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BETWEEN EAST AND WEST. THE IMAGE OF THE ROMANIAN PRINCIPALITIES IN THE ACCOUNTS OF FOREIGN TRAVELLERS (1710–1810). GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the image of the Romanian Principalities in the accounts of foreign travellers between 1710 and 1810, outlining the main directions that emerge from an ongoing investigation of these sources. Particular attention is given to how travellers perceived and described the Romanian Principalities as a frontier space between East and West. But their accounts are approached not merely as descriptions of places and events, but as testimonies shaped by the travellers' origins, education, professional background, political interests and reasons for travelling. The analysis follows their journeys from the moment they came near and crossed the frontier to their arrival in the principal political centres of Transylvania, Moldavia and Wallachia. Particular attention is paid to the elements through which the frontier became visible to travellers, including military presence, customs controls, quarantine measures and passports, as well as to the emotions and expectations associated with entering a different political and cultural space. The sources also reveal mental and civilisational boundaries that influenced the interpretation of the realities encountered. Transylvania was generally perceived as closer to Central and Western Europe, whereas Moldavia and Wallachia were more frequently associated with the Ottoman East. Beyond the frontier, they recorded roads, means of transport, accommodation, court ceremonial, dress, political practices and the living conditions of the population. Their accounts contain interesting observations on the Romanian language, the Roman origins of the Romanians, religious life, customs and popular traditions. They also repeatedly noted the considerable resources of the Romanian lands, often contrasting this potential with poor administration, political instability, corruption and the difficult situation of the peasantry. The Phanariot rulers, the Ottoman Porte, the native boyars and, in Transylvania, the nobility and Habsburg authorities occupy an important place in these assessments. At the same time, the foreigners' descriptions were inevitably influenced by their own political loyalties, cultural expectations and perceptions. The Romanian Principalities thus emerge from these accounts as a frontier space in which Eastern and Western political, cultural and civilisational influences met and interacted throughout the eighteenth century.

Keywords: Romanian Principalities, foreign travellers, frontiers; imagology, mentalities, East and West

The present research has its origins in my student years in Cluj-Napoca, which began in 1988 and ended in 1993. For history students, the works of French historiography produced by the Annales School on the history of mentalities and the “image of the Other” were, in the final years of the communist regime, veritable historical novels read with great pleasure. They represented a cultural and mental connection with the Western milieu and created an oasis of normality in an era of moral and political crisis in communist Romania. Even then, we thought that the works of Fernand Braudel, Marc Bloch and Jacques Le Goff, as well as those of other historians who identified with this historiographical current, could serve Romanian historians as models for writing national history freed from the political influences of the communist regime, while also presenting it in a form appealing to readers and history enthusiasts. For history students at the time, both our dedicated professors and the works of French historiography they recommended in Romanian translation held a special significance.

Both during the last years of the communist regime and, especially, in the period after 1990, I was concerned with the place and role of Romanians in the frontier space between Christianity and Islam, as well as with the way they were viewed by foreigners. Particularly after 1990, two opposing views regarding the perception of Romanians emerged in the public sphere. The first, dominant at the time, held that Romanians were far from possessing the qualities we sometimes attributed to ourselves, namely: generosity, kindness, hospitality, commitment, diligence and courage. Quite the contrary, I sometimes had the impression that a concerted effort was being made in the media to portray Romanians in a generally negative light. In recent times, so-called scholarly works have also appeared in academia that reject wholesale Romanian historiography from the interwar and communist periods, as well as the Romanity of the Romanians, which has kept us linked and connected for centuries to Western civilisation. On the other hand,

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in line with the Protochronism of the 1980s, Romanians were seen and described as the most remarkable people in South-Eastern Europe, who defended Western Europe from the Ottoman invasion, while the Romanian Principalities and, later, Romania were portrayed as the most beautiful countries and, respectively, the most beautiful country. This dichotomy of views about one's own people both intrigued and contributed to my interest in examining how the Romanian lands and their inhabitants were represented by foreign voyagers.

Historians, art historians and specialists in Anglo-Saxon literature have associated the period between 1680 and 1780 with the golden age of the "Grand Tour"¹. Numerous writings and objects preserved from the period demonstrate the importance of this ritual. Young men from leading families would spend three years travelling the great roads of Europe, accompanied by a tutor or other persons in their service². Robert Shackleton proposes distinguishing three types of journeys, namely: "the educational tour of young nobles, that of the wealthy man in full maturity and that of the scholar". Knowledge of the Roman Christian world and the Eastern Christian world, as well as of territories inhabited by "others" of different religions, is recorded in travellers' accounts from the earliest centuries of the Middle Ages³. It remained a constant during the Renaissance and at the beginning of the Early Modern period, except that the boundaries of the known world were much more extensive and the intellectual backgrounds of travellers far more diverse⁴. According to historian Jean Boutier, from the end of the seventeenth century the routes of the "Grand Tour" would also include parts of Hungary recently incorporated into Christian Europe.⁵

The reasons that impelled travellers to cross the Europe of the time were also far more diverse than in previous centuries. Consequently, the documentary sources produced by them are more numerous and contain more complex information conveyed to political authorities and to a public interested in the spaces described. Yet travellers came from diverse professions; consequently, historians, geographers, men of letters and historians of art and architecture were also receptive to this new direction of historiographical research through the documentary records they produced⁶.

From the second half of the eighteenth century, changes occurred in the reasons for travel. The journey was no longer understood solely as a personal experience, but would aim at the continual search for solutions to problems in society. Sophus A. Reinert discusses the solutions sought by travellers for the development of their countries or for the expansion of their personal businesses when addressing the economic motivation of the "Grand Tour"⁷. These educational and cultural journeys were undertaken by artists and men of letters, but also by other socio-professional categories, such as the so-called scientists⁸.

¹ Gilles Bertrand, *Voyager dans l'Europe des années 1680-1780*, in *Les circulations internationales en Europe, années 1680-années 1780*, Sous la direction de Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire et Pierrick Pourchasse, Rennes, 2010, p. 243. Gilles Bertrand & Pierre Serna (dir.), *La République en voyage, 1770-1830*, Rennes, 2013. See also Gilles Bertrand, *Le Grand Tour revisité: Pour une archéologie du tourisme: Le voyage des Français en Italie, milieu XVIII^e – début XIX^e siècle*, Rome, 2008. See also the study by Guido Santato, *Immagini e confini della nuova Europa nei viaggiatori italiani del Settecento*, in Bianca Maria Da Rif (a cura di), *Civiltà italiana e geografie d'Europa*. XIX Congresso AISLLI 19-24 settembre 2006, Trieste - Capodistria - Padova - Pola, Trieste, EUT, 2009, p. 180-198. Robert Shackleton proposes distinguishing three types of the Grand Tour: one intended for the education of young noblemen, another for the wealthy, and a third for scholars, in Robert Shackleton, *The Grand Tour in the Eighteenth Century*, Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture, I, 1971, p. 127-142.

² Paul Hazard, *Criza conștiinței europene 1680-1715 [The Crisis of the European Mind, 1680-1715]*, translation by Sanda Șora, preface by Romul Munteanu, Bucharest, 1973, p. 6. See the particularly interesting issue of the journal "Source(s) Arts, Civilisation et Histoire de l'Europe", Dossier: voyages éducatifs: histoires de textes et de pratiques pédagogiques, n° 18, 2021, Strasbourg, p. 7-196.

³ For travel in the Middle Ages, see the work by Jean Verdon, *Voyager au Moyen Âge*, Paris, 2007, 385p. See also Edouard Thomas Charton, *Voyageurs anciens et modernes ou Choix des relations de voyages les plus intéressantes et les plus instructives depuis le cinquième siècle avant Jésus-Christ jusqu'au dix-neuvième siècle, avec biographies, notes et indications iconographiques*, vol. II, *Voyageurs du Moyen Âge depuis le sixième siècle de l'ère chrétienne jusqu'au quatorzième*, Paris, 1863, 440p. Norbert Ohler, *I viaggi nel Medioevo*, Odoya, 2020, 448p.

⁴ See Edouard Thomas Charton, *Voyageurs anciens et modernes: ou Choix des relations de voyages les plus intéressantes et les plus instructives depuis le cinquième siècle avant Jésus-Christ jusqu'au dix-neuvième siècle, avec biographies, notes et indications iconographiques*. *Voyageurs modernes. Quinzième siècle et commencement du seizième*, Paris, 1865, 422p.; Edmond Bonnaffé, *Voyages et Voyageurs de la Renaissance*, Paris, 1895, 172p.

⁵ „Le voyage va jusqu'aux frontières, dans le sens militaire qu'elles revêtent alors: à la fin du XVII^e siècle, de nombreux Grands Tours poussent jusqu'en Hongrie, territoire récemment repris aux Ottomans, marqué par des batailles célèbres et par la construction d'imposantes fortifications. A l'est, la Pologne, souvent considérée comme dépourvue de culture, est peu fréquentée, moins encore la Russie", Jean Boutier, *Le Grand Tour: une pratique d'éducation des noblesses européennes (XVI^e-XVIII^e siècles)*, in *Le voyage à l'époque moderne*, Paris, 2004, p. 15-15.

⁶ Gilles Bertrand & Pierre Serna (dir.), *op. cit.* See also Gilles Bertrand, *Le Grand Tour revisité...*

⁷ Sophus A. Reinert, „Mapping the Economic Grand Tour: Travel and International Emulation in Enlightenment Europe", *Harvard Business School*, no. 17-005, July 2016, p. 1-5.

⁸ Gilles Bertrand, *Le Grand Tour revisité...*, p. 24. Idem, *En marge du voyage des élites dans l'Italie des Lumières. Du peuple regardé au peuple voyageur*, in *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Italie et Méditerranée*, tome 111, n°2. 1999. p. 847-881.

Without doubt, *Viaggio in Italia* by Goethe had a major impact at the time on those passionate about literature and travel⁹. Specialised works were also certainly printed in order to make travel safer and provide travellers with information¹⁰.

Yet travel was closely linked to and conditioned by the geopolitical realities of the period, by the borders established and drawn by the empires, kingdoms and principalities of the period under consideration. At the end of the seventeenth century, we witness the redrawing of Europe's southern and eastern borders following the defeats suffered by the Ottoman Empire. The Romanian lands and the neighbouring principalities once again attracted the attention of the major European powers as the territories occupied by the Turks were liberated by the armies of the Habsburg Empire¹¹ and incorporated within its borders. Gradually, after several centuries, Europe regained territories that, by virtue of the origin, language and traditions of their inhabitants, belonged to this space. Evidently, these events aroused the interest of politicians, military officers, churchmen and scholars concerned with the realities of the spaces recently recovered for Christendom. The question that arises is whether the inhabitants of these territories still felt attached to the culture and civilisation of Western Europe after a long period of Ottoman domination. To clarify this, in the present research we turn first and foremost to the accounts of foreign travellers concerning the Romanian lands.

The image of the Other, the foreigner and the marginal person is, as noted above, an avenue of research into the past that originated in the historiography of the Annales School and came from literature. French historians encouraged interdisciplinary research and the use of as wide a range of documentary sources as possible in historical research. Thus, travel accounts, journals, memoirs, press articles, letters written by those on various missions in the Principalities, as well as official reports to the sovereigns who sent them on those missions, are important documentary sources for our research. With the help of these diverse sources, we also seek to obtain an image as close as possible to the reality of the past under investigation, starting from the principle that the foreign observer is, at least theoretically, more detached in the records they make. This is precisely why, for a particular period, we sought to examine how the Romanian Principalities and the realities found there were perceived through observers who had no special or blood ties to Romanians and were therefore, theoretically, much more objective and closer to the truth.

Why the title *Between East and West. The Image of the Romanian Principalities in the Accounts of Foreign Travellers (1710–1810)*? Because then, as now, the Romanian Principalities were perceived as lying on the frontier between East and West. Some travellers placed Transylvania in Europe, while others regarded Moldavia and Wallachia as parts of the Ottoman Empire and thus as belonging to the East. The political realities of the Principalities led travellers to place them in the West or the East. The political argument is important in this classification, but it is not and should not be decisive. This is why, in our work, we seek to reconstruct the travellers' intellectual frameworks and emotional responses to the realities they encountered, in order to understand how they thought and what they felt in relation to the Romanian lands and its inhabitants saddened me.

The aim of this research is to critically analyse the representation of realities in the Romanian Principalities in the accounts of foreign travellers who crossed them¹². In the first stage, we examine the realities of the frontier, defined as a space that separates countries¹³. In general, travellers' first impression

See also Anna Tylusinska-Kowalska, *Viaggiatori polacchi in Sicilia e Malta tra Cinquecento e Ottocento*, Sicilia, 2012, p. 27-36. See also the study by Lucia Burello, *Viaggiare, in La porta d'Italia. Diari e viaggiatori polacchi in Friuli Venezia Giulia dal XVI al XIX secolo*. Curatore L. Burello, A. Litwornia, Udine, 2000, p. 13-43.

⁹ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Viaggio in Italia: 1786-1788*. Introduzione e commento di Lorenza Rega; traduzione di Eugenio Zaniboni, Milano, 2020, p. 671.

¹⁰ Mariana Starke, *Travels on the Continent: Written for the Use and Particular Information of Travellers*, London, 1820, 845p.

¹¹ See Călin Felezeu, *Statutul Principatului Transilvaniei în raporturile cu Poarta Otomană (1541-1688)* [*The Status of the Principality of Transylvania in Its Relations with the Ottoman Porte (1541–1688)*], Cluj-Napoca, 1996, p. 107-119; D. Prodan, *Supplex Libellus Valachorum. Din istoria formării națiunii române* [*Supplex Libellus Valachorum. From the History of the Formation of the Romanian Nation*], new edition with additions and clarifications, Bucharest, 1984, p. 134; Mathias Bernath, *Habsburgii și începuturile formării națiunii române* [*The Habsburgs and the Beginnings of the Formation of the Romanian Nation*], translated by Marionela Wolf, with a foreword by Pompiliu Teodor, Cluj-Napoca, 1994, p. 87.

¹² See Sorin Mitu's analysis of the main research trends and major contributions to imagological studies in Romania., in Sorin Mitu, *Transilvania mea: Istorii, mentalități, identități* [*My Transylvania: Histories, Mentalities, Identities*], Iași, 2013, p. 93-98.

¹³ An interesting description of the types of frontiers in Europe, albeit in relation to contemporary realities, can be found in the work of Mircea Brie and Ioan Horga, „Le frontiere europee – espressioni dell'identità”, in *Transylvanian Review*, vol. XXIII, Suppl. No. 1, 2014. See also Sorin Șipoș, Federico Donatiello, Dan Octavian Cepraga, Aurel Chiriac, *Categorie europene. Rappresentazioni Storiche e Letterarie del 'Politico*, in *Transylvanian Review*, vol. XXIII, Supl. No. 1, 2014, p. 202-216. More closely related to our research topic is the volume edited by. Romanița Constantinescu, *Identitate de frontieră în Europa lărgită. Perspective comparate* [*Border Identity in an Enlarged Europe: Comparative Perspectives*], Iași, 2008. See also Robert Muchembled, *Introduction: Frontières vives: la naissance du Sujet en Europe (XV^e - XVII^e) siècle*, in *Frontiers of Faith: Religious Exchange and the Constitution of Religious Identities 1400-1750*, ed. Eszer Andor and István György Tóth, Budapest, 2001, p. 1-8.

of the country they enter decisively influences their perspective. We are therefore interested in understanding their state of mind from their very first encounters with the realities of the country they enter. Following Michael Metzeltin's methodological suggestions¹⁴, we seek to identify the elements described by foreign travellers that may serve as landmarks, indicators and witnesses defining the frontier and signalling to the traveller that it is approaching. In the next stage of the research, we leave the territory of political, legal and geographical frontiers and move into the interior of the Romanian Principalities, extending our investigation to cultural and civilisational frontiers. We shall therefore accompany the travellers from their entry into the Principalities to their destination, paying attention to their means of transport, places of accommodation, emotions and experiences. Once the travellers reach Sibiu, Iași and Bucharest, we shall observe and analyse the ceremonial at the princes' courts and the influences coming from the East, through the Phanariots, and from the West, in dress, political ceremonial, behaviour and the attitudes of the political elite. Last but not least, we are interested in the manner in which foreign travellers interacted with Romanians and in how the indigenous population was described by them: who the Romanians were, what language they spoke, the qualities and shortcomings of this Neo-Latin people situated on Europe's south-eastern frontier, as well as their customs and traditions. Klaus Heitmann's research was of great assistance in preparing this part of our approach¹⁵.

Before proceeding to analyse the information contained in the memoirs, journals, reports and correspondence of foreign travellers, we should first clarify our research methodology. The first step was to identify the travellers who crossed the Romanian lands and left us documentary records. By the term travellers, we mean foreigners who reached the Principalities, regardless of how long they resided there. We likewise include both those travellers whose final destination was the Romanian Principalities and those who merely transited the Romanian lands but left records concerning them. The next step consisted in establishing the travellers' background, the reasons for their journey and the direction from which they entered the Romanian territories.

The intellectual background of travellers is important in assessing the value of documentary sources. An educated traveller can make well-founded and critical observations about realities in the Principalities. Their training also gives them the opportunity, at least theoretically, to draw information from published works and to obtain as much information as possible from the political elite of the Principalities.

The reasons for the journey are also important to the quality of the information collected. A traveller in a hurry to reach the destination has less time and interest in describing the places traversed and the people encountered. By contrast, visitors who arrived on political and economic missions, as well as those driven by intellectual curiosity, would write much better-documented memoirs. For the historian, it is important to establish the degree of objectivity of the records, since the accounts of representatives of various states present in the Romanian lands contain a high degree of subjectivity. The Romanian Principalities were traversed primarily by travellers who represented their countries of origin and owed their positions to the kingdom or empire that had sent them on a mission. The number of travellers belonging to the liberal professions and the humanities who reached the Danubian area was small compared with the situation in the Western world, a fact that also affected the originality of the surviving sources.

We also consider it important for our research to specify the travellers' regions of origin and the places through which they entered the Romanian space, in order to understand how they perceived the Principalities after crossing the frontier. This opens another research topic, namely the relationship between centre and periphery, between the civilised space, where law and institutions impose order, and the uncivilised one, where arbitrariness and corruption are the principal coordinates. Some of the negative attitudes towards the countries inhabited by Romanians, found among certain travellers from Western Europe, become intelligible when analysed through the lens of the relationship between centre and periphery. For example, a traveller moving from Transylvania into Wallachia would cross the border with states of mind and attitudes different from those identified in the accounts of someone leaving Moldavia or Wallachia and entering Transylvania. Among the three provinces, Transylvania represented the centre, while Wallachia and Moldavia were the peripheries. In turn, compared with Austria or Hungary, Transylvania was itself a periphery. In this type of analysis, it is important for the historian to specify where the centre lies in order to determine where the periphery is located. Most geographical and cultural spaces can become peripheral in relation to another space. For example, Count de Ségur, travelling from Prussia

¹⁴ Michael Metzeltin, *Geneza frontierelor în Europa și valoarea lor emoțională* [*The Genesis of Frontiers in Europe and Their Emotional Significance*], in *Identitate de frontieră în Europa lărgită* [*Border Identity in an Enlarged Europe*], p. 23-39.

¹⁵ Klaus Heitmann, *Imaginea românilor în spațiul lingvistic german (1775-1918). Un studiu imagologic* [*The Image of the Romanians in the German-Speaking World (1775-1918): An Imagological Study*], Bucharest, 1995.

into Poland in the winter of 1784-1785, was aware that he was crossing an important boundary. He felt that he had “left Europe completely” and, moreover, had “gone back ten centuries”¹⁶. Several decades later, the Marquis de Custine, while in Russia, recorded the following as the conclusion to his visit:

“One must have lived in this restless wilderness, in this unrelenting prison called Russia, to properly feel all the freedom enjoyed in the other countries of Europe, regardless of their form of government. If you encounter dissatisfied people in France, use my method and tell them: Go to Russia. It is a useful journey for any foreigner; anyone who has properly seen this country will be content to be able to live anywhere else”¹⁷.

In both travel accounts, we find an idea that is omnipresent among most travellers: that they were either at the edge of Europe, inside or outside its eastern frontiers, or in another geographical space, on another continent, which had little in common with Europe.

With regard to travellers’ places of origin, it also seems somewhat natural that those coming from far away and having no direct connection with the Romanian Principalities should be uninformed about local realities and less influenced in their assessments by the legacy of historical conflicts. Travellers arriving from countries neighbouring the Romanians could have their judgments coloured by negative images arising from military conflicts and from tensions generated by religious differences and disputes¹⁸.

We set out to accompany them on their journey from the frontier to the princely court, in order to gain an overall view of their travels from the first contacts, through officials, customs, quarantine and the means of transport used. Our starting idea was to obtain information from travellers horizontally, that is, from entry into the country to the final destination, but also vertically, from the princely authority down to the peasant who sheltered the traveller at night, exhausted after a gruelling journey and desperate because he had nowhere to sleep on a rainy or freezing night. Thus, he provides us with complex and detailed information about the symbolism and concept of the frontier at the time, about frontier markers and the states of mind experienced by foreigners when passing from one country to another, and about the differences between Transylvania and the other two countries, Wallachia and Moldavia.

Another important aspect concerns the means of travel, routes of communication, and the origin, customs and traditions of the Romanians. Although the roads and means of travel differed considerably from those the foreign travellers were accustomed to in their home countries, they were fascinated and impressed by the fact that both Romanians belonging to the political elite and ordinary people were conscious of their Roman origins, and that this heritage was preserved in popular customs and traditions. Likewise, considerable attention is devoted to the resources and administration of the Romanian Principalities, their political system, and the solutions proposed by travellers to improve the living conditions of the Romanians in the three principalities. One of the most frequent observations made by the travellers analysed concerns the wealth of the principalities, their poor administration, endemic corruption, and the poverty and exploitation of the Romanian population. Thus, with the help of and through the eyes of travellers, we seek to establish the existence of certain realities, some positive and others negative, and also to explain their causes. We are not pioneers; on the contrary, the subject has been investigated intensively and has attracted the attention of numerous Romanian and foreign authors, of whom we mention a few: Nicolae Iorga, Pompiliu Eliade, George Pascu, Paul Cernovodeanu, Maria Holban, P. P. Panaitescu, Klaus Heitmann, Dan Amadeo Lăzărescu, Andrei Cornea, Nicolae Isar, Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, Pierrick Pourchasse, Daniel Barbu, Nicolae Bocșan, Sorin Mitu, Toader Nicoară, Mihaela Grancea, Neagu Djuvara, Alexandru Duțu, Germaine Lebel, Larry Wolff, Maria Todorova, Ștefan Lemny, etc. I believe that, in light of earlier research on the subject, the period under investigation could be extended and greater attention could be given to the characteristics of the Romanians, their qualities and shortcomings.

Ultimately, the focus is on the Romanians and the lands they inhabited, their customs, beliefs and traditions, the political system of the period, and the solutions proposed by foreigners for the modernisation of society. It concerns the place and role of the Romanians in the history of Europe in the eighteenth century. Among the many pieces of information they left, most foreigners who came here also wrote the following,

¹⁶ Larry Wolff, *Inventarea Europei de Est: Harta civilizației în Epoca Luminilor* [*Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*], translated from the English by Bianca Rizzoli, Bucharest, 2000, p. 21.

¹⁷ Marchizul de Custine, *Scrisori din Rusia în 1839* [Marquis de Custine, *Letters from Russia in 1839*], edition, foreword, and critical apparatus by Pierre Nora, translated from the French by Irina Negrea, Bucharest, 2007, p. 337.

¹⁸ Klaus Heitmann, *op. cit.*, p. 20; 54.

which deserves emphasis: “The country is rich and beautiful, but it is very badly governed”. This information about the Romanian world, as seen, perceived and recorded by foreign travellers, has been interpreted and analysed “without hatred or bias” by the contemporary historians. At times, travellers’ accounts contain observations and appeals for the better organisation and administration of the country, as well as sharp criticism of the political class and the rulers of the Principalities. They were responsible then, as they are today, for how the country functioned. We would like to draw attention to the “anonymous and silent” masses who interacted with travellers and thus became historical figures. They were the payers of dues and taxes, those who fulfilled obligations to their masters; ultimately, they were the principal producers of goods. They are the country and those who sustain the country, as stated both in the ultimatum addressed by the peasants who rose in revolt in 1784 to the nobility besieged in the fortress of Deva and in the Proclamation issued by Tudor Vladimirescu only a few decades later.

At this stage of an ongoing investigation, the examination of foreign travellers’ accounts of the Romanian Principalities between 1710 and 1810 allows us to draw a number of preliminary conclusions. Although I have read most of the travel accounts concerning the Romanian lands, some of the conclusions reached at this stage of the research may be supplemented, nuanced and perhaps even invalidated by future research. This in no way diminishes the honesty and good faith of our investigation into a sensitive subject that is nevertheless so necessary and difficult to address. The research does not proceed from the assumption that the Romanians were exceptional or that the lands they inhabited were uniquely beautiful. Nor did I proceed from the premise that everything bad that happens is their fault, as is sometimes said and written about them all too often. I have sought to understand and critically analyse both the positive and negative descriptions in travellers’ records within the context of the period and in relation to the authors’ intellectual backgrounds and sensibilities. As a Romanian, I was pleased when foreign authors regarded the country and its inhabitants with sympathy, understanding and great warmth. Some foreign travellers educated within a particular cultural milieu genuinely suffered and sympathised with the hardships endured by Romanian peasants, strongly condemning social and national exploitation. Likewise, they condemned the abuses of the powerful within the country and those perpetrated by neighbouring empires.

As a historian, I came to understand that many of the criticisms, observations and suggestions made by foreign travellers about the realities they encountered here were objective, justified and correct. Their message was that greater involvement from all social categories was needed so that the Romanian Principalities could make use of the resources they possessed for the benefit of Romanians. Their message was that greater involvement from all social categories was needed so that Principalities could make use of their resources for the benefit of their inhabitants, and that the countries had great economic potential but needed to be better governed and administered. In other words, a national project initiated by an educated Romanian elite was needed, one that would act with care and responsibility towards the people. These moments would come shortly after the foreign travellers’ records, namely in 1821, 1848 and 1859, and would prepare the ground for the construction of modern and unified Romania.

Another conclusion that emerges is that certain aspects of this part of Europe that do not function well will not change easily and that much more time and effort are required. Representatives of the Annales School warned us decades ago that the most difficult changes are those affecting mentalities, which occur slowly and over the *longue durée*. For this very reason, they encouraged historical investigations to be conducted by specialists over a longer span of time, so that they might capture continuities as well as what is ephemeral, transient and without major impact on society. Together with our travellers, we can identify numerous negative elements found in the Principalities between 1710 and 1810 that remain present in one form or another today.

Several elements that lend originality to the present undertaking emerge from rereading the documentary sources and interpreting them in a modern manner. We focussed on the origins and intellectual backgrounds of the travellers who crossed the Romanian lands. These two aspects are important for establishing the scholarly value of the information in the documentary sources. We also identified the directions from which travellers entered the Romanian lands, specified their destinations and, where possible, captured their state of mind when crossing physical and civilisational frontiers. The route of travel was reconstructed from the frontier towards the capitals of the Principalities, taking into account the so-called frontier markers that separate West from East. Another direction of analysis focused on the types of documentary sources left to us by foreign travellers¹⁹.

¹⁹ Sorin Şipoş, *Între Orient şi Occident. Imaginea Principatelor Române în relatările călătorilor străini (1710-1810)* [Between East and West: The Image of the Romanian Principalities in the Accounts of Foreign Travellers (1710–1810)], University of Oradea Press / Romanian Academy Publishing House, Centre for Transylvanian Studies, Oradea / Cluj-Napoca, 2026, p. 11-30.

Most foreign travellers who crossed the Romanian lands came from Central and Northern Europe. Their presence in the Romanian space was largely due to political, military and economic assignments received from the sovereigns who sent them. Unlike in Western Europe, where educational journeys held considerable importance, those who travelled in the Romanian Principalities did so for other reasons and were officials or representatives of the great powers. When crossing from Transylvania into Wallachia and Moldavia, travellers were able to notice important elements in the perception and understanding of the frontier, namely: the militarised frontier, customs, quarantine and soldiers, customs officials and the passport. A border marked by so many elements did not exist between the Danubian Principalities and the Ottoman Empire. From this perspective, for many travellers less familiar with the political realities of the region, Moldavia and Wallachia were provinces of the Ottoman Empire²⁰.

Beyond all this, a different attitude can be observed among travellers crossing the Romanian Principalities. Travellers viewed entry into Transylvania with optimism and the crossing of Moldavia and Wallachia with suspicion and distrust. Beyond the existence of real causes, we must note a certain subjectivity among foreign representatives, who were pleased to reach, for example, Transylvania, a province closer to the realities of their native lands, as well as a certain desire to exaggerate the realities existing south and east of the Carpathians, a space perceived as part of the Ottoman Empire, as we mentioned above.

We also noted the existence of mental frontiers among foreign travellers, originating in historical realities and sediments accumulated over centuries and superimposed upon personal experiences. After crossing political frontiers, the representatives of the great powers entered the interior of the country and generally followed the road to the capitals of the Romanian Principalities (Bucharest, Iași and Sibiu) where they had the opportunity to come into contact with many of the ethnic, social and political realities found there.

Foreign travellers selected the means of transport by which they would cross the Romanian lands according to the direction from which they entered this space and their financial means. If entry into the Principalities involved crossing the Danube or another watercourse situated on the frontier, travellers used a boat, skiff or ferry. If, by contrast, they entered the country overland, they travelled by stagecoach, cart, on horseback or, in mountainous areas, on foot, owing to the poor condition and difficulty of the routes of communication²¹.

The crossing from Transylvania towards the extra-Carpathian Romanian Principalities was much more dangerous. This is probably also why few descriptions have survived of the passes linking these countries. The great majority of accounts are limited to describing the route followed, including the pass through which the travellers crossed the Carpathians, with evident emphasis on the dangers encountered. Yet perhaps the most important point is that most of them describe their experiences of crossing the Carpathian Mountains with great emotion.

Crossing the frontier between Wallachia and Moldavia, on the one hand, and Transylvania, on the other, took place under entirely different conditions and with great difficulty. The reason was that a mountain chain that was difficult to cross lay between the two extra-Carpathian principalities and Transylvania. Nevertheless, some voyagers, having no other option, were compelled to cross the mountain passes.

Judging by the number of travellers who left records, few high-ranking figures reached the Romanian lands, and those who did enjoyed the support of the princely authority. Crossing the country in general, and the frontier in particular, was transformed into a veritable display of power intended to demonstrate the strength of the country from which they came. The political authorities in the Principalities were also interested in ensuring that the journey of the ambassador or high official was carried out impeccably. The princes of the Romanian lands, on their own initiative, on the sultan's orders or at the suggestion of the ambassador accredited to the Porte, ensured that representatives of the great powers enjoyed the support of the princely authorities.

In exceptional situations, when floods or snowfall began, or when the Carpathian passes were crossed, even if they had modern means of travel at their disposal, the visitors' situation could become significantly more complicated. The notes made by travellers vividly reflect their state of mind at those moments.

Only a few of them managed to obtain audiences with the princes of the Romanian lands and described court ceremonial. This privilege was enjoyed primarily by representatives of the great powers on missions to Constantinople and by representatives of the great powers accredited to Iași and Bucharest. At

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 31-55.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 57-90.

times, persons travelling for personal reasons were also received by the prince, through the intervention of their countries' ambassadors in Constantinople. Official audiences or private meetings with the Phanariot rulers were accompanied by travel facilities. Nevertheless, sufficient information has survived from foreigners to allow us to form a complex picture of Eastern and Western influences in the capitals of the Romanian Principalities.

The travellers noted the strong Eastern influences at the rulers' courts, especially in ceremonial, dress and protocol. Yet they also observed the presence of Western influences at the courts of the Romanian rulers, admittedly still tentative. In Transylvania, at the governor's court, the presence of the Western world was overwhelming and evident.

Foreign travellers made numerous observations on dress, dwellings, mentalities and the political system of the Romanian Principalities. Official audiences and private discussions with the Phanariot princes were particularly significant. On each occasion, the princely authority organised evening gatherings or offered meals for the ambassadors or special envoys, at which they had the opportunity to observe Eastern and Western influences among those in power. At times, the observations and criticisms were justified, particularly with regard to the corrupt political system and the duplicitous attitude of the Phanariot princes. At other times, foreign visitors failed to understand the affectionate and open attitude displayed by the political elite of the Principalities. Likewise, representatives of the great powers had greater difficulty becoming accustomed to the attitudes, behaviours and cuisine of Bucharest and Iași²².

To a large extent, foreign travellers' observations on the political elite of the Principalities highlight its closeness to the East and the Ottoman Empire and, to a lesser extent, its affinity with elements of civilisation specific to the West. Representatives of foreign powers perceived Transylvania differently: the province was viewed as part of Western civilisation, albeit one situated on its periphery.

The accounts from the eighteenth century and the first decade of the following century are full of interesting observations about the language spoken by the majority population of the Principalities. The documentary sources used by travellers writing about the origins of the Romanians are diverse, but the most numerous are historical and geographical sources and works of ancient and medieval philology. These older sources were supplemented by works of history and geography published in the eighteenth century containing information about the origins of the Romanian language and about people. Some of the less educated ones obtained their information directly from Romanians, noting with surprise that this people spoke a language that many of them, especially inhabitants of the Italian Peninsula, could understand. Thus, most voyagers concluded that Romanian was the heir to Latin.

Among them, it was the scholars and those belonging to the liberal professions who understood the process by which the Romanian language was formed. Of the travellers who wrote about the origins of the Romanians, 23 clearly established that the Romanian language developed from Latin, while 21 also discussed the origins of the Romanians, which they reconstructed correctly, regarding them as the descendants of Roman colonists settled in Dacia. For all those who reached the Romanian Principalities, the language spoken by the Romanians was the determining element in establishing their origins. Only secondarily did historical data, such as archaeological sources or ancient and medieval chronicles that speak of the Romanians' Roman origins, lead foreigners to regard the Romanians as descendants of the Romans. Most of them succeeded in correctly reconstructing the processes of ethnogenesis and glottogenesis, including the presence of numerous Slavic and Turkish words in Wallachia and Moldavia, and Hungarian and German words in Transylvania. There were also five travellers who succeeded in distinguishing between the name Romanian, the term by which they called themselves, and Vlach, the name given to the Romanian population by foreigners; in their opinion, this distinction was an argument in favour of their Romanity and their closeness to the West²³.

The records concerning the beliefs and customs of the Romanians are among the most interesting types of *ad literam* information transmitted by foreigners. They address a subject that is both fascinating and intriguing for the image of the Romanians emerging from their accounts. The description and understanding of Romanian beliefs and customs became increasingly interesting to them. What are the Romanians like? What is their religious faith? How do they practise it? Are Romanians more devout than the compatriots of the travellers who came to our lands?

All the characteristics identified among the Romanians combine, to some extent, elements of Western and Eastern heritage, namely their origins, geographical position, language and religious faith. The

²² *Ibidem*, p. 93-124.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 149-168.

Romanians are descendants of the Romans, but they also have an important Slavic component. They are Christians, but of the Byzantine rite, with certain specific features that foreigners did not always understand. Voyagers noted in particular the forms in which religious faith was expressed among ordinary Romanians: long and rigorous fasts, the sign of the cross, the kissing of icons, Christian practices resulting from the combination of pagan and Christian elements, the commemoration of the dead, stones placed on the chests of those buried, and so forth. These were contrasted with forms of religious expression in the Christian Churches of the West. There, Christians knew the prayers, whereas here they knew them less well. There, heated theological debates took place; here, they occurred only at the level of the elite. In other words, most travellers associated the practice of the Christian faith with education and a sound knowledge of Christian teachings. Yet education and instruction were almost non-existent among ordinary Romanians, giving rise to religious practices that foreigners often failed to understand. For Orthodox Christians, however, the veneration of icons, the sign of the cross and fasting were important and represented the highest form of Christian expression among ordinary Romanians. It is true that some Romanians did not know how to recite the *Our Father* in full, that they were uneducated and that they did not observe Christian teachings *ad litteram*, but their intense religious experience and Christian devotion, characteristic of Orthodox Christianity, could not be denied.

Similarly, Romanian customs were associated with major feast days and with the important moments of human life: birth, marriage and death. At weddings, the religious ceremony was accompanied by the dances and music of the wedding party as they escorted the procession to the bride's house, while along the way the wedding guests, led by the master of ceremonies, danced continuously. At funerals, professional mourners were present alongside the priests and musicians at the head of the deceased. Carol singers, Căluș dancers and Drăgaica were also described only marginally as exotic practices whose meaning they did not understand. It would be necessary to wait until the end of the nineteenth century for specialists in ethnography, folklore and ethnology to reveal the importance and antiquity of these practices for Christian civilisation. Another conclusion emerging from the analysis of travel records is that they are important documentary sources for ethnologists, folklorists and historians of religion seeking to understand the beliefs and customs found among Romanians²⁴.

Foreign travellers who crossed the Romanian lands were impressed by the variety of resources found there. At the same time, they observed with surprise that these riches were not exploited efficiently, while the country's inhabitants, overwhelmingly peasants and the principal, perhaps the only, producers of goods, lived in poverty difficult to describe, despised and oppressed by the country's political elite. Voyagers generally proved well informed about the political and economic situation in the Principalities, drawing information either from older works or from direct contact with local realities.

Official audiences and private discussions with native and Phanariot princes would likewise prove decisive in providing a better understanding of local realities. Travellers sought to understand the status of the Romanian lands in relation to the Porte in previous centuries in order to assess contemporary realities correctly. In the great majority of cases, they observed that Romanian rulers had successfully resisted Ottoman military campaigns in the past and that the treaties concluded provided for a largely symbolic subordination to the Porte. The deterioration of relations between the Romanian Principalities and the Ottoman Porte occurred particularly after the imposition of Phanariot rule, even though economic and financial obligations had at certain times been far greater in the past.

Observations and criticisms by representatives of the great powers were often justified, especially regarding the corrupt political system and the duplicitous attitude of the Phanariot princes. Most foreigners noted that Phanariot princes and sultans were chiefly responsible for the difficult situation of the inhabitants of the Principalities. Yet they were not solely responsible for the situation. Nor had the situation of the Romanian lands in relation to the Porte been better in the previous century. Thus, not only the Phanariot princes but also the native princes and the indigenous boyar class were culpable for the political situation of the countries. The Phanariots, especially during the first part of their rule, sought to introduce reforms to improve the functioning of the Principalities. Some succeeded, others did not, but certain princes also had good intentions. This is why some travellers noted the sensitive position of the Phanariot princes in relation to the sultans and high Ottoman officials, who were their masters. Other Phanariot princes, appointed directly by the Porte regardless of their origins, governed the countries entrusted to them by the sultans solely with the aim of enriching themselves as rapidly as possible, using the harshest methods to this end. It is no coincidence that visitors had very harsh words for authoritarian and greedy princes, who resembled

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 169-197.

their masters, the sultans. One point is clear from the written records: the Romanian lands were oppressed, exploited and humiliated by the Phanariot princes and representatives of the Ottoman Porte. Frequent military conflicts, invasions by foreign armies, exactions, plunder and the killing of inhabitants played an equally important role in the difficult situation of the Principalities. Evidently, the native boyars were not spared the criticism of foreign travellers, and at times neither was the majority population, often accused of a passive attitude towards the injustices it endured²⁵.

In Transylvania, political realities were different: the province was integrated into the Habsburg Empire, and the sovereigns sought to promote reforms to remove the predominantly Romanian serf population from the authority of the nobility, which was largely of Hungarian origin. For this reason, the rulers in Vienna and the reforms they promoted were viewed positively both by the Romanians of the province and, especially, by foreign travellers. Here, the main impediment to the province's development was the abuses and retrograde attitude of the Transylvanian nobility.

Some voyagers who reached the Principalities did not confine themselves to describing the political situation, economic potential and geopolitical position, but attempted to propose solutions for improving their status, according to the interests of the powers they served at the time. Many authors were dissatisfied with and condemned the policies of the Porte and the Phanariots in the Danubian Principalities, as well as the attitude of the Hungarian nobility in Transylvania, but few offered solutions in the interests of the countries about which they wrote. The great majority proposed solutions not only for improving the political status of the Principalities in relation to the interests of the powers they served, but also to their own advantage.

The analysis undertaken here offers a perspective on the Romanian Principalities in the eighteenth century as represented, understood and interpreted by foreign observers. In relation to present-day reality, some of the things described by travellers have changed, others have changed little or not at all, and some have disappeared. This situation confirms Nicolae Iorga's thesis concerning the importance of historical continuities and the need for national history to be investigated and viewed from beyond ethnic and political borders and, very importantly, with a critical approach.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 199-243.