

## A NEW THEORY ON THE ETYMOLOGY OF THE NAME OF “MOLDOVA”

Doina MĂNĂILĂ MAXIMEAN\*

**Abstract.** The goal of this paper is to present a new possible explanation for the name of the historical and geographical region called “Moldova”. The meaning of the word “Molde” is considered in “Old Norse” language, that is an old North Germanic language, and for the first time is connected to the name of Moldova. The meanings and origin of the words “Molde, Mulde” in Germanic languages and “Moldă” in Romanian language are studied and proved as related.

**Keywords:** Moldavia, Moldova etymology, toponymy, Old Norse, Goths, Romanian language

### 1. Introduction

Since hundreds of years linguists, historians and politicians try to find the origin of the name of the geographic and historical region called “Moldova” (Moldova or Moldavia in English). This vast and rich territory, situated in Eastern Europe, between the Eastern Carpathians and the Dniester River is nowadays divided between three European countries: Romania, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.

In antiquity Moldova was inhabited by the Getae-Dacian tribes and the majority of its territory was not conquered by the Roman Empire. Due to its strategic location between Europe and Asia, at East of Carpathian Mountains and north of Black Sea, Moldova was invaded by many migrating people, such as: the Goths, Huns, Avars, Slavs, Bulgarians and later by the Mongols, Tatars etc. Archeological discoveries and written documents<sup>1</sup> show that the territory was continuously inhabited.

The medieval Principality of Moldavia (1359-1775) included the following geographical areas: Moldova, Bessarabia and Bukovina. The majority of the inhabitants of this territory speaks the Romanian language.

In 1775 the north-western part of Moldova, was included in the Holy Roman Empire (of the German Nation) and later, after the dissolving and reorganization

---

\* Professor at University “Politehnica” of Bucharest.

<sup>1</sup> A.D. Xenopol, *Istoria românilor din Dacia Traiană*, vol. II, Chapter III, [History of Romanians from Dacia Traiana], “Elf” Publishing House, Bucharest, 2009, p. 176.

of this Empire, it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This region was named Bukovina due to the multitude of beech forests (“Buche” meaning beech in German) and it remained under Austrian administration till the end of the First World War, when the General Congress of Bukovina decided to reunite this territory with Romania.

In 1812 the part of Moldova situated between the Prut River and the Dniester River was annexed by the Russian Empire, and it was named Bessarabia. The remaining territory of Moldova, has united with Wallachia in 1859 and formed The United *Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia*, also known as The Romanian United Principalities, the basis of modern Romania. At the end of the First World War the whole territory of Moldova (former Principality of Moldova) was included in the Romanian state.

At the end of the Second World War, a part of eastern Moldova (Bessarabia) was included in the USSR, forming the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic while the northern part of Moldova and the south of Bessarabia were included in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and thus also in the USSR.

*Moldova is also found in the name of some localities*, such as: a) “Moldovița” (diminutive from Moldova, Romanian language), “Vatra Moldoviței”, “Fundu Moldovei”, “Câmpulung Moldovenesc” situated in the geographical region “Moldova”; b) “Moldova Nouă” and “Moldova Veche” (“New Moldova” and “Old Moldova”) situated in the southwestern part of Romania, b) “Moldava nad Bodvou” in the south-east of Slovakia; c) “Moldautein”, considered the German name of the town “Týn nad Vltavou” from Czech Republic; d) the town called “Molde” in Norway.

The hydronym Moldova is found in a wide region in the central, eastern and northern Europe, for example: a) “Moldova” and “Moldovița” in Romania; b) “Moldau” the German name of the river Vltava from the Czech Republic; c) “Muldowa”, the Polish name of a river into the Peipus lake, near the Baltic Sea<sup>2</sup>.

## **2. Present theories on the origin of the name “Moldova”, until the writing of this research communication**

I shall briefly enumerate only a few of the theories belonging to different authors trying to explain the origin of the name of Moldova.

1. Constantin Negruzzi<sup>3</sup> considered that the name has its origins in the beauties of the country, “Molis Davia” or “Molis Dacia” with the meaning of

<sup>2</sup> Dragoș Moldoveanu, “Etymology of the hydronym Moldova”, *Anuar de lingvistica si istorie literara*, ALIL, XXVIII, 1981 – 1982, A, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Constantin Negruzzi, *Negru pe alb (Scrisori la un prieten)*, Scrisoarea I (Primblare, Mai 1837), [Black on white (Letters to a friend), First letter (Walk, Mai 1837)], “Litera International Bucuresti Chisinau” Publishing House, Chisinau, 1996.

pleasant, beautiful, and “the river (Moldova) took its name from the country” [“Dar iacă am venit la Moldova. Vornicul Ureche zise că numele țării vine de la ea și de la căpauca lui Dragoș; greșăște însă bunul bătrân în astă închipuire ce și-a făcut-o singur. Țara fu numită pentru frumuseța ei de romani Molis Dacia sau Molis Davia, și râul și-a luat nume de la țară”, (Romanian language)].

A controversial hypothesis is the provenience from the Latin and the Getae-Dacian languages: “molta” (“multum”, Latin) and the suffix “dava” (fortified town, in Dacian language), that would mean, a region with relatively many fortifications and inhabitants.

2. Some authors suggested the Gothic or Bastarnae<sup>4</sup> origin of the name.

A group of linguists and great cultural personalities, such as Bogdan Petriceicu Hașdeu, A.D. Xenopol<sup>5</sup>, Emil Vârtosu considered that the name of Moldova is connected to the German name of a place in northern Moldova, nowadays called “Baia<sup>6</sup>” (in the district of Suceava), which was “Mulde” or “Molde”, and it was interpreted as “dust” or “hollow, quarry, valley”.

It was also considered<sup>7</sup> that the name of Moldova comes from “Molda” meaning dale, fortified valley and “dava” meaning fortified town.

3. The historians Constantin C. Giurescu and Dinu Giurescu and the linguist Iorgu Iordan considered that the name comes from “spruce”, that is “molid”<sup>8</sup> in the Romanian language (because of the multitude of spruces in the area, “Molid” (Spruce) being also the name of a village situated on the banks of the “Moldova” river.

It is admitted by some authors that the name of Moldova comes from “Molde” plus the suffix “ova”, but considering an enigma the meaning of the word.

4. Dragoș Moldoveanu<sup>9</sup> in a detailed study on the “Etymology of the hydronym Moldova” searched a common origin of all hydronyms “Moldova”.

<sup>4</sup> Coordinators: Ioan Marian Țiplic și Silviu Istrate Purece, *Relații interetnice în spațiul românesc \*\**. Populații și grupuri etnice (sec II î. Hr. - V d. Hr.) [Interethnic relations in Romanian space. Populations and ethnical groups], Iosif Vasile FERENCZ, [Ethnical relationships or intercultural relationships. A view on some historical realities in Transylvania], Bibliotheca Septemcatisensis XXI -ISBN (10)973-7724-96-8 , ISBN (13) 978-973-7724-96-0, Alba Iulia, “Altip”, Publishing House, 2006, p.58.

<sup>5</sup> A.D. Xenopol, *Istoria românilor din Dacia Traiană*, vol. II, [History of Romanians from Dacia Traiana], “Elf” Publishing House, Bucharest, 2009, p.178.

<sup>6</sup> C. Giurăscu, H.C. Matei, F. Constantiniu, M.D. Popa, N.C. Nicolescu, G. Rădulescu, *Istoria Romaniei in date* (Romanian History data), Ed. Enciclopedică Româna, Bucuresti, 1971, p. 72; it is mentioned also as “Civitas Moldaviae”.

<sup>7</sup> Ion Pachia Tatomirescu, “Arudela/Arudela; Terra Aruteliensis/Arudeliensis”, *Revista Transilvania*, nr.8-9, 2003, p.83.

<sup>8</sup> *Istoria românilor* (History of Romanians), Constantin C. Giurescu & Dinu C. Giurescu, p. 209-210.

<sup>9</sup> Dragoș Moldoveanu, “Etymology of the hydronym Moldova”, *Anuar de lingvistica si istorie literara*, ALIL, XXVIII, 1981 – 1982, A, p. 5-61

The study considers the socio-geographical and historical conditions of each area where the hydronym was encountered and its possible linguistic evolution. Thus four hypotheses are discussed: the Celtic origin, the Iranian, the (old) Germanic and the Slavic origins. The conclusion of the study is that only the Germanic hypothesis complies with the conditions of a convincing etymology (“*credible socio-geographic motivation, possible from the linguistic point of view and probable from the historic point of view*”<sup>9</sup>). He considers that a possible origin of the hydronym “Moldova” was “Muldenah” (in genitive) or “Muldah” (in nominative), from “Mulde” + “Bach” (river), meaning “river with soft banks”.

In my attempt to establish the origin of the name of Moldova, I shall enumerate some *acknowledged data in the historical sources*:

- In 1334 was mentioned for the first time the town of Baia, situated on the banks of the river Moldova (nearby Suceava), under the name of “Civitas Moldaviensis”<sup>5</sup>. The town had its own “seal”. Some historians considered that the town existed since the first half of the XIII century (I. Nistor, C. Auner, M. Lepădatu). Baia will later become the first capital of the Principality of Moldova.

- Recent archeological discoveries prove that the place (Baia, the site “În muchie”- (Romanian)) was inhabited since 6000 B.C., proving the existence of a Pre-Cucuteni II civilization. It was known since the Roman Empire era that the region had minerals that were exploited by the “washing” method.

- The Transylvanian Saxons (known in German as “Siebenbürger Sachsen” and in Romanian as “Sași”) established at the eastern extremity of Transylvania in the middle of the XII century and in “Baia” at the first half of the XIII century<sup>10</sup>.

The population of German origin from Baia came also from Galicia- (in Romanian “Galitia-Halici”, nowadays Ukraine). With a population predominantly German, the town “Baia” was attested in the German sources under the name of “*Stadt Molde*”, “*Molda*” and “*Mulda*”.

- The name Baia, means “bath” and comes from the way the minerals were extracted by washing. In the Hungarian sources, the town is mentioned as “Moldabanya”.

- At the beginning of the XIV century, it was the greatest Moldovian town east of Carpathians. The old name of the Moldova river was *Molda*<sup>11,12,13</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Hugo Weczerka, *Das Fürstentum Moldau und die Deutschen*, în: Isabel Röska-Rydel, *Deutsche Geschichte im Osten Europas. Galizien, Bukowina, Moldau*, Berlin 1999, pag. 338.

<sup>11</sup> Laurențiu Rădvan, *Curs special de istorie medievală a romanilor, Structurile urbane în spațiul românesc, (secolele XIV-XVIII)*, [Special course of Romanian medieval history, Urban structures in Romanian space] pp. <http://history.uaic.ro/studenti/id/plan2010/docs/3193.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Laurențiu Rădvan, *East Central Europe*, Vol. 37 (2010), Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Vasile Neamțu, *Istoria orasului medieval Baia (Civitas Moldoviensis)* [History of the medieval town of Baia], Iași, Ed. Univ. “Al. I. Cuza”, 1997.

### 3. Elucidating the enigma

To understand the origin of the word “Moldova”, I observed that in *Norway* there is a town called “*Molde*”, that is *exactly the same name* as the one attesting the town of “Baia” in German documents. The Norwegian “*Molde*” is situated in a fjord, sheltered by numerous islands and afforested hills, at the crossroad of benefic winds and heated by the Gulf Stream, the place has a much milder climate than its latitude would indicate. Of course the Norwegians asked themselves what the name of the place means. The answer came faster and clearer, since in Old Norse, “*Molde*” means “*fertile soil*”: “MOLD” (feminine noun, singular), “MOLDAR” (plural)<sup>14,15,16</sup>. Old Norse is a North Germanic language spoken by Scandinavians and the inhabitants of the Viking settlements until the XIV century approximately. In time this language developed into Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Icelandic and Faroese, but the Scandinavian languages are easily mutually intelligible.

The Norwegian town of Molde is close to a lake named “*Moldevatnet*”, “*vatnet*” meaning water in Norwegian (a similar word, “*vatten*” means water in Swedish and Dutch and a *Wasser* means water in German).

It follows that “*Moldova*” is almost a short form of the compound word MOLDEVATNET (Molde water).

It results by simply translating from Old Norse that Moldova means “*fertile soil*” (near water)”.

The noun “MOLD” or “MOULD” has its origin before 900A.D. and in this context had the meaning of<sup>17</sup>: “loose soil, especially when rich in organic matter, fertile soil, earth. The word was used in Old Norse and Old English (MOLDE), Old High German MOLTA - soil) and Gothic (MULDE). By extrapolation I assume it had the same meaning in the dialects and languages spoken in the by the German speaking inhabitants established in the north-east of Romania.

Nowadays German language<sup>18</sup> also preserves the meaning of “soil” for the word “*der Mold, (e)s*”.

***German linguists<sup>19</sup> consider undoubtedly that the word “Molde” is an old loanword from Latin, “multa/muoltra/muoltera” coming from the Latin MULETRA, meaning milk bucket (from “mulgere”, Latin; “a mulge”, Romanian language).***

<sup>14</sup> Rygh, Oluf (1908) (in Norwegian). *Norske gaardnavne: Romsdals amt* (13 ed.). Kristiania, Norge: W. C. Fabritius & sønners bogtrykkeri. p. 280.

<sup>15</sup> Confirmation from Professor Jon Gunnar Jørgensen, Department of Linguistic and Scandinavian Studies, Oslo University, Norway.

<sup>16</sup> Jørn Sannes & Ola Stemshaug: */Norsk, stadnamleksikon/*, Oslo 1976, page 222 (Norsk stadnamleksikon = Norwegian Place Name Encyclopedia).

<sup>17</sup> A.S. Hornby, *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English*, London Oxford University Press, 1974, p. 560 and <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/mold>

<sup>18</sup> Mihai Isbășescu, *Dictionar German-Român*, Ed. Stiințifică, București, 1969.

Thus probably the word used by the German speaking colonized population found high resonances in the language of the local population, because the word “moldă<sup>20</sup>” (singular), “mulde” (plural) exists in the Romanian Language, meaning “through” (“albie, covată, etc.”, see Table 1). As it is known, the Romanian language is a Romance language.

**Soft soil, thus fertile soil:** The soil, maybe initially hard, was moulded by the river and became soft and fertile.

*The explanation of the origin of the name Moldova as “fertile soil” is plausible since it corresponds to a characteristic of the entire territory, Moldova being known mainly for its black, rich soil (chernozem, black earth), its vineyards, cereal crops and orchards.*

Table 1 presents several words in European languages reminding the word “Molde”, either by their meaning or their sonorousness.

	Word	Language	Translation or meaning in Romanian language	Translation in English
1	mollis	Latin	moale	soft
2	mou-molle, mollet	French	moale	soft
3	мягкий	Russian	moale	soft
4	mjuk	Swedish	moale	soft
5	mjúkur	Icelandic	moale	soft
6	myk	Norwegian	moale	soft
7	Muldes, Mools <sup>21</sup>	Scottish	pământ afânat (n.a.)	pulverized earth
8	der Mold, (e)s	German	pământ, pământ fărâmicios, moale (germana austriacă)	soil, brittle soil (Austrian German)
9	moll(ert)	German	moale, călduț, plăcut	soft, warm, pleasant
10	das Moor	German	mlaștină, nămol	mud
11	die Mulde, n	German	moldă, albie, copaie, covată, vâlcea, depresiune, jgheab	valley, dale
12	moldă	Romanian	adăpătoare, albie, copaie, covată, vas în care se scurge mustul după ce au fost presați strugurii; ladă în care curge făina la moară	water through, river bed, trough, recipient collecting the must of grapes, chest collecting the flour at the mill

Table 1. Words of European languages reminding the word “Molde”.

<sup>19</sup> Boris Paraskewow, “Auf der Spur der westgermanischen phonematischen Substitute /ʃt/ und /ft/ im Deutschen”, Zeitschrift für germanistische Linguistik, 33.2005, p.372.

<sup>20</sup> D. Macrea, *Dicționarul limbii române moderne* (Modern Romanian language dictionary), Ed. Academiei R.P.R., 1958.

<sup>21</sup> John Jamieson, *Etymological dictionary of the Scottish language*, Edinburgh, 1818.

#### 4. Other historical facts

It is considered that we do not know much about the language of the free Dacians. However they have frequently been in contact with "Germanic" people, such as:

(1) The Bastarnae were ancient Germanic tribes. At the end of the second century B.C. they moved to the territory of Moldova. At the beginning enemies of the Dacians, the two people allied later to fight against the Roman Empire. The last mention of the Bastarnae in history was at the end of the IIIrd-century A.D., when a large part of the Bastarnae population was moved south of the Danube by the Romans.

(2) At the beginning of our era another East Germanic people is mentioned: the Goths. There are two theories for the origin of the Goths: the theory of migration from the Baltic Sea and a modern theory, belonging to Michael Kulikowski, according to which, the term of Goths is applied to the population situated on the interaction zone between the Germanic population and the Roman Empire. The Goths settlements in Dacia comprised Moldova and the Eastern part of Wallachia (the region situated in the south of the present Romania). After the retreat of the Roman administration at the south of the Danube, the population living north of Danube was under Gothic occupation.

(3) Through the town of "Baia", former "Molde", passed old trade routes. These routes passed thorough Poland, north of the Carpathian Mountains, north and center of Moldova, the rivers Prut, Dniester, and Dnieper. We may suppose that the merchants spoke several languages and dialects, they noticed the richness of the Moldavian land and could contribute to the spreading of its name.

*Numerous historical documents prove that there have been connections between the Varangians (Vikings) and the inhabitants of Moldova, the territory comprise between the Prut and the Dniester Rivers being under Varangian influence between the VII-XII centuries AD. As it is known, the first state of the Eastern Slavs, Kievian Rus' was founded by the Varangians and its territory was later neighbouring Moldova. In his study<sup>22</sup>, Florin Pintescu discusses several proofs of the presence of Vikings in the south of Moldova, in interaction with the Wallachians (Vlachs), such as:*

a) A runic inscription on a funeral stone in Sjonhem cemetery (Gotland, Sweden), mentions that "Rodfos has been killed by Blokumen", the inhabitants of Wallachia (south of Romania), the Vlachs.<sup>23</sup>

b) The saga of the Norwegian ling Olaf Haraldsson (1015-1028) mentions the Vlachs as soldiers (probably mercenaries).

<sup>22</sup> Florin Pintescu, *Présences de l'élément Viking dans l'espace de la romanité orientale en contexte méditerranéen* (fr.), [Presence of the Viking element in the oriental Roman space in Mediterranean context], *Studia Antiqua et Archaeologica*, VIII, Iași, 2001, p.1-16.

<sup>23</sup> Sven Jansson B.F., "Runes in Sweden", translated by Peter Foote, Värnamo, 1987.

c) The discoveries from “Păcuilui lui Soare”, an archeological site situated on the banks of the Danube, South of Romania, mention a fragment of Viking sword<sup>24</sup>. Also in Dobruja, at Basarabi-Murfatlar<sup>25</sup>, on the wall of the small churches are represented Viking ships and dragons, together with undeciphered runic inscriptions.

d) The king Sviatoslav of Kiev (957-972), during his campaign against the Byzantine Empire, established his residence at “Pereyslavetz”, which has been located at “Perislava”, “Nufăru” (the Danube Delta, Romania).

Eugen Lozovan<sup>26</sup> argues the possibility of direct Gothic origin of the name of “Moldova” by the existence in the XI-XII centuries AD., in the north of Romania, of several traditions, similar to the Scandinavian ones, such as: similar organization of the hunting, the use of ax as a weapon, action in groups of 300-400 people, and the election of the king by general consensus.

## 5. Conclusion

The present study confirms the provenance of the name of “Moldova” from Germanic word „*Molde*” and, for the first time the meaning of the name of Moldova is related to its meaning of “*fertile soil*” in Old Norse, Gothic and Old English. The Norwegian town called “*Molde*” is added to the family of toponyms “*Moldova*”. Several historical arguments in favor of the presence of the Varangians (Vikings) in connection with the Vlachs (Wallachians) and the territory of Romania are mentioned.

***German linguists<sup>19</sup> consider undoubtedly that the word “Molde” is an old loanword from Latin, “multa/muoltra/muoltera” coming from the Latin MULETRA, meaning milk bucket (from “mulgere”, Latin; “a mulge”, Romanian language).***

The word “*moldă*<sup>27</sup>” (singular), “*mulde*” (plural) exists in the Romanian Language, meaning “water through, river bed, trough, recipient collecting the must of grapes, chest collecting the flour at the mill”). As it is known, the Romanian language is a Romance language.

A credible explanation of its origin is the fact that during its history parts of Moldova have been inhabited by people considered to be “Germanic” (like the Bastarnae, the Goths), which lived interconnected with the Getae-Dacians and their descendents.

<sup>24</sup> Petre Diaconu, “Urme ale vikingilor la Dunărea de Jos”, *Dorul* (Norresundby, Danemark), VII, nr. 94, 1997.

<sup>25</sup> Petre Diaconu, “Quelques observations sur le complexe archéologique de Murfatlar (Basarabi)”, *Dacia*, N.S., XIII, 1969, p. 443-456.

<sup>26</sup> Eugen Lozovan, “Rurik et Dragos”, *Revue des Etudes Roumaines*, XI-XII, 1969, p. 73-79.

<sup>27</sup> D. Macrea, *Dicționarul limbii romane moderne* (Modern Romanian language dictionary), Ed. Academiei R.P.R., 1958.



The word “Molde” is also related to modern German. It is probable that it had the same meaning for the German population attested by medieval documents in the town of Baia, county of Suceava, situated in the north of Romania.

This work is an invitation addressed to the specialists, historian and linguists, to continue the interdisciplinary study of the connection between the Romanian language (with its regionalisms and archaisms) and the other modern and old languages. I hope we will also learn more about the language attributed to the Getae-Dacians.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- A.D. Xenopol, *Istoria românilor din Dacia Traiană*, vol. II, Chapter III, [History of Romanians from Dacia Traiana], “Elf” Publishing House, Bucharest, 2009.
- Constantin Negruzzi, *Negru pe alb* (Scrisori la un prieten), *Scrisoarea I*(Primblare, Mai 1837), [Black on white (Letters to a friend), First letter (Walk, Mai 1837)], “Litera International Bucuresti Chisinau” Publishing House, Chisinau 1996.
- C. Giurăscu, H.C. Matei, F. Constantiniu, M.D. Popa, N.C. Nicolescu, G. Rădulescu, *Istoria României în date* (Romanian History data), Ed. Enciclopedică Română, Bucuresti, 1971.
- Rygh, Oluf (1908) (in Norwegian). *Norske gaardnavne: Romsdals amt* (13 ed.). Kristiania, Norge: W. C. Fabritius & sønners bogtrikkeri.
- D. Macrea, *Dicționarul limbii române moderne* (Modern Romanian language dictionary), Ed. Academiei R.P.R., 1958.