

Alex Drace-Francis, *Istoria mămăligii. Povestea globală a unui preparat național* [The Making of Mamaliga. Transimperial Recipes for a Romanian National Dish], transl. Anca Bărbulescu (București: Humanitas, 2023), 290 pages

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Alex Drace-Francis is an Anglo-Scottish historian from the University of Amsterdam, who has been familiar with the Romanian space for several decades. He has an intimate knowledge of its literature and culture. Going through his publications, Alex Drace-Francis seems to have discovered it as a result of his broader concerns regarding the South-East European and Balkan space. In reality, he has known the Romanian space, from the perspective of cultural history, for more than 25 years, as his doctoral thesis, defended at the University of London in 2001, is called *Literature, Modernity, Nation. The Case of Romania, 1829-1890*. The thesis was published as a book a few years later: *The Making of Modern Romanian Culture. Literacy and the Development of National Identity* (I.B. Tauris, 2005), in several editions, intone of which was the Romanian translation (by Marius-Adrian Hazaparu): *Geneza culturii române moderne. Instituțiile scrisului și dezvoltarea identității naționale. 1700-1900* (Polirom, 2016). It is one of several important works published in recent decades on this topic.

In parallel, Alex Drace-Francis became known for his numerous contributions and publications dedicated to travel literature. He coordinated, together with Wendy Bracewell, several significant volumes: *Balkan Travel Writing* (Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2005), *Under Eastern Eyes. A Comparative Introduction to East European Travel Writing on Europe* (Central European

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University Press, 2008) and published numerous valuable studies and articles dedicated to this topic. He also published in two prestigious historical syntheses dedicated to his major themes of interest: travel literature and the history of Central and Eastern Europe in the modern period: *The Cambridge History of Travel Writing* (eds. Nandini Das, Tim Youngs) (Cambridge University Press, 2019) and *The Routledge History of East Central Europe since 1700* (eds. Irina Livezeanu, Arpad von Klimo) (Routledge, 2017).

In recent years, Alex Drace-Francis has approached a more unusual theme, but in perfect agreement with his previous concerns (Central-Eastern European and Balkan area, cultural history): the history of gastronomy, more precisely the cultural history of polenta (Rom. *porumb, cucuruz, mămăligă*). In 2022, he published the book *The Making of Mămăligă. Transimperial Recipes for a Romanian National Dish* (Central European University Press, 2022), very quickly translated into Romanian: *Istoria mămăligii. Povestea globală a unui preparat național*, translated by Anca Bărbulescu (Humanitas, 2023).

At first glance, a simple but spectacular topic, or perhaps a difficult one in reality, because the author chose to treat it in a complex way, as we will try to demonstrate in the following. The book on the history of *mămăligă* could even be seen as a synthesis of his major research themes.

The first chapters are a kind of chronological approach to the introduction of corn into Europe and especially into Central-Eastern Europe. A fascinating subject, as is everything linked to cultural transfer and interference. Alex Drace-Francis very well observes that corn “is a product not only of nature, but also of culture” (p. 24). Given that for the medieval and early modern period there are no statistical, economic, fiscal or customs sources, as there are for the modern period, it is quite difficult to determine the precise channels through which corn was introduced, as a post-1492 acquisition, into Central and Eastern Europe. The most plausible (even if unusual) hypothesis seems to be the Ottoman channel, but it is likely that there were several ways for corn to penetrate the economy of Central-Eastern European countries (p. 24-30). The author does not miss anything, he is attentive to the smallest historical sources, while also aiming to introduce the terms that designate corn in the languages of the region. An interesting argument is the word *törökbúza* (Turkish wheat), attested in Hungarian already in the second half of the 16th century (p. 33). Towards the end of the book, the author introduces an appendix in which he discusses the terms that

designate corn in Romanian (*cucuruz*, *mălai*, *mămăligă*, etc.) (p. 161-175). There we learn about another interesting Hungarian term: *tengeribúza* (sea wheat, in the sense of a variety of wheat brought by sea/from overseas (?), a term that is still used in the form *tenchi* in the Oradea area (p. 171). Fabulous history!

During the 17th century, corn is already attested in Transylvania, Hungary and other Central European countries, as well as in the Romanian Principalities. In the 18th-19th centuries, corn cultivation spread, becoming – for example, in the case of the Romanian Principalities – a dominant crop (chapters II-IV). The author makes an important note – that the introduction of corn is not singular, as there are also other “American” plants introduced to Europe during that period (p. 41-42).

In the 19th century, corn is intensively cultivated in the Romanian Principalities; the increase in the number and diversification of the categories of historical sources helps the author following tracing the “career” of corn, which thus becomes an export commodity and even the subject of diplomatic negotiations between the Romanian Principalities, the Austrian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia (for example, chapter 5 “Corn without borders. Mămăliga is globalizing. 1829-1856”). The success of this agricultural crop had a considerable impact on the demography and health situation of the Romanian Wallachia and can also be attested in the scientific literature and works of fiction (p. 74-81).

One of the merits of the book (and of the author!) is the exploitation of a wide variety of historical sources, from private correspondence to illustrations, engravings, even commercial packaging, all of which help the author to reconstruct a very convincing cultural history of corn. Additionally, the author employs literary sources, folklore, toponymy and anthroponymy, even statistics on the production and export of corn and other agricultural plants (p. 122-123). Without adequate knowledge of the literature of the period, it would have been impossible to write a chapter such as the one dedicated to recipes (p. 124-141) or the one dedicated to “imaginary mămăligă” (p. 142-152).

Finally, it must be said that the author has achieved a feat that does not exist in the historiography of the country that is so closely linked to corn (Romania): writing a spectacular and convincing book about the cultural history of corn. Alex Drace-Francis’ work deserves to be continued.