

Eastern and Central European Studies IV



IOAN-AUREL POP

**"De manibus Valachorum
scismaticorum..."**

**Romanians and Power in the Mediaeval
Kingdom of Hungary
The Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries**



PETER LANG
EDITION

Introduction

The title above, albeit simple and clear in its structure, requires a few explanations.

The first part of this title (*"From the Hands of the Schismatic Vlachs"*) – which seems somewhat metaphorical, but is not – expresses the ethnic essence of the mediaeval Romanian people: their Latinity, which is derived from the Western world and contained within the term *Vallachi* ("Vlachs", "Vallachs", Wallachians" etc) and their allegiance to Eastern spirituality, which is reflected by the word *scismatici* ("schismatics"). Both concepts were used by foreigners, not by the Romanians themselves, and although they rest on facts, not fiction, they clearly have derogatory overtones. The term "schismatic", used in the Catholic world, has always carried tinges of contempt and condescension, while the word "Vlach" (with its variations), used by most foreigners, acquired such a meaning gradually, only in certain languages and under particular historical circumstances. The entire phrase that is placed under quotation marks in the title is drawn from a series of Latin documents which date back to 1377 and will be commented on below; the expression "from the hands of the schismatic Vlachs..." suggests the plunder of the (material, moral and spiritual) wealth that belonged to the patrimony of the Orthodox Romanians. It is this kind of pillage, denudation, despoilment and ravishment – not only of countries, estates, forests and villages, but also of beliefs and dreams – that sealed the fate of the Romanians for many centuries to come. All this will be explained at length in this study.

The second part of the title is clearer, but it also calls for a few comments. Which Romanians does it refer to? Obviously, to the ones comprised, in one form or another, in the Kingdom of Hungary, though, more broadly, it refers to all the Romanians north of the Danube, because they were all, with or without their consent, connected to mediaeval Hungary. What was the situation of the North-Danubian Romanians between 1200 and 1300? How many were they and how were they organised? It is difficult to provide definitive and precise answers to these questions, but throughout the book, I shall try to unravel the unknowns, based on the currently existing knowledge. In any case, the Romanians are today the largest nation in South-Eastern Europe, and there is no reason to believe that at the beginning of the second millennium, they were, with due proportions, fewer compared to others. The Romanians were the undisputed heirs of Eastern Romanness and were perceived as such, directly or indirectly, by the peoples surrounding them, by their institutions, and by various authors of the time. However, their Roman inheritance had been relativised by centuries of

invasions undertaken by the migratory peoples, of comingling and coexisting with the Slavs and other peoples of the steppe (the Pechenegs, the Oghuz, and the Cumans). One should, therefore, not attempt to imagine a compact and homogeneous Romanian people, because no people were like that at the time. One may, instead, speak of a Romanian population or Romanian populations that were quite disparate and dispersed across vast areas, of groups that were scattered among other tribes. North of the River Danube, the Romanians were included in different political state structures, ranging from those they organised themselves, to mixed structures or those belonging to other peoples, the Kingdom of Hungary among them. There have been attested Romanian political structures of the knezate and voivodate types (sometimes also called: countries, districts, and so on), as well as Byzantine ecclesiastical bodies (of these Romanians) having the same rank as dioceses. In around 1200, the Romanians north and west of the Carpathians were included, by conquest, in the Kingdom of Hungary (by about 1190-1200, Hungary's effective control had reached the mountain ridges), while those in Oltenia, Muntenia and Moldavia experienced certain pressures from the Hungarians, who had been trying to impose their rule, with variable and tentative results. Like in the case of other populations that were in the same situation, the Romanians' inclusion in the Hungarian Kingdom did not entail, from the very beginning, a substantial change in their status. Gradually, however, as the reader may see below, the Romanians' destiny as a people that had been conquered and subjected by force, with their Byzantine-Slavic component and their Eastern faith, led them to a certain degree of marginalisation, to a situation of inferiority, which was also reflected in the collective mentality. This status also gave rise to a sense of dissatisfaction and frustration, which intensified especially after 1204, when the "schismatic" Romanians were stripped of their "countries", lands, forests and churches, were imposed additional taxes, had their rights infringed, and so on.

What, then, do the Romanians have to do with the official power in Hungary, and why does the word "power" appear in the title? The idea that the Romanians never participated in the exercise of power in Transylvania and Hungary is largely a cliché, an impermissible generalisation, and requires serious explanations and corrections. The Hungarians did not promote, at first, and could not support an exclusivist policy in the vast territory known as mediaeval Hungary, for the mere reason that they were too few to rule and reign by themselves. In addition, the Hungarian political conception during the first two centuries of the kingdom's existence (1000-1200) had adapted to the rather heterogeneous structure of the country and the ideology of the Latin Middle Ages, recognising and supporting ethnic and even religious diversity. Important were the glory of the kingdom, its functioning, its defence, and for all this they needed people to work, fight and

pray. The “kingdoms’ jewels” were their men, and kings were anxious – in those times and places, with scarce population – to gather people in Hungary and provide incentives to the existing populace to stay on. That explains why, together with the Hungarians, the Szeklers, the Saxons, the Teutons, the Cumans, and so on, the Romanians were also, for a while, invited to collaborate, were engaged in the power structures, consulted, and recognised, both they and some of their forms of organisation. In other words, the Romanians, as a distinct community, also participated, temporarily, in the exercise of central (in Transylvania) and local power (in Transylvania and the western regions). How, where, in what forms and for how long – we shall see below. It should be noted that at some point in time – though not suddenly – the aforesaid Hungarian concept of diversity changed and, with it, the fate of the Romanians also changed. This book aims to capture exactly this change, which took place over a period of almost two centuries; afterwards, the status of the Romanians as an entity increasingly deteriorated, leading to the situation of a people that was excluded from among the estates or the nations, and was “endured” in the Principality of Transylvania “for as long as the princes and the citizens shall so please” (as recorded in the legally binding documents of the seventeenth century).

Another part of this book’s title draws attention to the notion of the Kingdom of Hungary, even though later I shall often also refer to Transylvania, or to Transylvania and Hungary together. Political concepts in the Middle Ages did not have the terminological clarity, precision and propriety of Roman law or the codes of the modern era. Hungarian sovereigns had many titles, as reflected in the letterheads of the Latin documents they issued; thus, they were also kings of Dalmatia, Croatia, Rama, Serbia, Galicia, Lodomeria, Cumania, Bulgaria and even, sometimes, Poland, princes of Salerno, and so on. Some of them expressed real titles, while others were mere fiction or titles of pretence. In essence, however, when I refer to mediaeval Hungary, I consider all the countries, provinces and regions that were effectively ruled, for a longer period, by the Hungarian sovereigns. They broadly included Hungary itself (roughly the territory of the Hungarian state today), Slovakia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, parts of Serbia, parts of Romania, parts of Ukraine, and parts of Austria. In juridical terms, the king of Buda was their sovereign not only in his capacity as king of Hungary, but also in that of king of Dalmatia, Croatia, and so on. By custom, however, even when referring to the realities of Dalmatia, Croatia or Bosnia, the reference to a particular sovereign was made only in his capacity as king of Hungary. Where was Transylvania in all this equation and why was it often mentioned specifically? In formal juridical terms, Transylvania was not a distinct kingdom like the above-mentioned, and did not appear in the titulature of kings; from this point of view, it was considered to be part of the Kingdom of Hungary. In concrete, factual terms, however, Transylvania was

a voivodate and had a special autonomous status, in the sense that it had a separate organisation, similar to that of Croatia, Slavonia and Dalmatia. I am referring here to voivodal Transylvania or the intra-Carpathian area, which comprised seven nobiliary counties, the Szekler and the Saxon seats, and the Romanian countries or districts. The Banat, Crişana, Sătmar, Maramureş, and the counties of Ung, Bereg, Ugocea, and so on (which were inhabited, among others, by Romanians) were not part of Transylvania back then (not until 1541), even though they often gravitated towards it. Still, many of them enjoyed a special, distinct organisation.¹ For example, up until the end of the fourteenth century (that is, for a longer period than Transylvania), the Voivodate or Land of Maramureş had a traditional Romanian organisation; the institution of the county (*comitatus*) effectively replaced the Romanian voivodate only towards the year 1400. Hence, an official document issued in Latin, in 1336, by an institution belonging to the Diocese of Eger (Agria) spoke about the “high road leading from Maramureş to Hungary”. The same held true for Transylvania itself: like Hungary, it was often referred to as a *regnum* (a distinct country) and was, sometimes, during the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries, counterposed to it. In other words, even the royal documents of the period made a distinction between Transylvania and Hungary. I have also done so, wherever necessary. Consequently, it is not erroneous to speak sometimes of Transylvania and Hungary as different entities in the Middle Ages. Extensive references to the specific institutions of the Voivodate of Transylvania and its distinct structures will be made below.

I have included, in the title, the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries because they were decisive for the relations between the Romanians and the power structures in Transylvania and Hungary, and also because this study refers mainly to that particular period, namely the last century of the Árpáadian kings’ reign and the century dominated by the Angevin kings. The elucidation of this case would involve, of course, studying also the reign of King-Emperor Sigismund of Luxembourg (1387-1437), but this represented an altogether distinct world, a different half a century, replete with momentous, glorious, sad and contradictory events. The events from the time of Sigismund until Mohács (cca. 1440-1514) are known now thanks to several research projects and, especially, to the outstanding work about the Romanian nobility of Transylvania that my colleague, the distinguished historian Ioan Drăgan, has written. I must, nonetheless, insist on the idea that the fate of the Romanians in Transylvania and Hungary was decided in the interval between the beginning of the thirteenth century and the end of the fol-

1 We might ascertain (without the claim of utmost accuracy, yet in agreement with several clear indications) that in the Banat, Crişana, Satu Mare, Maramureş, Ugocea, Bereg, Szolnok and so on, in other words, outside the voivodate, there lived at least as many Romanians as there were in Transylvania proper.

lowing century, in the sense that they or, rather, their elites were relegated to positions outside power.

I have not applied, in writing this book, too many of the contemporary theoretical concepts developed relatively recently by sociologists, political scientists, or jurists, who may or not conduct scholarly research of historical relevance. I am familiar with many of these new lines of study, which may truly enrich the historians' methodology and are often indispensable. Mention should be made of the study of the elites, group strategies, theories of power, the social imaginary and social anthropology, and so on. It would nonetheless be a tedious and ahistorical venture if I treated the rise—in fact the false rise—of the Romanian knezes from the vantage point of the contemporary theory of group strategies. I could have grouped, under a common denominator, all the knezes confirmed by the titles under which they were awarded estates; I could have claimed that they followed a specific economic group strategy, I could have placed all the Romanian landowners who acquired official administrative positions under the umbrella of a collective political strategy, just like the examples of Romanian leaders who converted to Catholicism could have served as the basis for a theory of spiritual (denominational) group strategies. However, fortunately or not, I have not found any traces of group strategies in the behaviour of the Romanian knezes from Transylvania and Hungary, during the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries. For us, the term “strategy” implies a preconception, a theory that is purposefully and, sometimes, programmatically developed so as to generate a set of coordinated actions for the achievement of a particular purpose. However, the Romanian knezes in mediaeval Transylvania did not devise any strategy; instead, they were forced to adopt various tactics, depending on the forms of societal evolution from the Kingdom of Hungary. The term “group strategy” is probably quite appropriate for the more recent periods, starting from the end of the Middle Ages, when various types of communities (estates, leagues, social strata and classes, parties, nations, and so on) formulated, through their leaders, their own long-term programmes and nurtured the conscience that they would indeed follow these programmes. On the other hand, an excessively sophisticated theoretical arsenal sometimes tends to lead to laborious constructions, which would be too removed from the mediaeval reality, especially when – as in our case – the sources are rather parsimonious and do not convey sufficient data.

In this book, I undertook to reconstruct events first (on the basis of research) and then, if possible, to interpret them, because, for various reasons, our historiography has not yet reconstructed the past in a satisfactory manner, not even in the form of the thorough knowledge of raw facts, as required by the positivist trend. I am, nonetheless, convinced that the documents I refer to here, which have also been read by other scholars in a different key and in combination with other evidence (arising from new re-

search), will offer eloquent suggestions for the history of the imaginary, for the study of collective mentalities, for social anthropology, for the study of marginals, and so on.

Given my experience and the historical school to which, out of genuine conviction, I have dedicated all my research efforts for many years, I have constantly aimed to reconstruct first the past that happened and only thereafter the past that might have occurred, the past that gains shape only in the people's minds and is handed down to us in the form of projections. Unfortunately, scholars do not always know how to restore what was. That is why for the Romanian historiography, restoring what might have been is, for the time being, a luxury. I do believe, however, that in view of the peculiarities of Romanian historical writings, working on the real and the imaginary at the same time may be highly productive and necessary: a few research stages, which other historiographies might have explored at length, in their sequentiality, may thus be compressed. I should nonetheless exercise a certain degree of caution. Otherwise, filled with enthusiasm about the new methods and an entire range of transient historiographical fads (as all fashions are), I might aim to convince the world that it is more important to know what was in the minds of people, or of communities even, than what was for real. Because people very often thought altogether different things than what actually happened, by studying the people's thoughts alone, I might risk mistaking the ideal for the real, projects for their achievement, goals for their accomplishment, or starting points for destinations. All these must be studied in their harmonious interplay, lest I should reach erroneous results. Historical sources remain the "raw material" that is vital for any foray into the past; they represent an essential part of a "historian's profession" (as an illustrious predecessor said) and of the profound content of the discipline called history. The past can only be revealed to us through a wide variety of sources, ranging from a shard that may be several thousand years old to the oral testimonies of our contemporaries. Research into the past may, of course, also be conducted outside the sources. However, this does not amount, as a rule, to research proper, and those who approach the past in this manner are not historians, but essayists, artists, politicians, journalists, and so on. Today, unfortunately, there is a frequent overlapping between levels, so much so that many well-meaning intellectuals will, in good faith, mistake the passion for history for the historian's profession, and endless speculation on the past for specialised historical research.

I do not look favourably upon such convolutions of the spirit, gratuitous departures from one's own professional background and hazardous word play, bordering on excessive relativism and often sowing distrust in the—naturally—limited ability to know the past. I consider that true historians should carry out specialised research, according to the precise and well-known rules of their profession. Such are the considerations—acquired from

my illustrious professors—that have guided me in the investigations I have conducted for the present work, over the course of many years of research.

However, as far as possible in this book, I have also looked at mediaeval history through the lens of ideas, images and mentalities, attempting to re-constitute ethnic, confessional and political identities through an examination of those who wielded power and those who were on the margins of or outside power altogether. I have also attempted to capture the mentality of the Romanian knezes and noblemen, stemming from their role as landowners, fighters, judges, Christians and so on. Naturally, I have done this with caution, avoiding the temptation to translate western historiographical themes onto Romanian soil, for the sheer sake of “modernising trends” and in the absence of the wealth of mediaeval sources that exists in those countries. Over the past few years, there has been a tendency in Romanian historiography to adopt the views of others, by pastiching certain trends and even works considered to be in fashion, on imagology, political mythologies, gender studies, childhood, domestic violence, attitudes towards death, and so on. At least for our mediaeval centuries, these perspectives are rather superannuated and unapproachable, given the precariousness of the sources. At best, such efforts may yield interesting essays, with ideas translated from other languages and other horizons, yet without any bearing on our past.

Speaking about the status of the Romanians as a group in mediaeval Hungary, I have also explored the question of national identity, a delicate and often reviled topic, especially because it has been seen in relation with our ancestral nationalism, with traditionalism and conservatism, with all their extensions in Ceauşescu’s brand of communism, and so on. Not infrequently, I have come across Romanian and foreign analysts horrified by “our nationalist disease”, which purportedly eats away at our souls and hopelessly throws us into a contagious obsessive syndrome, from which all our evil *comes*. Personally, I have studied national identities from various geographical areas and different historical times, finding sublime moments and abominable excesses everywhere, without some prevailing over others, in some or the other. Condemning national identities for crimes committed in the name of nationalism is like condemning the church, family or property, watchwords in whose name so many people have been killed. Just like the Hungarian, the French, the German and the Russian identities, with all their peculiarities, the Romanian identity has been formed and forged in time, outside the decision of some individual or political party. Being aware of the nature of these group feelings is essential for understanding the past and the present. In the case of the Romanians, the nationalistic exaggerations of the communist period put a sharp end to genuine research on this topic, leaving room for clichés (some call them myths) that are still in circulation today and stand in the way of accurately reconstructing the pre-modern

stage of the Romanians' identity. I have, therefore, leaned on them only insofar as the known sources (much poorer than in the West) have allowed us, reaching surprising conclusions in this respect, too.

Thus, today I submit some of the results of this long-term research to the attention of readers who are enamoured with the past, who have a penchant for life revealed through the methods of history. I do this with deep emotion and with the conviction that sooner or later, willingly or unwillingly, consciously or unconsciously, all of us "shall be held responsible for what we write".

Cluj-Napoca, 5 July 2013