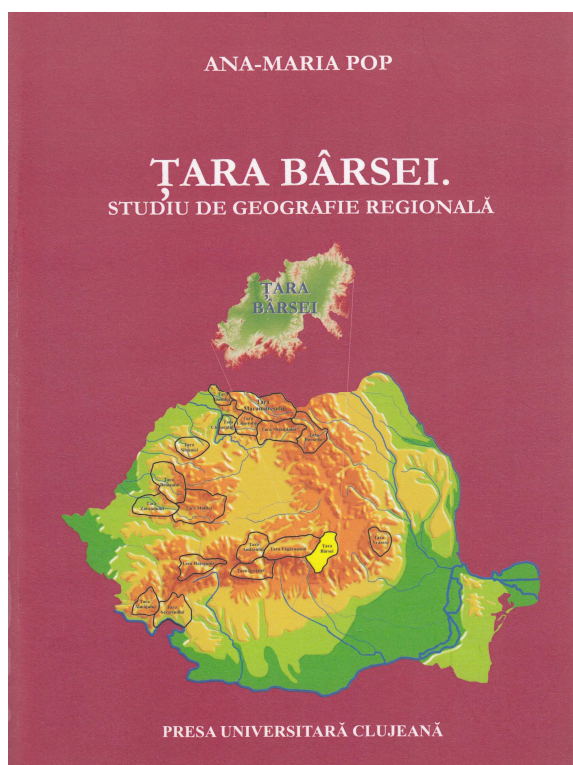


POP, ANA-MARIA - ȚARA BÂRSEI. STUDIU DE GEOGRAFIE REGIONALĂ [The Land of Bârsa. Study of Regional Geography], Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca, 2011, 410 p. ISBN: 978-973-595-350-8



There are, in the case of the Land of Bârsa, a series of aspects that not only distinguishes it from other spatial units of the same type, but also offers it a unique specificity, not always favourable to its conservation as an integrated territorial system. First, its geographical location, in the very heart of Romania, provides the yearned position of “central place”, with obvious polarizing functions and the entire assembly of catalyzing elements, mainly economic, derived from this position.

A primary criterion used by Ana-Maria Pop to delimitate the territorial system is the mental one, “țara” (the “land”) being an *espace vécu*, a space in which its inhabitants live with intensity. In this moment of choice, she faces the first big obstacle: the ethnic diversity accomplished over time as result of the colonisation of the Saxons and the Szeklers, action that generated a mosaic of views on self-identification. Starting from this issue, it should be pointed that out of all the “lands” of Romania,

the Land of Bârsa had to face, for centuries, the most complex and intense allochthonous pressure. The colonization of the Teutonic Knights, of the Saxons and the Szeklers (for a long historical period, the last two were privileged nations in Transylvania with respect to the Romanians) represented factors of permanent hostility against its genuine Romanian mental space. This is an explanation for the tendency to restrict its extension to the south-western part of the Braşov Depression, in order to attempt a substitution of the original spiritual traits of the mental with the allochthonous ones.

The author’s incursion into the historical realities of the region is one of the most profound and reasoned, the archaeological, ethnographical or toponymic evidence representing, on evolutionary stages, from the Middle Palaeolithic to present, the support of an investigation without any trace of partiality, conducted entirely under the rigors of the scientific truth.

The aim of the whole historical approach – which the author has fully achieved – was to reason the extension of the Land of Bârsa over the entire depression area of Braşov, just as the “Lands” of Maramureş, Oaş, Lăpuş, Haţeg, Beiuş, Zarand or Făgăraş, etc. fully circumscribe the homonymous morphological basins. Since all the above-mentioned “lands” were organized as territorial systems and mental spaces before the infiltration and settlement of the allochthonous populations, occupying the entire homonymous depressions located at the foot of the mountains or in the mountains, the Land of Bârsa was no exception, extending over the entire alluvial plain shaped by the Olt River and its strong left-bank tributaries (Râul Negru, Timiș, Bârsa).

A glimpse into the mental of the territorial system fully shows the self-identification of the Romanians with the afferent space, the name of “bârsan” being taken with all its meanings. Not the same can be said about the allochthonous populations, Szekler and German (the Saxons), arrived in the Land of Bârsa after the 12th century, for whom it has no special reverberation. The ethnographic evidence is indisputable as regards the original layer and the primacy of the Romanian element in the region, numerous architectural elements, customs and traditions having their roots in the Dacian and Daco-Roman pre-Christian practices, inherited from ancient times.

After the rigorous journeys made into the history and the mental of the analysed area, the

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author assesses the role of the natural potential, which represents a genuine component for the support and affirmation of the regional system. In this context, an extremely important factor for the region is emphasized, namely its geographical location as “central place” in relation to the Romanian ethnogenetic area. This means that the region is crossed by the absolute majority of the force lines, of the product and interest flows within it. In addition, the Land of Bârsa benefits by a special territorial architecture, being surrounded by mountains on all its sides (attribute that only the “lands” of Maramureş, Loviştea and Almăj can claim). The opening to the outside is done through a series of Carpathian passes and gorges (Predeal, Bran–Rucăr, Predeluş, Bratocea, Oituz, Vlădeni, Tuşnad, Racoş), acting as input or output “gates” for the above-mentioned flows. The morphological, climatic (topoclimatic level) and pedogeographic diversity provides a wide range of interrelations with man in terms of land use, location of habitats and infrastructures, while the richness and variety of reservoirs (from freshwater to mineralized water), plant associations or fauna have a positive impact upon water supply, exploitation of wood resources, curative tourism and recreation, etc.

The dynamics of the territorial system is reflected by the fundamental elements of the action and interaction component, namely population and the habitats built over time. The Depression of Braşov, as initial location of the Land of Bârsa, has been inhabited since prehistoric times, the degree of anthropization increasing continuously. However, there were periods characterized by population decline caused by invasions, plagues or wars, as well as periods of spectacular population growth, such as the one in the 1960s - 1980s, caused by forced industrialization. The territorial dynamics shows high values, population aging is evident, and so is the increase of the dependency index. Unlike the other “lands”, ethnic multiculturalism and the strong interference between the Romanians, Szeklers, Germans, Gypsies, Jews, etc. emerge significantly. The correlation between the ethnic structure and the religious one is also illustrative.

Human settlements date back to Paleolithic, although the first historical records mentioning them originated in documents dated much later, as in the case of the absolute majority of the settlements in Transylvania, namely in the 13th century, when the colonization of the German population took place. The settlement dispersion

is low, being subject to the constraints imposed by their location in the depression area, while the population size displays nine value groups, from small rural settlements, with less than 100 inhabitants, to cities (Braşov, with more than 284,000 inhabitants). The author highlights the level of equipment of habitats, educational and health institutions with utilities, aspects that complete, including from a social perspective, the analysis of the settlement system under consideration.

The economic component of the Land of Bârsa reveals novel aspects regarding the three main branches, agriculture, industry and tourism. Trade and transport are also included, being characterized by special features. They are catalyzed by a series of favourable factors such as geographical location, presence of resources, tradition, creative contribution of multiculturalism, etc. Not the same thing can be said about agriculture. Despite morphology, which offers a large depression area, with deep soils, the climatic conditions are more restrictive (see the *pole of coldness* in Bod) and reduce the range of crops considerably, favouring only the ones adapted to a colder and wetter climate, such as potatoes. But compensation comes from the presence of hayfields and pastures that include the Land of Bârsa among the regions with the largest sheep livestock. A first indicator of the state of economy is the share of population on activity sectors. The population employed in primary sector predominates, but with massive changes in recent years, from the industrial to the tertiary sector. The large number of enterprises (29,601) and the presence of large companies listed on stock exchange (68) can be also noted.

Agriculture has deep traditions especially in the field of sheep breeding, the shepherds of Voineşti (Covasna County) practicing transhumance since time immemorial. The region is also known for potatoes, being one of the country’s main potato producing regions, sugar beet, spring wheat and rye.

Industry has traditions descended from the medieval guilds, followed by the first textile factories in the 18th century. It underwent a remarkable development and diversification in the Communist period, followed by decay and restructuring after 1990.

As regards tourism, the Land of Bârsa exceeds by far the other “lands”, both in terms of potential and the intensity of its exploitation. Even the largest alpine resort in Romania is located in

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this region (Poiana Braşov). The mineral waters of Covasna, Zizin and Vâlcele, as well as the moffetes located in the area of the first resort, provide major resources for curative tourism. The analysis of the tourism phenomenon is correctly oriented towards highlighting the structure of the attractive potential, with emphasis on the importance of the “white gold”, of snow, and of the major cultural resources, with visible impact in attracting Romanian and foreign tourists. The technical infrastructure is properly inventoried (accommodation and access roads) and the recent tourist traffic is rigorously analyzed.

Braşov, the polarizing centre of the region, has shown since the early Middle Ages a special trade aura, provided by its geographical location (at the interface of the three Romanian states, Transylvania, Moldavia, Wallachia, and the Turkish and Austro-Hungarian empires). In general, it continues to display this aura nowadays, due to its function as road and rail hub, and as important industrial, cultural and tourism centre.

We consider that the diagnostic analysis performed by the author emphasizes, in its most relevant aspects, the group of the four types of conditionings dialectically found in a continuous antithesis, directly or indirectly set by the human action and initiative.

Out of all advantages, the “central place” location in Romania remains the most relevant one and with the highest chances of polyvalent exploitation. It is closely followed by the great tourism resources, industrial tradition and the benefic potential of multiculturalism.

The regional radiography of the Land of Bârsa, made with dedication and great skill by Ana-Maria Pop, completes the demarche on the “lands” of Romania with an outstanding achievement. Rigor, balance and concision are the three essential attributes of the analysis, but also of the elevated style, used in a logic construction meant to highlight a territorial system, with a unique structure and functions. Faced with numerous and delicate problems, generated by the ethnic and cultural interference in a long historical period, by the bias or timidity of some previous geographical or non-geographical approaches, the author succeeds to provide an accurate picture of the evolution of a geographical space, well-known for its complexity. Moreover, she succeeds to outline a model of a “land”-type territorial system of great viability, which has preserved its identity despite the allochthonous interferences that were neither simple nor few.

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