

Sorin Grigoruță

Diseases, epidemics and health care in Moldavia

(1700-1831)

Abstract

The diseases, epidemics and health care, be it public or private, are to the Romanian historiographic area still insufficiently examined topics, but they can provide important cues for the overall understanding of the Moldavian society of the eighteenth century. Diseases have always had an obvious importance into people's lives, but taking into consideration the individual, almost anonymous aspect of suffering, the testimonies that have been preserved are relatively few, dissipated in various types of sources. Therefore, one can feel the lack of solid contributions on this topic in the published literature.

This is the reason for which we propose that this doctoral thesis be an analysis of the way in which Moldavian society has constructed the understanding of disease and what its forms of response were. Even if in most cases diseases and their immediate consequences, bodily sufferings, have been considered "disruptive elements", we hold that a thorough analysis can often highlight the essential features of communities, and the "morbid event" may be the privileged means which enables a good observation of the administrative mechanisms, religious practices or relations of power in a particular context¹.

Such an approach is the more important, because the most part of the Romanian historiography on the history of medicine has been written from an institutional and biographic perspective, by doctors interested in history rather than historians per se. This explains the concentration of works published on topics relating to institutions - the emergence of the hospital and the development of medical education - as well as on topics related to the life and activity of doctors certified in the two Romanian Provinces. Undoubtedly, the institutional and the biographical approaches have not been exhausted, as the history of many institutions and the lives of many practitioners have not been analysed - centrally and, especially, locally - but also because, in both cases, other methodologies can be employed, methodologies that would offer new interpretation paradigms to the information known so far.

¹ Jacques Revel, Jean-Pierre Peter, *Le Corps. L'homme malade et son histoire*, in *Faire de l'histoire*, volume III, *Nouveaux objets*, edited by Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora, Gallimard, 1974, pp. 172-173; François-Olivier Touati, *Maladie et société au Moyen Âge. La lèpre, les lépreux et les léproseries dans la province ecclésiastique de Sens jusqu'au milieu du XIV^e siècle*, De Boeck Université, 1998, p. 11.

The exploration is decidedly influenced by the availability of sources; be they office records or simple deeds, the evidence preserved from the period is remarkably scarce in what concerns people's bodily ailments. Therefore we were forced to analyse a rich corpus of documents in order to obtain a minimal amount of information regarding to "what was ailing" the Moldavians of the eighteenth century. Documentary sources will thus form the basis of this dissertation. We have opted for their primacy because we did not wish to replicate the examples used by predecessors, but only where necessary, and mostly out of the need to fill the gaps and to clarify the ambiguities in the historiography of this topic. To the detriment of our own interpretations or of simple paraphrases, we often preferred not to encumber the document's "voice", especially in the case of unpublished testimonies, thus preserving glimpses of the spirit of the age.

This also explains the configuration of this dissertation, and the structural dimensions of its components, which will proportionally follow the amount of information discovered. We designed the work into four chapters. The first chapter is dedicated to diseases and epidemics, while the following three are grouping the two types of health care exerted in the Moldavian area within the researched period of time: the individual type (chapters 2 and 3), and the public, institutional type (chapter 4).

With the primary goal of analysing and describing the conception of diseases, endemic or epidemic, in the eighteenth century Moldavia, the first chapter, *Diseases and epidemics in Moldavia (1700-1831)*, firstly identifies the main ailments that affected the lives of Moldavians. We did not set ourselves though to accomplish their exhaustive enumeration and neither a biological analysis, but rather we have presented the social, economical and demographic effects of diseases. Discussing the sufferings of Moldavians two centuries ago proves to be a very difficult endeavour in itself, for the reason that those people have had completely different priorities than writing testimonies regarding the diseases that might have affected their existence, and when they did so - having to justify their absence from a trial or the impossibility to fulfil a behest - they used to come down to the simple mention that they were sick, without specifying the type of disease, its intensity or duration. Withal, some considerations can be made after analysing fragments of sources that make mention of physical ailments of the inhabitants of this lands. While being healthy was a gift of "God's mercy", the disease and suffering seem to have had the same origin, coming not only from a merciful, but chiefly just God, that wouldn't have left the sins of men unpunished. And because "the wages of sin is death", the important passageway is often prefaced by physical suffering. And this idea gained momentum especially in the context of the major plague

epidemics that have affected Moldavia, taking away so many lives. We tried not to limit ourselves to discussing only the plague, and we presented some examples of other infectious diseases, namely pox, fever and syphilis, diseases which Moldavians will have silently paid their dues to.

Throughout the eighteenth century and for the first decades of the next century, plague remained a constant life-threatening disease for the inhabitants of Moldavia. Starting from plentiful documentary sources, published and unpublished, together with descriptions stored in pages of chronicles and the few remaining memories of the epoch, we followed the emergence and evolution of epidemics, reactions of individuals and of the administration, before the epidemics' outbreaks, during, and after the epidemics, emphasising, wherever possible, that which Jean Delumeau termed a "typology of collective behaviour"² during the plague epidemics. We attempted such an approach to the detriment of the purely descriptive one in considering that simply enumerating all plagues testimonies in Moldavia, at least in this particular context, would be rather inopportune. Against the background of dense population, the lack of hygienic measures, and especially people's fatalism, plague was an endemic disease in the Ottoman Empire, and was easily brought to the north of the Danube, at sea or ashore, via Ottoman merchants and soldiers, but mostly via Russian soldiers passing by Moldavia or quartered in the military hospitals organised here. Not knowing the causes or the contamination ways of the disease made that fighting it be an unequal struggle, the authorities being forced to face an invisible and most agile enemy. They were only able to see the traces left behind by the mysterious epidemic, and they often eschewed from even pronouncing the name of the disease, for the fear of aggravating further the consequences of the scourge. However, starting step by step from empirically-based findings, doctors and power factors tried to fight the disease. Isolating the sick, then carrying them and the dead bodies away from communities, together with the "disinfection" of plague-affected houses, establishing quarantine coordinates, using travel permits and health letters were among the measures taken to curtail the effects of the epidemic. It is difficult to specify how effective they will have been; however, in their absence, no doubt the consequences of the plague will have been more serious.

All these measures help prove one more fact: that Moldavians did not resign themselves to suffering, but tried to seek remedies. The hope for Divine help when recovering health was a constant factor in the healing practices, even some of the doctors being

² Jean Delumeau, *Frica în Occident (secolele XIV-XVIII). O cetate asediată*, Volume I, translation, afterword and notes by Modest Moraru, București, Ed. Meridiane, 1986, p. 166.

convinced that faith played an important role for successful healing. The Divinity's unseen hand took shape through the "healers" endowed with therapeutic qualities or educated for this purpose.

The next two chapters have developed starting from the definition of medicine found in the pages of the *French Encyclopaedia*: "the art of applying remedies with the purpose of maintaining a healthy life, and restoring health to the sick"³. Starting from this definition, we can observe at least two components of the medical act: the ideational, aspirational component, where the goals pursued by medicine are being presented, and the concrete component underlying the fulfilment of these aspirations: "applying remedies". This latter component involves in its turn two factors of its own, difficult to differentiate in terms of importance: the remedy or the treatment on the one hand, and the ones who apply it, the practitioners of the medical art, on the other hand.

We focus our attention on this latter subject in the pages of the second chapter, *Change and continuity. Health care in the Moldavia of the eighteenth century*. Several other explanations are required, given the somewhat vague quality of the phrase "medical practitioner", vagueness which persists even when we opt for the term "healer". It is a known fact that in what concerns Moldavia, one can speak about public health care only relatively late, starting with the second half of the eighteenth century, when the hospital attached to the monastery Saint Spiridon was founded and the charge of doctor of the city was appointed. Until then, treating diseases and other bodily ailments was the perquisite of elites and especially of princes, as for the most Moldavians, the hope of being healed was in the hands of God and was solely depending on the knowledge passed down from generation to generation, as the large population was not having particular expectations regarding health and long life from a "professional" group. We have not riveted our attention upon the incantations that the elderly of the village used to mutter at the bedside of the sick. These incantations, together with other ancestral therapeutic practices, reunited under the canopy of popular or "superstitious" medicine, are often much easier to analyse within an ethnographical approach and with ethnographical instruments, rather than within a historical approach. We have concentrated our attention upon those practitioners of the medical art which, more often than not indulgently, can be considered forerunners of scientific medicine: barbers and surgeons. As expected, doctors should be here included, but a distinct chapter is reserved for them. We did discuss, however, those who were preparing the treatments necessary to regain

³ *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres*, tome X, Paris, 1765, p. 260.

health, namely the apothecaries; not least, we considered undertakers - a special group without medical valences, but to which an aspect of hygiene can be assigned, especially in the context of the major plague epidemics.

Historical sources regarding these "healers" are uneven. If in the case of surgeons and pharmacists more evidence of their activity has been kept in institutional documents - especially in the revenue and expenditures declarations of the Saint Spiridon monastery -, in what concerns barbers and undertakers, their activity is mainly known indirectly, from documents relating to the transfer of movable or immovable assets or within a dispute. Moldavian barbers, a constant presence in the Moldavian towns starting with the seventeenth century, were simple craftsmen whose main activity was hair cutting and shaving. Some of them, more skilled, have also had therapeutic duties, practicing what could be indulgently called minor surgery, thus helping their fellow human beings by bloodletting and wound tending. An evolution in quality could be captured as the surgeons were more frequently attested in the Moldavian area, but only after mid-eighteenth century and especially after the foundation of the hospital attached to Saint Spiridon monastery. Having more experience than barbers, experience often acquired in the years spent by a skilled surgeon or as a result of studying in one of the European universities, surgeons gradually take over the barber's duties, the two categories of "healers" coexisting, nevertheless, for a very long time. Along these, the figure of another character was about to take shape: the pharmacist, which had to prepare the treatments recommended by surgeons or doctors. The role of the pharmacist in the Moldavian society at the turn of the eighteenth century was getting a more and more distinct outline, as the duties of the medical staff became more and more separated. If diagnosing and treating diseases was the doctors and surgeons' task, the preparation and preservation of drugs necessary for healing was the pharmacists' task. As in the surgeons' case, the training of "apothecaries" lies somewhere between crafts and medical art.

The third chapter, entitled *Doctors. Professional activity and social evolution*, aims to foreground the status that medical doctors enjoyed in society, what their public role was, and, not in the least, how the relations with their patients were, be they princes, members of the ruling families or representatives of the local elite. This highlight is made within a broader approach regarding the professional activity and social evolution of medical doctors in the Moldova of the eighteenth century.

Graduates of medical schools within European universities, the number of doctors began to gradually increase in Moldova from mid-eighteenth century onwards. Until then, they had been constant members in the Moldavian princes' retainers, most of the time

however sharing their patron's fate. Thus, one cannot speak of a continuity of their medical activity in the Moldavian realm. Gradually, the social role of these royal physicians increases, becoming responsible for the supervision of all medical activities within the principality. After the foundation of Saint Spiridon hospital their work will be completed by the hospital doctors. In the second part of the eighteenth century many of these doctors, be they personal doctors of the prince or hospital doctors, are frequently encountered in the princely court entourage, being highly regarded for their superior professional and intellectual training. Most of them spoke several foreign languages and were having obvious bookish preoccupations, being interested in contemporary issues, more often than not being directly involved in the evolution of events. This made them an agreeable, other times even necessary presence for the prince. By the nature of their occupation, but also because they represented an element of novelty for the country's elite, doctors entered boyars' homes or were being visited by these, with which they often maintain friendly relations, thus being able to have a good grasp upon the real or made up facts and ideas. The close observation of the Moldavian boyars' lives makes many of the doctors fancy a coming closer to this lifestyle, many of them becoming integrated within the boyar life by marriages or by gaining a title of high official. Following the example of the great lords and boyars, starting with early nineteenth century small boyars of the provinces' residences coalesce with wealthier merchants out of the shared desire of having a doctor to care for them at the time of their suffering. Illustrative of this we consider to be the three case studies we have focused our attention upon. We wanted to bring to light glimpses of the medical and not only activity of three doctors from Iasi, whose lives mainly overlap the chronological range of the thesis. Maybe if one looks at them through the lenses of greater history, their names might not mean much, but we have nevertheless attempted to outline these biographical portraits with the hope of eventually drawing the broad strokes of the turn of the eighteenth century Moldavian doctor. The presence of this character in the Moldavian society, more timid at first and then gradually more visible, together with all other developments occurring in the realm of health care, are to be seen, we consider, as a milestone to certify the distance the Romanian Principalities have traversed in their meandering way towards modernity.

Our endeavour was that of demonstrating that Drache Depasta was the only medical doctor to bear this name in Moldavia in the second half of the eighteenth century, doctor Iacob Dracache being nothing more than an accidental historiographic invention. We believe that doctor Depasta can be considered a prototype of the medical doctor in Moldova, until mid-nineteenth century. Not a native born in these lands, but possibly closely acquainted with

them through his father, doctor who served at the Wallachian and Moldavian courts of Constantin Mavrocordat, he has married a representative of the local nobility and has accessed the hierarchy of Moldavian high officials. First, he occupied the function of sword bearer, then he was a high steward, towards the end of his life being great logothete of Northern Moldavia. Being more or less, overtly or covertly involved in the political events of the time, doctor Depasta has participated or assisted at princes being removed from their reign, at weaving and disclosing plots, being the "great friend" of the Russian consul in Iasi, Ivan Ivanovici Severin.

Reconstructing the biographical portrait of "doctor Fotache" proved to be a bit more difficult, as the inaccuracy of the historic testimonies regarding the name of this doctor made it difficult to identify him. We presuppose that there were two doctors bearing the same first name. The one we have considered here was the son of Neculai Vartolomei, boyar in charge of war tents and camps. His fate seems to have been closely related to his patron's, Grigorie III Ghica, to which he seems to have been close "from childhood yet". Having been unable to key out the ruse which the Sublime Porte's chamberlain used in order to entice Grigore Ghica into the chambers of the bey manor, doctor Fotache would be forced to leave Moldavia for a while. After the return in his "homeland", it is difficult to identify his medical activity, as he dedicated himself sooner to administrating his parents' estates.

The last character that we analysed, Eustathius Athanasius Rolla, seems to have been a worthy representative of Hippocrates' followers in Moldavia. Having studied intensely at the Halle Faculty of Medicine, which he graduated in 1794, doctor Rolla has chosen to perform professionally and personally in Moldavia. In 1804 he married Marioara - the daughter of another Greek, "schoolmaster Teodosie" - and they had four children together. He served as doctor of the city of Iasi, as well as the proto-doctor of Moldavia, and he fought against cholera and plague epidemics in terms of his duty as a physician.

In the last chapter, *Public health care. "Lazarettos" and hospitals*, we have tried to shed light on some issues that, in overtly high-flown terms for the realities of the time, would be called "public health care". The distant origins of the organised provision of medical care in Moldavia seem to plummet to early seventeenth century, when in the two big cities of the region, Iasi and Suceava, two secular settlements had been attested. These settlements were meant to offer house and care to those in suffering and those lacking family support, "the poor and weak and lame and blind". Their office wouldn't last too long. A constant in what concerns caring for the sick is represented by the monastery infirmaries or lazarettos, with the special mention that these settlements were rather intended for members of the monastic

community affected by old age and physical sufferings, and not so much to laymen. One can talk about a more extensive aspect of health care only starting with mid-eighteenth century, with the foundation of Saint Spiridon hospital in Iasi. We propose a change of perspective in what concerns the image of this medical establishment's ktitor. To make ourselves understood we will use the image of a votive portrait. If hitherto in this imagined portrait of the hospital presented most of the times was the figure of prince Constantin Cehan Racoviță, we consider that next to him should stay the figures of the other princes which were instrumental in founding and organizing of the Saint Spiridon hospital: Ioan Theodor Callimachi and Grigorie Alexandru Ghica. We believe that the foundation of this hospital was rather a collective act of several ktitors, that lasted over a decade, or the sum of several contributions having had a common result: the establishment of the first hospital in Moldova. The collective effort emphasises a necessity acknowledged by the power exponents of the epoch, and we refer here not only to the princes - their changing fate has not led to abandonment of the project - but also to the grand boyars and metropolitans, who played an important role as well.

At the end of these written lines we can ascertain that as a matter of fact we only covered little of the way that we had hoped to cross in our attempt to present an image of Moldavia's medical past along the eighteenth century. We have tried to present an overall context that would group all the components of this subject, so that in the future we can deepen those segments of research where analysis can be carried forward. Portraits of other physicians, surgeons and pharmacists await to be brought to light; in what concerns health care, alongside Saint Spiridon hospital, the activity of other hospitals taking shape in the cities of Moldavia has to be analysed. Not in the least, the attitudes and measures related to the plague epidemics could be collected in a separate analysis, under the form of "journals"⁴ or "histories"⁵ from the time of the plagues, especially for the well documented epidemic that took place between 1828 and 1830.

⁴ Daniel Defoe, *Jurnal din Anul Ciumei (A Journal of the Plague Year)*, translation, preface and notes Antoaneta Ralian, Iași, Polirom Publishing House, 2004.

⁵ Giulia Calvi, *Histories of a Plague Year. The social and the Imaginary in Baroque Florence*, Translated by Dario Biocca and Bryant T. Ragan, Jr., with a Foreword by Randolph Starn, University of California Press, Berkely, Los Angeles, Oxford, 1989.