

## HERDING IN RODNA MOUNTAINS

Elena ȘENDREA<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>"Babeș-Bolyai" University, Faculty of Geography, 5-7 Clinicilor St., Cluj-Napoca, Romania

„Milenii întregi păstorii au privit oile și oile i-au privit pe păstori.”  
(Gabriel Liiceanu)

### **Abstract**

*The aim of this research is to analyze and compare the situation of the herding in Rodna Mountains from the past with the current situation of this activity. This paper highlights the specific elements that characterize the herding in the Rodna Mountains. This millenary activity, which represents the foundation of the identity of the Romanian people, wears in these mountains a slightly different garment compared to other areas of the Carpathians, due to its environment. Another aim of this research is to analyze the natural elements that allowed the development of this activity in the area of the Rodna Mountains. Long ago, besides agriculture, this was the main occupation of the inhabitants who lived in this area. Today, the authentic, traditional herding, is seen with curious eyes, nostalgic we could say, because it was almost transformed into an industry. But there are small exceptions. The research methods used in this study includes bibliographic research, analysis and synthesis.*

**Keywords:** Herding, Rodna Mountains, Traditions, Transhumance

### **INTRODUCTION**

The herding's roots in the Carpatho-Danubiano-Pontic space are found at the beginning of the history of the Romanian people. The arguments that support this thesis are the reliefs on Trajan's Column which shows, among scenes of the Roman conquest of Dacia, the native population herding cattle, sheep and goats. Also, the archaeologists have found traces of mountain huts dating from this period, suggesting the early development of the livestock movements to mountain pastures (MATLEY, 1970).

The mountain wasn't only a good place for grazing, but it was an area of refuge off the population after the withdrawal of the Romans from Dacia in 271 AD (MATLEY, 1970). From this year until the 13th century, when the first chronicles was written, the fate of the inhabitants of Dacia is unknown. After the Roman armies left, the mixed Daco-Roman civilian population sought refuge in the mountains during periods of invasion, moving back to the lowlands when the danger was past (MATLEY, 1970). Many migratory groups moved through this area (Huns, Avars, Goths, Slavs), but just the Hungarians, in the 9th century, settled in a great number in Transylvania. The Carpathians represents the cradle' of the Romanians as many generations lived in the mountains, their main occupation being livestock herding and agriculture (MATLEY, 1970).

The Carpathian natural environment took the forme of a protective coat for animal breeding. The relatively high extension of the mountain area, located in the central part of the country, forming a continuous mountain chain, like a backbone, it was the support element of the livestock herding (PĂCURAR, 2014).

Not only the natural environment favored the development of livestock herding, but also the interest given by the Romanians, whose identity is closely linked to this ancient activity. OVIDIU DENSUȘIANU (1923) states that „the Romanian people are a nation of shepherds, the

shepherd being „a special Romanian occupation”, arguing these through the way of life and customs. ION CONEA considered that „the beginnings of the Romanian shepherd must be as old as the beginnings of the nation itself” (1936) bringing as arguments our pastoral terminology of paleo-Greek and Roman origin, as well as the vestiges about the Dacian occupations (PĂCURAR, 2014).

Regardless of the different types of shepherd, an essential feature of mountain herding is the fact that animals and shepherds are confined all year round in the mountains; in summer at sheepfold, on high heights, then in stopping areas when ascending and descending, and finally in the village, where the hay is collected for winter. Because the contact with the world from the chaise is insignificant, the influences received in technique and terminology were few, therefore, this is the most archaic and clean Romanian shepherd (DONAT, 1966).

From the earliest times, the cattle herding is a resource of existence for the population that lives in these mountains (MORARIU, 1937). Even if we don't have written documents, there are many clues to support this claim, such as the pastoral architecture, the name and manufacture of the objects from the sheepfold, the primitiveness of the defense weapons against the beasts, the way of preparing the milk products (MORARIU, 1940).

In the Rodna Mountains are found some of the most favorable lands for the shepherd's practice, with special geographical features and being of old origin. This study analyzes all the natural characteristics of the Rodna Mountains, on which the livestock herding was based.

### **THEORY, CONCEPT AND LITERATURE SYNTHESIS**

According to the New Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian language, the herding represents the raising of cattle (especially sheep) through pasture maintenance. The local agricultural herding supposes that the animals don't leave the border of the village, the shepherd only serves the quantity of cheese and wool needed by the inhabitants. One of the first studies about this subject was written by OVIDIU DENSUȘIANU, 1913 (*Păstoritul la popoarele romanice: Însemnătatea lui lingvistică și etnografică*). Based on this paper, also in 1913 Pentre Cănel publishes *Păstoritul la poporul român: precizări etnografico-istorice: cu prilejul apariției studiului D. O. Densușianu "Păstoritul la popoarele romanice"*.

Other important contributions about livestock herding in the Romanian area were brought by DONAT, 1966 (*Păstoritul românesc și problemele sale*); DUNĂRE, 1956 (Problema cercetării etnografice a păstoritului); SACHELARIE, 1941 (Despre viața pastorală și agricolă în trecutul nostru); VUIA, 1964 (*Tipuri de păstorit la români: (sec. XIX - începutul sec. XX)*).

The transhumance represents a periodic oscillation between a summer region and a winter one, to mountain, in the spring, or in the other way, in the autumn, a seasonal movement conditioned by the diversity of the relief, the climate and the vegetation of these two regions (OPREANU, 1930) or in a simplified approach, the transhumance is a pastoral pendulum between mountains and plains (PĂCURAR, 2014). Between the authors who wrote about this subject are: OPREANU, 1930 (*Contribuțiuni la transhumanța din Carpații Orientali*); MURGESCU, 1996 (*Drumurile unității românești: drumul oilor, drumurile negustorești*).

The Rodna Mountains are part of the northern group of the Eastern Carpathians, culminating with an altitude of 2303m at the peak of Pietrosul, this being the maximum altitude of the Eastern chain.

Their northern limit is very steep and corresponds to the Dragoș Vodă tectonic fault, with east-west orientation. To the west, the limit overlaps over the sinking line of the lens under the stream deposits, on which the Sălăuța Valley was formed and it continues on the Valea Carelor till its discharge in Iza. To the south and south-east, the mountains are extending to the

valley of Great Someș, than it continues along a fault, followed by the same valley. The eastern limit overlaps the Rotunda stream and the ridge of the Rotuda Pas, where the altitude drops to 1271m. From here it continues on the Preluca stream and the Great Someș course, separating the Rodna Mountains from the crystalline of the Suhard Mountains.

Regarding the studies on the livestock herding in these mountains must be mentioned TIBERIU MORARIU, 1937 (*Vieața pastorală în Munții Rodnei*); 1940 (*Material etnografic și folklor ciobănesc din Munții Rodnei*); PRECUP, 1926 (*Păstoritul în Munții Rodnei*).

## DATA AND METHODS

In the process of elaborating this paper, the main method used was bibliographic research, in order to outline an image of the natural elements that favored the development of this activity, as well as to identify the characteristics that individualize the livestock herding in the study area. The bibliographic materials were carefully analyzed, then synthesized in the most concise manner, the result being the present study. Also, several maps and graphs were analyzed, in order to observe the extension and the main areas of concentration of the shepherd in the Rodnei Mountains. In addition to the bibliographic materials, some current situations of pastoral life were analyzed, wich addressed the current problems faced by the shepherds and the projects started in the near pasy in order to support the devolpment and continuity of the shepherd in these mountains.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### The natural environment

#### *The relief*

The southern and eastern slopes of the massif, due to their gentle shapes, more exposed to the sun, with flat surfaces, are more suitable for the location of the sheepfolds, compared to the northern and western ones (MORARIU, 1937). The northern slope is individualized by significant glacial traces, such as glacial valleys, wich, through their open forms and fine deposits, have the property of storing water, wich favors the growth of vegetation (MORARIU, 1937). Nevertheless, the northern side of the mountain, being shaded, the climate is colder, so the development of vegetation is slower. The importance of glacial traces can't be neglected. The moreines that descended tot the altitude of 700 m, contributed to the modification of the land. They are responsible, for the most prt, for the formation of valleys with wide bottoms and rich river deposits (MORARIU, 1937).

Under the pesk of Pietrosul (2303 m), there is The spring of Pietrosu, with a glacial cirques surrounded by sheepfolds. The Buhăiescu Valley, the Repedea Valley, are some of the most populated glacial cirques (MORARIU, 1937). Due to the almost total lack of vegetation and the existance of numerous debris, the sheepfolds are rarely located inside of the cirques, but more in the valley or on the shoulders of the valley (MORARIU, 1937). Therefore, the places where the vegetation can't grow, were and will always be avoided by shepherds.

The southern slope also has numerous glacial cirques, but it's more covered in vegetation than the northern one because it's exposed to the sun continuously.

The shoulders of the valley are of interest to herding. If they are deforested and shelter a glade or they represents the contact area between the forest and the pasture, they forme important attraction centers for shepherd (MORARIU, 1937). Regarding the place of the

sheepfold, the 'facae' of the valley shoulders (right bank), exposed to the sun, is much more sought after by the grazing settlements, than the shaded 'back' (left bank) (MORARIU, 1937).

The lower levels (750-900 m), from the hills region, are the most important for the shepherd during the winter, spring and autumn, so almost all year. This region is better represented on the western and southern part of the mountain. The low altitude of the hills region allows the growth of vegetation in spring, so here the shepherd starts earlier, while in the mountains, due to the cold climate, the delay is quite significant.

#### *Climate conditions*

The period with snow is not too long (4-5 months), the favorable temperature is maintained up to 11° C at 1300-1400 m in July and 9° C (SIMEA, 2012) in September, the late frost, quite abundant precipitations, well distributed winds allow the development of vegetation, crucial for grazing (MORARIU, 1937).

#### *Vegetation*

An important factor that conditions the density of distribution of animals on the mountain is the quality and abundance of vegetation, closely related to soil composition (MORARIU, 1937). The most favorable areas are near the forest border, on the shoulders and feet of the mountain (MORARIU, 1937).

The richest places in good pasture vegetation are near the forests, at the limit of 1400-1600 m, on slightly rough surfaces, area well marked by the limit of the sheepfolds (MORARIU, 1937). Very high areas are repulsive to the shepherd. Given the forms of the relief, the exposure of the slopes and the nature of the pastures, it can be stated that the upper limit to which the cattle graze ranges from 2200-2250 m (MORARIU, 1937).

The lower, but also the upper, natural limit of the alpine pastures can not be precisely set, as they expand more and more downward because of the shepherd (MORARIU, 1937).

All the exploitation of the shepherd's area is related to the extent of hay fields inside the border of the village, because the number of animals in each village depends on the possibility for wintering. If the hay would be missing or insufficient and if the areas with alpine pastures would be gone, the population would have to practice transhumance, just like the shepherds from the southern Carpathians (MORARIU, 1937).

### **PASTORAL LIFE'S PAST IN THE RODNA MOUNTAINS**

Livestock herding and agriculture represents for the communities of inhabitants of The Valley of Someșul Mare an archaic occupation, the area of the Rodna Mountains being blessed with abundant pastures and springs, high mountains, but also gentle hills. In addition to the natural environment that allowed the practice of "sheep economy", as NICOLAE DRAGOMIR describes the activity of shepherding, the ownership of the mountains guaranteed to the inhabitants the possibility to practice agricultural activities as much as the geography of the place allowed them (MORARIU, 1940).

Some of the royal diplomas that mention these rights are the diploma of Matei Corvin (1484), Vladislav (1492 and 1494), Ludovic II (1520). This right of ownership over the mountains has often created conflict situations. In 1634, a first conflict arose (without results), which aimed at delimiting the mountains between the communes of Rodnei district and

communes of Moisei, Săcel, Săliște, Dragomirești and Ieud, from Maramureș (Morariu, 1937). Issues concerning this right have continued for many decades in row.

Shepherding in the Rodna Mountains can be considered a special form of shepherding because of its main characteristics (VUIA, 1964). The elements that makes it special are:

- The meadows were kept for mowing, with the exception of those at the foot of the mountain, where the grazing was made until the end of April or May, after that the sheep went up into the mountains. Here is the intersection of the mountains used in summer with sheepfold and mountains for hay;
- In the lower regions the local agricultural pasture was practiced during the spring and autumn, and in mountain regions in summer it climbs the alpine pasture;
- Many types of sheepfolds.



Fig. 1 Sheep flocks on Bătrâna platform (1650 m)  
Source: Morariu Tiberiu, 1937

All of these characteristics listed underline that in the Rodna Mountains, the pastoral population could winter their flocks in the mountainous regions without transhumance (VUIA, 1964). So there were mountains used during summer and mountains with meadows for winter, which means that in certain times and places it was possible to winter in the mountains without stable settlements, with a smaller number of sheep, the pastoral population passing from the summering in the mountain directly to wintering in mountains with hay, at first grazig the sheep in the mowed hay and, after the snow fell, going to the hay reserve (VUIA, 1964).

The hay mountains played a significant role for the shepherd, but there were villages that did not have them. Therefore, in these cases, of great importance is the area of grasslands at the foot of the mountain, at an altitude of 1000-1200 m (MORARIU, 1937).

There was a preference of people from the higher regions to leave the narrow valley and settle in the more gentle places in the hay area, action known as field emigration. Thus, the topography of the land and the existence of meadows led to the establishment of new settlements, known as scattered settlements. This phenomenon influenced the way pastoral life unfolded (MORARIU, 1937).

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in communities such as Rebrîșoara, Parva, Leșu, it was observed that the population gave up to the collective exploitation and the tendency towards the individual exploitation and a preference for big cattle.

Toponymy of the mountains: Tomnatecul (1633 m), Tomnatecul Vărărenilor (1700 m), attests the existence of mountains used during autumn, besides those of hay and pasture. In these mountains it was grazing was done until the snow fell, than the flocks either descended for wintering in the hay area or continued to stay in the mountains (MORARIU, 1937).

Mount Văratîc, near the Ineu peak, with a slightly rugged relief, a little warmer received its name because it was used for grazing during summer.

The evolution of the types of pastoral settlements in Rodna Mountains is the best represented in the Carpathians. Thus, from the tent that represents the most primitive architectural form of shepherd, to “coliba în cheutori”, which in the Rodna Mountains is was the most advanced stage of construction and from which the „houses in the field” were derived (VUIA, 1964).

As for the villages, there were two types: „colibele în furci” (or „removals” from the rough terrain, rarely encountered or mentioned for the rest of the Carpathians) and „stâna în cetori” (VUIA, 1964).

There are two ways to practice the exploitation of pastures in the Rodna massif: irrational grazing (no parcels with successive grazing) and grazing centers. In the first system, grazing was done irregularly, all over the mountain, which led to the fact that a large area of the alpine pasture could no longer be used by animals, due to the aging of the vegetation (MORARIU, 1937). The system with grazing centers (rotary) is specific to the Bârsan (shepherds that practiced the transhumance, they were from Moldavia and Ținutul Secuiesc). They divided the mountain into several plots, they had grazing centers which they used rotary. Thus, after finishing the resources from one place, they would move on to the next plot. Their animals wandered as little as possible and did not waste their time searching for food, while those of the local shepherds, being run away, had no time to feed, which resulted in a smaller amount of milk (MORARIU, 1937).

Shepherds' roads can be divided in several directions (from which paths and secondary roads are separated, on valleys or ridges of hills, to the alpine pastures) the most important being: along the Someș Valley (the most important one); over the Sălăuța Valley, in the Borșa Valley basin; to the Transylvanian Plain (MORARIU, 1937).



Fig. 2 “Colibă în furci” on Mount Mihăiasa (1650 m)  
Source: Morariu Tiberiu, 1937

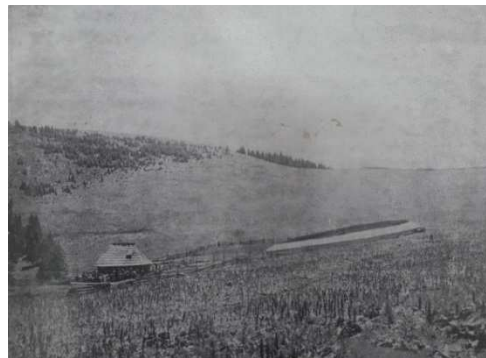


Fig. 3 Sheepfold pattern from Mount Rotunda  
Source: Morariu Tiberiu, 1937

*The transhumance*

Although the practice of transhumance in the Rodna Mountains was less important compared to the local agricultural shepherd, this massif represented an attraction for the shepherds' of Sibiu, Galeș, Săliște, Șura Mare, and even from the region of Brașov (MORARIU, 1937). The population, not very large and without a large number of sheep, leases the mountains to the Bârseni. Many times the shepherds in the Rodna Mountains went with them to winter in Moldavia or in the Plain of Tisa. Also, until the beginning of First World War, the shepherds migrated to Poland and Czechoslovakia (MORARIU, 1937).

OPREANU (1930) mentions the the țîțuieni from Poiana Sibiului and from other villages spent the summer in the mountains.

*Breeding of cattle*

Large animals always represented an indispensable resource of existence. Almost all the agriculture in the Rodna Mountains was done only with the help of cattle, they represented the driving force for soil work and a source of fertilizers for the soil. The well-being of the people was measured by the number of cattle held, because without the work of these animals, everything had to be done with arms, would lead to misery (MORARIU, 1937). Agricultural works with large animals are specific to the southern side of the massif, as for the northern side, the people were dealing with wood exploitation or taking the path of wandering (MORARIU, 1937).

**PASTORAL LIFE'S PRESENT IN THE RODNA MOUNTAINS**

The archaic tradition of shepherding in the Carpathians, unfortunately, has dampened. Animal breeders are struggling with many problems, from the sale of lambs (which has become a difficult thing) and finding people willing to work, to the fact that the state doesn't support livestock herding properly.

The shepherds complain that they no longer find reliable people to work with. Most come to work a day or two and then leave. Lack of workforce will be one of the factors that will lead to the sunset of this activity.

Another obstacle to the harmonious development of shepherding is the prioritization of the producers themselves in the markets. In many cases, traders, who buy products and then sell them more expensive, occupy top positions in the market. However, there are many customers who go straight to the sheepfolds to buy traditional products and to see how they are made.

Another regressive factor for the livestock herding in the mountain area is the degradation of the grassland structure due to the failure to apply some operating maintenance rules. Thus, the quality of the feed for animals and the production level is endangered. Although the Law no. 197/2018 of July 2018 (Law of the mountain) chapter V, art.6, paragraph 4, mentions that the Romanian state will grant a payment for the livestock breeders in order to maintain the productivity of the meadows, if the necessary technical measures were respected, then the grazing capacity would double.

The classic transhumance remained only a nostalgic memory of the old shepherds. Today, there is a regression of the number of animals in the Rodna Mountains, but also of those who will continue this profession, due to the factors mentioned above. Shepherding is no longer an activity as attractive as once for the population. On the paths of Rodna Mountains there are still shepherds with animals, but, of course, the phenomenon has lost its greatness.



Fig. 4 Sheep flock near the Cailor Waterfall  
Source: Personal archive, 2018



Fig. 5 Grazing cattle near the Gârgalău peak  
Source: Personal archive, 2018

In the last two decades, communities in the Rodna Mountains have begun to associate, realizing that this is the best method both to efficiently capitalize the obtained products, as well as for attracting European funds, important amounts of money, which helped to modernize the sheepfolds. An example of this was realized in 2007, when some owners from Rodna Mountains joined and managed to access European funds worth 4 million RON. Thus, the traditional sheepfolds have been modernized and turned into small-scale milk factories.

Another edifying example is the situation of Parva commune, where funds from APIA worth 300 000 RON were drawn, but also funds from the European Union and from the Romanian state. At an altitude of 1700m, a modern, European sheepfold was built, which complies with hygiene and cleaning standards. The sheepfold received the name of the Parva zoopastoral complex. People can come to stay at the sheepfold, to see how the life of shepherds unfolds and how milk products are prepared.

## CONCLUSIONS

From the earliest times the shepherd has represented the source of existence of the communities from Rodna massif. Regarding the permissiveness of the relief for livestock herding, Rodna Mountains include eroded-looking lands, vast erosion platforms, where the pasture extends both on the ridges and in the middle of the forests, in the form of meadows.

The livestock herding in these mountains has developed in relation to the orographic forms of the massif and the hills region, with the altitude and orientation towards the sun of these forms. Also this activity is conditioned by climate, which determines vegetation development. Higher altitude regions are important for herding, but the lower levels from 600-900 m are attractive because of their location. Here stay the animals during winter, spring and autumn. In these mountains the traditional shepherding, in its evolution, has taken on a form with its own characters, different from the other Carpathian massifs. Today the traditional character has



diminished, the breeders' communities are associated for a better yield, the sheepfolds are in line with European standards. The sheepfolds now are a place for attractive for tourists, the people being warmly welcomed to spend a few days with the shepherds, to observe the pastoral life or what is left of it.

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