THE IMPACT OF THE OTTOMAN FACTOR
ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE SOUTH-EASTERN
EUROPEAN COUNTRIES IN THE MIDDLE AGES
THROUGH HISTORIOGRAPHY PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: The study proposes a historiographic perspective on the image of women in the Middle Ages, as it is reflected in the historical literature of Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania and Moldova. The material is designed not only to report the researches conducted in the field of gender studies, but also to illustrate the link between different historiographical approaches from the mentioned geographical area. To the theoretical and contextual nature of the studied thematic area is an added description of the impact of the Ottoman factor on the female daily, as it was caught in the impressions of foreign travellers who crossed South-Eastern Europe. The emphasis on the details of the grouping results of research on women's history from the Middle Ages into three thematic cycles: general historical monographs, papers focused on privacy, thematic monographs specific to the gender studies.

Résumé: L’impact du facteur ottoman sur le statut des femmes dans les pays sud-est européens pendant le Moyen Age de la perspective historiographique. L’étude ci-jointe propose une perspective historiographique sur l’image de la femme au Moyen Age, réfléchie dans la littérature de spécialité de Serbie, Bulgarie, Roumanie et la République Moldavie. Le matériel ne constitue seulement un rapport des recherches menées dans ce domaine-ci, mais illustre en même temps la liaison existante entre les divers abords historiographiques de l’aire géographique qu’on vient de mentionner. On y ajoute aux précisions théoriques de nature contextuelle sur l’aire thématique étudiée une présentation de l’impact du facteur ottoman sur la vie quotidienne féminine, comme on le surprit dans les impressions des voyageurs étrangers qui transitèrent l’espace sud-est européen. On
insista aussi sur les détails qui permirent de grouper les résultats des recherches concernant l’histoire de la femme au Moyen Age en trois cycles thématiques: monographies historiques générales, ouvrages de spécialité centrés sur la vie privée, monographies thématiques, spécifiques aux études du genre.

**Keywords:** women, gender, historiography, the South-Eastern Europe, Ottoman factor, Middle Ages

**Introduction**

In recent decades, a massive change has taken a special place in historical research at the global, European and national level. Despite the large amounts of scientific literature on women’s and gender history, many thematic units – as gender-related European past – are almost unknown, and very little research has been made in this field. In particular, one of these issues is the impact of the Ottoman factor on the status of women in the conquered countries, in the Middle Ages. In this study, we shall review the contemporary historical literature of Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania and Moldova.

Moving on to the research subject, it is necessary to mention that the territories controlled by the Ottoman Empire had different status: incorporated and not incorporated. Moldova and Wallachia have not been incorporated into the empire; they have kept their statehood, language, local laws and customs. The official religion also maintained its status; these countries were not subject to Islamization. Unlike these countries, Bulgaria and Serbia were incorporated, and lost their independence for five centuries. For example, in Bulgaria, the legal status of Bulgarians was determined by Muslim private law – Sharia. Most Bulgarians remained Christians, but parts of them were forcibly converted to Islam – such as the so-called Pomaks, mostly in the Rhodopes; however, they preserved the Bulgarian language and many traditions.

In modern historical literature there is a common view that the Ottoman factor in many Christian countries, particularly in the Balkans, meant not only the negative radical change in the political and religious spheres, but also an improvement of the people’s lives, in economic terms: trade, granting land to the peasants etc., especially in rural areas, where “regime change did not bring about any change, life went on in the tradition of the peoples living there”¹. This is quite a complex issue, covering various areas and aspects, so we’ll confine to women social status. In our opinion, the daily life is of particular interest, as it is a most exact and

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¹Льюис Рафаэла [Raphael Louis], Османская Турция. Быт, религия, культура [Ottoman Turkey. Life, religion, culture], Москва [Moscow], 2004, pp. 210-211.
colourful reflection of the changes in the evolution of society by the influence of external factors.

The state of the problem in regional historiography

**Serbian historiography**

In recent decades, a large number of studies on the life of the medieval Serb appeared, describing environment, food and kitchen, private and family life. The authors also included issues relevant to the medieval Serb woman. An illustration of this trend is the work entitled Срби у средњем веку (Serbs in the Middle Ages)\(^2\), and the collective monograph Приватни живот у српским земљама средњег века (Family life in the Serbian lands of the Middle Ages)\(^3\), where an attempt is made to examine the daily life of a medieval man. Apart from the aforementioned works, some aspects of life in medieval Serbia have been discussed in various articles\(^4\), such as the example of Branichevskogo Deftira investigated by Mirjana Bobich\(^5\).

A special place in research on women's issues in the Serbian scientific community takes Svetlana Tomin, Professor at University of Novi Sad. Serbian scholar wrote a series of articles\(^6\) and monographs\(^7\) about the life of women in

\(^2\) С. Ћирковић [Cirkovic, S.], Срби у средњем веку [Serbs in the Middle Ages], Београд [Belgrade], 1997.

\(^3\) Приватни живот у српским земљама средњег века [Family life in the Serbian lands of the Middle Ages], Београд [Belgrade], 2004.

\(^4\) Б. Тошић [C. Tocić], Живот у средњовековном селу требињског краја [Life in Medieval Village of the Trebinje Region], in Српско село. Могућности и даљи правци истраживања [ Serbian Village. Opportunities and Further Directions for Research], Београд, [Belgrade], 2003, pp. 19–29; Idem, Земљорадња у средњовековној жупи Требиње [Agriculture in the Trebinje Parish], in „Годишњак Друштва историјара Босне и Херцеговине” [Yearbook of the Society of Historians of Bosnia and Herzegovina], vol. XL–XLI, Sarajevo, 1990, pp. 2–58.

\(^5\) М. Бобић [M. Bobic], Куће, породице и задруге [Houses, Families and Cooperatives], in Насеља и становништво области Бранковића 1455 године [Settlements and Population of the Brankovic Region in the year 1455], Београд [Belgrade], 2001, pp. 311–406.

medieval Serbia as a whole, and particularly about outstanding women of that era, as well as comments and reviews on the history of women. The monographs Кињолюбишћезенцићностьсрпског Средевековља (Book loving: Women of Serbian Middle Ages) and Мужественногезенцићностьсрпског Средевековља (Courageous women of medieval Serbia) are based on significant documentary material of that time and devoted to female aristocrats, queens, princesses, and all the women who played a role in highest social circles.

Bulgarian historiography
While characterizing the Bulgarian historiography, it should be noted that the issue of women's image in the Middle Ages did not get coverage in special studies. But in individual articles and general works on the Middle Ages, this problem is

9 Idem, Књиголюбиве жене српског средњег века [Book loving Women of the Middle Ages], Novi Sad, 2007; Idem, Мужествене жене српскогсредњег века [Courageous Women of Medieval Serbia], Novi Sad, 2011.
10 В. Златарски [V. Zlatarski], История на българската държава през средновековие, [The history of the medieval Bulgarian state], vol. 3, София [Sofia], 1972, pp. 325-326; Г. Цанкова-Петкова [G. Tsankova-Petkova], България при Асеновци [Bulgaria under the reign of the Asen dynasty], София [Sofia], 1978, pp. 109-137; Й. Иванов [I. Ivanov], Богомилски книги и легенди [Bogomil Books and Folktales], София [Sofia], 1980; П. Мутафчиев [P. Mutafchiev], История на българският народ [History of the Bulgarian People], София [Sofia], 1986.
partially paid attention too. For instance, in the works of P. Angelov, Yordan Andreev, Vzh. B. Venedikov, A.D. Vasileva, dedicated to outstanding male characters of that time, against the background of their military, administrative and political activity, stories of mothers, wives and daughters are clearly and concisely described. Of particular importance is the work of the famous Bulgarian scholar Ivan Bozhilov, which in addition to historical information, contains a rich genealogical material, the role and the political activity of life in which we find invaluable material. Passages of private life of Bulgarian women in the Middle Ages are reflected in the collective work of Ivan Bozhilova and Vasil Gyuzeleva, published in 2006.

**Romanian historiography**

Romanian historiography has a special place in the study of the role and place of women in society. Over the last 20 years in Romania, a series of studies appeared in historical and anthropological centres such as: Cluj Napoca, Arad, Bucharest and Iassy. This period is characterized by the emergence of new conceptual works, fundamental and multidisciplinary research on the legal and social status of women, family and legal status of women in the family, women's political participation, etc. In this context, we can mention the work of Maria Magdalena Székely, Alexandru I.


21 V. Barbu, „Ceea ce Dumnezeu a unit, omul să nu dispară.”. Studii asupra divorţului în Țara Românească în perioada 1780-1850 [“What God has united, man should not set apart”. Considerations on Divorce endeavours in the Romanian Kingdom during 1780-1850], in “Revista de Istorie” [Historical Review], III, nr. 11-12, 1992, pp. 1143-1155; Idem, Pagini din istoria căsătoriei în Țările Române. Căsătoria ca sacrament (secolul al XVII-lea) [Pages from Marriage History in Romanian Principalities. Marriage viewed as a Sacred Union (XVIIth century)], in “Studii şi Materiale de Istorie Medie” [Studies and materials of Medieval History], vol. XXIII, 2005, Bucureşti, pp. 101-117.

22 Constanţa Vintilă Ghîţulescu, Zestreata între normă şi practică. Țara Românească în secolul al XVII-lea (I) [Normative and Practical sides of the Dowry. The Romanian Kingdom during the XVIIth century], in “Studii şi Materiale de Istorie Medie”, vol. XVIII, 2000, pp. 213-222; Idem, Zestreata între normă şi practică. Țara Românească în secolul al XVII-lea (II) [Normative and Practical sides of the Dowry. The Wallachian Principality during the
These works are based on the methodology of modern European and, in particular, French School of History.\(^{28}\)


I. Țighiliu, Societate și mentalitate în Țara Românească și Moldova în secolele XV-XVII [Society and Mentality in the Wallachia and Moldavia during the 15-17th Centuries], București, 1997.

Ș. Solcan, Familia în secolul al XVII-lea în Țările Române [Family in Romanian Principalities during the 17th Century], București, 1999; Idem, Femeile din Moldova, Transilvania și Țara Românească în Evul Mediu [Women from Moldavia, Transylvania and Wallachia during Middle Ages], București, 2005.

D.H. Mazilu, Văduvele sau despre istorie la feminin [The Widows, or about History at Feminine], București, 2008.

Moldovan historiography


Σοβετόφ, Πανελ [Sovetov, Pavel], Ιστορική στην ιστορία της Φεδαλισμού στη Μολδαβία [Inquiries on the history of Moldavian feudalism], Chișinău, 1972, pp. 317-322; Idem,
Folea. It is important to note that female subjects were outside the academic research, and appeared purely episodic until the turn of XX-XXI centuries. Only in the last decade, women's history has become one of the new interdisciplinary research directions in the modern historiography of Moldova. The subject aroused a true interest, mostly by the appearance of a number of papers dedicated to the new social history. The main priority in women's history in the Middle Ages and modern times.
are: the image of the woman, women's daily life, the legal status of women and its reflection in the regulatory acts and documents, woman and power, social and legal status of the women, the role and the forms of women’s participation in social and political and public life, family relationships, etc.

35 Idem, Chipul femeii din Moldova reflectat în documentele interne și relațiile străinilor (sec. XVI-XV) [The Moldavian Women’s Appearance reflected in inland writings and foreigners’ statements (16th-17th centuries], in „TYRAGETIA”, Chișinău, 2006, pp. 149-157; Ibiden, Images of man and woman. Medieval Moldova as described by the missionaries (XVII-XVIII), in Celebration and every day life in the Grand of Lithuania and its context. Papers abstracts, Vilnius, 2006, pp. 31-33/

36 Idem, Unele considerații asupra testamentului Mariel Cneajna, fiica lui Ștefan cel Mare [Some considerations on Maria Cneajna’s, daughter of Stephen the Great testament], in Rumuni i Polacy w Europe. Historia i dziej dzisiejszy [Romanians and Polish in Europe’s History], Suceava, 2006, pp. 253-264.


38 Idem, Raporturile dinastice și rolul „diplomatiei de mriaș” în relațiile moldo-polone în a doua jumătate a secolului al XIV-lea – mijlocul secolului al XVII-lea [The Dynasty Affairs and the Role of the “Marriage Diplomacy” in the Moldo-Polish matters during the second half of the 14th –mid 17th century], Chișinău, 2004, 192 p.; Idem, Între politică și destin. Ruxandra, fiica lui Vasile Lupu, văzută prin prisma seculară a istoriei [Between Politics and Destiny. Ruxandra, daughter of Vasile Lupu, seen by Secular History], in “Revista de Iстorie a Moldovei”, nr. 3, Chișinău, 2008, pp. 16-45; Idem, Unele fragmente din viața privată a Movilencilor Maria și Anna [Some excerpts from the private life of Maria and Anna Moghila], in W kręgu relacji polsko-rumunskich. Materialy z sympozjumu [In the world of Polish-Romanian Relationships. Materials of symposium], Suceava, 2008, pp. 54-68.


Argumentation

In this study, special attention is paid to the influence of the Ottoman factor on the women’s life style, such as: clothing, behaviour, food, etc. The information on women’s clothing, hairstyles in the Romanian principalities, is quite controversial. Besides, in the statements of foreigners of the XVI century it was frequently mentioned the difference between women in Moldova and Wallachia in this regard. A diplomat from Dalmatia, Anton Verancsics (Verantio) (1504-1543), in his work entitled Description of Transylvania, Moldavia and Wallachia, said: “Their customs are barbaric. As to the clothing, they do not look like the Wallachian, who practically took over the fashion of the Turks, while Moldovans firmly adhere to their own clothes and if someone, tried to take over anything from clothing or weapons from the Turks, was to be punished by death”\(^{42}\). Continuing, Anton Verancsics highlighted the fact, that “The Wallachians has no rules on clothing [...] almost all are dressed like Turks, while the Moldovan boyars adorn themselves with numerous rings, dress in clothes made of silk, embroidered with gold thread, colourful fringed, wear chain around the neck and bracelets and various other decorations that are hung from the left shoulder, across the chest, the right hand to the foot”\(^{43}\). A similar description left Nicolaus Olahus, who wrote that “Moldovans are the same language, traditions, customs, and the same religion, but they differ in the clothes to a certain extent” (in comparison with the Wallachians, our note)\(^{44}\).

John Newbery visited two cities, Iasi and Renee (Tomarovo) in 1582, and left a lively description of them. These cities were significantly different from each other in terms of administrative and functional significance, ethnic, religious, etc. In particular, he wrote: “In Tomarovo children are like Indians, with small earrings. Women wear huge silver buttons, which hung over the ears and cloth, twisted in a large wreath on the head, which is very similar to the Turkish turban, and on top of it, a smaller blade, the upper part of the garment is decorated around with large silver buttons. And young girls are wearing braided hair, over which hung silver coins, and on top of the head a round silver clasp, adorned with precious stones; the sleeves are

\(^{42}\text{M.M. Alexandrescu-Dersca Bulgaru, Paul Cernovodeanu (eds.), Călători străini despre Țăriile Române [Foreign Travellers about the Romanian Countries], vol. I, București, 1968, p. 404.}\)

\(^{43}\text{Ibidem, p. 407.}\)

\(^{44}\text{Ibidem, p. 488.}\)
wide and short, on the shoulders they wear two large silver circles, the belt they have five or six knives, and the neck is no jewellery. Common people are mostly barefoot⁴⁵. We are of the opinion that the compilers of the first volume of the collection Foreign travellers about the Romanian Countries, who claim that John Newbery, describes children and women of Tatar origin. At the same time, on his visit in the city of Iasi, John Newbury, wrote that there, “Women wear Turkish dresses and big turbans with 2-3 discs, decorated with stones on all sides by a turban, dress at the front bottom, are decorated with stones and they wear earrings like large disks with a string of fine pearls, well-fixed to both ears, and the girls wear with the decoration on the head, like the church mitre, on which the hair is laid across, and some children wear with a twisted thread in their ears like the Indians”.⁴⁶

Considering the John Newbury notes, we can assume that the author was likely to describe urban women of superior social condition, upper classes from the cities of Reni and Iasi, who probably belonged to the aristocratic homes of Turkish origin, possibly, Moldovan, who imitated and dressed accordingly, with the Turkish fashion. This is evidence from the sources of the first half of the XVII century. The description of children, is rather unexpected, especially their likeness with Indian children, which finds no confirmation in the sources of the era.

The Italian monk, Niccolo Barsi (1633-1639)⁴⁷ pointed out that women in Moldova dressed in the Turkish fashion: “Moldovans dress like the Turks, from which they differ only in that the latter are a forelock of hair, which begins from the crown of the head and reach the forehead on the width of three fingers somewhere. The Moldavian women, as I say, don’t cover their faces, while Turkish women always have the face covered [...]”⁴⁸. In his writings Niccolo Barsi also compares women of different faiths: “Moldavian women differ from the Catholic ones with the fact that they wear earrings”⁴⁹. This description is deeply confusing, because in this period, the whole of Europe wore earrings, including men, especially of aristocratic origin. It is interesting that the earrings as a decoration never played a central role in worship.

The famous Marco Bandini who lived for many years in Moldova and knew the traditions, customs and manners of the Moldovan people, wrote about the imitation of the eastern fashion. In particular, during 1646, he wrote: “The clothes are long to toe in the Turkish custom, and other eastern nations. They especially like to wear silk, and though they often do not have enough bread to somehow satisfy a

⁴⁶The following portray does not relate to Moldavian female’s clothing (see the remarks of the authors, Ibidem, p. 517).
⁴⁸Ibidem, p. 80.
⁴⁹Ibidem, p. 78.
hungry stomach, but as to the clothing they are very demanding, they all look like small barons. Silver and gold buttons sparkle on the chest and sleeves. Outerwear or <toga> with long sleeves is especially worn. A quilting (lining) of sable fur is often worn not only by the boyars, but by merchants, too. Women and girls garments are similar, but not with long sleeves. Women and girls of aristocratic origin wear expensive rings, belts, bracelets, stones and pearls, but men only rings”50.

We believe that these discrepancies in the description of foreigners are due to various reasons. First of all, the descriptions are rather subjective, since each of them, had their own vision of the things. Secondly, it’s important to mention that foreign travellers described different cities, which are heterogeneous by their ethnic and social composition, as well as the various time intervals. Besides, we should take into consideration, that the travellers spent a different period of time, short for some, and on the contrary, long for others, who lived for many years in certain areas. There also was a natural and regional difference between the cities. Third, it was important, whether foreigners dwelled in the area. There was also a big difference between king’s palace, aristocratic estate (house), common urban areas, craftsmen or agricultural districts, and home of the poorest segments of the population.

Conclusions

In summary, I would like to emphasize that the present state of historical literature of Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania and Moldova on women's history can be divided into three thematic categories:

• General works on the Middle Ages;
• Research into the private life of the era;
• Thematic monographs and articles on women's history.

There are no specific studies on the influence of the Ottoman factor on the status of women:

I. First, in countries which the Islamization of the population occurred – for example, Bulgaria – the women who converted to Islam changed not only religion, but also the status: a. familial; b. social; c. legal (property-legal relations).

II. Second, in the unincorporated and non-Muslim countries, presence of Ottoman domination was noted. Particularly, in Moldova, in some cases, Moldovans rulers had to ask permission to marry for themselves and their daughters. An illustrative example is the ruler Vasile Lupu, who had to get approval from the Sultan for his second marriage to Catherine of Circassia. The youngest daughter of Vasile Lupu for years was held hostage in Istanbul (where, incidentally, got excellent education!), and then only with the permission of the Sultan got married.

III. Third, as sources indicate the era, the Ottoman factor affected the way of life of the conquered peoples: clothes, food, hairstyle etc.

However, in our view, the topic deserves special attention and requires united efforts for publishing a collective work of researchers in the field of women's history, from the countries conquered by the Ottoman Empire. In particular, on the example of women's history through the prism of historical, anthropological and interdisciplinary approach will permit to:

- avoid asymmetrical interpretation of historical events and processes;
- identify aspects of national and cultural identity of the conquered peoples;
- include in the study the problems of everyday life, spirituality and the role of the individual;
- consider the process of crossing, interpenetration and interaction of cultures, the exchange of cultures;
- avoid politicization and reinterpretation of history.

Research in the field of women's history, will help researchers to move out of the plane of political area into the anthropological research.