

ARIADNEplus Project: the Ottoman Heritage in Dobruja, Romania

Radu-Alexandru DRAGOMAN

Tiberiu VASILESCU

Iulian BÎRZESCU

Cătălin NICOLAE

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For almost five hundred years, Dobruja, a region located in the northeast of the Balkan Peninsula, between the Danube and the Black Sea, was part of the Ottoman Empire. Conquered by the Ottomans in the late 14th–early 15th century, their rule over Dobruja ended with the Russo-Romanian-Turkish War of 1877-1878 and the Berlin Peace Treaty of 1878, when Romania obtained not only the independence from the Ottoman Empire, becoming in 1881 the Kingdom of Romania, but also most of Dobruja. Thus, within Romania's borders was included a region with one of the most diverse populations from an ethnic point of view in Europe, in which Muslims continued to constitute the majority, despite the massive migration caused by the war (Iordachi 2002: 1, 8). At the same time, with the annexation of Dobruja, a rich Ottoman material heritage was integrated in the new Romanian state – houses, schools, public baths, fountains, mosques, cemeteries, etc. –, considered emblematic for the ethnic, cultural and religious landscape of Dobruja. However, the Ottoman past of Dobruja, but also of other regions of modern Romania that were part of the Ottoman Empire (e.g. Banat), entered for a long time into the shadow, the main cause being the structuring of Romanian state policy by nationalist ideologies – whether it is the Old Kingdom (1881-1918), Greater Romania (1918-1940) or communist Romania (1945-1989) –, doubled by an Orientalist attitude (*sensu* Said 1979) towards the Ottoman past, associated almost exclusively with oppression and backwardness. In 2011, without any institutional support and from own resources, two of the authors of this presentation (Radu-Alexandru Dragoman and Tiberiu Vasilescu), together with a small team composed of historians of the Ottoman period and sociologists, began to research the Ottoman heritage from Dobruja, focusing on the Ottoman materiality in the neighboring villages of Lanurile, Mereni and Bărăganu (Constanța County) (Dragoman et al. 2021). However, with the involvement in the ARIADNEplus project in 2018, it has become possible to expand the research both as an area and as objectives. Our research started from the observation that the post-communist official heritage policies operate with a discriminatory evaluation of the Ottoman sites and monuments. All the mosques included in the list of historical monuments have been selected for their antiquity and / or association with important names of the Ottoman elite, including sultans or their relatives, such as the case with the Esmahan Sultan mosque in Mangalia and its cemetery (Constanța County). In contrast, the modest mosques and especially the Muslim cemeteries located in the countryside or in the small towns and associated with the “common people” have been completely ignored.

In order to redress this aspect, within the ARIADNEplus project we decided to pay attention to all categories of Ottoman material heritage in Dobruja. The main objective of our approach was to identify and document in the field the mosques and the Muslim cemeteries dating from the Ottoman period, both in urban and – especially – in rural context. In all the cases, the exact location, the occupied perimeter, the dating, the structure(s) and the state of preservation have been taken into account. A total of 80 mosques and Muslim cemeteries have been documented so far, most of them in rural areas, of which 68 have been included into the ARIADNEplus project database. The data obtained in the field have been or will be supplemented with data obtained from other research projects, such as those dedicated to Ottoman fortifications and fountains (e.g. Stănică 2018; Manolescu 2021), but also with data from other sources (written, oral, web-sites). Following the fieldwork, some sites and / or monuments considered to be relevant for various aspects of the Ottoman-era materiality were chosen to be documented in more detail.

The research carried out within the ARIADNEplus project has clearly shown the link between the process of ruination (archaeologization) of the Muslim monuments and cemeteries in Dobruja, especially those in rural areas, on the one hand, and the declining of the Turkish and Tatar population, on the other. The traditional houses have almost completely disappeared – we have documented only one case, in Bărăganu. Also in Bărăganu, the modest mosque of the 19th century was quite degraded and left without a minaret. In the neighboring village of Lanurile, at the time of our first research, there was only one family of Tatars left, who later also left the village, leaving behind only an impressive cemetery.

Not only the depopulation process (sometimes forced, as was the case in Straja) contributed to the alteration of the Ottoman heritage in Dobruja, but also the changes made to the mosques in use, unprotected by the status of historical monuments. In their turn, not being protected by law, abandoned Muslim cemeteries have been and continue to be subject to destruction caused by industrial or real estate development in the area. Other cemeteries, still present on military maps from the interwar period, have now disappeared, the land being used for agricultural purposes. In other words, the entire research within the ARIADNEplus project has been a sort of rescue archaeology: the Muslim mosques and cemeteries remain among the most lasting material memories of the Ottoman past in Dobruja.

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