

## **TOPONIMIC LEGENDS OF DÂMBOVIȚA COUNTY - BETWEEN TRUTH, MENTALITY AND IMAGINATION**

Cristina Furtună

Assist. Prof., PhD, "Valahia University" of Tîrgoviște

*Abstract: After a brief presentation of the types of legends: historical, hagiographic, social, toponymic, we shall focus on the study of the toponymic legends of Dâmbovița County.*

*Assigning a special role to toponymy in the knowledge of the history of a people, Ion Donat has highlighted the special value of the toponymic material: "Names of places can also help orient the research in the field of dialectology, ethnography and archeology, because there is a possibility that in areas with toponyms of a certain origin, material, linguistic and cultural elements may have been preserved to this day, or archeological relics of the same origin as the toponyms may be found"<sup>1</sup>.*

*To realize an ample and complex study, one needs to know, by getting out in the field, the position, the shape and the vicinity of every toponymic reality. To this, one must add the use of the information from the local population regarding the origin or the history of certain names of places. In Dâmbovița County, more than in any other area of Romania, really helpful are especially the legends that have been circulating for centuries by word of mouth. Some may be confirmed by the historical research, others are either a play of folklore fabulation, or creations of some local people. Certainly, these pieces of information need to be verified with a critical eye. When they rely on a historical truth, attested by documents, they can help explain an etymology.*

*Based on the historical documents and on the research, out in the field, of these legends, these data can prove useful to the history of the respective places, if the legend is true. Yet, due to the village people's mentalities and to a kind of local patriotism, they can be just a play of folklore imagination, some acquiring even the aspect of imaginary legends. Anyway, they are important for the cultural history of the place.*

*Key words: legend, toponymy, history, metaphor, historical truth, mentality, imaginary, imagination, folklore.*

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<sup>1</sup>Ion, Donat. *Cosiderații istorice asupra toponimiei românești* (I) (Historical Considerations on the Romanian Toponymy) in LR, 1964, p. 616 and *Pentru un dicționar toponimic* (For a Toponymic Dictionary) LR, 2, 1968, p. 146.

The major difference between modern and traditional thinking is that, unlike the first, the second does not operate so much with the instruments of precise reason (concepts), with “definitions” in a scientific sense, but rather with intuitions expressed in symbols, wherefrom the symultaneous denomination of “symbolical thinking”. Understanding the symbol as the “unexpressible made comprehensible, without having been made expressible” (Andrei Pleșu, *Despre simbol* (On Symbol), conference held at the Arts History Institute, in September 1986, apud Manolescu 2002: 19), we can observe that one of its principal environments of manifestation is the legendary domain: the epic framework narrativizing the revelation, trying to express the unexpressible by means of the symbol.

The definition of the term “legend” has called for long specialized discussions. This has been due, largely, to the fact that, for a long period of time, it was used in various contexts to denominate diverse realities, without having clarified well enough its actual sense and its boundaries. Known since the earliest times, namely since the romantic period characterized by appreciation for folklore, considered by the ethnopsychological school as a document of primary importance in the process of definition of the national identity, commented and used as a source of inspiration for the cult literature, legend has been one of the first folklore species to have caught the attention of the specialists and of the general public.

In the Romanian area, despite the existence of a real interest in collecting this folklore species even since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, no full inventory and classification of the popular legend category has been reached.

Regarding the classification of legends, there are approximately just as many theories as in the case of the definitions. Referring strictly to the Romanian area and relying on the folklore material recorded and on its local character, Tony Brill classified the Romanian popular legend into four great sectors: etiological, mythological, religious and historical, subdivided in their turn into domains, chapters and subchapters depending on the specific of each of these sectors.

A species of the popular literature, in prose or in verses, legend connects certain fantastic explanations to causal, historical events, using the modalities of the epical genre (narration, dialogue, portrait, description). Reduced as length, legends can be grouped in two great categories: mythological (expressing a fundamental attitude of the ancestral man to the great problems of man’s existence, by the intervention of some imaginary forces) and historical, subdivided into domains, according to their specific: toponymic and religious.

In Dâmbovița County, there are two legends about two churches, which, in our opinion, have a mythological and historical character.

The first is about a church built by Constantin Brâncoveanu, which the village people were unable to reconstitute, and the second is the legend of the church of Pucheni Village, where the theme is both the myth of the creative passion, and the myth of sacrifice, as in the legend of Argeș Monastery.

The legend easily breaks the boundaries of the literary genres, making use of epic, lyrical and dramatic sequences. “Their study leads to knowing the popular thinking and history, the mythology and the faiths, the people’s narrative art”<sup>2</sup>.

Out of the toponymic legends we have chosen the legends about vegetation: forest, tree, linden, oak.

In the popular culture, the forest holds a special place. Here, people come when they flee their enemies.

It is also in the forest that the haidouks come together and more often than not their meeting place is near an oak tree, a sycamore maple or a fir tree.

Trees also have a mythical-religious connotation.

Being tough, compact or fibrous matter, of vegetal origin, made up of root, trunk and branches, a tree is “*matter*” by excellence.

The term *lemn* (wood, tree), of Latin origin - *lignum*, can designate a tree as such: it appears in the popular denominations of some plant species: *lemn-dulce*, *lemn-câinesc*, *lemnul domnului*.

When used in expressions such as: *a rămâne ca de lemn*, *a inlemni* (*a rămâne de piatră*) (turn to stone/wood), *a fi de lemn* (*a fi insensibil*) (have a wooden heart), it gives the feeling of immobility, rigidity, insensitivity. Symbolically, to express Jesus’ crucifixion, the event that changed the trajectory of the descendants of the forefathers fallen into sin and led to man’s ransom, we use the syntagm “*astăzi s-a spinzurat pe lemn*” (“today, [Christ] has been hung on

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<sup>2</sup>*Dicționar de termeni literari* (Dictionary of Literary Terms), București, 1976, p. 234.

wood”). In a ritualic and ceremonial context, wood operates, in many situations, as a substitute of the human body, as actually do most of the vegetal forms of existence<sup>3</sup>.

The forest, the area where one can find the greatest concentration of wood matter in trees, grouped, this time, according to their compatibility and adaptation to diverse geographic environments, unites the diurnal and the nocturnal in a tissue of semantic tones and behavioral options<sup>4</sup>.

In the forest, hidden by the vegetation and protected by the tall and thick tree trunks, lives and fights the outlaw, the haidouk, the protester: he benefits of the light and heat hidden in the wood essences, he feeds on the local resources, hunting animals or collecting plants and edible fruits. The fruit-bearing tree provides to man his first food, even before the forest’s offering him meat by hunting animals<sup>5</sup>.

The tree is the symbol of life in motion, in evolution, while immobility, regeneration and growth are associated as well to the symbolism of verticality, to the tendency of reaching the sky<sup>6</sup>. A special status goes to the tree in the Garden of Eden, whose fruits, eaten by the first people, despite the interdiction formulated by the Creator, determines man to know “good and evil” and, implicitly, death. Another wood, coming from the same garden, brought in this world by the waters of the flood and shaped like the cross on which Jesus was crucified, according to a legend, offers man the possibility of being ransomed from the “slavery of sin” and of acquiring eternal life<sup>7</sup>. The tree is the symbolical bearer of man’s fundamental experiences: life, death, and, by these, the entrance to the eternal life. The tree is the axis of the world, uniting the sky, the earth and the under-ground, being, in essence, “living wood”.<sup>8</sup>

The research undertaken during the last few years on certain parts of the Romanian traditional folklore and the analyses on certain ritualic or cultic texts, by which it has been

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<sup>3</sup>Tony, Brill. *Tipologia legendei populare românești* [Le catalogue typologique de la légende populaire roumaine]. 1. *Legenda etiologică* (Typology of the Romanian folklore legend. 1. Etiological Legend). Preface by Sabina Ispas. Edition and introductory study by I. Oprea, București, Ed. Saeculum, 2005, *Vegetația* (Vegetation) 10423 – 10946.

<sup>4</sup>Sabina, Ispas. Ipoteze ale vegetalului în spiritualitatea românească (Hypostases of the Vegetal World in the Romanian Spirituality). In: *Text și discurs religios* (Religious Text and Discourse), no. 3 / 2011, p. 281.

<sup>5</sup>Idem, p. 282.

<sup>6</sup>Jean, Chevalier; Alain, Gheerbrant. *Dicționar de simboluri*. Mituri, vise, obiceiuri, gesturi, forme, figuri, culori, numere (Dictionary of Symbols. Myths, Dreams, Habits, Gestures, Shapes, Figures, Colours, Numbers). Vol. I, A-D, București: Editura Artemis, 1994, p. 124-132.

<sup>7</sup>Nicolae, Cartojan. *Cărțile populare în literatura românească* (Popular Books in the Romanian Literature), vol. I-II, București, 1929, 1938.

<sup>8</sup>Sabina, Ispas. Ipoteze ale vegetalului în spiritualitatea românească (Hypostases of the Vegetal World in the Romanian Spirituality). In: *Text și discurs religios* (Religious Text and Discourse), no. 3 / 2011, p. 283.

attempted to decipher the Christian message, supposedly “*occulted*” in them, has reinforced our conviction that we are dealing with a culture founded, first of all, on a system of similarities between the human and the vegetal world, with a profoundly theological foundation<sup>9</sup>.

In the thematic category of the confrontations between the vegetal representatives, one can find, as well, the poetical texts about the dispute between *the fir-tree and the linden tree*<sup>10</sup>.

The most complex lyrical text on the arguments between trees is the one concerning the “dispute” between the fir-tree and the linden-tree. A more complex set of problems is approached here, closer to the one presented in the carol about the “debate of the three holy flowers”, because this text refers to the presence of wood essences in the sacred area and to the way they become bearers of sacred identities (Jesus) or acquire an exemplary spiritual life (the saints)<sup>11</sup>.

As in the flowers’ dispute, mentioned previously, each tree proves to have had a role in the spreading, among the people, of the divine authority or exemplary requirements. The linden tree has, in his turn, access to the sacred, not as a direct substitute, but as a mediator, message-bearer via its image<sup>12</sup>.

Legends are particularly important for the popular culture related to the vegetal sphere in the Romanian spirituality.

There are four tree types with three well-defined functions. The fir-tree is the substitute of the human body, the cross of the crucifixion, the sign of salvation and the tree of life. The linden tree is the one that helps man to get in touch with the transcendent world, offering its own substance to render the sacred image. The poplar tree is a fragment of the creation, which becomes a symbol of pride and insensitivity to human suffering. In the lyrical texts analyzed, the three wood essences are not mentioned as part of simple metaphors or allegories. They become substitutes of the human essence in three hypostases: divine, holy and open to sin, and the oak represents in the popular culture the virtues of a valiant man<sup>13</sup>.

### Annexes:

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<sup>9</sup>Sabina, Ispas. Ipostaze ale vegetalului în spiritualitatea românească (Hypostases of the Vegetal World in the Romanian Spirituality). In: *Text și discurs religios* (Religious Text and Discourse), no. 3 / 2011, p. 287.

<sup>10</sup> Idem, p. 290.

<sup>11</sup> Idem, p. 291.

<sup>12</sup> Idem, p. 293.

<sup>13</sup> Idem, p. 294.

### **Legenda Bisericii Constantin Brâncoveanu (The legend of Constantin Brâncoveanu Church)**

People say that, very many years ago, in Doicești Commune, a locality situated near Tîrgoviște Town, the reigning Prince Constantin Brâncoveanu had a big and beautiful church built, which is now bearing his name.

After the ruler's death, the church began to gradually fall apart, little by little, and ruins remained in its place instead. The village people tried to reconstruct it, but everything they were building was collapsing. Legend has it that this is all because of a curse of the regning Prince, because the people had been too bad and bitter.

Ion Broajbă, aged 87, Doicești, 5 May 2000

Al. Nicolescu. *Legende populare din Dâmbovița* (Popular Legends of Dâmbovița County).

Tîrgoviște: Editura Bibliotheca, 2000, p. 142.

### **Legenda despre biserica noastră (The legend of our church)**

People say that many years ago, our church was situated on the hill behind Vlad Ghiță's house. When a strong wind blew, the church fell apart, and a cross and the belfry roof flew to the place where the church is now.

According to the custom, in the foundation of the church, they would put the measure of a man. And legend has it that for the foundation of our church, they took the measure of a man nicknamed Cucu. People say that the ugliest will die. So they took his measure without him knowing it, as he was drunk. People say that he will have died. This tradition also seems to be since Negru-Vodă's time.

Chițulescu Rodica, aged 50, Pucheni

Al. Nicolescu. *Legende populare din Dâmbovița* (Popular Legends of Dâmbovița County).

Tîrgoviște: Editura Bibliotheca, 2000, p. 142.

### **Fântânile pădurii (The wells of the forest)**

There are three wells in the forest. It is said that a man dried them out, I'll tell you his name, and found money on their bottom. As soon as they were using the money, they were getting sick. All the three wells were taken care of by three cart lessors who carried wood from the forest. Now the Forest Wells are uncared-for. You are asking me if they are old? They are,

because people have taken wood from the forest since always. They say that this part of the county was called Pădurești.

Constantin Manolescu. *Cartea pământului* (The Book of the Land). Tîrgoviște, 1981, p. 63

Constantin Dumitrache, aged 49, 1973, Drăgăești

Al. Nicolescu. *Legende populare din Dâmbovița* (Popular Legends of Dâmbovița County).

Tîrgoviște: Editura Bibliotheca, 2000, p. 145

### **Poiana Băjeniei (The Clearing of the Exile)**

After the 1821 revolt, after the killing of Tudor here in Tîrgoviște, hunted by the Turks who had set fire to the city and had killed one after the other both the pandours and the eterists who were few, it is true, hidden in our places blessed by abundance, a group of townsmen ran to the mountains to cross over them in Transylvania.

Following them, the Turks caught them in a clearing, up in the mountain, at Runcu. Their fortune, in a bag hidden in a tree, was not seen by the Turks, who, taking their cattle, contented themselves with the rings with precious stones found on the hand of a richer townsman.

A man of Runcu, called Oprea, found the bag in the tree and waited for a few years to see at least one of the men chased back then coming back, hoping that at least one may have made it over the Hotarului Rivulet, but nobody came back. Being brought up in a spirit of honesty and honestly obtained remuneration, he gave the bag of money for the construction of the church of Runcu. The clearing where the exiled men (“băjenii”) were killed was called after their name.

Constantin Manolescu. *Cartea pământului* (The Book of the Land). Tîrgoviște, 1981, p. 65.

Mitu Paul, 1969, aged 34, Runcu

Al. Nicolescu. *Legende populare din Dâmbovița* (Popular Legends of Dâmbovița County).

Tîrgoviște: Editura Bibliotheca, 2000, p. 146

### **Legenda lacului fără fund (The legend of the Bottomless Lake)**

Once, a very long time ago, in Gheboieni Village, there was a wedding. When the participants to the wedding were heading to the bridegroom's house, where the wedding was to take place, they had to go through a forest. In the middle of the forest there was a lake with a bridge over it. When the participants to the wedding were over the lake, the bridge collapsed and they all fell into the lake. The people tried to find them, but their bodies were not found. Since



then, that lake was called “Lacul fără fund” (The Bottomless Lake). The lake exists to this day and people still visit it and remember the sad event that happened a long time ago.

Rădoi, Dumitru, aged 72, Ungureni-Mănești, 13.05.2000

Al. Nicolescu. *Legende populare din Dâmbovița* (Popular Legends of Dâmbovița County).

Tîrgoviște: Editura Bibliotheca, 2000, p. 154

### **Teiul Bănicerului (The Busher-Maker's Linden Tree)**

The northern part of the village is called Teiul Bănicerului (The Busher-Maker's Linden Tree) because busher-makers were living here, people who were making bushers and other homemade objects – made out of light linden wood. And these busher-makers had spared a big, large linden tree, which they did not cut down, in order for it to bring them good luck.

Constantin Manolescu. *Cartea pământului* (The Book of the Land). Tîrgoviște, 1981, p.  
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Mircea A. Teodorescu, aged 73, 1974, Căprioru

Al. Nicolescu. *Legende populare din Dâmbovița* (Popular Legends of Dâmbovița County).

Tîrgoviște: Editura Bibliotheca, 2000, p. 158

### **Pădurea Bălașa (Bălașa Forest)**

Situated near Mătășaru Village, on the left side of the road, the forest is called after the name of one of Constantin Brâncoveanu's daughters, who was once its owner. In the margin of the forest, they say that there was a big palace and the Turks, after having ransacked it, checked its walls knocking on them, broke its cellars, to find the voivode's treasures, and then set fire to it.

Its ruins could still be seen. Because people say that, while the Turks took the voivode's sons to Istanbul, to make even their names disappear, they left the girls here, yet scattering their fortune and burning their palaces.

Constantin Manolescu. *Cartea pământului* (The Book of the Land). Tîrgoviște, 1981, p. 90

Ion Ioniță, 1970, Mătășaru

Al. Nicolescu. *Legende populare din Dâmbovița* (Popular Legends of Dâmbovița County).

Tîrgoviște: Editura Bibliotheca, 2000, p. 162



### **Pădurea Negrii (The Forest of the Black Mare)**

Negru Vodă, at war with the Tartars, was defeated and in his retreat through the forest, while he was moving fast through the forest, near a lake, something like a pond, the voivode was under the impression that someone was calling him from behind. A voice was letting him know that his mare was bleeding, as she had lost her horse-shoes. Bending down to see what was going on, his leg was pierced by a spear and he fell off his horse.

The forest and the lake were named *Negrii* after the mare, whose colour was black.

Constantin Manolescu. *Cartea pământului*. Tîrgoviște, 1981, p. 91

Ion Iliant, 1970, Dărmănești

Al. Nicolescu. *Legende populare din Dâmbovița*. Tîrgoviște: Editura Bibliotheca, 2000, p. 163

### **Trei Stejari (Three Oaks)**

On a hill, above Brănești, there is a group of three oak trees, big and large, and quite old. Haidouks were coming there, and they were also three and would stay there or rest there after days of walking through the woods, chased as beasts. One day, they buried somewhere around there a pot used for making brandy full of golden coins, swearing not to unearth it, except when they will be all the three of them, as the oak trees.

Yet, one of them got killed by the *potere*, and, in order to respect their oath, they never unearthed the treasure again.

The earth is so full of hidden treasures, man!

Constantin Manolescu. *Cartea pământului* (The Book of the Land). Tîrgoviște, 1981, p. 97-98

Mihai Bădoi, 1973, aged 40, Brănești

Al. Nicolescu. *Legende populare din Dâmbovița* (Popular Legends of Dâmbovița County).

Tîrgoviște: Editura Bibliotheca, 2000, p. 165

### **Stejarul din Parc (The oak tree in the park)**

Ciocăneștii have a big and beautiful park. At the back of it, the Colentina River is flowing. The big palace of this place has grown increasingly desolate. It belonged to the Cantacuzino family, just as the church, which must have belonged to the princely court, although it is newer. The park is a marvel. One can also see the traces of the entrance gate, yet fallen now, collapsed. On the right side of the former gate, there is a dried oak that people call the voivodes'

oak. Michael the Brave is said to have halted there and to have bound his horse to this oak, because whatever other tree he might have bound it to, the horse would have unrooted it. Michael the Brave was then on his way to Călugăreni. Constantin Brâncoveanu is also said to have stayed under this oak, but he was not able to stop over for a long time, as he and the Cantacuzino family were not in good relations, so that he entered the village only up to the gate, and he did so only for the eyes of the people, who were not supposed to know about the quarrels of the noble families.

Constantin Manolescu. *Cartea pământului* (The Book of the Land). Tîrgoviște, 1981, p. 98-99

Timiuș Velcescu, 1981, Crevedia

Al. Nicolescu. *Legende populare din Dâmbovița* (Popular Legends of Dâmbovița County).

Tîrgoviște: Editura Bibliotheca, 2000, p. 166

### **Pădurea din Răzvad (The forest of Răzvad)**

The old people say that in the forest of Răzvad, stars were falling down. So they saw trees growing up triangular in shape and each tree was made up of three other trees. The people of yore would say that nightmares were coming out of these stars, which would not let people sleep, while others say that hideous creatures come out of them, who hide themselves in ditches and caves and catch people and steal their souls.

Maria, 87, Răzvad

Al. Nicolescu. *Legende populare din Dâmbovița* (Popular Legends of Dâmbovița County).

Tîrgoviște: Editura Bibliotheca, 2000, p. 166

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