

SHIPYARDS AT THE DANUBE IN THE 17TH–19TH CENTURIES

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Abstract. *The research of the problem which was the subject of the present communication allows us to formulate, without reticence, the conclusion that, starting with the 17th century – although logically we should accept the idea that this activity had been carried on even before – there were Romanian shipyards at the Danube.*

Keywords: Historiography, Shipbuilding, navigation, Galați, Brăila, Giurgiu, Zimnicea, Adrianopole

The communication¹ I am presenting in front of you synthesizes a research begun and developed 40 years ago, suggested to me by Constantin C. Giurescu, but which, due reasons that do not interest anybody today, I had not published, but I did not even finalize it, to make closer to a book.

When I proposed the present communication to be included the program of our session I considered that it might be owing to the novelty of the subject, to the information and evaluations promoting interesting conclusions regarding the respective domain of activity in the ensemble of the country's economic and social life in the 17th–19th centuries.

1. Until the second half of the 20th century, Romanian historiography stopped only rarely on ship constructions and on shipyards in the Romanian Countries. When it did it, there were more often singular and limited references, these issues – of an importance that does not need to be emphasized – not doing the object of a monograph or being at least an important part of a work of large coverage regarding the Danube² or the history of Romania³.

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¹ Communication presented at the Spring Session 2011, *The Danube: Past, Present and Future*, organized by the Academy of Romanian Scientists, June 3, 2011.

² Far from addressing a reproach, I note pure and simply that the work *Dunărea în istoria poporului român*, by Iulian Cârțână and Ilie Seftiuc, published in 1972, in Bucharest, under the auspices of the Editura Științifică, in its 402 pages there is nothing, absolutely nothing, about the shipyards at the Danube, even more hard to understand when the authors refer to the river navigation and to the companies that had organized and supervised it.

³ The shipyard at the Danube are treated in 6 (six) lines in *Istoria Românilor*, vol. VII, tome I, *Constituirea României moderne (1821–1878)*, coordinator acad. Dan Berindei, Academia Română, Secția de Științe Istorice și Arheologie, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 2003, p. 155. At *Bibliography* chapter VI mentions a single source (found out by us later) and namely: I. Toderașcu, *Din activitatea șantierului naval Galați în prima jumătate a secolului al XIX-lea*, in „Analele Științifice

2. The lack of a methodical research of the documentary material concerning these aspects, sometime reduced to a couple of disparate information, caused the formulation and persistence of some conclusions insufficiently based on the particular age such an interesting phenomenon.

3. The Romanian concern for shipbuilding and navigation organization at/on the Danube finds its explanation in our specific geographic situation – we have the longest and richest hydrological segment of the river and we enjoy an immediate sea horizon – which had included and include the Danube as one of the fundamental elements of the life and historical becoming of the Romanian people.

4. Over 45 years ago, Constantin C. Giurescu published a study regarding the naval construction in the Romanian Principalities, formulating the conclusion: “There was an old occupation of naval constructions, in the *Giurgiu*, *Galați* and *Căscioarele* shipyards; there were constructed not only ships for the Danube, but also sea ships, not only commercial vessels, but also war ships, from the kayak armed with a cannon, during the reign of Brâncoveanu, up to the frigate with dozens of cannons, by the end of the 18th century”.¹

5. I deepened this research, benefiting from the suggestions and stage observations of Constantin C. Giurescu, synthesizing and ordering relevant information regarding the shipyards and constructions at the Danube, which, maybe, even if I would not go further with the investigation closed in 1972, I would gather and publish in an interesting booklet, which does not close the prospect of continuing a research in this domain and does not rob anybody of the joy of identifying new relevant data.

6. The first sure documentary information about these naval constructions in the shipyards at the Danube – known until now – come from the 17th century.

7. During the reign of Constantin Brâncoveanu (1688–1714), there was certainly a shipyard at *Giurgiu*, where there were built vessels of various categories.

8. The study of the register of the treasury of Constantin Brâncoveanu, allows us to state that:

a) During the reign of Constantin Brâncoveanu, at *Giurgiu*, there were built and repaired ships of various kinds;

b) The frequency of the sums allotted in this sense proves the continuity and amplitude of these activities;

ale Universității, «Al. I. Cuza»“, Iași, ist. 16, 1970, 1, pp. 67–76; *Ibidem*, p. 166. Dedicating to sea and river navigation in Romania a substantial chapter, of almost 50 pages, in *Enciclopedia României*, the scholars Ion Manoliu and Nicolae Dașcovici do not reserve the smallest space for the Romanian shipyards at the Danube – *Enciclopedia României*, vol. IV, *Economia României. Economia națională, circulație, distribuție și consum*, Imprimeria Națională, București, 1943, pp. 78–127.

¹ Constantin C. Giurescu, *Construcții navale în Principatele Române în secolele al XVII-lea și al XVIII-lea*, in *Omagiu lui P. Constantinescu-Iași cu prilejul împlinirii a 70 de ani*, Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Române, București, 1965, pp. 317–328.

c) The concern for the insurance of the material and financial means necessary for the good running attest to an organized work, whose development is rigorously followed from the level of a some authority state institutions;

d) The existence of specialist people in such constructions (foreign Turks/Greeks – and Romanians);

e) The institution of some financial obligations strictly regulated and followed (for counties, boyars, and guilds).¹

9. Another shipyard, at *Căscioarele*, is shown as very active in the last decade of the 18th century.²

10. A series of documentary information, from the second half of the 18th century, attest – directly or indirectly – that the construction of vessels, commercial or military, continued to be constantly followed in the Romanian ports at the Danube, first of all at **Galați** and **Brăila**.

Personally, I did not identify evidence that might attest to the existence of shipyards at **Galați** and **Brăila** in the first half of the 18th century. Thus, we can make only suppositions; suppositions and, so much the more, speculations are good for nothing.

The activity of the **Galați** shipyard was well-known to foreigners who had visited us or had been in the close proximity of our countries, leaving us references either in their consular reports, or in their traveling memoirs.

The evidence of Peysonel and Boscowich – noted after some visits in the zone, in the early 60ies of the 18th century – are of a real interest for the knowledge of this activity, the construction of ships, at **Galați**.³

11. In 1775–1776, the Porte obliged⁴ the reigning princes of Wallachia and Moldavia, Alexandru Ypsilanti and Grigore III Ghica, to make each of them a galleon, each, 41.5 *cot* long.⁵

The reigning princes in the two countries conformed themselves with the promptitude of the received order⁶, placing the construction of ships in the two

¹ Constantin C. Aricescu, *Condica de venituri și cheltuieli a visteriei de la leatul 7202–7212* (1694–1704), in „Revista istorică a Arhivelor Române“, Imprimeria Statului, București, 1873, pp. 9, 13, 21, 29, 37, 39, 69, 73, 77–78, 79. See also Constantin C. Giurescu, *op.cit.*, in *l.c.*, pp. 329–324 and Ștefan Ionescu, Panait I. Panait, *Constantin Vodă Brâncoveanu. Viața. Domnia. Epoca* Editura Științifică, București, 1969, pp. 90, 91, 98.

² Constantin C. Giurescu, *op.cit.*, in *l.c.*, p. 326.

³ Peysonel, *Observations sur le commerce de la Mer Noire et des pays qui la bordent auxquelles on a joint deux mémoires sur le commerce de Smyrna et de l'isle de Candie*, Amsterdam, Leide, Rotterdam, Utrecht, 1787, pp. 278–279; Constantin C. Giurescu, *op.cit.*, in *l.c.*, p. 325; R.P. Joseph Boscowich, *Journal d'un voyage de Constantinople en Pologne fait à la suite de son excellence Mr. Jaq. Porter, ambassadeur de l'Angleterre, Franç Grasset et Comp. Lausanne, 1772*, pp. 196–198.

⁴ V.A. Urechia, *Istoria românilor*, vol. I, Litografia Carol Göbl, București, 1891, p. 139.

⁵ 1 *cot* = 0.664 m in Wallachia and 0.637 m in Moldavia.

⁶ N. Iorga, *Documente și cercetări asupra istoriei financiare a Principatelor Române*, p. I, Institutul de Arte Grafice „Eminescu“, București, 1902 (1900), p. 48.

countries under the sign of the foreign order – at least for some time – as origin, under the sign of rigor, as method.

12. The effects of these measures imposed by the Porte – which local authorities have set in motion, skilled labor, material and financial means– let us say that at the beginning of the fourth square of the 18th century, shipbuilding on our countries stepping into a new stage, exceeding improvisation and arbitrariness.

13. Evidence from the last quarter of the 18th century, diverse in point of origin and belonging (Crzanowski, Raicevich, Choiseul-Gouffier, Le Roy, a.o.) attest to:

a) The construction, simultaneously, at **Galați**, surely for several years, of commercial vessels and of war ships.¹

b) The design and construction of ships at the Romanian shipyards have been done, at the end of the 18th century by foreign specialists: French, as designers; Turks, as qualified workers; any new information might correct or complete this estimate.²

c) The correspondence of the French Ambassador, Count Choiseul-Gouffier, at Constantinople, informs us that the Porte imposed to the reigning princes of Wallachia and Moldavia, the obligation to build on their own expense war ships for the Porte.³

d) Construction materials, mainly wood, used at the Danube shipyards, but also at Constantinople, are of Romanian source; they are ordered by more and more provinces and in larger and larger quantities.⁴

e) Up to 1829, the main beneficiaries of large size ship building, on the sites on the territory of the Romanian Countries were the Turks: institutions of the Porte and private people.⁵

f) River circulation grows also on the great interior rivers of the Romanian Principalities, commercial ships and war ships are signaled more and more frequently at their mouths into the Danube. Nothing prevents us to believe that they had been built at the Romanian shipyards at the Danube.

g) The creation of special detachments – “the gang of the *Galiongi*” – commanded according to military criteria.¹

¹ Constantin C. Giurescu, *op.cit.*, in *l.c.*, pp. 325–326.

² V. Mihordea, *De Hauterive, secretar domnesc în Moldova (1785)*, in „Revista Istorică”, an XXI (1935), nr. 1–3 (ianuarie–martie), pp. 34–42.

³ *Ibidem*; Constantin C. Giurescu, *op.cit.*, in *l.c.*, p. 326; N. Iorga, *Documente și cercetări asupra istoriei financiare...*, p. 5.

⁴ Hurmuzaki, *Documente privind istoria României*, new serie, vol. I, *Rapoarte consulare ruse (1770–1776)*, documents gathered and published by Alexandru Vianu, Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Române, 1962, doc. nr. 157, p. 334.

⁵ Hurmuzaki, *Documente privind istoria României*, new serie, vol. I, *Rapoarte consulare ruse (1770–1776)*, documents gathered and published by Alexandru Vianu, Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Române, 1962, doc. nr. 166, p. 355; doc. nr. 232, pp. 457–458; doc. nr. 300, p. 540; Hurmuzaki, *Documente privitoare la istoria românilor*, supl. I, vol. II, p. 48.

14. A significant moment in the development of navigation on the Danube, but also in the history of ship building in the Romanian Countries was “*Hrisovul* (Princely Book)² for the ships that must navigate on the Danube”, given by the ruling prince of Wallachia, Alexandru Moruzi, on November 23, 1793: “In order to have the orders obeyed without difficulty, those which can be obeyed, and make the trade easier and stimulate the till of land, and invite the finding of crafts and urge the achievement of duties that the citizens are in duty bound and make all efforts to achieve with easiness and all those which I had seen as lacking to this country, one and the greatest being also the lack of the means with which it could carry and bring the goods with approval, on the water of the Danube, from one place to the other, I thought with much perseverance to make this good deed to the country and pray to the most powerful Empire, to whose kindness and goodwill having sympathy our uninterrupted prayers, to obtain permission and power, through the glorious and most famous hetisherif, with orders capable of all obedience, that Wallachia might make and have great boats, saic, kayaks, and all ships on the waters of the Danube, on the territory of the country, that would never be overrun by anybody, a privilege which from old times, has been lost by this country, although her borders are the Danube bed; thus, after the receipt of this permission, I looked hastily and I found now for the first time a vessel for the use of each county of the country...”

All these vessels were placed under the authority of the great spatharus, that is Ianache Văcărescu.

On the same occasion there were established: all vessels, at the level of counties to be placed under the command of a captain; a Turkish captain had also to be on board; the boatmen, function of the size of the vessel, had to be Christian.

People who served these vessels had to be paid by the Treasury; they were exempted to pay their obligations to the Treasury (of course, only during their service).

In winter these vessels were placed “in the princely marsh of Cărnogi at the south of Ilfov”, their protection being ensured by the necessary watchmen from the nautical guild.

The vessel construction by private persons could be made only with the authorization of the reigning prince.

15. The recognition on 1829 of the freedom of commerce and of navigation on the Danube gave a real impulse to the building of ships on the Romanian sites that were along the river:

¹ P.P. Panaitescu, *Călători poloni în Țările Române*, Academia Română, Studii și documente, XVII, București, 1930, p. 239; Constantin C. Giurescu, *op.cit.*, in *l.c.*, pp. 324–325; V.A. Urechia, *Istoria românilor*, vol. III, pp. 21 și 453.

² V.A. Urechia, *Istoria românilor*, vol. V, Tipografia și fonderia de litere Thoma Basilescu, București, 1893, pp. 96–100 or C. Ciuchi, *Istoria marinei române* (în curs de 18 secole – de la împăratul Trajan până la al 40-lea an de domnie a regelui Carol I), Tipografia Ovidiu H. Vurlis, Constanța, 1906, pp. 53–58.

a) “Wallachians and Moldavians – wrote Bois le Comte, on May 15, 1834 – started last year to build a couple of ships.”¹

b) In 1839, there were launched at **Galați** – according to some information – 2 merchant ships.²

c) According to other sources, in 1839, at **Galați**, there were finished and launched 7 vessels, and in 1840 other 10 vessels.³

d) A press news of 1841 lets us have a glimpse of the rapid development scored in only a couple of years by the activity of the Moldavian shipyard. “From the creation of the new establishment, our homeland gaining the right to build merchant ships, the last two years there were built at the Galați port, 71 vessels and the Moldavian flag started to enjoy the merchant navigation on the European seas.”⁴

16. Documentary mentions regarding a naval shipyard at **Brăila** would be identified as late as the first quarter of the 19th century.

The fact that **Brăila** had been since long one of the main ports of Wallachia entitles us to believe that such an occupation – the building of ships or at least ship repair – has a very old age.

On July 19, 1823, report sent from Bucharest confirms that “at **Brăila**, the Ottoman Government hurries, with all the haste it is capable, the works of building and cocking the flotilla, whose preparation it had ordered previously and for who the two principalities had been asked to furnish the wood and other things”⁵.

The information as it was conveyed justifies several suppositions:

a) The Porte used since long the **Brăila** shipyard;

b) At this shipyard there were made far-reaching works (construction and cocking), having in view a flotilla;

c) At the site there were concentrated, upon the order of the Sublime Porte, material resources, and maybe also human resources, from the two principalities.

We have got evidence⁶ regarding other launchings of vessels at **Brăila**, in 1838 and 1843. The launching, in 1843, of the ship named “*Marița*” (named so in honor of Lady *Marița*, the wife of reigning prince George Bibescu) was accompanied by a special solemnity. Cezar Bolliac, the poet and publicist, delivered on this occasion an allocution with vibrating notes: “Go, ship, go and show to Europe the colors of Romania; go to bring it the riches of our soil and ask it for its

¹ Hurmuzaki, *Documente privitoare la istoria românilor*. vol. XVII, *Corespondență diplomatică și rapoarte consulare franceze (1825–1846)*, published by Nerva Hodoș, București, 1913, doc. nr. DXXI, p. 377.

² „Albina Românească“, X (1839), p. 331.

³ Nicolae Soutzo, *Notions statistiques sur la Moldavie*, Jassy, 1849; cf. also Ion C. Filitti, *Domniile române sub Regulamentul Organic, 1834–1848*, București, 1915, p. 578.

⁴ „Icoana lumii“, I (1841), pp. 139–141.

⁵ Constantin C. Giurescu, *Istoricul orașului Brăila. Din cele mai vechi timpuri până astăzi*, Editura Științifică, București, 1968, p. 111.

⁶ I. Cojocaru, *Documente privitoare la economia Țării Românești* vol. II, Editura Științifică, București, doc. nr. 416, pp. 556–558; C. Ciuchi, *Istoria marinei române*, p. 90.

lights; go and visit Italy, France and Spain and tell their peoples that there are still Romanians from the Danube to the Dniester, from Tibiscum to the mount Ernul. When you will pass before Italy, raise your pavilions, this is your mother; when you will sail along the coasts of France, cheer it with yells of joy, she is the country of freedom. And if you reach Spain, you must reach it, you will tell us at your come back how much virtue was needed to this proud country to regenerate itself. You will salute in her your greatest sister, the homeland of Trajan.”¹ Full of enthusiasm, Cezar Bolliac, gave to publication, shortly afterwards, the poem “At the first Romanian ship.”²

17. In 1864, at **Brăila**, the naval reparations site “Brăila” was created.³

18. In 1856, at Turnu Severin, Erste Donau Dampfschiffahrts Gesellschaft (DDSG) initiated a shipyard⁴ that will impose itself rapidly.

In 1893, the Turnu Severin shipyard was bought back from the State Monopoly Administration, which paid to DDSG the sum of 240,000 Lei. Between 1893–1901, the shipyard was under the administration of the State Monopoly Administration, which oriented the activity towards the construction of transportation means it needed for the export of salt to Serbia. A series of improvements and completion of equipment are linked to this period. In the 1893–1901 period, when the site was under the administration of the State Monopoly Administration, there were built here 5 steamers (“Principele Carol”, “Giurgiu”, “Călărași”, “Domnul Tudor”, “Vasile Lupu”, 20 barges, 14 gangways, 1 floating crane, 3 ferry port torpedoes, etc.

19. In 1833 there functioned surely shipyards at **Giurgiu** and **Zimnicea**.⁵ It is hard to say if the small ship ordered by Alexandru Vilara, at April 24, 1833, was built in one or the other of the mentioned shipyards. We are tempted to believe – at least so is suggested by the context – that it was achieved at the **Zimnicea** shipyard, the wooden material being sent towards this point, to Ghiță Enescu, the tribute collector of Teleorman County, by Alexandru Vilara himself.⁶

20. On September 10, 1834, Alexandru Vilara addressed himself to Alexandru Ghica, the reigning prince of Wallachia, informing him about the efforts he made to build at **Giurgiu**, with Romanian materials, a ship, private property, and about his wish, as the first trip of his ship, flying the Romanian flag, to be made to Constantinople; Alexandru Vilara requested to be approved in an exceptional way to load his ship with a quantity of wheat of 300 chile⁷. The Prince put on this request a favorable resolution.⁸

¹ C. Ciuchi, *Istoria marinei române*, p. 90.

² „Curierul Românesc“, XV (1843), p. 188.

³ M. Trufașu, *Considerațiuni asupra industriei Brăilei*, in „Analele Brăilei“, I (1929), 1, p. 38.

⁴ *Șantierul naval din Severin*, in „Marea Noastră“, V (1937), nr. 2–3, pp. 110–111.

⁵ *Istoria României*, vol. III, Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Române, București, 1964, p. 961.

⁶ Arhivele Statului București, Ind. 1126, Fond Saint Georges, IV–29.

⁷ 1 chilă = 680 liters in Wallachia and 430 liters in Moldavia.

⁸ I. Cojocaru, *Documente privitoare la economia Țării Românești*, vol. II, doc. nr. 416, pp. 556–558.

21. Consular memorials sent by Mimaut, on November 30, 1834, and by Cochefort, on August 16, 1835, confirm the undertakings of some Romanian boyars, both in matter of ship construction, and in their engagement in ship transports under Romanian flag.¹

22. Ship building continued beyond doubt both at **Giurgiu**, and at **Zimnicea**; until 1836, 5 ships, came out of these sites, which navigated both on the Black Sea, and on the Mediterranean.²

23. Without reviewing them, we mention that there are numerous documentary information regarding the obligations of the Romanian countries to build bridges connected with the military need in various wars: places where they were achieved (**Hârșova, Oltenița, Turtucaia, Rusciuc, Gogoși, Gruia, Brăila**); military commanders and their requests in this sense (general in command Kamenski, major general Städter, major general Engelhardt, a.o.), civil engineers, materials and costs, expert workers (“smithies with Gypsy smiths”³, “stopping masters”⁴ and joiners), estimates and deductions, payers, a.o.⁵

24. The research of the problem which was the subject of the present communication allows us to formulate, without reticence, the conclusion that, starting with the 17th century – although logically we should accept the idea that this activity had been carried on even before – there were Romanian shipyards at the Danube.

The creation and existence of these shipyards, with a complex activity, were closely linked to the intimate needs of the life of the Romanian people.

The data the Romanian historiography disposes of regarding these domains allow an ample re-evaluation of the part and place given to these shipyards (inclusive of to our navigator activity) in the past of the Romanian people.

The old age of this institution is fully attested today.

Sure information attests – by the variety of documentary sources – the material and human resources involved in these activities, in various parts of the Romanian Principalities and beyond their borders.

Steadfastness remains another trait of our concerns in this domain.

Political circumstances influenced, in various ways, also this sector of human activity.

¹ Hurmuzaki, *Documente*, XVII, nr. DXL, p. 440; N. Iorga, *Istoria comerțului românesc. Epoca mai nouă*, Editura Tiparul Românesc, 1925, *passim*.

² „Curierul Românesc“, VII (1836), p. 61.

³ Smithy, where the smith or the shoeing smith is working and where he places his tools.

⁴ From the verb to stop the holes between the planks of the decks of a ship in order to make them water-tight.

⁵ I. Cojocaru, *Documente privitoare la economia Țării Românești*, vol. I, doc. nr. 22, pp. 91–92; doc. nr. 30, pp. 101–102; doc. nr. 41, pp. 114–115; doc. nr. 61, pp. 141–142; doc. nr. 62, p. 142; doc. nr. 63, p. 143; Idem, vol. II, doc. nr. 717, pp. 922–923; doc. nr. 720, p. 925.

The regaining of the freedom of commerce and the liberty of navigation on the Danube, under the Treaty of Adrianople of 1829, stimulated the construction of ships in this country.

The growth of the economic potentiality of the country, after 1859 and especially after 1918, caused the amplification and diversification of concerns in this domain, better fructifying the richer material and human resources, on the one hand, and, on the other, the Romanian and foreign scientific conquests and innovating technical experiences.

A largely comprising and deep prospect regarding the social and economic evolution in the period after the Second World War – noting different political regimes – demands an objective and rigorous research about the ship building in Romanian shipyards and all the objective and subjective factors, of the causes and responsibilities for the spectacular evolutions and the disastrous involutions in this process.

