropic characteristics. The natural environment causes the local vitality, a vitality that results both from the infinite resources and especially from the inhabitants' spirit.

Oltenia's habitat and population cannot be known and understood without analysing the province's institutional framework. This framework is presented in the chapter *Institutional structures*. Oltenia had its own institutions ever since the 11th – 13th centuries, when the first principalities (*cnezate*), voivodeships (*voievodate*) and countries (*țări*) are documentary attested. These determined the emergence of particular ruling forms, which confer a note of specificity on the region.

The institution of the banate (*bănie*) and later on that of the caimacan (*căimăcănie*) are reminiscences of the autonomy and of the peculiar political status that Oltenia enjoyed during its medieval and modern history. The banate was first and foremost a complex high dignity created to administer the province from the right side of the river Olt. The ban was the second high official in the state after the ruler, having his own court, from where he exercised his vast administrative, judicial and military powers. The reputation earned by three great rulers who have risen from amongst these bans, namely Neagoe Basarab, Matei Basarab and Constantin Brâncoveanu, has contributed to the importance of this high dignity. The historical tradition and the prestige that this institution had led to the maintenance of the banate, even if with more limited attributions, by the Austrian, Phanariote and Russian administrations.

The decisions of the central institution (the banate) were implemented in the territory by a large range of institutions which corresponded to the territorial-administrative divisions. Thus, the counties, the districts (*plaiuri*), the small rural districts called *plăși*, the villages and the towns were represented by high officials whose administrative prerogatives were confounded and overlapped with their juridical ones until the beginning of the 19th century when the separation of powers in the state took place. The tendencies towards delimiting the powers in the state appeared ever since the beginning of the 18th century, when a certain demarcation between the administrative branch and justice occurs.

The reforms adopted between 1718 and 1831 led to the creation of a hierarchy of instances at the level of the province. The juridical functions were assumed by civil servants and high officials, who fulfilled, at the same time, administrative, judicial and fiscal attributions. At the state's level, the judge for petty matters was the *pârcălab* (chief magistrate of a district), the affairs with a higher gravity were solved by the *ispravnic* (subprefect) and the most serious and most important cases were allotted to the *vornic* (chief magistrate of the county). We consequently have three instances, the *pârcălab*, the *ispravnic* and the *vornic*, the latter representing the head of the county judicial hierarchy.

The reforms of Constantin Mavrocordat, Alexandru Ipsilanti and Ion Vodă Caragea and the Organic Regulations have relieved the boyars of any juridical attributions, have created specialised institutions and have generated judicial procedures that have modernised the society and its evolution.

In the 18th century, important army corps, which preceded the military institutions, distinguish themselves as well. Amongst these, the sentry lancers (*fustași de strajă*), those of the harem and those of Craiova's caimacan, the servants of the captains, of the colonels (*polcovnici*) and of the suprefects (*ispravnici*), the thief catchers (*poterași*), the infantry mercenaries called *haiduci*, the *mazili* (boyars who had lost their public functions and served as cavalymen) and the *seimeni bănești* (pedestrian mercenaries armed with primitive guns called *sânețe* who guarded the ruler's court) were the most remarkable. Ever since the middle of the 18th century, the pandours (*panduri*) make themselves conspicuous, at first for maintaining order in Oltenia's counties and later on throughout Wallachia.

The institutional image would not be complete without knowing the organisations with an institutional character from the sanitary domain. The distinct impact of health on the population has determined us to research it. In Oltenia, the natural environment and the climate have offered some of the most favourable conditions for keeping diseases at bay. In this region only the plain areas were predisposed to paludism due to the lakes and ponds from here.

Temporarily the region was also confronted with plague epidemics, mostly caused by wars, but especially by the east-west, north-south transit that took place through this area. In order to stop diseases from spreading, sanitary institutions were created, which had in view chiefly preventive measures (quarantines, lazarettos), but also treatments.

During this pioneering period, the sanitary institutions from Oltenia, even if they did not have spectacular results, have decisively contributed to changing people's mentality about the image of the human body. People became aware of health's importance and made important steps especially in what regards the initiatives for the arrangement and the systematisation of the houses and of the rural and urban settlements in order to live in a clean, beautiful and healthy environment.

The habitat and population from Oltenia suffered tremendously from a demographic viewpoint due to the insecurity determined by its positioning at the confluence of the Great Powers' interests: the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire and the Habsburgs' Empire, powers that found themselves in a full expansion in the centre and south-east of Europe. In their expansionist politics, one way or another, all three powers manifested their interest for the Romanian area, pursuing the annexation, occupation and exploitation of the territory.

As a result, for more than 150 years, Oltenia became not only a territory of confrontations, but also a battlefield on which the empires' armies met. For many years, Austria and Russia fought against the Ottoman Empire (1716-1718, 1735-1739, 1768-1774, 1782-1792, 1806-1812, 1828-1829, 1853-1856), most of these wars directly involving Oltenia's territory. These battles were always accompanied by a foreign military occupation, which often was maintained long after the war had ended.

The chapter *Demography*, based on a critique of the sources and statistical records, estimates Oltenia's population, over a century and a half. The analysis emphasised the administrations' interest towards a good knowledge of the province's human potential, especially due to administrative-fiscal reasons.

Nevertheless, the documents with a statistical character revealed a stable demographic state and no major phenomena disturbed this demographic stability. Although it was affected by numerous Russian-Austrian-Turkish wars and occupations, the population resorted to diverse subterfuges (flight, refuge, hiding, emigration, etc.) in order to avoid paying the various human and material levies.

Situating itself within normal parameters, Oltenia's population knew, especially beginning with the first decades of the 19th century, a certain demographic growth, due to the climate of political, economic and social stability from this period. This increase was not a very large one, but merely a consequence of the fact that the population no longer felt the need to hide from the different invaders and occupiers. At the same time, this growth was also a result of the improved efficiency of the methods and means of correctly recording the population by the authorities.

The geographical and institutional framework determined a particular development of the villages and towns from Oltenia. In the fifth chapter, we have presented *The town* by emphasising its defining elements. Beyond the juridical and economic classifications of the towns, we have insisted upon two representative towns: Craiova, the capital of Oltenia, the banate's chief town, an important economic centre, and Râmnicul Vâlcea, a cultural and commercial centre. In the 18th century, these towns became attractive for numerous nationalities, owing to their relations with everything happening in the high circles of both the Occident and the Orient. As areas of cultural and especially commercial connections, these

towns became cosmopolitan, due to the ethnically and religiously variegated population that lived there.

However, most of the population inhabited the villages. This juridical organisation, namely *The village from Oltenia*, was the expression of man's sustained effort to derive certain benefits from the physical-geographical components of space, of nature. By its numerous anthropic creations, the village is one of man's genuine masterpieces, with a distinct structure, a specific architecture, an occupational way of life that constantly connects it with the land and its resources. These elements were treated by emphasising the main transformations that the village underwent during two centuries, with a focus on territorial location, systematisation policies, architecture, population structure (socio-juridical categories, socio-professional categories).

The last chapter was dedicated to *Population and communication routes*. In the studied period, although there existed a wide variety of communication routes, they were still rudimentary, but picturesque. The communication routes from Oltenia must be placed in connection with the region's economic development. Transhumance and the intense commercial relations created the necessary preconditions for investing in this infrastructural domain.

The roads' state interested travellers, merchants and even princes. Deputations, the transport of merchandise or the armies' movements depended upon the roads, regardless of whether they were of stone or earthen, dry or covered with mud.

Oltenia was traversed by large roads, used by both merchants and armies. As intermediaries for any sort of transportation, the roads have had a considerable role in the process of integrating the Romanian area into the international economic circuit. For example, Oltenia's territory was traversed by a variant of the commercial road that linked Buda to Constantinople ever since the Middle Ages.

During the studied epoch, quite a number of communication routes existed in Oltenia, both by land and water. The roads by land can be classified into various groups: natural roads and roads that were improved in some way, large roads (the Olt's road – *drumul Oltului*, Vâlcan's road – *drumul Vâlcanului*, Banat's road – *drumul Banatului*, Trajan's road – *Drumul Troianului*), commercial roads, village roads, specialised roads (the salt's roads, the sheep's roads, the potters' roads, the barrels' road, etc.).

Circulation by water, although it could have been one of the cheapest and most efficient communication methods, was not very intense in Oltenia during the 18th – 19th centuries. The development of the means of transportation by water was below the level of the possibilities offered by the geographical environment's conditions.

However, there existed a few attempts to organise transportation on the Danube and the Olt. For Oltenia, information regarding circulation on the Danube is scarce. This situation was due to the Ottoman supremacy on the Danube, but also to the loss of some ports.

On the other hand, ever since the Middle Ages the Olt served as a navigable route. Starting at Turnu Roşu, the Olt was used for transporting different goods to the Danube: salt, timber, etc., thus facilitating the transport of merchandise both from Transylvania and especially from Wallachia. Later on, due to the construction of some important hydroelectric power stations, the Olt's navigability was reduced.

Until the official organisation of the roads, which took place after the Organic Regulations were introduced, the information about their condition was provided by the various travellers who have passed through these parts. Their impressions can be included in the category of literary imagology, as they distort the historical truth, but they also construct it at the same time. Actually, it is known that in the field of imagology, the image is what matters and an image remains an image, even if it is contrary to the historical truth. It engenders sympathies and antipathies, attitudes of acceptance or reactions of rejection.

The purpose of this chapter was to chronologically follow the manner in which the roads and postal stations appeared, were organised and developed, as well as the impact that they had both on the natural environment and particularly on the travellers who benefitted from these transportation routes.

Regardless of their nature, transport routes determined the peopling of certain geographical regions, led to the appearance of some settlements and of specific production centres, saved a few geographical areas from anonymity, brought various resources into the economic circuit. The communication routes caused important modifications of the natural habitat through the alterations they made, thus decisively contributing to the development of the region, but also of the entire country.