

ROYAL VISITS AND FOREIGN TRAVELS

HISTORICAL DATABASES. A NEW RESEARCH PROJECT: *FOREIGN TRAVELERS THROUGH THE ROMANIAN PROVINCES IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY*

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Today, computer assisted historical research has gained its well-deserved place, although animated controversies about this relative new methodology still exist in the international scientific reunions. The coexistence of different points of view and their well-documented defense can only be benefic for the development of this research field.

A part of the historical research community think that the computer is a real God Almighty and that the only thing that counts is the result, without considering both the real possibilities and the limits of the method. On the other hand, there are other historians who consider that the benefits of informatics for historical research do not exist. Between these two extreme points of view, there are an important number of historians who plead, on a solid argument base, for the true scientific aspects of computer assisted historical research, emphasizing the necessity of learning the new methodology and adapting the statistical and IT methods to the particularities of historical data.

If we turn our attention to the historical research projects of the last years, we will be amazed by their variety, and we will first see the preoccupation for the continuous development of the systems of gathering, organization and selective retrieval of information, in other words of the systems of design and management of historical databases.

Three main reasons explain the current trend of using computers in history, especially in processing the historical data sources:

- Historians are not interested in becoming specialists in automatic data processing; they are interested in obtaining reliable historical data fast in order to interpret them;
- Historians may use the same sources/data in various ways, according to the characteristics of their own research and methodology, and the explicit and implicit theoretical perspectives of historical research;
- Historians use and interpret the same historical source, for a long period of time, according to their intuition and to newly-discovered documents.

Historical research is a continuous dialog between historians and the sources they investigate, and is directly affected by their personality. Along this line, the computer should not be seen as an instrument in applying rigid methods and standards to the processing and interpretation of the historical sources, but as an instrument that may sensibly contribute to diminish the subjectivity in the historian-source relationship.

The databases illustrate exactly this aspect of computer assisted historical research, and provide a simple mechanism through which information with a complex structure is easily stored, processed, categorized, and presented. The main advantages offered to the historian by the databases include:

- The processing methods and the statistical analysis are determined by the used sources and the goal of historical research, and not imposed by some rigid rules of a software application;
- Historical information is stored in its raw form, as it appears in the source;
- The database is an archive itself, because it stores information in its original form; hence, it could be useful to different users, different research projects, or to comparative research;
- The database makes possible categorizing the information for a quantitative analysis, without altering the primary data.

Internationally, more and more research projects have large historical databases as a starting point. Today, three types of historical databases are dominant in historical research:

a. *Prosopographic Databases*: This type of database facilitates the study of the lifecycle of a group of individuals, which requires collecting the demographic data relevant to these individuals and their families, as well as data about their profession, education, income, wealth, etc. The items of information are extracted from a multitude of sources, whose data are not all relevant.

Processing the prosopographic databases has a remarkable interdisciplinary character: it uses methods specific to history, paleography, heraldry, genealogy, and mathematical statistics. The prosopographic databases also find applicability to computer assisted editing of medieval documents, facilitating the authentication and ensuring the correctness of data relating to the persons named in the documents.

b. *Demographic Databases*: This type of database can be viewed as an extension of the prosopographic databases. Such a database analyzes and aggregates rich nominal information, as well as economic, social, geographic, heraldic or genealogic data contained in catagraphies, nominal lists, parochial or civil registries, and census reports. The creation of such a database is usually a far reaching research program; the database could represent, for a given period, the demographic status of a country or that of an entire continent. A start in this direction could be considered the study conducted by C. Desama and S. Pasleau.¹ The researcher should ensure the homogeneity of a demographic database, as well as the existence of systematic links among its elements. From this point of view, the demographic database really appears composed of three databases

¹ C. Desama, S. Pasleau, *Pour une banque européenne de données historiques (XIX^e-XX^e siècles)*, in vol. *Standardisation et échange des bases de données historiques. Actes de la troisième table ronde internationale tenue au LISH (CNRS), Paris, 15-16 mai 1987*, ed. by J. P. Jenet, Paris, 1988.

independently managed, but integrated in an informational system. They comprise the population registries (or the civil registries), the nominal lists (electoral lists, tax payers lists, etc.), and the data aggregated at local or regional levels. Each component has its own procedures of data collection and file management.

c. *Databases for Studying the Evolution of the Historical Event*: The computing techniques known under the name of “analysis of the event history” generate significant research projects, for example *The Eurasia Project*, which is a vast comparative study of population registries of Belgium, Italy, Sweden, China, and Japan, and which tries to distinguish the demographic processes of the past and to discover the correlations between the births, deaths, marriages and migrations on the one hand, and the history of individuals, their families, or even larger communities on the other hand.

To date, the Romanian historiography has three historical databases, of medium size, created with small budgets during the period 1998-2006, and related to the following research topics:

1. *The Large Land Ownership in 1864-1918*.² The evolution of the large land ownership of Romania during the period 1857-1918, by being an interesting problem of socio-economic history, has determined the creation of a historical database based on archives and published sources, which have been selected by their precision and richness. The data sources have been the following:

- The voter lists for the ad-hoc assemblies of 1857;
- The nominal rolls (registers) of the individuals who received land through the rural law of 1864;
- The *General Yearbook of Agriculture, Commerce, and Industry* – 1905;
- The dossiers of the agrarian reform after the First World War.

2. *Boyards and Boyards' ranks of Wallachia and Moldavia, 1837-1857*.³ The data were extracted from Alexandru Perietzeanu-Buzău's manuscript, *The Archondologies of Wallachia at 1837*, from the collection of the Institute of History “N. Iorga,” and from Mihai Răzvan Ungureanu's study, *The Big Archondology of Moldavia's Boyards (1836-1856)*.⁴ The resulting database has been the starting point for a series of studies that followed the structural mutations within the boyard class, a result of the profound transformations of the Romanian society until the institutional abolition of this class.

² Irina Gavrilă, *Baze de date istorice. Marea proprietate funciară potrivit matricolelor nominale ale locuitorilor împroprietăriți prin Legea rurală din 1864*, București, 2005; Eadem, *Baze de date istorice. Cercetarea istorică asistată de calculator. Rezultate statistice ale comparării automate a bazelor de date istorice*, București, 2007.

³ Paul Cernovodeanu, Irina Gavrilă, *Arhondologiile Țării Românești de la 1837*, Brăila, 2002.

⁴ Mihai Răzvan Ungureanu, *Marea arhondologie a boierilor Moldovei (1835-1856)*, Iași, 1997.

3. *Decorations of Modern Romania (1877-1916)*.⁵ This database includes information extracted from "Monitorul oficial" with regard to orders and medals conferred in that period. This database will be the starting point of an extensive study regarding the history of the orders and medals of Romania (1877-1947).

Their statistical processing yielded interesting novel results published in historical books and studies. They also are a source of documentation and a tool for all researchers interested in the social, political, and economic history of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.

The new project I would like to present in this article, the first far-reaching of its kind in Romanian historiography, joins the trend of multidisciplinary, extremely actual research of designing large historical databases, aiming to serve as an alternative source of documentation, and also as a starting point for a multitude of subsequent research projects in various fields of history. Along this line, we aim to build a database of foreign travelers through the Romanian space during the nineteenth century, which then we intend to process statistically. The project is funded by the National Council of Scientific Research in Higher Education.

One of the main historical sources, often referred to by researchers, consists of travel accounts, which fortunately complete the information provided by the internal sources. The relevance of these sources is still very strong today, as proven by an entire section dedicated to debates on travel accounts at the 21st International Congress of Historical Sciences, which will take place in Amsterdam, in 2010.

The foreign travelers' accounts contribute to sketching the historical landscape of the Romanian space from the economic, social, and cultural points of view, although this kind of sources are inherently subjective and lack homogeneity, because they depend on the traveler's profile (origin, profession, trip purpose and duration, unexpected incidents, etc.) and take different forms (diaries, diplomatic reports, geographic descriptions, letters, testimonies of some missionaries, logs of military campaigns, etc.).

Our historiography has exploited such foreign travelers' accounts in order to depict the medieval and modern past of the Romanian provinces, in general considering these accounts a historical source of first class, despite the limitations mentioned above, which could be factored in by the historical critique.

The project we are involved in will emphasize the importance of these sources for the Romanian history, specifically those of the nineteenth century. The project falls into the class of computer assisted historical research which, as mentioned, is one of the newest trends in the research methodology internationally. We should note that this trend is not merely a fashion, but is dictated by the informational explosion in all domains, including history. At the same time, this project aims to strengthen the Romanian school of quantitative history, by involving young researchers and Ph.D. students interested in this domain, who will attend lectures on statistical methods applicable to history and on database management.

⁵ Ileana Căzan, Irina Gavrilă, *Decorațiile din România modernă (1877-1916). Rezultatele prelucrării unei baze de date*, in "Studii și materiale de istorie modernă," vol. XV, 2002, pp. 125-148.

This project, through its dimensions, is the first of its kind in Romanian historiography. Its importance is a consequence of the fact that today historical research requires the development of systems capable to automatically collect, organize and structure, and selectively retrieve information. In other words, historical research requires the help of database management systems applied to historical data. The relation historian – source is unimaginable today without the computers' help.

Stripping the existing published⁶ or unpublished sources, and storing information in a standardized format into the database will help create a synthetic image about the foreigners who traveled through the Romanian provinces because of different reasons or missions, as well as about their opinions on the geographic space they covered during that time period (like environment, occupations, ruling class, education, customs, income, property and wealth, morals, ethnic groups, religion). The biographic, demographic, and socio-political data gathered early in this project will be statistically analyzed with the goal of creating categories of travelers, by grouping them according to criteria like age, birthplace, social origin, profession, way of transportation, purpose and duration of the trip, points of interest, and opinions. The result would be a source of information about how the Romanian society was seen from the outside, a source for the research regarding how this society and its mutations towards modernity during the nineteenth century were perceived through a short-term contact with the Romanian provinces. The project also intends to consolidate the Romanian school of quantitative history, by attracting and training young researchers in the fields of mathematical statistics and informatics.

The usefulness of this kind of database is increased by the fact that the documents describing the foreigners' perception of the Romanian space are hard to access, as many of them are in foreign institutions. Their testimonies about the Romanian provinces are an important part of our knowledge about the society of that time, even though they are subjective. The scientific value of the database, as well as its importance as a research instrument will also increase if it includes not only the traveler's attributes (age, origin, period of time, etc.), but also transcripts of documents, graphical elements as digital photocopies, photographs of the travelers, translations of documents, maps, images or slideshows.

The creation of a web site that would give the academic community the ability to remotely consult our database would integrate it into the global scientific circuit. The web site could be organized according to multiple dimensions, the user being able to easily navigate among them. These dimensions could be, for example, the nationality, the profession, the trip duration, or the travelers' opinions about various aspects of the social/political/economic/cultural life in the Romanian provinces.

The objectives pursued in this project include the following:

- Identifying the travelers of the nineteenth century, unknown until now, sketching their biographies, and critically evaluating their testimonies;
- Identifying the goals of their journeys;

⁶ *Călători străini despre țările române în secolul al XIX-lea*, vol. I, ed. by Georgeta Filiitti, Beatrice Marinescu, Șerban Rădulescu-Zoner, Marian Stroia, București, 2004; vols. II-IV, ed. by Paul Cernovodeanu, Daniela Bușă, București, 2005-2007.

- Making a correct interpretation of their travel accounts, factoring in the geographic and political contexts of the modern era;
- Shining light on their particular interest in certain geographic, economic, social, demographic, or cultural aspects of the Romanian provinces and their possible integration in the European space;
- Making a critical evaluation of their opinions related to various aspects of life in the Romanian provinces;
- Designing a database to include the travelers of the nineteenth century;
- Creating a synthetic image of the information stored in the database through its statistical analysis, including tabulation, graphical representations, grouping by age, sex, country of origin, education, profession, trip purpose, itinerary, way of transportation, opinions, etc.
- Making the database available for search on the Internet, as a research and informative tool;
- Completing the collection *Foreign Travelers about the Romanian Provinces in the Nineteenth Century* by discovering and publishing new sources;
- Disseminating the partial and final research results by publishing them in “Revista istorică,” “Studii și materiale de istorie modernă,” “Revue roumaine d’histoire,” by publishing two volumes, organizing round tables and workshops, going to conferences in Romania and abroad.

The project will employ:

- Methods specific to historical research (finding new published and unpublished sources in libraries and archives, inside and outside the country, framing the newly found travelers’ accounts about the Romanian space in the historical context of the epoch);
- Methods of information technology, specific to the design and management of historical databases (establishing the characteristic attributes of the travelers, the design of the relational database, the input, validation and evaluation of data, the interrogation of the database in specialized languages);
- The methodology of web design in order to create the project’s web site (planning the web site, consisting in defining and gathering information about the web site audience, purpose, and policies for information development and use; analysis, consisting in evaluating the information that would be uploaded to the web site; designing the site; graphical design; implementation; promotion for the web site; getting feedback and updating the site design and content);
- Methods of mathematical statistics (tabulation, cross-classification, graphs, clustering and cluster analysis).

Through its use of methods and analysis characteristic to historical science, information technology, and mathematical statistics, the project has a pronounced interdisciplinary character, contributing to the training of young researchers in the field of quantitative and computer assisted historical research.

The database will offer not only an image of the Romanian space through the eyes of the foreign travelers, but also a starting point for subsequent biographical, demo-historical, or prosopographic research and studies of socio-cultural history.