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PURCHASE COST OF ROMANIAN OLD BOOK
FROM TRANSYLVANIA IN THE XVITH-
XVIIITH CENTURIES

DOCTORAL THESIS
(ABSTRACT)

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Key words: purchase cost; trade; florin; Romanian book; Transylvania; XVIth-XVIIIth centuries.

Geographic position, historical and politic development of Transylvania between XVIth-XVIIIth centuries delineate the idea of a state (later on province of the Hapsburg empire) whose cultural and economic life was directly influenced by these. Religious reform, beyond doubt much major in Transylvania than in the other two regions, Moldavia and Wallachia and Union of the Church with Rome – one century and a half later – created a pattern where Romanians could manifest amongst cohabiting ethnic groups (Szeklers, Hungarians, Saxons) partly preserving characteristics similar to those of Romanians from outside the Carpathian arch. The most eloquent evidence on this line - despite the union of the Church with Rome – is preserving the use of Cyrillic alphabet in a province which was under the rule of the Habsburg dynasty, defender of Catholicism and promoter of counter-Reform. This alphabet was used also for printing cult books necessary for Romanian Churches from Transylvania, both the Orthodox and the Greek-Catholic one, books which represent the object of our research.

Knowing historical, political, social, economic and cultural realities is even more important in this action as our research focuses on the Romanian book printed in Transylvanian centres, afterwards it becoming a commercial item which was sold and bought in Transylvania.

Old Romanian printings – books printed in the actual Romanian area during 1508 and 1830 – or what we nowadays generically call, Romanian old book, represented the study object of researchers belonging to different fields of science.

The study of Romanian old book is an interdisciplinary activity, attention being directed to different directions. Language used in writing old books represents the study object reserved to philology. By studying these linguistically one can follow evolution of Romanian language along centuries.

The most important success concerning research of Romanian old book, is, beyond doubt, stocking of all titles and printed editions that appeared between 1508-1830; this step resulted in appearance of monumental Romanian Old Bibliography and some subsequent works meant to complete it.

Book was also approached from the perspective of history, especially cultural history and that of collective mentalities. Similarly, history of Romanian printing was not avoided, researches in the field resulting in numerous works concerning the development of printing, amongst these remarking works dedicated to important typographical centres from the Romanian area. Decorated initials, title pages and designs present on pages of old books drew attention of art historians, who dedicated them more studies.

Paper used in printing books was also studied, fact which allowed to discover and use some methods proper for conservation of old books.

Last but not least, Romanian old books were also studied in the light of their content, in a great measure this being religious, printed book from the Romanian area being exclusively religious until the end of the XVIIth century.

This work proposes to study Romanian old printings from another perspective, which regards book as commodity, goods involved in commercial exchanges from the XVIth-XVIIIth centuries, beside the primary role, that of information carrier.

Research is based on the wish of knowing the role of Romanian books in commercial exchanges from Transylvania, carried out throughout XVIth-XVIIIth centuries, as well as

finding out the real value of book, by comparison with other goods that were the object of some transactions during the mentioned period.

Methodologically, the base of the research is represented by handwritten notes existent on copies of books, notes which register the moment when the book was bought, persons who bought it and the amount of money paid for it. Utilised notes come from published catalogues of old book, as well as other scientific works on Romanian old book. We must mention the fact that we took into consideration books that were printed in the typographical centres from Transylvania: Brasov, Balgrad (Alba Iulia), Blaj and Sibiu, they being the result of an activity of production carried out in the same geographic area where they were going also to be sold.

An important element was knowing coins that circulated in the Transylvanian area in the mentioned time interval, their equalization being most times necessary. Coins equalization was possible through use of information offered by studies from the field of numismatics and commercial relations.

The third important component was knowing price of other products on the commercial market in the period contemporaneous to selling of books, prices that we find out sometimes quite through the same notes, but most part of information comes from works dedicated to commercial relations.

We evaluated price for each title/edition in part for a period of a decade, following its modifications throughout periods of approximately 90-140 years since the book was printed. Due to the great number of titles and editions of Romanian book printed in Transylvania between the XVIth century and beginning of the XIXth century we selected only a few, we considered to be more important for this study: *Noul Testament (New Testament)* (Balgrad, 1648), *Chiriadromion*

(*Kyriacodromion*) (Balgrad, 1699), *Evangelhelie (Gospel)* (Blaj, 1765), *Evangelhelie (Gospel)* (Blaj, 1776), *Minologhion (Menologion)* (Blaj, 1781), *Biblia* (Blaj, 1795) and *Liturgii (Liturgies)*(Sibiu, 1798).

Historiography concerning the purchase cost of Romanian book during the proposed period to be evaluated in this work is extremely poor. Except for one synthesis, of recent date, which studies thoroughly the issue of book trade in the Romanian area, we rarely encounter information concerning book as item involved in commercial exchanges. Other information referring to such a trade from Transylvania we find in the study belonging to the researcher from Cluj, Francisc Pap, yet it deals with imported book from weastern Europe. The most important source concerning the book cost is represented by handwritten notes published in collective catalogues, in their great majority published at the end of 1980 and beginning of 1990, rarer being works that appeared after 2000. A problem was represented by absence of specialized works for certain areas, such as Bistrita Nasaud, Mures or Arad Counties. Studies published within specialized magazines, which include notes from old books that are in smaller areas from counties of Transylvania were also added to catalogues of old book.

As far as money circulation from Transylvania is concerned, the fundamental historiographic core that was used is represented by works which cover, in general, money circulation in the whole Romanian area, but also those which refer strictly to the Transylvanian area, accompanied by numerous studies published within specialized magazines.

For the costs of items, which were found on the commercial market from Transylvania during the period when books that are the object of this study were sold, we used both studies and articles referring to different costs of some items or services in exchange of which an amount of money was payed,

and works that have as base subject, commercial relations and prices of items involved in commercial transactions.

The Ph.D. thesis is divided into six chapters, to which conclusions, annexes and bibliography are added. The chronological factor was essential in delimitation of chapters.

The first chapter, the shortest, lays emphasis on the idea of trade with book in the European area, beginning with Greek-Roman Antiquity, passing through the Middle Ages and until modernity. Trade with book did not appear from nowhere, information on this type of activity is found ever since Greek-Roman Antiquity, in Athens and Rome existing specific locations from where books were bought. During the Middle Ages, book was a characteristic of nobility, of wealthy people. Manuscripts made on parchment and beautifully decorated with miniatures were found in libraries belonging to personalities of time, such as was the case of Matthias Corvinus. Appearance of printing with movable type made book to be accessible to poorer classes. There may be noticed, at European level that book cheapened considerably in the second half of the XVth century and XVIth century.

The following five chapters debate extensively the proposed subject, purchase cost of Romanian book in Transylvania between the XVIth century and the beginning of the XIXth century and other expenses assumed by conservation of book, restoration of book binding.

Trade with Romanian book in Transylvania in the XVIth century and price of book are debated in the second chapter, the picture being completed by comparisons amongst price of books and price of some jewels, clothes or cereals. There are presented prices of printed books, manuscripts and incunabula, as it is the beginning period of Romanian printing, few copies of Romanian book printed in the XVIth century being preserved.

Although printing entered the Romanian area in 1508, trade with book is rooted much remotely, handwritten books circulating in the XIVth century, even incunabula are present in this type of transactions. Once as the printing house of deacon Coresi was set up, in Brasov, we find out the first official prices of some books, *Psaltirea (Psalter)* (Brasov, 1570) cost 1 florin and *Liturghierul (Liturgy Book)* (Brasov, 1570) cost 32 dinars. Comparison of the book price in Transylvania, in the XVIth century with that of clothes or cereals reveals the fact that a book was extremely expensive, in the respective period printed books being, most of times, donated to churches by their editors. Data concerning the price of other books complete the picture with regard to trade with book in the respective period.

The third chapter dedicated to the price of book in the XVIIth century focuses on activity of the printing house from Alba Iulia, capital of Transylvanian principality, where *Noul Testament (New Testament)* (1648) and *Chiriadromionul (Kyriacodromion)* (1699) appeared.

The first official mentioning of the selling price of a book from the Romanian area, which appears on the title page we encounter on the *Pravila (Nomocanon)* (Govora, 1640) it costing “21 silver constandas”. As opposed to the *Nomocanon*, we don’t know the price for printings appeared in Alba Iulia, except for *Kyriacodromion* (1699), for which Atanasie Anghel fixed the price of 20 florins, the book being sold for much considerable sums immediately after printing. The other printing we dealt with, the *New Testament*, (1648) did not have an official price, but according available data at this moment, the price of a copy was of approximately of 9-10 florins at the moment of appearance. As main characteristic of the price of the two previously remembered books we mention the uniformity of price for long periods of time (20 up until 40 years). Parallel drawn between the purchase cost of books and

some clothing accessories or jewels bought by members of nobiliary families from Transylvania or remuneration received for some services provided (transports) show the gap between social classes, with money given on a jewel, one was able to buy up until thirteen books.

Data concerning price of books are accompanied by charts that render its evolution for a period of ten years and comparative tables with price of other products from the commercial market from Transylvania.

Chapter four follows evolution of the book price in the XVIIIth century, but also information on setting up new Romanian printing houses where books studied in this paper were printed. Books released by printing houses from Blaj and Sibiu are added in continuation of evaluating the prices of printings from the XVIth century and those from the XVIIth century.

Appreciation that the *New Testament* and *Kyriacodromion* enjoyed is proven by the very great number of sell / buy transactions of books in the first half of the XVIIIth century. Endeavours made by the communities continue to be great, books costing sometimes just as a domestic animal; in 1717 a copy of the *Kyriacodromion* was sold in exchange of an ox and lard to a total value of 18 florins, so that at the middle of the century to cost as much as a mare, meaning 16 florins. Comparatively with the previous period, the price of the *New Testament* increases, a copy costing even 25 florins. Fifth decade of the XVIIIth century is the moment when we consider that from now on transactions were carried out with secondhand books. Beginning with 1747, Romanians from Transylvania benefit again from a printing house, established in Blaj, whose items held also attention of our research. Editions of *Evangelhie (Gospel)* (1765, 1776), *Minologhion (Menologion)* (1781) and *Biblia (Bible)* (1795) were printed in Blaj also for the fact that they are part of the most

representative printings of the period, were chosen for analysis of purchase cost. *Liturghiile (Liturgies)* (Sibiu, 1798) are added to these, they appearing in the printing house ran by Petru Barth.

Juxtaposing prices of the two editions of the *Gospel* printed in Blaj evidences the fact that their prices were not very different, being close in the period we are interested in, both being sold at the beginning of the XIXth century, under circumstances in which in Blaj, a third edition also appeared in 1817. For the *Menologion*, an impressive book from graphic point of view, of large dimensions, the price undergoes small fluctuations, but it is constantly over 25 florins; there are rare known copies to cost less. Documents offer information on book price in printing office for this period, vehiculating costs in handwritten notes being, in general, higher with several florins, consisting in the addition of the colporteur who took over the book from the printing house and then sold it to communities. Towards the end of the XVIIIth century, due to greater number of copies printed, to inflation induced by emissions of banknote series, book price falls in relation with previous periods and by comparison with items from the commercial market. A copy of the *Menologion* was equalized with the monthly income of a typographer. Although we encounter cases in which one person or a family buy the book for the church „for prayer for the dead”, more rarely for the personal use, in continuation most books are bought out of the collection of the whole community and then are donated to churches.

The fifth chapter provides an overview concerning the book price at the beginning of the XIXth century, period influenced by the financial crisis that affected Europe, we assist to currency devaluation and periods of hunger. Although people confronted with difficulties, they continue to buy books, in their exchange offering sometimes other items, such was the

case of *Liturgies* bought by the priest from Saliste, in 1816 with a gun evaluated at 15 florins! The *Bible*, in its turn, was expensive, price varying between 30 florins in metal coin and 50-60 in banknotes.

The last chapter, the sixth, is dedicated to conservational issues of books held by the communities. Most times long use of a volume assumed destruction of binding. Cost of a new book being extremely high, members of the community chose the variant of a new binding, cheaper than buying the book, but it represented also a cost we considered necessary to be researched.

The great quantity of information which results from the handwritten notes present on pages of old books whose price was brought forward – names of sellers and buyers, place where transaction was carried, date, sum and different curse formulas - made impossible their rendering in the proper text, they being integrally reproduced in annexes.

There is only one final conclusion, book, irrespective of typographical centre it came from or the period in which it was bought, was expensive. Difficulty of buying a book, large sums of paid money made these books to become jewels of communities, which donated them to churches, this way being explained the handwritten notes from their pages, notes which stand for documents, as information they provide does not contain only the names of those who bought the book, but also its price. Important events from the history of community that held the book, natural phenomena or subsequent „investments” made to the respective volume were noted most times. Importance and value of book for the community that bought it is revealed also through curses that most times end the note which depicts the moment of its acquisition.

By this research we proposed an analysis then synthesis referring to evolution of book price in the Transylvanian area. We considered useful this evaluation of the situation for the

period between XVIth century and first three decades of the XIXth century. This doctoral thesis is not exhaustive. We presented more case studies referring to the most representative printings for the period and geographic area. The great number of titles and book editions printed in the second half of the XVIIIth century and beginning of the XIXth century make difficult a total evaluation of purchase cost of Romanian book from Transylvania, at least for the actual moment. By our research we wished to bring a contribution to history of culture from Transylvania on a segment that is less researched, which, in the end, may serve researches from the field of history of economy, social life, because history of literature, language or even history and bibliology had taken into consideration the phenomenon of Romanian old book ever since the half of the XIXth century.

Finally, it would have been hard to think of writing a study like this, without the inspiration (invaluable information and useful advice) offered by my scientific coordinator of the thesis, professor PhD. Eva Mârza. Also, I wish to thank Mr. Francisc Pap for detailed comments that helped me to shape the ideas to complete this work.

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- *Tiparituri balgradene în judetul Mures (1648-1699)* – Alba Iulia, 23-24 November 2007, at the scientific session *Unitate, continuitate si independenta în istoria poporului român*, organized by the National Museum of Union Alba Iulia.
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