CHANGE AND CONTINUITY: THE HISTORY OF A RURAL LANDSCAPE IN SOUTHERN ROMANIA

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Abstract Rural landscapes are the result of complex interactions between natural and social forces. Product of changes through time, landscapes can only be understood in their historic context. The present study focuses on the historical change of a rural landscape in Valea Dragului, a traditional farming community in southern Romania, during the past 200 years; it uses maps from the end of 18th century to 1980 and recent Landsat imagery, supplemented with evidence from historical sources, statistical data, recent field surveys.

At the end of the 18th century, local landscape is still largely natural, but population growth (with the crucial contribution of Bulgarian immigrants), successive land reforms and technological progress during the 19th c. shape it into the traditional agricultural landscape. Landscape change amplifies during the second half of the 20th c., following 2 major political shifts. One is the socialist restructuring of landownership patterns and farming systems after the WW II, when traditional rural landscapes were replaced by “productivist” agrarian landscapes. The second one, following the political shift in 1989 and the recent land reform, is the unexpected resurrection of traditional rural landscapes. Recently, Romanian rural landscapes have to cope with two new challenges: the major one is global environmental change; the other, accession to the European Union (January 2007) and compliance with the Common Agricultural Policy. Accordingly, the re-adjustment of land use patterns is expected to reverberate in further landscape transformation.

Key Words: Southern Romania, landscape history, traditional rural landscape, land reform, landscape transformation.

1. Introduction

The present study is an attempt to trace the historical evolution, the “making” of a rural landscape in Valea Dragului, Southern Romania, inspired by the landscape history approach. Used by Dion (1992)
in France and by Hoskins (1985) in England, it considers landscapes as the result of complex interactions between natural and social forces over centuries, even millennia. As so, landscapes can be understood only in their historic context, as political, economic, socio-demographic, ethnic and cultural factors characteristic of specific human communities are active drivers of landscape transformation.

Landscapes are dynamic phenomena, constantly changing. In the initial stages of development of rural communities, the landscapes they shape are the result of successive adaptations to environmental challenges. However, rates of landscape change accelerate over time with advances in technology, population growth and the increasing complexity of society, with the past 200 years mostly responsible for the creation of the rural landscapes as we know them today.

In Europe, most rural landscapes have been shaped by human land use over millennia, resulting in a highly diverse landscape mosaic, well preserved in some Western European countries. In the Central and East-European context however, retracing the history of rural landscapes is a challenging task due to their troubled history and to massive changes during the socialist period.

The present study is the first one to focus on Romanian rural landscapes from a historical perspective. It relies on historic maps and documents, corroborated with statistical data and information on the political, social and economic context of the end of 18th C. and 19th C. For the 20th C topographical maps and data from local land registers are used, while the past decade is documented from two Landsat images and information from recent field surveys and interviews.

2. Case study

Valea Dragului, a traditional farming community 40 km south-east from Bucharest, was chosen as typical for the evolution of rural landscapes in Southern Romania. The present-day rural commune is the result of the amalgamation of 3 villages (Ciocoveni, Ghimpati and Valea Dragului); in 2002 it had a total area of 3664 ha (of which 3129 ha farmland), with 3078 inhabitants and about 1100 households.

Natural potential in Valea Dragului favors farming activities: the flat plain (max. altitude 60 m) on sedimentary deposits (loess and alluvial), is connected by mild slopes of the terraces to a wide floodplain (average altitude 40 m). The climate is temperate of continental nuance, with 4 seasons; the average annual temperature is 10.5 °C, while precipitation averages around 500 mm/year; dry summers and cold winters are characteristic. The Sabar-Arges hydrographic system creates a well-developed floodplain, while on the higher loess plateau water is relatively scarce. Fertile soils (brown forest soils and chernozems on loess deposits, alluvial soils in the floodplain) represent major assets for the development of agriculture. The original landscape was characterized by sylvo-steppe vegetation (grassland with patches of deciduous forest and xerophilous shrubs), while in the periodically flooded alluvial plain, riparian forests and meadows alternated with marshes.
3. Landscape history in Valea Dragului

Although there is archeological and documentary proof of early inhabitation and agricultural occupation of land since Roman times (Giurescu 1979), the rural landscape of Valea Dragului as we know it today, with its pattern of fields, earthworks, roads, buildings, is largely a creation of the past 200 years, the period on which this study is focused.

The village of Tamasesti (present-day Valea Dragului) is first mentioned in documents in 1620 as part of a large local estate (based in the neighboring village Herasti). Its position on the terrace provides shelter both from flooding and from the NE dominant winds, and a sunny exposition. The "ecotone" location (characteristic for most settlements in the area) allows easy access to complementary local resources: water, forest, grazing land, fertile soils for farming.

In spite of such resources, population density remains low in this exposed area until the end of 18th C., due to frequent Turkish incursions and wars; as a consequence, the development of farming activities is delayed. At the end of 18th C., all land belongs to the local landlord; peasants lease land as tenants in exchange for labor and payment of rent and various taxes; they are allowed to use the pastures and to clear and work an area of farmland proportional to the subsistence needs of their families.

The Specht Map (Spech 1790) (Fig. 1), the earliest detailed map pertaining to the area, depicts the situation at the end of feudalism in Southern Romania. At the time, the area is under Turkish domination (including a trade monopoly over Romanian livestock and grains). In the rural area south of Bucharest, the main occupation is extensive livestock husbandry (especially of sheep), using natural steppe grassland and floodplain meadows as grazing land. Grain crops (maize, wheat, oats, barley) are locally cultivated in an open field system (there are no enclosures, nor the 3-field system of Western Europe) (Corfus 1969).

![Fig. 1 Valea Dragului in 1790. Specht Map 1790.](image-url)
At the scale 1:57,000, the map offers details of the natural landscape: the morphology (terraces in hatches, the meandered valleys of the 2 rivers, extensive wetlands in the floodplain), and the vegetation (on the higher plateau north of the village extensive steppe grassland with isolated trees and shrubs; in the floodplain, the forest S-E of the village and extensive meadows). The settlement (only Ciocoveni “Csokoveni” village figures, Tamasesti/Valea Dragului is omitted) is a typical “street” village, developed on the ecotone location at the contact between the floodplain and the lower terrace. Gardens surround the village, while patches of arable land appear in the floodplain. The dense network of narrow, sinuous paths connecting the villages and the frequency of wells indicate livestock herding as the main local activity.

The map can be considered a close rendition of the initial/natural landscape before the start of massive human intervention.

In 1829 a trade liberalization treaty allows the penetration of Romanian produce on the European market, giving a new impetus to the development of agriculture in the area. A period of rapid population growth follows: between 1810 and 1850 the population doubles in the area south of Bucharest, mainly by contribution of Bulgarian immigrants established in 1820-1831 in Valea Dragului and neighboring villages (Mihailescu 1924). They bring with them the know-how of vegetable gardening and diary farming, and are welcomed by local landlords as much needed skilled labor. Their presence will play a crucial role in the shaping of local rural landscapes.

It is also a period of continuous and vigorous expansion of farmland, especially arable land by means of forest clearing and grassland tilling, in a typical extensive manner.

Such advances over a half century are well reflected in the Satmari Map (Satmari 1864) (Fig. 2), based on field surveys from 1856, which, at the scale 1:57,500, offers a detailed and reliable description of land use and landscape at the beginning of the modern period in Southern Romania.

Fig. 2 Valea Dragului in 1856. Satmari Map 1864.
Local morphology is clearly rendered: the alluvial plain and the higher plateau appear separated by terraces (hatched). Extensive marshes occupy the floodplain. Natural vegetation also figures: forests (one SE of Valea Dragului, keeping its natural contours, another affected by clearing south of Ciocoveni) and meadows in the alluvial plain, steppe with shrubs on the higher plain north of the villages. The settlements (2 villages, Valea Dragului and Ciocoveni and 1 new hamlet Ghimbati) are rendered with their disorderly internal structure: houses chaotically interspersed with gardens, lacking a road network. Bulgarian immigrants' characteristic ethnical/cultural imprint on the local landscape is already conspicuous in the geometrical-shaped, well tended vegetable gardens in the floodplain, around most villages in the area. Other categories of land use are also represented: vineyards on the south-facing terrace slope north of Ciocoveni; geometrically shaped arable fields in the floodplain; part of the land north of the villages is also under cultivation, interspersed with vestiges of natural shrub vegetation.

Livestock breeding remains an important activity, as proved by place names (Odai north of villages means a seasonal shepherds' establishment) and by the frequency of wells along roads or in the middle of pastures. It is around this time however, that cultivated land comes to dominate the landscape, with grain crops, vineyards replacing natural grasslands on the higher plain and vegetable gardens taking the place of meadows in the floodplain; however, from the chaotic road structure we can infer that the land is not yet systematically, intensively worked.

The map captures the transition from the mostly natural landscape towards the traditional rural landscape, with its characteristic land fragmentation, and the diverse and complex mosaic of land uses, finely tuned to the local natural potential.

The first land reform in Romania (Satmari 1864) brings along significant changes in landownership structure, reverberating in further land use adjustments and landscape change. In Valea Dragului, approximately 500 ha of farmland are distributed to 165 of the total 433 households, resulting in an average of 3 ha per family farm (Alessandrescu 1895). Interesting is the original land ownership pattern, faithful reflection of local traditions: each household receives scattered land plots of various suitability, in order to guarantee access to all available local resources.

In the following decades, continued immigration flows and population growth translate into new pressures and increasing human intervention on the landscape.

The Topographical Map (Romanian Ministry of Defense 1905) (Fig. 3), complemented with detailed statistical data of the time, vividly depicts the situation 40 years after the first land reform. In 1890 Valea Dragului commune has a total area of 3831 ha, with 454 households and 1926 inhabitants. Over 80% of households live on farming revenues, while more than half of total population is of Bulgarian ancestry (Alessandrescu 1895). Population growth is evident in larger, merging settlements (Ciocoveni, Ghimpati), with an orderly structure- houses aligned along roads, but still surrounded by gardens plots, orchards, pasture. Large estates still prevail (on 75% of local land: forest, pasture, arable land, pond etc), while peasants own the rest of land (arable land, pasture, vineyards) with an average farm area over 5 ha (Alessandrescu 1895) on which they perpetuate the system of subsistence mixed farming.
The landscape is dominated by expanding areas of arable land, overlaid by a systematic, rectangular road network which testifies to the intensification of agricultural use. Vineyards compete with orchards for best location on terrace slopes, both north and south of villages. Remarkable is the expansion of vegetable gardens: 3 massive areas in the floodplain, well-laid with paths, attesting to their systematic, intensive exploitation. It is around this time that commercial gardening for city markets starts, stimulated by the synergy of suitable natural potential, skilled Bulgarian labor and the advent of modern pumps for irrigation.

Accordingly, there is a marked decline of natural areas, relegated to marginal locations: pastures survive only in remnant patches in areas of low potential for cultivation (along minor hydrography in the floodplain), while forests are also reduced to geometrical patches (probably recently cleared, as attested by the isolated trees surviving on former location); marshes SE of Ciocoveni are drained and the land reclaimed for cultivation in 1867, when Sabar river is channeled (mainly to fend villages from flooding).

The map marks the radical transformation of landscape in only 100 years, from the mostly natural landscape rendered by the Specht map in 1790 into the traditional rural landscape mosaic typical for Central and Eastern Europe.
The land reform in 1921 distributes more land to peasants; however, rapid population growth leads to increasing fragmentation of farmland and intricate landownership patterns. Between the wars Valea Dragului enjoys a period of relative prosperity, due to the progress of commercial farming: fresh vegetables for Bucharest markets and grains for export (Mihailescu 1924).

The political shift in 1945, when communists seize the political power in Romania, has major consequences on the rural world: restructuring of landownership structure and farming systems, with further impacts on land use and rural landscapes.

The communist land reform in 1945 confiscates land of large estates, which is partly used for the creation of state farms (on Sovkhoz model) and partly distributed to landless or poor peasants. In Valea Dragului the estates are liquidated, as all land is distributed. A decade of economic hardship follows, due to imposed quotas of produce and increasing pressures for restructuring of agriculture on Soviet models (Kolkhoz, collective farms). At the end of the 1950s “free” farming associations are initiated locally, but in the area south of Bucharest majority of farmers oppose the move.

It is in this context that the topographic map (Romanian Ministry of Defense 1960) (Fig. 4) is published (based on field surveys from 1958). Complemented with detailed data from the local land registers 1958-1959, it documents land use and landscape before the radical restructuring of agriculture and the creation of the local collective farm in Valea Dragului.

![Fig. 4 Valea Dragului in 1958. Topographical Map 1960.](image)

The system of semi-subsistence mixed farming continues, combining commercial intensive vegetable gardening with subsistence crops and diary farming. The typical fragmentation of farmland is perpetuated: in 1958, the average family farm in Ciocoveni village has 3 ha, in 9 plots/farm; average
area of plots is 0.3 ha (Sasaki 2001); the high density of roads and dirt paths between fields is proof of land fragmentation and scattering.

Also characteristic is the mosaic land use pattern: in the floodplain, vegetable gardens appear much extended compared with 1905, in 4 compact areas, each 20 to 150 ha in area; orchards in 3 compact plantations and vineyards on the traditional location (although their extension is probably exaggerated) are rendered, while pastures in the floodplain appear much diminished. Arable land dominates the landscape, in a fragmented, scattered pattern of landownership and land use/crop structure. New is the dense network of hedgerows (usually the quick-growing, drought-resistant *Robinia pseudoacacia*), used to mark property boundaries, but also playing important ecological and productive functions: shelter against dominant NE winds, helping snow accumulation on the fields, providing firewood, stacks. Isolated trees, mainly fruit trees, also used to mark boundaries, provide shade and offer refuge and food for wildlife species.

Natural elements recede, with isolated forest patches left along Arges River, in view of their role in protecting farmland from flooding.

The map depicts a balanced, mature agricultural landscape, result of a long process of evolution and adjustment, with land use optimally suited to the natural potential resulting in a complex landscape mosaic.

The process of socialist transformation of agriculture is accomplished in 1962, with the creation of collective farms. Farmers “donate” their land and farming implements and become collective farm members. The radical changes of landownership patterns and farming system are reflected in a new land use structure and the thorough transformation of the traditional rural landscape.

In Valea Dragului the collective farm starts in 1962 with 1000 members, on over 70% of local farmland; the rest of the land is used by members as household garden plots (around 0.3 ha per a family) (Sasaki 2001).

Use of modern technology allows increasing human intervention in landscape: farmland area gradually expands by means of land improvement (residual marshes are drained, micro-morphology is flattened). For improved productivity, farmland is consolidated in larger fields (average area 125 ha); in the process, essential landscape elements like hedgerows, isolated trees and forest patches are razed (Sasaki 2001).

The collective farm in Valea Dragului specializes in grains, industrial and fodder crops and diary farming. The scale of the operations, the use of farming machines, chemical inputs and irrigation, allow improved productivities. However, the excesses of the industrial-type farms in the immediate proximity of Bucharest are avoided, due to the limited investment capacity.

Traditional farming continues on the household plots, “islands” that conserve the features of the traditional landscape: land fragmentation, mosaic land use, landscape diversity. Relative economic prosperity returns at the end of the 1960s with the revitalization of commercial vegetable gardening, although constrained by the narrow plots to more intensive operations; it is the start of the widespread vinyl/greenhouse farming in the area.

The 1980s is a period of worsening economic conditions and population decline, a consequence of
the system crisis reverberating at the local level (labor deficit, as majority commute to better-paid urban industrial jobs; declining productivities of the cooperative farm), compounded by environmental degradation. A project for the Arges navigation channel starts at the end of the 1980s; in Valea Dragului, the 2 meanders south of the village are rectified, concrete embankments are built and the talweg is deepened with severe ecological consequences: the water table under the village permanently lowers by 0.5-1 m (Sasaki 2001).

The results of 30 years of socialist farming clearly appear in a satellite image (Fig. 5). The compact, geometrical, monotonous fields of the farming cooperative are in stark contrast with the intricate patterns of the household plots massed around the villages. It is a typical socialist “productivist” agricultural landscape, of declining diversity and complexity; natural/semi-natural elements survive in marginal locations or not at all: forests are actually plantations (poplar, acacia); rivers run through man-made channels; micro-morphology is flattened, wetlands are drained.

![Fig. 5 Valea Dragului in 1989. Landsat 5 image, July 1989.](image)

The consequences of the political shift in 1989, followed by the radical socio-economic reform, are manifest in the recent transformation of rural landscapes all over Romania. The collapse of the collective farming system was followed by restructuring of the farming sector and the land reform (1991), basis for the restitution of land to former owners or their inheritors. In Valea Dragului, where the
farming traditions preceding socialism remained vivid in the collective memory, the repossessio
land conformed to the traditional landownership patterns (each farmer received land plots of variou
natural potential, for equitable access to all local resources). The main consequence has been the re
renewed land fragmentation: the average farm has 2.45 ha in a few scattered plots, sometimes in very
distant locations.

Family farms were thus revived, with a majority of aging farmers reverting to the subsistence-orien
ted farming system. There has been a partial return to traditional land use patterns and crop struc
ture, resulting in decreasing intensity of farming operations. Traditional farming practices and
know-how respectful of the local natural potential are also revived: use of animal traction, manual la
use of organic fertilizers, watering by pumps etc.

10 years after the land reform, the situation is well documented in a satellite image (Fig. 6), comple
mented with data of the field survey conducted in July- August 2000.

The traditional rural landscape, with its narrow plots and the polarization between intensive and ex
tensive uses, makes a spectacular come back. The typical mosaic land use pattern is revived: in the
floodplain, a mix of pastures, irrigated vegetable gardens, fodder crops and grains; patches of vineyards
on the terrace; on the higher plateau north of village, mainly grain crops and sunflower. In contrast with
the narrow plots of the new private farms, land worked by the farming associations (inheritors of the
farming cooperative) retain the large monotone field patterns; however, following their bankruptcy in
1997, land was left fallow (as visible on the satellite image), with negative impacts on landscape quality
(Sasaki 2001).

Fig. 6 Valea Dragului in 2000. Landsat 7 image, June 2000.
A positive evolution is the regeneration of natural landscape elements promoting landscape diversity, complexity and stability: forests have improved densities, wetlands reappear periodically in the floodplain following the demise of draining systems.

The most recent field survey (July-August 2005), however, has identified new challenges for traditional rural landscapes. A major challenge is recent environmental change (unreliable weather patterns: prolonged drought/excessive rain, flooding; declining water table; declining soil fertility). Our field survey showed that traditional land use patterns and crop structure, which used to represent the optimal adjustment to the local potential, do not correspond any longer to the present local context. In response, the trend of re-adjustment of land use patterns and crop structure to the new conditions is already conspicuous, with grain crops, previously cultivated on the higher plain, being gradually moved to the floodplain, due to recent dry spells. As a result, on the one hand, is the process of intensification of operations in the floodplain, while on the other hand, marginalization of cultivation of higher land, affected by drought. These opposite trends represent both a threat to the preservation of traditional rural landscapes.

A second challenge for traditional rural landscapes is Romania’s Accession to the E.U. in January 2007 and compliance to the Common Agricultural Policy. The new CAP shows a greater concern for the protection and sustainable management of the countryside, proposing a new model of a multi-functional, sustainable farming sector, which has a key role to play in preserving rural communities, the countryside and rural landscapes (European Union 1998).

Answering such concerns, Romania’s National Plan for Rural Development 2007-2013 (Romanian Ministry of Agriculture 2006), proposes major changes to the existing landownership patterns and farming systems, expected to reverberate in further land use and landscape changes. One of the priorities is promotion of sustainable farming systems and environment-friendly farming practices for landscape conservation. Accordingly, the most probable scenario of evolution in Valea Dragului and surrounding areas would be the continuation of traditional farming activities, guarantee of the preservation of traditional rural landscapes.

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(* in Romanian; ** in French)