

## ROMANIANS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS DEATH IN THE VISION OF THE FOREIGN TRAVELERS IN THE SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES

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**Abstract.** *This study shows the Romanians' attitude towards death, which was expressed through the discourses and practices of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. We used the notices of the foreign travellers who through the Romanian Principalities in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. Thus, we note that for Romanian society, death and dying have had a social dimension.*

**Keywords:** *religion, discourse, religious attitudes, mentality.*

The Christian teachings are encouraging the believer to see death as a passage from life to *The Real Life* (a passage through „The Gates of Heaven”<sup>1</sup>) or from one state to another<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, death is associated to the worldly life to which it gives value and fullness<sup>3</sup>. Man must be in control of his life and he must get ready for *the Coming and Judgment of Christ*. Still, death has continued to raise fear in the heart of any believer towards the moment of passage, fear towards the judgment of one's deeds, and also a certain attraction for the way in which others perceived it. Thus, death as a fact and dying as a result of living one's life have lead to two perspectives for analysis: the religious one (this perspective nuances relationship between man and God, in the Christian vision) and the social perspective (which emphasizes the significance of their community life)<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Dumitran, 2007, *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> To see Ariès, 1996; Idem, 1975; Nicoară, 2004, 20-23; Barbu, 1994; Dobre-Bogdan, 2002; Stăniloae, 1987; Galeriu, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> There exist differit ways to define the death, this is caused by impossibility to have an universale establishment of his simolistics, see Weber, 2006, 123.

<sup>4</sup> We recall a some of these contributions: Ph. Ariès, M. Vovelle, J. Delumeau, P. Chaunu, R. Sabatier, J. Le Goff, G. Duby, Em. Le Roy Ladurie, J. Huizinga (belong the Occidental historiography) and A. Pippidi, L. Boia, Șt. Lemny, D. H. Mazilu, C. Dobre-

For the Pre-modern Romanian Extra-Carpathian society, death had more of a social dimension, then a personal one, so for a foreigner, “the great passage” was seen as a good occasion to define the identity of the Romanian community. Even if fragmented and subjective, the Other’s, the foreigner’s perspective proves to be quite useful in the attempt to fill in and understand the profile of the Romanian sensibility. Thus, we want to emphasize some of the foreign travelers’ perspectives over the way in which in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Romanians from Moldova and Wallachia used to perceive and live the approaching death. By this phrase we designate all persons who passed through or lived for a while in the Romanian space, for random or purposeful reasons, out of personal or “job-related” interest. We hope in this case to contribute to the collective consciousness Romanian analysis of that time and that place.

We consider that the notes of the foreign travellers (consisting of memoirs, diaries, reports or correspondence, referring to less known situations) are literary rather than historical sources due to their style, their content and the intentions lying at the basis of their writing. This kind of literature<sup>5</sup> must be taken with reticence<sup>6</sup>, due to their subjective and fragmentary vision<sup>7</sup>. They proved equally important because their authors, getting directly in touch with the Romanian society, opened new perspectives in the understanding the life of the Romanians. These are the writings where we can see the Romanians’ attitude towards the different “faces of death”<sup>8</sup>.

**1. Death seen as a punishment (“the well deserved death”)** – it is perceived as quite severe from the Christian point of view because it was believed that it was given by the divine justice. God was allowing the physical disappearance of those who were threatening the order of things. Death meant getting all the things done by the punished one, right; therefore it had to be echoed in the conscience and memory of the community. So, the death punishment needed to be transformed into “a show” filled with teachings<sup>9</sup> which could serve as an example and as proof of authority (mounds, crosses, churches, cemeteries etc.). This

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Bogdan, M. Grancea, T. Nicoară, I. Țighilui, A. Dumitran (belong Romanian historiography).

<sup>5</sup> We have used the notorious volumes of *Călătorilor străini prin Țările Române* (*Foreign travellers through the Romanian Principalities*) (coord. Maria Holban).

<sup>6</sup> See Cristea, 2005, 13-25.

<sup>7</sup> Cernovodeanu, 2004, 7-40.

<sup>8</sup> This expression is taken from Dobre-Bogdan, 2009, 54-77.

<sup>9</sup> An aplicated analise to see in Lazăr, 2007, 249-265.

could be turned also into *a social death*, because it involved the out-casting of the guilty one and gaining of “a bad name”.

In this sense, we will recall the episode from the story written by Paul Strassburg, the counselor confidential of King of Sweden, regarding his voyage in Wallachia, in the 1632, the lord Leon Tomşa (1629-1632) “was complaining about the wickedness and evilness of his subjects” and he was pointing, in sign of victory, “towards the graves of those who were murdered and towards all of the crosses that were being raised”<sup>10</sup>. Also, the monk Niccolo Barsi from Lucca noted that whenever someone was being punished to have his head cut off, his body “was left to lay on the naked ground for three whole days so as for all those passing to leave money which were used for his burial”<sup>11</sup>. In this situation we must emphasize the fact that the capital punishment meant also the loss of the fortune, the family of the guilty one losing all their rights to it.

Generally, in the writings of the foreign travelers, the lord is presented as having unlimited authority over his people, death punishment being a direct proof of this. Marco Bandini in the 1644 year justified the power of lord from the judicial point of view because as the lord said “if your deed is punishable by death, then you will die”<sup>12</sup>.

2. **The good death** was an expected one (“*the wanted death*”), “a party” long time prepared by the one embarking on this journey and also by those who, left behind, will help him cross over. This type of death is of most interest for the foreign travelers, mainly due to the religious and popular practices it was accompanied with. Still we must not neglect the fundamental importance attributed by the Romanians to death. For instance, P. Bonici in „The letter to the patriarchal vicar of the Orient, Giovanni din Frata” (24 April 1630) was complaining of the growing number of Catholics converting to Orthodoxy because “they had no priests, especially in time of death”<sup>13</sup>.

3. **Death as a social fact** was presented in the context of the burial ritual, at which the community was always taking part. The foreign travelers found it quite similar both in Moldova and in Wallachia<sup>14</sup> and despite some specific details due to the social differences, the burial ritual was consisting in the following staged:

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Strassburg, 1973, 66.

<sup>11</sup> Niccolo Barsi, 1973, 77.

<sup>12</sup> Marco Bandini, 1973, 342.

<sup>13</sup> Paolo Bonici, 1973, 17.

<sup>14</sup> Paul de Alep, 1976, 123.

a. *Letting everybody know that a Christian from the community has died* („Anunțarea morții”).

This was done by ringing the church bell<sup>15</sup>. Paul de Alep, the patriarchal attendant, describing the his „Travellingcommitted in Moldavia”, noted that the sound of the big bell meant that someone important from the community has died, someone rich or a church founder which was about to be buried in the monastery. Thus, all the priests from the town were to gather and participate at the burial. But if the dead person was a poor one, then the family “would bury him without ringing any bells so as no one to know”<sup>16</sup>. Paul de Alep referred to the ritual burial who corresponded to the status of capital held by the deceased and his family.

b. *The preparation of the dead man’s body and its wake* („Pregătirea pentru trecerea la Viața de Dincolo”).

After the ritual of “cleaning” the body, the dead man was laid on “a nasal in the middle of the hallway”<sup>17</sup> and thus the wake was starting („priveghiul”). The dead man was being watched at candle light for the whole three days. In the case of lordly burials, the body was being laid under a baldachin, on a “parade bed”, with many candles around him. On a side table, there were found many Psalter books from which the priests used to read<sup>18</sup>. Even in the case of Lady Bălașa (12/22 March 1657), the body was laid “with great honors under a baldachin in the royal court” (...), it was carried around the church (...), all those present have received a great amount of money (...) and a great feast was offered to all (...), be they poor or rich. The same happened on the ninth day”<sup>19</sup>.

Also it is mentioned the Romanians’ custom to keep the dead man inside the house “with his face uncovered”<sup>20</sup> and with candles burning around him day and night<sup>21</sup>. In this time, the dead man’s family used to offer “food to the poor and to travelers and to sing at instruments”<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Paul de Alep, 1976, 71.

<sup>16</sup> Paul de Alep, 1976, 70.

<sup>17</sup> „A wood nasal”, see *Ibidem*, 300.

<sup>18</sup> De La Croix, 1980, 363-364. Similar to Cantemir, 1956, 223.

<sup>19</sup> De La Croix, 1980, 174.

<sup>20</sup> Erasmus Heinrich Schneider von Weismantel, 1983, 363.

<sup>21</sup> Paul de Alep, 1976, 123. It say that the candly helps dead man to shows him in front the Lord; if the dead man has not the light, he has o „dark death”, see Simeon Florea Marian, 2008, 24. The lit candly dont permite the bad spirits to approach the dying, see Teodor T. Burada, 2006, 16.

<sup>22</sup> Niccolo Barsi, 1973, 77.

c. *The mourning of the dead*<sup>23</sup> („Bocirea mortului”).

The custom which most fascinated the foreigners was *the mourning* („*bocirea*” / „*jelirea*”) of the dead. The Swedish officer Erasmus Heinrich Schneider von Weismantel, in his „Diary” (1710 -1714) was noting with irony the Moldavians’ custom to hire “mourners” which were laying next to the dead man and “were loudly crying after him and were asking him the reason for his death, if he lacked something or if someone envied him, and they used to cry after him even when the body was being laid in the ground: Oh God, oh God, my dear, why did you have to die? Did not you have enough sheep or oxen?”. During all of this time, all the priests “are standing next to the dead man” and “at the dead man’s feet, the gypsies and the fiddlers were constantly singing at their instruments”<sup>24</sup>.

d. *The funerals* („Înmormântarea”).

In the day of the burial, after the praises said by the priests in the dead man’s house, the body, accompanied by a large cortege (priest, mourner, singer of instruments, relatives, neighbors, those who knew him and other community members<sup>25</sup>) was being taken to the church for the funeral services and then in the cemetery for the burial<sup>26</sup>. When the Gospel was being read, the women and girls were sitting on their knees, under the Gospel<sup>27</sup>, while the men were standing with their heads uncovered. When saying goodbye to the dead man, „the last kiss”, the priests and all those present, were kissing the icon sitting on the dead man’s chest; the relatives were kissing his hands and face, while the rest of the people were kissing only his hands<sup>28</sup>.

There were many services held for the commemoration and salvation of the dead man during which they were singing psalms, were burning candles and were offering alms: wafers, wheat boiled with honey, raisins, nuts<sup>29</sup>. These last ones were being offered inside the church by the priest to all those present and they were keeping some for themselves also in order to “eat them in loving memory of the deceased one, as it was Christian like to do”. For the Protestants, these rituals were despised (these were considered superstitions) because “all their

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<sup>23</sup> For details see Ion Constantin Chițimia, 1959, 642.

<sup>24</sup> Erasmus Heinrich Schneider von Weismantel, 1983,363.

<sup>25</sup> Niccolo Barsi, 1973,77; see also Robert Bargrave’notice, 1973, 494-495; Paul de Alep’notice, 1976, 124.

<sup>26</sup> Paul de Alep, 1976, 300.

<sup>27</sup> Paul de Alep, 1976, 125.

<sup>28</sup> Paul de Alep, 1976, 124.

<sup>29</sup> For the significance of alms in Romanian’mentality, see S. Fl. Marian, 2008, 109.

Christianity and their life have a sinful beginning and continues to be this way until their very end”<sup>30</sup>.

The social differences are highlighted even when sharing the alms (for the poor people, these were being rapped “in paper, while for the rich, in embroidered kerchiefs, and all were invited to eat in the dead man’s house”<sup>31</sup>). The sharing of alms was accustomed even between the poor. After burying the dead, they used to offer alms and bread to the people present and to pray for forgiveness<sup>32</sup>, a “much appreciated” custom<sup>33</sup>.

On the way to the cemetery, the cortege used to stop a couple of times for the passage of the so called “bridges”, while the priests were continuing to pray<sup>34</sup>. At the grave, a short prayer was being said and the tomb was being sealed by throwing earth on the coffin. Erasmus Heinrich Schneider von Weismantel was writing ironically that “sometimes, they put bread and money alongside the dead man so as to – as they claim – not die of hunger on his long journey towards the eternal life; and in order for him to see even at night, they put a candle in his hands, and by the end of the night they also bring lit cinders at the grave with which the dead man will lit his candle. And even if you will not see this on every grave, you will definitely find them on the fresh ones, because dead men are kind and they do not mind sharing with others until they reach together their final place of rest and, according to their belief, the eternal life<sup>35</sup>”.

The burial ritual was keep also in the death of the lord Matei Basarab (1654): pulling the bell of church, weeping and wailing dead (especially by women), incensing, prayers and kissing the deceased<sup>36</sup>.

Sometimes the funeral ritual was linked with an older tradition, an aspect pinpointed by Englishman Robert Bargrave in „The Diary” of the him Travel (1650): “the burial ritual is similar to the past traditions when the dead men were being accompanied to their grave by singers. The him sword, boots and hat were hung a dead horse conducted by the halter; the fiddlers were walking ahead of the cortege and were singing, his relatives

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<sup>30</sup> Erasmus Heinrich Schneider von Weismantel, 1983, 363.

<sup>31</sup> Paul de Alep, 1976, 70-72.

<sup>32</sup> Paul de Alep, 1976, 209.

<sup>33</sup> Erasmus Heinrich Schneider von Weismantel, 1983, 363.

<sup>34</sup> More about this practice, see Nicolae Cojocaru, 2012, 560.

<sup>35</sup> Erasmus Heinrich Schneider von Weismantel, 1983, 363.

<sup>36</sup> Paul de Alep, 1976, 137-139.

were riding next, while his body was being laid in an open coffin, just in the middle<sup>37</sup>.

To emphasize the sensational present in the Romanians' attitude towards death, in *A Curious Description of Moldova and Wallachia* (1699) written by an anonymous writer, being actually a fragment from a brochure inspired by the political situation of 1699, the funeral ritual was reduced at: "before the funeral and before burying their dead, they mourn them, then they take them to the grave<sup>38</sup> with lit candles and icons, and they bury them with all sorts of things („puppeteers"- „păpușării"). Some of them place needles, thread, patches of baize and cloth, a driving money, bread and many things like these, alongside the dead man so as to have how to spend their time in the grave while on their way to the so called paradise"<sup>39</sup>.

e. *The commemoration of the dead* (the unceasing care of those left outside of live). After the funeral, in the dead man's house, was being organized "a meal („praznic"), both for men and women, rich and poor, for people of all kinds" at which the priest was present also "in order to bless the food"<sup>40</sup>.

The reformed man Erasmus Heinrich Schneider von Weismantel noted a custom a little bit different: "after burying the dead, they organize a great feast in his honor, even if it means sacrificing their last cattle, and they offer alms to the poor for the wellbeing of the deceased. Four weeks later and after a year, they do this again as this marks the moment when the dead man must have reached heaven, no matter how long his journey was"<sup>41</sup>.

The connection with the dead man is rendered by mourning, a period of sadness („doliu"), of wailing and of taking care of the soul. Mourning is something met in the tradition of other peoples as well, the specialists explaining this as "a threshold period for the survivals",

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Bargrave, 1973, 494-495.

<sup>38</sup> See also Niccolo Barsi, 1973, 77.

<sup>39</sup> *A Curious Description of Moldova and Wallachia*, in *Foreign travellers through the Romanian Principalities*, 1983, 634.

<sup>40</sup> Paul de Alep, 1976, 72, 125. They eat „only fish" and they explain that „they do this thing for show the punishing of their body and their own pain for the dead man"; „but they drink some win and beer", see Niccolo Barsi, 1973, 77. Also, to see a meal who commemorating the death of Lady Balașa, Constantin Șerban's wife (Paul de Alep, 1976, 174).

<sup>41</sup> Erasmus Heinrich Schneider von Weismantel, 1983, 363.

marked by separation rituals and by trying to reintegrate in society („lifting mourning rites”<sup>42</sup>).

In the case of the Romanian society, the mourning period was not constant: usually, the men’s mourning meant walking for six weeks with their head uncovered, while women were wearing black kerchiefs; the relatives of the dead were walking with their head uncovered for 15 days<sup>43</sup>.

Mourning was also perceived as a change in the social status. Tommaso Alberti, after his journey through in Moldavia (1612) noted that „in order to show that his wife has died, the widower was walking with his head uncovered for several days”<sup>44</sup>.

The Church prayers had to be said for the dead man’s soul even after his burial, when the alms were being blessed periodically, on sacred holidays or on specific days from the Christian calendar<sup>45</sup>. So did lord of Wallachia Matei Basarab who after the religious service went to the grave of the recently deceased, Lady Elina (August 1653) and buried in The Biserica Domnească from Târgoviște. There “prayers were said and the sign of the cross was made above the lordly alms that were later on shared with all those present”<sup>46</sup>.

Such gestures in honor of the dead are complementary to the days of requiem that are well established after 3, and 9 days<sup>47</sup> and 40 days since the burial, when candles and alms are being offered to priests and to all those present”<sup>48</sup>. Also, the same author has rendered another moment which shows the preoccupation to obtain “the forgiveness” of the dead man’s sins and also to show the respect for his will expressed while he was still alive. He told how, after the dead man’s will to be exhumed after three years in order to obtain the forgiveness for his sins, the family has solicited the patriarch to say “the usual prayers for the dead”; there was a special sermon and “the body was splashed with holy water”; then followed the requiem hold at the refectory where incense was used on all of them while saying prayers for the dead man and while sharing the alms.

Another custom, perceived as superstitious was linked to the fact that on Maundy Thursday, it is believed that the souls of the dead are

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<sup>42</sup> Arnold Van Gennep, 1996, 132.

<sup>43</sup> Paul de Alep, 1976, 125.

<sup>44</sup> Tommaso Alberti, 1972, 361.

<sup>45</sup> Niccolo Barsi, 1973, 76; Paul de Alep, 1976, 86, 125; Marco Bandini, 1973, 343.

<sup>46</sup> Paul de Alep, 1976, 112.

<sup>47</sup> Paul de Alep, 1976, 70.

<sup>48</sup> Paul de Alep, 1976, 123,125.



returning back to their families “for food”. Therefore, “at dawn, father of the family and / or mother of family, they make a fire in front of their front door, they place next to it a stool covered with a clean cloth on which they place bread, food and drink for their parents and grandparents to feast their soul”. „The ridiculousness” of this superstition was unveiled of course by a Catholic from Baia, a place where such a feast happened to be taken by a dog. Witnessing the scene, he cried out laughing: “Here is the soul of your four legged, shaggy hear and fangs grandparent who is running away with the good food!”<sup>49</sup>.

The concern for the tomb was also very important for the Romanian society. Thus, foreigners cannot be buried on these lands. A Swedish officer was declined by some Moldavian villagers the right to bury his dead in the local cemetery<sup>50</sup>. The care for the dead was cultivated even at the level of the central authorities, the lords confirming periodically the relief of debts for all the grave-diggers („ciocli”) “only to make sure that they take care of the dead as it is accustomed”<sup>51</sup>.

In conclusion, we support the idea that even if the foreign travelers’ writings are exaggerations and somewhat tendentious interpretations, they prove the main preoccupation of the Romanian society for the afterlife which was also built on the principle of solidarity. This observation proved also the preservation of the burial ritual whose change would have affected the dead man’s destiny. In this way, we can support also the existence of a fine distinction between devotion and the reinterpretation of religion which took place in the Pre-modern Romanian society.

Foreigners’ writings have helped us grant a greater value to the social dimension of the Romanian’s attitude towards death. The passage into the other world was „helped” by society. The death of one of the community members has determined a continuous activation of the social links. Thus, someone’s death meant an occasion to transmit the social codes, to show off one’s social status, a re-actualization of the idea of disappearance and a means to manifest one’s belief.

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<sup>49</sup> Marco Bandini, 1973, 344-345 .

<sup>50</sup> Erasmus Heinrich Schneider von Weismantel, 1983, 355.

<sup>51</sup> Ioan Caproșu, 2000, Doc. no. 60. 51 (11 August 1693); Doc. no. 256, 218 (11 Februarie 1704: „only they have care the borns of dead men”), Doc. no. 405 (25 Decembrie 1710): „they („ciocli”) gather the bodies of the dead men”). Their importance is biggest during the disasters and the pandemics.

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