

# **THE JEWS IN OTTOMAN DOBRUJA (15<sup>TH</sup> – 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES): LEGAL STATUS, RELIGIOUS LIFE, AND PARTICIPATION IN COMMERCIAL NETWORKS**

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*Abstract: The article provides a systematic analysis of the Jewish community's presence, status, and role in Dobrogea during Ottoman rule. The study highlights the marginalization of this minority in Romanian historiography, noting the scarcity and dispersion of sources and significant methodological challenges. The study situates Jewish presence within the multiethnic and multiconfessional context of Dobrogea, referencing Byzantine precedents and regional connections with the wider Jewish diaspora. Under the Ottoman millet system, Jews benefited from religious autonomy and economic privileges due to their transregional commercial networks and patronage ties with the imperial administration. Controlled migration, settlement policies, and their status as dhimmi facilitated the integration of Jews into Dobrogea's main cities, where they played active roles in commerce, tax collection, and diplomacy. The article further examines interconfessional relations, revealing a pragmatic coexistence between Jews, Muslims, Christians, and other minorities. It emphasizes the absence of major religious conflicts, underlining the Jewish contribution to the region's economic development and urban dynamics. The conclusion calls for a reevaluation of Dobrogea's Jewish history within the broader Ottoman context and advocates for the increased use of Ottoman and rabbinic sources to deepen research into this minority's discreet but significant role in the ethnic and religious mosaic of Dobrogea.*

*Keywords: Ottoman Empire, Jewish community, Dobrogea, Religious minorities, Trade networks*

## **1. Historiographical Context: The Problem of Studying Minorities in the Dobruja area**

The historical research about the religious and ethnic minorities in Dobruja (in Romanian: *Dobrogea*, in Bulgarian: *Добруджа*; Romanized: Dobrudzha; also spelled Dobruja) during the Ottoman occupation (1418–1878) remained, till the last decades, peripheral in Romanian historiography, often being eclipsed by historical discourses centred on the geo-political, ethno-national or confessional-Orthodox issues of the Danubian-Pontic area. Especially the situation of the Jews has rarely been approached systematically, and the existing approaches are often tributary to fragmentary perspectives, a consequence of either the lack of accessible sources, or of a historiographical interest focused on the modern and contemporary period.

Until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Romanian historiography paid little attention to the Ottoman realities in Dobruja, especially regarding religious or ethnic minorities that did not fit into the dominant national paradigm. This direction is also reflected in the absence of the respective themes in bibliographic works, as for example in the one written by Stoica Lascu<sup>1</sup>. In this context, Jewish communities appear only sporadically in the Ottoman and Western archives, often being mixed up with other categories of "foreign" populations or generically included in the category of *reaya*, without clear confessional distinctions.

A major methodological obstacle lies in the nature and dispersion of historical sources. Ottoman documents of the *defter type*, the reports of Western travellers, rabbinical chronicles or

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<sup>1</sup> Stoica Lascu, "Dobruja in Ottoman Times. A Romanian Bibliography (From the 50s of the Twentieth Century Until Today)", in: Aurel-Daniel Stănică, Gabriel Custurea, Daniela Stănică, Emanuel Plopeanu (Eds.), *Dobruja: historical and archaeological coordinates*, StudIS Publishing House, Iași, 2016, pp. 301-358.

the diplomatic notes of the great European powers are rarely convergent, and when they provide data on the Jews from Dobruja, they are either summary or mediated through an ideological filter (orientalist, anti-Semitic or imperial). Moreover, unlike the regions with a consecrated Jewish urban tradition (Istanbul, Thessaloniki, Edirne), Dobruja remains a marginal area in the Ottoman or rabbinical historiographical networks. The situation is like the one identified by Haim Gerber in his study about the Jewish-Muslim relations, that present the difficulty of identifying a coherent corpus of sources for Ottoman Jews in the border areas<sup>2</sup>.

Another difficulty lies in the absence of a tradition of interdisciplinary research. The study of Jewish minorities in Dobruja involves an integrated approach that combines economic history, history of Ottoman law, religious ethnography and urban archaeology. Thus, the analysis of the tombstone of the Alexandrian merchant Seppon or of the commercial activity of some Jews documented in Tulcea, Isaccea or Babadag can only be carried out through a collaboration between historians, linguists and archaeologists, in a spirit of critical and comparative research.

From a conceptual point of view, the study of minorities in Ottoman Dobruja also requires a re-evaluation of the *millet* paradigm. Although in the historiographical tradition of the Ottoman Empire, this confessional organization was seen as a framework of tolerance and autonomy, recent research notes the pragmatic and hierarchical dimension of the system, in which certain religious groups, such as the Jews, were in certain contexts more favoured than others, depending on their economic capital and patron-client relations with the central power<sup>3</sup>. This dynamic is important for understanding the role played by the Jews of Dobruja in the Ottoman trade networks, as well as their fiscal and legal status.

Also, in the context of the Romanian national construction after 1878, the memory of the Jews of Dobruja was partially erased or reinterpreted, depending on the dominant ideological discourses. This "organized oblivion" is an integral part of what Dietmar Müller calls the "national code" of modern ethno-state identity, which has systematically excluded religious and ethnic otherness that does not conform to the ideal of the majority nation<sup>4</sup>.

The present study is part of the effort to rebalance the historical narrative regarding Ottoman Dobruja, by bringing to the fore a community that, although numerically modest, had a significant role in the local economy, in regional diplomacy and in the ethnic dynamics of the space between the Danube and the Black Sea. The reconstruction of this history involves a work of collecting documents, but also a critical reassessment of the concepts used to understand interfaith coexistence and the mechanisms of integration/segregation within the Ottoman Empire.

## **2. The Jewish Presence Prior to the Ottoman period – Historical and Religious context**

Before the integration of Dobruja into the administrative and social system of the Ottoman Empire, the territory between the Danube and the Black Sea experienced a succession of dominions and cultural influences that contributed to the formation of a framework of multiethnic and multi-confessional coexistence. Among the groups sharing this space we have the Jews, whose presence is attested since the Greco-Roman times, continuing intermittently throughout the Byzantine period. Even if the data are sporadic and fragmentary, they constitute valuable clues regarding the existence of an early Jewish community in Dobruja.

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<sup>2</sup> Haim Gerber, *Crossing Borders. Jews and Muslims in Ottoman Law, Economy and Society*, The Isis Press, Istanbul, 2008, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Syahrul Hidayat, "Minority Groups in Ottoman Turkey Before 1856", in: *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, Volume 4, Number 1, June 2014, pp. 29-31.

<sup>4</sup> Dietmar Müller, "Orientalism and Nation: Jews and Muslims as Alterity in Southeastern Europe", in: *East Central Europe*, Volume 36, Issue 1, Jan 2009, p. 66.

Despite its strategic position in the trade networks of the Euxine Pontus and the Roman Empire, Dobruja does not provide direct epigraphic or archaeological evidence of the existence of an organized Jewish community in the Greco-Roman or Byzantine period. The funerary and commercial inscriptions discovered at Histria<sup>5</sup>, Tomis<sup>6</sup>, Capidava, Troesmis or Noviodunum<sup>7</sup> do not mention the Jewish religious or ethnic affiliation of the evoked populations<sup>8</sup>. By comparison, in the neighbouring provinces – Moesia, Thrace and Macedonia – symbols such as the menorah or typical Jewish names in epigraphy are attested, which allows the hypothesis of the existence of individuals of Jewish religion involved in the Pontic trade, but without direct evidence for Dobruja<sup>9</sup>.

The lack of epigraphic evidence might be compensated by patristic sources attesting to the presence of Hellenized Jews in Scythia Minor, especially in the context of the spread of early Christianity. Hagiographic tradition attributes to the Apostle Andrew a mission of evangelization in this area<sup>10</sup>, thus establishing a contact with local Jewish groups<sup>11</sup>. Although this information has more of a symbolic rather than documentary value, it reflects the perception of a religious continuity, and a Jewish presence integrated into the spiritual landscape of Dobruja in the first centuries<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ancient Inscriptions from Dacia and Scythia Minor, Collection curated by D.M. Pippidi and I.I. Russu, Second Series, Volume I, Histria and Surroundings, Collected, Translated, Accompanied by Commentaries and Indexes by Dionisie M. Pippidi, Publishing House of the Academy of the Socialist Republic of Romania, Bucharest, 1983.*

<sup>6</sup> However, there is an interpretation regarding a fragment of a stone that has the inscription "... pious, (son) of Seppon, wine merchant of Alexandria", presumed to be Jewish by some historians – *Ancient inscriptions from Dacia and Scythia Minor, Collection curated by D.M. Pippidi and I.I. Russu, Second Series, Volume II, Tomis and its Territory, Collected, translated, accompanied by comments by Iorgu Stoian, Indices by Al. Suceveanu, Publishing House of the Academy of the Socialist Republic of Romania, Bucharest, 1987, pp. 369-370.* See also Florin Stan, "The Jews of Constanta", in: *Cumidava, Muzeul de Istorie din Braşov, vol. XXIX, Braşov, 2009, p. 229.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ancient Inscriptions from Dacia and Scythia Minor, Collection curated by D.M. Pippidi and I.I. Russu, Second Series, Volume V, Capidava – Troesmis – Noviodunum, Assembled, translated, accompanied by comments and indexes by Emilia Doruţiu-Boilă, Publishing House of the Academy of the Socialist Republic of Romania, Bucharest, 1980.*

<sup>8</sup> A limestone stele discovered in Constanta speaks of Aurelia Sambattis, a name with Jewish resonance – *Greek and Latin inscriptions from the IV-XIII centuries discovered in Romania, Collected, translated into Romanian, accompanied by indexes and commented by Emilian Popescu, Preface by D.M. Pippidi, Publishing House of the Academy of the Socialist Republic of Romania, Bucharest, 1976, p. 49-51.*

<sup>9</sup> Jean Juster notes the major difficulties in identifying the religious affiliation of inscriptions when they are not found in clear contexts, such as Jewish cemeteries, due to the fact that most inscriptions are in Greek or Latin and do not contain explicit Jewish symbols, which makes Jewish affiliation often assumed based on onomastics or symbols: "It is not the same when they [the inscriptions] are isolated; In this case, they are difficult to identify: for, being very rarely written in Hebrew and almost always in Greek or Latin, it is often not known whether they refer to Jews, pagans or Christians. Since most of the Jewish inscriptions date from the Christian era, it happens – and this is regrettable – that the confusion is all the greater in relation to the Christian inscriptions, since they borrowed Jewish funerary formulas" – Jean Juster, *Les Juifs dans l'Empire romain: leur condition juridique, économique et sociale*, Tome premier, Librairie Paul Geuthner, Paris, 1914, p. 121.

<sup>10</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea takes over a tradition found in Hippolytus the Roman (Hippolytus [The Roman], "On the Twelve Apostles", in: *Sources on the History of Romania. Source ad historiam Dacoromaniae Pertinentes*, Vol. I, From Hesiod to Antonius' Itinerary, The Academy of the Romanian People's Republic Publishing House, Bucharest, 1964, p. 712) and Origen (Origen, "Commentaries on Genesis III, 24", in: Origen, *Homilies, Commentaries and Annotations on Genesis*, Bible edition, Introductory Study, Translation and Notes by Adrian Muraru, Iaşi, 2006, p. 515). See also *Sources of the History of Romanian Christianity. Fontes Historiae Daco-Romanae Christianitatis*, Unpublished translations from Latin and Greek by Mihaela Raraschiv, Claudia Tărnăuceanu, Wilhelm Dancă, Revision of translations by Mihaela Paraschiv, Revision of texts by Claudia Tărnăuceanu, Selection of texts, introductory study, bibliographic notes, notes and comments, index Nelu Zugravu, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University Publishing House, Iaşi, 2008, pp. 165-167.

<sup>11</sup> Florin Stan, "Ethnic Communities from the Pontic Space. Jews from Constanta (I)", in: *The Yearbook of the Romanian Navy Museum*, 2005, volume VIII, Publishing House of the National Company Administration of Maritime Ports Constanta S.A., Constanta, pp. 223-224.

<sup>12</sup> Dr. Carol Blum, "On the Ancient Jewish Colonies of Pontus-Euxine. The Activity of the Apostle Andrei", in: *The Jews of Romania in Historiographical Texts. Anthology*, Introduction, selection of texts, notes and comments, translations from Hungarian, German and French, bibliography and indexes by Lya Benjamin, Hasefer Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004, pp. 538-540. See in the context

In the Byzantine period, there is no direct epigraphic, archaeological or documentary evidence attesting to the existence of an organized Jewish community in Dobruja. However, the frontier character of the region, located between the Byzantine world, the Pontic steppe and the North-Euxine trade routes, makes plausible the presence of isolated Jewish individuals or groups, integrated into the trade networks that crossed the Pontic space. The lack of explicit attestations in inscriptions or chronicles does not exclude the possibility of a discreet presence, difficult to document in the absence of clear Jewish symbols or specific onomastics.

In the adjacent northern regions, especially in the north-Pontic steppes and in the Crimea, Arab and Byzantine documents from the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries confirm the existence of Jewish communities, especially in the context of the conversion to Judaism of the Khazarian elite. According to Kevin Alan Brook, Jews were active in centres such as Chersones and Atil, and Byzantium carried out Orthodox missionary activities in areas dominated by Khazars, in a plural religious context, in which Judaism was among the tolerated or competing religious forms<sup>13</sup>. Although these communities cannot be precisely located in Dobruja, the geographical proximity and commercial contacts make it possible for there to be Jewish influences around the mouths of the Danube.

In the absence of direct evidence, a comparative and contextual approach is required: in Moesia and Thrace, Roman epigraphy attests the presence of Jewish symbols (such as the menorah) and names of Hebrew origin, suggesting that, at the regional level, the Jewish diaspora was active. Thus, the existence of Jewish groups dispersed in Dobruja, even if not organized by the community or archaeologically visible, cannot be excluded. The hypothesis is indirectly supported by the openness and religious interference of the region, especially in the port areas and on the Danube trade routes.

Thus, before the integration of Dobruja into the administrative structure of the Ottoman Empire, a vague but methodologically pertinent historical background of a potential Jewish presence emerges as part of a complex commercial and religious landscape<sup>14</sup>. These antecedents, even if fragmented, would be in the Ottoman era the starting point of a Jewish presence better documented and integrated into the imperial system.

### **3. The Jews in the Context of the Ottoman Domination (15<sup>th</sup> –19<sup>th</sup> centuries)**

#### ***3.1. Integration of Dobruja into the Ottoman System and the Confessional Pluralism of the Region***

After the end of the process of conquering the territory of Dobruja in the first decades of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, within the Ottoman-Moldavian and Ottoman-Wallachian - Polish confrontations, Dobruja was gradually integrated into the administrative system of the Ottoman Empire. It was organized within *the Sanjak Silistra*, part of *the Eyalet Rumelia*, and later the Danube Vilayeti (Tuna Vilayeti), a structure established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to a *defter* from the period of Sultan Bayezid II (1481–1512), the Kazakh Hârşova included localities such as Isaccea, Tulcea, Babadag, Cernavoda or Medgidia, reflecting a significant urban density and a network of settlements with commercial, customs and strategic functions.

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of a Jewish presence in Roman Dacia: Silviu Sanie, *Culte orientale în Dacia romană.1. Syrian and Palmyrian Cults*, Scientific and Encyclopedic Publishing House, Bucharest, 1981, pp. 161-162, as well as Ladislau Gyemant, "The Romanian Jewry: Historical Destiny, Tolerance, Integration, Marginalisation", in: *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, Volume 1, Issue 3, Winter 2002, p. 86.

<sup>13</sup> Kevin Alan Brook, *The Jews of Khazaria*, Third Edition, Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, pp. 59–67.

<sup>14</sup> Natalia Midvichi, "A Few Considerations on the Jews in Dobruja Province During the Ottoman Rule", in: *Peuce*, VII (XX), New Series, Studies and Research in History and Archaeology, Tulcea, 2009, p. 425.

The multi-confessional character of the region was a result of the deliberate policy of colonization and redistribution of the population, typical of the Ottoman system in the border areas. According to Nikolay Antov, in the 15<sup>th</sup> –16<sup>th</sup> centuries Dobruja experienced an accelerated process of demographic reconfiguration, being colonized by Turkomans from Anatolia and Thrace, but also by Christians from other parts of the Balkans<sup>15</sup>. In this context, the Jewish presence, although numerically limited, was integrated into a complex ethnic and religious mosaic, dominated by relations between Muslims, Orthodox Christians, Armenians, Jews and other groups.

### ***3.2. The Legal and Social Status of Jews in the Ottoman Empire***

The Jews, like other non-Muslim populations (Orthodox Christians, Catholics, Armenians), were included in the *millet* system, which regulated the life of the religious communities in the Empire. As *dhimmi* — an Islamic term for "people of the Book" (*ahl al-kitab*), Jews enjoyed legal protection in exchange for submission to the authority of the sultan and the payment of special taxes, the most important of which was *the cizye*, imposed on non-Muslim heads of households. This organization, although hierarchical, allowed a relatively wide denominational autonomy, with the internal functioning of the rabbinical courts, the administration of synagogues and the management of community property.

As Haim Gerber points out, the legal status of Ottoman Jews was complex and varied depending upon the region and period, oscillating between pragmatic tolerance and structural discrimination. Haim Gerber points out that the attitude of the Ottoman Empire towards the Jews – as *zimmī* – oscillated between legal severity and contextual pragmatism, depending on the era and circumstances. For the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the author shows that "the way the *zimmī* were treated clearly inclined towards the latter",<sup>16</sup> that is, towards administrative flexibility and practical negotiation. Also, Aryeh Shmuelevitz notes that *the rabbinic responsa*<sup>17</sup> of the 15<sup>th</sup> –16<sup>th</sup> centuries reflect not only an adaptation to Islamic norms, but also an active economic relationship with the authorities and the majority Muslim population<sup>18</sup>.

Although legally and fiscally subordinated, the Jews enjoyed, in relation to other minorities, a series of privileges, especially in the economic<sup>19</sup> and diplomatic fields. The Hidayat Syahr highlights that Jews were often preferred in the roles of translators<sup>20</sup>, tax collectors, or commercial intermediaries, due to their transnational networks and linguistic skills. This favourable situation is also confirmed by the analysis of Syahrul Hidayat, which shows that the Jews, through their economic positioning, benefited from patronage relations within the Ottoman administration, thus acquiring effective protection against local abuses<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Nikolay Antov, "Demographic and Ethno-Religious Change in 15th- and 16th-Century Ottoman Dobruja (NE Balkans)", in *Radovi - Zavod za hrvatsku povijest*, vol. 51, no. 1, Zagreb, 2019, p. 95

<sup>16</sup> Haim Gerber, *Crossing Borders. Jews and Muslims in Ottoman Law, Economy and Society*, p. 69.

<sup>17</sup> The term *responsa* (lat. 'responses'; in Hebrew: *She'elot u-Teshuvot*, meaning "questions and answers") designates a literary-legal genre in the rabbinic tradition, consisting of the written answers of rabbis to questions received from Jewish communities or other rabbis.

<sup>18</sup> Aryeh Shmuelevitz, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire in the Late Fifteenth and the Sixteenth Centuries. Administrative, Economic, Legal and Social Relations as Reflected in the Responsa*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1984, pp. 57-58.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Issawi, "The Transformation of the Economic Position of the *Millet*s in the Nineteenth Century", in: Benjamin Braude (Ed.), *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, The Abridged Edition, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., London, 2014, pp. 160-161.

<sup>20</sup> Syahrul Hidayat, "Minority Groups in Ottoman Turkey Before 1856", p. 34.

<sup>21</sup> Syahrul Hidayat, "Minority Groups in Ottoman Turkey Before 1856", p. 37.

### 3.3. Jewish Settlement and Migration Policies in Ottoman Dobruja

One of the fundamental features of the Ottoman administration in border provinces, such as Dobruja, was the use of controlled migration as a tool to consolidate authority and economic revitalization of peripheral regions. In this context, Jews – especially those of the Sephardic rite, expelled from the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century – were integrated into the plans to repopulate key cities in the Balkans and Anatolia<sup>22</sup>. According to Stanford J. Shaw, the Ottoman sultans, beginning with Bayezid II (1481-1512), deliberately sought to attract Jews by guaranteeing freedom of worship and granting tax privileges, precisely to capitalize on the economic potential of these communities<sup>23</sup>.

Dobruja, especially the northern area of the maritime Danube, was one of the possible destinations for such demographic reconfigurations, although in the absence of direct quantitative sources, the phenomenon must be deduced indirectly from the convergence of favourable factors: strategic position, river trade networks and access to the Black Sea. Fragmentary data, such as the mentions of the economic activity of the Jews in the ports of Isaccea and Tulcea, suggest the existence of stable or semi-nomadic groups that maintained commercial contacts between the imperial capital, the Pontic ports and the Moldavian fairs.

According to Andrew Robarts, in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Dobruja was an area of imperial periphery, crossed by multiple migratory movements and characterized by a heterogeneous demographic landscape. In an Ottoman census from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, in ten kazas from Dobruja – including Tulcea, Isaccea, Măcin, Hârşova, Babadag, Constanța and Mangalia – 119 Jewish families are recorded, along with Turkish, Tatar, Romanian, Bulgarian, Lipovan, Armenian, Greek and German communities<sup>24</sup>.

The Jewish diplomatic presence in the Romanian space (including in Moldavia and Wallachia) on the part of the Ottoman Porte, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, is another indication of the trust granted by the Ottoman authorities to these communities. Bülent Şenay's study highlights the fact that various representatives of the Sublime Porte in the Danube principalities were Jews, often coming from Sephardic networks in Istanbul or Adrianople, some of whom also had Austrian citizenship, which underlines their dual loyalty and diplomatic versatility<sup>25</sup>.

These settlement and mobility policies were carried out in a climate of relative religious stability, without major interethnic conflicts documented in the Ottoman sources. The Ottoman-Dobrujan multicultural model, far from being idealized, allowed Jews – like other communities – to preserve their religious identity and actively contribute to the region's economy. This reality is also highlighted by Nilgün İsmail in his study on the social and economic life in the Danube vilayet during the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II, which explicitly mentions the functioning of schools, religious centres and commercial infrastructure in Dobruja localities with mixed<sup>26</sup> populations.

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<sup>22</sup> Tudor Mateescu, "Evreii din oraşul Silistra în timpul stăpânirii otomane", in: Dr. Silviu Sanie, Dr. Dumitru Vitcu (Coord.), *Studia et Acta Historiae Iudaeorum Romaniae*, III, Hasefer Publishing House, Bucharest, 1998, p. 62.

<sup>23</sup> A passage attributed to Rabbi Elijah Capsali, in which it is stated that Bayezid II: "heard of all the evils that the king of Spain had done to the Jews [...] He sent letters and messengers to proclaim throughout his empire that no governor should refuse entry to the Jews or expel them. On the contrary, they were to be received with good will, and anyone who acted against this provision was to be punished with death [...] you call a wise king, the one who impoverishes his kingdom and enriches us by expelling the Jews" – Stanford J. Shaw, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic*, Macmillan Press LTD, 1991, pp. 33-34.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Robarts, *Migration and Disease in the Black Sea Region. Ottoman-Russian Relations in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2017, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> Bülent Şenay, "Jews in the Ottoman Foreign Service Dispatched in the Romanian Principalities (Wallachia and Moldova) Until Early 20th Century", in: *Uludağ Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi*, 29/2 (Aralık 2020), p. 584.

<sup>26</sup> Nilgün İsmail, "Some Aspects of Social and Economic Life of Turkish Community Living in Northern Dobruja During Abdulhamid II", in: *Sultan II. Abdülhamid Sempozyumu, 20-21 Şubat 2014, Selanik: İç ve Dış Siyaset*, Bildiriler, Türk Tarih Kurumu, Ankara, 2014, p. 153.

Therefore, in the period of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Dobruja became a space of interaction and coexistence, where the Jewish communities, although few and often marginal, benefited from the legal and economic framework offered by the Ottoman Empire to develop a coherent and active presence in the region, especially in the sphere of city trade<sup>27</sup>.

#### **4. The Economic and Social Activity of the Jews in Ottoman Dobruja**

##### **4.1. Commercial Networks and Jewish Economic Influence in the 15<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries**

Within the Ottoman Empire, trade was one of the main spheres of activity open to religious minorities, and Jews – especially those from the Sephardic diaspora – occupied a privileged place in the economic architecture of the border regions. Dobruja, with its strategic position between the Balkans, the Danube and the Black Sea, was integrated into a dynamic trade system, which capitalized on river and seaports, annual fairs and trans-Balkan routes<sup>28</sup>. The Jews contributed to this dynamic as merchants, suppliers, intermediaries or tax collectors, benefiting from the protection of the sultan and the legal status of dhimmi, which, although restrictive on a symbolic level, was functional on an economic level.

The example of Joseph Nasi (c. 1524–1579) illustrates the model of the Sephardic Jew integrated into the Ottoman economic and diplomatic elite of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Nasi, a protégé of Sultan Selim II, received the title of Duke of Naxos<sup>29</sup> and controlled important trade monopolies, including the export of wines to Poland and the wax trade, activities through which he accumulated significant resources and exerted influence on the policies of the Central European space. Although there are no direct mentions of its involvement in the transit through Dobruja, the geostrategic position of the region on the way to Eastern Europe suggests that the circuits controlled by Nasi may have interacted indirectly with this area<sup>30</sup>.

Giovanni Botero, in his famous treatise *Universal Relations* (1591), noted the strategic importance of Dobruja in the trade between the Levant and Central Europe, explicitly mentioning the fact that "the goods are handled (especially in Moldavia) by Armenians, Jews, Saxons, Hungarians, Raguzans, and consist of grains and wines that go to Russia and Poland, beef skins, the so-called 'schiavine', wax, honey, bottles of linden roots, prized for the beauty of their vines, cow pastrami, vegetables and butter for Constantinople. The geranium or malvasia from Candia to Poland and Germany also passes through there, from which the ruler makes a lot of money".<sup>31</sup>

At the regional level, Ottoman documents and Western diplomatic reports indicate the involvement of some members of the Jewish communities in economic and fiscal activities in the ports of Ottoman Dobruja, such as Isaccea, Chilia or Tulcea<sup>32</sup>. Although rarely explicitly mentioned in Ottoman administrative sources, Jews appear in trade registers and diplomatic

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<sup>27</sup> Adrian Rădulescu, Ion Bitoleanu, *The History of Dobrogea*, Second Revised Edition, ExPonto Publishing House, Constanța, 1998, p. 216.

<sup>28</sup> Hakan Engin, "Resmi Kaynaklara Göre Demografik ve Sosyo-Ekonomik Yapıya Dair Bazı Tespit ve Değerlendirmeler", in: *Balkan Araştırma Enstitüsü Dergisi / Journal of Balkan Research Institute*, Cilt/Volume 12, Sayı/Number 2, Aralık/December 2023, p. 385.

<sup>29</sup> Haim Gerber, *Crossing Borders. Jews and Muslims in Ottoman Law, Economy and Society*, p. 13; Cecil Roth, *The House of Nasi: the Duke of Naxos*, Greenwood Press, Publishers, New York, 1948, p. 78.

<sup>30</sup> Bülent Şenay, "Jews in the Ottoman Foreign Service Dispatched in the Romanian Principalities (Wallachia and Moldova) Until Early 20th Century", pp. 582-584.

<sup>31</sup> Giovanni Botero, *Le relazioni universali*, Rome, 1591, p. 165, *apud* Dr. Moses Rosen, Dr. Alexandru Vianu, Sergiu Stanciu (ed.), *Sources and Testimonies Concerning the Jews in Romania*, vol. 2, Federation of Jewish Communities in the Socialist Republic of Romania. The Documentation Center, Bucharest, 1988, p. 197.

<sup>32</sup> Aurel-Daniel Stănică, Daniela Stănică, "Economy and Commerce in Tulcea in the 14th-16th Centuries", in: Aurel-Daniel Stănică, Gabriel Custurea, Daniela Stănică, Emanuel Ploeanu, *Dobruja (Dobrogea): historical and archaeological coordinates*, StudIS Publishing House, Iași, 2026, p. 115.

correspondence as effective intermediaries between Greek, Armenian, Muslim, and Christian merchants in the Balkans. They capitalized on the advantages of bilingualism<sup>33</sup> – knowing Ladino, Greek, Turkish, sometimes even Romanian – as well as the trans-imperial trade networks of the Sephardic diaspora in Istanbul, Edirne and Thessaloniki. The literature reveals that the Jews of the Ottoman Empire were frequently co-opted into commercial, fiscal or diplomatic positions, especially in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, not only because of their technical skills, but also in the context of a pragmatic administrative policy. Thus, Aryeh Shmuelevitz notes that a significant number of Jews held positions of "emin" (tax controllers) or tax collectors, especially in ports and border fairs, being part of a flexible system of managing state revenues<sup>34</sup>. Haim Gerber adds that this economic involvement was based on a "relationship of conditional trust", in which the imperial authorities used the expertise of minority communities to manage resources without altering the established religious hierarchy<sup>35</sup>.

Within the Ottoman Empire of the 15<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, there are documents showing that Jews were involved in the administration of tax revenues and in the economic mechanisms of the state, especially in urban and commercial regions. Thus, in provinces such as Edirne, Bursa or Istanbul, rabbinical responsa and Ottoman tax documents attest to the appointment of Jews as emins (*tax inspectors*) and amils (*revenue administrators*) within mukata'at (*tax farms*), *managing income from activities such as salt production, wax factories, cattle markets or taxes on the deceased people without heirs* (beytülmal<sup>36</sup>).

These positions were not isolated exceptions, but part of a systemic model of fiscal delegation to religious minorities that offered guarantees of economic efficiency and administrative loyalty<sup>37</sup>. Although in the consulted Ottoman *defters* there are no explicit Jewish officials in the cities of Dobruja, the institutional analogies with Edirne and Silistra – both important administrative centres, located in the same imperial region – allow the formulation of a methodological hypothesis regarding the applicability of this model in the Lower Danube area as well.

In addition to their tax duties, Jews were also active in the financial field, especially through lending activities. Since Islamic law (shari'a) prohibited the granting of interest-bearing loans between Muslims, but not between Muslims and *zimmī*, Jews played a significant role as providers of capital in Ottoman cities. Haim Gerber shows that, especially in the urban areas of Anatolia and Rumelia, Jews were involved in loan transactions between private individuals and even in lending to small producers or local officials<sup>38</sup>. This type of financial activity contributed, on the one hand, to the consolidation of the economic position of Jewish communities, but, on the other hand, might have generated social tensions in times of economic crisis, drought or price increases.

#### **4.2. Centres of Jewish Life: Location and Dynamics**

The urban map of Ottoman Dobruja was deeply influenced by its geographical position between Central Europe, the Balkans and the Near East. The cities with access to the Danube or with strategic positions on the Balkan trade routes became, starting with the 15<sup>th</sup> century, centres

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<sup>33</sup> Andrada Danciu, "The Jewish Community of Constanța from 1878 to 1930", in Vasile Grădian, Olga Lukacs (ed.), *Telling Stories of Hope – Reconciliation in South East Europe Compared to World-Wide Experiences*, Ed. Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj Napoca, 2010, p. 353.

<sup>34</sup> Aryeh Shmuelevitz, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire in the Late Fifteenth and the Sixteenth Centuries. Administrative, Economic, Legal and Social Relations as Reflected in the Responsa*, pp. 64-69.

<sup>35</sup> Haim Gerber, *Crossing Borders. Jews and Muslims in Ottoman Law, Economy and Society*, pp. 132-134.

<sup>36</sup> Aryeh Shmuelevitz, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire in the Late Fifteenth and the Sixteenth Centuries. Administrative, Economic, Legal and Social Relations as Reflected in the Responsa*, p. 68-70.

<sup>37</sup> Haim Gerber, *Crossing Borders. Jews and Muslims in Ottoman Law, Economy and Society*, pp. 132-136.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 132-136.

of administration, trade and diversified confessional life. The Jews, although numerically small, found a stable place in these centres, especially where the economic context allowed the operation of transregional trade networks.

Isaccea, a city located further south on the right bank of the Danube, was not only an important commercial and military crossing point, but also a confessional centre with diverse religious structures<sup>39</sup>. Ottoman documents mention the existence of an imperial mosque, but also of a *mahalle* (neighbourhood) with a non-Muslim population, probably mixed (Greeks, Armenians, Jews). According to Nilgün İsmail, Isaccea was included in *the Sanjak* of Tulcea and benefited from a remarkable economic and educational infrastructure, including denominational schools and transport networks developed since the 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>40</sup>. It is likely that the Jews of Isaccea, documented only towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>41</sup>, were involved in river trade and in the management of supplies for the Ottoman troops in the region, activities attested in other similar centres in Rumelia.

Babadag, the administrative residence of the Pasha of Silistra and a stationing place for the Ottoman troops on their way north, was one of the most important political centres of Ottoman Dobruja. In his work on the city of Babadag, Ioan Vasilia highlights the role of the city as a military and economic centre, with a heterogeneous population<sup>42</sup>. Jewish settlements, although less visible in direct sources, can be inferred based on the presence of Jewish officials and translators at the Pasha's court, as well as the commercial activities recorded in the *defters* of the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>43</sup>. Babadag functioned as a regional centre for the redistribution of goods – especially textiles and spices – that Jews were traditionally known for and also had efficient networks in this respect. On a diplomatic mission to Constantinople at the end of 1709, the Swede Michael Eneman wrote that many Jews and Christians lived in Babadag<sup>44</sup>.

In all the three cities, it is presumable that there were incipient forms of Jewish community organization — though not always in the institutionalized form of a synagogue or a *beth of*. Given the semi-nomadic nature of trade and the intermediary role of the Jews, it is likely that the groups were small but connected to larger centres in Thessaloniki, Istanbul or Adrianople, from where they received religious and legal support, in the form of rabbinic responses or ritual messengers (*shaliah*).

The expansion of the Ottoman urban system to the south of Dobruja in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries led to the development of new centres of economic and confessional life. Among them, the localities of Kara-Su (present-day Medgidia) and Bazargic (Dobrich, today in Bulgaria) were important points of connection on the "Balkan Road" between Edirne, Varna and Silistra. These cities, developed especially after the administrative reorganization during the Tanzimat, became frontier trading hubs, where the Jewish presence was indirectly attested by tax documents, rabbinical sources, and diplomatic reports.

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<sup>39</sup> T. Mateescu, *From the Links of the City of Isaccea with the Romanian Territories from the Left of the Danube to 1877*, in "Analele Dobrogei – Serie nouă", year V, no. 2, Constanța, 1999, pp. 67-96.

<sup>40</sup> Nilgün İsmail, "Some Aspects of Social and Economic Life of Turkish Community Living in Northern Dobruja During Abdulhamid II", p. 151.

<sup>41</sup> Natalia Midvichi, "A Few Considerations on the Jews in Dobruja Province During the Ottoman Rule," p. 426

<sup>42</sup> Ioan Vasiliu, "Historical News and Archaeological Data Regarding the City of Babadag in the Middle Ages", in: *Peuce*, XII, Studies and Research in History and Archaeology, Tulcea, 1996, p. 197.

<sup>43</sup> Natalia Midvichi, "A Few Considerations on the Jews in Dobruja Province During the Ottoman Rule", p. 428

<sup>44</sup> Hary Kuller, *A History of the Jews in Romania in Data*, vol. 1, Hasefer Publishing House, Bucharest, 2000, p. 111.

### 4.3. Social and Interfaith Life

One of the defining aspects of Ottoman Dobruja was its profoundly multi-ethnic and multi-confessional character, supported by an administration that, although hierarchical and divided into several confessions, allowed the peaceful coexistence of various religious communities. In this context, Jews lived alongside Muslims (Turks, Tatars), Orthodox Christians (Romanians, Bulgarians, Greeks), Armenians, as well as other minorities, in a fragile but functional social balance. The social life of the Jews in Dobruja was not isolated, but deeply interconnected with other communities, in a space characterized by commercial exchanges, institutional collaboration and administrative pragmatism.

The interfaith character of the region is reflected in the Ottoman sources which, although elaborated from a Muslim perspective, explicitly mention the status and obligations of each community. The *millet* system played an important role in this organization, giving Jews religious and legal autonomy in internal affairs, but also controlled integration into the social life of the cities<sup>45</sup>. Thus, Jews could manage their synagogues, cemeteries and community funds, but commercial, legal and even housing relations with other *millets* were regulated by the local Ottoman authorities.

Several documents show that in localities such as Isaccea, Tulcea or Medgidia, Jews lived in mixed neighbourhoods, together with Greeks, Armenians and Muslims. According to Nilgün İsmail, the cohabitation in these cities was marked by a "functional cosmopolitanism", in which religious identities were maintained, but social interactions were inevitable and often peaceful<sup>46</sup>. Such urban structures favoured intercultural exchanges: Jews participated in common markets, collaborated with merchants of other religions, and sometimes rented space in Muslim-owned caravansaries.

This reality is also confirmed by Haim Gerber's analysis of the Ottoman provincial cities, which shows that the "zimmi", although legally subordinated, did not live in isolation, but in permanent interaction with the Muslim majority, in a form of daily symbiosis<sup>47</sup>. Unlike the large centres of Anatolia or the Levant, where the communities were large enough to create their own enclaves, in Dobruja the contact between Jews and other inhabitants was inevitable, favouring a culture of pragmatic tolerance and relatively peaceful cohabitation.

In terms of demographics, the Jewish communities in Dobruja have always been small compared to the Muslim or Orthodox ones. Fragmentary data indicate the presence of only a few hundred Jews in the region<sup>48</sup>, concentrated in port cities and administrative centres. This small but strategic distribution has encouraged forms of inter-communitarian solidarity, particularly in the economic and mutual assistance fields.

Another notable feature is the lack of mentions of major religious or interethnic conflicts between Jews and other communities in Dobruja during the Ottoman period. The absence of these events from Ottoman and Western sources can be interpreted as a sign of a social balance supported by both the imperial administration and the mutual dependence between local groups. Historian Ibram Nuredin affirms, to support this idea, that "the history of Dobruja has not recorded events, facts, with dramatic confrontations, with incalculable losses of lives and human values. There were

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<sup>45</sup> Ahmet Yaman, "Jews in the Ottoman Millet System and their Judicial Status. A Family Law Review", in: *İlahiyat Studies*, Vol. 4 No. 2 (2013), p. 215.

<sup>46</sup> Nilgün İsmail, "Some Aspects of Social and Economic Life of Turkish Community Living in Northern Dobruja During Abdulhamid II", p. 154.

<sup>47</sup> Haim Gerber, *Crossing Borders. Jews and Muslims in Ottoman Law, Economy and Society*, pp. 68.

<sup>48</sup> In 1850, 119 Jewish families are attested - Captain M.D. Ionescu, *Dobrogiia on the threshold of the twentieth century. Geografia matematică, fizică, politică, economică și militară*, Bucharest, Atelierele Grafice I.V. Socecu, 1904, p. 347.

no churches or mosques damaged, the respective buildings have kept their function and none of them was demolished. In Dobruja there is no record of large-scale interethnic and interconfessional disturbances."<sup>49</sup>

On the cultural level, the Jews from Dobruja maintained relations with the rabbinical centres of the southern Balkans and Anatolia, but they also participated in local public life, especially in fairs, tax institutions and in auxiliary roles (translators, officials, merchants). This participation did not lead to a religious syncretism, but rather to a coexistence in which confessional boundaries were respected but were at the same time socially and economically permeable.

## Conclusions

The present study aimed at the historical reconstruction of the presence of Jews in Dobruja during the Ottoman domination (1418–1878), through the analysis of the available documents, the historiographical sources and the regional context specific to a multicultural border space. Far from representing a simple marginal episode of Jewish history in South-Eastern Europe, the Dobruja experience is part of a broader model of coexistence under Ottoman authority, marked by legal tolerance, economic integration and interfaith dynamics.

The Jews of Dobruja benefited from the administrative framework of the Ottoman Empire, which, through *the millet* system and the status of *dhimmi*, ensured them functional religious autonomy, but also opportunities for involvement in economic life. Their presence is documented in the main urban centres of the region – Isaccea, Tulcea, Babadag, Kara-Su (Medgidia) – where they carried out commercial, fiscal and diplomatic duties. Mobility, adaptability, and transregional networks have made them indispensable players in the Ottoman economy of Dobruja, despite their small number.

Also, the analysis of the interactions between Jews and other confessional communities indicates a climate of pragmatic conviviality, without great ethnic or religious tensions, in which the authority of the sultan played the role of balance keeper. This coexistence was not devoid of hierarchies or inequalities, but it allowed the survival and affirmation of the Jewish community in a space at the crossroads between East and West.

The above research enhances the importance of reevaluating the history of the Jews from Dobruja in the broader context of the Ottoman Empire, but also within the Romanian historiography, where the minorities of the pre-modern period are often treated fragmentarily or peripherally. The study suggests that future research could use more of the Ottoman sources, rabbinical responsa and local archaeological research, to complete the picture of a discreet but significant Jewish presence in the ethnic and confessional mosaic of Dobruja.

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<sup>49</sup> Nuredin Ibram, "Historical and Cultural Landmarks of Interethnic and Interconfessional Coexistence in Dobrogea – Romanian Land", in: *Akademios. Journal of Science, Innovation, Culture and Art*, No. 4 (51), 2018, p. 100.

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