

The Polymath Vasilie Popp or the Temptation of Change On the first Romanian Doctoral Thesis in Medicine (1817)

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(Vasilie Popp)

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THE HISTORY of Romanian culture in Transylvania and the history of Romanian medicine represent a particular stage in Vasilie Popp's work (1789–1842), which comprises ethnography, bibliography, philology, and literature, culturally situated at the crossroads of Enlightenment and Romanticism. On the other hand, in the history of Romanian medicine, Vasilie Popp is a pioneer, being the first Romanian doctor with a Ph.D. in medicine, obtained on 14 July 1817 at the University of Vienna, where he defended his thesis in Latin, as was the custom at the time. The present study is an analysis of this last component of his work, based on his published doctoral thesis. Its relevance does not only relate to the moment, but especially to the content of the thesis itself. The seemingly surprising subject of his work were the Romanian traditions concerning funeral rites and the fight against superstitions. Still, taking into account the medical and scientific level of the age as well as the particular context of Transylvania, the matters in dis-

cussion would seem indeed relevant. Thus, the topic of this first Romanian doctoral thesis is important today from four points of view: medical, historical, ethnographical and philological.

The Man and His Time

VASILIE POPP was born in 1789 in the southwest of Transylvania; his father was a priest, and both parents were of Romanian nationality. He finished high school in Cluj, the main city of Transylvania at the time, and in 1811 he was enrolled at the University of Vienna. In 1814 he earned a Ph.D. in philosophy, and in 1815 he graduated from the Faculty of Medicine at the same university. After obtaining a Ph.D. in medicine, he settled in Braşov in Transylvania, where he worked as a doctor until 1829. That year he gained the position of doctor of the Zlatna estate¹ (a mining area in central Transylvania). His interests in medicine were not strictly confined to his doctoral thesis. In 1821 he wrote a scientific paper, *Despre apele minerale de la Arpăţac, Bodoc şi Covasna* (On the mineral waters of Arpăţac, Bodoc and Covasna), the first medical work published in the Romanian language. In 1825 he translated into Romanian a *Manual pentru moaşe* (Handbook for midwives), a work by the Viennese professor Raphael Johann Steidle (1779). This study was meant to be distributed to midwives in Romanian villages with the help of priests, but for unknown reasons this did not come to pass. Moreover, as a doctor, his activity included various campaigns against plague, goitre, and several diseases specific to various professions (such as miners). This is illustrated by the many reports that he forwarded to the secular authorities concerning improvements in medicine, the fight against epidemics and infant mortality,² along with other proposals. In 1820 he unsuccessfully tried to organize a forensic medicine department at the Cluj School of Medicine and Surgery, inspired by Johann Peter Frank's ideas.³ He died in 1842, leaving a son who, paradoxically, would fight for the Hungarians against the Romanians in the civil war between these two nations during the Transylvanian Revolution of 1848–1849.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century Transylvania was part of the Habsburg Empire, a multiethnic territory with several religions and a population of about 1,569,000 in 1818. The majority of the population was Romanian (53%), living in rural areas, illiterate, and deprived of political rights.⁴ For example, despite the fact that they were in the majority, the Romanians were not represented as a nation in the Transylvanian Diet. Their only representative was the Greek-Catholic bishop, and he had that position not due to his nationality, but because he was an important landowner. At the same time, illiter-

acy among the Romanians in Transylvania was high: in 1840 only about 10,000 out of roughly 850,000 Romanians were able to read and write.⁵ During the second half of the eighteenth century this circumstance determined the character of the national emancipation movement in Romania. At first the Church controlled the movement, as the Romanians were Orthodox and Greek-Catholic as compared to the Hungarians and Germans, who were Roman Catholics and Protestants.⁶ The first point considered was cultural emancipation, later followed by political liberation. At this stage, the political actions of the Romanian leaders were aimed at an Enlightenment emancipation based on arguments such as the Latinity of the Romanians or their majority presence in Transylvania.

From the point of view of medicine, at the time Transylvania had a very low life expectancy (about 30 years), due to epidemics, high infant mortality,⁷ and a small number of doctors (there were 69 doctors in 1843 and only about 94 in 1863).⁸ The main epidemical illnesses in the first half of the nineteenth century in Transylvania were cholera (there was a widespread outbreak in 1830) and the plague (the last epidemic was recorded in 1828), along with a considerable increase in the incidence of tuberculosis and syphilis.⁹

On the other hand, the end of the eighteenth century saw a series of actions meant to improve the health of the population of the Habsburg Empire and of Transylvania, including methods to avoid diseases and especially epidemics. The introduction of vaccines against smallpox in 1801 and the establishment of modern hospitals such as those in Târgu-Mureș in 1812 and in Cluj in 1818 are also to be noted. These also appeared with an ostensibly *higher purpose*: that of allowing the state to impose its predominance “against archaic forms.” The Church endorsed some measures: in Transylvania there were discussions concerning the problem of religious holidays and marriages, along with matrimonial legislation and jurisdiction (through the decrees of the Emperor Joseph II in 1783 and 1786). These kinds of actions affected even funeral practices in Transylvania. The imperial decrees of 1784, 1788 and 1805 imposed a ban on funerals in churches, and ruled that cemeteries were to be built outside villages and towns, tombs had to have moderate dimensions, while the last kiss given to the dead was banned as well as the belief in ghosts. This also included the belief in bloodsuckers, which was widespread among the Romanians in Transylvania. Bloodsuckers were a kind of vampire who had to be unearthed, had their heart pierced, and buried again face down, in order to be kept from disturbing the tranquillity of the living by their evil actions.¹⁰ Understanding the dreadful medical and cultural condition of Transylvania, a series of Romanian intellectuals made persistent efforts to enlighten the people (especially the Romanians). Among them were Gheorghe Șincai and Petru Maior, who wanted to be not only historians and philologists, but also teachers of the people. Moreover, their actions

were designed to ensure the continuation of their methods for the Romanians in Transylvania throughout the entire nineteenth century.

This is the context of the activities of Doctor Vasilie Popp, who considered himself a pioneer of the Enlightenment period. He was guided by the aim of serving “the common good and not for scholarly glory.”¹¹ Still, through the development of new methods and their forms of expression, Vasilie Popp can also be seen as a representative of Romanticism.¹²

On a general level we can see a great change that took place in Transylvania during that time: starting in the eighteenth century, the doctor became the expression of a growing investment of trust among educated people. In this manner, the role of the doctor in society increased, producing important changes, such as the demystification of death, which is no longer seen as a punishment, but as a natural occurrence.¹³ Such ideas, in the opinion of many Transylvanian Romanian intellectuals, had to be seeded into the whole society.

Dissertatio

VIENNA WAS not an accidental choice for Vasilie Popp when it came to continuing his medical studies. This erudite city was the capital of the empire and a university centre connected to the latest developments. In addition, Vienna was preferred by most Romanian intellectuals of the time for its educational resources. Actually, during the nineteenth century, there were three main university centres where future Romanian physicians could be trained: Vienna, Budapest, and Cluj (the first university centre in Transylvania, established as late as 1872). Analysing these three universities comparatively, Valeriu Bologa, one of the most important historians of Romanian medicine, concluded: “Vienna gave the Romanians in Transylvania, from a medical point of view, the elite of its medical corps,” through doctors like Ioan Piuriu Molnar, Vasilie Popp, Ștefan P. Pop, and especially, at the end of the nineteenth century, Victor Babeș.¹⁴

To obtain the title of Doctor of Medicine, Vasillie Popp undertook two *rigurosum* exams, which he passed successfully, receiving the grades of *suficienter* and *satis bene*. He defended his thesis on 14 July 1817, with the title *Dissertatio inauguralis historico-medica de funeribus plebejis Daco-Romanorum*, supervised by professor Georgius Prochaska; and on 19 July 1817, he became a Doctor of Medicine.¹⁵ Professor Prochaska enjoyed great reputation at that time due to his theories concerning the nervous system,¹⁶ a thing that also helped V. Popp.

The dissertation itself was not one of major proportions, consisting of only 56 pages. It contained a preamble and four chapters: the origin of the

Romanians and their attitude toward death (Preamble), the funeral and its methods (Chapter I), particulars prior to the funeral (Chapter II), the “deeds” that accompany the lifting of the body (Chapter III), and “what follows after the funeral” (Chapter IV). Thus, it detailed all the steps of the funeral ritual with the Romanians of that time. Its significance was obvious: accepting the idea of the ritual itself was proof of an important cultural identity. It referred to a series of obligations held individually and collectively, as the funeral ritual determines the circumstances of “dying well.” This fundamental feature creates meanings referring to death, establishing, in the case of a traditional culture, two opposing patterns, the “good” death and the “bad” death. As far as this duality is concerned, we can understand what is accepted and rejected, imposing models with an obligatory character. At the same time the three characteristics of the ritual—the collective aspect, the mandatory aspect, and the fact that it imparts a meaning—explain its importance even better.¹⁷

In general, the purpose of the funeral ritual, clearly based on information about death, is to control the event of death through symbolic equivalences. Thus, we see that defensive rituals are necessary so that the deceased can rest in peace, an expiatory function of the imagination needed to assuage the guilt and resentment of the living and bolster the community’s solidarity in order to help gain a compensatory collective revitalization.¹⁸ The sources on which Vasilie Popp based his doctoral thesis can be grouped into four important categories: a) the medical literature of his time; b) his fine knowledge of the Latin literature; c) pieces of information taken from the works of various Romanian intellectuals of the time, and d) data collected by him or left by his father. If we take into account the topic of the thesis and the intellectual atmosphere in Romania at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the third direction seems essential. Among the Romanian intellectuals who provided information to Popp were Petru Maior, Ioan Nicolidis and Simion Bran, who, along with other Romanian intellectuals in Transylvania, regarded the completion of this doctoral thesis as a “national” cause.¹⁹ They would periodically send information to Popp referring to the thesis with the purpose of enlarging his documentary basis. That is how the presence of two letters and responses addressed by the author to Simion Bran and Petru Maior can be explained in the printed version of the thesis. Maior wrote the following to Popp: “No one has ever written on this subject before” and that is why he asked Popp to present it “in all of its glamour.”²⁰

The author’s character, specific to the Enlightenment, is illustrated by his personal confession at the beginning of the paper. This underlines his wish to dedicate himself to the service of society, in a rational and also utilitarian spirit: “I did not write this paper to offer something new, because I am very careful

when it comes to traditional customs, to for the benefit of my fellow countrymen and through them, as the power allows, to the benefit of the Country."²¹

The first issue concerning Vasilie Popp's doctoral thesis has to do with the chosen topic. Thus, it does not include research and medical innovations, but is a description of the Romanian customs in Transylvania and their close connection with Roman traditions; however its context remains that of a medical doctoral thesis, as its declared purpose was the fight against the various existing death-related superstitions in Transylvania. This last aspect seems less important than the first, because the ideology and political interests of the Transylvanian Romanians influenced the chosen topic. They tried to prove the Latin origin and therefore the antiquity of the Transylvanian Romanians as compared with other nations such as Hungary. So, the first chapter described the origin of the Romanians as "the successors of the ancient Romans in Dacia, derived from the colonists brought by the divine Trajan to this uninhabited province."²² Thus, Vasilie Popp's opinion was that the Romanians inherited their funeral customs from their ancestors, in spite of any changes that appeared once the Christian religion was imposed. Hence, the central topic of the thesis was the Latin origin, seen as a personalising factor for the nation. Along with the Romanian language as descended from the Latin vernacular and the territory on which the Romanians lived (identical to that of their ancestors), the addition of these traditions gave the perception of a national community and thus contributed to a definition of the concept of nation.²³ The motivation for using this topic is simple: a positive national self-image aimed at the progress and elevation of the Romanian nation. Because Romanians were direct descendants of the Romans, they could face their discouraging reality as well as criticism from abroad, supported by their belief in the purity of their Latin origins: no other people living in that region had a more illustrious origin than the Romanians.²⁴ This is how the presence of the subject in the first Romanian medical doctoral thesis can be explained, and also the focus on the similarities between Romanian and Roman funeral customs. Actually, what Vasilie Popp accomplished was not new, as the issue of the Latin origins was already strongly debated among the Transylvanian Romanian intellectuals in the last decades of the eighteenth century. They put together demonstrations on this subject, using as a basis linguistic or historic arguments (as in the cases of Petru Maior, Samuil Micu, Gheorghe Șincai or Ioan Budai Deleanu). Still, Vasilie Popp's originality resided in his new arguments about the Latin origin of the Romanians, specifically the as yet unexplored field of funeral customs. Thus, he created a fundamental precedent in Romanian culture, developing a new subject—ethnography—that was further expanded upon through detailed research in the second half of the nineteenth century, with the help of Theodor Burada (1883)²⁵ and especially Simion Florea Marian (1892).²⁶

Some aspects of the level of medical knowledge among Transylvanian Romanians are also outlined in the discussion on illnesses, especially epidemics, and on a series of methods meant to fight them. There is an important section on the perception of disease in Transylvanian society and with the Romanians who lived there. In this respect, Popp confessed in an open manner that “I have never seen a difference in illnesses among Romanians.”²⁷ Taking this into consideration, the names of some epidemic illnesses are rarely mentioned. The realism, drama, and tragedy of these circumstances in Transylvania in the second decade of the nineteenth century, based on the ignorance and illiteracy of most of the people, inspired Vasilié Popp, with the help of a doctor and of the authorities, to expose the great obstacles to applying protection measures. The practice of giving the dead person’s clothes for charity, a perfect opportunity for spreading epidemical diseases like plague and typhoid fever, elicited this statement from Popp: “How little such a rule [against this practice] is respected in my country. I say this because my beloved father was witness to this fact.”²⁸ Thus, he revealed the differences in superstitions between the educated and the less educated people (commoners, especially Romanians) and began the fight against those superstitions. The main difficulty lay in eliminating traditional behaviours and customs related to death and the body of the deceased, which were considered dangerous for the health of the living. In Popp’s opinion, these were growing because those customs were inspired by the religious discourse of the time: “I realize how hard it is to fight against general fallacies, especially the ones that are related to religion. Because the nobles (if we look at the education level of each individual) understand superstitions better and they correct them; still, the commoners hang on tight to their traditions, to their good and bad parts, and they will not give them up.”²⁹

Moreover, the topic of fighting superstitions was reinforced in the pieces of advice inserted at the end. One illustrated the possibility of transmitting epidemical diseases through archaic practices: “The infection (as Romanians often die of a transmissible disease) is recklessly passed on, not only in families, but amongst healthy communities as well, and after the simple rules are ignored, a huge outbreak occurs in which thousands of people die miserably.”³⁰

The abuses associated with the rituals performed around the deceased were thus condemned. For example, Popp identified shutting the eyes of the dead as being “one of the most cherished practices for the Romanians,” as it was part of the Roman heritage. The author thus pointed out that such a duty compelled the dying person’s relatives and friends to “compete with each other to be the one that shuts his/her eyes, so that they start pressing the dying person’s eyes shut even before they have given their last breath, thus making sure that no one else would do it first.”³¹ In some areas inhabited by Romanians, there was also the custom of putting wax in the shape of a penny on the dead per-

son's eyelids. Popp fought against this practice, as he believed it to be "a possible barrier against stimulants, breath and vision, to enter the body for a rebirth of the hidden soul."³² Similarly, the custom of washing the dead is also discussed (a custom performed mainly by women), and the author suggested that midwives should avoid it, as they could spread contagious diseases.³³ Another dangerous practice was that of the last kiss given to the dead. With regard to this, Popp shed light on the exaggerations of his time, underlining their gravity: "This custom is more widely spread among the Romanians, as not only the close friends or the relatives of the dead perform it; any stranger present kisses the dead; and this takes place in the house where the dead person is kept before being taken to the grave."³⁴

The subject of cemeteries occupies a significant portion of Popp's thesis. It leads to different issues, dealing, for example, with the importance of the grave, of the decorations at the grave, the sanctity of the space, ending with the position of the body in the grave. However, seen from the perspective of a doctoral thesis in medicine, we are more interested in the customs that Popp mentioned in relation to their affect on the health of the living. Consequently, this part of the thesis should be linked to another part from the beginning, which emphasized the dangers that the dead body presents for others. Elaborating upon on the idea of Doctor Josephus Habermann and of other Latin writers (especially Seneca), Vasilie Popp showed that the burial of the dead was based on two reasons. The first was related to human dignity, while the second was based on utilitarian arguments as dictated by the level of medical knowledge at the time: "So that, because of the decay of the body, the air does not attract anything rotten and cause a great diversity of diseases and even jeopardise the public health, which is the supreme law for the leaders, and also to guarantee that the bodies are taken out of the people's sight."³⁵ The risks that come from the corpse thus make burial a necessity.

The author confirmed all this, emphasizing the importance of the state in performing all the necessary attendant duties. Also, in Transylvania there was a repeat of what had happened in other areas regarding dangerous emanations coming from cemeteries. This had led to the relocation of cemeteries outside towns, uniting this action with public health as well as with other long-term concerns.³⁶ But, in spite of the relevant measures adopted by Joseph II in 1784, no kind of safeguards were put into practice in Transylvania, a fact pointed out by V. Popp: "It is rare to see Romanian cemeteries outside towns or villages, even more seldom to see them separated from the church, and very rarely surrounded by high walls or fences." However, for all of Transylvania, these circumstances would not be remedied throughout the nineteenth century, even when, periodically, the civic and ecclesiastic authorities imposed measures in that direction.

Similarly, other practices were criticized, such as reading the Gospel in the vicinity of the dead, putting it on the dead person's chest, and then having it kissed by all the people around. This was dangerous as "the rotten smells of the decaying body" could be transmitted to the living, and the covers of the Gospel, usually made of "skin taken from dead animals" were likely to spread the germs of contagious diseases to those kissing it.³⁷ The luxury of the burial—the dressing of the dead in expensive clothes—was also disapproved of, even though its Roman origin had been identified. The central argument in this case was a logical one, based on the recognition of the social status of the dead and its lack of needs, often misunderstood by the living: "Do the dead have any use or loss in this? Do not moths and maggots consume us all? And if they do not, isn't it time and decay that finally destroy us?" Thus, Vasilie Popp, who also cited "German simplicity" and described the 1784 laws of Emperor Joseph II as futile, dismissed the exaggerated expenses. Yet, he admitted that this was a practice that could hardly be abandoned for two main reasons: one was the "pointless vanity after death" and the other was the Romanians' belief in the afterlife and the fate of the dead: "They go from this world to another, passing through hot and cold, thirst and hunger, and others of the sort; furthermore, they believe that the soul will be present in another life, under the same physical appearance, standing before God—a public judge—and that is why people take care of their dead, offering them useful things for the trip to the next world, like bread, salt, a cane, or money."³⁸

It is equally interesting that Popp also discusses cremation in his thesis, defending its existence in the ancient world. He adopts a positive attitude toward this practice, placing it on the same level as entombment: "I have divided burials into two: entombment and cremation, from which I found out that each practice was received by God and regained by the people."³⁹ But this positive attitude did not make him a supporter of the practice of cremation, as he considered it old-fashioned and characteristic of ancient times. But his rationalist nature prevailed, as he was aware that the dead did not care about the manner in which their bodies were disposed of: "Anyway, neither entombment nor cremation will give any comfort to the dead. And those about to die are not interested in the procedure to be used, as they will die anyway."⁴⁰

Popp's thesis identifies another important issue: the differences between local superstitions and Romanian burial customs, and the preference of the populace for both; the balance tips mostly towards the latter, tradition prevailing over superstition. However, this study does not refer only to Transylvania but to other Romanian areas as well: Moldavia, Wallachia, and the areas south of the Danube. This section of the thesis has a double significance: it emphasizes to all Romanians of the time the relationship between funeral customs

and formal ritual, and it advances the ideological purpose of the entire thesis (i.e., the Latinity and the antiquity of Romanians in Transylvania). Therefore, the *Dissertatio*, beyond its exaggerations, is a testament to the specific habits that Romanians had towards death. It offers excellent documentation to present-day historians. For example, there is currently a special interest in the collective representations of death and various related customs. Vasilie Popp approaches this subject, in connection to the Romanians in Transylvania, as follows: “The common people honestly and unquestionably believe that man gets strength from the body and the soul and that the soul is immortal, and that after leaving the body it is happy or unhappy, depending on the time that he spent attached to the body.”⁴¹ The body was considered a prison for the soul, whose fate is determined by the mortal time spent in this world. Accordingly, there is the image of life and death as a voyage, having the role of purification and renewal: “Furthermore, the Romanians believe that their dead pass from this life to another like voyagers; on this trip they have a lot to endure, and they also have an established place and wait for doomsday.”⁴²

The process of dying is also presented, although the author confessed to having actually seen few people die. Thus, he presents the predominant attitude of Romanians in Transylvania, especially of the men, about death and dying, which was similar to that of their Roman ancestors. Death was not a thing to fear: “I could maintain that the Romanians end this life with a steady, peaceful soul. Men do not fear death, and are indifferent to agony.”⁴³ Such an attitude toward death denotes an open acceptance of destiny and of the natural fact of dying, an aspect that does not bring evasion or great fear. Therefore, quoting Dimitrie Cantemir, Vasilie Popp points out that “most Romanians believe that the time of their death has been pre-established by God, and that, even in war, no one can die before their time was up.”⁴⁴ This open attitude about death imposes a sort of fatalism and surrender, a situation that characterizes traditional societies, where the priest is the authority figure, the dominant discourse is the theological one, and death is a strong presence in the community.⁴⁵ Its effects are therefore negative because they can result in a behavior that rejects taking any kind of action against dying. Popp also noticed this and stressed its destructiveness: “Ordinary people reject the doctor in the case of the most serious illnesses and they also refuse any treatment.”⁴⁶ However, this attitude also had positive results, fostering courage in battle.

As previously stated, Vasilie Popp’s presentation of the death-related customs of the Romanians in Transylvania at the beginning of the nineteenth century and of their Latin origins put the emphasis on specific existing circumstances. Also worth mentioning here is the existence of some practices that persist in Romania even today, despite their diminishing importance because of the demys-

tification of death. It is true that, due to the specific circumstances in Romania throughout the twentieth century, the secularization of death has not reached the same level as in Western countries when it comes to the preparation of the body, the existence of funeral parlors⁴⁷ and the use and considerable presence of crematoriums.⁴⁸ The practices identified by Vasilie Popp covered the entire burial process: closing the eyes, washing and clothing the body, the contribution for the dead, the exposure of the body, the games during the wake, the prayer for the dead, charity, mourning, the removal of the dead from the house, the voyage to the cemetery, and finally the alms for the dead. Given the limited space available, I can expand on only a few of these, which the author considered the most relevant. The first refers to the significance of the candle for the dying person, which has a sacred character, like the wax of which it is made: “It is a Romanian custom for a close relative to keep wake over a lit candle placed in the dying person’s right hand; if the close relative does not perform this ritual, because they had fallen asleep or for other reasons, and discovers that the person had died without a candle in his/her hand, they believe it is a loss for the dead and that they have committed a serious sin and will try to redeem themselves through alms.”⁴⁹ The practice constitutes thus an obligation that, if not respected, gives rise to negative opinions about the dying person.

The major aspect that is presented and analyzed is the dirge, occurring during the washing of the body and the interment. The dirge was performed by women; Popp established a connection between this practice and the Roman one. He based his assertions on testimonies taken from Ovid and Pliny the Elder. The significance of the dirge was detailed in three interpretations: the expression of the pain caused by death, a way to confirm the reality of dying, and a delay in the departure of the soul to the other world. Of course, later research on the dirge by Romanians expanded on these themes, but out of the three, only the second one seems relevant to us. It indirectly points to one of the themes that seemed to elude the Enlightenment: the belief in apparent death.

Another part of the thesis—the one dedicated to the washing of the body—reveals not the discrepancy between what was happening at the time in European and in Transylvanian medicine, but the persistence of tradition in Romania. Thus, Popp explains that for a lot of his fellow countrymen “life would hide in the dead body, as it may happen for those who are half dead to be considered dead because of the great connections with the spirits that keep a person alive.”⁵⁰

As concerns the position and exposure of the dead, Vasilie Popp underlined several main aspects. They dealt with the lack of disgust toward the dead body, the position in which it was placed, which was supposed to be natural—head up and looking toward the sky, and very importantly, with the feet forward

(part of the Roman heritage—Popp cited examples from Latin literature, Caius Plinius Secundus, and Aulus Persius Flaccus).

For the Romanians in Transylvania the moment of death was crucial as it marked the dissolution of the misunderstandings and tensions that the dead had had with the living. They would come to express their grief as “hatred and death buried the sad anger.”⁵¹ What is more, enemies of the deceased also had to take part in the funeral, otherwise the entire community would have pointed their fingers at them. Not respecting this custom could have negative effects, as the Romanians of the time believed that “if the deceased died with any regrets, their soul would come out of the grave and torment even the descendants of the enemy of the dead.”

With regard to the wake, Popp centered his presentation of the practice on two levels. The first referred to the significance of the wake, identified as a means of keeping vigil for the soul of the deceased by spending the night by their side. The second one referred to the games performed during the wake, of which the author only describes one—the windmill—although citing a multitude of games he could not elaborate upon.⁵²

In addition to the Romanian burial rituals mentioned above, there is also, for example, the use of the flag at funerals if the deceased had not been married. A white flag (the color of innocence) with red stripes (the color of tears) forming different angles and triangles was carried during the ceremony. It would then be displayed on the grave for forty days and afterwards at the entrance to the church, and kept there until completely destroyed by the elements. Although Popp does not sufficiently explain this practice (“the flag used at the funeral of a young, unmarried person is a sign of victory, because they think that the young person had beaten the spells of the world”),⁵³ he was the first to note its existence, as recent research shows.⁵⁴ Moreover, in some cases, he would formulate daring hypotheses regarding other burial customs, such as leaving burning coal, water, salt, bread, or wine at the grave to feed the lost souls. He postulated that the carrying of a pot filled with burning coals to the grave the next day by women might be a remnant of the rite of cremation carried out by the ancestors of the Romanians. It was a daring hypothesis at the time, and it is only recently that anthropological research has revealed its possible origin.

The way in which the body was carried to the grave was and still is significant. This makes the funeral procession a representation of death in motion. The carrying of the body was the duty of four male relatives. But Popp observed a series of differences regarding this practice in the different areas of Romania of the time: “In Banat, Timișoara, Wallachia and Moldavia, the body was carried in the coffin upon the shoulder; in Transylvania it was slightly different: ropes

or linen towels would be put around the coffin; after the ends had been tied around the wrist, the carriers would lift the body and the coffin upon their knees.”⁵⁵

Like the Romans before them, the Romanians had a special treatment for those who had died a violent death; such was the case for those struck by lightning, whose bodies were not buried in a cemetery: “The people killed by lightning would be buried at the place where they died, on the plains or in the fields.”⁵⁶ However, Vasilie Popp’s doctoral thesis does not refer to other cases of violent death, such as suicide or crime. The explanation for this is that in the rural society of Transylvania these deaths would be included in the superior group, that of “bad deaths,” and for that reason they were not given any special treatment.

The practice of giving money to the dead is also important. This represents payment to Charon, the ferryman, for the soul’s trip to the next world. Popp shows that the practice was taken directly from the Romans, the penny being placed in the right hand, under the tongue, or between the teeth (in the Romanian villages, says Popp, this penny has the old name used in the days of the Roman Empire—denarius).⁵⁷ If the practice was not respected, it meant that the soul of the dead would not pass to the other world, spawning a living dead. This custom is important because it is a pre-Christian practice, which, over time, has become part of the existing Christian funeral ritual in Transylvania.⁵⁸

At the same time, the paper also contains several exaggerations. They can be explained by the absolute novelty of the topic, which, combined with his lack of scientific knowledge, made the author highlight real or imagined similarities between Romanian and Roman customs. His explanations were rooted in his rational nature as well as in folk culture, but not always with a factual basis. Among these we find, for example, ideas that relate to the fact that, just like the ancient Romans, the Romanians forbade people under forty to accompany the funeral procession⁵⁹ or that sprinkling the body with wine would be part of the Latin heritage,⁶⁰ or that the priest performed the ceremony without being paid for it.⁶¹ Other exaggerations referred to the practice of breaking the pot of ash after the deceased had been taken out of the house and after the funeral cortege had been formed.⁶² Popp’s explanations referring to the tradition of passing a black hen over the grave to the gravedigger, one of the most original practices at the time, are also erroneous.⁶³ However, as mentioned before, Vasilie Popp deserves credit for being the first to reveal their existence.

From a philological perspective, Vasilie Popp’s paper is important, because historically it relates to the time of the valorization of the Latinity of the Romanian language, and especially in light of the strong and even exaggerated contemporary tendencies to enlarge the Romanian lexicon with Latin words and phrases. Consequently, Popp’s thesis brings direct evidence in support of the Latin character of the Romanian language.

Beyond the ideological influences and the cultural and political interests dominant among the Romanians of Transylvania at the beginning of the nineteenth century, we should not forget that Vasilie Popp's work was a doctoral thesis leading to a title in medicine. Therefore, even if it showed the Latin origin and the roots of the Romanians in Transylvania through their funerary customs, the paper was linked to the medical practices in the field. The most representative names in the medical and scientific literature of the age that Popp made frequent references to were those of E.G. Baldinger, Ferencz Beke, Joannes Faes, Johann Peter Frank, Hugo Grotius, Lilius Gregorius Gyraldus, Josephus Habermann, Johann Dionys, Johannes Kirchmann, Johannes Andreas Quensted, Simon Pierre, C. E. Struwe and Philipp Verheyen. Of them, it seems that the strongest influence upon Vasilie Popp's thesis came from Johann Peter Frank (due to his contributions to the topic of public death)⁶⁴ and Johannes Kirchmann (with his work *De Funeribus Romanorum. Libri quatuor* written in 1605 and dedicated to the analyses of the graves and funerary habits of the Romans).⁶⁵ Similarly, Popp's references to the Greek and especially Latin literatures are even more numerous: Aristophanes, Julius Caesar, Cicero, Diogenes, Dio Cassius, Quintus Ennius, Eutropius, Herodotus, Hippocrates, Horatio, Tit Livy, Lucanus, Martial, Ovid, Petronius, Pliny the Younger, Plautus, Plutarch, Propertius, Seneca, Rufus Sextus, Strabo, Suetonius, Tacitus, Thales of Miletus, Tertuliannus, Tibullus, Varo, and Virgil. Both directions outline the image of a genuine scholar, who pioneered many directions in Romanian culture. Moreover, Vasilie Popp's greatest merit is not only that of having described a series of funeral customs of the Romanians in Transylvania, but also of having tried to explain them.

IN CONCLUSION, apart from the fact that Vasilie Popp was the first Romanian doctor with a Ph.D. in medicine, he also laid the foundation of ethnographical research in Romania, a fact that strongly supports the importance of his doctoral thesis.

But that significance also resides in two other elements. First, few modern nations had their funeral customs described in 1817, as the Romanians did.⁶⁶ Second, if we consider the profile of the Romanian Transylvanians of that time, illiterate and living mostly in rural areas, Vasilie Popp's contribution presents what is probably the most significant image of their way of explaining, understanding, and behaving in regard to death. Therefore, the historic value of his work undoubtedly goes well beyond the simple idea of a doctoral thesis in medicine. Moreover, this value increases when we consider the importance of the subject matter itself as a source of discourse, pointing again and again at the universal characteristic of the human condition: to eventually die.⁶⁷



Notes

1. A. Neamțu, “Din activitatea doctorului Vasile Popp pe domeniul minier al Zlatnei (1829–1842),” *Arhiva Institutului de Istorie și Arheologie din Cluj* 15 (1972): 134.
2. Eva Mârza and Iacob Mârza, “Introductory Study” to Vasile Popp, *Disertație despre tipografiile românești în Transilvania și învecinatele țări de la începutul lor până la vremile noastre, Sibiu, 1838* (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1995), 45–49.
3. Sámuel Izsák, “Propunerea doctorului Vasile Popp din 1820 privind crearea catedrei de ‘politia medica’ la Lyceum Medico-Chirurgicum din Cluj,” in *Studii de istoria medicinei*, ed. Valeriu Bologa (Cluj, 1968), 130.
4. Ladislau Gyémánt, “Evoluția demografică a Transilvaniei în prima jumătate a secolului XIX,” *Crisia* (Oradea) 21 (1991): 132.
5. Keith Hitchins, *Conștiință națională și acțiune politică la românii din Transilvania (1700–1868)*, trans., vol. 1 (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1988), 87–103.
6. In Transylvania there were 4 privileged Churches: Roman-Catholic, Calvinist, Lutheran, and the Unitarian Church, the Orthodox and Greek-Catholic being considered “tolerated.”
7. Ștefan Lemny, *Sensibilitate și istorie în secolul al XVIII-lea românesc* (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1990), 118–119.
8. V. L. Bologa et al., eds., *Istoria medicinei românești* (Bucharest: Ed. Medicală, 1972), 163–178, 275–287.
9. *Ibid.*, 166–267.
10. Daniel Dumitran, *Un timp al reformelor: Biserica Greco-Catolică din Transilvania sub conducerea episcopului Ioan Bob (1782–1830)* (Bucharest: Scriptorium, 2005), 79–81.
11. Vasile Popp, *Despre apele minerale de la Arpătac, Bodoc și Covasna și despre întrebuintărea acelorăși în dischilinute patimi* (Sibiu, 1821), 3.
12. Dumitru Popovici, *Romantismul românesc. Partea I-a: prima perioadă romantică: Scriitorii de la Dacia Literară* (Bucharest: Ed. Tineretului, 1969), 327. See also Paul Cornea, *Originile romantismului românesc: Spiritul public, mișcarea ideilor și literatura între 1780-1848*, 2nd edition (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2008).
13. Michel Vovelle, *La Mort et l’Occident de 1300 à nos jours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 398–401.
14. V. L. Bologa, *Contribuții la istoria medicinei din Ardeal: Patru veacuri de medicină în Ardeal. Întâii medici români și întâiele tipărituri medicale în Ardeal. Oameni și fapte din trecutul medical al Brașovului* (Cluj: Ardealul, 1927), 35.
15. Vasile Popp, *Dissertatio inauguralis historico-medica de funeribus plebejis Daco-Romanorum sive hodiernorum valachorum et quibusdam circa abusibus, perrpetuo respectu habito ad veterum Romanorum funera*, Ph.D. thesis (Vienna, 1817).
16. G. Prochaska (1749–1820) was a professor at the University of Vienna between 1791 and 1819, known for his work *De Functionibus Systematis Nervosi Commentatio* published in Prague in 1784. See J. Brozek, “Physiological Psychology,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 9 (1958): 71.
17. Patrick Baudry, *Le Place des morts: Enjeux et rites* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1999), 99–101.

18. L.-V. Thomas, *Rites de mort pour la paix de vivants* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), 120.
19. Ladislau Gyémánt, *Mișcarea națională a românilor din Transilvania între 1790 și 1848* (Bucharest: Ed. Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1983), 93.
20. Popp, *Dissertatio*, 6–7.
21. *Ibid.*, 3.
22. *Ibid.*, 9. According to Romanian history, the Romanian people emerged after the conquest of Dacia by the Roman Empire, during Trajan's rule, after two bloody wars that took place between 101 and 102, and 105 and 106, respectively. Through the Romanization of the Dacians and the settlement of colonists from the Roman Empire, the birth of a new nation was accomplished, a fact that explains the name of the country (Romania, after the old capital of the Roman Empire) and the fact that the Romanian language is a Neo-Latin language. Still, in the Enlightenment period, Romanian intellectuals, especially the Transylvanians, strongly upheld this belief. However, they sometimes exaggerated due to their desire to emphasize their pure origins (such as the case of the idea used by Vasile Popp; i.e., the population of Dacia exterminated after the Roman conquest).
23. Nicolae Bocșan, *Ideea de națiune la românii din Transilvania și Banat: Secolul al XIX-lea* (Cluj-Napoca: Banatica-PUC, 1997), 79.
24. Sorin Mitu, *Geneza identității naționale la românii transilvăneni* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1997), 273–74.
25. Teodor T. Burada, *Datinile poporului român la înmormântări*, ed. I. Opreșan (Bucharest: Saeculum I.O., 2006).
26. Simion Florea Marian, *Înmormântarea la români*, ed. Iordan Datcu (Bucharest: Saeculum I.O., 2000).
27. Popp, *Dissertatio*, 34.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*, 4.
30. *Ibid.*, 52.
31. *Ibid.*, 20.
32. *Ibid.*, 19.
33. *Ibid.*, 22.
34. *Ibid.*, 35.
35. *Ibid.*, 14.
36. M. Jenner, "Death, Decomposition and Dechristianition? Public Health and Church Burial in Eighteenth-Century England," *English Historical Review* 120, 487 (2005): 616–618.
37. Vasile Popp, *Dissertatio*, 45.
38. *Ibid.*, 32.
39. *Ibid.*, 13.
40. *Ibid.*, 16.
41. *Ibid.*, 10.
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*, 17.

44. Ibid.
45. G. Howarth, *Death & Dying: A Sociological Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 25–27. See also L. H. Lofland, *The Craft of Dying: The Modern Face of Death* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1978), 18–33.
46. Popp, *Dissertatio*, 17.
47. At present in Romania there are no funeral homes. Most Romanians found out about them from the television series *Six Feet Under!*
48. At present in Romania, a country populated by approximately 22 million people, there are only two crematoriums, of which only one is functioning. Both are in Bucharest, the capital city.
49. Popp, *Dissertatio*, 18.
50. Ibid., 27–28.
51. Ibid., 26.
52. Ibid., 29.
53. Ibid., 30.
54. Not only the flag, but also the fir tree and the post form the marital couple of the unmarried dead person. Their use implies the completion of the entire cycle of human existence for Romanians: birth, marriage, death. Therefore, in some areas in Romania there is still the custom known as the wedding of the dead. Ion Ghinoiu, *Lumea de aici, lumea de dincolo: Ipostaze românești ale nemuririi* (Bucharest: EFCR, 1999), 302. See also Gail Kligman, *Nunta mortului. Ritual, poetică și cultură populară în Transilvania*, trans. (Iași: Polirom, 1998), 123–125.
55. Popp, *Dissertatio*, 4.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid., 25.
58. D. J. Davies, *Death, Ritual and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites*, 2nd edition (London–New York: Continuum, 2002), 116.
59. An assertion impossible to sustain because of the life expectancy in Transylvanian villages and the small number of inhabitants living in this type of community.
60. Not really part of the Latin heritage, but the use of wine for washing and sprinkling the dead body was based on Christian symbols.
61. There are numerous testimonies from those times referring to legal disputes between priests and laymen for the payment of some amounts of money for the religious funerary service.
62. Vasile Popp had two explanations for this practice: man is as frail as a pot, and by dying one turns to ashes; and the family has lost a member and no longer needs the extra pot. Ovidiu Bârlea thinks that Vasile Popp's explanation is too rational, given the spirit of that time. Ovidiu Bârlea, *Istoria folcloristicii românești* (Bucharest: Ed. Enciclopedică Română, 1974), 119.
63. Popp thinks that the gravedigger would receive this gift only because he was poor. But the explanation of the practice is far more complex: the hen, as the Romanians believe, opens the road to the Other World, and it goes ahead of the dead person's soul, opening the way to Heaven or Hell. Florea Marian, 231–233. See also Ghinoiu, 191–198.

64. G. Rosen, “Biography of Dr. Johann Peter Franks . . . written by himself,” trans. George Rosen, *Journal of History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 3, 1 (1948): 11–46.
65. On the categorization of this paper see Peter Burke, “Images as Evidence in Seventeenth-Century Europe,” *Journal of History of Ideas* 64, 2 (2003): 277–278.
66. Ioan Muşlea, in *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie Națională* (Cluj) 5 (1930): 94. See also id., “Viața și opera doctorului Vasile Popp (1789–1842),” in *Cercetări etnografice și de folclor*, vol. 1, ed. Ioan Taloș (Bucharest: Minerva, 1971), 211.
67. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Moartea și Timpul*. trans. (Cluj-Napoca: Biblioteca Apostrof, 1996), 70.

Abstract

The Polymath Vasile Popp or the Temptation of Change:
On the first Romanian Doctoral Thesis in Medicine (1817)

The study is dedicated to the doctoral thesis defended by Vasile Popp in 1817 at the University of Vienna, drawn up under the supervision of Professor Georgius Prochaska, the first doctoral thesis in medicine successfully defended by a Romanian. The otherwise short thesis—only 56 pages in length—deals with the Romanian traditions concerning funeral rites and was aimed to fight existing superstitions, its topic being important today from four points of view: medical, historical, ethnographical and philological. Thus, despite some fallacies and unsubstantiated claims, Popp deserves credit for providing an early scholarly description of Romanian funeral traditions and for laying the foundations of ethnographical research in Romania.

Keywords

medical science, popular beliefs, funeral customs, public health