

The Romanians' Identity in the 16th Century

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Due to their characteristic mobility, the Italians showed special attention to Central and South-Eastern Europe in the 16th century and before. Of all the foreigners, the Italians left most testimonies on the Romanians. Their credibility is relative, but higher than with other authors.

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Like most peoples in Central and South-Eastern Europe, the Romanians lived in more than one state during the Middle Ages, and acted separately, according to circumstances. Therefore, the Romanians too did not have a strong and active national community as in modern times. The generation of romantic historians as well as some of those that followed thought of the Middle Ages in terms of united people-nations aware of their entity. Such obvious exaggerations, and especially those during the nationalistic communist epoch have unfortunately brought about an exaggerated reaction, which made certain present-day circles reject any manifestation of medieval national consciousness with the Romanians, as if the latter have experienced only a primitive gregarious spirit, have never questioned their origin, have been utterly unaware of the unity of their language, traditions, religion and in general everything that distinguished them from their neighbors.

As it often happens, the relative truth – that is, whatever we know of it – is somewhere in between: in the Middle Ages, the Romanians lived in two Romanian states (with a Romanian political power) and in certain provinces or regions of Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, where they had

the status of subjects: they were never able to act together at that time, nor did they aim to set up one Romanian country; however, many of the Romanians – i.e. their elite – were aware of the territory inhabited by the Romanians, the common language spoken by the inhabitants of Moldavia, Wallachia, Banat, Transylvania, Maramureș, etc., their common Christian faith and old Roman origin. Consequently, like everywhere in Europe, there also existed a medieval Romanian nation¹, which was taking its first steps towards a modern status in the 16th-17th centuries. It would have been unnatural otherwise. Just like the individuals, communities everywhere have always asked questions and provided answers (real or imaginary) regarding their origins, language and faith, i.e. questions regarding their identity as compared to other communities. And in any ethnic community there are a number of members who can view the respective group as a whole and define its characteristic features or personality in a simple or more complex way. Foreigners will do the same. They are the most likely to notice the characteristic features of various peoples, make comparisons and draw conclusions. Romanians came to be known quite early by the Byzantines (Greeks), Slavs and Hungarians (the end of the 1st millennium), and later by the orientals, Germans, Italians, French, etc.

In 1500 there already existed a tradition of Italian references to the Romanians. From Pope Innocent III (around 1200), Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459), Flavio Biondo (1392-1463) or Enea Silvio Piccolomini (1405-1464), to Alessandro Cortesi (1460-1491), Antonio Bonfini (around 1427-1502), Filippo Buonacorsi Callimaco (1438-1496) or Nicolaus Machinensis, bishop of Modrussa and papal legate, Italian authors speak of the Romanians' Roman origin and their language derived from Latin². Antonio Bonfini even says that the Romanians were keener to defend their language than their lives³, while Nicolaus Machinensis knew that that Romanians used one language in the divine services and in writing, i.e. Slavonic (Illyrian), and another one (*vermaculus sermo*), very similar to the Romans' language and Italian, *ab incunabulis*⁴. In old days, it was known that the Romanians had two names: one they called themselves by, which preserved the memory of Rome (*rumân/român*), and another one given by foreigners⁵, of which Piccolomini (Pope Pius II) says quite fancifully that it came from the name of the Roman general Flaccus (*vlachi* with its variants)⁶. It is also before 1500 that some authors claim they had heard of the Roman origins of the Romanians from the latter (i.e. from certain Romanians)⁷.

Thus, in the 16th century, the Italian and the Italian-speaking scholarly and political circles had a rather accurate idea regarding the Romanians, who had participated quite successfully in the late crusade of the previous century⁸. After 1500, as a result of the increased mobility and the expansion of the Ottoman Empire towards the West, the interest for Central and South-Eastern Europe grows. Out of 35 Italian authors who mention the territory of the future Romania between 1500 and 1593 (until Michael the Brave's reign, which should be treated separately), 30 speak about the identity of the Romanians or of part of the Romanians, i.e. about the Romanians' origin, language, name, faith, clothes, customs, institutions, etc. Certainly, not all of them speak of all these elements, and they don't do it in the same manner.

For instance, out of the 30 studied authors, 20 claim the Romanians descended from the Romans or the Italics, one (Tranquillo Andronico⁹) that they descended from the Dacians and the Romans, one that they are the descendants of the Italians (Giovanni

Botero¹⁰), yet another that they descended from the Italians and the Longobards (Ferrante Capeci, who adds that they are the oldest inhabitants of Transylvania¹¹), while five others (Mario Negri, Mancinelli, Sivori, Rocca, Bocignoli¹²) say nothing clear in this respect. Francesco Massaro states that Transylvania was a Roman colony¹³, and Antonius Buccapadulius says the Moldavian Prince Petru Șchiopul was of Roman origin¹⁴. An explanation of their origin is not always given. Francesco della Valle learns from the monks at Dealu monastery that Emperor Trajan followed by others came with Roman soldiers and colonized Dacia¹⁵. Antonio Maria Graziani too mentions a Latin colony during Emperor Trajan¹⁶, while Giovanandrea Gromo says that the Romanians descended from the Roman colony left (consolidated) by Hadrian in Transylvania, after having been brought there by Tiberius, who had fought against Decebalus (an obvious anachronism)¹⁷. Giovanni Lorenzo d'Anania believes that Wallachia is a former Roman colony of the Senate, set up in order to stop the barbarians' invasion¹⁸.

Most authors associated the Romanians' origin with their name, and this name was double: *vlahi-rumâni/români* (Wallachians-Romanians). As far as the name *vlahi* (Wallachians) (with its variants), given by the foreigners to the Romanians, is concerned, nine authors (M. Coccio, G. Candido, T. Andronico, A. Centorio, P. Giovio, G. Ruggiero, G.L. d'Anania, F. Commendone, A. Possevino)¹⁹ adopt the theory of Enea Silvio Piccolomini from the previous century. According to it, the word *vlahi* came from the name of the Roman general Flaccus. However, many Italians, especially those who had traveled in "Dacia", knew that the Romanians did not call themselves *vlahi* (Wallachians). A group of authors (T. Andronico, Fr. della Valle, Fr. Capeci, the anonymous of 1587²⁰) state clearly that the Wallachians called themselves Romanians (Romans), while some of them as well as others (R. Maffei²¹, the anonymous of 1587, Fr. della Valle, A. Possevino²²) point out that the Romanians' name came from the ancient Romans, which allegedly shows their Roman origin. Lastly, Fr. della Valle, A. Guagnini²³, G. Gromo and the same anonymous of 1587 add that (some of) the Romanians themselves claimed (proudly) they were the descendants of the Romans. Another group of authors (A.M. Graziani, G. Ruggiero²⁴, G.L. d'Anania, the report of the Jesuit order mission of 1588²⁵, the Jesuit anonymous author of 1583²⁶, G. Botero) bring as an argument of the Romanians' Roman origin the language the latter spoke.

The language itself is seen as a mark of identity in almost all the works of the time. Out of the 30 studied authors, only four (A.I. Burgius, B. de San Giorgio, Fr. Massaro and A. Buccapadulius) do not mention the Romanians' language. All the others refer, one way or another, to the Latinity of the Romanian language: twelve of them say Romanian comes from Latin or Roman, its 16th century version being "corrupt" or "distorted" as compared to its ancient form; eight authors claim Romanian comes from Italian (Italic) or resembles Italian; two humanists know that Romanian comes from Latin and Italic (Italian); two others say that the language contains many words of Latin origin, one (G.L. d'Anania) claims it is Latin-Slavonic, and another one (Fr. Sivori²⁷), that it is a mixture of Latin, Italic (Italian), Greek and Slavic elements. Giulio Mancinelli²⁸, a Jesuit who traveled to Wallachia and Moldavia, seems to be closer to the truth when he says that the Romanians' language "*is half Latin and half vulgar [Latin]*"; he is the first author to make a connection between Romanian and vulgar Latin²⁹.

Several texts, fewer in number, also refer to the Romanians' religion. Marcantonio Coccio³⁰, Giulio Ruggiero, Antonio Possevino, Anibal di Capua³¹, the anonymous of 1587, Francesco Commendone³² mention that the Romanians were Christians of the Greek (Byzantine, Eastern) rite, but some authors – especially the Jesuits – suggest they were initially Catholic and so they could be brought back to that denomination. Especially popes Gregory XIII (1572-1585), Sixtus V (1585-1590) and Clement VIII (1592-1605) promoted an offensive of the Roman Church in Northern, Central-Eastern as well as South-Eastern Europe on the basis of the Trento Council directives. The Catholic Church aimed both at converting the Romanians and at keeping them in the anti-Ottoman Christian alliance. The authors explain to the papal circles the grounds of the Holy See's right over the Roman Danubian colony, the most important of them being the Romanians' traditional affiliation to the Latin world³³.

Among the elements that individualize the Romanians as descendants of the Romans and document their common origin – apart from historical data, language and name – the following are also mentioned: agriculture, animal breeding and letters (?) (M. Coccio); Roman antiquities and coins (J.B. Castaldo³⁴); customs and laws (P. Giovio³⁵ and Fr. Commendone); institutions, customs and clothes (A.M. Graziani), their appearance and customs (the report of the Jesuit Order mission of 1588).

Many Italian authors expressed opinions with regard to the ethno-linguistic unity and the identity of the Romanians in Moldavia, Wallachia and, occasionally, in Transylvania. Thus, Raffaello Maffei (Volterano) says that the Dacian territory, covered in his time by Transylvania (*Septem Castra*) and *Valachia* (consisting of two countries), was inhabited by the offspring of the Roman colonists who spoke a semi-Italic language³⁶. Tranquillo Andronico states that in old times all the Romanians lived under the rule of one prince and that they split later³⁷; he also speaks of “two Wallachias.”³⁸ A. Ioannes Burgius knows that Moldavia and *Transalpina* (Țara Românească, Wallachia proper) together form *Valachia* (Wallachia)³⁹, while G. Lorenzo d'Anania speaks of “Greater and Little Wallachia” (the two extra-Carpathian Romanian states), a phrase used later by G. Botero⁴⁰. A.M. Graziani sees the ethnic unity of the Romanians from the former Trajan colony in their language, political institutions, customs and clothes⁴¹. Possevino's anonymous companion (1583) shows that those who still called themselves Romans (Romanians) in Transylvania during his time, also inhabited Wallachia and Moldavia, up to the Black Sea⁴². The other anonymous writer, writing in 1587, says that to the south of Moldavia lies Wallachia, whose inhabitants, also called Romanians, share the same language, clothes and rite⁴³. Giovanandrea Gromo locates the part of the Banat around Lugoj and Caransebeș in *Valachia Cisalpina* (Transalpine Wallachia was Wallachia proper!), while Ferrante Capecci also emphasizes the ethnic unity of the Romanians from the three lands; he locates Lugoj and Caransebeș in *Valachia*, that is, in a Romanian land, a sign of a demographic and even institutional reality, as well as of a name used in the epoch and mentioned by other authors too⁴⁴. Franco Sivori says that the language of the inhabitants of Wallachia is also spoken by the inhabitants of neighboring Moldavia, brave people, who believe there is no one like them in the whole world⁴⁵. Ascanio Centorio asserts that Moldavia is united with Wallachia and that both provinces have one single name: *Valacchia*⁴⁶.

Naturally, the most valuable observations on the Romanians are made by authors who traveled themselves, on various occasions, to the lands inhabited by the Romanians. Book information is also important because it documents a trend of thought in the intellectual world with regard to the Romanians' Roman origin. The authors – 19 in number – who traveled to the Romanians lands or to the neighboring countries (Hungary, Poland) prevail over those who took their information exclusively from other sources. In fact, it is eye witnesses – with few exceptions – that provide the most accurate data on the Romanians. For instance, R. Maffei, who visited Hungary, is among the first to give up the derivation of the name *Valachus* from that of the general Flaccus⁴⁷. Michele Bocignoli, a traveler to the Romanian lands, wants a cooperation between Wallachia, Transylvania and Moldavia against the Turks, because the subordination of these countries would mean the end of the Hungarians and the Poles⁴⁸. Francesco della Valle, secretary to Aloisio Gritti, talked to Romanians and saw that their language was slightly different from Italian, learnt that they called themselves Romanians “because they say they came from Rome long ago”, and heard some of the Romanians speak about the Roman colony established by Emperor Trajan in Dacia; quite convincing in the sense of information authenticity is the sentence “Do you speak Romanian?”, reproduced by Francesco della Valle as a sign of the Latin origin of the Romanian language and people⁴⁹. Tranquillo Andronico, also a secretary to Aloisio Gritti, says that Flaccus allegedly imposed the marriages between the Dacians and the Romans, a mixture from which emerged the Romanians, who called themselves Romans (... *et nunc se Romanos vocant*)⁵⁰. It is also from the locals that T. Andronico must have heard the idea of an old political unity of the Romanians, an idea that would endure in Romanian culture. As a matter of fact, the Italian author does not like the Romanians and has no reasons to like them after what he was through in his travels. However, even their inner disputes and habit of killing their princes – which the author noticed with the Romanians – are seen as proofs of their Roman origin⁵¹. Having arrived in Transylvania, General Castaldo wants to reconstruct Dacia by the manner in which the Romans had conquered this province. G. Gromo sees that the Romanians are scattered throughout Transylvania, and A. Possevino notices that the Szeklers live among the Romanians and that the latter have an inferior political status. It is important that all the authors who state that the Romanians call themselves Romans or pretend they descend from the Romans (T. Andronico, Fr. della Valle, G. Gromo, F. Capeci, the author of the description of 1587, A. Guagnini) traveled to the Romanian lands and talked personally to Romanians. Occasionally, direct observations are combined with book information or with opinions expressed by the Romanians' neighbors. Thus, with Alessandro Guagnini, the Jesuit anonymous author of 1583 or Ferrante Capeci⁵², the theory of the Romanians' Roman origin is enlarged and gains a certain coloring given by the Polish (maybe Polish-Hungarian) model taken especially from Martin and Joachim Bielski: the Romanians are the descendents of the Romans, but of the Roman exiles and convicts who were undesirable in Italy⁵³; as an argument, they paradoxically mention the case of the poet Ovid, who was exiled to Tomis (i.e. in Moesia, not Dacia) in the time of Augustus (about a century before the conquest of Dacia). On the other hand, the Romanians could have been proud of ancestors such as Ovid, if this theory didn't have a rather disparaging character (the Romanians as the descendents of Rome's scum). We have here a theoretical construct originating in the reality of the 16th century, when Moldavia (which the Poles called

Wallachia) was trying to repudiate the Polish suzerainty, and when the Moldavians (whom the Poles called Wallachians), Orthodox and considered “barbarians” and less civilized by their Catholic northern neighbors, did not seem to be, at first sight, the brothers of the ancient Romans and the Italians. In fact, the Poles’ image in the Moldavian circles was not very bright either. In the Middle Ages and the epoch of the Renaissance, the other, the different neighbor was not assigned too flattering attributes. In other words, the close otherness has rather negative connotations. That is why, apart from the occasional distortions, the Italians, who were at some distance from the Romanians, offer more credible and objective viewpoints.

The testimonies of the Italian travelers and authors on the Romanians and the countries they inhabited in the 16th century should be taken into consideration for several reasons. They

- offer credible information on the Romanian society of the epoch;
- show what were the elements on which the Romanians’ identity was based at that time;
- emphasize the fundamental role of the Romanian language in preserving the Romanians’ Roman character; the fact that the Italians characterized the language spoken by the Romanians Latin or corrupt Italian, their remarks that Romanian resembles Italian and can be easily learnt show the authenticity of the information;
- attest that some of the Romanians themselves asserted the Roman origin of their people.

Due to their characteristic mobility, the Italians showed special attention to Central and South-Eastern Europe in the 16th century and before. Of all the foreigners, the Italians left most testimonies on the Romanians. Their credibility is relative, but higher than with other authors. In their testimonies, the Romanians are identified through their Roman origin, language, name, religion, customs, clothes, appearance, institutions, etc. The name of Wallachia often covers Wallachia proper (*Țara Românească*) and Moldavia, and sometimes even the Banat. A more general name is that of Dacia, used according to the archaizing habit of the Renaissance and referring to Transylvania, Moldavia and Wallachia. The 16th century invariable data on the Latin character of the Romanian language deny the hasty assertions expressed sometimes regarding the (re)Latinization of Romanian through the works of the Transylvanian Scholars. Romanian developed naturally and changed like any other language; it gradually adopted a great number of neologisms (mainly of Latin origin), but has always been, in its grammatical structure and vocabulary, a Romance language.

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Notes

- ¹ IOAN-AUREL POP, *Națiunea română medievală. Solidarități etnice românești în secolele XIII-XVI*, București, 1998, passim.
- ² AL. MARCU, *Riflessi di storia rumena in opere italiane dei secoli XIV e XV*, in *Ephemeris Dacoromana*, I, 1923; ADOLF ARMBRUSTER, *Romanitatea românilor. Istoria unei idei*, 2nd edition, București, 1993, pp. 32-76; CLAUDIO ISOPESCU, *Notizie intorno ai Romeni nella letteratura geografica italiana del Cinquecento*, in *Bulletin de la Section Historique de l'Académie Roumaine*, XVI, 1929; MARIA HOLBAN, *Călători străini despre Țările Române*, vol. I, București, 1968 (hereafter: *Călători...*); GEORGE LĂZĂRESCU, NICOLAE STOICESCU, *Țările Române și Italia până la 1600*, București, 1972, pp. 245-270.
- ³ *Călători...*, I, p. 483.
- ⁴ A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-66; ȘERBAN PAPACOSTEA, *Geneza statului în evul mediu românesc. Studii critice*, enlarged edition, București, 1999, pp. 245-246.
- ⁵ It has been revealed recently that the ethnonym "român" (Romanian) was used for the first time in parallel with "valah" (Wallachian) in a fragment from a world chronicle edited in Italy around 1313-1315 and copied in 1394 by the Florentine Ammaretto Mannelli. See ȘERBAN TURCUȘ, *Prima mărturie străină despre etnonimul "român" (1314)*, in *Cele trei Crișuri*, 3rd series, I, no. 7-9, 2000, pp. 1-14.
- ⁶ *Călători...*, I, p. 472 (Latin text at p. 474).
- ⁷ Ș. PAPACOSTEA, *op. cit.*, pp. 239-248.
- ⁸ G. LĂZĂRESCU, N. STOICESCU, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-314; D. GĂZDARU, *Mențiuni italiene și dalmatine din secolul al XVI-lea despre limba și poporul românesc*, in *Arhiva*, XLVII, 1940, passim; A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-142.
- ⁹ A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-90; G. LĂZĂRESCU, N. STOICESCU, *op. cit.*, pp. 278-280.
- ¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 139-140, and pp. 321-325 respectively.
- ¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 131, and pp. 309-311 respectively.
- ¹² Their texts or the commentaries of their texts are to be found in the cited works (*Călători...*, A. ARMBRUSTER, G. LĂZĂRESCU and N. STOICESCU, etc.)
- ¹³ *Călători...*, I, p. 162.
- ¹⁴ A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, p. 129.
- ¹⁵ *Călători...*, I, p. 321; A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-91; G. LĂZĂRESCU, N. STOICESCU, *op. cit.*, p. 282.
- ¹⁶ *Călători...*, II, p. 377; A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, p. 108; G. LĂZĂRESCU, N. STOICESCU, *op. cit.*, p. 288.
- ¹⁷ *Călători...*, II, p. 312; A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, p. 124; G. LĂZĂRESCU, N. STOICESCU, *op. cit.*, p. 292.
- ¹⁸ A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, p. 126; G. LĂZĂRESCU, N. STOICESCU, *op. cit.*, p. 299.
- ¹⁹ See note 12.
- ²⁰ A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-132.
- ²¹ A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, p. 84; G. LĂZĂRESCU, N. STOICESCU, *op. cit.*, p. 270.
- ²² A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, p. 129; G. LĂZĂRESCU, N. STOICESCU, *op. cit.*, p. 302. See also *Călători...*, II, pp. 527-607.
- ²³ *Călători...*, II, p. 291.
- ²⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 630-631.
- ²⁵ A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, p. 132.
- ²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 130, note 151; *Călători...*, II, p. 594.
- ²⁷ A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, p. 138. See ȘTEFAN PASCU, *Petru Cercel și Țara Românească la sfârșitul sec. XVI*, Sibiu, 1944, passim.
- ²⁸ *Călători...*, II, p. 519.
- ²⁹ G. LĂZĂRESCU, N. STOICESCU, *op. cit.*, p. 309; A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, p. 132, note 155.

- ³⁰ G. LĂZĂRESCU, N. STOICESCU, *op. cit.*, pp. 271-272.
- ³¹ A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, pp. 129-130.
- ³² *Ibidem*, p. 128.
- ³³ A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-129.
- ³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 104.
- ³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 105.
- ³⁶ A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, p. 84; G. LĂZĂRESCU, N. STOICESCU, *op. cit.*, pp. 270-271.
- ³⁷ A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, p. 90.
- ³⁸ *Călători...*, I, p. 248.
- ³⁹ A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, p. 89, note 32; G. LĂZĂRESCU, N. STOICESCU, *op. cit.*, p. 273.
- ⁴⁰ G. LĂZĂRESCU, N. STOICESCU, *op. cit.*, p. 321.
- ⁴¹ A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, p. 108.
- ⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 130, note 151.
- ⁴³ *Ibidem*, pp. 131-132.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 131; G. LĂZĂRESCU, N. STOICESCU, *op. cit.*, p. 310.
- ⁴⁵ A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, pp. 138-139.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 103, note 70.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 84.
- ⁴⁸ *Călători...*, I, pp. 175-180.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, I, pp. 321-340; A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-91.
- ⁵⁰ A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, p. 90; G. LĂZĂRESCU, N. STOICESCU, *op. cit.*, p. 278; *Călători...*, I, pp. 246-255.
- ⁵¹ A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, p. 90, note 36.
- ⁵² See A. ARMBRUSTER, *op. cit.*, pp. 109 (note 89), 130 (note 151), 131.
- ⁵³ *Ibidem*, pp. 117-121.