

URBAN HISTORY RESEARCH IN ROMANIA IN THE LAST 30 YEARS: SOURCES, TOPICS, METHODS, LIMITS

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Changes introduced after 1989 caused a paradigm shift in approaching Romanian urban history, which had lagged far behind the Western historiographies in almost all chapters. The Communist period represented a caesura compared to the years before the Second World War when various writers, professional historians or people with a passion for history had taken the audacious step of publishing monographs of the towns to which they felt attached. With a few exceptions, the Communism years represented, from this perspective, a blank. Interest shifted towards aspects that complied with the classical schemes of Marxist interpretations of the past, where the urban world occupied an altogether marginal role. Only archaeology and the history of monuments managed to make some progress as a field.

After 1989 there were no more ideological restrictions, but this did not lead immediately to urban history recovering the place to which it was entitled within historical research. There was significant progress, however, and my purpose is to assess the evolution of urban history research in Romania over the last three decades. I do not claim to carry out an exhaustive analysis for the entire Romanian space. My focus is rather on the history of the former Romanian principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, with only some specific references to Transylvania. Furthermore, such an endeavour can only be an inventory – as objective as possible, considering my opinion concerning the historiographical evolutions of the past decades, but with an inevitable touch of subjectivity.

Why is urban history relevant? From ancient times, towns have represented places for people to gather, spaces with a denser occupation than villages, with specific professions different from those of the noblemen, peasants or people dedicated to the spiritual sphere. This type of habitation and these ways of obtaining resources for surviving made towns places where different mentalities emerged, and people were more open to new things and change. Such changes occurred at a faster or slower pace, depending on the historical period. The Romanian space has recorded a variable urban habitation. In Antiquity, Greeks and Romans for a while introduced ways of organising life that were more rigorous in their colonies and municipalities. However, after the Roman retreat, during the reign of Aurelian (for the North Danubian space) or

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after Phocas' uprising (for the Dobrujan space), urban life disappeared for several centuries. It returned to the Danubian area in 1000 CE, in a similar Roman setting, this time Byzantine. New urban structures inspired by the West emerged in Transylvania in the thirteenth century and the young Romanian principalities from the fourteenth century.

Towns are also relevant to the history of Romanians. Often neglected and ignored by many historians (or dubbed "larger villages" by foreign travellers), urban centres played a role in the society, economy and political life of this region. Sources illustrate several aspects of the organisation of urban society, thus building up a picture of the economic activities conducted by inhabitants. However, it is a challenge to pin down the political involvement of urban inhabitants; there are various sources of data on the particular relationships between certain inhabitants and various princes, but they are scarce compared to the magnitude of the towns. Townsfolk were not exempted from joining the army in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, but there is no actual evidence preserved on the organisation of such participation. Consequently, the state of the sources is reflected in the writing manner and in the extent to which one may discover the urban past.

Before the Communist regime, the history of towns was an attractive topic mainly for those interested in the past of the place where they lived. Thus, the works of this period were dominated by a somewhat romantic approach, rather literary and less historical. Furthermore, many authors of town monographs in this period were not historians but lawyers, physicians or even members of the clergy. In the case of many authors, the critical spirit is missing and legends or dubitable accounts are intertwined with reliable historical interpretations. Among the works published in that period (some of them still relevant today) are several written by local personalities who are considered veritable historians nowadays. In that period, several individuals managed to master the sources and methods of historical study. It is worth mentioning, in this respect, Melchisedec Ștefănescu, who inserted histories of the towns Roman and Huși into monographs dedicated to the bishoprics of the area; Dimitrie F. Caian, who wrote a volume, which included historical documents, focusing on Focșani; Alexandru Ștefulescu, who wrote a history of Târgu Jiu; Ioan Răuțescu and his excellent monograph on Câmpulung Muscel; and N. A. Bogdan, with his partially romanticised history of Iași. Last but not least, I highlight here Nicolae Iorga, who penned a history of Bucharest.¹ Various other

¹ Melchisedec Ștefănescu, *Chronica Hușilor și a episcopiei cu asemenea numire* [Chronicle of the Huși and of the Episcopate with Such an Appointment] (Bucharest, 1869); Idem, *Chronica Romanului și a episcopiei de Roman* [Chronicle of the Roman and of the Roman Episcopate], vol. I (Bucharest, 1874); Dimitrie F. Caian, *Istoricul orașului Focșani* [The History of the City of Focșani] (Focșani, 1906); Alexandru Ștefulescu, *Istoria Târgu-Jiului* [The History of Târgu Jiu]

authors wrote studies of variable quality on towns, but this is not the place to analyse them.

Things did not change substantially during the Communist period – quite the opposite. The 1950s started with the “performance” of failing to publish any urban monographs. However, during that decade, several systematic archaeological research studies were initiated, one of the most relevant being carried out in Suceava.² The subsequent decade brought the first professional monographs written by historians – or, actually, by one historian – with the first synthesis by Constantin C. Giurescu, dedicated to the situation of Moldavian towns and their evolution from their emergence to the sixteenth century. Also in the 1960s, Giurescu wrote a monograph on Bucharest and one on Brăila. The first work, *Târguri sau orașe și cetăți moldovene*, had limited circulation; the public did not have access to it, and it never made it to libraries because it featured a sensitive issue.³ In it, Giurescu naturally included the towns and cities on the other side of the River Prut, which risked worsening the relations between Communist Romania and its big brother, the Soviet Union, which had forcibly taken that territory after the war. Historians knew of the book but could only obtain it after signing a document; as a result, many refrained from citing it.⁴ It was not until 1997 that Giurescu’s son, Dinu, published it in a new edition, which circulated freely. In his two other monographs, C. C. Giurescu made some concessions to the regime, making positive remarks about its achievements after the war, which ultimately brought him professional acknowledgement; as a result, he became an official historian of sorts.⁵

(Târgu Jiu, 1906); Ioan Răuțescu, *Câmpulung-Muscel. Monografie istorică* [Câmpulung Muscel. Historical Monograph] (Câmpulung Muscel, 1943); N. A. Bogdan, *Orașul Iași. Monografie istorică și socială ilustrată* [The City of Jassy. Illustrated Historical and Social Monograph] (Jassy, 1913-1915); N. Iorga, *Istoria Bucureștilor* [The History of Bucharest] (Bucharest, 1939).

² Excavations carried out by a team made of Ion Nestor, Mircea Matei, Gh. Diaconu, Ștefan Olteanu, Trifu Martinovici și N. Constantinescu, with results published in *MCA* IV (1957): 239-278; V and VI (both 1959): 593-618, 679-697.

³ Constantin C. Giurescu, *Târguri sau orașe și cetăți moldovene din secolul al X-lea până la mijlocul secolului al XVI-lea* [Moldavian Markets or Towns and Fortress from the 10th Century to the Middle of the 16th Century] (Bucharest: Editura Academiei R.S.R., 1967).

⁴ Dinu C. Giurescu, “Cuvânt înainte” [Foreword], in Constantin C. Giurescu, *Târguri sau orașe și cetăți moldovene din secolul al X-lea până la mijlocul secolului al XVI-lea*, 2nd ed. (Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 1997), II.

⁵ Constantin C. Giurescu, *Istoria Bucureștilor din cele mai vechi timpuri până în zilele noastre* [The History of Bucharest from Ancient Times to the Present Day] (Bucharest: Editura pentru Literatură, 1966; 2nd ed., Bucharest: Sport-Turism, 1979); *Istoricul orașului Brăila din cele mai vechi timpuri până astăzi* [The History of the City of Brăila from the Earliest Times to the Present Day] (Bucharest: Editura Științifică, 1968).

The rest of the Communist period is known only for the lack of coherent approach to the past of various towns. This was understandable, given that Nicolae Ceaușescu had initiated an intensive process of urban systematisation, involving almost everywhere massive demolition of the old centres. Consequently, researchers had to avoid focusing on the history of towns to prevent hindering the regime's plans. Protests from historians, art historians, architects, doctors and clergymen were scarce, and those that did occur mainly concerned the massive restructuring applied by Ceaușescu in Bucharest, which involved the demolition or displacement to less visible areas of dozens of churches. Reactions to similar processes within other towns were even rarer. An exception was the work of a female architect who tried to provide solutions for the destructive plans of the regime. Eugenia Greceanu was a singular figure, as she drafted three papers – excellent case studies – on the spatial and constructive evolution of three towns, Roman, Botoșani and Pitești, in order to enable the preservation of their heritage.⁶ Greceanu was a voice heard only by specialists; among the three towns, it was only in Botoșani that they managed to save some of the nineteenth-century heritage which was still quite well preserved. Furthermore, as a positive element, in this period, specialists in art history and architecture (such as Pavel Chihaia and Cristian Moisescu) wrote various works covering both historical monuments and urban areas.⁷

In the last decades of the regime, we witness the initiation and valorisation of archaeological excavations dedicated to churches, monasteries and princely courts⁸ or based on discoveries made during demolitions.⁹ Most of

⁶ Eugenia Greceanu, "La structure urbaine médiévale de la ville de Roman," in *RRH* 15, no. 1 (1976): 39-56; Eadem, *Ansamblul urban medieval Botoșani* [The Medieval Urban Ensemble of Botoșani] (Bucharest: Muzeul Național de Istorie, 1981); Eadem, *Ansamblul medieval Pitești* [The Medieval Urban Ensemble of Pitești] (Bucharest: Muzeul Național de Istorie a României, 1982).

⁷ Cristian Moisescu, *Curtea domnească din Târgoviște* [The Princely Court from Târgoviște] (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1965); Idem, *Biserica Curtea Veche* [The Curtea Veche Church] (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1967); Cristian Moisescu and N. Stoicescu, *Târgoviștea și monumentele sale* [Târgoviște and Its Monuments] (Bucharest: Litera, 1976); Pavel Chihaia, *Din cetățile de scaun ale Țării Românești* [From the Seat Cities of Wallachia] (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1974); Idem, *De la „Negru Vodă” la Neagoe Basarab. Interferențe literar-artistice în cultura românească a evului de mijloc* [From "Negru Vodă" to Neagoe Basarab. Literary-Artistic Interferences in the Romanian Culture of the Middle Ages] (Bucharest: Editura Academiei R.S.R., 1976); several studies dedicated to monuments by the latter author have been published together in the volumes *Artă medievală* [Medieval Art], I-IV (Bucharest: Albatros, 1998).

⁸ The best example is N. Constantinescu, *Curtea de Argeș (1200-1400). Asupra începuturilor Țării Românești* [Curtea de Argeș (1200-1400). On the Beginnings of Wallachia] (Bucharest: Editura Academiei R.S.R., 1984).

⁹ See, among others, the research carried by Pușcașu family from Iași: Nicolae N. Pușcașu, Voica-Maria Pușcașu, "Mărturii de civilizație și urbanizare medievală descoperite în vatra istorică a Iașilor" [Testimonies of Medieval Civilization and Urbanization Discovered in the Historic Hearth

the time, the latter did not include rigorous research, which prevented a better insight into the past of the towns concerned. Archaeological evidence that could have revealed much about the beginning of many settlements was probably lost or compromised forever.

In early 1990, programmatic documents were published by groups of researchers in several history publications, supporting decisive paradigm shifts in historiographical approaches. They argued, among other things, for an open horizon in which research into the urban past could be approached systematically and make better use of the available resources.¹⁰ The transformations that followed December 1989 and the lifting of the restrictions that had limited research in several fields and on various topics led to a veritable liberalisation of the perspective on urban history.

However, this necessitated better organisation and coordination of the people interested in urban history. For many historians, research on towns had been of secondary interest. Under these conditions, in 1992, the Commission for the History of Romanian Towns (subordinated to the Romanian Academy) was founded, to exert a symbolical patronage of the field. Paul Niedermaier (of the Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities in Sibiu) played an essential role in developing the constitution of the Commission and initiating, in 1993, publication of the first and only urban history journal in Romania, called precisely *Historia Urbana*. In this institute of the Romanian Academy, the country's only urban history department has functioned since 1997. The researchers of this institute took over the mission of coordinating and publishing the journal mentioned above, along with several other specific projects, such as the development of the *Historical Bibliography of Romanian Cities*.¹¹ The initial Commission included, alongside historians, several architects, among them T. O. Gheorghiu, Carmen Oprescu and Valeriu Drăgan.¹²

of Jassy], *RMM-MIA*, new series 14, no. 2 (1983): 20-64; *idem*, *Biserica „Sfântul Sava” din Iași. Monografie arheologică* [The Saint Sava Church in Iași. Archaeological Monograph] (Bucharest: Vremea, 2020).

¹⁰ See Dan Berindei, “Cuvânt înainte” [Foreword], *HUI*, no. 1 (1993): 7. Also, see “La început de drum” [At the Beginning], *RI*, new series I, no. 1 (1990): 3-5; Alexandru Zub, “Cuvânt înainte” [Foreword], *AIIA XXVII* (1990): V-VII.

¹¹ Vasile Ciobanu, Judit Pál, and Anda-Lucia Spănu, eds., *Bibliografia istorică a orașelor din România* [Historical Bibliography of Romanian Cities] (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 2008). Local bibliographies mentioned in Vasile Ciobanu, “Cercetări din ultimele două decenii cu privire la istoria orașelor din România în secolul XX” [Research from the Last two Decades on the History of Romanian Cities in the 20th Century], *HUXXI* (2013): 110-111.

¹² See Paul Niedermaier, “Comisia de Istorie a Orașelor din România la 20 de ani” [The Commission of Romanian Cities History at 20 Years Old], *HUXXI* (2013): 5-14; Vasile Ciobanu, “Historia Urbana la 20 de ani de la apariție” [Historia Urbana 20 years After Its Appearance], *HUXXI* (2013): 15-19.

Paul Niedermaier is also an architect by training. He was already Romania's representative in the much older International Commission for the History of Towns (ICHT) and has attended its annual meetings since the 1980s. He imposed a similar organisational structure to the ICHT on the Romanian Commission: a board and fee-paying members, annual conferences (from 1992) and the publication of papers in the journal. The Commission represented a relatively coherent form for structuring interests in urban history, and had an impact at the level of concrete research as well. Each annual conference had a different theme. Over time, the conferences and the pages of *Historia Urbana* (where the papers were published) tackled both broad topics (for example, the emergence of medieval towns, the sources of urban history, social and political aspects) and specific themes that had not been emphasised before, such as urban topography (town plans, road network, neighbourhoods) and daily life. They also explored specialist topics, such as the relations between the town and the Church, towns and banks, villages, social work, food, transport, and disasters – fires, epidemics and so on.

Besides *Historia Urbana*, research on the history of towns has been published in the journals of various museums which also feature topics related to local history. As the field attracted many people, not all of them professional historical writers or with a deep understanding of academic methodology, the quality of the papers is variable, from high-quality studies with references to archival sources to rather general papers. As such, the research published covers all levels, but it is worth stressing the significant progress made in approaching urban history. Many aspects of Romania's medieval and modern history have become significantly clearer as a result.

Institutionally, besides museums and the institutes of the Romanian Academy (in Sibiu, as well as Bucharest, Cluj and Iași), urban history has been a point of interest for professors in major Romanian universities, including the University of Bucharest, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" in Iași and "Babeș-Bolyai" in Cluj-Napoca. The only syntheses dedicated to the towns within the Romanian space published in this period are the outcome of doctoral research initiated by young university professors and researchers, most of them from these universities or centres: Judit Pál, Enikő Rűsz-Fogarasi, Laurențiu Rădvan, Simion Călția, Denis Căprăroiu and Marius Chelcu.¹³ For the most part, they are

¹³ Judit Pál, *Procesul de urbanizare în scaunele secuiești în secolul al XIX-lea* [The Process of Urbanization in the Szekler Seats in the 19th Century] (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 1999); Enikő Rűsz-Fogarasi, *Privilegiile și îndatoririle așezărilor urbane din Transilvania voievodală* [Privileges and Duties of Urban Settlements in Voivodship Transylvania] (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2003); Laurențiu Rădvan, *Orașele din țările române în evul mediu (sfârșitul sec. al XIII-lea – începutul sec. al XVI-lea)* [The Cities of the Romanian Lands in the Middle Ages (Late 13th - Early 16th Century)] (Iași: Editura Universității Alexandru Ioan Cuza, 2011); Simion Călția, *Așezări urbane sau rurale? Orașele din Țările Române de la sfârșitul*

individual initiatives, although a smaller number resulted from the work of research teams. The latter situation was often conjectural due to project contests launched being by the Ministry of Research which ceased to function (or be funded) in the long term.

Concerning regional research, the most reliable approaches focus on Transylvania and Banat, as well as Moldavia. In the regions west of the Carpathians, Romanian, Hungarian and German historians alike have been interested in urban history. Given the specificity of the medieval and modern period, Romanian historians focused on the small towns in the areas of Hațeg or *Țara Moșilor*, or on the evolution of towns after 1918.¹⁴ The Hungarian and German historians chose to analyse the history of centres inhabited by Transylvanian Saxons and of the existing Hungarians market towns.¹⁵ In

secolului al XVII-lea la începutul secolului al XIX-lea [Urban or Rural Settlements? The Cities of the Romanian Lands from the End of the 17th Century to the Beginning of the 19th Century] (Bucharest: Editura Universității din București, 2011); Denis Căprăroiu, *Orașul medieval în spațiul românesc extracarpatic (sec. X-XIV). O încercare de tipologizare a procesului genezei urbane* [The Medieval City in the Romanian Extra-Carpathian Space (10th-14th Centuries). An Attempt to typologize the Process of Urban Genesis] (Târgoviște: Cetatea de Scaun, 2014); Marius Chelcu, *Istoria orașelor din Moldova de la jumătatea secolului al XVI-lea până la jumătatea secolului al XVIII-lea. Studii și documente* [History of Moldavian Cities from the Mid-16th Century to the Mid-18th Century. Studies and Documents] (Jassy: Editura Universității Alexandru Ioan Cuza, 2015). We add to these monographs the works in which older research is synthesized, as *Târguri sau orașe și cetăți moldovene*, by Constantin C. Giurescu, already mentioned above, or Mircea D. Matei, *Geneză și evoluție urbană în Moldova și Țara Românească* [Genesis and Urban Evolution in Moldavia and Wallachia] (Jassy: Helios, 1997).

¹⁴ Ioachim Lazăr, *Hațeg. Istorie, cultură și civilizație* [Hațeg. History, Culture and Civilization] (Hațeg, 1997); Ștefan Manciualea, *Istoria Blajului. Monografie istorică și culturală* [The History of Blaj. Historical and Cultural Monograph], ed. Mircea Popa (Blaj: Astra, 2001); Romulus Neag, *Monografia municipiului Brad-Zarand* [The Monograph of Brad-Zarand Municipality] (Deva: Corvin, 2002).

¹⁵ Harald Roth, *Hermannstadt. Kleine Geschichte einer Stadt in Siebenbürgen* (Weimar, Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2006); Hans-Heinz Brandsch, Heinz Heltmann, and Walter Lingner, eds., *Schäßburg. Bild einer Siebenbürger Stadt* (Thaur bei Innsbruck: Wort und Welt Verlag, 1994); Hans Vastag, György Mandics, and Manfred Engelmann, *Temeswar. Symbol der Freiheit* (Wien: Amalthea Verlag, 1992); Paul Niedermaier, *Der mittelalterliche Städtebau in Siebenbürgen, im Banat und im Kreischgebiet* (Heidelberg: Arbeitskreis für Siebenbürgische Landeskunde, 1996); Tibor Kálmán Dáné et al., eds., *Kolozsvár 1000 éve* [Cluj 1000 Years] (Cluj: Erdélyi Múzeum Egyesület, 2001); Barna Marosi, *Bernády György városa* [The City of György Bernády] (Târgu Mureș: Mentor, 1993); Hermann Gusztáv, *Székelyudvarhely művelődéstörténete* [The Cultural History of Odorheiu Secuiesc] (Bucharest: Kriterion Könyvkiadó, 1992). See, newer works by Judit Pál, *Armenii în Transilvania. Contribuții la procesul de urbanizare și dezvoltare economică a provinciei / Armenians in Transylvania. Their Contribution to the Urbanisation and the Economic Development of the Province* (Cluj-Napoca: Institutul Cultural Român, Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 2005); Mária Pakucs-Willcocks, *Sibiu-Hermannstadt: Oriental Trade in Sixteenth Century Transylvania* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2007), and Eadem, *Sibiul veacului al XVI-lea: rânduirea unui oraș transilvănean* [Sibiu of the 16th Century: The Ordering of a Transylvanian City] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2018).

Moldavia, the historians of Iași have been the most prolific. They have shown constant interest in, among other things, issues related to the history, heritage, topography and society of the former Moldavian capital.¹⁶ There is still a lingering nostalgia for the period when this town played a substantive role in the regional political and economic scene, which ended in 1859 when Bucharest became the Romanian capital. Regarding the other Moldavian towns, researchers have investigated Suceava, Bacău, Galați and Roman; the last of these town has compensated for the loss of status as county centre through local history studies, albeit not all high quality.¹⁷

In the south, in Muntenia, there has been an inconsistent approach to local towns. Authors have focused on Bucharest,¹⁸ where efforts were made to retrieve the town history in the nineteenth to twentieth centuries,¹⁹ and Brăila, with a disproportionate number of studies dedicated to the local history and archaeology compared to other towns of former Wallachia.²⁰ In both cases, I highlight the merit of museum directors, Adrian Majuru and Ionel Căndea, who emphasised focused research on the past of these two towns. As a particular element, although they are smaller, the towns within the current county of Argeș (Pitești, Curtea de Argeș and Câmpulung) have undergone more intense local history retrieval activity than other towns, driven by the same nostalgia for the golden era of these places.²¹ More recently, there has been an increased interest in the past of Ploiești.²² The other extreme is the towns in Oltenia,

¹⁶ Many studies written by Ștefan S. Gorovei, Petronel Zahariuc, Maria Magdalena Székely, Laurențiu Rădvan, Marius Chelcu, Dan Dumitru Iacob, Sorin Iftimi and others we have no place to name here.

¹⁷ Vasile Ursachi et al., eds., *Istoria orașului Roman (1392-1992)* [History of the Roman City (1392-1992)] (Roman: 1992). Conferences were organized annually in this city and volumes of studies were published: *613 ani de la prima atestare documentară a Romanului* [613 Years Since the First Documentary Attestation of Roman] (Roman, 2006); *614 ani de la prima atestare documentară a Romanului* [614 Years Since the First Documentary Attestation of Roman] (Roman, 2007) and so on up until recent years.

¹⁸ After a less glorious period in the 1990s, starting with 1999, the periodical *București. Materiale de Istorie și Muzeografie* [Bucharest. History and Museography Materials] (published by the Museum of Bucharest), an annual publication hosting local history research, resumed its appearance. Recently, the editorial team decided to change the name of the journal, which since 2020 is called *Urbanitas. Revistă de Studii Urbane Integrate* [Urbanitas. Journal of Integrated Urban Studies], this step aiming at a greater openness to interdisciplinarity, but also offering current and professional answers to the challenges facing the city: Adrian Majuru and Vasile Opreș, "Foreword," *Urbanitas. Revistă de Studii Urbane Integrate* I (2020): 6-10.

¹⁹ See the many works of Adrian Majuru, which we do not mention here for reasons of space.

²⁰ Works by Ionel Căndea and his colleagues from the Museum of Brăila.

²¹ Petre Popa, Paul Dicu, and Silvestru Voinescu, *Istoria municipiului Pitești* [The History of the City of Pitești] (Bucharest: Editura Academiei RSR, 1988); Spiridon Cristoccea, *Orașul Pitești în catagrafia din 1838* [The City of Pitești in the Catagrapy from 1838] (Pitești: Ordessos, 2011).

²² Gheorghe Marinică and Constantin Trestioreanu, eds., *Marea carte a Ploieștilor* [The Great Book of Ploiești], vol. I-III (Ploiești: Editura Ploiești-Mileniul III, 2011-2019).

comprising less visible and far more modest research in terms of scientific rigour.

It is worth making special mention of the urban history in Bessarabia, where after the Soviet period interest in the history of late medieval towns has increased considerably, from those that developed with the contribution of Italian merchants in the Black Sea region (Cetatea Albă and Chilia) to the fortress towns controlled by the Mongols in the inner area (Orhei, Coștești) to Kishinev and its development after 1812. My goal here is not to discuss the historiography; however, the studies by specialists such as Pavel Cocîrlă, Tamara Nesterov, Mariana Șlapac, Sergius Ciocanu and others has made strong connections with the topics, concerns and methodology of Romanian historians.²³

Only a small part of the research on urban history has crossed Romania's borders – a very small amount compared to town history accounts from Hungary or Poland, for instance. With the exception of a history of the towns in the Romanian Principalities and the studies published regularly by a few Romanian historians in the proceedings of the annual ICHT conferences, few works have familiarised international historians with the realities of towns in this part of Europe.²⁴ The reasons for this situation also relate to the gap in present urban history research, as the Romanian historians are still catching up on the basic subjects (urbanisation, social and ethnical structures, local topography) that had been neglected for decades, while in the West, researchers were already discussing issues such as urban mentalities and gender history.

The precarious situation of urban history research may also be explained by the poor state of the sources, particularly for the period between the mid-seventeenth century and the nineteenth century. A multilevel perspective on

²³ Here are just a few significant titles: Pavel Cocîrlă, *Târgurile sau orașele Moldovei în epoca feudală, sec. XV-XVIII* [Moldavian Markets or Cities in the Feudal Era, 15th-18th Centuries] (Chișinău: Universitas, 1991); Mariana Șlapac, *Arta urbanismului în Republica Moldova. Privire de ansamblu* [The Art of Urbanism in the Republic of Moldova. An Overview] (Chișinău: Academia de Științe a Moldovei, 2008); Sergius Ciocanu, *Orașul Chișinău, începuturi, dezvoltare urbană, biserici (secolele XV-XIX)* [The City of Chișinău, Beginnings, Urban Development, Churches (15th-19th Centuries)] (Chișinău: Cartdidact, 2017).

²⁴ Laurențiu Rădvan, *At Europe's Borders: Medieval Towns in the Romanian Principalities* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2010); volumes of the ICHT conferences with studies regarding Romania: Michel Pauly and Martin Scheutz, eds., *Cities and Their Spaces. Concepts and Their Use in Europe* (Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2014); Michel Pauly and Alexander Lee, eds., *Urban Liberties and Citizenship from the Middle Ages Up to Now* (Trier: Porta Alba Verlag, 2015); Roman Czaja et al., eds., *Political Functions of Urban Spaces and Town Types through the Ages. Making Use of the Historic Towns Atlases in Europe* (Toruń: Towarzystwo Naukowe, 2019); for Transylvania, we have the newer works of Mária Pakucs-Willcocks, mentioned above, or Ágnes Flóra, *The Matter of Honour. The Leading Urban Elite in Sixteenth Century Transylvania* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019).

these aspects is essential, because there are several types of sources. I have already mentioned the archaeological research and how it was limited to accidental finds or rescue excavations. There was a strong focus on monuments at the expense of other topics, hence there is relatively little information regarding the life of regular town inhabitants. Archives have not preserved enough official documents, ownership documents, correspondence, private documents, and so on. Around 90% of what was preserved until 1831-1832²⁵ consists of ownership deeds or accompanying documents (for example, for setting plot boundaries or announcing bids for plots opened for sale). This is explicable if we analyse things from the standpoint of owners, who were interested in conveying the documents proving their ownership. Many such documents concerning the towns of the Romanian Principalities ended up in monastery archives, which contributed to their preservation until they were eventually ingested into the National Archives. Such sources are valuable because they provide information regarding not only a property per se but also the people who lived there, the family and their social status, their occupations, the local topography and sometimes even legal matters. More than once, the buildings and lands in towns were involved in various legal proceedings. Another significant problem is that not even one of the hundreds of town registers from the Romanian Principalities has survived. Such registers (mentioned from the sixteenth century) listed all building and land transactions, their existence being attested by the numerous formulae such as “this was noted in the town’s register” recorded in the documents issued by the princely chancery. Their preservation would have helped reconstruct the premodern urban land register, a real challenge nowadays, given the small number of such documents that have survived. Sources illuminating the lifestyle or mindsets of urban inhabitants are even more scarce. Historians try to compensate for this lack by means of the remaining preserved written sources (legal documents, official or private correspondence, wills, various documents), but they do not always succeed. The lack of preservation of many late medieval or premodern sources is the result of several factors, such as loss of internal coherence in the urban communities, or the reduction of their solidarity due to the restriction (and sometimes removal) of autonomous organisational forms. Given that in Bucharest there has been no mention of a mayor (*județ*) since the

²⁵ During these years, the archives of Wallachia and Moldova were established. Since then, the keeping of documents has become official, so that the number of institutionally preserved sources has increased significantly. Until then, we can speak of archival forms only next to the princely courts and the Metropolitan churches (Sanda Bădărău et al., “Istoricul Arhivelor Statului, 1831-1956” [The History of State Archives, 1831-1956], in *Arhivele Statului. 125 ani de activitate, 1831-1956* [The State Archives. 125 Years of Activity, 1831-1956] (Bucharest: Direcția Generală a Arhivelor Statului, 1957), 17-32).

reign of Constantin Brâncoveanu (1688-1714), while in Iași there is no evidence of a mayor (*șoltuz*) since the time of Constantin Mavrocordat (several reigns between 1733 and 1769), we can only assume there were no institutions representing the townspeople and interested in preserving the documents after these times, at least, not those that the community valued. Such institutions remain visible only in a few of towns, such as Câmpulung Muscel or Bârlad, but even here the local autonomy was reduced significantly. There was no urban archive and no interest in preserving internal documents, hence the registers of towns were lost. Some of them survived for a while in private archives; however, even these were eventually affected by the numerous calamities (natural or, most often, manmade) that regularly hit the towns. Fires were the most common cause of archive destruction, besides the wars between the Great Powers, in which the Romanian Principalities were caught in the middle throughout the eighteenth century and the first half of the subsequent century. Even the calamities of the twentieth century affected the archives, as was the case with the First and Second World Wars: the first precipitated the evacuation to Moldavia, while the second saw the bombing of the Grivița depot in Bucharest, where wagons with archival documents were stationed.²⁶ Consequently, any researcher interested in the written sources kept in archives has to be satisfied with fragments. This situation provides, most often, a limited perspective for reconstructing the past and former life in Romanian towns.

In the last century, though, some of these sources were published due to various efforts lacking any order. The initiatives were consistent with those of the pre-war and pre-Communist periods when only a couple of achievements were recorded in the field.²⁷ There was no coordination, just the interest of several professional or amateur historians. In Bucharest, it is worth noting the selection of documents published in three volumes by George Potra, despite its document transcription issues.²⁸ The volumes complete a previous volume of documents within the collection of the Bucharest History Museum.²⁹ The

²⁶ Ibid., 38-39.

²⁷ Those that accompany research on history of Târgu Jiu (Alexandru Ștefulescu), Roman (Melchisedec Ștefănescu), Focșani (Dimitrie F. Caian), Bârlad (Ioan Antonovici), mentioned above.

²⁸ George Potra, *Documente privitoare la istoria orașului București (1594-1821)* [Documents Regarding the History of the City of Bucharest (1594-1821)] (Bucharest: Editura Academiei RPR, 1961); Idem, *Documente privitoare la istoria orașului București (1821-1848)* [Documents Regarding the History of the City of Bucharest (1821-1848)] (Bucharest: Editura Academiei RSR, 1975); Idem, *Documente privitoare la istoria orașului București (1634-1800)* [Documents Regarding the History of the City of Bucharest (1634-1800)] (Bucharest: Editura Academiei RSR, 1982).

²⁹ Florian Georgescu, Paul Cernovodeanu, and Ioana Cristache-Panait, eds., *Documente privind istoria orașului București* [Documents Regarding the History of the City of Bucharest] (Bucharest: Muzeul de Istorie al Orașului București, 1960).

documents hosted by the archives of Suceava, Pitești or Râmnicu Vâlcea were published before 1989,³⁰ but this effort did not continue after the fall of the Communist regime. Democracy brought along more interest in the use of local document sources; hence, the publishing initiatives multiplied. The trend became visible in Câmpulung, Târgoviște, Slatina, Turnu Severin, Tecuci and Huși,³¹ but the editorial effort sometimes failed to observe the unanimously accepted publication standards for such documents. Again, in these cases, the projects are singular, and their success depended strictly on the effort capabilities of the initiators, not on any academic establishment support. The most comprehensive initiative took place in Iași, and its initiator was a professional in document editing. In only eight years, Ioan Caproșu managed to publish none less than ten volumes, thus covering a significant part of the history of the former Moldavian capital from 1408 to 1800.³² Though the

³⁰ Vasile Gh. Miron et al., eds., *Din tezaurul documentar sucevean. Catalog de documente (1393-1849)* [From the Suceava Documentary Treasure. Catalog of Documents (1393-1849)] (Bucharest: Direcția Generală a Arhivelor Statului, 1983); Vasile Gh. Miron et al., eds., *Suceava. File de istorie. Documente privitoare la istoria orașului, 1388-1918* [Suceava. History Sheets. Documents on the History of the City, 1388-1918], vol. I (Bucharest: Direcția Generală a Arhivelor Statului, 1989); Teodor Mavrodin et al., eds., *Pitești. Mărturii documentare. 1388-1944* [Pitești. Documentary Testimonies. 1388-1944], vol. I (Bucharest: Direcția Generală a Arhivelor Statului, 1988); Corneliu Tamaș et al., eds., *Tezaur medieval vâlcean. Catalogul documentelor de la Arhivele Statului din Râmnicu Vâlcea (1388-1715)* [Medieval Treasure from Vâlcea. Catalog of Documents from the State Archives of Râmnicu Vâlcea (1388-1715)] (Bucharest: Direcția Generală a Arhivelor Statului, 1983); Corneliu Tamaș et al., eds., *Comori arhivistice vâlcene. Catalogul documentelor de la arhivele statului din Râmnicu Vâlcea (1467-1800)* [Archival Treasures of Vâlcea. Catalog of Documents from the State Archives of Râmnicu Vâlcea (1467-1800)] (Bucharest: Direcția Generală a Arhivelor Statului, 1985). We can add the documents published by George Potra and Nicolae Simache in *Contribuții la istoricul orașelor Ploiești și Târgșor (1632-1857)* [Contributions to the History of the Cities of Ploiești and Târgșor (1632-1857)] (s.l., s.a.), and, right after 1989, the thematic volume: Vasile Manole, Mihaela Bădescu, and Mihaela Ciucă, eds., *Documente privind dezvoltarea industriei în orașul București* [Documents Regarding the Development of the Industry in Bucharest], I (1856-1933) (București: Direcția Generală a Arhivelor Statului, 1991).

³¹ Gheorghe Pârnuță and Ștefan Trâmbaciu, eds., *Documente și inscripții privind istoria orașului Câmpulung-Muscel* [Documents and Inscriptions Regarding the History of the City of Câmpulung-Muscel], vol. I-III (Bucharest: Semne, 1999-2000); Mihai Oproiu, ed., *Inscripții și însemnări din județul Dâmbovița* [Inscriptions and Notes from Dâmbovița County], vol. I-V (Târgoviște: Transversal, 2003-2004); Gheorghe Mihai and Badea Geaucă, *Istoricul orașului Slatina în documente* [The History of the City of Slatina in Documents], vol. I, 1346-1918 (Slatina: Editura Casa Ciurea, 1998); series of volumes of *Documente ale municipalității severinene* [Documents of the Severin Municipality], edited by Tudor Rățoi (Craiova: Alma, 2005-2012); Ștefan Andronache, ed., *Documente istorice tecucene* [Tecuci Historical Documents], vol. I-III (Tecuci: Biblioteca Municipală, 2001-2002); Costin Clit, ed., *Documente hușene* [Huși Historical Documents], vol. I-IV (Jassy: Pim, 2011-2017).

³² Ioan Caproșu, ed., *Documente privitoare la istoria orașului Iași* [Documents Regarding the History of Jassy], vol. I-X (vol. I, edited by Ioan Caproșu and Petronel Zahariuc) (Jassy: Dosoței,

documents from the last decades of the eighteenth century are yet to be published integrally (some of them are still unpublished and hosted by the collections of the Romanian Academy Library), the efforts of Professor Caproșu in Iași are still commendable, though singular. Bucharest has not benefitted from similar attention. Concerning the Wallachian space, it is worth noting an equally professional publication initiative for economic history sources. Gheorghe Lazăr has already published two volumes of documents issued by merchants (covering the period 1656-1714) and one of the registers belonging to houses of commerce active in the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries.³³

In recent years, progress has been made concerning other urban history sources. Among them, the most notable regards the cartographic sources. The Commission for the History of Romanian Towns took over a project supported by the International Commission: the publication of historical town atlases to highlight the historical plans of the urban centres, thus providing the possibility of comparative research through integration with the other types of sources. The historical atlas project is one of the few supported and institutionally assumed by the Romanian Academy, though support has not been constant in this case, either. The team was coordinated in Sibiu initially by Paul Niedermaier (the first atlas), then by Dan Dumitru Iacob, and it reunited – *rara avis* in Romania – historians, geographers and architects. Thus, they published seven atlases: two for Transylvania (Sighișoara and Sebeș), three for Wallachia (Târgoviște, Câmpulung and Brăila), two for Moldavia (Siret and Suceava).³⁴ Concerning the historical town plans, the process of their publication has been far from consistent. Nicolae Docan pointed out a century ago the presence of such cartographic documents in the archives of Vienna,³⁵ but no publishing

1999-2007).

³³ Gheorghe Lazăr, ed., *Documente privitoare la negustorii din Țara Românească* [Documents Regarding the Merchants from Wallachia], vol. I-II (Jassy: Editura Universității Alexandru Ioan Cuza, 2013-2014); Idem, ed., *Catastife de negustori din Țara Românească (secolele XVIII-XIX)* [Registers of Merchants from Wallachia (18th-19th Centuries)] (Jassy: Editura Universității Alexandru Ioan Cuza, 2016).

³⁴ *Atlas istoric al orașelor din România* [Historical Atlas of Romanian Cities], A series, *Moldova* [Moldavia], fasc. 1, *Suceava*, ed. Mircea D. Matei (Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 2005); fasc. 2, *Siret*, ed. Dan Dumitru Iacob (Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 2010); *Atlas istoric al orașelor din România*, B series, *Țara Românească* [Wallachia], fasc. 1, *Târgoviște*, ed. Gh. I. Cantacuzino (Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 2006); fasc. 2, *Câmpulung*, ed. Dan Dumitru Iacob (Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 2008); fasc. 3, *Brăila*, eds. Ionel Căndea and Dan Dumitru Iacob (Brăila: Muzeul Brăilei and Editura Istros, 2013); *Atlas istoric al orașelor din România*, C series, *Transilvania* [Transylvania], fasc. 1, *Sighișoara*, ed. Paul Niedermaier (Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 2000); fasc. 2, *Sebeș*, ed. Dan Dumitru Iacob (Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 2004).

³⁵ N. Docan, “Lucrările cartografice despre războiul din 1787-1791” [Cartographic Works on the War of 1787-1791], *AARMSI*, 2nd series, XXXIV (1912): 1249-1360.

ensued. Related to the same topic, in the 1950s, teams of archivists identified numerous town plans concerning the Romanian Principalities in the Russian archives. However, only a few were brought to Romania and used (some are on microfilm at the National Archives).³⁶ Only recently, individual initiatives have resumed the publication of such plans, with the implication of Dan Dumitru Iacob, Laurențiu Rădvan and Mihai Anatolii Ciobanu. Hence, Iași and Bucharest enriched their thesaurus of plans considerably, the oldest being from 1739. This way, the historical research circuit benefits from new and valuable information.³⁷

Numismatic sources are also worth including in this list. Several treasures discovered in towns were published, but they are more relevant for the economic history of the Romanian Principalities, given that the Moldavian and Wallachian towns never minted any coin (except for Cetatea Albă only in the fifteenth century). The most remarkable treasure contains 15,000 silver items from the fourteenth-seventeenth centuries, discovered in 2002 in Iași and published in a volume four years later.³⁸

Concerning the topics, I have already pointed out that contemporary Romanian historiography is still behind the Western one: our specialists are busy covering subjects clarified long ago in other spaces, such as the process of urbanisation, the organisation of urban communities or the nineteenth-century modernisation. This gap is understandable if we consider the Communist caesura.

Due to the archaeological research following the numerous demolitions during the Communist period, material civilisation has represented a point of interest. The same does not go, however, for the last three decades. Aspects related to medieval people's lifestyle, organisation and social relations were no longer of interest except for specific studies. Progress was made concerning the history of buildings, particularly monuments and people (genealogically), but

³⁶ Inventory no. 1022, Collection *Microfilme Rusia*, r. 1-46, 96, Serviciul Arhivelor Naționale Istorice Centrale Bucharest, accessed 18.11.2021 <http://arhivelenationale.ro/site/download/inventare/Microfilme-Rusia.-Rola-1-46.-Inv.-1022.pdf>; I. Ionașcu, "Planul cartografic inedit al orașului București din anul 1770" [The Unpublished Cartographic Plan of the City of Bucharest from 1770], *RdI* XII, no. 5 (1959): 113-131; Gheorghe Ungureanu, "Documente privitoare la istoria românilor păstrate în arhivele statului din Moscova și Leningrad" [Documents Regarding the History of the Romanians Preserved in the State Archives of Moscow and Leningrad], *RA* V, no. 1 (1962): 33-40.

³⁷ Dan Dumitru Iacob, "Harta orașului Iași și a zonei înconjurătoare din 1855" [Map of the City of Jassy and of the Surrounding Area from 1855], *HU* XXVIII (2020): 267-316; the studies published by Laurențiu Rădvan and Mihai Anatolii Ciobanu were reunited recently in the volume: *Planurile orașului Iași în arhive străine (1739-1833) / The City Plans of Iași in Foreign Archives (1739-1833)* (Bucharest, Heidelberg: Dar Publishing & Herlo Verlag, 2020).

³⁸ Virgil Mihailescu-Bîrliba, ed., *The Great Medieval Coin Hoard of Iași (Historical Significance of the Great Medieval Coin Hoard of Iași – 2002)* (Jassy: Institutul European Press, 2006).

neglecting attitudes and mentalities. Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu represents a notable exception through her historical pursuits; her goal was not urban history study, but her endeavours integrate into the topic because she also approaches the realities of the urban or micro-urban life (life in the slums) in the Wallachian towns during the passage from medieval to modern times.³⁹ Dan Dumitru Iacob has carried out similar research, but he focused on the social elite, concentrated mainly in the urban environment in the nineteenth century.⁴⁰ In addition, several research directions concerning the modernisation process in the Romanian space comprise studies that may be considered a part of urban history, while this process has a significant dimension in the urbanisation characterising this region after 1800. Unfortunately, the same exceptions confirm the rule: a lack of interest concerning how the towns passed from an initially medieval base model with an Eastern form to a modern and Western model. Simion Câlția carried out several case studies that would represent a reliable starting point.⁴¹ The Communist period – the most recent part of the secular town history – has become quite late a topic of interest for specialists. Several of them have published research studies in the past few years regarding the industrialization process in Moldavia.⁴²

³⁹ Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu, *În șalvari și cu ișlic: biserică, sexualitate, căsătorie și divorț în Țara Românească a secolului al XVIII-lea* [From Ișlic to Top Hat: Church, Sexuality, Marriage and Divorce in Wallachia of the 18th Century] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2004); Eadem, *Evgheniți, ciocoi, mojici: despre obrazele primei modernități românești, 1750-1860* [Evgheniți, Ciocoi, Mojici: About the Cheeks of the First Romanian Modernity, 1750-1860] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2013); Eadem, *Patimă și desfătare: despre lucrurile mărunte ale vieții cotidiene în societatea românească, 1750-1860* [Passion and Delight: About the Little Things of Everyday Life in Romanian Society, 1750-1860] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2015). For the evolution of a *mahalla* [outskirts], see also Iuliana Brătescu, *Iașii de la jumătatea secolului al XVII-lea până la 1831. Mahalaua Muntenimii* [Jassy from the Middle of the 17th Century until 1831. The Muntenimii Outskirts] (Jassy: Editura Universității Alexandru Ioan Cuza, 2016).

⁴⁰ Dan Dumitru Iacob, *Elitele din Principatele Române în prima jumătate a secolului al XIX-lea. Sociabilitate și divertisment* [The Elites of the Romanian Principalities in the First Half of the 19th Century. Sociability and Entertainment] (Jassy: Editura Universității Alexandru Ioan Cuza, 2015).

⁴¹ Simion Câlția, “Mahalaua, indicator al urbanității” [The Outskirts, Indicator of Urbanity], *RI XXI*, no. 1-2 (2010): 111-122; Idem, “The Debate of Modernization. A Project for Electrification of Bucharest’s Trams in 1899,” *RA LXXXVII*, no. 2 (2010): 100-115; Idem, “The Role of the City Administration in Modernizing Meat Trade (Bucharest, 1879-1938),” *AUB ist.* series LXIII, no. 1 (2014): 27-44, and others.

⁴² Alexandru-Dumitru Aioanei, *Moldova pe coordonatele economiei planificate. Industrializare, urbanizare, inginerii sociale (1944-1965)* [Moldavia on the Coordinates of the Planned Economy. Industrialization, Urbanization, Social Engineering (1944-1965)] (Târgoviște: Cetatea de Scaun, 2019); also, see the studies of Teodor Octavian Gheorghiu on the evolution of historic centers and the effects of systematization, including, recently, *Continuities and Destructions in the Romanian City Centers. Moldavia and Wallachia, 18th - 21st Centuries* (Saarbrücken: Globe Edit, 2017), or of Liliana Iuga, “Oraș istoric, oraș industrial, oraș socialist: Dezbateri pe tema reconstrucției la Iași în

Considering that I discuss topics, the methodology must be outlined, too. I note, in this respect, the perpetuation of classic and positivistic methods related to the story conveyed by sources. The interpretation of sources has focused on closing the gap in the knowledge of the past. These approaches have lacked the interdisciplinary side – more and more specific to contemporary historical research. Specialists have tried to compensate for it in the past two decades. The funding of research projects through grants (projects involving researchers from various areas) enabled progress in this field, too. Historians have collaborated with experts in economic sciences, linguistics, architecture, sociology, but partnerships between specialists are still rare.

The conclusion is that the last 30 years have witnessed a substantial increase in local and urban history research as a natural response to the ideological constraints and orientations enforced during the Communist period. However, the increase has been quantitative and not always qualitative. It is worth noting the lack of systematic research. There is no coherent support from the institutions coordinating the research process in Romania at a central or local, academic or university level. Depending on local management, there has been more consistent support in the museum setting, which may be explained by the object of their activity. The existing initiatives are dominantly individual, and the outputs are inconsistent. As I want to finish on a positive note, I argue that the past three decades represent, nonetheless, the most flourishing period for urban history across a century and a half of history research.

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primele două decenii postbelice” [Historic City, Industrial City, Socialist City: Debates on the Reconstruction of Jassy in the First Two Decades Post-War], *HUXXVII* (2019): 259-277.