

ETHNIC AND CONFESSIONAL SENSIBILITIES IN TRANSYLVANIA DURING THE TIME OF NICOLAUS OLAHUS

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Nicolaus Olahus wrote in his work *Hungaria*, in 1536–1537: „This entire kingdom of Hungary includes in our times, different nations – Hungarians, Germans, Bohemias, Slaves, Croats, Saxons, Szeklers, Romanians, Serbes, Jaziges, Ruthenians and finally, Turks – that use different languages, except for some names, that as a result of a long tradition seem to be alike”¹. About the ethnic structure of Transylvania, his own birth place, the Romanian humanist wrote: „Here are four nations of different origin: Hungarians, Szeklers, Saxons, Romanians; out of them, the Saxons are considered less fit for fighting. The Hungarians and the Szeklers use the same language, except the Szeklers use some words characteristic to their origin ... The Saxons are some colonies from Germany brought here by Charles the Great; this fact is proved by the similar language of these two peoples. By tradition the Romanians are Roman colonists. As a proof, they have much in common with the language of the Romans, a people whose coins are to be found in these places; these are undoubtedly, important proofs of ancient Roman rule over here”². Olahus said about the confession of the Romanians: „The Romanians are Christians, but following the Greeks in the proceeding of the Holly Spirit, they are different from our church in some unimportant matters”³.

It is important to determine what the meaning given by Olahus to the term nation (*natio*) was. Thus in the first text, the 13 nations and their respective languages, merely define the ethnic meaning of the term, while as for the four nations of Transylvania, Olahus considers the Romanians as one of these social status. The expression *quator diverso genere nationes* is relevant in this respect, as the word *genus*, – *eris* (= origin, people, family, descendancy, race, species),

¹ Nicolai Olahi, *Hungaria et Atila sive de originibus gentis regni Hungariae* ... edited by Fr. Kollarus, Viena, 1763, p. 90.

² *Ibidem*, p. 61

³ *Ibidem*, p. 59

implies the idea of origin, and not that of privileged group. That is why, the correct translation seems to be *four nations of different origin*, or *four nations of different descent*. The ethnic meaning given by Olahus to the word *nation*, is clearly revealed by the way he characterizes these nations, through their origin and language: the language of Saxons is similar to German; the Romanian, to the Roman; the Saxons came from Germany, the Romanians are the Romans' colonies, moreover, he also brings the numismatic argument. The Romanians are also characterized by their Christian confession. Consequently by the word *natio-nationes*, Nicolaus Olahus meant peoples and not privileged groups; these peoples are defined by *origin, language, confession, ancient origin and even continuity*, in the case of Romanians. These nations are defined therefore in a modern, ethnic way. Nicolaus Olahus, by the intelligence and culture, was a well known European humanist, much above the average of intellectuality of the time: so, he was able to mark the difference between forms or formulas and the core of things. During the time of Olahus, the autonomous principality of Transylvania came into being, when the three „nations” and four „religions” were accepted. Besides Olahus, there were other humanists of the 15th–16th centuries, who, when describing the peoples of Transylvania, and especially the Romanians, appealed to linguistic arguments (Enea Silvio Piccolomini, Antonio Bonfini, Johannes Lebel, Georg Reicherstorffer, Johann Hertel, Anton Verancsics, etc.). All these humanists considered the Romanians as descendants of the Romans, speaking a language derived from Latin and being Christian orthodoxes.⁴ The question is, whether during that time, there existed ethnic sensibilities. The answer will be found only in studying the sources.

On November 16, 1523, Paul Thomory, archbishop of Kalocsa and Vac, wrote a letter to the Saxons from Sibiu as an answer to their complains addressed to him, in connection with the officials from Făgăraș and the Romanians⁵. Paul Thomory suggested the right, lawful way of justice for solving the problems: „You must know that nothing is more unbearable to the subjects than, when one does not want to obey the law, but tries to get justice by himself. These were the causes of robberies, fires, pillage, that by great efforts, as you yourselves well know, we have brought again to a better state”. Therefore, he recognizes, that Romanians were forced to violent actions by the abuses of Saxons, their way of avoiding justice. In spite all these, the discrimination is still obvious: „We do let alone the complains of the people from Făgăraș who answered our letters: only that the Saxons must have priority against the Romanian as was in our times, otherwise that country, would come soon to equality, if the Romanian's interest had to be the same as that of the Catholic.”⁶ Thus, justice had to be obeyed by everyone, except

⁴ See Maria Holban, *Foreign Travellers about The Romanian Countries*, vol. I, Buc. 1968; A. Armbruster, *Dacoromano-Saxonica. Romanian Chroniclers about The Saxons. Romanians in the Saxon Chronicle*, București, 1980.

⁵ Hurmuzaki, *Documente ...*, vol. XV/1, p. 275, nr. 500.

⁶ N. Iorga, *The History of Romanians from Transylvania and Hungary*, vol. I, București, 1915, p. 131.

for the Romanians its measure was different. The letter openly accepts and suggests discrimination: this was why the Romanians were forced to violent actions.

A document of 1557 illustrates an ancient conflict between Saxons and Romanians from Romos for a piece of fertile land. The Romanians arguments are the followings: „Even if the Saxons (*Christians*) had cleaned that land still, for the taxes obligations, the school teacher's salary (*rector scholae*) we are equal (*equaleonus*), therefore, we want equal pieces of land.”⁷ This document is representative for two principles: the mediaeval one, concerning the rights over the land of those who upturned it – and the modern principle of the equal rights to the harvest. After long years of dispute, the Romanians from Romos appealed to the „senate” of the Saxon University and obtain the acceptance of their principle: „So if the Romanians from Romos do have equal obligations with the Saxons paying the same taxes, even if the Saxons had upturned those lands, these should be used in common, with the Romanians ...” Consequently, in 16th century the justice of a principle, that will be later on (18th–19th centuries) rejected, was fully accepted. The document of 1557 named the Saxons *Christiani*, and the Romanians *Valachi*.

A false convention of 1548 (it must have been concluded between the Romanians from Țara Făgărașului and „Universos Saxones septem et duarum sedium”, but the Romanians had not been invited to the confirmation of this document) drastically stipulated: „First, the Romanians from Făgăraș should not push their sheep on Saxons land if there is no agreement in this respect, before the law.”⁸ If they still did, the Saxon had the right, under certain circumstances, to kill them. This was the meaning of the discriminatory principle suggested by Paul Thomory: The Romanians should be treated according to rules, more rigid ones. Practically it was difficult to make the Romanians understand that even the land had ethnic attributes (Saxon land, Szekler land and the Magyar nobility's land) and the animals had to obey these rules. That is why, under the rule of Mihai Viteazul, there were attempts to do justice. Up to his time, the Transylvanian dietas continued their distinctive activities; thus the Țirgu-Mureș Dieta in art. 28 stipulated: „The Romanian may not denounce (extradite) the Hungarian or the Saxon, but the Hungarian or the Saxon may denounce the Romanian”⁹.

A decision of the Dieta from 1554 said that „no Magyar peasant could be accused by only 3 witnesses, but it is necessary the testimony of 7 persons, all trustworthy.” On the other hand, the Romanian could be accused by only 3 trustworthy persons.¹⁰ The next year, 1555 another dieta, stipulated in art. 20: „At

⁷ Hurmuzaki, *op. cit.*, p. 524–525, nr. 959, see also I. Aurel Pop „*Mediaeval Romanian Solidarity on Social-Economic Grounds (14th-16th centuries)*”, in *Istorie și civilizație. Profesorului Cihodaru la a 80-a aniversare*, Iași, 1988, p. 502–504.

⁸ Hurmuzaki, *op. cit.*, II / 4, p. 430–433, nr. 263.

⁹ D. Prodan, *Supplex Libellus Valachorum. The History of the Romanian Nation's Origin*, București, 1984, p. 108–109.

¹⁰ Hurmuzaki, *op. cit.* II / 5, p. 206–207, nr. 90.

the same time, the Christian peasant may be accused by the oath of 7 Christians, 7 Romanians must testify for a Romanian."¹¹ Such attitudes naturally led to ethnic sensibilities. When the army of Petru Rareș was crossing Transylvania, Petru Perembsky, queen Isabella's secretary, wrote: „Some Romanians would gladly join him (Rareș), because they have the same language”¹². In fact, many Romanians from Ciceu, Țara Lăpușului, joined the Moldavian army¹³. In 1552, the Magyar nobles from Hunedoara county, complained that as a result of the robberies and pillage of General Castaldo's men, the Romanians from Deva, left in great number for Wallachia¹⁴.

Under these circumstances, several measures were taken in Transylvania; in 1542 „unio trium nationum” was twice consolidated, with a view to counteract the plans of Petru Rareș and „reform” the change created by him¹⁵. The three nations are also afraid of Habsburg; thus, the Diet from Cluj asked the King Ferdinand that in Transylvania, in official positions should be appointed only Hungarians, not strangers: „non extraneos, sed Hungaros constituere dignetur”¹⁶. The Diet of 1551 stipulates: „We also do ask Your Majesty to accept as voivode in Transylvania a Magyar one (*ex nationes Hungarica*)”¹⁷. It is obvious, that the word *natio* acquired an ethnic meaning even in official documents, as the *Magyar nation* replaced the nobles nation. There was no peace for Romanians within this system, even if they were nobles. The Italian Jesuit Antonio Possevino, wrote in 1583 that the Romanian nobles, even when distinguished in war, do not enjoy the same honours from the prince, as the Magyar nobles¹⁸. This attitude was very clear in the case of Ștefan Voievod (Mizgă) in 1577, while wandering through Transylvania, he asked for a piece of land around Ardud, „where there are people speaking Romanian”. The voievode „*in spe*” gets such a village, that the authorities wanted to take back because he was „of Romanian nationality” (*ex natione Valachica*), he did not know Hungarian and German, he did not know the traditions of the country¹⁹. The humanist chronicler Szamosközi, after stating that the Romanian are lazy, dirty, bent to robbery and pillage, accepts that the Romanian nobles from Caransebeș are more civilized because „their origin is of Hungarian descendance”²⁰. This was in fact, a mediaeval „cliche” of Magyar

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 227, nr. 115.

¹² *Ibidem*, II / 4, p. 306–307, nr. 171

¹³ L. Șimanschi (editor), *Petru Rareș*, București, 1978, p. 98.

¹⁴ See the magazine *A Hunyadmegyei történelmi es régészeti tarsulat évkönyve*, 1896–1898, nr. IX, p. 41–42.

¹⁵ N. Iorga, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

¹⁶ Hurmuzaki, *op. cit.*, II / 4, p. 297, nr. 164.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 662, nr. 424.

¹⁸ A. Veress, *Fontes Rerum Transilvanicarum*, vol. III, Budapesta, 1913, p. 64.

¹⁹ I. Crăciun, *The Chronicler Szamosközi and his notes about the Romanians (1566–1608)*, Cluj, 1928, p. 41–42.

²⁰ D. Prodan, *Serfdom in Transylvania in 16th Century*, vol II, București, 1968, p. 321–322.

chronicles according to which the Hungarian nobility descended from the Magyar conquerors, while the peasants from the subdued peoples found in Panonia and the Carpathian basin, by the conquerors²¹.

The Orthodox church was also object of discrimination as a result of the Reform. Nicolae Iorga wrote: Ioan Sigismund thought that, if the ancient belief had been quitted by Romanians, this would be an advantage for closing Transylvania within its own frontiers, this is why the bishop superintendence for the Romanians was not a religious idea, but a political one²². The prince and the Calvinist church had the same opinions as king Ludovic 1st and Bartolomeu of Alverna, who knew, since 14th century, that those who aren't loyal to their prince, would never be faithful, because of their foreign religion²³. The religious reform could never win the Romanians from Transylvania, regardless of its methods; however, the national character of Othodoxism became more emphasized as well as the difference between „accepted” and „tolerated”. The system of accepted religion officially known up to 1572 continued to keep the privileges of the minority, the Catholic. This led to the aggravation of the „tolerated” Orthodoxes who were rejected, while Orthodox religion was even considered as no Christian one, the Romanians being adversaires of Christianity²⁴. The Diet of 1566 intended to put an end to idolatry among Romanians, „whose shepperds being blind, led the blind”; these people, if they do not accept the truth, should be removed from bishop to priest and monk²⁵.

Under these circumstances, Transylvania of the 16th century seemed to be a country of serious discrimination and injustice. The testimony of Anton Verancsics, who can not be suspected of sympathy for the Romanians, is relevant in this respect: „there are three nations in the country: Szeklers, Saxons, Magyars. I should still add the Romanians who, though as many as the others still do not have any liberty, any nobility, any right, except for a small number of people in Hațeg district, that is supposed to have been the capital of Decebal, and who, during the time of Ioan de Hunedoara, originar of this district, got their nobility, for having fought against the Turks. The others are all ordinary people serfs of the Magyar, spread all over the country, having a miserable life²⁶. Therefore, during the time of Olahus, in Transylvania the nations were privileged

²¹ J. Perenyi, “La conscience nationale dans les chroniques hongroises du XIII^e siecle.” in *Le développement de la conscience nationale en Europe Orientale*, Paris, 1969, p. 53–57.

²² N. Iorga, *op. cit.*, 164

²³ S. Papacostea, “The Romanian countries in the 14th Century European World”, in *Magazin Istoric*, 1980 (XIV), nr. 4, p. 56.

²⁴ D. Prodan, *Supplex ...*, p. 108

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ Maria Holban, *op. cit.*, p. 410–411, latin text in A. Verancsics, *Összes munkái*, vol. I, Pest, 1857 p. 143.

groups according to ethnic criteria : the nobles nation became Magyar nation, favoured towards the Saxons and the Szeklers ; the Romanian nobles and peasants are discriminated as compared to the non-Romanians. This discrimination was already a tradition, and it became now official. Consequently, there were two opposite attitudes, that of masters and that of the serfs. At the same time the whole society, its institutions and rules follow the same way : the land, the social groups (noble = Magyar, serf = Romanian); Orthodoxy is considered a „Romanian religion”. The Romanian are all the time considered inferior to the other inhabitants of Transylvania. The term *Christiani-Valachi*, used in the documents of the time, is a proof that Romanian was a synonym for Orthodox, different from Christian. Nicolaus Olahus belonged only in part, to this mediaeval, discriminatory conception ; the humanist also perceived the modern trend of his outlook, he did not want to see the discriminations. This is why, he considered all the Transylvanian nations as equals. Olahus regarded the Romanians as Christians, as a people of illustrious origin. In his diplomas as baron of the Roman-German Empire, the Great humanist praised the ancient origins of the Romanians, their famous princes such as Ioan de Hunedoara, the father of king Matia²⁷. He bore all his life the name of Olahus, a vivid proof of his Romanian origin, with giving it up, even when he became Archbishop and regent of Hungary. On the other hand as noble and Catholic priest, he was a *Hungarus*, while as humanist, and scholar, he was *homo Europaeus*. In spite of all he had done he was envied, hurt, despised. When he died, the bishop of Oradea, Francisc Forgách, wrote in his *Magyar Historiája* : „The Archbishop, a man of lowest type, born from a Romanian father, raised out of hate against the others at the highest rank, tried to keep the regency and the royal seal. As he had all these high dignities he owned ignominiously, the dignities and ranks of others”²⁸. Thus Forách did not take into account the fact that Olahus had been a good Catholic, a great nobleman, an illustrious humanist scholar ; all that mattered, was his low, Romanian origin that are revealed with hate, and satisfaction that everything was over. This is one of the most relevant proofs of the ethnic element, within some circles of the power. Unfortunately, moderation and tolerance, illustrated by Olahus and some other humanists, was rejected, in favour of discrimination. Under these circumstances, it was natural that during the time of Mihai Viteazul, there were attempts to diminish if not eliminate discrimination in the 16th century Transylvania and this could only be possible, by bringing the Romanians to an equal status, such as Nicolaus Olahus, ideally meant to.

²⁷ Al. Tonk, “The Nobility Diplomas of Nicolaus Olahus. Some Questions on the Genealogy of the Olahus Family” in *Revista Arhivelor*, 1969 (XII), nr. 1, p. 21–31.

²⁸ Gyimesi Forgách F., *Magyar historiája (1540–1572)*, în *Monumenta Hungariae Historica*, II, Scriptores, XVI, Pesta, 1866, p. 254, D. Prodan, *Supplex ...*, p. 106.