

CHANGES IN WALLACHIAN TOWNS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE MODERN TIMES. A CASE STUDY: THE ROLE OF THE MILITARY SERVANTS *

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to evaluate the role played by certain social groups in the changes occurring in Wallachia (historical province in modern-day Romania) at the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern times. Ever since the 14th century, urban centres emerging in the area between the Carpathians and the Danube followed a Central-European pattern, with representative local institutions (with a *Judex* and a council of 12 *Bürger* in charge of town's affairs) and relative autonomy (legal and economic rights, tax exemptions and so on). Although on the outskirts of Europe, the towns in the Romanian-inhabited area were also subject to the changes that swept through the continent after 1500. The central authority gradually became more powerful and intrusive, with a decrease in the role played by urban institutions. This process runs parallel to towns being “infiltrated” by new groups of people, who were more connected to the ruler than to the town community. Even though they would come to share the same place, the same streets and churches, and the same town domain with the townspeople, the newcomers had an advantage: they were not placed under the authority of the *Judex* and the town council. These were the military servants, called the *roși*, due to the colour of the clothes they wore in battle (“roșu” = red), accompanied into towns by the *slujitori* (=servants, literally), divided into mounted and foot soldiers. They were all freemen and held first and foremost military duties, their role increasing as the rulers could no longer rely on the country's army. The *roși* were well-to-do small nobles (called *boyars*), who owned land, while the *slujitori* were more modest in terms of wealth and origin, many descending from landless peasants. For this reason, they were allowed to settle into towns and to work the land on the ruler-owned town domain. This is also how they would become competitors for the townspeople, who also enjoyed this right. The ranks of these military servants were also joined by some town inhabitants, even if they were foreigners (Greeks), who found tax exemptions and a better life more appealing. In the second half of the 17th century, as the servants rebelled (especially between 1653 and 1655), the rulers gradually diminished their numbers. An increase in the obligations towards the Ottoman Empire led to the levying of new taxes from the servants, leading to the loss of this status by those unable to pay them.

Key Words: Wallachia, towns, military servants, social impact

Introduction:

The 16th century brought changes for many towns in the Romanian Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, as it did for many European towns. The continent itself was changing, and urban centres could not steer clear of „foul circumstance”, as a well-known Romanian chronicler, Grigore Ureche, put it. Geographic discovery had opened up a horizon unthinkable to the medieval man, bearing economic possibilities with consequences that the people of the time could not even come to imagine. Western Europe was gradually shifting its focus towards the Atlantic and America, with the Mediterranean Sea and the Levant becoming of auxiliary interest. Italian towns, Austria, the Ottoman Empire, and then Russia, which became increasingly unequal in status, would continue their rivalry, but the stakes would become regional, rather than continental. Another significant event, with deep implications, would sweep through the urban world and beyond, in the entire Europe: the Reformation. Not long after Luther's initiative in 1517, a good part of Central and Western Europe

would be torn by denominational dispute, which would rend through states, regions, towns and families alike. Although on the outskirts of Europe, in an area influenced both by the Latin world, and the Greek Orient, towns in the Romanian area could not avoid the shifts that the continent gradually faced after 1500. Our paper does rely on a recent landmark in historiography, Jaroslav Miller's work on "urban societies in Central and Eastern Europe". Where towns are concerned, Miller believes that there are five processes which are indicative of the changes that characterized the move from the Middle Ages to modern times: new forms of urbanization; an immigration much more diverse socially, religiously and socially; the Reformation and its impact; the creation of early modern states; high-level structural changes in European economy. These processes affected towns first of all by undermining the concept of "town" as a political and economic, autonomous entity, influencing the integrity of urban society as well (after a process of denominational, cultural, and social fragmentation)²⁷². This paper seeks to bring a new approach, meant to help identify common features, as well as differences regarding the process of change in urban communities during the progress from the Late Middle Ages to modern times. We will take into account the obvious features present in Eastern Europe, which have impressed certain specifics on the above-mentioned change. Any historian interested in these aspects is faced with several challenges: first of all, the state of available sources (mostly documents and narrative sources), overall scarce; this improves as we progress towards Modern times. Another challenge, this time one of methodology, lies in the fact that we do not have as many insights into the urban life of the Romanian area prior to 1500 as we would wish. The reason is the lack of sources, so we had to resort to later sources to understand the historic process.

Main text:

A few words on the less known Romanian Principalities. They are only late in emerging on the map of Europe, in the 14th century; Wallachia and Moldavia evolved as principalities with a very high degree of autonomy, with the first dependent on the kingdom of Poland, and the second, on Hungary. From the 16th century on, they come under Ottoman influence, which became ever-present in the region. Between the Carpathians, the Danube, and the Black Sea, towns emerged in the 14th-15th centuries, with their inhabitants following a pattern of organization borrowed from similar centres in Central Europe: they enjoyed internal autonomy, elected their own mayor (called *judex*) and a council, their trials were held by their own laws, but they did, however, pay somewhat large taxes to the ruler.

The signs of social, ethnic, and denominational changes can be seen in Wallachian towns in the latter half of the 16th century. Until that time, some of the oldest towns (Câmpulung, Râmnicul Vâlcea, Târgoviște and Argeș) held hints that the main role within the communities had been shared by Romanians with Germans and Hungarians. On a background of religious Reformation, the latter converted to Lutheranism, and a large part chose to cross the mountains into Transylvania²⁷³. They were replaced by people from the Balkans: Ragusans, Armenians, Italians, Jews, and even Turks. But 16th century sources pay even more attention to another group of people who become more present: the Greeks. We must point out that not all those referred to as "Greeks" in the sources were truly Greek, since this generic reference was actually an umbrella for various peoples arriving from south of the Danube and who shared the usage of Greek. This language, along with Ottoman Turkish, the official language of the Empire, was a true *lingua franca*, used in Church, daily communication, trade, etc²⁷⁴. Most had settled in towns, where they dealt in trade; this led to the name of "Greek" becoming synonymous with "merchant" in the Romanian area of the 17th-18th centuries²⁷⁵. There are hence some changes in the ethnic make-up, with urban communities becoming even more mixed, and people arriving from regions of Europe with different urban traditions, everything set against the central authority's trend towards reinforcing its power.

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²⁷² Miller 2008, p. 3.

²⁷³ For the impact of Reformation in Moldavia, see Crăciun 1996.

²⁷⁴ Stoianovich 1960, p. 290.

²⁷⁵ Lazăr 2006, p. 107.

But foreign merchants or craftsmen are joined in Wallachian towns by locals as well, who are representatives of other social groups, which only highlights the loose structure of these communities. Our interest was drawn by two categories of people who are becoming even more present in towns at the end of the 16th century, namely those referred to as *curteni* (or *roși*) and *slujitori*. With several exceptions, only few Romanian scholars took interest in them, and even fewer were those who studied their presence and impact in the towns of the period²⁷⁶. This is why the present paper will seek – to the extent made possible by the sources – to explain why they are even more of them in towns, who supported them and to what extent their group influenced the urban environment.

The *curteni* (literally, “servants of the court”) were those in service of the ruler who were meant to ensure that the administration of the country performed better; but they also had important military duties²⁷⁷. What’s more, they even had a military chain of command: captains (Rom. *căpitani*, usually recruited from among the high nobility, called “boyars” in Wallachia)²⁷⁸, and lower ranks (Rom. *iuzbași*, *ceauși* and *vătafi*). Despite being dependent from the start on the ruler’s residence, they were free men, and fell into a particular category of their own when it came to tax matters²⁷⁹. From the latter half of the 16th century on, they are more often referred to as *roși* (Old Slav. *cerveni*, Rom. *roșu*, Engl. *red*)²⁸⁰, due to the colour of the uniform they wore in battle; this name change was partly simultaneous with the changes in their status. The increasing need for money exhibited by the rulers led to even more taxes being levied on these people, and they finally became more of a tax category than a military group²⁸¹.

Not long after they are being referred to under the new name of *roși*, they can be met in towns. However, they were seen as a specific category, closer to nobility than to the townspeople. Some even came from among the ranks of the lesser rural nobility, but as part of them approached the towns, the *roși* began to emerge even among the sons of priests and merchants. One of the most renowned cases is that of Mihai from Târgșor, whose path in life is a very interesting one. At first, he seems like a common man, a townsman of Greek origin who had arrived here in order to deal in Eastern goods, fabric and clothing²⁸². These earned him some money, but he becomes more influential by a different route, by the direct support of one of the most renowned rulers in Romanian history, Michael the Brave (1593-1601). The prince exempts him from military duty, on the one hand since some of the grand nobles intervened on his behalf, on the other, for a more “natural” reason: the ruler himself had a relationship with Tudora, Michael’s daughter, which later led to the birth of an illegitimate daughter²⁸³. Benefitting from protection, Mihai the Greek purchased various houses, lands and domains in his town and the adjacent areas²⁸⁴. During the reign of the next prince, Radu Șerban, Mihai continues his climb on the social and material ladder, and is granted exemption of all taxes, entering the category of the *roși*²⁸⁵. His case remains illustrative of how someone entering the urban community from outside it could “function” for a while within it and also acquire economic gain. Since Mihai had become a member of the privileged *roși*, he, but especially his inheritors found it easier to come closer to the rest of the nobility; this would allow some of them to follow a distinguished career. Mihai’s youngest son, Antonie, was prince of Wallachia between 1669 and 1672²⁸⁶.

The few data remaining reveals that the *roși* in towns were selected among those with a higher standing. Although insufficient for us to create a full picture, sources reveal them as people owning land, both in the towns which they inhabit, and in the villages, where they purchase lands and

²⁷⁶ Filitti 1935, pp. 33-40; the best work on this subject is Stoicescu 1968.

²⁷⁷ Grecescu 1963, p. 83, 150.

²⁷⁸ Grecescu, Simionescu 1960, p. 102.

²⁷⁹ Stoicescu 1968, pp. 15-19, 53-54.

²⁸⁰ First mentioned in 1574 (*Documenta Romaniae*, VII, p. 219).

²⁸¹ Stoicescu 1968, p. 27, 31.

²⁸² *Documenta Romaniae*, XI, p. 35.

²⁸³ *Documenta Romaniae*, XI, p. 59, 87; *Documente privind istoria*, II, p. 440; III, p. 72.

²⁸⁴ *Documenta Romaniae*, XI, p. 381; p. 410 and 571; *Documente privind istoria*, I, p. 23; p. 30 and 38; Grecianu 1916, p. 199.

²⁸⁵ *Documente privind istoria*, I, p. 89.

²⁸⁶ Ionașcu 1938, pp. 5-15.

even serfs, and also engage in trading. Some of them became the foremost representatives of the communities which they were a part of, and were also invited as witnesses in various transactions.

Their increase in number certainly had some consequences on urban communities. Since they constituted a different tax category, the *roși* were removed from under the authority of the *judex* and the town council. When Mihai from Târgșor is acknowledged as part of the *roși*, the law issued by the ruler highlights his status keenly: “you, *judex*, with your 12 *Bürgers* and along with all the townspeople, as soon as you see this law of mine, are to keep well aloft of this servant of mine, Mihai, as of his house and his belongings, and no one should seek to cross him, for any such wrongdoer will face my punishment.”²⁸⁷ However, the *judex* retains some of his duties for a while (including legal and taxing functions) regarding the *roși* in towns, even though he shares these duties with the ruler’s officials, who are given priority; the authorities elected by the town inhabitants lose influence²⁸⁸.

But why did some townspeople prefer to enter the ranks of the *roși* and have special status? As we have already suggested above, the answer most probably comes from the fact that the townspeople paid an ever-increasing number of taxes, and their amount was well over that owed by the *roși*. Furthermore, the *roși* were exempted of the tithes that countrymen usually paid²⁸⁹. This also included the townspeople who worked the land on the town domain. It would be enough to mention the wine tax out of all these tithes, and we would realize how important these exemptions were, given that many town inhabitants had vineyards and wine was a popular income-producing beverage. The bulk of the town population felt the tax burden growing, and this was why some were looking for various loopholes in order to evade it, one being the move into the above-mentioned privileged category. In turn, this eroded the fabric of the town community, which, in time, would come to be made up of people with different tax status. Along with merchants and craftsmen, whom we assume would continue to make up a large part of the town population, urban centres were populated by an ever-growing number of people which the *judex* and the *pârgari* had no power over. At the turn of the 18th century, the *roși* entered a new process of transformation, following the actions taken by prince Constantin Brâncoveanu (1688-1714)²⁹⁰.

They were joined in this process by the *slujitori* (=servants, literally), who were more modest in origin and mostly descended from peasants who no longer owned land, but also from foreigners, who provided their services at a cost and remained here. A well known decree passed by Michael the Brave has been preserved: in it, the ruler paid 3 to 5 thalers to those coming in to fight on foot or on horseback; these amounts would increase, depending on the position held in the army²⁹¹. No matter their origin, those who satisfied the requirements to become military servants would enlist in the captains’ corps, who usually lived in the towns. The servants, just like the *roși*, were registered with special status in the treasury. They had military, police, and tax duties, some of them being settled by the rulers on their own domains, especially in towns²⁹². The fact that they occupied these domains is no accident, since the towns were considered property of the ruler. Urban domain was only provided to the townspeople with a temporary right to use, so the ruler allowed his servants to work them as well. Since they did not have these domains under full control (except for Câmpulung), urban communities failed to react, and silently accepted this intrusion by the rulers. It is true that the central authority also allowed military servants to settle only on some domains, especially those of newer towns, developed in the latter half of the 16th century.

Michael the Brave is credited with organizing the system of servants, since he felt the need for better military structuring; this can only be explained if we take into account the numerous actions of military kind in which the ruler participated (over an eight-year reign, Michael has led several campaigns in the Ottoman Empire, Transylvania and Moldavia). The servants can be found in larger numbers in the settlements which were slow to urbanize, in late 16th century. We are referring to market towns which Michael the Brave raised to town status and which were supported as a basis for

²⁸⁷ *Documente privind istoria*, I, p. 89.

²⁸⁸ *Documenta Romaniaae*, XXI, p. 37.

²⁸⁹ *Documente privind istoria*, I, p. 89.

²⁹⁰ Stoicescu 1968, pp. 71-75; Rezachevici 1989, pp. 98-102.

²⁹¹ *Documenta Romaniaae*, XI, p. 323.

²⁹² Stoicescu 1968, pp. 60-63.

his politics. Groups of military servants were set up on the Ploiești domain, recently obtained by the ruler²⁹³, as well as in the market towns of Caracal and Rușii de Vede²⁹⁴. The towns of Floci, as well as Târgșor and Gherghița would follow.

Sources refer to servants fighting on horseback at their own expense as *călărași*, while foot soldiers were called *dorobanți*. The latter were sometimes compensated financially (this is why they were rarely granted domains), and are more often encountered in larger towns (especially where the ruler resided) and less so in small towns²⁹⁵. As for the mounted soldiers, they are mentioned in most towns in the eastern side of Wallachia. They can be found in large numbers in Ploiești²⁹⁶, Râmnic²⁹⁷, but also in Buzău²⁹⁸. They could not fail to be present in Bucharest as well, where they seemed to dwell in relatively large numbers ever since before Matei Basarab's reign (1632-1654), and they will remain there during his reign too²⁹⁹. However, their vast presence here can be explained: on the one hand, as a town Bucharest is relatively new; furthermore, several rulers resided here, and they preferred to have their main residence in this place, on the Dâmbovița river³⁰⁰. It was natural for the ruler to have a group of servants at hand, ready to wage battle when called upon.

The data or the hints regarding the pursuits of military servants dwelling in towns are much fewer. We may assume that, when not going to battle, some traded goods, even though there is no direct information, since they are never referred to as "merchants"; this term is reserved for those in the respective guild. A craft is indicated for some of them, and it might stand for their current occupation. This is why there were servants who fought on horseback, but who are also noted as tanners, boot makers, or even soap makers³⁰¹. However, these cases are rare, and they reveal that most servants handled business distinct from those specific to the townspeople or that they rather worked the lands on the town domain, instead of engaging in trade or any craft.

If some sources suggest that Michael the Brave played a significant part in rethinking the military servant system in the country, an increase in their numbers, especially in the towns, becomes obvious under Matei Basarab. It is estimated that, while in 1632 the army was made up of 12.000 soldiers, its numbers reached 40.000 people at the end of Matei's rule (8.000 *roși* and 10.000 servants)³⁰². Matei Basarab, himself a former soldier, sought to have a more numerous army for several reasons, among them his wish to keep the throne (based on his rivalry with Vasile Lupu, the ruler of neighbouring Moldavia), but also to play a more important part on the local political stage (as part of his alliance with the prince of Transylvania)³⁰³.

The role and status of military servants goes through gradual changes as well. Their numbers decrease³⁰⁴. The cause for this was two-fold: some of the group representatives lost public confidence due to regular riots, and their numbers dwindled on account of the battles, famine and plague³⁰⁵. On the other hand, one role was also played by the more severe taxing conditions, as the country's duties towards the Ottoman Empire also increased³⁰⁶. We must also take into account the measures to reform the military system taken by Constantin Brâncoveanu, who also included the *roși* among servants, while the *călărași* and the *dorobanți* lost significance and were replaced by new categories³⁰⁷.

Towns were indirectly influenced after the servants and the *roși* settled in. Besides the fact that the *judex* and the *Bürgers* had no authority over them, the larger group of military servants had

²⁹³ Sevastos 1937, pp. 825-827.

²⁹⁴ Grecescu, Simionescu 1960, p. 94; Grecescu 1963, p. 90.

²⁹⁵ Stoicescu 1968, p. 116.

²⁹⁶ *Documenta Romaniae*, XXIV, p. 323; XXXVII, p. 155.

²⁹⁷ *Documenta Romaniae*, XXIV, p. 516; XXXVIII, p. 79.

²⁹⁸ *Documenta Romaniae*, XXI, p. 280; XXX, p. 173 and many other documents.

²⁹⁹ Numerous testimonies in the local sources: *Documenta Romaniae*, XXI, p. 120, 375; XXII, p. 246, 357; XXV, p. 53, 159 and so on.

³⁰⁰ *Documenta Romaniae*, XXV, p. 423; see also our considerations on this subject in Rădvan 2010, pp. 255-260.

³⁰¹ *Documenta Romaniae*, XXI, p. 169, 249; XXV, p. 67; Stoicescu 1968, p. 68.

³⁰² Stoicescu 1988, pp. 70-72.

³⁰³ See Andreescu 1989, pp. 225-228.

³⁰⁴ Grecescu 1963, p. 176, 206.

³⁰⁵ Grecescu, Simionescu 1960, p. 147; Cernovodeanu, Binder 1993, pp. 86-88.

³⁰⁶ Stoicescu 1968, pp. 32-33.

³⁰⁷ Rezachevici 1989, pp. 100-104.

become a factor of instability, due to the riots occurring for political or fiscal reasons. One of the first movements ascribed to them was recorded by chronicles in 1626, and had a political nature (we cannot infer the social nature based on current information)³⁰⁸. Interestingly enough, the *roși* did not take any part in it, but they are noted as suppressing the riot by the same chronicles. Almost three decades later, the 1653-1655 period was marked by several riots of the servants (especially of the *dorobanți*), as part of a vast movement with causes that were both political (conspiracies of the nobles, challengers for the throne) and fiscal (taxes levied, wages not paid)³⁰⁹. The chronicles of the time provide enough detail for us to create a perspective on the impact on towns. Where numbers are concerned, the first significant role was played by the mercenary servants called *seimeni*, many of them Serbian in origin, who were joined by the foot soldiers (*dorobanți*)³¹⁰. The noblemen took the harshest blow, but the acts of the rioters also overwhelmed the common town population, especially in larger cities, where the ruler resided. Prince Constantin Șerban (1654-1658) succeeded in temporarily appeasing the movement, by paying the wages of the servants and exempting them from several tax duties, but his attempt to take apart the *seimeni* group generated a new riot and created new victims among the nobility. It was at this point that the townspeople in Bucharest had a lot to suffer, as sources of the time mention: “they [the *seimeni*] plundered the houses of boyars and merchants and all those they could find”³¹¹; “the servants in Bucharest rose and pillaged all the monasteries and churches in town and in other parts and took whatever they could find there.”³¹² Most town dwellings were made of wood at the time, so any spark could have caused a devastating fire, as it happened in towns in the Romanian countries until mid 19th century. The *roși* could not have taken part in it, and mounted servants participated when required by their captains and their political views³¹³.

The presence of military servants in towns can also be explained by the specifics of Wallachian society in the final days of the Middle Ages. If we refer strictly to the urban world, we notice that, even though it had begun to follow a Central-European model, local conditions undermined the trend towards unity of people living here. In the Middle Ages, the town, a centre holding autonomy, was in fact a community which reunited people with mainly economic pursuits: merchants and craftsmen. At the end of this period, in keeping with the changes occurring in other parts of the continent, Wallachian towns also began to attract the most diverse of social categories. The central authority (the ruler), who claimed dominion over the country and implicitly over towns, had begun a process of consolidating its power, both in its relation with the nobles, and with other social categories. The settling of military servants into towns is part of this process, in our view. The *roși* were the lesser nobility, a force to be reckoned with, and which the ruler relied on not only in battle, but also for various taxation or administrative purposes (on county level). As for the servants, we may notice that they also gained importance because of the higher number of people without land or those who wished to attain a higher standing than that of mere workers of the land. Sources mention quite a few serfs who ran to town and who, by resorting to various deceptions, tried to enrol as servants, mounted or not. The servant status (since they could not reach the status of the *roși*) was superior and desirable for many of these people, and the rulers accepted those who could fit into this category or, as the case had it, rejected those who attempted to find their way into it by trickery.

The distinction between the *roși* and the servants also existed in towns. The *roși* were men of a certain standing, holding estate (houses and land in town, small domains in the neighbouring villages) and who were on good terms with the rest of the nobility. Instead, servants were more modest, and only used lands on town domains, competing with the townspeople; in time, some of the servants also obtained houses, vineyards or windmills in or around towns. The rulers tried to avoid the older towns (Câmpulung, Râmnicul din Vâlcea), where certain privileges could be invoked, and placed military servants especially on the domains of poverty-stricken towns or those ravaged by war and invasions, such as Gherghița or Floci. A second category of town dwellings where servants

³⁰⁸ Grecescu, Simionescu 1960, p. 94; Grecescu 1963, p. 90.

³⁰⁹ See Mioc 1959, pp. 53-83.

³¹⁰ Iorga 1910, pp. 187-210; Demény, Demény, and Stoicescu 1968, *passim*.

³¹¹ Grecescu, Simionescu 1960, p. 116-123.

³¹² *Catalogul*, VIII, p. 488.

³¹³ Demény, Demény, and Stoicescu 1968, p. 263.

played a major part are those that would become towns only later, supported by some rulers. Ploiești and Caracal are two examples. Lastly, there are servants in more peripheral towns, especially closer to Moldavia, such as Buzău or Râmnicul Sărat. This may be explained by the conflicts with Moldavian rulers, but also by the Mongol (*tatar*) threat, their attack waves coming in from the north of the Black Sea. Even though we can only rely on statistic sources, in the first half of the 17th century, servants seem to be more numerous in Eastern Wallachia (the area referred to as "Muntenia") than in the Western half (called "Oltenia"). This is no accident, and explanations for this division also point to how Western towns came under the ruler's control (and were also acknowledged as "towns") only in the 16th century³¹⁴.

Conclusion:

Although many military servants were based in towns, they were never seen as common townfolk. Their superior status also becomes evident in descriptions of the country assemblies, where they are situated above the townspeople, who are not even mentioned at times. This served to give value to their relation to the ruler, since the military duties of the *roși* and the servants made them more valuable "assets" than the townspeople and their economic duties. Sources clearly reveal the hierarchy of the time, with noblemen at the forefront, followed by the Church and the army, with townspeople and peasants at the end. Even decrees passed by the ruler are addressed first to noblemen and servants, and only then to the townspeople.

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³¹⁴ Rădvan 2010, pp. 167-170.

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