

# SOME OBSERVATIONS CONCERNING THE MEDIEVAL HISTORY OF TRANSYLVANIA

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The publication of a new history of Transylvania from the Hungarian point of view, but in French this time, is a distinct part of a well-defined program of the Budapest propaganda machine, designed to lend "historical" legitimacy to an old nostalgia: the multi-national kingdom of "Saint Stephen's Crown," built by conquest, in the first centuries of our millennium. It is true that this study does not do so directly, its true meaning being more difficult to ascertain than usual, hidden somewhat by a skillfully constructed scientific structure. The usual historic pride, obvious up to now, is replaced by a direct affirmation or simulation of objectivity, the old disdainful tone is frequently rejected in favor of a more tempting one, while the elaboration is more decent than it used to be in the past.<sup>1</sup> However, the purpose is still the same, the new form is merely meant to reinforce, to justify and to intensify it more successfully.

According to the authors, the arrival of Arpad's horsemen and their relatives before the end of the 9th century, in a quasi-deserted place in Pannonia and in Transylvania, would have given full legitimacy to the ancient Hungarian domination of the region, as well as to that dreamed of in future. The presence of

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<sup>1</sup> David Prodan, *Transilvania și iar Transilvania. Considerații istorice*, (București, 1992), p. 164

some groups of Slavs on these territories, before the stormy invasion of the Magyars from the steppe, though quite inconvenient, does not matter very much, because they were soon assimilated. Consequently, nobody has ever laid claim to establish a Slavic state in Pannonia or Transylvania in modern times. The problem of the Romanians is entirely different. They represent two-thirds of Transylvania's population and beginning with the 18th century they have been systematically fighting for their political and national rights, and later, for union with Romania. Therefore, up to the 18th century no one had consciously falsified the history of the Romanians. No one had ever questioned the fact that the Romanians were the descendants of the Daco-Romans, or only of the Romans, colonized in Dacia by the emperor Trajan. In the 18th century history became, to a greater extent, a weapon for political struggle, for almost all central and eastern European peoples, but especially for their rulers. Therefore, the Austrian and Magyar rulers of Transylvania appealed to history, in their efforts to deny the rights of the Romanians, and to diminish their importance and value in the region, considering them as natives of places other than Transylvania, as inferior and incapable of culture and civilization. After the fall of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire in 1918, Austrian historiography, with few exceptions, abandoned the anti-Romanian campaign as it had no further political value for Austria. It was not the same thing with Hungary which tried to re-establish, in 1848-1849, despite the course of history, the multinational kingdom that was their "gift" from the Austrian rulers in 1867 for 51 years. The liberation of peoples from under Magyar domination in 1918 (Slovenians, Croatians, Serbians, Ruthenians, and Romanians), was considered as a historical injustice imposed on Hungary. This is why, regardless of the political regime after 1918 – from the proletarian, Soviet revolution of Béla Kun to the post-war communist regime, from the totalitarian fascist system of Horthy Miklos, to the democra-

tic regime after 1989 – in Hungary, frustration has always been carefully cultivated, and the wish to rectify this "great injustice" was often a state policy. In this sense, an American historian of Magyar origin, said that Hungarian nationalism, "the more it changes, the more it remains the same."<sup>2</sup> It is also true that historical research cannot bring about the alteration of borders, but it can foster a certain point of view, which at a given historical moment, has its own significance (see, for instance, the Magyar irredentist propaganda in 1938-1940, when the neighboring states lost territories in favor of Hungary). The new study concerning the history of Transylvania, first published in 1986, in three volumes, in Hungarian, is proof of the continuing tendency of Hungarian historiography to present in a distorted manner the past (and even the present) of the states that were formed in 1918 and whose existence was legitimized by international treaties. The authors of the study took full advantage of the political circumstances during Ceaușescu's dictatorship, when a great part of the Romanian historiography was characterized by nationalist excesses. The fighting of these excesses was just the opportunity needed by Magyar historians to take up again the old theses and to express new ones, more subtle, but equally unrelated to the historic truth.

One of the favorite thesis of Magyar historiography is that of the Romanians late emigration into Transylvania. The important fact is that Romanians or their ancestors should not have been in Transylvania at the end of the 9th century and not even in the following ones, in the 11th – 12th centuries, when Transylvania was conquered by the Magyar Kingdom and was colonized with foreign populations. The strange, almost absurd arguments for such ideas were: the Dacians were entirely or nearly destroyed after the Roman wars; Dacia could not be

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<sup>2</sup> An affirmation made on different occasion, orally or written, by George Baranyi, in the USA.

Romanized in the short period from Trajan to Aurelian; the whole population of Roman Dacia was moved by Aurelian to the south of the Danube, where the Romanian people were born, a "Balkan people, of nomad shepherds," who "stealthily" came to Transylvania in the 13th – 14th centuries and afterwards. To support these arguments, Dacian civilization and the number of Dacians had be minimized; the process of Romanization in Dacia was contested; the obvious proofs for the existence of a Dacian-Roman population in the northern parts of the Danube after the year 274 A.D. were not taken into consideration; the importance of the barbarian populations in Transylvania, after the 3rd century A.D. was overestimated in order to demonstrate the impossibility of the survival of some "Roman enclaves" on their territory. Thus, this is an attempt to reject the autochthonous nature of the Romanian population in Transylvania, but at the same time, it is also an attempt to deny any similarities between the ethnogenesis of the Romanians and of the other Roman people – French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, etc. Still, all these were not enough for the authors of the "The History of Transylvania." They took for granted opinions and hypothesis that certified the continuity of the Hungarians in Pannonia and Transylvania. For example: the migration of the Hungarians in Pannonia, is placed in 895 although the most reliable sources place it in 896; then, the "theory of the double setting down" argues that before the Hungarians, in about 670, the Onogurians, a people related to them, had migrated in Pannonia. Consequently, the strange idea of the continuity between the invaders of 670 and those of 896 is accepted; on the other hand, in Transylvania, more protected against migrations and better defended naturally than Pannonia, the continuity of the Romanians ancestors is not admitted. Moreover, despite the most important Hungarian and foreign chronicles, the idea that the Hungarians entered Pannonia through the Verecke pass is not accepted; instead, it is argued

they went west through the passes of the eastern Carpathians. Tradition, logic and historical geography are abandoned, to legitimize the theory that the Hungarians first settled in Transylvania and only afterwards in their present country (p. 118). It does not matter to the authors that this ad hoc "theory" is in contradiction with the most important Hungarian and Russian chronicles of the period.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, these same chronicles mention the presence of the Romanians not only in Transylvania, but also in Pannonia, at the time when the Hungarians came there. The chronicle of Simion de Keza, as well as many other Latin-Magyar ones, from the 14th century stated that, after the death of Attila's sons and the fall for the Hun empire, Pannonia was inhabited by Slavs, Greeks, Germans, Bulgarians, and Romanians (Wallachians). The presence of the Romanians in Pannonia, before the invasion of the Hungarians, represented a rich source of inspiration for the medieval literature: *Nibelungenlied*, *Witeolf und Dietleib*, *Die Klage*, *La guerre d'Attila*, written by the poet from Bologna, Nicolae da Casola. Many other humanist scholars such as Anton Verancsics of Frederic Menius sustained the above idea. It is obvious that the oral tradition from Pannonia and Transylvania kept alive the memory of the Romanian presence there; on these grounds, some literary sources advanced the idea that the Romanians had existed in Pannonia even during the epoch of the Huns.<sup>4</sup> In fact, there is only an apparent error, as the Romans' descendants (that is the Romanians' ancestors) – often called "*pastores Romanorum*" – were certainly in Pannonia when the Huns came. From sources other than Simon de Keza, the Anonymus Chronicler of King

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<sup>3</sup> Victor Spinei, *Migrația ungarilor în spațiul carpato-dunărean și contactele lor cu romanii în sec. IX-X*, in "Arheologia Moldovei", 1990, XIII, pp. 120-121

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 122-123

Bela (the Magistrate P. – Anonymus), also said that, when the Hungarians came to Pannonia, they found there Slavs, Bulgarians, and Romanians (*Blachii ac pastores Romanorum*).<sup>5</sup> The same chronicler mentioned that Transylvania (*terra Ultrasilvania*) was inhabited then by Romanians and Slavs, and the ruler was a Romanian, Gelu (*Gelou quidam Blacus dominium tenebit*).<sup>6</sup> The painted chronicle of Vienna (*Chronicon Pictum Vindobonense*) clearly states that the Romanians were the successors of the Roman colonists, and that they had willingly remained in Pannonia as shepherds (*Vlachis qui ipsorum – Romanorum – coloni existere ac pastores romanentibus sponte in Panonia*).<sup>7</sup> This information is also confirmed by the Russian chronicle *Poves't'ore – mennych let*, which mentions the fact that in 898 (in fact 896), the nomad Hungarians, after crossing "the Hungarian mountains," met the Romanians and the Slavs in Pannonia.<sup>8</sup> All these sources are deliberately ignored by the authors of this history of Transylvania, whose only purpose is to eliminate the Romanians and their ancestors from Transylvania and Pannonia before the 12th and 13th centuries.

In order to deny this evidence, the authors have resorted to strange tactics, scarifying even the values and personalities of their own civilization in the process. The anonymus notary of king Bela (Anonymus) – a learned man who had studied at Sorbonne, because he mentioned the Romanians as having been in Transylvania before the arrival of the Hungarians, was discredited, being considered naive and not well informed. The historiography that considered Anonymus as a main witness of

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<sup>5</sup> P. Magistriri qui Anonymus dicitur *Gesta Hungarorum*, ed. A. Jakubovich, D. Pais, in "Scriptores Rerum Hungaricum," I, p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>7</sup> Virgil Ciociltan, *Observații referitoare la românii din Cronica Notarului Anonim al regelui Bela*, in "Revista de istorie," 1987, 40, nr. 5, p. 447.

<sup>8</sup> V. Spinei, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

the events from the 9th and 10th centuries is also severely criticized. Still, all the examples of "erroneous tales and fantasies" of Anonymus mention the Romanians. Anonymus' Romanians were mere inventions, along with their rulers, the battles between the Romanians and the Hungarians from west are only the chronicler's fantasies (see pp. 114-118). Anonymus, though not infallible, clearly confesses his aspiration for truth, rejecting tales and legends. Even if Anonymus had invented the presence of the Romanians in Pannonia and Transylvania (why should he have done it?), there are still other chronicles and proofs that support the author of the *Hungarian Gestae*, had there been a great anti-Magyar and pro-Romanian conspiracy at the beginning of the Middle Ages and the Hungarian history discovered it only in the last century?

Romanian historiography, especially during the communist dictatorship, certainly had its shortcomings, but it is at least malevolence to accuse it of having "praised Gelu the Romanian," while quoting further, "the Romanians are the poorest people in all the world" (p.116). First, this observation has nothing to do with the discussed problem: rich or poor, the Romanians were there, in Transylvania. Second, after the pillage of the Barbarians (Goths, Huns, Gepidae, Avars, Slavs, and Bulgarians) it was natural that the Romanians had a humble condition which grew worse following the Hungarian conquest. Third, if Romanian historians neglect to mention the poverty of their people, it is also true that their Magyar counterparts do the same; for instance when Anonymus said that the Hungarians (in the 9th and 10th centuries) were eager to suck human blood, like the leech.

Still we wonder what would happen if Hungarian historians quoted this remark all the time.

Following their own logic, the authors sustain that the only valuable sources regarding the presence of the Romanians in the north of the Danube and in Transylvania are these contem-

porary with the events. On these grounds, Anonymous who lived probably in the 12th century, and wrote about the 9th to 11th centuries, is repudiated. Thus, "the first valuable historical source," mentioning the Romanians in Transylvania, according to the above mentioned authors, is the work of John Kinnamos the secretary of the Byzantine emperor Manuel Comnenus (1143-1180). Relating a Byzantine expedition against Hungary in 1166, Kinnamos mentions the Romanians north of the Danube: "It is said that from ancient times they are the successors of the Italian colonists."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, Kinnamos undoubtedly sustains the Romanity of the Romanians then, using the impersonal formula "it is said," he suggests that the idea exists in the collective consciousness, and he only underlines it. Finally, characterizing the Romanians as successors from ancient times of the Roman colonists, the Byzantine chronicler implicitly recognizes their continuity north of the Danube. Yet, "*Histoire de la Transylvanie*" states that only in the 12th century there began a timid "migration" of the Balkan Romanians towards the Carpathians. The only difference being that, except for a few natural crossings of the population in both directions, there is no proof of the movement of large masses of Romanians from the south to the north of the Danube, namely into Transylvania. However, Hungarian historians have discovered an explanation: the Romanians came all the time, in great number, but "secretly" in silence, so that nobody knew about them. Strange logic! How could such a large mass of people moving from south to north, not be noticed by anyone, neither by the Slavic-Byzantine world from where they were said to have departed, nor by the Hungarian kingdom where they were supposed to have arrived? It was just during this period of time (the 12th and 13th centuries) that the great movements and colonizations of foreign populations in Transylvania took place – Saxons, Szeklers, Teu-

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<sup>9</sup> Dimitrie Onciul, *Opere complete*, I, "Originile Principatelor Române," ed. A. Sacerdoțeanu, București, 1946, p. 329.



tons – and all these are minutely recorded by the contemporary sources. How come that only the Romanians, today the most numerous people in southeastern Europe, could have been left out by these sources? Each population that entered into Transylvania is named by the sources with a typical term (colonists, genests, hospites, etc.) and had special privileges. The Romanians never had such privileges and were never named by a term indicating that they were foreigners. This was only natural, as the Romanians were the only ancient, autochthonous people in Transylvania. All the historical sources of the Middle Ages considered the Romanians from the north of the Danube as autochthonous and successors of the Roman colonists in Dacia. Consequently, the Romanian people were born on both sides of the Danube, as its constituent elements were both on the northern and southern sides of the great river. To move the Dacian-Romans to the south in the 3rd century A.D. and bring them back after one thousand years, on the very territories of their ancestors, has neither reason nor historical support. The great French historian, Ferdinand Lot, who first believed the migration theory, wrote about the Romanians in 1943: "Still, where should we place the Daco-Romanian? The Hungarians, the Serbians, the Bulgarians, and the Greeks agreed that their place is by no means, neither Transylvania, nor Serbia, Bulgaria or Macedonia. Yet, they have not fallen from heaven and have neither come from hell. This unanimity against the Romanians is leading to the acceptance of the thesis of Dacian-Roman continuity north of the Danube."<sup>10</sup> Ferdinand Lot had been under the influence of several Magyar studies concerning the origin of the Romanians, but an important study by the Romanian historian Gheorghe I. Brătianu, written in French, made him change his mind.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gheorghe I. Brătianu, *O enigmă și un miracol istoric: poporul român*, ed. S. Brezeanu, București 1988, pp. 161-162

<sup>11</sup> See note 10.

Still, "Histoire de la Transylvanie" goes on with the errors and exaggerations of the past, even after recognizing the presence of the Romanians in Transylvania. The authors seem to accept this presence most reluctantly. As a result, Romanian civilization is constantly minimized, while the Romanians are always on the last place among Transylvania's populations. The conquest of Transylvania, the colonization of foreign populations are overestimated; the pretended civilizing role of the Hungarians and the benefit of western influences are strongly emphasized. The Romanians are presented as a "Balkan people" of nomad shepherds, who were wandering over large places (pp. 181-186). The nomadic life is considered as an inferior way of living, as if the great civilizations of the world, including the western medieval ones, were not built upon nomad occupations. It is all the more strange, that the historians of a typically nomadic people at its origin (the wandering of the Hungarians up to 896), consider as nomadic a typically sedentary people, such as the Romanians. Migratory populations, in the context of the long duration (according to Fernand Braudel's method) have left insignificant traces, an idea extended throughout the study, which applies it to the Romanians of the Middle Ages.

The stress laid upon the privileged categories in medieval society is quite natural, but it is to the prejudice and neglect of the majority, with no privileges, to which the Romanians of Transylvania belong. The authors "forget" an important thing, that has been mentioned by older historians (not only Romanians): up to 1366-1437, the Romanians, represented by their elite also belonged to the privileged categories. They were expelled late, as a result of discriminating measures taken by the second Angevin king of Hungary. These facts are not mentioned.

The ethno-demographic estimations are forged and distorted. The authors risk exact estimations, with no real basis; for the pre-modern era there were no statistics or censuses (p. 263).

ian population of Transylvania is estimated at 500,000 people, the Germans 90,000, and the Romanians 280,000. The Catholic priest, Anton Verancsics, who knew Transylvania very well, wrote in 1549: "It is inhabited by three nations, Szeklers, Hungarians, and Saxons; I would still add the Romanians who, though equal in number with the others, have no liberty, no nobility and no rights..."<sup>12</sup> Verancsics speaks about the three "nations" legally recognized in Transylvania, but also mentions the oppressed Romanians. The author recognized the ancient Roman origin of Iancu de Hunedoara; he deplored the humble condition of the Romanians, who were "serfs of the Hungarians," and does know anything about their late arrival from the south.

The theory of the increasing number of the Romanians by emigration in Transylvania is contradicted by the humanist Antonius Bonfinius, a secretary at the court of king Matthias Corvinus; the authors of this history of Transylvania do not mention him, though he stated that "the Romanians have their origin in the legions and colonies taken to Dacia by Trajan and other Roman emperors;" further on, he wrote that the barbarian invasions "could not destroy the Roman legions and colonies that had recently developed" in Dacia.<sup>13</sup> There is another important idea of Bonfinius also ignored by the Magyar authors. Praising a predecessor of Matthias Corvinus, the king Ludovic of Anjou or Ludovic the Great (1342-1382), the Italian scholar said that by the end of his reign, in everybody's opinion, the belief was so much extended and grew so strong in Hungary that more than one-third of the kingdom became religious."<sup>14</sup> Here

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<sup>12</sup> Maria Holban, *Călători străini despre Țările Române*, I, București, 1968, pp. 410 and 425.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 482-483.

<sup>14</sup> Antoni Bonfini *Rerum Ungaricorum. Decades quator cum dimidia* ed. M. Brenner, I.Sambuco, Basilicae, 1568, decades II, liber X, p. 377

is proof that around 1380, with great effort, a part of the

Hungarian population had Christian customs, Catholic belief. Let us accept that Transylvania, as a principality of Hungary, had the same proportion of Catholics (though here the Magyar population was smaller than in the Pannonian Plain); among these Catholics we must consider the Magyars, the Saxons, the Szeklers and maybe some of the Romanians, who altogether represent one-third of the population. And the other two-thirds? Naturally, here we must take into account the Orthodox Romanians, considered as schismatic by the West. There were so many other non-Catholics in Transylvania. Consequently, these two authors – Bonfinius and Verancsics – the former for the second half of the 14th century, the latter for the second half of the 15th century, testify that the Romanians represented about two-thirds of the Transylvanian population. Hence, the Romanians were the majority in Transylvania during the 14th century and 15th centuries, as well as later on. We would not risk, as the Hungarian authors did, to give exact figures, but the proportion is convincing enough, and it will remain unaltered even in the 18th century, when the first censuses are performed. From the conquest of Transylvania by the Magyars and the colonization of foreign populations (13th century), up to the 20th century the proportion of two-thirds of the Transylvanian Romanians was the same, despite all the official efforts at denationalization. Of course, the Magyar authors who bring the Romanians from other places to Transylvania and who consider they were very few there, try to prove their ideas by means of strange arguments: in the 13th century the great invasion of the Tartars and Mongols removed only the Magyars, while the Romanians came from the south and took their place; the great plague of the 14th century killed only the Hungarians and spared the Romanians, then, the Romanians grew more and more numerous, as they were more prolific, because their food was mainly sheep's milk, cheese, etc.; finally, they formed the interfere in this problem which they considered vital for their

majority in the 18th century, when because of the Turkish-Phanariot oppression, they ran away from Wallachia and Moldavia, to Transylvania under the Habsburg rule that was kind and civilized. Such "arguments" do not stand up to a critical examination. The Hungarian authors would have rejected the Romanian majority even in the 18th century, but they could not ignore the first census in Transylvania, conducted by the Austrian administration. That is why they found a skillful but false explanation: the Romanians came from the two principalities southeast of the Carpathians (pp. 399-404). The great historian David Prodan already proved the falsity of this theory, in 1944; he demonstrated, by means of arguments beyond doubt, that Romanians movements took place mostly in the opposite direction than that wished by the Magyars: the Romanians were crossing the Carpathians from Transylvania to the other two Romanian principalities, said David Prodan<sup>15</sup> as they had all the reasons to do so. The serfs in Transylvania were mostly Romanians (the name Romanian was synonymous with serf), they need to work 3-4 days a week for the feudal landlord, while the dependent peasants from the south and east of the Carpathians, did the same work 12-14 days a year, even under the "severe" Phanariot rule. For the 18th century Romanian peasant, life under the oppression of the Magyar nobles, was a tragedy which led to the uprising of Horea in 1784. Therefore, there was no logical reason for the Romanians to come to Transylvania, on the contrary, all the sources prove that they rather left Transylvania to go to the Romanian principalities where both the subjects and their Landlords were Romanian (there was no national oppression), while the social oppression was lighter.

To be more convincing in their *pro domo* pleading, the Hungarian authors appeal to yet another theory: the Magyar

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<sup>15</sup> D. Prodan, *Les migrations des Romanians au delà des Carpathes au XVIII-eme siècle. Critique d'une théorie*, Sibiu, 1945.

culture radiates not from the center of Hungary, but from Transylvania, from Tîrgu Mureş and Cluj. It is true, that after 1541 (when Hungary was dissolved by the Turks and Austrians) Hungarian culture manifested itself only partly, in Transylvania, which became an autonomous principality, but Buda was liberated from the Turks in the 17th century, and it would become the center of modern Magyar culture. It is quite surprising the denial of such a well-defined spiritual geography, just for the sake of an illusion.

In what follows the narration goes on the same way. An impressing erudition, a modern methodology, a pleasant and alert style, all these are used to falsify the truth. There is not a shade of sympathy for these Romanians, who for hundreds of years have worked hard on the territory of Transylvania, have bred cattle and sheep, have worked hard in the mines, digging for salt, iron or gold, and when necessary, they took up arms to defend their country dominated by others. In the authors' view everything the rulers did was moral and positive, while, the Romanians, expelled from the privileged categories and despised, are to blamed for all the misfortunes: being Balkan and Orthodox, they are incapable of cultural superiority; they did not accept to convert themselves to Catholicism, that would have brought them happiness; they did not adopt the Reform, as they could not understand it; they have a rural-Orthodox culture, a modest one. The authors do not or will not understand that the Orthodox belief and the Latin origin of their language were the most efficient means of preserving the Romanians national identity; this Orthodox belief, in its popular forms was by no means inferior to other Christian confessions; the Romanians were mostly rural because they had to live in rural places (until late they were strictly forbidden to live in towns); they could not build for themselves many stone churches because their church was persecuted and despised (a council from Buda in the 13th century had forbidden the "schismatics"

to build stone churches). Throughout the Middle Ages a national aristocratic pride was in the collective Magyar consciousness, and this pride was perpetuated during all the regimes that followed. The idea of Great Hungary comes from the medieval past, when, by means of force, a multinational kingdom was built. The modern national ideology, based on justice, emancipation and liberty has transformed the oppressed people into a true force of history, that has partly redressed the injustice. Therefore, it would be better if erudition and eloquence were used for understanding and tolerance and not for disregard and ignorance.

In a united Europe, these old prides seem rather anachronistic, while the search for truth is the supreme task of the historian.

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