

## A PHYSICAL AND MORAL PORTRAIT OF BALKAN VLACHS IN HISTORICAL SOURCES (IX<sup>th</sup>-XII<sup>th</sup> CENTURIES)

### DESPRE PORTRETUL FIZIC ȘI MORAL AL VLAHIILOR BALCANICI ÎN SURSELE ISTORICE (SECOLELE IX-XII)

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#### **Abstract**

Like any other people, the Balkan Vlachs (Romanians) came into being and defined themselves as an entity during a long and difficult historical process. Ethnoculturally and historically they share similarities but also differences which bring them closer, but also separate them from neighbouring peoples. Balkan Romanians' physical and moral traits are differently perceived from one observer to another. For Byzantines, „Vlachs“ meant „barbarians“, namely those who didn't speak, think or live like a Greek.

Ever since Vlachs have been first mentioned in historical sources (approx. 850) until the Asanesti rebellion (1185), „the physical and moral portrait of Balkan Vlachs differs with each observer. Latin authors, especially Italians and Dalmatians, depicted them favourably, mainly highlighting their bellicose attributes and their pleasant appearance, sometimes associated to their Roman descent. On the contrary, they are often negatively perceived by their Balkan neighbours. This is not surprising at all: for Byzantines and Southern Slavics, endowed with their own states and cultures, the Vlach is „the other“, a foreigner refusing integration by asserting his own identity and even worse - often trying to establish his own state in an area they claimed“.

**Key words:** „Romanus“, „the other“, transhumance, „kjelatori“, Haemus, Vlachs, Christians.

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to another. For Byzantines, „Vlachs“ meant „barbarians“, namely those who didn’t speak, think or live like a Greek<sup>1</sup>.

Balkan Vlachs had lived in the peninsula long before the arrival of Slavic tribes<sup>2</sup> and Protobulgarian hordes<sup>3</sup>, and we are going to prove here that the term „Romanus“ refers to the very Roman nature, while its basic content is ethnical.

Throughout history, the Balkan Romanity has been described as concerned with hunting and fighting when needed, but also with land cultivation and animal breeding.

Due to the VIIth century historical and demographic circumstances, the Balkan Romanity is distinct among the Balkan Peninsula populations, mainly regrouping in the mountains.

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In the IXth century, year 850 approximately, the Vlachs were for the first time mentioned in historical sources. A short note from the Kastamonitu monastery (Mount Athos)<sup>5</sup>, mentions the Vlahorinhins (the Vlachs living in the Rhino valley) among the populations that had attacked Thessaloniki. The already mentioned note tells about the Vlahorinhins, who devastated several territories in the Balkan

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<sup>1</sup> In ancient times a „barbarian“ was someone who couldn’t speak Hellenic, who didn’t belong to the Hellenic civilization.

<sup>2</sup> Slavic tribes belonging to the South-Eastern ethno-linguistic group settled in Southern Danube in the VIth century and especially in early VIIth century, when the Northern border of the empire collapsed, due to Phocas’ rebellion. The Slavs massively penetrated the Balkan Peninsula and colonized whole regions with *Sclavinian* communities. W. Tradgold, *O istorie a statului și societății bizantine*, translated by Mihai-Eugen Avădanei, ed. supervised by V. Spinei and Bogdan-Petru Maleon, with a preface by V. Spinei, vol. I (284-1025), Iași, 2004, p. 241-242.

<sup>3</sup> Khazars’ attacks forced the Bulgarian community under Asparuh to retreat on Dnieper, Dniester and Danube lower courses, in an attempt to preserve a part of *Old Bulgaria*’s Western possessions. For a short time, Asparuh’s nucleus strengthened its reign in Bugeac (Southern Basarabia), the starting point for his raids in Southern Danube Byzantine territories, where they had settled since 681. *Ibidem*, p. 334-335.

<sup>4</sup> S. Brezeanu, G. Zbucnea, *Românii de la sud de Dunăre*, Bucharest, 1997, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> This note is apparently a reproduction of a local chronical and supplements the information from *Acta S. Demetrii* on the populations attacking the Thessaloniki. *Fontes Historiae Daco-Romanae*, IV, Bucharest, 1982, p. 7 (hereinafter referred to as FHDR).

Peninsula, up to the Holy Mount Athos, in an ‘anarchy epoch’ when the fight against icons was at its height. Our source reveals how the Vlachs in the Rhino valley used to travel „with their women and children“<sup>6</sup>, a key element proving their non-nomad trait and their desire to settle down: „With the lapse of time, after they had received Christian education from holy priests, some of them believed and became Christians“<sup>7</sup>.

Before going on, we’d like to explain the confusion found in some historical sources regarding the nomad/shepherd ratio, related to the ethnonym „Vlach“. A treaty that emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus the VIIth signed with Bulgarians in the year 927, refers to carriers with caravans and nomads, apparently Vlachs. Given the Vlachs’ pursuit, the Byzantine historians certainly refer to Vlachs in the Bulgarian thema when mentioning the Bulgarians, a frequent fact in the epoch’s historiography.

In the year 976 approx., the Byzantine historian Kedrenos mentions some travelling Vlachs who had killed David, brother of the future Bulgarian csar Samuil. „Of these four brothers, David was immediately killed by some Vlachs travelling between Castoria and Prespa<sup>8</sup> and the so-called <<fair oak wood>>“<sup>9</sup>.

The Byzantine historian Kekaumenos provides precious reports on Greek Vlachs. „And he also asked the Vlachs: <<Where are your animals and wives now?>> They answered: <<In Bulgarian mountains>>. As from April till September they used to take their families and animals to high mountains and very cold places”<sup>10</sup>.

Emperor Alexios I Comnenos’ daughter Ana Comnena mentions in her historical work the *Alexiad*- a biography of her father- „those who live a nomad life (in everyday language they are called *Vlachs*)”<sup>11</sup>.

A decree enacted by Emperor Alexios I Comnenos in February 1094 and preserved in the Great Lavra monastery on Mount Athos refers to the Vlach shepherds in Moglenei thema, from the Athos monastery estates<sup>12</sup>. This document also mentions the Vlachs, as monastery’s servants, didn’t pay any tribute to the

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<sup>6</sup> FHDR, IV, p. 7; S. Brezeanu, G. Zbucea, *op.cit.*, p. 104.

<sup>7</sup> S. Brezeanu, G. Zbucea, *op.cit.*, p. 104; N. Saramandu, *Romanitatea orientală*, Bucharest, 2004, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> Currently, Pisuderi and Vlahoclisura Aromanian cities are to be found in this region, strategically located in the mountain passes, Eastwards-Westwards.

<sup>9</sup> *Fontes Historiae Daco-Romanae*, III, Bucharest, 1975, p. 145 (hereinafter referred to as FHDR).

<sup>10</sup> FHDR, III, p. 30-33.

<sup>11</sup> FHDR, III, p. 108-109.

<sup>12</sup> „As I said, these Vlachs from St.Atanasie monastery will graze their herds on allowable places in Moglena province, from now on and for ever, without any trouble, menace, or tribute. Besides, I order that the two folds, one owned by Stan, called Rinmitza, and one managed by Radu the Lame’s and Peducel’s children, as well as this monastery’s Vlachs-owned folds on the Cravitza height should be in their possession free of any tribute, menace or trouble; as this monastery has been entitled to ask a tribute on the fold and the tenth part of products from any human being under its authority and any habitual tax from the folds located on the above-mentioned height“. FHDR, IV, p. 28-31.

state; they freely grazed their herds in that thema and had to pay the annual pastoral tax to the monastery.

When speaking of Vlachs, Constantine Porphyrogenitus the VIIIth, Kedrenos and Ana Comnena used several terms e.g. „travellers“, „nomads“ and „shepherds“. All these names are nothing else than illustrations of Balkan Vlachs' life. Sometimes, the „traveller“ is related to the „nomad“, reflecting their transhumant life-style<sup>13</sup>; sometimes, the „traveller“ is directly linked to the „kjelator“, frequently found in the Serbian medieval sources, designating a social category of travelling Vlachs who used to work as carriers and guardians of main roads<sup>14</sup>.

Therefore, no matter the confusions made by reviewers over the time, these must not be understood apart from historical events involving Balkan Romanians, named Vlachs. Constantine Porphyrogenitus (*De administrando imperio*) left us the name *romanus*<sup>15</sup>, used to designate the Romanians in Byzantine sources. According to A. Armbruster, the word *romanus*, mentioned by Constantine Porphyrogenitus, marks the ethnogenesis notion and also the newly born people's awareness. Thus, the new name used to designate Romanians throughout the Middle Ages, *vlachus*, is linked to the end of the Romanian people ethnogenesis, expressing its Romanic, implicitly ethnical character. „This name the foreigners used to designate Romanians in the Middle Ages marks the end of the Romanian people ethnogenesis, expressing precisely its Romanic character, while its basic content is etnical”<sup>16</sup>.

The above excerpts show us how several social categories take shape among Balkan Vlachs. The first and most manifest one includes the stock-breeders, also called shepherds, possibly the basic activity of the Southern Danube Romanity. They owed a certain amount of their products to the state, monastery or nobles. Legally, some Vlach communities were free, while others depended on the state, monasteries or nobles. A different category I have noticed in the previous passages regarded the travellers or the „kjelatori“ who used to carry goods and guard the main roads. „They carried merchandise from the Dalmatian coast, through the peninsula mountain passes, which they knew like no others, to the Danube valley. The Vlach carrier caravans often counted up to 300 horses. They transported grains, wine and, most importantly, salt from Raguza to the Serbian, Croatian or Hungarian markets inside the peninsula, in exchange for metals, skins and wax”<sup>17</sup>.

To conclude the paragraph on the nomad/ shepherd ratio, associated with the „Vlach“ ethnonym, we will briefly analyze the confusion in the passage<sup>18</sup> of

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<sup>13</sup> P. P. Panaitescu, *Introducere la istoria culturii românești*, Bucharest, 1969, p. 122-123.

<sup>14</sup> S. Dragomir, *La patrie primitive de Roumains*, in „Balcanica“, VII, 1944, 1, p. 73-74.

<sup>15</sup> „Emperor Dioclețian deeply loved Dalmatia; that is why he brought the people of Rome together with their families and settled them in Dalmatia: they are also called Romans, as they've come from Rome and kept this name until nowadays“. *Fontes Historiae Daco-Romanae*, II, Bucharest, 1970, p. 662-663.

<sup>16</sup> A. Armbruster, *Romanitatea românilor. Istoria unei idei*, Bucharest, 1972, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> S. Brezeanu, G. Zbucnea, *op.cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> FHDR, III, p. 109.

Anna Comnena's historic work, which generated historiographic controversy. The author undoubtedly confuses transhumance with nomadism. Transhumance is an activity regularly performed by Vlach shepherds and specific to their pastoral society; it means that in springs they send their flocks of animals and families to the „high mountains of Bulgaria“ only to come back to the field pastures, in autumns<sup>19</sup>. On the other hand, the transhumance must be understood in all its complexity, as it is practiced by many Mediterranean societies, although, without any doubt, people and animals' migration in search for mountain and field pastures cannot be mistaken for a nomadic movement. The transhumance necessarily implies a division of work within the pastoral society. A different branch of the pastoral economy is the agriculture, omnipresent in the life of the Vlach Balkan pastoral communities, and, the same time, providing a stable habitat with specific activities. „On the other hand, according to certain sources, especially Dalmatian, Vlachs' negative characteristics are explained by the present differences between their pastoral<sup>20</sup> way of life and their neighbors', where agriculture or, for others, even urban life, prevails. However, the shepherd - farmer and shepherd - townsman oppositions are not singular in South-East Europe. Fernand Braudel pointed this out with all its implications reflected in the entire Mediterranean space, while it is also present in the premodern history of other continents“<sup>21</sup>. This analysis shows the obvious close connection between the transhumant shepherding and agriculture, thus confirming the stable characteristic of Vlach settlements and their special status inside the Byzantine and Southern - Slav territories, from whom they received benefits and obligations as well. First, by benefits we mean extended autonomy for the Vlachs, also certified by their inaccessible settlements.

The portraits of Vlach warriors depicted in the medieval sources reveal a defined image of the genre, but different from one author to another. When Vlachs were allies of the Byzantine Empire, most of their portraits were neutral and rarely positive, yet instead, when opposed to the imperials, they were often negatively portrayed.

Benjamin de Tudela, rabbi and explorer, crossed the Byzantine Empire territory while heading to Jerusalem and wrote about the reality he encountered on his way - an autonomous and unsubmissive Wallachia. „Here starts Wallachia whose settlers live in mountains and who themselves bear the name of Vlachs. Like the fast running deers, they come down to Greece to ravage and plunder. Nobody can challenge them into war and no Emperor can conquer them... Furthermore, they live their lives disregarding the empire's laws“<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> S. Brezeanu, G. Zbucnea, *op.cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> FHDR, IV, p. 158-161.

<sup>21</sup> S. Brezeanu, G. Zbucnea, *op.cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 113.

According to Ioan Kinnamos, the Vlachs, descendants of <Roman> colonists from Italy, are regimented in Manuel Comnenus' large army fighting against the Hungarians. Related to this, one cannot establish precisely the geographic origin of the Vlachs found under Byzantine command in 1166. It is likely they have come from Northern parts of the Danube river, although we tend to support the theories stating the Paristrion theme is about the Vlachs from the South of the Danube, commanded by the Byzantines<sup>23</sup>.

The work *Advice and tales* authored by Kekaumenos presents the Thessaly Vlachs in a negative light<sup>24</sup>, as the Byzantines think of them as infidels and traitors, the same as their Dacian ancestors were considered by the Romans<sup>25</sup>. Kekaumenos' diatribe against the Vlachs, „full of unsubstantiated accusations and written in an unusually violent language, is explained by the author's attempt to protect his relative, Nikoulitzas, for his part in the Thessaly uprising”<sup>26</sup>.

Starting with the XI<sup>th</sup> century, references on the Vlachs gain weight in Byzantine authors' works, as they reveal a real picture on their spreading and write about their political, military and church organizational forms. Organized in „Romanian countries“, the Vlachs from the South of Danube are integrated in the Byzantine and Southern-Slav cultural and political system.

When Samuel' czardom was conquered in 1018, an imperial decree issued in 1020<sup>27</sup> stipulated emperor Basil the II<sup>nd</sup> Bulgaroctonus (Slayer of the Bulgars) would submit the Vlachs in Bulgaria Thema to the Okrida bishopric. The new structure of the church was substantiated during emperor Alexios I Comnenus ruling (1081-1118), as two Vlach bishoprics in the Bulgaria themes and Justiniana Prima were mentioned. The information about the Balkan Vlachs' church structure was meant to create a safety feeling because they posed a threat to the Byzantine Empire, given their number and ethnic force<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 114, n. nr. 5.

<sup>24</sup> „My advice to you and your descendents is as follows: Vlach people are totally unfaithful and rotten, have no faith in God, emperor, relatives or friends, and they also try to cheat on everybody, lie and steal, swear daily, uttering awful curses against their friends, easily break their <vows>, make brotherhoods and relationships thinking this way they will deceive even the simple ones, and never hold their faith towards anyone, not even the old time Romei emperors“. FHDR, III, p. 39-41.

<sup>25</sup> „They are the so-called Dacians, <also known as> Besi. At the beginning, they had lived near the Danube river and its bed, the river we presently call Sava and where Serbians live nowadays, in places hardened by the <nature> and inaccessible. Counting on that, they pretended to <look> for friendship and that they obeyed the old time Romei emperors, but when coming out of <their> fortifications, they ravaged the Romei lands“. FHDR, III, p. 40-41.

<sup>26</sup> FHDR, III, p. 39, note no. 68.

<sup>27</sup> FHDR, IV, p. 24-25.

<sup>28</sup> FHDR, IV, p. 24-25 (introductory note). For further details regarding the church organization of the Balkan Vlachs as well as Byzantines fears for a Balkan ethnics uprising. S. Dragomir, *Vlahii din nordul Peninsulei Balcanice in Evul Mediu*. (anastatic edition), Iași, 2001, p. 136-138; FHDR, IV, p. 24-25.

In exchange for economic, administrative, and religious autonomy privileges, Balkan Mountains Vlachs perform military service for the Byzantine Empire. During Basil the II<sup>nd</sup> Bulgaroctonus reign, Romanians in the Greater Wallachia had their own military structure within the empire. „Though I know my late father gave a charter for you to hold this job, instead of the excubitorides I offer you the leadership of Ellada Vlachs“<sup>29</sup>. The close military cooperation culminates during emperor Manuel I Comnenus ruling (1143-1180)<sup>17</sup>. After that, the Angelos family, founder of a new Byzantine dynasty, starts practising unbearable taxation policies. Moreover, they try to annihilate Romanian autonomies across the Balkan Peninsula. When threatened with destruction, they reacted. Their defending efforts revealed that Vlachs from the South of the Danube turned from the traditional country political framework to the state one. Thus, at the end of the XII<sup>th</sup> century, Haemus Vlachs, descendents of Eastern Romans from the South of the Danube, raised to battle against the Byzantines<sup>18</sup>.

An important chapter of Vlach political life is the Vlach-Bulgarian kingdom of the Asanesti. Representatives of Eastern Romans, they made history as inhabitants of Thessaly, Epirus, Central Greece and Haemus Mountains, where they built *real countries*. They represented a self-conscience population, a well-defined ethnic group of ancient Dacian - Latin origins, with an ongoing and stable habitat in the Balkans not at all inferior to their brothers' in the North of the Danube. They were town settlers and also transhumant shepherds from April until September moving to *the high mountains or very cold places*.

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<sup>29</sup> FHDR, III, p. 44-45. Kekaumenos emphasizes the importance of Vlach troops recruited from the Ellada themes whose commander was appointed via imperial charter, thus revealing the role played by the Balkan Vlachs in the imperial army structure.

<sup>30</sup> A. Madgearu, *Organizarea militară bizantină la Dunăre în secolele X-XII*, Bucharest, 2007, p. 130-131.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 132-137; *Istoria Românilor* (Tratatul Academiei Române), vol. III, Bucharest, 2001, p. 427-438.