

THE SHEPHERDING IN THE MARAMUREȘ MOUNTAINS AND ITS ROLE IN THE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT. – **The Shepherding in the Maramureș Mountains and its Role in the Local Development.** Maramureș Mountains by their position in the Maramureș Land constitute from immemorial times a favourable space for shepherding. This study, part of a much more ample research, focuses on the analysis of this traditional economic activity and its role in the local development in the Maramureș Land. We have in view many aspects concerning the organization of the space with sheepfolds, rules concerning the order of the sheepfolds, the correspondence between the position of the sheepfold and the tourist roads, aspects concerning the capitalization of the products obtained as well the degree of use of the wool and the leather in the traditional costume and the way in which is reflected in the welfare of the population. We analyzed too aspects concerning the system of the sheepfold organization and the migratory flows that are realized from the considerable distance. This work tries to present progressively these aspects beginning with 14th century (the first written documents) to the present.

Keywords: *local development, sheepfold, shepherding, welfare, Maramureș.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Maramureș Mountains, situated in the northern group of the Eastern Carpathians, at the north border of Romania, cover an area of 168 814 hectares. At the end of 2008, the total population was 87 525 inhabitants within 8 rural municipalities (Moisei, Vișeu de Jos, Leordina, Petrova, Bistra, Ruscova, Repedea, Poienile de Sub Munte) and two towns (Borșa and Vișeu de Sus).

Within this space, shepherding is a very old activity, with typical forms of organization having a sedentary character and a very old terminology. The archaeological discoveries and the medieval documentary attestations regarding pastoral life do not offer much information, probably because most of the tools and buildings were exclusively made of wood and they have not left well preserved traces. Only starting with the 13-14th centuries appear the first mentions (diplomas or documents of sale) regarding the hay fields and the pastures. The alpine pastures of the Maramureș Mountains offered exceptional conditions for breeding sheep, which were kept, in a pasture area for the summer in sheepfolds which are called in the 14th century documents from Maramureș “loci estivales” or “descensus in alpihus” (Mihaly de Apșa, 1900).

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In the 14th century, it is not certain if cattle were kept for the summer on the alpine pastures, as it happens today in most of the villages, which is due to the extension of the arable lands in the detriment of low altitude pastures. According to the information given by documents, grazing in the mountains seems to have been limited to sheep and the number of sheepfolds was more reduced than it is nowadays. According to Radu Popa (1997), the giving of the sheep to a shepherd or “quincuagesima ovium”, which is a service in products of the Romanians reflects exactly the differences between the branches of economy as far as the making of some products which are beyond the needs of rural communities is concerned. The giving of sheep to a shepherd dates back in Maramureş to 1360 and to the middle of the next century. The importance of breeding sheep within the economy of Maramureş had as a result also the separation from the limits of the village of some mountains with pastures which have begun to appear as distinct properties since the 14th century. The mountains were considered as part of the village land even when they were not a common body with the village land and were at great distance. It is not known if the separation of the mountains from the village land and their distinct patrimonialisation began with the alpine pastures geographically separated from the village, although it is natural that this process might have had such an evolution. Thus there are pastures which although are inside the administrative territory of a certain settlement, they belong to other village or persons from other villages.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The information for this study was collected in 2008. In analyzing the elements of shepherding, an important traditional economic activity in the local community, we used statistical information from the municipalities of the Maramureş Country, Statistical Institute from Baia Mare, historical documents and an immense field work.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The shepherding in these mountains is favored by the existence of a favorable land cover in which the pastures and hay fields account for 50 250 ha which represents about 30% of the total area of the present study (14.46% pastures and 15.30% hay fields) and the wooded area represents 65.03% (fig. 1).

The arable land is under 5%. By studying the structure of the agricultural fields in 2008, we notice for each municipality in the study high ratios of the pastures and hay fields. The largest surface of pastures are found in Borşa (over 8000 ha), Poienile de Sub Munte (about 4000 ha) and Moisei (3358 ha). The vineyards are not present in Maramureş Mountains and the orchards have an insignificant ratio, 91 ha which is 0.05% of the total surface (fig. 2).

Regarding the type of shepherding, in the Maramureş Mountains there is a pendulous shepherding - simple or double - imposed by the fact that the number of sheep exceeds the foddering possibilities offered by the natural pastures existing in

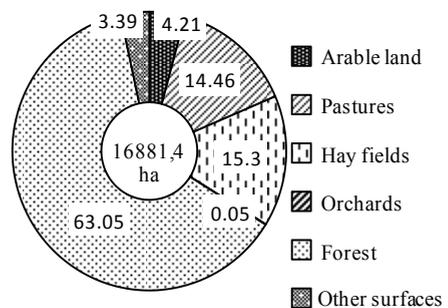


Fig. 1. The structure of the land cover.

the limits of the villages. The pendulating of the sheep take place within two areas: the first, in the limits of the village, on arable lands and pastures, and the second in the natural pastures high in the mountains. Besides the economic purposes (dairy products, meat, skin, wool etc) a permanent manuring of the lands is achieved. The grazing of sheep on the mountains lasts generally 4-5 months, according to the altitude of the sheepfold, beginning with the end of May and until the beginning of September in the alpine area, or until October at lower altitudes, when the summer grazing season actually ends (from the 23rd of April, the celebration of St. George, until the 26th of October, the celebration of St. Demetrius).

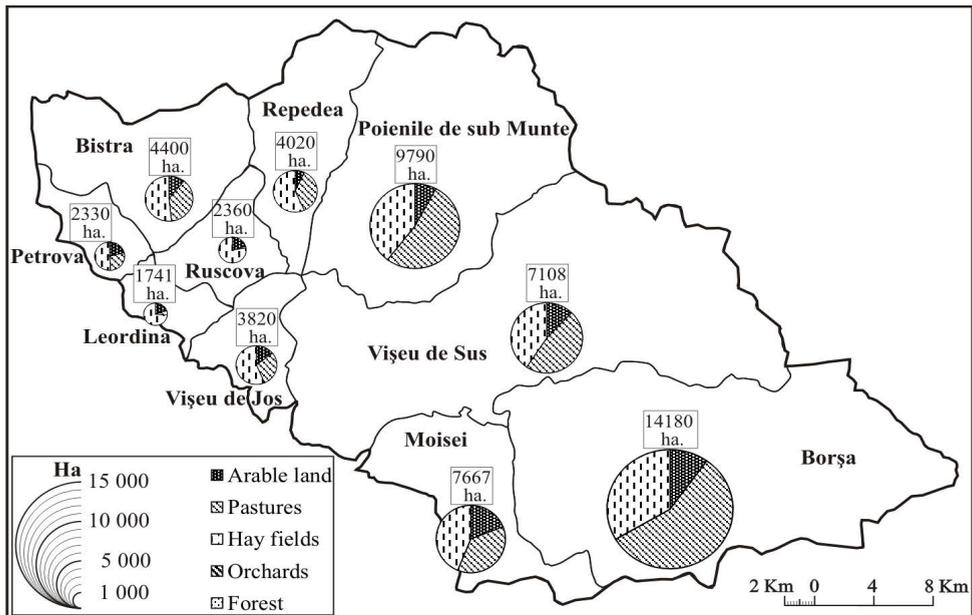


Fig. 2. The structure of the agricultural lands by municipalities.

In the case of simple pendulating shepherding, the sheep pendulate every pastoral year between the village and the mountains to be kept for summer, but they always spend the winter in the villages of origin. In spring, sheep graze on the hay fields or on arable lands (except for the lands with wheat, clover and alfalfa). Once grazing in these areas stops, generally in the first decade of May, there take place the “sâmbra oilor” or “împreunatul” (the process of mating), an ancient pastoral habit with multiple social and economic significances. The leaving of sheepfold for the mountains is thus celebrated by a rustic celebration somewhere not far of the centre of the village and all the sheep owners’ families and other guests take part at this celebration. On this day the measuring of the milk for each sheep is done, and based on this measurement the owner will receive a certain amount of cheese.

The double pendulating shepherding, an original form of Romanian pastoral life is more complex than the simple pendulating shepherding. In spring sheep graze within the limits of the village or on the hay fields just below the forests, in summer on the alpine

pastures, in autumn the sheep gradually descend to the hay fields below the forests and from there to the meadows surrounding the villages, and in winter sheep again ascend near the summer pastures in the area of mountain hay fields (900-1300 m), where the hay was mowed during summer but could not be transported down to the village. This type of shepherding has in fact two circuits, of which one has a larger extension: village limits – area of summer grazing – village limits, and another circuit which is more reduced: village limits – area with hay fields – village limits. This pendulating shepherding is conditioned firstly by the gradual development of vegetation on altitude and secondly by the existence of fodder for animals during winter time.

As far as the place and manner of locating the sheepfolds is concerned, they are established by the head shepherds. As a rule, the sheepfolds are located depending on characteristics of the local landforms from 600-700 m up to 1900 m. In most cases, the sheepfolds are located near forests, surrounded from three parts by forest, or in the glades from forests, or near springs or other water sources (streams, glacier lakes), on a sunny place especially with a southern exposure and extremely rarely with a northern exposure, on an elevated terrain on a slope not too steep; near roads or other means of access. Many sheepfolds are located on tourist trails or near them thus becoming a place of halt for tourists or even a place of spending the night as well.

The number of sheep has grown in the last hundred years, more than threefold from 13277 sheep in 1895 to 51500 in 1989, and presently there are 34948 in 2008. However to this number of sheep, one may add another 9974 sheep from villages which do not belong to the area of the present study, but whose sheepfolds are located in this area during summer (28 sheepfolds). Thus the total number of sheepfolds is 95 and the total number of sheep is 44922. The average density of sheep on the agricultural land is 78.18 sheep on 100 ha of agricultural land. On figure 3 it can be noticed the fact that the largest number of sheepfolds belong to Poienile de Sub Munte (23). Out of these, only 8 are from this municipality, the rest belonging to other municipalities. In summer, many sheep both from the Maramureş Mountains and from greater distances, come to this municipality for grazing. From the Iza Valley, there are three sheepfolds from Bârsana and a sheepfold from Strâmtura, but sheepfolds also belong to other distant places, from the Mara drainage basin (Călineşti, Berbeşti, Vadu Izei) and from Rona de Sus on Ronișoara Valley as well. In the municipality of Repedeă, there are also a number of sheepfolds both from the valley of Iza (Bârsana and Strâmtura) and the Valley of Ronișoara (Rona de Jos). To Vișeu de Sus usually come sheepfolds from closer settlements situated on the upper basin of Iza (Bocicoel, Bogdan Vodă, Sălișteea de Sus). An important fact is that to Borșa come 12 sheepfolds which do not belong to the area of the present study - from Rozavlea, Sălișteea de Sus, Săcel and Ocna Șugatag - which is quite far away.

These pendulating flows have taken place for hundreds of years. The number of people involved in these activities is 524 persons, exclusively men. The transportation of sheep is done on foot and usually lasts between 24 and 40 hours depending on the distance. The shepherds have regularly used the same trails for centuries. Thus the localities from the Valley of Vișeu but more important those from the Valley of Iza, where there is a lack of pastures send their sheep towards the Maramureş Mountains using the roads that follow the Vișeu, Țâșla, Vaser and Ruscova rivers. In this way, some toponyms linked to the sheep transportation appeared: for example, the road that links Bârsana to Petrova goes along a valley called the *Valley of the Mountain*, and the hamlet situated on the road bears the same name.

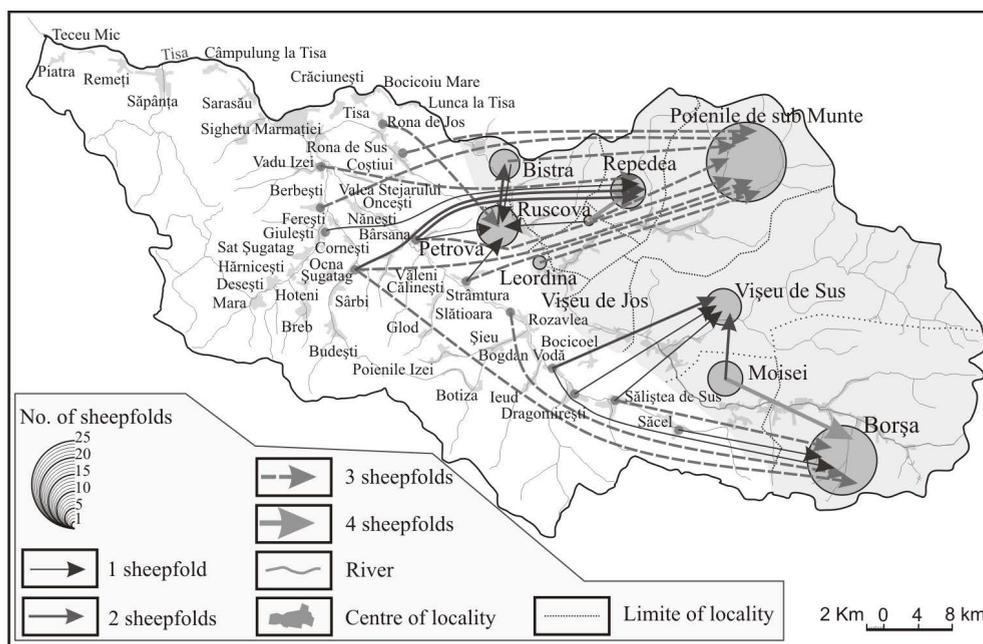


Fig. 3. The flows of sheepfolds towards the Maramureș Mountains.

The sheepfolds of the Maramureș Mountains are made up since the old times by the association of several small owners of sheep called “sâmbrăși”. In the past, the cases when great sheep owners had their own sheepfold were very rare. The sheepfold owner has between 100-200 sheep and the average for the small owners, the “sâmbrăși”, is 5-10 sheep. Initially, in spring, sheep are gathered in herds of 50-150 called “boteie” which are given to a shepherd. After that in May when the “ruptul” or “sâmbră” takes place, these small herds (“boteie”) gather at the “sheepfold” (300-500 sheep, it is unusual to be more than 600 sheep) and the responsibility of the sheep is given to the host of the sheepfold. The host of sheepfold is chosen by the sheep owners using different criteria: he has the greatest number of sheep; he is the owner of large pastures; he is hardworking and trustworthy. He exerts his direct authority over all the members of the sheepfold.

The staff of a sheepfold is made of the “baci” (he is the leader or the most important character in a sheepfold; as a rule he is an elderly man, hardworking and knows the mountains and the places of grazing very well), the shepherds or “păcurari” (their main responsibility is guarding the sheep), “strungași” - they are on the lowest scale of hierarchy in a sheepfold; as a rule they are young and put the sheep in pens. Sometimes, they willingly accompany the sheep on the pastures, guard the sterile sheep, or attend to the housework things from the sheepfold.

Shepherding is an economic activity whose sphere does not limit to breeding cattle or sheep but it also deals with the capitalization of animal goods. As pastoral life goes on, most often, outside the limits of a village, at great distance from the centres of village, it is natural for the milk to be processed at the sheepfold, the processed products –green ewe cheese or soft cottage cheese – are meant to supply the daily needs of a sheepfold, and the rest of the cheese is meant to be commercialized. The procedure of making green ewe cheese

and other dairy products as well the pots from the sheepfold are specific to an ancient pastoral type, the techniques used are ancient as well. The average amount of cheese given by a sheep is 8-14 kg and the total amount of cheese made throughout the Maramureş Mountains has an average of over 250 tons. The dairy products are capitalized in the town markets of Vişeu de Sus, Borşa and Sighetu Marmaţiei and the largest amount is given to the factories which process milk from Vişeu de Sus and Borşa, but these factories pay for the dairy products 25-35% less than on the free market. The predominant breed is the "ţurcana" (tzurcana sheep) whose production of wool is 2.5 – 4 kg yearly. Wool is largely present in the traditional costumes of both men and women, traditional costumes which are still worn in this area. From wool and sheep skin, modern clothes are made also (sweaters, or "irha" which is a warm winter coat). It must be said that the traditional costumes are home made with technical devices.

4. CONCLUSIONS

As a conclusion it can be said that although the geographical specific features of the mountainous landscape are not entirely favourable for the development of the local communities, the shepherding in the Maramureş Mountains finds excellent conditions for developing and finally these conditions have a positive influence on all the area by the products created. The purpose of this activity is to satisfy the needs of a household and the excess is capitalized to satisfy other needs.

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