

SOME NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS REGARDING THE MILITARY USE OF ARCHERY IN 17TH CENTURY MOLDAVIA

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ABSTRACT:

THE MOLDAVIAN ARMIES OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY SAW A CONTINUITY IN THE MILITARY USE OF ARCHERY, UNLIKE MOST OF THE EUROPEAN CONTINENT, WHERE MODERN FIREARMS QUICKLY REPLACED THE OLD TACTICS AND WEAPONRY.

DIFFERENT SOURCES REPORT THAT FOOT OR MOUNTED ARCHERS WERE DEPLOYED AS AUXILIARY TROOPS ON THE BATTLEFIELD IN MOST OCCASIONS AND USED IN PARRALEL WITH ELITE SOLDIERS WIELDING GUNPOWDER WEAPONS. PRACTICALLY APPLIED AS LATE AS THE EARLY EITEENTH CENTURY, ARCHERY KNEW A SIGNIFICANT DECLINE IN MOLDAVIA ONLY ALONG WITH THE CRITICAL MILITARY REGRESSION DURING THE SO-CALLED "PHANARIOTE RULE", HAVING BEEN COMPLETELY DISAPPEARED PROBABLY BY THE MID-1700'S.

KEY WORDS: MOLDAVIA, SEVENTEENTH CENTURY, ARCHERY, MILITARY HISTORY.

INTRODUCTION

In his monographic work, *Descriptio Moldaviae* ("The Description of Moldavia"), written in 1714, the former Prince of Moldavia Dimitrie Cantemir alleged that "*the Moldavians are very good archers, as well as spear bearers; but their greatest victories were won by the sword. Only hunters use rifles, for Moldavians consider it a shameful thing to use firearms against their enemies whom they wouldn't be able to reach either by military art or bravery*²". As it may easily be observed, a long-lasting military tradition such as archery was still common and in customary use in Moldavia at the mere beginning of the 18th century.

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² Dimitrie Cantemir, *Descrierea Moldovei*, ed. Miron Nicolescu (București: Socec & Co., 1909), 225.

Throughout the Middle Ages, in most of the Western and Central Europe, bows and arrows were largely replaced by the more powerful and effective (in certain circumstances) crossbows³. Thus, by the 14th century, archery was used in combat only by armies traditionally related to it, in regions such as England or Hungary. However, a completely different situation can be noticed regarding the Eastern part of the continent, where in Russian or Ottoman armies irregular troops of archers (mostly mounted) still played an important role until the early 19th century⁴. Of course, Moldavia didn't make an exception. Ever since the foundation of the principality, in the 14th century, the bow was a primary weapon to be used in combat and large formations of archers, combined with light cavalry divisions, were amassed for the battle disposition⁵. This general strategy was mainly used until the second half of the 16th century and, although crossbows and early gunpowder weapons (handguns and arquebuses) were utilized, they never fully replaced bows.

Nevertheless, as the Moldavian army started to rely on mercenaries⁶ (as most European armies of the time), beginning around middle 16th century, and firearms industry saw an “explosion” of technological development, archers would soon be substituted by arquebusiers and, later, musketeers. For all that, archers were not completely replaced and the bow was still used extensively by irregular units throughout the next century.

Although a series of comprehensive works have been published concerning the military history of Eastern Europe and some focused, particularly, on Moldavia and Wallachia⁷, none of them described later use of archery (17th – 18th centuries) with more than a few short passages, “*en passant*”. This brief article aims to bring some light over the subject, with an emphasis on narrative sources – chronicles, campaign diaries, foreign descriptions – regarding Moldavian military archery along the 17th century.

³ For further information see Terence Wise, *Medieval European Armies*, ed. Martin Windrow (London: Osprey Publishing, 1975).

⁴ Radu Rosetti, *Istoria artei militare a românilor până la mijlocul veacului al XVII-lea* (București: Imprimeria Națională, 1947), 272. See also Laurence Spring, *The Cossacks: 1799 – 1815* (London: Osprey Publishing, 2003).

⁵ Ian Heath, *Armies of the Middle Ages*, Vol. 2: *The Ottoman Empire, Eastern Europe and the Near East, 1300 – 1500* (Worthing, Sussex: Flexiprint Ltd., 1984), 79.

⁶ See Nicolae Iorga, *Istoria armatei românești*, Vol. 2: *De la 1599 până în zilele noastre* (București: Tipografia „Cultura Neamului Românesc”, 1919), 1 – 93.

⁷ Regarding this matter, worthy of consideration are the efforts of Romanian military historians like Nicolae Iorga, Radu Rosetti, Nicolae Stoicescu, Ion Barnea and so on.

MOLDAVIAN ARCHERS AS IRREGULAR AUXILIARIES (1611 – 1630's)

Obviously, as the professional mercenaries were not yet significant in numbers like an absolute majority, auxiliary local troops were still present on the battlefield in the first decades of the 17th century. This meant more archers being deployed more often, so the accounts about them are significantly more frequent than in the middle third of the 1600's.

For Moldavia, strong evidence about 17th century use of archery can be traced back to Michael the Brave's campaign and brief rule (1600 - 1601), when archers were widely used on both sides⁸. However, for our considered purpose, worthy of mentioning are later events. As the three principalities, Moldavia, Wallachia and Transylvania were thrown into a period of political instability, military conflict and diplomatic disputes, both Constantin Movilă⁹ and Radu Șerban¹⁰ intervened in Transylvania against Gábor Báthory¹¹, defeating him at Sânpetru, near Brașov (July 1611). About the battle, Báthory's biographer, Bojthi Veres Gáspár, tells us that Radu Șerban's army was supported in the left flank by two thousand Moldavian archers (the source doesn't mention if they were on foot or mounted), as well as some Polish arquebusiers and Tatars, all of them sent by Constantin Movilă¹². A conspicuous observation can be drawn here, that archers were still preferred as a prevalent unit for skirmish in the Moldavian army.

Other reports will appear couple of years later, mostly from Polish sources, in a conjuncture marked by internal struggle, exceedingly short reigns (1 – 3 years) and Polish – Ottoman disputes. As the Moldavian and Polish joint armies were retreating, with Alexandru Movilă¹³, from a large force consisting of Turks, Wallachians and Tatars, they were ambushed and defeated near the lake Drăcșani (Northern Moldavia) in August 1616. Accounts described arrow shots from both sides (most likely from the Moldavians in the first case) as a prologue to the battle, in which several Polish high-ranking officers were badly wounded¹⁴, including Hetman Potocki¹⁵.

Four years later, in the same violent political context, we have two sources revealing the importance of the bow as a weapon, but also as a symbol of distinction and

⁸ Iorga, *Istoria armatei*, 21 – 32. See also Rosetti, *Istoria artei militare*, 372 – 376.

⁹ Prince of Moldavia, 1607 – 1611.

¹⁰ Michael's successor in Wallachia, 1602 – 1610/1611.

¹¹ Ottoman-protected ruler of Transylvania, 1608 – 1613.

¹² Iorga, *Istoria armatei*, 88 – 89.

¹³ Prince of Moldavia, 1615 – 1616, Constantin's Brother.

¹⁴ Miron Costin, *Letopiseșul Țării Moldovei de la Aron Vodă încoace*, ed. P.P. Panaitescu (București: Fundația Regală pentru Literatură și Artă, 1944), 35.

¹⁵ Nicolae Iorga, "Doamna lui Ieremia Vodă", *Analele Academiei Române. Memoriile Secțiunii istorice*, s. II, tom XXXII (1910), 1043 - 1044.

high social status (other references on this matter will follow in the further pages). One of them is a [probable] Polish description¹⁶ of Gaspar Graziani's¹⁷ Princely Court, which states that the Prince's personal guard consisted, among others, of "*seventy bearded halberdiers, six officers with yellow leather boots, long red mantles and small satin caps (...) they carry quivers tied with large silver belts, bows on their shoulders and silver maces.*"¹⁸. The bows, in this matter, are clearly related to social and military status, as are the silver maces. Afterwards, in the same year, as Polish – Moldavian troops once again fled from the Turks, a middle-ranking hussar officer held a semi-official campaign diary¹⁹. According to him, after the Turkish troops reached them up, most of the Moldavians, feeling betrayed by their foreign ruler, changed sides. As the Polish tried to defend in made-on-the-spot trenches, the diary has repeatedly reported waves of arrows coming from the last ones, usually fighting alongside Tatars in the Ottoman rearguard²⁰.

One last testimony about the present matter in the "*pre-mercenary era*" comes from an Italian monk, Niccolo Barsi, who, between 1633 and 1639, traveled twice through Moldavia. In his short descriptions (probably written between 1633 and 1634) he mentions, regarding the customs of the Prince²¹, that "*he travels with a large suite. Four companies of arquebusiers, each one of 150 men, escort him. An equal number, bearing only bows with arrows and a sabre, walk behind them*"²². Needless to specify here that bows and arrows are slowly becoming nothing more than parade accessories.

ARCHERY IN THE "MERCENARY ERA"²³ (1630's – 1660's)

The medial lapse of the 17th century was defined, for both Moldavia and Wallachia, by the two longer reigns of Vasile Lupu and, respectively, Matei Basarab²⁴. A longer rule meant, of course, a period of relative peace and political stability (at least compared with the past thirty years of struggle). It also meant prosperity for both of the principalities and

¹⁶ Made in the context of a meeting between Graziani and hetman Zolkiewski, autumn 1620.

¹⁷ Prince of Moldavia of Croatian origin, 1619 – 1620.

¹⁸ Iorga, *Istoria armatei*, 113.

¹⁹ Maria Holban *et al.*, *Călători străini despre țările române*, vol. IV (București: Editura Științifică, 1972), 444.

²⁰ Holban *et al.*, *Călători străini*, vol. IV, 451 – 460.

²¹ Either Moise Movilă (1633 - 1634) or Vasile Lupu (1634 - 1653).

²² Holban *et al.*, *Călători străini*, vol. V, 77.

²³ See Iorga, *Istoria armatei*, 111 – 157.

²⁴ Prince of Wallachia, 1632 – 1654.

economical growth, thus leading, certainly, to better equipped armies²⁵. Which, in other words, designates a much larger proportion of professional, elite mercenary units, in the numerical detriment of archers.

In this area of the 1600's we can only provide three sources regarding the use of the bows, two of which describe them as merely more than "pompous gadgets". The first of them comes from an Italian of Bosnian origins, Marco Bandini, who, ordained as a catholic archbishop, arrives in Moldavia in 1644 as a Jesuit missionary²⁶. There is comprised, in his letters to Ingoldi²⁷ (same year), a brief but detailed description of the local military "attire", where it is recalled that "*they (the Moldavians, A/N) are usually bearing the bow and a quiver of arrows, the bent sabre and, few of them, the double-edged broadsword.*"²⁸". Another close description of "ceremonial archery" is offered by the German author and polymath Eberhard Werner Happel, who was present at the wedding of Polish magnate Janusz Radziwiłł with Maria Lupu, daughter of Vasile Lupu. His depiction sketching the military games at the wedding includes a few paragraphs about the exquisite skills of the Turkish horse archers (serving in the personal guard of the Prince)²⁹.

Last, but not the least, a third indication on the current issue is given by a Romanian chronicle, this time. More precisely, the summary exposition about the Battle of Finta – a major landmark in the conflict between the above-mentioned Vasile Lupu and his Wallachian counterpart, Matei Basarab – from the presumably anonymous³⁰ "*Letopisețul Cantacuzinesc*" (or "*The Cantacuzene Chronicle*"). In May 1653, the Wallachian army was entrenched trying to defend against the Moldavian – Cossack offensive. Apparently, when the soldiers' morale was at its lowest, Matei Basarab held an impressive speech, rising their combative spirit, after which according to the unknown author of the chronicle, "*they, being heartened again, started to fight with great bravery, all that day; with muskets and cannons, with arrows, with swords, hand-to-hand (...) terrifying and scattering the enemy*"³¹". No reference to Moldavian archers whatsoever. Yet, considering that a storm prevented the Moldavian victory (because of the heavy rainfall, the Moldavian muskets

²⁵ See Nicolae Iorga, *Istoria românilor*, vol. VI: *Monarhii* (București, 1938), 1 – 204.

²⁶ Holban *et al.*, *Călători străini*, vol. V, 294.

²⁷ Secretary of "*Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*" ("Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith").

²⁸ Holban *et al.*, *Călători străini*, vol. V, 331.

²⁹ Holban *et al.*, *Călători străini*, vol. V, 646.

³⁰ Written by Stoica Ludescu, according to certain historians of the Romanian literature.

³¹ Stoica Ludescu (?), *Istoria Țării Românești (1290 – 1690): Letopisețul Cantacuzinesc*, ed. C. Grecescu (București: Editura Academiei R.P.R., 1960), 111.

became useless) we cannot refrain from asserting that Vasile Lupu's strategy was largely based on ranged infantry, both arquebusiers/musketeers and archers (especially since almost two thirds of the entire army were Cossacks).

As a very laconic ending, we believe it can be properly sustained that this last phase of warfare in the medieval history of Romanians meant, for the martial art of archery, a "beginning of the end", as it started to rapidly lose its significance and decline in popularity, while its equipment got close to nothing more than display dressing ornaments. Nevertheless, a short and ephemeral revival of the archers' practicability would follow.

ARCHERS AT THE TURN OF A CENTURY: SERVING THE OTTOMANS (1660's – 1711)

In the following decades, last of the concerning century, we can plainly remark the emergence of a general phenomenon, in all of the three principalities: "national" armies cease to be national and begin to be used increasingly often as auxiliary forces in the wars of a regenerate Ottoman Empire³². This will ultimately lead to an accelerated decline, in the next hundred years, of the already broken-down armies; but for now it will only mean a noticeable increase in the proportional numbers of the old, traditional and almost forgotten types of units.

Following a last zenith of political and military power, the Turks started waging a series of campaigns in Eastern and Central Europe, culminating with the Siege of Vienna, in 1683. Because the Moldavian army, like the others, played a minor role of assistance and logistic support, the State's concern for a well-equipped and well-trained army began to diminish. Thus, in just a few years, the proportion of professional hired mercenaries went considerably down.

There seems to be a wider range of accounts related to archery in the late 17th century Moldavian army, from local chroniclers to foreign reports. Two of the most significant ones specify it to be successfully utilized during the Transylvanian campaigns, in the early 1660's. When György Rákóczi II was reestablished, in spite of Ottoman warnings, as Prince of Transylvania (1657), a Turkish intervention was imminent. As recalled by Miron Costin³³, at the Battle of Gilău (where Rákóczi was finally defeated)

³² For further details see Iorga, *Istoria armatei*, 157 – 192.

³³ Moldavian chronicler (1633 - 1691). Himself a participant in several Turkish military undertakings, he would later recall some of the witnessed events in his main work, "*Letopiseșul Țării Moldovei de la Aron Vodă încoace*" ("A Chronicle of Moldavia from Prince Aron till Today").

there were two thousand Wallachians and one thousand Moldavians fighting alongside Ottoman forces. Describing the strategy used, a full cavalry charge, the same author presents the Ottoman commander, before the main assault, as giving specific orders that only hand-to-hand combat weapons should be used, and “*if anyone would grab a bow or another weapon, he shall be beheaded*³⁴”. Some years later, as the Austrian – Ottoman conflict will reemerge³⁵, Transylvania will become the main battlefield for the two belligerents. In the frequent disputes arisen here between different throne candidates (each supported by one or the other party), we notice a significant participation of Wallachians, Moldavians and Tatars on the Turkish side. In the summer of 1663, there were apparently as much as four thousand troops coming from each principality, both armies comprising horse archers in large numbers³⁶.

Later significant statements regarding Moldavian archery are provided by the will of a French secretary in Constantinople, known only as „sieur Delacroix³⁷”. Among his descriptions of the various subject provinces and populations of the Ottoman Empire, there are two mentionings (both from 1676) worthy of consideration. Depicting the investiture of the Moldavian ruler by the Sultan, Delacroix tells us that when leaving the Turkish capital, the Prince is followed by a personal guard consisting of „*two companies of Turkish soldiers, given by the Porte, (...) followed by sixty horse archers of his own and the sword bearer*³⁸”. In the same writings, there are featured some Moldavian Easter customs, as seen in Iași (the country’s capital), among which a particular game shows some importance within our perspective: “*A fur cap was thrown in the air and it had to be shot with an arrow by a moving horse archer, before falling to the ground*³⁹”.

Based on the last three pieces of information we can safely assume that foot archers were no longer used in the Moldavian army for some time (probably since the 4th or 5th decades), due to their relative inefficiency against modern, sophisticated weaponry. However, as it can be seen, horse archers were still attending the battlefields, being efficacious enough for their mobility and “bite and run” strategy. Such an assertion could be supported by a fourth reference, regarding the military equipment of a Moldavian

³⁴ Costin, *Letopiseșul*, 216.

³⁵ See Christabel Donatienne Ruby, *Austro-Turkish War (1663-1664)* (Fidel, 2011).

³⁶ Iorga, *Istoria românilor*, vol. VI, 283.

³⁷ Holban *et al.*, *Călători străini*, vol. VII, 232.

³⁸ Holban *et al.*, *Călători străini*, vol. VII, 259.

³⁹ Holban *et al.*, *Călători străini*, vol. VII, 265.

mercenary (a certain Lascăr Cioranul) attempting to enlist for the Zaporozhian Host, around 1690: “*two horses, one pair of arrow quivers with their bows and a sabre*⁴⁰”.

In order to better exemplify the hypostasis of archery during the last years of the 17th century, we had to take into consideration, as we lack direct accounts, three sources related to the last anti-Ottoman action of Moldavia, the Russian Pruth River Campaign. Planning to ally himself with the Russians against the Turks⁴¹ (which he did), Prince Dimitrie Cantemir ordered a general conscription⁴² in the spring of 1711, about which a local chronicler, Ion Neculce⁴³, recalls: “*So many people wanted to enroll (...) [that] the bowyers sold out [all] their bows, arrows and quivers, and their stores were empty*⁴⁴ ”. Two other sources acknowledge the presence of archers during the above-mentioned campaign. Erasmus H. Schneider von Weismantel, a German officer fighting in Poland for the Swedish army, reaches Northern Moldavia (1710) in a rather complicated conjuncture⁴⁵ and holds a campaign diary (1710 - 1714) containing some monographic notes about the country. Observations about the local army (presented as being in a poor condition), include a note about the weapons utilized: “*the sword, the bow and arrow and also the pike, few are those who have pistols or a musket.*⁴⁶”. The second annotation comes from a French officer in the Russian army, Jacques Moreau de Brasey⁴⁷, who wrote in 1711: “*He (Prince Cantemir, A/N) swore allegiance to the marshal (field marshal Count Sheremetev, A/N) and gave him about five or six thousand Moldavian troops, mostly light cavalry, armed with arrows and short pikes, like the Cossacks.*⁴⁸”. Another reference to mounted archers, as we can see.

As previously emphasized in “Introduction”, the military use of archery was patently still alive and currently in the early 18th century Moldavia. Its regression and total disappearance would only occur as a part of a general phenomenon of severe military

⁴⁰ Iorga, *Istoria armatei*, 170.

⁴¹ See Lambert M. Surhone, Mariam T. Tennoe and Susan F. Henssonow, *Russo-Turkish War (1710 – 1711)* (Betascript Publishing, 2010).

⁴² Nicolae Stoicescu, *Curteni și slujitori. Contribuții la istoria armatei române* (București: Editura Militară, 1968), 305 - 306.

⁴³ Moldavian chronicler (1672 - 1745). Main work, “*Letopisețul Țării Moldovei de la Dabija Vodă până la a doua domnie a lui Constantin Mavrocordat*” (“*A Chronicle of Moldavia from Prince Dabija to the Second Reign of Constantin Mavrocordat*”).

⁴⁴ Mihaïl Kogălniceanu (ed.), *Cronicele României sau Letopisețele Moldaviei și Valahiei*, vol. III (București: Imprimeria Națională C.N. Rădulescu, 1874), 45.

⁴⁵ Holban et al., *Călători străini*, vol. VIII, 311.

⁴⁶ Holban et al., *Călători străini*, vol. VIII, 347.

⁴⁷ Holban et al., *Călători străini*, vol. VIII, 459 - 460.

⁴⁸ Holban et al., *Călători străini*, vol. VIII, 463.

decline along the next decades, as a consequence of stricter Ottoman control and supervision.

CONCLUSION

Bows and arrows were a primary weapon in Moldavia throughout the Middle Ages and continued to be so long in the Pre-Modern Era. Although firearms spread over the Eastern Europe with the same speed they did in the Western part of the continent, they were not as popular in replacing old tactics and weaponry.

In the 17th century, Moldavia was one of the last areas in Europe (along with England⁴⁹, Sweden⁵⁰, Hungary⁵¹, Russia⁵², Wallachia and the Ottoman Empire) where bows were still in full use. Probably the best explanation for this would take into consideration the strong influences manifested through the region, such as the Mongol/Tatar, or – later – the Hungarian and Turkish ones. A significant, inherent tradition was thereby formed, with deep roots in the collective mentality. A comparison with Early Modern England could be made in this direction, as the traditional longbow was used in parallel with firearms for more than two hundred years and, even after, it was not easily replaced, but gradually. The value and significance of archery, in both cases, appear to be similar, also⁵³. Under such circumstances, we can perceive an emerging pattern: areas where crossbows were extensively used in the Late Middle Ages (Western Europe, excepting the British Isles, Central and Southern Europe) were the first to replace them with gunpowder weapons, as soon as they were invented. In the other regions, where the bow prevailed on the battlefields, firearms would be adopted progressively and used along with bows for some time (decades or, in the current case, centuries). There is no point, however, to change the hereby discourse towards a new direction whereof completely independent studies could be made. It is only important to acknowledge that archery was still a considerable domain of the military art in Moldavia over the whole 17th century, its disappearance (probably by the mid-1700's) could only be placed in the general context of a hastened military decline, a defining process of the 18th century in the region.

⁴⁹ See E.G. Heath, *Archery : A Military History* (London: Osprey Publishing, 1980).

⁵⁰ Sámi archers were present in Charles XII's army.

⁵¹ See in Rosetti, *Istoria artei militare*, 321.

⁵² Rosetti, *Istoria artei militare*, 321.

⁵³ See Clive Bartlett, *English Longbowman: 1330 – 1515* (London: Osprey Publishing, 1995).

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