
BOOK REVIEWS

FRIEDRICH SCHWANTZ VON SPRINGFELS

Descrierea Olteniei la 1723

(A description of Oltenia in 1723)

Translated from German and edited with an introductory study, notes and index by

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IN RECENT decades, the regions, with their distinctive geographical, ethno-confessional, administrative or developmental features, have become the centerpiece of the claims referring to the distinct identity of their inhabitants in regard to integrationist political constructs or to concurrent national designs. They have also been a source of anxiety, on grounds that have to do with ethnic loyalty, unequal development, or potential centrifugal tendencies in regard to an administration structured in keeping with the paradigm of modern centralism, with its bureaucratic and leveling tendencies. The regions, as agents of economic development and catalysts of community solidarity, have been enjoying increased public interest, capitalizing on the opportunities generated by the dynamics of the European project and by the revival of the identities of the stakeholders, as agents of cohesion or disintegration. Historiography has responded to this plethora of approaches that cover all the humanities and social sciences. According to the place occupied by the matters pertaining to regional history in the

general interest area of professional historians, the interpretations belonging to this genre range from the self-serving official support, likely to affect the scientific quality of the approaches, to skeptical analyses that question their very relevance for our knowledge of the essential data of the past.

The critical edition of the manuscript drawn up in Sibiu in 1723 (eight copies of which can be found in the Vienna, Berlin, Innsbruck, Budapest and Bucharest collections) of Captain Friedrich Schwantz von Springfels, an engineer and topographer, prepared by the Cluj historian Mircea-Gheorghe Abrudan, offers a possible solution to these contradictory developments. The author deserves credit for the ethical principles underlying his editorial approach and for his genuine interest in this primary historical source. These, together with the express references to the previous contributions associated with the transfer of this document to the collections of the Romanian Academy, are a testimony to the modesty and the dedication which must accompany the work of a historian, so exposed to the temptations of vanity. Mircea-Gheorghe Abrudan proves to be a good mediator between the edited document, drawn up in the 18th century in the context of the German exploration of other countries, and the reading public, possessing very good knowledge both of the German language and of the realities presented by the author, a man in the service of the Austrian Empire. The return to the concerns regarding the history of Oltenia comes to continue a number of previous endeavors affected by various ideological

imperatives, from the national militancy of the 19th century, through the national-communist statism of the previous century, to the unquestioning admiration for the Western civilization of the recent decades. The period during which the *Kleine Wälachei* (Valachia Cisalutana, Oltenia) was under the rule of the House of Austria (1716–1739) also comes to illustrate, but at a different level, the historiographical disputes caused by the inclusion of Transylvania in this political design of medieval extraction, turned into a vector of modernization starting with the Enlightenment period, and which was the source of national disputes whose echoes are still identifiable in the mindset of the ethnic communities of Central and Eastern Europe. The positions of the Romanian historians ranged between highlighting the expansionist nature of Oltenia's annexation and the recognition or the exaggerated praise heaped upon the influence of Joseph II's reforms on a number of similar initiatives occurred in the Romanian Principalities.

In his introductory study, Mircea-Gheorghe Aburdan briefly presents the Habsburg expansion towards Central and Eastern Europe and Southeast Europe, the transition from Little Europe to Greater Europe, as Pierre Chaunu once described the Austrian integration of Central and Eastern Europe, following the failure of the second Ottoman siege of Vienna and the offensive of the Holy League which ended in the victories scored by Prince Eugene of Savoy. The annexation of Oltenia after the Austrian-Ottoman war of 1716–1718, the two subsequent decades of Austrian rule, and then the loss of this territory following the Treaty of Belgrade are all presented in a text that focuses mainly on the concrete events as they unfolded, without however disregarding, through a recourse to con-

temporary sources, the changes occurred in the attitude of the population towards the new authorities, as well as the reforms implemented here by the imperial authorities (fiscal, socio-economic, demographic, administrative, judicial, religious). In the following subchapters, political history is replaced by a unique attempt at a personal history, meant to piece together the biography of engineer Friedrich Schwantz von Springfels. The editor carefully selects the concise references found in Hungarian and Saxon authors and also draws on testimonies featured in various document collections edited by Romanian historians. The competition between the editor's erudition and the scarcity of sources presents the reader with the opportunity of a digression into the anatomy of the mechanisms that ensured the functioning of the Austrian administration, challenged by its detractors but nevertheless efficient enough to ensure the completion of infrastructure projects essential to the development of commercial exchanges, such as the *Via Carolina*, the road from Turnu Roșu to Râmnic, and the regulation of the flow of the Olt River, under the supervision of the same Schwantz von Springfels, between 1717 and 1722.

In what concerns the Austrian attempts to turn to good account the economic and demographic resources of the new province, which had their origins in the Austrian cameralism, the editor also highlights the contribution of Schwantz von Springfels as a topographer, as between 1720 and 1722 he drew up two maps of Oltenia. The detailed description of these first modern maps of Oltenia comes to illustrate the interdisciplinary nature of an intellectual's training at the beginning of the Enlightenment period and the manner in which it was placed in the service of the public interest. The incursion into the

archives ends with the references concerning the number of existing copies of these maps and their precise location, useful for the possible future investigations. It must also be said that the book comes with a DVD featuring three different copies of the manuscript and of the 1722 map, with all the Vienna and Bucharest versions.

The working method employed by the author of the report that accompanied the 1722 map and was intended for the Imperial War Council in Vienna meant that the presentation had to be structured in keeping with the conventions of the German historical and geographical school of the 18th century. The chapter devoted to the origin of the local inhabitants indicates the propensity of the Austrian engineer for the comparative investigation of sources, as demonstrated by his incursions in the hermeneutics of a number of classical and medieval texts regarding the Roman origin of the inhabitants and of their language, or the references to the theory regarding the royal descent of the Hunyadis. The historical approach is followed by a return to the geography of the part of Wallachia lying beyond the Olt River, accompanied by notes on the borders of the province and on its importance for the defense of the territories controlled by the House of Austria. Also present is a comprehensive analysis of the communication routes, where the historical information blends with the presentation of military operations and of the projects set in motion by the new authorities. The section dealing with the governance of the country, which confirms the administrative autonomy of Oltenia within Wallachia, includes a presentation of the capital (Craiova) and a number of military observations regarding the creation of an administrative center in the area of Târgu-Jiu. The following sec-

tion speaks about the administrative divisions of the region, followed by a number of considerations regarding the heraldry of Oltenia, which the author relates to the campaigns of John Hunyadi and to the attempts of the military high command to individuate the counties. The following sections involve a tentative regional sociology, focusing on aspects such as the religion and the culture of the inhabitants, social categories, economic activities, and data concerning everyday life. The last subchapters return to the initial aims of the report, the assessment of the economic potential of the region, and include a minute description of the rivers, an analysis of the soil, and a survey of the mineral resources.

The report drawn up by engineer Friedrich Schwantz and the remarkable editorial work undertaken by historian Mircea-Gheorghe Abrudan combine into a historical text that fully comes to respond to the current questions regarding the scientific nature and the usefulness of history. In terms of the dynamics of historical development, we are introduced to the reality of a political and administrative experiment belonging to the chronological interval in which Dimitrie Cantemir was publishing his famous *Description of Moldavia*, preserved for posterity due to the contribution of a man trained in the hard sciences. A reading of this text indeed comes to provide one with food for further thought. Apart from the manifest erudition and the permanent recourse to ethics, the editor deserves credit for having avoided the method inspired by counter-productive rivalries and favors an interdisciplinary method, essential to the development of knowledge. □

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