

On the Beginnings of Târgoviște Town

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Abstract: Our study is concerned with the early evolution of Târgoviște town, from an old exchange place situated in a favorable geographic environment, on Ialomița River, in the boundary area connecting the Subcarpathian hills and the plain, to the future capital of the Medieval State Walachia, following Câmpulung town and Argeș town. On the one hand, this evolution was influenced mainly by the activity related to the commercial road that united Central Europe to Lower Danube, via Brăila, the commercial road having as main landmark the very town of Târgoviște. On the other hand, the subsequent installation of the Princely Court and of the Saxon colonists of Transylvania stimulated decisively the development of this settlement according to specific urban coordinates, as it is highlighted by the documents of the time.

Résumé : Notre étude a pour objet l'évolution de la ville de Târgoviște à ses débuts, d'un ancien endroit d'échange – située dans un cadre géographique favorisant, sur la rivière de Ialomița, dans la zone de contact entre les collines subcarpatiques et la plaine – à la future capitale de l'Etat médiéval Țara Românească (la Valachie), suivant une voie similaire, donc, à celle des villes de Câmpulung et Argeș. D'un côté, cette évolution a été influencée, avant tout, par la mise en fonction de la route commerciale qui liait l'Europe Centrale au Danube inférieur (via Brăila), cette route ayant comme repère principal en Valachie justement la ville de Târgoviște. De l'autre côté, l'installation ultérieure de la Cour princière et des colonisateurs saxons de Transylvanie ici a stimulé de manière décisive le développement de ce habitat suivant des coordonnées spécifiquement urbaines, mises en évidence par les documents du temps.

The future capital of Walachia developed, as its name suggests (E. Fruchter, G. Mihăescu, 1976: 93-101), from an ancient exchange place. The favoring geographic factor – which in fact assured the inhabiting of the territory of the medieval habitat, at least in Suseni sector, starting with the first centuries of the first millennium (L. Oancea, 1976: 55-74; L. Muscă, T. I. Muscă, 1980-1981: 101-116) – was joined as well by the significant economic benefits coming from the activity of the first Walachian commercial road, on the route Brașov-Rucăr-Câmpulung-Cetatea Dâmboviței-Târgoviște-Brăila.

The ideal position of Târgoviște, on the trajectory of this important segment of the great international commercial road joining Central Europe to Lower Danube, which became functional in the 6th-7th decennia of the 14th century (under special circumstances, described previously) will soon create the premises for the evolution of this habitat towards a better status, that of *permanent market town*, hosting not only significant exchange activities, but also important artisan trades (G. Mihăescu, 1979: 522-523; Gh. I. Cantacuzino, 1982: 225-233). Moreover, the archeological research undertaken during the last decennia (Gh. I. Cantacuzino, 2005: 219-220; P.-V., Diaconescu, 2005: 99-121) confirmed the gradual extension of the habitat, which, starting from the initial core, represented by Suseni area

(L. Muscă, 1998: 7-31), situated in the northern zone of the site, will integrate as well parts of the southern area, subsequently leading to the appearance of the “*târgul de jos*” (“downhill market town”) (M. Oproiu, 1978-1979: 443-449; 1976: 129-133).

All these evolutions, attested archeologically and by documents, have been influenced by the early installation, at the moment when the international transit road became active, *in the area later occupied by the Princely Court*, of an administrative control point, defended by a large *trench*, of considerable dimensions¹⁵. Maybe these very circumstances made it possible to erect, right here, an impressive civil construction, considered to be “the oldest urban dwelling from the Romanian area, known so far” (N. Constantinescu, C. Ionescu, 1980: 57-58), with a rich numismatic inventory, dating before the year 1394¹⁶.

By the novelty of the way how it was built – two-storied, with tiled stove – but also by the exceptional ceramic material discovered inside it, this dwelling, belonging most likely to *an official* (P.-V. Diaconescu, 2005: 104-105) with delegated authority, controlling the custom-house activity¹⁷ – appears to “illustrate the passage of this locality from the market-town stage to the incipiently urban stage”, namely the transition, for the first time in Târgoviște, “from the rural dwelling, the hut, to the urban, two-storied dwelling” (P.-V. Diaconescu, 2005: 104-105).

Actually, the respective dwelling “represents the prototype following which, at the beginning of the 15th century, appear the urban dwellings with cellar, which are bigger and more carefully built, which disappear as well in a fire, but not in 1394, but half a century later, during the conflicts of the rulers Vlad Dracul and Vlad Țepeș with the Ottoman armies.” From this perspective, it marks “a stage of better quality in the history of this settlement: *the town.*” (P.-V. Diaconescu, 2005: 104-105).

The aspect of this settlement was, just as during the following centuries, elongated along the right terrace of Ialomița river, the buildings being placed on one side and the other of the Big Street (*Ulița Mare*), the main crossroads being situated in front of the administrative and customs point located on the territory of the future Princely Court. From this point left, westwards, the *road of Câmpulung*, and also a secondary artery that led to the permanent market, situated in the north, towards the initial core of the future private residence. Southwards, the settlement was delimited by the churches *Sfântul Ioan*, *Stelea*

¹⁵ The trench was discovered recently, in 1999, and, if subsequent researches confirm it, it might be „the oldest urban medieval fortification south of the Carpathians”. According to the author of this discovery, “this constructive effort was obviously the result of a local military force, at a moment when the administration had probably moved from Cetățeni to Târgoviște, during a stage when the young Walachian State was extending itself southwards and eastwards - it may have been a control point of *the road of Câmpulung* and of the neighboring land” (P.-V. Diaconescu, 2005: 103).

¹⁶ “The town of the 14th century records a moment of destruction by general fire, the houses and all the other households being burnt; substantial traces of the fire have been found around them up to a certain distance. The moment was dated using coins emitted by Mircea the Old (Mircea cel Bătrân) during the first part of his reign, and by Srațimir, the tsar from Vidin. It corresponds chronologically to the preying and plundering of Baiazid Ildîrîm on the occasion of the battle of Rovine which took place on October 10, 1394, when a series of settlements from Walachia became the victim of the Azaps and Akîngs. The interpretation of this massive fire that took place at the scale of the town, which troubled its existence, shows that Baiazid’s action corresponds to the archeological reality of the whole town.” (C. Ionescu, 1983: 65).

¹⁷ The *early* existence of a customs house in Târgoviște is confirmed by the act emitted on August 6, 1413, following the order of the reigning prince Mircea. So, in the privilege act given to the merchants of Brașov, which mentions very clearly the stages covered by the merchants on their *way to Brăila*, including the custom taken in *Târgoviște*, the reigning prince mentions that he was renewing and consolidating in this way “the privileges they had had *from the ancestors of my reign*, concerning the custom, in the market towns of the country of my reign and on the road of Brașov, up to Brăila” (*DRH*, D, I, 1977: 198).

Veche (P. Diaconescu, C. Ionescu, 1979: 353-366)¹⁸, *Sf. Nicolae Geartoglu*¹⁹, westwards by the churches *Târgului*, *Sfinții Voievozi* and *Nicolae-Andronești*²⁰, and northwards by the permanent market place (*târgul de sus*, the future *Bărăției* market place) and by the Roman-Catholic church dedicated to *Saint Mary* built by the Saxon merchants from Transylvania (R. Gioglovan, 1978-1979: 141-173).

“The market town’s area was marked by two axes, the long one oriented SE-NW, which had no more than 700 m, and the short one, oriented SW-NE, which did not go beyond 200-250 m, this width being recorded only in the area of the Princely Court (measured on the old road of Câmpulung), occupying a surface of about 15 ha, of which 7-8 ha inside the above-mentioned trench.” (P.-V. Diaconescu, 2005: 103).

But, the extended limits of the town included, nevertheless, *Suseni* neighborhood, whose situation is special. Though it represents the area where the oldest traces of habitation of Târgoviște area were discovered, they preserve their rural character until late in the 15th century, when next to traditional huts appear the first urban dwellings, which are two-storied and have tiled stoves²¹.

However, at the passage between the 14th and the 15th century, after 1394, when the settlement is set on fire by the Turks, yet before its *status of capital* is attested²²–, the reigning prince Mircea the Old (Mircea cel Bătrân) will install a *Princely Court* at Târgoviște (N. Constantinescu, 1987: 69-78; Gh. I. Cantacuzino, 1999: 127-154; 2001: 222-232), decisively stimulating the ascending evolution of the settlement situated on the bank of Ialomița River, which was back then undergoing a full process of consolidation of its urban structures. This happened in a particular historical context:

On the one hand, the enormous pressure exerted by the Ottomans on Bulgaria had determined the *submission* of the brothers Șişman and Srațimir, to the country of Târnovo and Vidin, respectively in 1388, and 1390. *On the other hand*, the fact that king Sigismund of Luxemburg (1387-1437) becomes king of Hungary means as well the continuation of the policy of catholic infiltration in the Balkans, practiced obstinately by his predecessor Louis le Grand. Consequently, Sigismund requires the submission of the tsar Șişman to the Hungarian crown and the latter accepts to start some secret negotiations. Finding out about it, the sultan

¹⁸ It is about a wooden church, on a base of bricks, whose dimensions are of 6×14 m, built during the second half of the 14th century. It has been considered that the church had a special importance, given the fact that here were buried some important characters, in tombs covered with gravestones (C. Ionescu, 1985: 40).

¹⁹ The archeological diggings that took place in 1988-1989 proved the existence of a wooden church that preceded the *Nicolae-Geartoglu* church made of bricks. Moreover, outside was found as well a half-buried hut, on whose floor was found a treasure made up of 290 coins, which were seriously burnt, belonging to the first monetary emission of the reigning prince Mircea, which ceases in 1394. This confirmed both the generalized fire that happened in 1394, and the existence of a first church whose presence is certain in the 14th century (P.-V. Diaconescu, 2005: 105).

²⁰ It was noticed that, except for the Market Town’s Church (*Biserica Târgului*), whose moment of construction was impossible to grasp precisely (before or after 1394), all the churches mentioned above have, as a first building stage, a wooden structure (P.-V. Diaconescu, 2005: 103).

²¹ See the dwelling discovered near *Sfântul Gheorghe Church*, “having belonged, of course, to some wealthy townsman” and dating from the end of the 15th century (G. Mihăescu, 1980-1981: 117-134).

²² Here, we refer to the famous paragraph of Johann Schiltberger’ travelogue: participant in the battle of Nicopole, he remembers that he was “in Walachia, in its two capitals which are called Agrich (Argeș) and Türkoich (Târgoviște)” (*Călători străini despre țările române / Foreign travelers on the Romanian Countries*, I, 1968: 30). If the identification of the second town as being Târgoviște is non-equivocal, and all the specialists agree about it, the data when Schiltberger could have noticed this reality remains a subject for discussion. This is because the Bavarian author crossed the Romanian territory twice: firstly, on his way to Nicopole, in 1396, and secondly when he returned from prison, about 1427. If some historians, like M. Holban (*Călători străini despre țările române*, I, 1968: 27), opted for the variant of his passing through Târgoviște on the occasion of his first trip, others considered that it was possible as well that the respective story might be related to the moment of his return from his long Asian pilgrimage (Gh. I. Cantacuzino, 1970: 101).

Baiazid decides, however, to make central Bulgaria disappear, which happens quite rapidly, in the summer of 1393 (A. Decei, 1978: 61-62).

During the respective campaign, the fall of Târnova and Nicopole was followed by the siege and conquering of Silistra, which had previously been the possession of the Walachian reigning prince, Mircea cel Bătrân²³. Reacting violently to this loss, the reigning prince from Argeș will attack and destroy, during the period following immediately after this event, the groups of Akîngis from *Karinovasi*, at the southern foot of the Balkan Mountains, the Turkish chronicles abundantly reflecting the echoes of this expedition (A. Decei, 1978: 62).

As a consequence of Mircea's "cheeky" behavior, the sultan Baiazid will set out personally against Walachia, in the autumn of 1394. Without going further into the details of this controversial campaign (P. P. Panaitescu, 2000: 297-230), we will content ourselves with noting, here, its main consequences: the coming of Vlad "the Usurper" ("*Uzurpatorul*") in Argeș and the setting on fire of Târgoviște.

We consider that the burning of the settlement itself - while other towns, like Argeș or Câmpulung were spared - denotes the fact that in that conjuncture it had the quality of main residence of the reigning prince Mircea²⁴, whose northern parts of the *country* had been stolen, but who had remained, yet, master of the territories situated east of Dâmbovița. The fact is confirmed by the provisions of the treaty of Brașov, from March 7, 1395, where Mircea cel Bătrân guaranteed to Sigismund of Luxemburg and his armies "free, peaceful and secure passage, as well as adequate food" in the event of organizing an anti-Turkish campaign "in the area of Dobrotici or in any other lands, walled towns, counties, gorges, ports or any other places *submitted to our mastership and obeying us* (our underlining)" (*DRH*, D, I, 1977: 140-141)²⁵.

After the removal from the throne, in 1397, of Vlad *the Usurper* (P. P. Panaitescu, 2000: 330-332), and the association to his reign of his son, Mihail²⁶, the reigning prince Mircea will return to Argeș, allowing his son to reside in *the second capital* of the country: Târgoviște.

"The situation of Mihail was subordinated to his father, he was not an associate with equal rights. But he had some special mission, maybe a part of the army was under his command and had a different residence than his father. Mircea was living in Argeș, the old capital: almost all his chronicles are dated from this town (...), it is probable that the great reigning prince died in Argeș as well, not far across the hills from Cozia monastery, which houses his body for eternity. In exchange, Mihail was living in Târgoviște, the commercial town that held, on the valleys of Ialomița and Dâmbovița, the commerce with Brașov through the pass of Bran. The document mentioning him as associate to the reign is dated from Târgoviște (...) *from the town of my reign itself* (*DRH*, B, I, 1966: 84). Târgoviște is therefore Mihail's town, the place where he had his own court...

After Mircea's death, Mihail did not move to the ancient princely court from Argeș,

²³ In the act of January 20, 1390, Mircea called himself "reigning prince of Walachia, duke of Făgăraș and Amlaș, administrator of Severin, ruler of the lands of Dobrotici and *reigning prince of Dârstor*" (*DRH*, D, I, 1977: 122).

²⁴ The fact is fully confirmed in Schiltberger's memories, who had passed, in 1396, through the two capitals of Walachia, "*called Agrich (Argeș) and Türkoich (Târgoviște)*".

²⁵ Even P. P. Panaitescu highlighted the fact that "*This alliance treaty shows interesting facts and situations.*" So, "reminding the Romanian forces that are to take part in the battle and especially mentioning *the lands of Dobrotici (pârțile lui Dobrotici)* is a proof that *Mircea was not a runaway in Ardeal, but was holding his army in the east, and some of the towns of Dobrogea were still bearing his name*" (2000: 309).

²⁶ The moment when Mihail becomes associated to the reign of his father is still a controversial topic for the Romanian historiography (P. P. Panaitescu, 2000: 63).

but continued to stay in his new court from Târgoviște²⁷. After him, there remained here, in the richer town, placed on the great commercial road, other reigning princes. *This explains the change of the capital of the country from Argeș to Târgoviște*” (P. P. Panaitescu, 2000: 64-65)²⁸.

The fact that the princely court was established in Târgoviște will attract, just as we have highlighted, “first of all the great boyards (landlords), which were part of the princely council, and then other princely assistants and servants, who, moving next to the reigning prince, contributed to the improvement of the town and at the same time, increased its population. In order to satisfy the demands of the Princely Court (...) in the new capital come and settle down artisans, merchants and numerous townspeople, which in turn will attract the intensification of the economic activity” (C. Moisescu, 1979: 11).

Fully in agreement with the facts highlighted so far, we should mention, as a special event, the settling of the Saxon *guests* from Transylvania in Târgoviște, in the area later known as *Fundătura Brașovului*, immediately near *târgul de sus (Bărăției market place)*. The contribution, both material and spiritual, of this population to the affirmation of the urban character of Târgoviște town is undisputable. So, beside bringing with them their specific economic preoccupations, the new-comers will also have a decisive contribution to the improvement of the architectonic aspect of the capital situated on Ialomița river (R. Gioglovan, 1978-1979: 141-173).

A special positive influence concerning the stimulation of the economic potential of Târgoviștei will go to the setting up, here, by Mircea cel Bătrân, of a unique custom house meant for the commerce practiced by the people from Lvov - in the privilege act of 1403, renewed in 1409, the Walachian reigning prince addresses the merchants “from the country of the father and brother of my reign, Vladislav, and from the country of the brother of my reign, the great prince Vitold”, who *will pay custom only in Târgoviște*, where they sell their merchandises; the reigning prince claimed the right to be the first one to buy from their merchandises what he needed for his court, then they would be free to go anywhere, from the gangways of Danube to the passes of the mountains (P. P. Panaitescu, 2000: 120-121).

A natural consequence of all these evolutions is the fact that Târgoviște appears in the document of 1417-1418 as a fully constituted *town*: the act is emitted by Mihail, as associate reigning prince (“...Ioan Mihail voievod, fiul preadulcelui Io Mircea, binecredinciosului și de Hristos iubitorului și *singur stăpânitorului*, marelui voievod...” reigning prince Ioan Mihail, son of the very sweet reigning prince Mircea, the faithful, Christ-loving and *only reigning prince...*), *from his princely court and his princely town* (“*din însăși casa domniei mele și din însuși orașul domniei mele*”) (DRH, B, I, 1966: 84).

²⁷ See the document of June 22, 1418 (DRH, B, I, 1966: 86-88).

²⁸ Going over this reasoning again, L. Rădvan mentioned, recently, the essential landmarks of the above-mentioned process: “In the multiple princely court system of the country, the reigning prince preferred a main residence, generally orienting himself towards that court that held a favorable geographic and strategic position. Because of the extension of Walachia towards south-east, Argeș town lost the favorable position it had held previously, being too close to the mountains and to Transylvania, but too far from the Danube. Under these circumstances, naturally, from the beginning of the 15th century, the reigning prince preferred a residence situated more towards the center of the country, a condition met by Târgoviște, as its connections with all the other parts of the country were better assured and its administrative position was better as well. This geographic position, to which we can add the economic interests (the fact that Târgoviște was situated on an important commercial road) and the political interests, will determine, after Mircea cel Bătrân, the choice of this town as the country’s main princely residence” (2004 : 487).

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