

# COURT FABRICS AND ATTIRES IN THE ROMANIAN PRINCIPALITIES (14<sup>TH</sup>-17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES). BETWEEN UTILITY AND SYMBOLISM<sup>1</sup>

– ABSTRACT –

**Keywords:** *attires, Romanian Principalities, fabrics, color, furs, clothing fashions, political ceremonial, gifts, emissaries, Middle Age, caftan, granata*

Regardless of space and time, attires have always had a major importance in human society. Each era has been characterized by a certain clothing style, which reflected the image and mentality of the society. It is worth underscoring an evolution of attires, in close connection with the political, economic, social, or cultural factors. A nation's dressing type represented not only their specific lifestyle, habits, customs (or changes occurred following a political event), their economic development or the influences from another space, but also a way of transmitting diverse messages, with various functions and contents.

Therefore, clothing is not only meant to protect the owner from natural hazards, to define his/her social class, or to transmit a contextual message; in relation with the power, clothing becomes an accessory, a symbol of authority. At the same time, the attire contributes to completing the sovereign's image as representative of the power, to propagating his image on society level, and to being identified by his subjects. The representatives of the power reserved certain colours, fabrics, clothes, or objects with symbolic value precisely in order to become easily recognisable by members of the society, as well as to highlight their position or role or to legitimate their authority, ultimately.

This theme concerns, first of all, a segment of daily life: the court attire of princes in the Romanian Principalities, concerning only the main items "reserved" by the authority (the Prince or the high dignitaries), as well as the various implications of clothing in the society, in the 14<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

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## **Research objectives**

The focus of my research is the attire, analyzed in the context of Romanian medieval society, from the perspective of its semiotic role (in the domain of social communication) and of the symbolic meaning associated to it within the coronation ritual.

The objectives of my research are closely connected to these two distinct but complementary dimensions of clothing. On one side, my objective is to identify and analyze the main functions of attire in the medieval society and, on the other, to describe and interpret the relation between attire and power, in order to understand the way in which clothes became an accessory – symbol and guarantee of authority.

Besides the two **main objectives**, but much dependent to them, I also propose several **secondary objectives**: establishing a coherent and relevant terminological base for my theme; identifying the main clothing items that can be related to political authority; analyzing the role of clothing in the coronation ceremonial; presenting the main accessories of ceremonial attire; determining the role of clothing in different social interactions (the practice of gifts, exchanges) and the importance of fabrics and of clothing items in treasuring; finally, elaborating a catalogue of fabrics and clothes based on archaeological research.

The thesis is structured into five chapters; the plan, the size and the approach have been determined by the available material for research.

The first chapter (“Attire – Introductory notions”) was dedicated to notions related to outfits, such as *attire*, *clothing*, or *fashion*. I had to make terminological distinctions because of the different meanings of a term within a certain space or period, and because of the semiologic approach to the notion of *veșmânt* (clothing), due to its double identity: of object and of sign. From a semiologic perspective, attire was seen as a code; in this case, the actions associated to putting the attire on acquired a semantic and symbolic meaning. In their turn, they were illustrated in a clothes-related language through which various meaning and values were conveyed in the context of social interactions. In this chapter, I also analyzed the main functions of clothing. Starting from its role in preserving modesty and concealing/revealing the identity and passing through its protection role, clothing became an instrument of social communication, through which information such as age, gender, nationality, religion, social status, or certain states or feelings were transmitted. Hence, clothes acquired the role of marking and setting a

person's position in the society, of indicating his/her place, thus allowing the wearer to show his/her wealth and power, hence his/her authority over the others.

The second chapter ("Clothing trends in the Romanian Principalities") features the main clothing trends in the Romanian Principalities in the 14<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Reflections of the society, clothes were subjected to changes caused by new fabrics, new colourings, new trends in fashion, but also new ideologies in evolution, as well as by contacts between societies. Therefore, this century was subjected to transformations and it was characterized by certain elements, which provided a special beauty to clothes. Therefore, three influence levels are detectable in the princely attire: Byzantine, western or Occidental, and Oriental. These influences adopted in clothing are explained by the nature of relations with of the Oriental fashion would assume the acceptance of Ottoman sovereignty. These fashion trends overlapped and they created a clothing style that reflects the image of the Romanian society and that responds to the preferences of the prince and of his court. The influences from different cultural spaces – Byzantium, the West or the East – imposed certain transformations to court attire, in terms of technique, fabrics, ornamental motifs (embroidered or created by applying precious stones), or colours.

In medieval clothing, everything represented a symbol: the fabrics (material, origin, and decoration), the items and shape, the colours, the dressing manner, the choice of a certain clothing item. This symbolic value was expressed by conventional, heavily coded signs, which admitted a number of values and which ensured the relations between correspondents. Each individual must wear clothes according to his rank and his status. Hence, in the third chapter of this thesis ("Attire as symbol"), I presented the main fabrics used for the prince's clothes, the role of furs in the Romanian society, and several observations on colour. In the last part, I analyzed the role of clothing within of the coronation ritual.

Fabrics had a very important role in outlining social rank differences. For their court attire, princes imported best quality fabrics from the Oriental or Occidental space, while, for the clothes worn by their subjects, they used products from Braşov or Sibiu. Among merchandises brought by Walachian, Moldavian, or foreign merchants, I mention expensive Italian materials, precious Oriental fabrics (*camha*, atlas, *bogasia*, *çatma*, *boucassin*, satin, and others) or western felts. Because of their quality, some of these fabrics were preserved to our days and they confirm the image and information within chronicles, paintings, or archaeological excavations.

Furs (symbol of luxury), alongside fabrics, played an important role in court attire. They were used not only for making clothes (for lining or for clothing items per se), but also as gifts for foreign sovereigns, dignitaries, important persons, or for paying debts (such as the tribute).

In the Romanian Principalities, too, colour had a role in determining clothing rules and hierarchy. It was not a superfluous addition, but a necessary element. For the representatives of power, it was an attribute of dignity and of rank, a trademark and a label. Though the courts of Moldavia or Walachia did not impose the so-called sumptuary laws (regulating the use of a certain colour), there was a preference for red (colour of the power par excellence). The last part of this chapter analyzed the position of the attire within sovereign coronation or boyar appointment ceremonials. Before outlining the symbolic function of clothing, I discussed the notions of symbol, ritual, and ceremony because – during these solemn moments – clothing acquired the attribute of symbols. Hence, I tried to emphasize on the main parts of coronation ceremonials, in which clothing played a special role.

Ceremonies – sumptuous or simple – were events attended by the entire society. They were not mere events focused on the prince, but their importance was provided by people's perception of them: they illustrated daily life, mindset, or experience aspects. Along with the other elements of royalty (the crown, the globe, the cross), attire was part of these insignia of power; in order for it to acquire a symbolic value, it was integrated in the imperial ritual, thus being considered an instrument and an expression of power.

Considering the attention given to attire within coronations in the Romanian space (though sources illustrating it are not various), it can be considered a symbol of power, with an important role to play during these events. The importance of attire was also apparent within the ceremonies for dignitaries' appointment, when they wore "their best attire".

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For the Romanian Principalities, I identified two cloaks that may be considered attributes of power: the *granața* and the kaftan. Though both were part of court attire, too, they were seen as symbols of power in different periods, which can be explained by the nature of the political context. In order to be considered an attire of power, the cloak had to be integrated within a

ritual/ceremony. Within the coronation ceremonial, this quality was ascribed by putting the cloak on the new sovereign.

Alongside the cloak, the *cuca* and its accessory (the *surguci*) also played an important role. Symbols of power, they were sent to the new prince by the sultan. Therefore, along with the kaftan, the *cuca* and *surguci* completed the princely attire and they transmitted information concerning the position of the person wearing them.

Clothing accessories (*paftale* [belt clasps], buttons, fasteners, or belts) did not benefit from a symbolic power, but they embellished the prince's clothes and they played a small role in transmitting authority, implicitly.

Clothes are considered simple items meant to protect us from natural hazards or to emphasize on beauty or social status. However, in the medieval period, they were not limited to a simple protective or decorative role, but their utility was far broader. Hence, in the last chapter of the thesis ("Utilitarian function of clothing"), I outlined other utilitarian functions of clothing, besides the ones mentioned in the first chapter (social, protection, or substitution function).

The symbolic value of the attire is confirmed by the gifts offered during various holidays or in other situations (to foreign emissaries, merchants, or sovereigns). These gifts were entirely dependent on the function and position of the person who gave it, but the status of the recipient was also taken into account. The context of such gift offering had a special connotation. The role of gifts in the Romanian medieval society was major, both domestically (for consolidating the relationship between the prince and his subjects) and internationally (for maintaining friendly relations with the neighbours). Gifts were given out of courtesy, generosity, friendship or for an interest (in the political and commercial sphere). An important diplomatic and political role was played by emissaries. In their missions, they used not only their oratory skills, but also gifts. In their turn, they were rewarded by the prince for their successes.

Comprising expensive threads or made of precious fabrics, clothes and clothing materials were very important within commercial trades, as shown in the documents of the period. They were used as payment method, because of their high price compared to lands or animals. Hence, in certain landownership confirmations or *înfrățiri* (exchange of gifts upon purchasing a land), payments were made by offering a fabric or clothing item in exchange; or, the amount to be paid was completed with such an item.

Starting with the 16<sup>th</sup> century, people have shown a preference for preserving fabrics, clothes, jewellery, or furs as valuables. The princely treasury was meant to highlight a hierarchical dignity and to define a social position. It was an instrument of power and it represented, at the same time, a reserve to which the prince appealed in certain situation. In addition, the treasury also had an economic function: it became a “money supply” available for the court’s expenses or for gaining political capital. Princely treasuries were made of luxury clothing items, expensive fabrics and high quality furs, and they reflected the owner’s social status in the society.

Medieval clothes surprised by the beauty of fabrics, colours, embroideries, accessories, and precious stones applied. All of these details had the role of highlighting the beauty and status of the owner. People of the time dressed in a certain way to transmit a series of information related to age, function, rank, nationality, to mark the passage from one phase of life to another, or to reveal certain feelings or states. Attire illustrated the social differences and it presented the society hierarchy in a visible manner. The number of clothing items owned, the novelty of shapes or colours, the fabrics used, or the size of clothes represented indicators of various social practices.

The study of clothing offers a perspective not only on the clothes specific to the period, on the items per se as, but it provides a view of social realities overall and of the symbolic connotation of collective practices. For the period studied, attire is considered a “total social phenomenon”, which reveals the technical possibilities of making clothes and the various aspirations of people in that period; the aspirations entail, in their turn, individual or collective gestures or practices. Through all the aforementioned aspects, attire illustrated the social functions, which represented one of the most expressive languages of that world. The various topics analyzed within the thesis from multiple perspectives show clearly the symbolic and practical value of clothing within a highly ordered society. Clothes, clothing accessories, jewellery, colours, fabrics, and furs – all of them were part of the court attire, which impressed, transmitted information, and was a symbol of power.

Besides abbreviations, bibliography, and illustrations, the thesis also comprises a dictionary of terms and two working tools: a catalogue of fabrics and clothes and a list of prices. Based on findings of archaeological excavations, I did my best to inventory the main clothing items and fabrics within a catalogue. I believe that such a working tool may prove useful

because, on one hand, it provides an insight into the clothes of the period and, on the other, it helps provide a clearer image of the findings (by collecting the main reports). As for the list of prices, I used the documents of the period, the wealth inventories and the dowry documents.

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