

THE “BABEȘ – BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY  
THE FACULTY OF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY  
THE DEPARTMENT OF MODERN HISTORY

**ȚARA OAȘULUI FROM 1861-1918. AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL  
MONOGRAPHY**

— Summary of the PhD dissertation —

**Coordinator:**

Prof. PhD. Toader Nicoară

**PhD student:**

Zsolt Vasile Grigoruț

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**KEYWORDS:** community, customs, behavior, ethnicity, confession, anthropology, Țara Oașului, population, image, typology, reconstitution

## SUMMARY

„What a shame that this region is almost unknown even by our tourists, as we do not even dare to speak about the larger audience”<sup>1</sup> was noticing Ion Mușlea in 1932 when speaking about the smallest of all our “countries” and “the least known of all” as professor Vasile Netea<sup>2</sup> added, that is ȚARA OAȘULUI – the OAȘ COUNTRY.

Țara Oașului – the Oaș Country, occupying the eastern part of the Sătmar county, is a picturesque region thanks to its natural landscapes, but especially due to everything that the people of this area represent and transmit through their popular costumes, language, life and daily behavior, or through their customs and traditions that have been kept alive up to our days. For a long period of time, the small OAȘ country was gaining the attention of the leaders of the time only when speaking in terms of a transfer of ownership, land, or a donation, an administrative document that involved the territories and population of the 16 communities from this region. Only starting with the first decades of the 19th century there came the first general works that approached also aspects specific to this region, like that of the „old historian of the regions of Sătmar” as Ion Mușlea used to call Szirmay Antal<sup>3</sup>, who, within a larger presentation of the history of Sătmar county, made a series of references specific to the Oaș Country.

As concerning this region, this „country”, it has stimulated the interest of numerous scholars and scientists during the last two centuries, people who have tried one way or another to find out and to present, with the help of arguments relying on documentary sources or just on interpretations of some „oral information that have crossed through centuries”, information about its origin, starting with the name and reproducing experiences from the region, a small region but a very attractive one, animated by a special type of social and community life, presenting also aspects which are common to the entire county.

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<sup>1</sup> Ion Mușlea, *Cercetări folklorice în Țara Oașului*, in *Anuarul Arhivei de Folclor*, vol. I, ed. Cartea Românească, Cluj, 1932, pg. 119

<sup>2</sup> Vasile Netea, *Țara Oașului*, in *Cunoștințe folositoare din lumea largă*, seria C, nr. 109, ed. Cartea Românească, Cluj, 1940, pg. 101

<sup>3</sup> Antal Szirmay, *Szathmár vármegye fekvése, története és polgári esmérete*, Budán, 1809

Our approach is an attempt to present „ȚARA OAȘULUI” in a way that should allow it to render both the general aspects that are known and have been investigated until recently by historians, ethnographers, folklorists, but most of all the specific characteristics of this area, be it related to settlements as a whole, or to the reconstitution of the life of its communities, which are analyzed with respect both to factors like the ethnic and confessional one and the general factor of behavior. Our research was focused on the time from 1861-1918 as a period of analysis, starting from the main argument of the continuity of the investigated sources, and we mean here especially those related to the registers of parishes, which are kept at the County Department of the National Archives in Satu Mare, representing the linking source we used in our attempt to reconstitute most accurately and exact (in figures) the realities of Țara Oașului.

Even since the publishing of the article „*Populația comunei Bixad în perioada modernă. Câteva aspecte privind fenomenul căsătoriei în parohiile greco-catolice (1861 – 1910)*”, in 2003, the idea of a more ample research on the entire region of Țara Oașului has developed each year, focusing even more on a more thorough and varied investigation, of course within the limits set by the historiographical sources and publications of that time, as well as the archive documents and the information resulted from the investigations undertaken in the region along time, in the fields of sociology, economy, demography, ethnography and history.

The structure of the present work has tried, with the help of published and unpublished sources, to put together both information generally known and investigated until recently by historians, ethnographers and folklorists, and especially characteristic aspects of the settlements, able to contribute to a more complex reconstitution of the life in Țara Oașului, information which are analyzed through the prism of ethnic and confessional components.

Investigating and presenting the period from 1861 – 1918, with an extension, according to the investigated aspects, up to the year of the first Romanian census – 1930, the analysis completed the way certain sources of that time related to the Oaș region were used, by presenting them in a full translation by the author, adding thus more clarity to the sequences of texts from the same sources, which had already entered Romanian historiography.

The historiographical investigation was doubled by the research of registers of marital status from the 16 communities and for all confessions, which were identified in the *Collection of parish registers of marital status from Satu Mare County* kept at the County Department of the National Archives in Satu Mare. After going through the ample archive material, we preferred

the option of a thorough research of some representative samples of the representative ethnic and confessional elements of the communities in Oaş.

From the first pages of the work it was intended to present things as close as possible to the realities supported by statistic documents and historiographical sources, meaning a multiethnic, multi-confessional, and implicitly multicultural Țara Oaşului. Representing the majority population of Romanians, more important minorities like the Hungarians, or Jews, but also the other ethnic groups of the area at that time, all people contributed to that what this region has become, and only by bringing back to the scholarly environment the old realities of this area in a more complete way, will it be possible to go further to a series of more thorough investigations of the specific aspects, which will eventually contribute to the „construction” of the real image of that what ȚARA OAȘULUI was.

The first chapter of the work presents the historiographical context, the structure of the sources, the methodology used, as well as a series of details related to the investigated administrative and territorial frame, and its evolution.

The second chapter outlines a series of information related to the geographical and natural environment, as well as to the typology of settlements from the Oaş region. The most extended part of the chapter was focused on the individual presentation of the 16 communities. This way we came to the conclusion that these settlements are following the pattern of the spread village. In most cases they followed the same stages, as concerning their territorial and administrative development, including here the evolution of property and owners within their boundaries, for the analyzed period of time. From a demographic point of view, with only two exceptions and valid only for a few decades, they were middle sized and large villages. Also from a demographic point of view, but considering the ethnic and confessional factors, we were able to notice that the 16 communities can also be classified according to these criteria. According to census data from 1869, 1880, 1890, 1900, 1910 and 1930 we can say that there were: 13 settlements with a majority Romanian/Greek-Catholic population, 2 settlements with a majority Hungarian population and only one locality where, ethnically speaking, the population was balanced, with an approximately equal number of Romanians and Hungarians. More thorough general and particular demographic aspects were analyzed in chapter 4. Next to the basic elements which are necessary to be analyzed in order to get a better picture of the realities in a community, for a certain period of time, we noticed the attention granted by the authors of

that time for informing and obviously promoting the resources of the thermal and mineral springs of this region. Getting past the slightly nationalist, but somehow natural narrations of the time, it is noticeable that the suppliers of information continued to offer arguments in order to get attention for this area of Țara Oașului, which could be called, by extrapolating some accounts of that time and without false modesty, as a true „Mecca of tourists and spa treatment” in Europe at the time (very significant in this respect are the images from the annexes).

Chapter 3 of the work reconstitutes the life of the communities in Țara Oașului, tracking some particular aspects of behavior and daily life of the Romanian and Hungarian population in this region as well as characteristics relating to the architecture, popular costumes, customs, spiritual and social life, education and morality of the inhabitants from the investigated area.

Chapter 4 was dedicated to the population of Oaș, analyzing it on the basis of the researched statistic data. Based on the information given about the ethnic and confessional structure, one may come to a series of conclusions concerning the population of Oaș. The first interesting aspect was noticed following the analysis and corroboration of data from the censuses used in the research, and the interpretation of their declarative character, this is the fact that out of the 13 Romanian villages, 10 had as the most numerous ethnic minority the Jewish one, with the same situation in one of the two villages with a majority Hungarian population. In this respect we analyzed in a separate subchapter the evolution of the Jewish population in Țara Oașului. Another feature of the population in these settlements was the compact living of each ethnic group.

We also noticed that, although there had been several ethnic groups amidst the population of Oaș along time, as a result of some organized actions like colonization initiated by several landlords and administrative or religious leaders, especially for economic reasons (the case of the Germans and partially of the Jews) or following some contexts related more to the economic and social life (the case of the Slovaks), these groups did not leave a strong and continuous mark on the way of life in this settlements. In most cases these ethnic groups became assimilated by the Hungarians (Germans, partially Jews, Croats, and Slovaks) or by the Romanians (Ruthenians, Serbs). This was achieved either very sudden and by scores, as we could notice from the results of censuses, caused by a series of economic, social or political factors, or individually, slowly, through mix marriages. The compared case study done for the three sample parishes from Țara Oașului (Greek Catholic in Bixad, Reformed in Remetea Oaș and Roman Catholic in Huta

Certeze) at the end of the chapter and the work outlines the demographic behavior of individuals during the three main events in peoples' lives: marriage, birth and death, presenting a series of common characteristics but also a series of distinct features, as a result of the different way people reacted to outer challenges.

The reconstitution of life in the communities from Țara Oașului, for the investigated period of time, is important, enabling us to create an accurate image about the population of this region, tracking its „inclinations”, customs and daily practices. After reading these information we may say that although Țara Oașului was overwhelmingly represented by archaic and rudimentary elements in the investigated period of time, elements which are still motivating the construction of its identity, it was though an area which, due to its resources and inhabitants, no matter of their ethnicity and confession, was generally dynamic and partially individualized, but in the same time integrated into the specific of times, whether we speak of the daily life, or of the religious, economic and social life, or whether we analyze its individual or collective demographic behavior.

The initiative of research has also been supported in time by the need of several present generations to know as much as possible about the area their ancestors lived, and their grandparents still live, be they Romanians, Hungarians, Jews, Slovaks or Greek Catholics, Reformed, Roman Catholics, Israelites, but especially by the fact that the area has benefited in the last half of the century from researches and legends which did not intend or avoided to bring to light a series of aspects like the ethnic, confessional, and ethnographic diversity of the region, which could and even should become the main pillars of a future complex image of that what has been and should remain Țara Oașului, both for the scientific community and for the larger audience.