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## BOOK REVIEWS

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### A GLIMPSE INTO THE PAST OF A GYPSY COMMUNITY: THE RUDARI OF SOUTH-EAST EUROPE

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#### ABSTRACT

*Gypsy history is a field of research in which it is still necessary to make use of more or less known archival sources in order to fill a number of gaps in our knowledge of the past of this community. In the following lines, we propose an evaluation of a recent volume that investigates in detail the past of the Rudari community. The detailed analysis of archival sources and the inter-disciplinary approach to the problem make it possible to gain a new vision of a community whose past seemed difficult to understand.*

**Keywords:** Rudari, Gypsies, slavery, book review.

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Julieta Rotaru and David Gaunt offer readers and researchers interested in Gypsy history an original approach to the origins of the group identified as “Rudari” or “Boyash” in the volume “The Wallachian Gold-Washers. Unlocking the Golden Past of the Rudari Woodworkers”, Brill, 2023.

Gypsy historiography in Europe, with very few exceptions, usually oscillates between fantastical accounts lacking a documentary basis, reconstructions of old accounts and speculative interpretations pushed to extremes using truncated historical sources or excessively ideologized. The history of gypsies in Europe is written with great difficulty, primarily due to the spatial spread of archival sources and the fact that they are written in a patchwork of languages reflecting the migration of these people over a long period. The difficulty of approaching the history of a pan-European and at the same time marginal people with few references in historical sources has made overview works difficult to compile, such as Angus Frazer’s<sup>343</sup>, a synthesis volume that has not yet been equaled – but which at the same time needs a consistent updating to bring it in line with the research carried during the more than 30 years since its publication. For Eastern Europe we

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<sup>343</sup> Angus Frazer, *The Gypsies*, Blackwell, 1992.

have the volume by the Romanian historian Viorel Achim<sup>344</sup>, who has produced an impressive synthesis of the history of the gypsies in Romania, based on archival sources and narrative sources. The volume “The Wallachian Gold-Washers. Unlocking the Golden Past of the Rudari Woodworkers” follows on from these works and, although it appears to deal with a relatively narrow issue – the question of the origins of a particular group – it manages to reveal the development over time of some general problems that have affected the gypsies in Eastern Europe.

## 2. SOUTH-EAST EUROPE’S RUDARI

The starting point of Julieta Rotaru and David Gaunt’s investigation is the mystery of the groups called “Rudari” or “Boyash”, which are present all-over South-Eastern Europe: a marginal population whose assumed name is related to mining, but who by the time their presence was reported in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were no longer mining but were already engaged in the manufacture of small wooden household objects such as spoons. Referred to as “Gypsies” by the neighboring populations, these marginal groups reject this identification as speakers of an archaic variant of the Romanian language – indeed, Gypsy-speaking Roma call them “Romanians”. Rotaru and Gaunt re-mapped the presence of these groups at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by researchers such as Gustav Weigand, Emil Petrovici and Ion Gheție. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ion Calotă’s research revealed that the “Rudari” were gold-washing gypsies who had adopted the Romanian language. Thede Kahl’s 2016 research analyzing the Rudari of Greece, Hungary, Serbia, Ukraine and Republic of Moldova shows that they are Romanian-speaking populations with no contact with the Romanian space and who share many similarities, proposing an origin in a wider area where gold-gathering gypsies from rivers have been historically attested: Oltenia, Banat, Transylvania. From a linguistic point of view, there are no attested traces of Romani in the dialects spoken by the populations of Rudari in the countries around Romania, the dialectal differences are due to contact with the language of the countries where they are currently found.

Earlier ethnographic research inventoried by Rotaru and Gaunt also reveals continuing confusion about the origins and identity of groups designated as “Rudari”. Thus, Paul Bataillard notes that in the mid-nineteenth century, the shift from gold gathering to other trades led to confusion as to the origins of the various groups analyzed.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Martin Block noted the same differentiation: Romanians called the Rudari gypsies, the Rudari rejected this identification, and the gypsies rejected the association with the Rudari. A specific element of these groups was the fact that the Rudari did not live-in tents but preferred to live in huts. In the same period, Ion Chelcea’s investigations have outlined a map of the spread of the Rudars in Wallachia and their customs.

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<sup>344</sup> Viorel Achim, *Țigani în istoria României [The Gypsies in the History of Romania]*, Bucharest, Encyclopedic Publishing House, 1998.

### 3. HISTORY OF EMIGRATION

An extensive exploration of the historical sources allows Rotaru and Gaunt to place the emigration of the Rudari from Wallachia to the neighboring territories during the Habsburg Empire's rule over Oltenia between 1718-1739. During this period, the Austrians attempted an administrative reform of this territory, and the activity of gold-gathering from the rivers particularly attracted their attention. A series of legal conflicts between the local people and the Cozia Monastery, which had owned this group of people since the 14<sup>th</sup> century, favored their emigration, along with the beginning of the depletion of the gold-bearing sand in the region. In this context, the history of gold extraction from the rivers of Wallachia from ancient times until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the organization of this activity as a monopoly of the sovereign of the country and its entrusting to the sovereign's servants or monasteries, the most important of which was the Cozia Monastery, is described. It is worth mentioning here that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the gypsies mentioned in various sources in the Banat region under Habsburg rule were also involved in collecting gold from the rivers.

Probably the most interesting and important chapters of this book refer to the systematization of the ethnonyms under which the Rudari, who are spread today in several South-Eastern European countries, have been known over time, as well as to the evolution of the terms used in Wallachia to describe the legal status of slavery to which the gypsies were subjected between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. On the basis of extensive documentation, Rotaru and Gaunt establish the chronological evolution of the ethnonyms attributed to this population: *aurar* – *zlătar* – *rudar* – *băieș* – *lingurar*; the first of these emphasizing the community's involvement in gold mining, the last representing a mutation from the late 18<sup>th</sup> to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, marking the exhaustion of the gold-bearing sands and the transition to another occupation, given that the name "*lingurar*" appears to be attributed to these communities precisely during this period. The argument is a convincing one, considering a temporal evolution in terms of space, linguistic and economic changes.

The extensive analysis of the evolution of the term "*rob/ robie*" (slave/ slavery) in the Romanian Middle Ages uses a wide range of historical sources, from Bible translations and legal sources to property documents. We are dealing here with a highly complex historical analysis, covering a historical period of several centuries and involving transformations of terms from the Slavic and Romanian languages. Slavery as an institution is explained in Romanian historical documents quite late and differentiated from other social or ethnic categories. Until the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Wallachia, the term "*rob*" had the exclusive meaning of submission to the divinity or referred to prisoners of war or civilians captured by invading armies.

The ambiguity of the social-legal term *rob* in the sense of slave in relation to the other meanings of the term in documents from Wallachia makes it difficult to render the social-legal reality through translation and what was intended for each document, especially if we also consider the evolution of terms over time. In general, the term "*gypsy*" was preferred for the designation of slaves of South Danubian origin in the documents of the Romanian Middle Ages.

These two chapters prove to be extremely useful for understanding the conflict between the Rudari and the Cozia Monastery that started in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. At the end of the fourteenth century, the voievod Mircea the Elder had donated to Cozia Monastery 300 gypsy families who were slaves of the monastery and who were mainly engaged in collecting gold from the rivers. After 1718, the Austrian administration of Oltenia imposed a change in the status of the Cozia's Rudari, who were subordinated to the imperial authorities because of their gold-gathering, and at the same time they were allowed to emigrate to Banat to collect gold from the rivers. A description of this community in Banat in 1774 shows that in summer they collected gold from the rivers, while during the winter they made wooden spoons. After the return of Oltenia to Wallachia, the Rudari were again placed under the authority of the Cozia Monastery, which sparked their protests and a legal dispute, which was eventually lost.

#### 4. FROM GOLD PICKERS TO SPOON MAKERS

It was not until 1832 that the Rudari were released from the property of the Cozia Monastery, but already at that time the depletion of the gold in the river sand was noted in several official documents. The loss of their traditional occupation and their transfer to occupations such as woodworking or agriculture, which brought them into direct contact with Romanian peasants and competition for resources, triggered several conflicts in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The origin of the migration of the Rudari in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is thus identified in the conditions of the Austrian occupation of Oltenia. The conflict with the Cozia Monastery explains the rejection of the slave status associated with the term "gypsy", as the Rudari migrated to other Habsburg provinces and permanently rejected the term "gypsy", which they understood as "slave". The 1838 census records 800 families of Rudari (the term used to designate both occupation and ethnicity) in Wallachia, 300 of whom were gold gatherers from the rivers, the rest made wooden spoons; this was the moment of transition from the traditional occupation to a new occupation.

The historical investigation by Rotaru and Gaunt thus clarifies the uncertainties surrounding the origin and past of the Rudari communities in south-eastern Europe, primarily the conflict between their ethnonym, which comes from an old Slavic word for mining, and their recent occupation as wooden spoon makers. The extended analysis of the evolution of the terms that designated slavery in the Romanian Middle Ages will certainly be useful for any further studies that will deal with this topic. Last but not least, it is worth mentioning that the present volume contains a collection of Romanian historical documents relating to the Rudari community translated into English.

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