

# Imagined and Real Bandits. Robbers and *Hajduks* in the Travel Literature of the XVIII<sup>th</sup> and XIX<sup>th</sup> Centuries concerning the Romanian Countries

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**Keywords:** *robbers, hajduks, travel literature, the Romanian countries*

**Abstract:** *The foreign travelers who visited or went through the Romanian countries in the 18th and 19th centuries have always been concerned about their safe passage. The fear of being robbed was among the most frequently expressed worries since their life was on the line. Nevertheless, being conscious that their travel notes might find an audience in the West, these travelers do not hesitate to spice up their accounts with bandit tales that satisfy the literary taste of the era. Robbers stand therefore, in these travel notes, at the borderline between fabulation and reality, being both a sort of expectation and a terrifying prospect at the same time.*

Passing through Moldavia in the time of Alexander I, on a trip to Jerusalem, the knight Ghillebert de Lannoy is robbed, beaten and “badly wounded in the arm”, stripped, tied to a tree and left for a whole night “in great danger of being killed or drowned”. The episode took place, as the victim stated, near Cetatea Albă, on the banks of the Dniester, the prejudice being estimated at around 100-120 ducats “and other things and jewelry”. At his insistence, the ruler of Moldavia gives satisfaction to the unfortunate knight and brings the aforementioned felons to him, “submitted to me with the noose around their necks and with the approval to kill them”. After returning the stolen goods, the robbers enjoy Lannoy’s knightly mercy and are left alive. No matter how questionable it is (there are some suspicions concerning the veracity of the incident), Ghillebert de Lannoy’s account is one of the first travel notes about the Romanian countries to present highway robbers extensively<sup>2</sup>. Other similar episodes, more or less sensational, are inserted now and then in the accounts of other travelers along the ages, but things really get interesting from this point of view only beginning with the 18th century. This sort of “set pieces” not only do they multiply but also become more nuanced and detailed.

The reasons why such incidents become more frequent in the travel literature concerning the Romanian countries are easy to guess. First of all the number of foreign “visitors” rockets beginning with this period, the accounts are more numerous

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<sup>2</sup> Maria Holban (Ed.), *Călători străini despre țările române*, vol. I, (Bucureşti: Editura Ştiinţifică, 1968), 49-51; the doubts concerning the authenticity of the robbery near Cetatea Albă are expressed by the editor of the same volume on pages 59-61.