

# GEOPOLITICAL ASPECTS OF JEWISH PRESENCE IN THE ROMANIAN PRINCIPALITIES DURING THE MIDDLE AGES

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„Geopolitical aspects of Jewish presence in the Romanian Principalities, during the Middle Ages” is probably one of the very few scientific articles about the geopolitical role of Jewish existence in Romanian territory during the last centuries. Few historians dared to deal with this topic, as it was regarded a very delicate issue. The author is the only geographer that managed to show us some geopolitical aspects regarding the immense role of this ethnic group in the political, economical and social life of the Romanian people during the Middle Ages. Based on various sources of information, and expressing all the facts from a geographical point of view, the author offers us an analytic study of the geopolitical role of Jews who had settled in Romanian territory between XIV<sup>th</sup> and XVIII<sup>th</sup> centuries. Interesting facts are revealed regarding the way Romanian ‘voivodes’ came to the throne and the help they received from the Jews.

**Key words:** Jews, geopolitics, intermediary, trade, Ottoman Empire.

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The Jewish population, present in these territories for hundreds of years, has represented quite an important element in the political and especially in the geopolitical evolution of the Romanian Principalities during the Middle Ages. Some particular features of this population, well as conditions imposed by the political environment of the Romanian Principalities in those times have given the Jewish population a special status. Because of their particular character traits as an ethnic group, so much different from the local Romanian population<sup>1</sup> the Jewish that have arrived and settled here have found a very good way of surviving. Relationships with the local Romanian population, as well as with the ruling class of the two Principalities<sup>2</sup> clearly show the role held by them at royal courts, as well as their evolution regarding the political aspects of the time.

Survival as a community and occupying key positions at Romanian courts and within the Ottoman Empire has been done by certain knowledge of taking advantage of any opportunity created by the political circumstances and skillful finding of niches within the administration. Relations between Moldavian and Walachian Jews will act as a guide pattern of future relations with the Ottoman Empire and will give them a much needed advantage.

The Jews that had settled in the Romanian territories have held different roles in their relations with the Romanian population and especially with the Principality administration. From skilful mediators and natural born diplomats to doctors and clerks, the Jewish people have managed to shape the Geopolitical relations between the Principalities and the Ottoman Empire in a way no one else could have done. Proof of their intelligence, keen observation sense, invincible logic and realistic perspective, their shaping of Geopolitical relations

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<sup>1</sup> For further details we suggest reading the second part of “The Jews in Romania - A Human Geography Survey” by Silviu COSTACHIE, 2004, Bucharest University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Moldavia and Walachia, excluding Transylvania because of it being part of the Hungarian Kingdom, as well as being independent for some time periods.

has had unsuspected consequences throughout the Middle Ages. A particular aspect of Jewish political 'existence' refers to the mediator role that they had between the Romanian rulers and Western Christianity. Because of their keen<sup>3</sup> diplomatic skills, the Jews proved that they could dominate diplomacy, on the basis of their superior education in comparison to the other populations, which gave them the chance to occupy high positions within the Ottoman administration. The Constantinople crises lead to the forming of a coalition against the Ottomans, under the guidance of Venice, which stood as a symbol of resistance against the Ottoman Empire. In 1473 this coalition will try to gain the support of King Stefan Cel Mare and use the Moldavian Principality in the fight against Ottoman expansion. This diplomatic effort was secretly being done by the Jewish mediator Isac-Beg, who held a great role in moving Jewish communities out of Spain and into the Romanian Principalities and the Ottoman Empire, in order to protect them from the Spanish Inquisition.<sup>4</sup>

The Ottoman Empire has proved to be very hospitable to the Jews coming from Spain, not only because the situation could be used as 'propaganda' by the sultan<sup>5</sup>, but also because the Jews could help the Ottomans expand their spiritual, economic and diplomatic influence, helping them enrich their society and better rule the Balkans. The Ottoman

Empire became aware of the fact that using this group of people as diplomats could be helpful, and will extend cultural and economic presence where military establishments cannot be done.

Not only the political, but mainly the economical role played by the Jewish population will be recognized by the rulers of the two Romanian Principalities, who see Jews as a population that provides a lot of opportunities. Moldavian and Walachian rulers were supporting Jews from Moldavia in the XV<sup>th</sup> and XVI<sup>th</sup> centuries as this trade activity helped them pay their tribute to the Ottomans, and also because trade was an important source of income. Some of the money that came from trade was used by Walachian rulers to pay their debt to Jewish money lenders that helped them come to the throne.<sup>6</sup> This source of income will be extremely used by Walachian rulers. The Jews were giving financial support to the ruler not only because of the high interest rate, but also for royal protection offered to the entire Jewish community in the country. Petru Rares is one ruler that borrowed money from Moldavian Jews as well as from Jews in other parts of the Ottoman Empire in order to come to the throne. So did Iancu Sasu, who paid 4.970 Leopoldine golden talers to become king. Some of the Jewish personalities of the time supported the naming of different rulers by influencing the Ottomans, on condition some protection was offered to the Jewish community. It is the case of Josef Nassi an important figure at sultan Selim's court who helped Despot Voda get the throne. Such influent Jews had good knowledge of succession to the thrones of Moldavia and Walachia. Always being well informed about the

<sup>3</sup> We underline the word 'keen' because any mistake when confronting the sultan often ended with severe repression against the whole Jewish community and even death to the initiator. This only comes as a confirmation of their diplomatic abilities.

<sup>4</sup> Neumann V., page 21, quoting from V. Eskenasy's works *Jews, 'Romanians and Ottomans': Some Political aspects of their relations in Moldavia (XV<sup>th</sup>-XVI<sup>th</sup> centuries)*, in the "Romanian Jewish Studies", magazine, I, Jerusalem, 1987, page 7-14.

<sup>5</sup> Showing the world the intolerance of the Catholic religion, and the open character of Islam.

<sup>6</sup> Ciocan, N. (1988).

situation, the Jews who were close to the sultan's court or to the local Ottoman ruler knew long before anyone who has got the biggest chance of coming to the throne. In exchange for a certain protective status offered to the Jewish traders, they offered to support any ruler who claimed the throne.

A strong connection between an influent Jew and a pretender to the throne meant that the person whom the sultan was to appoint had been already decided. In most cases the sultan only confirmed the decision of his Jewish adviser. The Romanian rulers rewarded the Jews for their support at the Ottoman court not only by financial payment<sup>7</sup> but mainly by giving commercial tax relief and religious freedom, which was appreciated by the entire community and not by only one person. Choosing to receive such a reward proves a highly superior way of dealing with the future, in so that it made the local nobility jealous. This confrontation between Jews and non-Jews led to serious trade disruptions and over time competition between Jew and Greek or Armenian traders will surpass the commercial aspect. Greek and Armenian traders will begin to consider their Jew counterparts not only a competitor but also a possible danger regarding the relationship Jews were having with the rulers. In 1492, Vladislav the 2<sup>nd</sup> of Hungary, will send two letters to the city councils of Sibiu and Brasov supporting the Jewish cause<sup>8</sup>. This was a lost competition for the Greek and Armenian traders in favour of the Jews not only in Walachia, but also in Moldavia. The only area where the Greeks and the Armenians managed to maintain their trade supremacy, although they never reached the same level as the Jews, was the Walachian region close to the river Danube.

<sup>7</sup> though sometimes also present in huge amounts...

<sup>8</sup> Neumann, V. ... quoted works , page 27.

In 1476 King Stefan cel Mare of Moldavia will use the arrested Jewish traders to justify his campaign against sultan Mehmet the 2<sup>nd</sup> (1451 – 1481), which will only be ended at Valea Alba battle (July, 24<sup>th</sup> 1476). This information appears in the 15<sup>th</sup> document of 'Records and testimonies concerning Jews in Romania', volume I, page 14 as well as in Turkish chronicles by Elia ben Elkana Capsali in 1523: "and they turned against the Turks – among them was the ruler of Great Walachia – Stefan cel Mare. It was the time Jewish traders came to Walachia. The ruler kept them arrested for three days. On the third day, after being tormented, the king asked for money in exchange of their freedom, threatening them with shameful punishment. He took everything they owned causing great pain to the one who had no money. When the Constantinople Jews found out they went straight to the sultan screaming: help us our king, we are thy subjects, how can the lord of Walachia make us his subjects?

The sultan's answer was: "I shall get my revenge on the Walachians when God will send Zuchaz-Zan<sup>9</sup>...". Thus, the Jews were becoming a reason for Ottoman intervention in Moldavia and a factor that will lead to an anti-Ottoman movement in the two Romanian Principalities. Any repression against the Jews was a form of rebellion against the Turkish rule in a time when Jews were considered as representatives of the Ottoman Empire<sup>10</sup>. Such repression acts became violent as they were meant to make a religious cleansing due to the fact that non-Christian population was considered an

<sup>9</sup> the sultan of the White Lamb Turkish state, Uzun Hassan (1453-1478) who fought Mehmet the 2<sup>nd</sup>, together with King Stefan cel Mare.

<sup>10</sup> go to document 84, on page 64, of "Records and testimonies concerning Jews in Romania", vol. I, about Mihai Viteazul.

anomaly. This is the case of King Mihai Viteazul and some other rulers, though the population did not share the same opinion. Ordinary people did not think Jews were any danger to them as Orthodox religion proved to be quite tolerant. Jews were not a threat to the people, but mainly to the local traders, who used religious differences to mask commercial interest. Getting rid of Jewish trade competition meant Greek and Armenian traders could regain their previous markets, and for the local nobility this meant receiving presents from the new traders<sup>11</sup>.

Jews will be regarded as an accepted, friendly and sometimes a too protected population. A turning point in the existence of the Jewish community in the territories of the Romanian Principalities is the year 1495. The Jews that escaped the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal are well received in Constantinople, helping to build the local armory (guns) industry which was very much appreciated by the sultan and thus reach high positions in the Ottoman administration and getting involved in the relations between the Principalities and the Ottomans. Mircea Ciobanul (1545-1554 si 1558-1559), Patrascu cel Bun (1554-1557), Petru cel Tanar (1559-1568), Petru Cercel (1583-1585) si Mihai Viteazul (1593-1601) are among the kings that came to the throne with financial help from the Jews<sup>12</sup>. One way of rewarding Jewish help was to give them full control over the river Danube customs, so that they could establish their own taxes. Jewish and Turkish customs officers obtained large sums of money<sup>13</sup> from the river crossing tax in the Danube region at Giurgiu County.

This fact can surely be related to the writings of a German traveller who described his voyage through Walachia and mentioned the Danube customs which were controlled by Ottoman Jews. Apart from the tax the Jews collected at the customs office, they were also given the chance to be the first who heard the news or any other important information and took advantage of this for the wellbeing of the entire Jewish community. Another benefit of controlling the customs was that it proved to be very easy to escape from the country in case of any danger.<sup>13</sup>

The Geopolitical role of the Jews was far more important than their number in comparison to the locals; the Jews managed to maintain this role on the basis of their skills and not on their numbers. It was not a large number of Jews the thing that ensured their survival, but the key positions they occupied. Most times, Jews took advantage of their positions by getting protection for the entire community and not just for themselves. The importance of the community surpassed that of the individual, whose only chance of survival was within the community.

Being advantaged by the Ottomans, because of trade interests, the Jews were a much needed alternative to the Greek trade monopoly. The merge of Romanian and Jewish goals and interest is greatly described in Professor Constantin Rezachevici 's 1995 article, called "Jews in Romanian territories during the Middle Ages", of 'Magazin istoric', number 10, page 63 who said: '...only protestant Holland offered the same kind of freedom that the Romanian Principalities offered to the Jews in the

<sup>11</sup> go to document number 89 and number 90, page 68, of "Records and testimonies concerning Jews in Romania" vol.I.

<sup>12</sup> "A history of Romanian Jews in facts and figures", volume I, page 101.

<sup>13</sup> according to the minorit monk Petru Bogdan Baksić wrote while travelling through Walachia.

VII<sup>th</sup> century...”. Indeed, the presence of Jews in these territories helped improve the Romanian society of the time at least from the geopolitical point of view. The influence of their presence will

be noticed along the following centuries shaping Romanian Geopolitics in the last 3 centuries continuing the story of Jewish existence on these lands.

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