

The „Muntenime” neighbourhood. The city of Iasi from Mid-seventeenth century until 1831

The Romanian medieval town that were established late, at the end of the European urbanization process, had a specific history, due to the political, social and economic context of the Romanian Principalities in the Middle Ages. Whereas between the 14th and the 16th centuries Romanian town fitted the typology of the urban centres of Central Europe, in the second half of the 15th century, once the Ottoman domination grew stronger North of the Danube, these towns underwent a new evolution stage, an „oriental” one. Some of the elements of this oriental specificity of Romanian towns were the absence of fortifications, the subordination of the town government to royal rule, a close relationship between the religious factor and the urban environment and the presence of the neighbourhood (Romanian: „mahala”) as a form of administrative structure of the town.

This research aims to be a theoretical and succinct approach of this element of the Romanian medieval town, the neighbourhood. The objective is to describe two angles of approach for the neighbourhood-type urban structure in the Romanian Principalities, making a reference to a well-defined spatial and temporal setting: the Muntenime neighbourhood of

Iasi in the early 18th century – the so-called "Phanariot century" – up to 1831, around the time the Organic Regulation was adopted.

In its space of origin – the Ottoman Empire – the neighbourhood (Turkish: mahalle) was the main urban morphological unit and administrative structure of cities. Together with the increasingly more pronounced Ottoman influence North and South of the Danube starting with the 15th and the 16th centuries, the neighbourhood became widespread first in the Balkan Peninsula and later on, in the following century, in the Romanian Principalities, at a time where the urbanization process was still in progress. The adoption of the neighbourhood in the new provinces – irrespective of the type of political or juridical relationship with the Ottoman Empire – involved on the one hand the preservation of the defining elements of the space of origin, as well as the emergence of new features, imposed by the local specificities. By definition, the neighbourhood was exported from the Ottoman Empire with two major purposes. The first was the administrative one, as the neighbourhood was part of an urban settlement, with its own boundaries, having as a focal point a religious edifice, be it a mosque or a church, hosting a population that was heterogeneous in terms of social-professional structure or social status, but homogenous in terms of ethnicity or religion. The second purpose was the social one, as the neighbourhood was the setting for the manifestation and aggregation of the local

society, for encouraging and developing the identity sentiment and for preserving security. From this point of view, the neighbourhood provided to the community a physical setting for manifesting the realities of everyday life: the religious dimension, social security and control, identity and belonging, vicinity relationships, as well as a setting for the spatial manifestation of the social groups of the town and of solidarities for solving civic problems.

In the town of Iași, the neighbourhood came as a layer over other, incipient, local structures of administration, such as the parish (a structure pertaining more to the social and religious organisation rather than to administration) and the street (Romanian: "ulița") – a term used mainly for territorial division and for designating urban communication routes. Apart from this superposition over existing urban zones, the neighbourhood was also adopted for organising the rural areas in the vicinity of town boundaries, which had a predominantly semi-urban specificity and which, once the town expanded, came to be integrated in the urban space proper in the shape of adjacent neighbourhoods. Document sources do not provide information as to the way this structure was adopted, whether it was a measure of spatial organisation imposed and managed by the local powers or just another urban reality imported from South of the Danube by merchants and quickly assimilated by the local.

One such adjacent neighbourhood is Muntenime, a neighbourhood established in the North-Eastern are of Iași, around a new commercial space which had emerged in on its right-hand side in the early 17th century, called Târgul de Sus ("the Upper Market"). The toponym *Muntenime* points to the local origin of the population, as its approximate translation is "people coming from mountain areas".

From the point of view of the space it occupies, the neighbourhood has always been dependent of social evolution. The development of Iași once its role as the capital of the principality was firmly established, as well as the inclusion of urban territories under royal government once the royal residence was established in Iasi, resulted in an expansion of the urban territory, especially towards the North, in the Muntenime neighbourhood. The development of the spread was in places spontaneous (people settled at random, somewhere towards the boundaries of the neighbourhood), and in other places managed by the ruler of the city – the prince – through land plotting and allotment. The recipients of such allotments were various kinds of town dwellers – aristocrats, officers, merchants and craftsmen – who settled in the neighbourhood, causing it to expand and separate into three areas: Upper, Middle and Lower Muntenime. The lack of complete statistical sources for the city of Iasi in the 18th century is an impediment for finding out the actual area

covered by this neighbourhood, this information being available only as of 1830, when we know that the Muntenime neighbourhood covered 10% of the entire area of the town (16,645 fathoms of a total of 171,937 for the entire town), the larger of the three subdivisions being that of Upper Muntenime.

The morphological composition of the space and the zoning methods are also more interesting than in other parts of the town, as we can see from documents and from the later plans of the city. In terms of appearance, Muntenime was an area in full development, transitioning from big plots spread over a larger area, to small plots located closer together, belonging to city dwellers, some plots contiguous from one end of the street to the other, belonging to aristocratic families towards the end of the 18th century, some spread on small plots of 50-100 square metres, belonging to ordinary town dwellers. The space of the neighbourhood was filled with buildings of various shapes, volumes and symmetry. One could see rural-type households, hovels and other plain wood structures accompanied by the various auxiliary elements of a household, these being predominant at the periphery of Muntenime. Most often than not they had one or maximum two rooms used for living, were built in the middle of an arable plot used for farming, or in the middle of an orchard, a vineyard or a vegetable garden. Aside from these stood the larger houses, with four or more rooms, belonging to the

more wealthy town dwellers, as well as the houses of the higher aristocrats, built out of brick and stone, fronted or surrounded by flower gardens. The inhabited "islands" were interspersed with vacant plots, land that was administered by the state and plots that had been destroyed by fires, war or other calamities. In the second half of the 18th century, the commercial space covered the residential one, and remained predominant in the neighbourhood until the 19th century; it consisted of numerous commercial buildings (market, shop, tavern, inn), and this shows that there was no delimitation between private and public space. In such a small building (8-10 square metres) the inhabitants ran both their professional and their family life.

The neighbourhood urbanization process was dictated by the configuration of the land; it unfolded around social and spatial landmarks, the most important of these being the church. The expansion resulted in the construction of new religious buildings; by 1800 the neighbourhood had a total of eight churches, the largest group of religious edifices in any neighbourhood (the average being three, maximum four churches). In a profoundly religious era, the church was the focal point of the social, cultural and spiritual life of the neighbourhood, being also the urban landmark used for spatial identification, as well as the element that helped social aggregation.

Spatial communication in the Muntenime neighbourhood was achieved using an extensive network of streets – given the fact that the neighbourhood covered quite a wide area. Two categories of access routes were included in this network: large, main roads, such as the Sării Road, the road of Păcurari or that of Copou, as well as secondary access routes, the "ulițe", identified and named according to nearby landmarks: "the street that goes to St. Theodore's church", "the street that goes to Copou" etc. In terms of geographic framework, any urban structure of this kind had features specific to the area itself, to the configuration of the land and to the political and economic circumstances. The space of the Muntenime neighbourhood fitted the local urban landscape of the Romanian Principalities, a setting with contrasts in all the aspects of the geographic space.

The social component of the Muntenime neighbourhood had dynamism and diversity, at ethnic level, also at religious and professional level, as well as in terms of social stratification. The number of inhabitants grew constantly, as did density, especially in the interval 1755-1830, when the entire population of Moldavia tripled. From a total of 1500 inhabitants in the early 19th century (1808), the population of this area reached approximately 5000 inhabitants in 1830, that is approximately 10-12% of the town's population. The population included both men and women, in equal proportions, with a slight increase in the female population,

mentioned by statistics and documents especially when the women in question were on their own – single, widowed or orphaned. The urban hierarchy of the neighbourhood had the boyar at its centre; many of these aristocrats, such as the grand chancellors (marii logofeți) or the treasurers, representatives of the great families Cantacuzino, Ghica, Balș, Sturza, Bogdan etc. settled in the area of Muntenime in the interval 1760-1800, after receiving allotments on the Copou Hill. The neighbourhood was also the chosen area of residence for some of the Moldavian princes (such as Alexandru Moruzi and Mihai Sutu) in late 18th century, when the Royal Court in the city centre was destroyed by fires. Priests, together with merchants and craftsmen, with high- and low-ranking officers, clerks or middle and low aristocracy formed the rest of the social hierarchy of the neighbourhood, as most of them served in the nearby churches (St. Nicholas, Sf. Haralambos, St. Theodor, Sts. Athanassos and Kirill etc.). Apart from their central mission to serve in the church, priests also represented the community before the authorities, testified as to vicinities and the citizens' ownership rights, and they even filled the role of notary public whenever the royal officers were unavailable. The inhabitants' occupations virtually matched the needs of everyday life. In the space of the neighbourhood one could find a large number of craftsmen, working wood, stone or erecting buildings. The Muntenime neighbourhood was an area

preferred also by pottery craftsmen, by those processing fabrics (textiles) and by those who processed food (cooks, bakers etc.). Dozens of officers, boyars and clerks whose role was to coordinate court life and who had chosen or were ordered to live in the neighbourhood, made their way daily to the Court. Among them were those who dealt with paperwork (clerks), those in charge of security of the royals, those ensuring the smooth running of the court and of the rituals of the time. The merchants of Iași also lived in the Muntenime neighbourhood when they chose to settle in the Moldavian capital; they are mentioned in documents dating from the establishment of the area, the richer ones living closer to the centre of the neighbourhood, closer to the main roads and dealing with the sale of all sorts of merchandise imported from all over Europe. On the neighbourhood streets, a public space belonging to everyone, where the community spent an important part of its time one could meet merchants coming from Constantinople, from Poland, from Transylvania and even from further away. Alongside the natives of Muntenime lived many Serbs, Russians, Greeks, the same as all over the town of Iași, and especially Jews, arriving from the northern areas, from the Czarist Empire or the Austro-Hungarian one, who dealt overwhelmingly in commerce and crafts and lived in smaller or larger houses, in shops rented or bought from the natives. This social heterogeneity gave rise to interesting and, more

importantly, active urban vicinities, a very new direction for the Romanian urban space, worthy of investigation. In its social form, vicinity was manifested by belonging to the same community, by visiting similar public places, such as the church, the market, the tavern, so that in the neighbourhood the individual and the community overlapped. Solidarity between inhabitants was imposed by geographic closeness, alliances were forged between close or more remote neighbours, as well as on ethnic criteria. In the neighbourhood, truth, property rights or justice were sought "in the street", by assembling the neighbourhood dwellers, the neighbours and those who owned adjoining properties, these relationships becoming thus a genuine archive of collective memory and being turned both by the neighbourhood dwellers and by the authorities into a structure with a judicial role, however not recognized officially.

The Muntenime community, heterogeneous in all its aspects, becomes homogenous, a singular element before the authorities and in front of the dangers that tended to disturb the peace of the neighbourhood; strangers, newcomers were accepted only if they observed the rules and the values of the group they entered, an Orthodox community whose relationship with the society was based on the religious perspective. In order to become integrated or to advance socially in such a community, the newcomers, and especially the Jews, in the first three decades of

the 19th century, found ways of social integration, some going as far as to convert religiously. In Muntenime, the community was forced "by the time and age" as well as by a number of external and internal factors to become solidary; as expected, however, there were differences of opinion attributed most of the time to economic or judicial causes (property rights) and, paradoxically, to a lesser extent to ethnic or religious conflicts. The entire neighbourhood, the community, the public space were witness to both alliances and conflicts, as the acquisition of an important status (through kinship or conversion), as well as defamation and individual compromise called for display and exposure before the entity that decreed them – the community.

As shown above, from a social point of view, the neighbourhood offers numerous avenues for investigation, in terms of the individuals, groups and communities inside it, a heterogeneous community dominated by collective life, neighbourhood relations and alliances of all kinds, which, when analysed, portray the Romanian medieval urban world of the time.

The present research took the form of a work structured in four chapters. The last three chapters has meant the space for analyzing of a component of urban life from Muntenimea neighbourhood: geographical space (chapter II), social life (chapter III), urban modernization (chapter IV) and the first sums up the history of the concept of slum. I used equally maps and

documents as annexes to exemplify the information identified in documents.