
TRANSILVANICA

ASTRA's Founders:

VLAD POPOVICI **A Prosopographical Study**

Those who founded ASTRA could be subsumed, in their vast majority, to an incipient Romanian bourgeoisie.

Vlad Popovici

Researcher at the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca. He published two monographs: **Tribunismul (1884–1905)** (2008); **Acte și documente privind elita politică românească din Transilvania (1860–1896)** (Acts and documents regarding the Romanian political elite in Transylvania, 1860–1896) (2010).

THE IMPORTANCE of the founding of the Transylvanian Association for Romanian Literature and the Culture of the Romanian People (ASTRA) has been reflected throughout time in the numerous historiographical studies dedicated to it. Its role in promoting the cultural development of the Romanians living in the Habsburg Monarchy was invaluable, and the very scope and scale of its activities have led to the situation that today some of its branches are still unstudied or under-researched. Through major projects such as exhibitions, its library or the *Romanian Encyclopaedia*, as well as through local initiatives such as literacy courses, ASTRA brought its contribution to both advancing Romanian culture and educating its co-nationals.

Its origins and genesis have been the subject of several monographic or biographical studies, which have underscored the steps taken by the Romanians through the maze of Austrian

This study was supported by CNCIS-UEFISCSU, project number PN II-RU PD-425/2010.

bureaucracy and the role played by various personalities of the time, in particular by those who were subsequently elected in ASTRA's leadership structures.¹ However, the vast majority of ASTRA's members have never been the subject of elaborate research, except for mere surface considerations. Is it really difficult—though not impossible, given today's technical research conditions—to recover information about such a large number of people, especially since ASTRA's contributing members never exceeded 1,000, except later, after 1895.² The sheer fact that the lists of contributors and membership registrations are rendered in *Transilvania* (beginning with the 1868 issues) should prompt their closer examination.

With these premises in mind, we aim to provide, in the present research, a prosopographic analysis³ of the first members of the Association, those who founded the ASTRA during the Sibiu meeting of the constituent assembly (23–26 October/4–7 November 1861). Initially, we were tempted to refer to them as “founding members,” but in order to avoid creating confusion between them and the category of the “founding members” as defined in the Statutes,⁴ we have chosen to call them simply “founders.” Their list is given in the brochure that presented the event and it includes 211 persons (founding and ordinary members, individuals and corporate members).⁵

Some of the Romanian leaders could not be present at this constituent assembly, since they had left for Vienna with the national delegation led by Metropolitan A. Sterca-Șuluțiu, which is why their names are not found amongst the 211. Missing, for example, are: Knight Ioan of Pușcariu—one of the main founding fathers of the Association, Dimitrie Moldovan—aulic advisor, and Ioan Maior—aulic chancellor; all three had signed a congratulatory address that was read before the plenary meeting.⁶ The fourth signatory of that act, Vasile Ladislau Pop, is mentioned as an ordinary member,⁷ which leads us to believe that the first three may not have contributed financially at that particular moment and that is why they had been omitted. Starting from this example, it seems likely that not all those enumerated in that list had participated in the constituent assembly, but simply sent their financial contribution, thereby becoming ordinary members.

In what follows we shall analyze the confessional distribution, the socio-professional status and the native geographical area of these first members of the Transylvanian Association, their selection criterion being their payment of the registration fee rather than their actual participation in the event. We intend thus to achieve a sociological profile of ASTRA's members in its beginnings, as well as to provide a model and also a term of comparison for other similar analyses targeted at distinct groupings (ASTRA's membership composition at different moments in its existence, or the structure of various political, ecclesiastical, or economic elite groups, etc.).⁸

Where the profession was not mentioned, we have used the period sources, ranging from encyclopedias to the press. The electronic collection of the *Transilvania* journal, digitized by the Lucian Blaga Central University Library, has been of tremendous assistance to us in this respect, through the option of automatic text search.⁹ In the case of the clergy, their confession was identified using Church registers and religious calendars.¹⁰ In the case of the laity, we only assumed that those accompanying a priest from a particular locality belonged to his confession if that locality was exclusively Orthodox or Greek-Catholic.¹¹ Since our study has focused on many elite members, identifying their confession could also be made on the basis of their subsequent contributions to ecclesiastical synods and congresses. The participants' geographical distribution started from Transylvania's old administrative organization, restored immediately after the absolutist period and maintained, with minor modifications, until 1876.¹²

The 211 founders of the ASTRA are divided into "founding members" and "ordinary members," according to their financial contribution. Only 9 founding members were registered in 1861. One of them represents what we might call a collective member: the Greek-Catholic Metropolitan Chapter of Blaj. The others are either personalities of the time (Alexandru Sterca-Șuluțiu, Andrei Șaguna, and Andrei Mocioni) or wealthy people, officials, merchants and high clergymen (Lazăr Pipoș, Nicolae Popea, Nicolae Șandor, Ioan Vișa and Ioan Pinciu).

The collective members are represented, besides the abovementioned chapter, by the alumni of the Greek-Catholic seminary in Blaj, the inhabitants of the village of Salva, those from of the village of Sâncel, as well as those from Lăpuș and Chioar. It should be noted that all these five collective members pertain to the Greek-Catholic confessional space. At a first glance, this may be interpreted as evidence of their higher cultural interest and educational level as compared to the Orthodox, but this explanation does not fully satisfy us; in our opinion, this was also a matter of the better organization and social discipline amongst the members of the Greek-Catholic confession.

Of the 206 individual members, we have succeeded in identifying the denomination of 162 (79%): 81 Orthodox and an equal number of Greek-Catholics. However, taking into account the collective members, as well as the area of origin of many of those unidentified (Blaj, Alba Iulia), we may say that the number of Greek-Catholics was higher than that of the Orthodox amongst the founders of the ASTRA. This naturally entailed also higher financial contributions, especially since Metropolitan A. Sterca-Șuluțiu's donation was twice as big as that of the Orthodox bishop, Șaguna (2,000 fl. compared to 1,050 fl.).¹³ Of course, we could not expect the two denominations to have been represented on a strictly equal basis; their competitive attitude could certainly be sensed in the genesis of the Association, reverberating, in memorialistic and historiographical

terms, even several decades later, in the dispute between Knight Ioan of Pușcariu and Ioan Rațiu.¹⁴ Despite these “mathematical” realities, the actual differences remain small, supporting the idea of the ASTRA’s supra-confessional character and the fact that the unity of conception and cultural-national action overcame the confessional rift.

From the point of view of the socio-professional structure, we have identified data for 188 of the 206 individual members (91%). The professional distribution indicates the presence of 59 clergymen (bishops, archpriests, priests, monks, theological seminary teachers), 46 clerks, 23 lay educators (teachers and professors), 10 merchants, 11 people in the professions (lawyers, doctors, artists, translators, etc.), 9 “economists” (well-off peasants), 27 “owners” (an ambiguous term, which also included people in the trading business, but also clerks, besides the real “owners,” who earned their living by entrepreneurship), 1 officer and 2 students. It should also be noted that amongst the 18 members of unidentified profession there were no church people, making the clergy/laity ratio be 59/147 (28.5% clerics and 71.5% laypeople).

It was not by accident that the proportions (approximately 1/3 clergy and 2/3 laity) came close to those found in the case of the Romanian political organizations of the period, in, say, the 1863 National Committee or in the 1869 Central Electoral Committee.¹⁵ They were also relatively similar to the clergy/laity ratio Șaguna envisaged in the Orthodox Church organization.¹⁶ These apparent coincidences must give food for thought, because unlike the aforementioned situations, the establishment of the ASTRA was not subjected to any regulations in this regard: the composition of the founding body was the result of a much more spontaneous and less forced approach. Under these circumstances, the fact that at various unrelated national events there was a relatively constant proportion between the participation of the clergy and that of the laity may be interpreted as evidence that such a ratio (1/4–1/3 clerics vs. 2/3–3/4 laymen) also existed at the level of the entire Transylvanian Romanian elite in the 1860s.

As far as the laity was concerned, dominant were the clerks, the professors/teachers and the hybrid category of “owners”—a reflection of the main non-eclesiastical professional groups of the Transylvanian Romanians during the decade of absolutism. The number of big merchants, as well as of that of the people in the liberal professions was small. Almost absent were categories such as army officers and students, the reasons probably being, in the case of the former, the poor publicity of the event and its politically ambiguous character, and in the case of the latter, the financial effort necessary for covering the travel expenses and the membership fee. A special category was that of the “economists,” 9 in all. They were wealthy peasants, many from Săliște (5), and what makes them worth mentioning is not so much their social environment of origin but the fact

that some of them were closely related to future members of the political elite: Petru Truția from Cricău (the father of the future MP Petru Truția)¹⁷ and Dimitrie Borcea from Săliște (probably the brother of the Sibiu lawyer Ioan Borcea and the son of the local priest D. Borcea—himself a founder of the ASTRA).¹⁸ The 18 persons with unidentified professions may be broadly classified amongst the “owners,” but in the absence of reliable data, we have preferred to place them in a separate category.

Comparing the socio-professional structure of ASTRA’s founders to that of the members of the Arad National Association (ANA) at its inception (1863), we may encounter a series of significant differences.¹⁹ First of all, the clerics’ percentage was much higher in the case of the ASTRA (28.5%) compared to the ANA (12.8%). The category of clerks, attorneys and jurists was also higher (26.69% vs. 19.4%). On the other hand, tradesmen, individual practitioners and “owners” represented only 18.45% in the ASTRA’s case as compared to 36.8% in the ANA. Similarly, lay professors and teachers amounted to only 4.85% in the ASTRA relative to 11.4% in the ANA. The percentages were not balanced even if we include here the theological seminary teachers. It is difficult to estimate to what extent these differences reflected structural social differences between the Romanians in Transylvania and those in the Western Parts (Partium), or whether they were simply the expression of different strategies for circumscribing the target groups and attracting members to each association. We incline towards the latter explanation, because it supports the observations of historian Ioan Bolovan concerning the less elitist character of the ANA as compared to other similar associations throughout the empire,²⁰ including the ASTRA.²¹

In terms of the geographical area of extraction, 148 of the 206 individual founders of the ASTRA, (72%) came from urban environments (royal free cities, privileged towns, episcopal sees, boroughs, county and seat capitals). Most were citizens of Blaj (37), followed, in order, by Alba Iulia (26), Sibiu (26), Braşov (15), Sebeş (9), Cluj (8), Aiud, Baia de Criş, Făgăraş, Haţeg, Miercurea, Năsăud, Orăştie, Reghin, Sighişoara, Turda and Zlatna (with a total of 27). Of the 58 members residing in rural areas, a large number came from localities situated in the hinterland of the abovementioned centers (especially from the neighboring villages of Sibiu) or from archpriesthoods (Şaroş, Ocişoara, Satu Lung, Cugir, Ţelna, Roşia, and Alma).

Corroborating the above results with the socio-professional structure, we may say that those who founded the ASTRA could be subsumed, in their vast majority, to an incipient Romanian bourgeoisie, a socio-economic layer that was insufficiently coagulated at the time, but whose members proved to share a common horizon of national and cultural expectations. Their primarily urban origin is a major argument further supporting the idea of the prevalently elite character of the Transylvanian Association at its beginnings.

Analyzing the administrative-territorial distribution of the ASTRA's founders makes it apparent that the core members resided in the central-southern part of Transylvania, in the counties of Alba de Jos and Târnava, in the seats of Sibiu and Sebeș, and in the districts of Brașov and Făgăraș. Its extensions towards the west (the seat of Orăștie, the counties of Hunedoara and Zarand) or towards the north (the Turda and Cluj counties, the districts of Cetatea de Piatră and Năsăud) were quantitatively smaller and geographically discontinuous, while those towards the east (the Saxon and the Szekler seats) were sporadic. This confirms the major role played by the religious centers (Sibiu and Blaj), and by their diocesan networks.

It is apparent that although participation in the event was voluntary, certain means of propaganda and persuasion at a personal or community level were used to attract as large a number of members as possible. The main propaganda agents (the "claques"²² of the stage setup that gave birth to the Transylvanian Association) seem to have been the priests and the archpriests, which was a natural phenomenon given the absence of any other organized national institutions outside the churches. This situation also provides an additional explanation for their high percentage.

Romanian archpriests and priests from cities like Brașov, Alba Iulia, Sibiu, Cluj, or Sebeș were present almost without exception, regardless of their denomination. From other localities (Alma, Făgăraș, Hațeg, Orlat, Rășinari, Săliște, Vinerea, and Zlatna) the clergy representatives were accompanied by local groups, and sometimes even by relatives. The latter were mostly members of the local elites (the small officialdom, self-employed professionals, or wealthy peasants), whose sons could be found several decades later also as members of the elites, but a few levels higher than their parents. This was the case of the future MPs Petru Truția from Cricău and Ioan Mișu from Vinerea, of the canon Alexandru Grama from Blaj, the lawyer Ioan Borcea from Săliște or the teacher Herlea from Vinerea.

In some cases, several members of the same family, united by blood or by marriage, were registered: the Berghianus from Alba Iulia (5 members), the Almășans from Alma, the Gramas, the Blasianus and the Rațius from Blaj, the Borceas from Săliște, the Brașov provost Iosif Barac with his sons-in-law, Gavrilă Munteanu and George Belissimus (Moldovenescu),²³ Archpriest Simion Balint with his son-in-law Iosif Hodoș,²⁴ Archpriest Gregoriu Rațiu from Țelna with his son-in-law, provost Alexandru Tordășian from Alba Iulia,²⁵ the relatives of Axente Sever and George Barițiu. The percentage of those listed above approaches 15% of the total number of founders, but, taking into account that these are only the best-known cases, which may easily be identified, the actual percentage of kinship within this restricted circle may have been between 20% and 25%. Without overestimating the efficiency of blood relations in the emer-

gence of the cultural act under examination here, we must emphasize their presence and their catalytic role. We may also assume that further prosopographic research on the ASTRA's members may show in the future the scope of such relations and may reveal the extent to which family networks contributed to supporting this cultural-national project.

The presence of family and community networks within the body of the ASTRA's founders, the geographical distribution of its members and their polarization around a few major urban centers are indicators of the solid organizational actions that preceded the Constituent Assembly of 23–26 October/4–7 November 1861. At the origin of such thorough preparations lay not only the liberal effervescence of the moment, but also the competitive collaboration between the two centers of power (the Orthodox Church and the Greek-Catholic Church), each setting in motion a vast mechanism in an attempt to secure the largest possible share of the prestige that would accompany the establishment of the Association. This explains the relative statistical equilibrium, in which Blaj held a slight advantage by concentrating a higher participation from several urban centers, while Sibiu counterpoised a wider rural network, from the “hinterland.”

Another conclusion relative to the setting up of the Association is that those who chose or were persuaded to join it largely came from an echelon situated above the average of the Transylvanian Romanian society: more than 50% of the clergy were hierarchs and archpriests, the number of officials and “owners” prevailed upon that of teachers, self-employed professionals or wealthy peasants. Without being an academic society, the ASTRA may be considered, given the socio-professional profile of its founders, to have been not a mere elitist association, but one whose original composition reflected fairly accurately the Transylvanian Romanian elite of the time, which gave it particular national representativeness.



Notes

1. We shall selectively mention some of the most important ones: Eugen Hulea, *Astra: Istoric, organizare, activitate, statute și regulamente* (Sibiu: Astra, 1944), 4–7; Vasile Curticăpeanu, “Întemeierea societății ‘Astra’ și rolul ei în cultura poporului român,” *Studii: Revistă de istorie* (Bucharest) 14, 6 (1961): 1439–1466; Vasile Netea, “Proiectele de statut ale ‘Astrei,’” *Revista Muzeelor* (Bucharest) 7, 3 (1970): 202–205; George Cipăianu, “Din activitatea Astrei în 1861 și 1862 (până la a doua adunare generală),” *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai series Historia* (Cluj) 16, 2

- (1971): 53–62; Pamfil Matei, “Asociațiunea Transilvană pentru literatura și cultura poporului român” (*Astra*) și rolul ei în cultura națională (1861–1950) (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1986), 17–24; Victor V. Grecu, ed., *Astra 1861–1950: Asociațiunea Transilvană pentru Literatura și Cultura Poporului Român. 125 de ani de la înființare* (Sibiu: Academia Republicii Socialiste România, 1987); Nicolae Josan, “Noi contribuții și precizări privind înființarea și începuturile ‘Astrei,’” *Apulum* (Alba Iulia) 33 (1996): 75–87; id., *Ioan Pușcariu: Viața și activitatea* (Alba Iulia: Altip, 1997), 143–147.
2. Ioan Bolovan, *Asociația Națională Ardeeană pentru cultura poporului român 1863–1918* (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia XXI, 2011), 102.
 3. Although it was frequently employed during the last decade, prosopography—also known as “collective biography”—remains one of the most under-theorized methods in the Romanian historical writing. For basic theoretical references and methodological issues, see K. S. B. Keats-Rohan, ed., *Prosopography Approaches and Applications: A Handbook* (Oxford: Unit for Prosopographical Research, Linacre College, 2007). An older but still noteworthy study was signed by Lawrence Stone, “Prosopography,” *Daedalus* 100, 1 (1971): 46–73.
 4. *Acte privitoare la urdirea și înființarea Asociațiunei Transilvane pentru literatură română și cultură a poporului român date în tipărire de însasi Asociațiunea* (Sibiu: Tipografia Dieceasana, 1862), 26.
 5. *Ibid.*, 54–62. The original count is 1–212, but position 31 is missing, leaving a total of 211 members. Sometimes, historiography preserved only the final, wrong, number. See for example: Matei, 36; Nicolae Trifoiu, “Năsăudenii și începuturile Astrei,” *Virtus Romana Rediviva* (Bistrița-Năsăud) 3 (1998): 47–48. We have not considered the special categories of correspondent and honorary members, since they were guests of the Association, having no financial obligations, according to its statutes.
 6. Josan, “Noi contribuții,” 85–86.
 7. *Acte privitoare la urdirea și înființarea Asociațiunei Transilvane*, 61.
 8. The need for prosopographical approaches in the study of Hungary’s political elite was emphasized by László Péter, “The Aristocracy, the Gentry and their Parliamentary Tradition in the Nineteenth-Century Hungary,” *The Slavonic and East-European Review* 70, 1 (1992): 110. An example of approaching the ecclesiastical elite through the method of collective biography was offered by Jan Plamper, “The Russian Orthodox Episcopate, 1721–1917: A Prosopography,” *Journal of Social History* 34, 1 (2000): 5–34.
 9. <http://documente.bcucuj.ro/web/bibdigit/periodice/transilvania/> accessed between 1 April 2011 and 15 May 2011.
 10. *Șematismul Veneratului Cleru Catholicu de ritulu Orientale alu Archi-Diecesei Metropolitane a Albei-Julie pre anulu dela nascerea lui Christosu 1865, éra dela S. Uniune cu Baserica Romei vechi alu 166-le* (Blasiu, 1865); *Șematismul veneratului cler al Arhidiecesei Metropolitane Greco-Catolice Române de Alba Iulia și Făgăraș pre anul Domnului 1900 de la sânta Unire 200* (Blaj, 1900); *Calendariu pe anul comun dela Chriostos 1861 întocmit după gradurile și clima Ungariei și a României*, 10 (Sibiu: Tipografia Diecezană, 1861).

11. The conscription data was taken from Árpád E. Varga, *Erdély etnikai és felekezeti statisztikája, 1850–2002*, electronic edition, available at <http://www.kia.hu/konyvtar/erdely/erd2002.htm>, accessed between 1 April 2011 and 15 May 2011.
12. Anton Dörner, “Administrația Transilvaniei în perioada anilor 1867–1876,” *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie “George Barițiu” din Cluj-Napoca* 40 (2001): 105–122.
13. *Acte privitoare la urdirea și infintarea Asociațiunei Transilvane*, 54.
14. Josan, “Noi contribuții,” 77–82.
15. *Protocolulu Congresului natiunei romane din Ardealu, ce s’au tienutu in Sabiiu la 20/8 Prieru 1863* (Sabiiu: Tipografi’a diecesana, 1863), 5–13, 34–36; Teodor V. Păcățian, *Cartea de aur sau luptele politice-naționale ale românilor de sub coroana ungară*, vol. 5 (Sibiu: Tiparul Tipografiei Arhidiecezane, 1909), 115.
16. *Protocolulu Congresului Nationalu Bisericescu Romanu de religiunea greco-resariteana conchiamatu in Sabiiu pe 16/28 Septembre 1868 tiparitu din partea presidiului* (Sibiu: Tipografia Archidiecezana, 1868), 248, 252, 259, 267, 276, 281.
17. Adalbert Toth, *Parteien und Reichstagswahlen in Ungarn 1848–1892* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1973), 332.
18. Dumitru Peligrad, “Dr. Dumitru Borcia (1877–1946) și despărțământul Săliște al ASTREI,” in *Astra 1861–1950*, 223–224.
19. The information has been taken from Bolovan, 103, and the values for ASTRA have been adapted in comparison with the percentages from our previous analysis, given that the socio-professional structure on which the author’s calculations were based is sometimes different from the ones we have used.
20. Regarding the membership of the Slavic literary societies (Matica) in the Habsburg Empire and Austria-Hungary, see Stanley B. Kimball, “The Austro-Slav Revival: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Literary Foundations,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* (new ser.) 63, 4 (1973): 14–15, 18–25, 31–71; Peter Herrity, “The Role of the Matica and Similar Societies in the Development of the Slavonic Literary Languages,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 51, 124 (1973): 368–369, 385.
21. Bolovan, 76.
22. Nicolae Râmbu, “La claca nella storia della cultura,” *Cultura: International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology* 5 (2006): 117–129.
23. Laurențiu Streza and Vasile Oltean, *Mitropolitul Andrei Șaguna în documentele din Șcheii Brașovului*, vol. 1 (Sibiu: Andreiana, 2008), 90.
24. Ioan Chiorean, *Iosif Hodoș: Viața și activitatea sa* (Târgu-Mureș: Mica Doris, 1996), 77.
25. N. Josan, *Memorandistul moș Rubin Patiția 1841–1918* (Alba Iulia: Altip, 2002), 34–35.

Abstract**ASTRA's Founders: A Prosopographical Study**

Starting from the premise that prosopography may provide supervenient explanations to those extant in classical historical approaches, this study has tried to acquire as much information as possible about the 211 members registered in the protocol of ASTRA's Constituent Assembly (Sibiu, 3–26 October/4–7 November 1861). After the analyses we have undertaken, we may conclude that its confessional distribution was relatively balanced, that its socio-professional structure was representative of the entire Romanian Transylvanian elite of that time, and that its geographical distribution reveals several urban centres that massively supported the creation of the Transylvanian Association. This study also highlights and exemplifies the role of a catalyst played by the family and community networks, which allowed for the involvement of a large number of participants. The conclusions emphasise that this genesis process was well organised and controlled from both of the national centers (Sibiu and Blaj), probably against the background of a competitive approach, each Church attempting to capitalise as much as possible on the prestige that would accompany this event.

Keywords

cultural associations, Transylvania, statistics, elites, prosopography