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DOCTORAL THESIS

Romanians between northern Europe and northern
Asia. Nordic and Russian travellers' notes on the
Romanian people (17th – 19th centuries)

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Cluj-Napoca, 2012

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Keywords: identity and alterity, Nordic countries, Russia, the Romanian people, travel writing, religious life, 17th – 19th centuries

Abstract

My interest in the relation between Nordics and Romanians is older and has become more complex with time: in order to obtain my bachelor's degree I've studied *The image of the Nordic countries as perceived by Transylvanian Romanians in the 19th century (Imaginea țărilor nordice la românii transilvăneni în secolul al XIX-lea)* and for my master's degree I've used some Nordic travellers' accounts about the Romanian people: *Identity and alterity. Four Nordic travellers through the Romanian area (17th – 19th centuries) (Identitate și alteritate. Patru călători nordici prin spațiul românesc (sec. XVII-XIX))*.

The subject of my PhD thesis therefore supplements the conclusions of my previous research by comparing Nordics' opinions about Romanians with those of the Russians. The choice of the second category of travellers was based on certain observations I've made while conducting the prior studies. A first set of findings was related to the high frequency of the Nordic travellers' notes regarding the differences in religious rites and rituals, a second decisive aspect in choosing this counterweight for the Nordic accounts being the cultural dissimilarity (expressed in terms of civilisation) between the travellers and the locals with which they made contact. As a result, Russians' notes had the role of counterbalancing the conclusions of an identity and alterity research like the present one because these travellers share Romanians' religion and because, moreover, they were regarded, at least partially, as belonging to the "East" of Europe. The assertions of the "Occidental" Protestant Nordics who passed through the Romanian area in the 17th – 19th centuries could thus be compared with those of the half European, half Asian Orthodox Russians.

The main purpose of this work was therefore to enlarge our knowledge of the manner in which the Romanian people was perceived by two distinct categories of travellers of the 17th – 19th centuries, namely the Nordic and the Russian ones. Although a number of studies about the relations between identity and alterity or about social imaginary have used travel accounts as sources, I was not able to identify a single research that had in view the perception of the Romanian realities by the Nordic travellers, considered as a special class of journeyers. Besides, Romanian historiography completely lacks a comparison between the perceptions of the groups of travellers considered by the present thesis.

Therefore, the research questions that have guided the study of these journeyers' narrations were meant to clarify these aspects:

- 1) What were the characteristics of the Nordic and Russian travellers through the Romanian area in the modern epoch?
- 2) Which was the nature of the relations between the Nordic countries, the Russian Empire and the area inhabited by Romanians in the studied period?
- 3) How did the Nordic and Russian travellers perceive the Romanian people from a religious viewpoint?
- 4) Do significant differences exist between the Nordics' and Russians' opinions about Romanians?
- 5) Does these travellers' image of our ancestors evolve with time?
- 6) Can one notice some variations of this image caused by visiting (only) a certain historical province (Transylvania, Moldavia or Wallachia)?

In order to give an answer to these interrogations it was necessary to pass through a number of stages, illustrated by this doctoral thesis' chapters. Thus, in an initial phase, I set the work's theoretical and methodological grounds. As a result, the thesis' first part refers to the characteristics and the benefits of approaching a research theme from the viewpoint of cultural history, as emphasising the manner in which the social imaginary influences the interactions between "us" and the "others" is extremely important in the context of interpreting testimonies that have foreign observers as authors.

The next phase in the elaboration of my thesis was the sources' identification and classification. The Nordic and Russian travellers' accounts of their passage through the Romanian area were arranged chronologically and attributed to a certain category based on their origin and on their author's occupation. The quantitative analysis I conducted also had in view the notes' type, these four above-mentioned elements (the traveller's origin, the chronological interval of his visit, his occupation and the type of text that he wrote) having a significant impact on the information provided about the Romanian people.

The sources' examination has shown that, of the 124 travel accounts that were used for this research, 42% belong to Nordics, the rest (58%) being written by Russians. Within the former category, Swedes are the authors of over half of the notes taken into consideration and

therefore their and the Russians' narrations represent 81% of the total. Therefore, the Danish, Norwegian and Finnish accounts are much less relevant from a quantitative point of view.

In a similar manner, the observations about the Romanian people mainly refer to the 18th – 19th centuries, this chronological interval witnessing the visits of 87.5% of the travellers whose texts have been analysed. As for the voyagers' occupational distribution, the clear predominance of military men (42%), but also the rather large presence of diplomats (19%) and clerics (12%) on the Romanian territory are perfectly explainable if one considers the period's political context. And the type of available accounts are related to the Nordics' and the Russians' occupations, because, in spite of the undeniable preponderance of simple travel notes (41%), journals of military campaigns or official and diplomatic reports are also well-represented (7% and 11%, respectively). Memoirs (13%), correspondence (10%), monographs written after the journey (7%) and indirect accounts of certain travellers' passage through the Romanian area (11%) complete the classification of the types of texts that were used in this thesis.

Another relevant element in the context of influencing the quality of some observations is represented by the relations between the Romanian area, the Nordic countries and Russia during the 17th – 19th centuries, as these connections have affected the interactions between the locals and the military men, the diplomats and the clerics who passed through Transylvania, Wallachia or Moldavia. The Thirty Years' War, the Great Northern War, the Russian-Turkish War of 1806-1812, the Crimean War, the Romanian War of Independence, etc. have facilitated and sometimes even conditioned the existence of some sort of links between the inhabitants of such distinct and remote spaces. This aspect was even more important as the establishment of diplomatic relations was accomplished only in the second half of the 19th century (a Romanian legation was set up in Sankt Petersburg in 1878) or even at the beginning of the 20th century (the establishment of diplomatic relations at the level of legation with the Nordic countries took place in 1916 in the case of Sweden, in 1917 for Denmark and Norway and in 1920-1921 with Finland).

Hence, the manner in which the representatives of these powers were received and treated by the Romanian rulers is highly informative with regard to the connections between these areas at a certain point in time. But the importance granted to ceremonial cannot be underestimated either, because sometimes it was considered more important than some minor

conflicts. Perhaps this explains why the utilised sources do not reveal significant differences between the manner of greeting Nordic diplomats as compared with the Russian ones, although Romanians' relations with the Russian Empire were often conflictive, a situation that does not have an equivalent in the case of the Nordic countries. Nevertheless, some dissimilarities can be detected within the relevant categories, one of these being the fact that the Moldavians seemed to appreciate more the presence of the Russian representatives on their territory than the Wallachians. Moreover, a certain evolution with time of the courtesy gestures is also visible, as communication between the foreign diplomats and the Transylvanian princes or the Romanian Principalities' rulers partially changes its content and form towards the end of the 19th century. On the other hand, offering precious gifts, granting magnificent audiences, reciprocal visits, sumptuous banquets and grandiose balls remain a constant of the relations between locals and the Nordic or Russian representatives during the analysed period.

The existence of a certain level of political-military and diplomatic relations between the area inhabited by Romanians, on the one hand, and the Nordic countries and Russia, on the other hand, has also ensured a tighter commercial, scientific and cultural collaboration between these areas. And the fact that the Romanian royal family was related both to the Swedish one (as Queen Elisabeth was King Gustaf V's cousin) and to the Russian one (through Queen Marie, who was King Alexander II's niece) could only improve these connections.

But besides all these contextual elements, one could have expected that the examination of the information about Romanians provided by the Nordics and Russians would lead to diverse results at least in an extremely important aspect of the modern communities' existence, namely religion. Although Christians, the Nordic travellers had a worldview that was impregnated with Protestant values and therefore they suffered a sort of "cultural shock" when confronted with the Romanian realities. On the other hand, as Orthodox believers, the Russians already had implicit or explicit knowledge about the religious practices which they witnessed and, as a result, they could offer a clearer picture of these.

From the viewpoint of the Nordic and Russian travellers' perception of the Romanian religious life, the fact that 12% of them were clerics has significantly influenced the information they offered to their compatriots. This happened mainly because, as members of the clergy, they were versed in issues related to dogma and ritual, therefore thoroughly understanding the events

in which they took part. This statement is also true in the case of Nordics, not just Russians, although the differences between the cult practiced by the former and the Romanians' Orthodoxy were significant. It is interesting to note that the religious rituals differed even when sharing the same faith, as the Russian notes demonstrate. Nevertheless, it is possible that such a perception was influenced just by this confessional closeness, as the Russian clerics could very easily notice any minor deviation from their habitual routines, while for the Nordics almost any ceremony they witnessed was unusual and extremely dissimilar from their own customs, so that there was no need for further scrutiny.

In conclusion, both the Nordic accounts and the Russian ones reveal resemblances and differences between the travellers and the Romanians in such aspects as the manner of crossing oneself, opinions about icons and mural paintings, honouring the Virgin Mary, some saints or the latter's relics, celebrating certain holidays (the Epiphany, Easter, Christmas), including through the fasting periods that preceded these events, the use of the *toaca*, the baptism, wedding and funeral ceremonies, the purpose of funeral repasts or the traditions strictly respected by the people.

The Romanian Orthodox churches and monasteries draw the journeyers' attention as well. They usually remark these edifices' rather large number in the rural environment, in Jassy or in Bucharest, but also their poor state due to the Ottoman rule and to the frequent wars that took place on the Principalities' territory. Beyond these elements that are common both to the Nordic and Russian notes, a trait that is typical for the latter is the interest in pecuniary matters: many of the Russians who passed through Moldavia or Wallachia specify the enormous sums of money sent by the Romanian monasteries to Athos, Jerusalem or Mount Sinai.

At least from a religious point of view, the Romanian people thus seems fairly similar both to the Nordics (who do not disregard the fact that, because they are Lutherans, the Transylvanian Saxons have the same practices as they do, the only major difference being the cultic language) and to the Russians (who, being Orthodox believers as well, could only remark a series of resemblances). But the distinctions are also worthy of being mentioned, and the presence of fire arms or military music with the occasion of the Epiphany, calling the believers to church by using the *toaca*, the Romanian monks' debatable morality, the role played by the wailers or using an open coffin at funerals appear as typical to the Romanian religious life.

Therefore, one can easily notice that Nordics' and Russians' opinions about the Romanians are rather similar, although, as I have already noted, a series of distinctive elements can also be observed, the travellers' personality being one of the most important sources of these nuances. And the attempt to emphasise certain temporal evolutions of the voyagers' opinions about the alterity represented by Romanians is affected by the variable distribution of the accounts pertaining to the two categories of travellers. The 17th century is depicted mainly by Swedish diplomats who passed through the Transylvanian area, while for the 18th – 19th centuries most of the diplomats, clerics and military men were Russians and had in view Moldavia and/or Wallachia. Moreover, the Russians' perception is affected by the fact that, from a certain point in time onwards, they tended to consider that the tsars and tsarinas were only trying to ensure the welfare of the area's inhabitants and to protect south-east European orthodoxy. In this context, sharing the same religious faith with some of the region's peoples was pointed out as one of the main reasons for the repeated military conflicts with the Turks that took place in the modern period.

In conclusion, the present doctoral thesis reveals a number of elements that influence the image that foreigners had about the Romanians some centuries ago. Amongst these factors, the travellers' origin, the visits' chronological interval, the authors' occupation, the period's political context and the observers' religion are extremely important because they have a major impact on the manner of perceiving the alterity. The research questions that have guided this study were meant to provide proof for these general observations and the answers given to these interrogations, detailed in the work's chapters, are mainly due to the opinions expressed by Russian or Finnish military men, by Russian or Swedish diplomats or by Russian clerics. Moreover, they concern mainly the extra-Carpathian space in the 18th and 19th centuries, as only approximately 7% of the 124 travellers have (also) visited Transylvania. Nevertheless, certain elements as the religious tolerance professed by the inhabitants of the Romanian area, the Orthodox priests' poor dogmatic knowledge or the superficiality of the faith put into practice by the people (denoted by the inclination towards visible rituals, severe fasting periods and superstition) are common both to the Nordics' accounts and to the Russian ones and, as a result, they can be considered as the most important traits of the Romanian Orthodoxy in the 17th – 19th centuries.