

STATE AND LAND – ORIGINS AND TOPONYMS

BESSARABIA – A COUNTRY NAME

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Only fourteen years had passed since the great clash between Charles Robert and Basarab, an event marking “the first Romanian union,” more exactly the union between the Voivodate of Argeș and the Country of Severin, when the son of the victor of 1330 caused a new turn in the external policy of a country he had come to rule upon under circumstances still unknown. In 1344, after a meeting with Louis of Anjou, “Alexandru, son of Basarab” removed the country he was effectively ruling from under the domination of the Golden Horde and placed it in the great coalition of forces which attacked the positions of the Mongol power centered in Sarai, both north and east of the Carpathians, and on the northwestern shore of the Black Sea. In less than two decades, the coalition gathered under the flag of the crusade, with the blessing of the Papacy, was able to reduce considerably the area of domination of the Golden Horde. In the fifth decade of the fourteenth century, after several years of military confrontation, the Golden Horde had lost important territories eastward of the Carpathians to Poland and Hungary, together with no less important positions on the northern and western shores of the Black Sea to the Genoese. The decline continued in the following years, with the western border of the Mongol power withdrawing gradually to the east.¹ As a result, the geopolitical background of Central and Eastern Europe changed considerably, and so did the international relations in the region. To the east and northeast of the Carpathians, in the Danubian-Pontic space, both to the north and to the south of the maritime segment of the river, alongside traces of Tatar power, new or revived political entities cropped up: the Knezate of Halych, which came under Polish domination; the Voivodate of Moldavia; the Bishopric of Milcovia – a reincarnation of the Cuman Bishopric on a considerably smaller territory; the principality of some military heads of controversial origin to the south of the maritime section of the Danube, in a territory which would take over the name of one of these military

¹ S. Iosipescu, *Despre unele controverse ale istoriei medievale*, in “Revista de istorie,” XXX, 1979, no. 10, pp. 1067-1074; Ș. Papacostea, *Triumful luptei pentru neatârnamare: întemeierea Moldovei și consolidarea statelor feudale românești*, in vol. *Geneza statului în Evul Mediu românesc*, București, 1999, pp. 45-48; V. Ciocîltan, *Mongolii și Marea Neagră în secolele XIII-XIV. Contribuția Cinghizhanizilor la transformarea bazinului pontic în placă turnantă a comerțului euro-asiatic*, București, 1998, pp. 182-202.

chiefs, Dobrotici; a political entity of the Tatars under the leadership of a “Demetrius princeps Tartarorum”; and, last but not least, a territorial entity lying on the north bank of the Chilia arm, which would preserve in time the name of Bessarabia.

In the days of Alexandru Basarab, further to become Nicolae Alexandru, and of his immediate successors, Ungro-Vlahia or Wallachia underwent successive extensions and territorial involutions, according to changes in the international background. Eastwards, a primordial and most important extension was made in a first stage to the Siret, then beyond the Siret, on the northern shore of the Chilia arm, to the sea. This brings us directly to the issue of Bessarabia.

“A most important argument sustaining the rule of Muntenia over the southern parts of Moldavia – says Nicolae Iorga – is the persistent name of *Bessarabia*, borne exclusively by this region until very late. For this name to become so well-established, even for neighbors, the Basarabs’ rule there must have been more than accidental.”² This perfectly well-grounded remark calls nevertheless for an explanation of the eastward expansion of the Great Voivodate with its center in Argeș. More exactly, when and how did the Basarabs of Argeș extend their domination over the strip of land lying north of the Chilia arm, between the Prut and the Dniester?

The establishment of the Basarabs at Câmpulung in 1345 or so,³ after the alliance signed by Alexandru with Louis of Anjou and the first victories in the anti-Tatar campaign, the creation of a voivodal residence on the road connecting the town of Brașov to the commercial line of the Danube, all seem to indicate the beginning of an eastward expansion. In this military and political context, the country may have expanded as far as Vicina, where the Byzantine Metropolitanate bearing the same name had its headquarters. By that time, according to some historians, this Metropolitanate had lost the traditional purpose for which it had been established there a century before. One may only assume these early evolutions. On the contrary, it is quite certain that the country’s expansion to the point of confluence between the Siret and the Danube had already occurred in 1358, when the King of Hungary drew a corridor, on paper, between the Ialomița and the Siret, for the merchants of Brașov, whose free access to the maritime Danube and the Pontic commerce he was trying to protect.⁴ This demonstration of authority or, more likely, of power on the part of the King, which affected directly

² N. Iorga, *Studii istorice asupra Chilie și Cetății Albe*, București, 1899, p. 74.

³ P. Chihaiia, *Din cetățile de scaun ale Țării Românești*, București, 1974, p. 232-311; Al. Ciocîltan, *Prope Turcos et inter Scismaticos. Conventurile ordinelor mendicante în Țara Românească (secolele XIV-XVI)*, in “Historia urbana,” XVII, 2009, pp. 5-23.

⁴ *Documenta Romaniae Historica, D Relații între țările române*, vol. I 1222-1446, ed. by Șt. Pascu, C. Cihodaru, K.G. Gündisch, D. Mioc, V. Pervain, București, 1977, p. 72.

the interests of the owner of this territory, recently integrated by Alexandru Basarab into his country, led to a major conflict between the two former allies, whose joint efforts had repelled the Tatars far to the east.

At the core of this enduring conflict, with alternating clashes and compromises, lay the interests of international trade, with its Pontic and Danubian ramifications. The establishment of the dominating Genoese at the Danube Mouths, more exactly at Licostomo, in the sixth decade of the fourteenth century, the importance attributed by Louis to maintaining a direct link with the Black Sea through the merchants of Genoa and of Braşov – a dominant and consistent orientation of his external policy – clashed against the categorical opposition of the great voivode of Argeş or Câmpulung, now Alexandru, who was ruling alone after his father's death. Thus, a successful military alliance turned into antagonism shortly after victory was achieved, just as the booty was being split. And this booty, once the Tatar domination had been removed from the western shore of the Black Sea, was primarily the possibility to exert control over the current and future commercial roads linking the Black Sea and the Lower Danube to Central Europe, and collect the deriving commercial and customs benefits. This called for territorial domination in the area, in order to be able to favor some of these roads and prevent competition from other roads. Firmly determined to secure, for his country, a share in the benefits from trading activities with such excellent prospects, Alexandru Basarab did not hesitate to protect his interests, even at the risk of a conflict with his sovereign. Alexandru Basarab's commercial and territorial approach would become one of the major orientations of the external policy of the country until the time of Turcocracy.

This major clash of interests determined Alexandru Basarab to break away from the alliance with Hungary and the Roman-Catholic milieu, towards which he had taken significant steps, and turn his attention to Byzantium, where he sought and was granted new spiritual and political legitimacy. From Constantinople, Basarab's country obtained in 1359 a metropolitan seat "of the entire Ungro-Vlahia," a title which would also designate the entire territorial rule of the great voivode, recognized from now on as an autocrat, *avthentis, dominus, domn*.⁵ In addition to the Metropolitanate of Vicina, the metropolitan of which also became the head of the Church "of the entire Ungro-Vlahia," the new eparchy also took over the territorial legacy of the metropolitan seat struck off the patriarchal catalogue, and this legacy included especially the maritime Danube course, with its commercial centers and their Orthodox population.⁶ Would the prince, at that point

⁵ *Fontes Historiae Daco-Romanae*, vol. IV *Scrittori și acte bizantine secolele IV-XV*, ed. by H. Mihăescu, R. Lăzărescu, N.-Ș. Tanașoca, T. Teoteoi, București, 1982, pp. 196-203.

⁶ Nicolae Alexandru "admitted that the new Metropolitan should be brought over from Vicina to the Danube Mouths, a region now targeted by the rule of a Prince who had brought the Danube bank nearer to himself" – N. Iorga, *Istoria românilor*, vol. III *Cititorii*, București, 1937, p. 191.

Nicolae Alexandru,⁷ recently legitimized by Byzantium, transform this spiritual-ecclesiastic legacy into a political and territorial program?

Dimitre Onciul attributed to the founder of Ungro-Vlahia the expansion along the maritime Danube, north of the Chilia arm, into a territory that would receive and definitely preserve the name of the ruling dynasty of Wallachia, Bessarabia.⁸ Onciul's interpretation is plausible, given the congruence between this enterprise and the commercial and customs interests of Wallachia, firmly protected by its founder. Along the principles of his commercial policy, the Danubian territory north of the Chilia arm was a buffer zone against any attempt by the King of Hungary, now an enemy, to establish a direct link with the Genoese of Chilia, and thus deprive the country of the huge benefits derived from the control over an intercontinental commercial road. Other historians attributed this advance of the eastern borderline of Wallachia towards the sea to one successor of Nicolae Alexandru or another, the last of whom, chronologically, was Mircea the Elder who, undoubtedly, controlled the Lower Danube on either bank.⁹ It is certain that this territory was under the rule of Wallachia effectively and durably, even if with interruptions, and it was attributed by contemporaries the name of Bessarabia. But who exactly attributed this name and, more importantly, who ensured its perennial character after Wallachia's withdrawal from the area?

Questions raised by the name of Bessarabia, followed by a forced explanation, can be found in the writings of one of the founders of Romanian historiography, Miron Costin. In his *Chronicle of the countries of Moldavia and Wallachia*, written in Polish, Costin devotes a paragraph, entitled *On Bessarabia*, to the territory lying in the south of his country, at that time incorporated into the Ottoman Empire: "What a great mistake to bring out maps and write that *Țara Muntenească* or some part of our country used to be called Bessarabia. As for the Muntenians, they had an illustrious family of the Basarabs, and several princes, one after another, among whom the well-known Șerban ... Therefore, because of these princes, or because of this family, the first person who wrote about Bessarabia mistakenly claimed that *Țara Muntenească*

⁷ D. Barbu, *Sur le double nom du prince de Valachie Nicolas/Alexandre*, in vol. *Byzance, Rome et les Roumains. Essai sur la production politique de la foi au Moyen Âge*, Bucarest, 1988, pp. 103-122.

⁸ After discussing the hypothesis of the establishment of the Basarabs at the Danube Mouths in the thirteenth century, the historian concludes that the expansion could only have occurred "by the middle of the fourteenth century, when the Tatars had withdrawn from Moldavia. Then, the Basarabs took over the *Tatar parts* near the Danube Mouths (mentioned in Mircea the Elder's title), which were further on annexed to Moldavia under the name of *Bessarabia*" – D. Onciul, *Originile Principatelor Române*, București, 1899, p. 175; Gh.I. Brătianu, *Basarabia, drepturi naționale și istorice*, ed. by Florin Rotaru, București, 1995, pp. 7-8.

⁹ P.P. Panaitescu, *Mircea cel Bătrân*, București, 1944, p. 227.

would be called Bessarabia. As to our country, <concerning the hypothesis> that the parts near the sea would have been called at some point in the past Bessarabia, how this started, I have no acceptable answer to provide, except that when Sultan Bayezid waged war against our prince Stephen, the Muntenian prince Basarab was then in the Turkish army, as a vassal, and the Turks may have called those places by his name ...”¹⁰ The lack of knowledge of the author about the past of the region called Bessarabia can explain the naïve explanation of the name attributed to this region. Had Costin had access to the early chancellery deeds of his country, he would have undoubtedly changed his opinions about Bessarabia.

In one volume of his remarkable edition of Moldavian documents of the fourteenth-sixteenth centuries, Mihai Costăchescu made the following remark: “*Țara Basarabia* is Muntenia. It is often called by this name in Moldavian documents [reference to several such documents is further on made] ... *Țara Muntenească* is sometimes called, in the time of Stephen the Great, *Țara Basarabească* or a *Basarabilor*, whereas the Muntenians are called Basarabs in Moldavian inscriptions ... In the old Moldavian chronicles in Slavonic, this name can be found only once, in *Letopisețul de la Bistrița* ...” In the related note, the author says that in the old Moldavian chronicles written in Slavonic, only the names “Muntenian, Muntenia or *Țara Muntenească* can be found,” (a great variety of examples are further on presented as arguments).¹¹ Quite surprisingly, Mihai Costăchescu merely noted this fact of geographic terminology, without looking into it any further. I shall try here to assess its significance, starting out from the context of political history in which the aforementioned names were adopted in the chancellery of the Moldavian princes.

¹⁰ Miron Costin, *Cronica țărilor Moldovei și Munteniei (Cronica polonă)*, in vol. *Opere*, ed. by P.P. Panaitescu, București, 1958, pp. 209-210.

¹¹ M. Costăchescu, *Arderea Târgului Floci și Ialomiței în 1470. Un fapt necunoscut din luptele lui Ștefan cel Mare cu muntenii*, Iași, 1935, pp. 161-167: “Basarab,” “Basarabia,” “Țara Basarab,” “Țara Basarabilor”; for “Bessarabskaia Zemlja,” see M. Costăchescu, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2; I. Bogdan, *Documentele lui Ștefan cel Mare*, vol. II, București, 1913, pp. 227, 274, 278, 423. The name employed by the chancellery of Moldavia was taken over by the Poles, who would most often designate Wallachia by the name of *Bessarabia*; see. Jan Dlugosz, cited by M. Costăchescu, *op. cit.*, p. 132. The names of “Țara Muntenească,” “Muntenia,” “Multanska” were also employed in Polish documents; Miron Costin, *Letopisețul Țării Moldovei dela Aaron Vodă încoace*, in vol. *Opere, ed. cit.*, pp. 62, 63, 91, 105, 113, 114, 115, 117, 121, 147, 148, 149, 179, 217, 221, 226, 261; in *Cronica Țărilor Moldovei și Munteniei*, pp. 203, 204, 205, 206, 208, 209. P.P. Panaitescu, *loc. cit.*, makes the pertinent assertion that “the name of Bessarabia ... does not come from Basarab, the founder, but rather from the name of Wallachia, called Bessarabia in the fifteenth century.” For the distribution of the person name Basarab in the Romanian world, see St. Brezeanu, *Basarab. O nouă ipoteză asupra originilor antroponimului*, in vol. *Identități și solidarități medievale. Controverse istorice*, București, 2002, pp. 371-386.

The country stubbornly called by the princes of Moldavia *Țara Basarabească* or *Țara Muntenească* did have an official name: Ungro-Vlahia or *Vlaška Zemlja*, that is Wallachia or Valachia, and this name must have been known at Baia and at Suceava. The refusal to acknowledge these names sprang from the fierce rivalry between the two countries, which dated back to the end of the fourteenth century, when the first clash between the two had occurred for territorial reasons and for reasons of prestige and primacy. Ungro-Vlahia was not merely a country name agreed upon with the authorities in Constantinople – the Emperor and the Synod. Ungro-Vlahia was also a political program, placing under the same authority the entire Vlach – Romanian – population living north of the Danube, in an area of contact with Hungary. The great voivode, who became a prince after being granted Byzantine legitimacy, was able to subordinate all the local voivodes in the territories freed from the Golden Horde.¹²

A researcher who deduced this implicit tendency in the new title of the prince of Ungro-Vlahia admitted nonetheless that the integration of the local voivodes into Wallachia and their possible resistance to the process are scarcely documented.¹³ Except for one case: Moldavia. Indeed, the refusal of the Moldavian princes to designate the neighboring and related country by the name of Ungro-Vlahia or *Țara Valahă*, and their refusal to accept in their own title the names of Vlachia or Wallachia were an expression of their determination to reject the supremacy or sovereignty of the state which had appeared first in the Romanian north-Danubian space. A derogation from this categorical refusal was seen in a subsequent stage, when Moldavia in the time of Stephen the Great, considerably strengthened in reciprocal relations on the international level, claimed and was granted, even if intermittently, the title of Greater Wallachia, the other Romanian principality being given the title of Lesser Wallachia. This overturn in the balance of power was also felt on the international level, other countries calling Moldavia Greater Wallachia, and Wallachia, Lesser Wallachia, ever more frequently.¹⁴

¹² "... Țara Românească <Wallachia> had once a meaning that many have forgotten, could never understand: the name used to designate the entire territory ethnographically inhabited by the Romanians" – N. Iorga, *Studii asupra Evului Mediu românesc*, p. 413.

¹³ M. Coman, *Ungrovlahia și Țara Românească. Eparhia și țara* (manuscript).

¹⁴ Ș. Papacostea, *Politica externă a lui Ștefan cel Mare. Opțiunea polonă (1459-1472)*, in "Studii și materiale de istorie medie," XXV, 2007, pp. 22-23. For pertinent remarks on the names attributed to Wallachia in Moldavian sources, see M. Coman, *Terminologie statală medievală și rivalitatea moldo-munteană (secolele XV-XVI)*, in vol. *Vocația istoriei. Prinos profesorului Șerban Papacostea*, ed. by Ovidiu Cristea and Gheorghe Lazăr, Brăila, 2008, pp. 407-422. In a final stage of his research, the author will undoubtedly draw all the implicit conclusions.

When the fledgling Romanian state established on the valley of the river Moldova felt in its turn the attraction of the sea, and gave way to it by developing its own artery of international trade, in cooperation with Poland, it inevitably stepped into the space controlled by the rival Romanian state from the northern shore of the Chilia arm. From the end of the fourteenth century, when the country “descended” from the “Plonini,” that is the mountains shielding the birth of the new state, to the “Great Sea,” until the days of Stephen the Great, this space was a constant bone of contention between Wallachia and Moldavia, and came alternately under the rule of one or the other. The history of these shifts in rulership was recorded at one point by Nicolae Iorga.¹⁵

However, new documents put into circulation and the subsequent research work on the topic call for a reassessment of this aspect of Romanian history, from the time of the creation of the two states until the establishment of Ottoman hegemony in the area. A territorial fragment of the rival state, Bessarabia, whose vital center was Chilia, was known to the Moldavians under this specific name and has remained as such. To the Moldavians who, politically speaking, drew a clear line between themselves and their southern rivals, Bessarabia was the entire territory from the chain of the Carpathians, separating the Banat of Timiș from Oltenia, to the area north of the Chilia arm. When in 1465, Stephen the Great put an end to the presence of Wallachia at Chilia, where a Hungarian garrison was posted then, the territory whose function was to protect the much coveted Danubian port preserved the name of Bessarabia. Neither did the Turkish rule established in the region two decades later cause a change in name. *Țara Basarabilor* eventually imposed its official name adopted by the chancellery in 1359 – Ungro-Vlahia, Vlachia, Wallachia – but its eastern Danubian-Pontic territorial fraction preserved the name of Bessarabia, which was subsequently employed regularly in Romanian and European geography.¹⁶

The Moldavian-Muntenian territorial disputes were not limited to Bessarabia. A no less vivid dispute occurred over the territory between the Eastern Carpathians and the Siret, to the Trotuș, an area coveted in a first stage by the Hungarian Kingdom, under whose auspices the Bishopric of Milcovia had been reestablished, and Wallachia. During the reign of Radu cel Frumos, Wallachia was

¹⁵ N. Iorga, *Studii istorice asupra Chilie și Cetății Albe*.

¹⁶ In the first half of the eighteenth century, a Saxon historian, author of a synthesis of Romanian history, placed Bessarabia and Pontus Euxinus on the eastern border of Moldavia: Johannes Filstich, *Încercare de istorie românească (Tentamen Historiae Valachicae)*, ed. by A. Armbruster and R. Constantinescu, București, 1979, p. 38; Martin Cromer, *De origine et rebus gestis Polonorum libri XXX*, Basileae, 1538, defines Bessarabia as “maritima ora quam Bessarabiam vocant in qua Bialogrodum arx est et Kilia ...”

still voicing claims over this territory which, in the opinion of the Moldavian princes, was *Țara de Jos* <the Lower Country>.¹⁷

Territorial dynamic was a characteristic trait during the coming into being of the two Romanian states in the fourteenth century. Once Wallachia and Moldavia became bordering countries, rivalry ensued between these states, leaning one on the southern Carpathians and the other on the Eastern Carpathians. In this stage of territorial evolution, relations between the two countries evolved naturally. The attempts made by the *great voivodes* and *princes* of Argeș to impose their supremacy over the *voivodes* of Suceava and to integrate their territory into Ungro-Vlahia were met with fierce opposition.

This opposition was also seen in the refusal of the Moldavian princes to accept the names of Ungro-Vlahia or Wallachia, *Vlaška Zemlja*, and the constant substitution of these names in the official Moldavian documents with those of Bessarabia, *Țara Basarab*, and *Țara Muntenească*. When after 1465, Wallachia lost control over the region north of the Chilia arm, Bessarabia, in the largest meaning of the term, was divided into the trunk of origin, namely Ungro-Vlahia or *Vlaška Zemlja*, and its Danubian-Pontic extension, which continued to be called Bessarabia by the Moldavians, a name which history preserved.

After Suleiman II's campaign of 1538 in Moldavia, against Prince Petru Rareș, the Ottoman Empire annexed the Bugeac and Tighina, and extended its domination northward. The line delimiting the Ottoman control in the region now fell between the Prut and the Dniester, near the town of Fălciu. This territory to the south of Moldavia was annexed under the name of Bessarabia. In 1812, after the peace treaty signed at Bucharest with the Sublime Porte, Russia was able to wrest from Moldavia the entire territory lying between the Prut and the Dniester, consistently called from now on Bessarabia. This was the destiny of a country name: Bessarabia.

¹⁷ Fl. Solomon, *Episcopia Cumaniei – Episcopia Milcoviei. Două episoade din istoria relațiilor româno-maghiare*, in vol. *Studii istorice româno-maghiare*, ed. by Lucian Năstasă, Iași, 1999, pp. 7-18. The northward expansion of Ungro-Vlahia towards the bend of the Carpathians was the object of considerable research work; for a bibliography, see the recent study of S. Iosipescu, *Vrancea, Putna și Basarabia – contribuții la evoluția frontierei sudice a Moldovei în sec. XIV-XV*, in vol. *Închinare lui Petre Ș. Năsturel la 80 de ani*, Brăila, 2003, pp. 205-224.