

The Princely Fathom. Uniformization of Measures and State Making in Wallachia, 1775-1831¹

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Abstract: This article discusses the relationship between the uniformization of measures and the transformation of the state in Wallachia from 1775 to 1831 by focusing on the fathom (stânjen), a measure of length used before the introduction of the metric system. The extant Romanian historiography of weights and measure tended to consider early modern measures as standards easy to convert in the metric system. To the contrary, my article shows that that consistent attempts made by the central power – the principality – to define and control the measures can be documented consistently only from the last quarter of the 18th century on. Triggered by the dissolution of communal property and the incipient commodification of land, this process of standardization contributed to the bureaucratisation of the state apparatus and to the constitution of the state as an impersonal entity.

Key words: fathom, standardization, Wallachia, Phanariot period, state, state idea, bureaucratisation.

Rezumat: Stânjenul domnesc. Uniformizarea măsurilor și constituirea Țării Românești, 1775-1831. Articolul de față discută relația dintre uniformizarea măsurilor și transformarea statului în Țara Românească din perioada 1775-1831, concentrându-se asupra stânjenului, o măsură de lungime folosită înainte de introducerea sistemului metric. Istoriografia metrologică românească a tratat măsurile premoderne ca standarde, ușor de convertit în sistemul metric. Articolul meu arată în schimb că încercările coerente ale puterii centrale – domnia – de a defini și controla măsurile pot fi documentate doar din ultimul sfert al veacului al XVIII-lea. Provoocat

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de disoluția stăpânilor obștești și de comodificarea incipientă a pământului, acest proces a contribuit la birocratizarea aparatului de stat și la constituirea statului ca entitate impersonală.

Cuvinte cheie: stânjen, standardizare, Țara Românească, perioada fanariotă, stat, ideea de stat, birocratizare.

Introduction

Witold Kula, one of the most important historians of metrology, noted that weights and measures have a political dimension in that ‘the right to determine measures is an attribute of authority in all advanced societies’. Moreover, this authority ‘was able to gain further prestige by arbitrating [metrological] conflicts’.² Starting from these observations, this paper explores further the relation between the incipient uniformization of measures and the transformation of the state in the last decades of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century in Wallachia. For reasons of space I will insist on one measure, namely the fathom (*stânjen*³), used to measure length (land plots, roads, buildings).

First, I am interested in the circumstances and timing of the transition from fathom to princely fathom that is, from a local to a centrally defined and authorized measure. Second, I ask how the central authority benefits the standardization process and how it is affected by it. Correspondingly, I make two main claims. First, I show that consistent efforts to control weights and measures are documented towards the end of the 18th century and therefore, operating with a notion of standard measure, as the historiography of metrology has done, leads to anachronism. Secondly, I believe that it is much more profitable to look at the process of metrological standardization which was constitutive of the modern state in Wallachia; on the one hand it fostered rationalization in the activity of the state apparatus; on the other, it created the possibilities for imagining the state as an objective entity.⁴ This argument

² Witold Kula, *Measures and Men*, transl. by R. Szepter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 18 and p. 21.

³ Wallachian vocabulary, like the weights and measures, was not standardized. Thus, several variants of the word appear in documents: *stânjen*, *stîjnen*, *stînjân*, *stănjăn*, *stănjen*, *stăngen*, *stîngen*, *stîjin*. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Romanian to English are mine.

⁴ I am building on works that have pointed to the connection between metrological standardization and administrative centralization: Julian Hoppit, ‘Reforming Britain’s Weights and Measures, 1660-1824’, *The English Historical Review*, 108/426 (Jan., 1993): 82-104; William J. Ashworth, ‘Metrology and the State: Science, Revenue,

has a wider implication with regard to the history of modern transformations in Wallachia (and Romania) usually centred on the image of a weak, corrupt and abusive state apparatus.

In what follows I will discuss the notion of state as I use it; I will review the Romanian literature on weights and measures and highlight what I regard as a major weakness; I will trace the process whereby the fathom comes under the central control and definition; finally, I will discuss the implications of this reconsideration of the metrological history for the study of the state and of the political modernization in Wallachia.

What is the state?

During the period under study, the notion of state did not enter the political and legal vocabularies in Wallachia. What is usually called Wallachian state was a patrimonial organization called principedom (*domnie*) from the title of the incumbent prince (*domn*). The notion of state as an apparatus distinct from society with a legitimate space of intervention and activity emerged later in the 19th century. It is my contention that the standardization of the fathom contributed to this transition from *domnie* to state. But what is the state? In the literature on the transformation of the (early-) modern state, this is conceived as an organization or set of organizations fulfilling several functions, in short as government.⁵ According to these views the state is a given, the scholar having only to study how it grows, it is built, it develops and only rarely how it breaks.⁶

and Commerce', *Science*, Vol. 306, No. 5700 (2004): 1314-1317; James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State. How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 25-33

⁵ Here are some of the most influential contributions to the early-modern and modern state formation employing the institutional notion of the state: Charles Tilly ed., *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 990-1992* (Blackwell: Cambridge MA & Oxford UK, 1992); Brian M. Downing, *The Military Revolution and Political Change: Origins of Democracy and Autocracy in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Thomas Ertman, *Birth of Leviathan. Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 1974).

⁶ See for instance the massive study of Jack A. Goldstone who focused on the breaking down of states, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

Recent reflections on this matter departed from this conceptualization of the state. In a seminal article, Philip Abrams has argued that the state does not possess the unity, coherence and purpose which are usually attributed to it. The state is a matter of belief-'the idea of the state'-and is the result of an ideological project meant to conceal domination. The state idea is achieved through techniques of governmentality, artefacts, rituals and generally administrative practices. The limitation of Abrams' reflection on the state is the lack of a historical perspective. There is no place for transitions in Abrams' approach. It is not clear how something which is not state evolves to something that we can call state in his terms and how his argument would apply to polities where there is no notion of state whereby multiple are given the appearance of a block. It is important however to retain from Abrams that the governmental organizations and practices usually designated as state need the 'idea of the state' to be (mis)recognized as such, as a unitary entity.

Pierre Bourdieu offers a better angle to study the transition from a patrimonial form of power to the modern state. He similarly conceived of the state in terms of beliefs and defined it as an authorized and, therefore, legitimate representation of social reality which is rendered visible through the manifestations of the public order.⁷ The state is 'this mysterious reality' which 'exists through the effects and the collective belief in its existence' according to Bourdieu.⁸ Specific to the (modern) state is the idea of the 'universal', a principle of universal applicability as against the personal and the privileged. By invoking the universal, the agents in the field of administrative power consolidate their position as disinterested actors; but they can base their actions only if they act in the name of an entity possessing the same attribute of universality - neutral, impersonal, objective. In the same vein, two British sociologists - Derek Sayer and Philip Corrigan claim that administrative routine practices make the state.⁹

In this view the state is performed and constituted through the actions of its agents and through the interactions of the subjects with the agents and other objects which embody the state - such as standard

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Sur l'État. Cours au Collège de France (1989-1992)* (Paris: Raisons d'agir/Seuil, 2012), p. 15.

⁸ Bourdieu, *Sur l'État*, p. 25.

⁹ Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, *The Great Arch. English State Formation as Cultural Revolution* (Oxford UK & Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1991), p. 3.

measures. By imposing metrological standards, the officials – recruited from higher and lesser boyars – were in a position to manipulate a ‘universal’, a norm valid throughout the country, at all times and all places; in doing so, they asserted their power as neutral and objective, but they could do so only in the name of an entity or principle endowed with the same attributes and believed to exist out-there. So, the state, both as objective reality encapsulated in various things and practices and as subjective category of perception, is made and re-made in the course of daily interactions involving administrative practices.

Historiography.

General evaluation of the period. The period under study, corresponding to the last phase of the Phanariot period and the ‘indigenous princes’ (*domniile pământene*), scattered with military occupations by Russian, Austrian and Ottoman troops, is hardly regarded as a period of modernization or development. Without constituting an object of analysis, the state was considered to consist of the body of venal officials, corrupt, inefficient and usually abusive in their relations with the common subjects. It was also the period when the Wallachia (like Moldavia) lacked an army and sovereignty, playing the role of temporary provider for various occupation armies. These aspects favoured summary judgements and precluded any problematization of the state and of its transformation in the period under study as the current article attempts.¹⁰

Metrological Historiography. The most important historians of weights and measures in pre-modern Wallachia were Nicolae Stoicescu and

¹⁰ The bibliography on the Phanariot period is voluminous. For a recent dismissal of the Phanariot state see Damian Hurezeanu, ‘Regimul fanariot. O poartă spre modernizarea Țărilor Române?’ [The Phanariot Regime. A Gate to the Modernization of the Romanian Principalities?] in Violeta Barbu (ed), *Historia manet. Volum omagial Demény Lajos* [Historia manet. Tribute to Demény Lajos] (Bucharest-Cluj: Kriterion, 2001), pp. 399-412; the historiography on the Phanariot period and its stereotypes were subject to criticism by Ion Ionașcu, ‘Le degree de l’influence des grecs des principautés roumaines dans la vie politique de ces pays’ in *Symposium. L’Époque phanariote, 21-25 Octobre 1970. A la mémoire de Cléobule Tsourkas* (Thessaloniki: Institute of Balkan Studies, 1974), pp. 217-228 and Ștefan Lemny, ‘La critique du régime Phanariote: clichés mentaux et perspectives historiographiques’ in *Culture and Society. Structures, Interferences, Analogies in the Modern Romanian History*, ed. Al. Zub, (Iași: Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1985), pp. 17-30.

Damaschin Mioc, yet their approach was weakened by the so-called 'juridist method', a notion I borrow from Henri H. Stahl to designate the search of a country-wide valid rule or norm in a pre-modern society which lacked such norms¹¹. In such societies, a large extent of the social life was local or locally based and so were the norms, the units of measurement included. The problem with such an approach, besides operating with ahistorical categories of norm, is that it obscures the process of norm making at country level. The 'juridist method', or rather the 'juridist' fallacy, in my case refers to the assumption that a pre-modern measure - say the fathom - has a standard size. Sources mentioning it are in this view either confirmations of this standard or deviations from it (hence confirming the existence of the standard). The possibility that there were more legitimate 'standards' (on estates or in towns) or that the principedom was not always keen on implementing standard measures is not taken into consideration. Hence, studies of historical metrology always indicate the metric equivalent of this or that medieval measure and some of them even end with conversion tables. In doing this, historians actually operate with an anachronistic notion of standard measures. This approach is illustrated by the most important historians of pre-modern Romanian metrology, Nicolae Stoicescu and Damaschin Mioc;¹² other studies which touch only tangentially the problem of

¹¹ For a critique of the "juridist" method see H.H. Stahl, *Controverse de istorie socială* [Controversies in Social History] (Bucharest: Editura Științifică, 1969), pp. 5-61. In reviewing the problem of feudalism in Romanian history he noticed that Romanian historians interpreted various disparate documentary references as expressions of the "feudal laws".

¹² There are few modern (post-WWII) studies dedicated to the problem of weights and measures in the Romanian historiography and their aim was to provide instruments for economic historians, hence the inclination to find stable measures in the past: Nicolae Stoicescu and Damaschin Mioc on the early modern metrology in Wallachia, each of them ending with tables of conversion of various measures in the metric system: Damaschin Mioc and Nicolae Stoicescu, 'Măsurile medievale de capacitate din Țara Românească' [The Medieval Capacity Measures in Wallachia], *Studii*, 6 (1963): 1151-1178; Damaschin Mioc and Nicolae Stoicescu, 'Măsurile medievale de greutate din Țara Românească. Instrumentele de măsurat capacitatea și greutatea' [The Medieval Measures of Weight in Wallachia. The Instruments for Measuring the Capacity and the Weight], *Studii*, 1 (1964): 88-105; Damaschin Mioc and Nicolae Stoicescu, 'Măsurile medievale de lungime și suprafață și instrumentele de măsurat lungimea din Țara Românească', [The Medieval Measures for Lengths and Area and the Instruments for Measuring Length in Wallachia], *Studii*, 3 (1965): 639-665. The most important book on Romanian pre-modern metrology is Nicolae

weights and measures suffer from the same limitation.¹³ More aware of the historical character of the standardization process-though inconsistently so -was I. Brăescu in his study from the beginning of the 20th century.¹⁴

Contrary to this approach I start from the premise that the fathom was not standardized and the mentions of fathoms are actually local measures which had not yet been displaced by the official fathom. Consequently, the standard or the official fathom is the result of a protracted process of standardization that needs to be documented and explained. By standardization I don't refer to a system in which 'units of measurement are precisely defined and related to one another in a

Stoicescu, *Cum măsurau strămoșii. Metrologia medievală pe teritoriul României* [Medieval Metrology on the Romanian Territory] București: Editura Științifică, 1971); the book is based on the previous three articles but its scope is wider, covering both Moldavia and Transylvania in the fashion of national historiography. His position is rather ambiguous, than it might appear in my short rendering. He does acknowledge in introduction that the state manifested interest in the control of weights and measures towards the end of the 19th century (pp. 25-26) yet his practice and particular treatment of the measures actually contradict at every pace such assumptions. Everywhere he looks for the standard of this or that measure, for the standard used in a region and for the metrical equivalent. These works form the basis of two articles on Romanian early modern weights and measures by Alexandru Constantinescu which brings no other contribution to the field: 'Măsurile în evul mediu românesc' [Romanian Units of Measurement during the Middle Ages] (I), *Studii și articole de istorie* XXVI (1974): 138-145 and Măsurile în evul mediu românesc (II), *Studii și articole de istorie*, XXVII-XXVIII (1974): 183-195. Corina Pătrașcu does not fall into this category; she approached the issue at a later stage, overlooking earlier attempts at standardization, 'Uniformizarea măsurilor și greutateților folosite în comerțul Țării Românești, o acțiune de unificare a pieței interne (1829-1840)' [The Uniformization of the Measures and Weights Used in the Trade of Wallachia, an Action of Unification of the Internal Market], *Studii*, 4 (1968): 667-683.

¹³ Emil Vărtosu, 'Sigiliu de târguri și orașe din Moldova și Țara Românească' [ET] *Analele Universității C. I. Parhon*, nr. 5 (1956), Seria Științelor Sociale, Istorie, p. 137. Igor Ivanov - Gheorghe Ivanovici, 'Istoricul învățământului metrologiei în România', [The History of Metrologic Teaching in Romania], *Buletinul științific al Institutului de Construcții Bucharest*, Year XIII no. 2 (1970): 228-231.

¹⁴ Ion Brăescu, *Măsurătoarea pământului la români din vechime până la punerea în aplicare a sistemului metric*, [Land Measurement in the Romanian Principalities from the Ancient Times to the Introduction of the Metric System], (Bucharest: Atelierele grafice Socec & Co., 1913), passim.

consistent, coherent manner', as the metric system.¹⁵ Less ambitiously, it was a process whereby the central power in Wallachia attempted to stabilize and officialise two and then one version of the fathom. In Wallachia, such an attempt is discernible in the last quarter of the 18th century and is part and parcel of a larger process of transformation of the modes of rule.

Before going further, I have to clarify what can be considered a standard fathom in the documents I use. Not only that fathoms differed in terms of size, but no such fathom survived to be measured according to the metric system. Hence, it is hopeless to try to equate these pre-modern fathoms with a metric measure. We have instead documents which refer to a fathom controlled by the central authority by adding an attribute: "the princely fathom" (*stânjenul domnesc*), "the fathom of Șerban Cantacuzino" (*stânjenul lui Șerban Cantacuzino*) and the fathom of Constantin Brâncoveanu (*stânjenul lui Constantin Brâncoveanu*). In the 1820s the documents refer to a "timber fathom" (*stânjenul cheresteliu*), used in measurements of civil constructions in Bucharest. As these are the only indicators of a central control and attempt at standardization of the fathom, it is important to know when and why did they appear. Let us now turn to the evidence of the fathom and this process.

From Fathom to Princely Fathom.

The idea that the fathom was standardized by Șerban Cantacuzino (1678-1688) and Constantin Brâncoveanu (1688-1714) is common currency in the Romanian metrological historiography. So, if the information is correct, around 1700 Wallachia had two "standard" fathoms, one of Șerban Cantacuzino, the other of Constantin Brâncoveanu. The fact contradicts the notion of standardization itself; this was partially and unconvincingly solved by claiming that the fathom of Șerban Cantacuzino was more widespread. This fathom measured 1.962 m according to Nicolae Stoicescu and Damaschin Mioc. At a closer look, their statement is problematic.

First of all, there is no direct or contemporary evidence that Șerban Cantacuzino or Constantin Brâncoveanu issued official standard fathoms. Associations between their names and official fathoms are documented almost a century later. But whence do the notion of

¹⁵ Daniel R. Headrick, *When Information Came of Age. Technologies of Knowledge in the Age of Reason and Revolution, 1700-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 40.

standard fathom and its precise metrical equivalent arise? A closer examination of the sources mobilized by Stoicescu and Mioc to support their idea of standard measure indicate that they are from the 19th and early 20th century, a period when the process of standardization was well advanced – if not fully accomplished throughout the country.¹⁶

There are however several documents which refer to princely fathoms before the middle of the 18th century. In 1709 several plots are sold in Bucharest and their measure is expressed in ‘princely fathoms’.¹⁷ In 1719, one document mentions a plot of ‘four princely fathoms’ (*stânjeni domnești patru*) received by a boyar from the former prince Constantin Brâncoveanu, as an exchange for another plot;¹⁸ similarly, a plot of land sold in 1734 was demarcated with the ‘princely fathom’.¹⁹ Still, none of these documents was known to Damaschin Mioc and Nicolae Stoicescu – or at least they didn’t cite them (it is true that only one of these documents was published before their studies).

To sum up, the documents I presented above suggest that there was an official fathom at the beginning of the 18th century and some people used it in their private transactions. Yet, there is no evidence that the principedom attempted to implement throughout the country an official and uniform fathom. Moreover, Nicolae Stoicescu and Damaschin Mioc

¹⁶ Brăescu, *Măsurătoarea pământului*, pp. 4-5. Brăescu cites in turn a work of metrological conversions from 1880, Alexandru Zane, *Barem de măsurii și greutateți ...* [Standard of Measures and Weights ...] (Bucharest: Imprimeria Statului, 1880); The work was republished with revisions in 1904, but it is impossible to determine which edition did Brăescu use since he does not specify the date of publication in the reference. Another source invoked by Stoicescu is a dictionary from 1830s. The cited author, Iordache Golescu, was the author of two dictionaries in that period (a Romanian explanatory dictionary in 1832 and a Romanian-Greek dictionary in 1838) yet Stoicescu refers rather imprecisely to “the dictionary of Iordache Golescu”; other sources are Ion Ghica, *Măsurile și greutatețile românești și moldavești ...* [The Romanian and Moldavian Measures and Weights ...] (Bucharest: Tipografia lui K.A. Rosetti & Binterhlader, 1848) and Dimitrie Iarcu, *Măsurii și greutateți sau aritmetică socială* [Measures and Weights or Social Arithmetics] (Bucharest: Typographia Națională a lui St. Rassidescu, 1862).

¹⁷ George Potra ed., *Documente privitoare la istoria orașului Bucharest (1594-1821)* [Sources regarding the Town of Bucharest] (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Române, 1961), pp. 245-246. (hereafter Potra, 1594-1821).

¹⁸ Potra, 1594-1821, pp. 285-286.

¹⁹ George Potra ed., *Documente privitoare la istoria orașului Bucharest (1634-1821)* [Sources regarding the Town of Bucharest] (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1982), p. 166. (hereafter Potra, 1634-1800).

were unaware of the few documents which could partially support their thesis about the existence of an early standard fathom. And, as I have already showed, they grounded their assertions about the metric equivalent of the fathom in 19th and early 20th century sources and studies. Hence, the statement of Stoicescu that ‘usually, in distinction to Moldavia, one of the two fathoms [of Șerban Cantacuzino or of Constantin Brâncoveanu] was used’²⁰ is unjustified; the mentions of the measures associated with the two princes appear after their reigns and are part of a process of standardization that can’t be documented in their lifetime.

To the sparse and late evidence about official fathoms one has to add the evidence, some of it provided by the two authors, that plainly contradicts the idea of a fixed fathom easy to convert in metrical units. A fathom, dating from the late 16th century, was incised on the walls of the church from Marița and measured 2.060 m.²¹ In 1697, a fathom was made on the spot in Meriș in order to measure some piece of land.²²

Local fathoms still existed in the 18th century. In 1776 a similar fathom is mentioned in the village Moșteni-Mănăilești (Vâlcea county); it is one of the few physical traces of a pre-modern measure as it was incised on the wooden beam of the local church which was built in the same year. In the metric system is 2.010 m long and inside the scratch an inscription reads: “this is the fathom from Craiova, [measuring] eights palms, Bujorianu”.²³ So, it is a fathom made according to a standard sent from Craiova (not from Bucharest), by Bujorianu, most likely the official entrusted with the measurement.²⁴ Its metric measure is different from the standard established in the 19th century (1.962 m). The interpretation of this piece of evidence raises several problems. As the region in discussion communicated with Bucharest through the *caimacam* of

²⁰ Stoicescu, *Cum măsurau strămoșii*, pp. 48-49.

²¹ Stoicescu, *Cum măsurau strămoșii*, p. 53. We can ascertain the metric equivalents of pre-modern measures only if their physical remnants exist! The observation is valid for the next preserved fathom.

²² Stoicescu, *Cum măsurau strămoșii*, p. 48.

²³ Stoicescu, *Cum măsurau strămoșii*, p. 53.

²⁴ Alternatively, “Bujorianu” could be a local boyar commissioned by princely order to carry out a task, in this case measurement. Almost certainly he was part of the boyar family Bojoreanu which possessed estates in the same county (Vâlcea), see Octav-George Lecca, *Familii boierești române. Istorie și genealogie* [The Romanian Boyar Families. History and Genealogy] (Bucharest: Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române, s.d.), pp. 163-165.

Craiova,²⁵ it is possible that the fathom was actually sent from Bucharest. So it might have been a 'princely fathom', but in the local consciousness, the origin of the measure was not the capital of the country but the centre of the region. Alternatively, the fathom could have been made on the spot, by an authorized official sent from Craiova. In either situation, the fathom can hardly be considered a central standard measure.

Towards the end of the 18th century the villagers from Cotești, Mușcel county, complained that the fathom employed by the officials who measured their property was two inches (*degete*) shorter than the fathom incised on the walls of their church, resulting in a significant shrinking of their plots.²⁶ So, there was a centrally validated fathom, but apparently the villagers rejected it as a violation of their customary measure. In the same period, two wooden laths were made to measure the lands of Tismana moastery and preserved in a register. They represented one palm, one of the fathom of Șerban Cantacuzino, the other of the fathom of Constantin Brâncoveanu; 8 such palms made one fathom. In neither case, the resulting fathom is tantamount to the 19th century standard.²⁷

Thus, the only physical remnants of pre-modern phantoms differ in size from the standard fathom of the 19th century which was assumed to represent a legalization of a pre-existing standard measure. Moreover, the evidence I presented above suggests that at the end of the 18th century there were still local fathoms. When fathoms were delivered

²⁵ The *caimacam* appeared in documents in 1761 and replaced the Great Ban of Craiova. In the middle ages (15-16th centuries) the Great Ban enjoyed a significant autonomy and was regarded as second in rank after the prince; by the 18th century his power was much reduced, the establishment of the *caimacam*, as just a princely representative in Oltenia being a sign of this trend. The great *ban* became a member of the divan, residing in Bucharest, whereas the *caimacam* had administrative and judicial tasks in the five counties of Oltenia (Mehedinți, Gorj, Dolj, Vâlcea and Romanați).

²⁶ Ion Răuțescu, *Mănăstirea Aninoasa din județul Muscel* [Aninoasa Monastery from Muscel County] (Câmpulung-Muscel: Tipografia și Librăria Gh. N. Vlădescu, 1933), pp. 235-236. The document has no date but the author dates it on the basis of diplomatic analysis to the late 18th century. Another argument in favour of this date is that the document reflects the attempt made by the central power to impose its own official measure at the expense of the local one, a process which, as I show below, can be documented no earlier than the last two decades of the 18th century.

²⁷ Ileana Leonte, 'Două etaloane: palma lui Șerban Vodă și a lui Constantin Brâncoveanu', [Two Standards: The Palm of Șerban Vodă and that of Constantin Brâncoveanu] *Revista Arhivelor*, I (1958): 217-219.

from outside of the community, it was either perceived as coming from the regional centre (Moșteni-Mănăilești) or was rejected on the grounds that it violates the local customary measure (Cotești). This resilience of the local fathoms is less surprising given that the first consistent attempts by the central power to control the size of the fathom are documented by the end of the 18th century. What is the logic of this attempt to standardize measures?

The first attempts at standardization went in parallel with a massive administrative overhauling initiated by Prince Alexandru Ipsilanti (1775-1782) and continued by subsequent princes. The “reform” consisted in the multiplication, specialization, hierarchization and territorial penetration of the administrative apparatus; this went hand in hand with intensive regulation, more and more regulations being issued, covering a widening area of the social life; concomitantly, there was a renewed interest in the storing of information, the number of clerks affiliated to administrative offices increasing and their duties being well specified.²⁸

On a deeper level, this new preoccupation with measures has to do with a massive social and economic transformation, the dissolution of the communal property and the individualization of plots. The process entailed attempts by individuals to mark out their own plot, to measure it with correct and just measures and obtain valid title deeds. The inheritance, sale/purchase, renting and pawning of plots were affected by the same phenomenon.²⁹ Naturally, a growing number of litigations ensued. When in 1815 Prince Ioan Gheorghe Caragea demanded from the princely council to establish a standard fathom, he invoked the proliferation of litigations.³⁰

In parallel, there was a visible trend of urban concentration in Bucharest which meant both the disappearance of large tracts of cultivated land (usually orchards) and the growing number of houses;

²⁸ For a perspective on these transformations of the Wallachian state, see my PhD thesis Vasile Mihai Olaru, *Writs and Measures. Symbolic Power and the Growth of State Infrastructure in Wallachia, 1740-1800* (PhD diss, Central European University, 2013) and the relevant literature discussed there.

²⁹ The process is traced with impressive erudition and theoretical sophistication by H.H. Stahl, *Contribuții la studiul satelor devălmașe Românești*, [Contributions to the Study of Communal Romanian Villages] vol. II, and 2nd edition (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1998).

³⁰ Apud Brăescu, *Măsurătoarea pământului*, p. 5.

the consequence of this trend was the raise of the prices of real estate. Naturally, this development could only bring a preoccupation with exact and reliable measurement of the land plots.³¹ It is not surprising that the first documents speaking of a princely fathom are from Bucharest and have to do with transactions of real estate. As taxation became the main preoccupation of the Phanariot princes, princely stamped fathoms were used where the taxes were assessed per acreage. Finally, in the last decade studied here, an official fathom is mentioned in matters of civic constructions and prohibitions to infringe on the public roads.

Socio-economic transformations and administrative reforms demanded a more stable metrological system and triggered two responses from the principedom. One was to legalize an official measure in the legal texts enacted from 1780 on. The other was to impose official measures bearing the official stamp in the country for various metrological operations (delimitation of boundaries, sales, and litigations). The two undertakings did not correspond to different periods, but were interwoven and illustrated continuous attempts by the central power to adapt to developments in economy and society.

The first legal text to include stipulations about standard fathom was The Legal Register (*Pravilniceasca condică*, 1780); it was followed by The Law of Caragea (*Legiuirea lui Caragea*, 1818) and The Organic regulation (*Regulamentul organic*, 1831). The Legal register, printed in 1780, stipulated that all land measurements are to be done with the "old" fathom but in the act describing the boundary the measurement was to be expressed in 'present day fathom' (*stîinjenul de acum*)³²; it is the first mention of an attempt to establish a single, standard length measure throughout the country; alas, which fathom was the new one, is not indicated. Evidence which I will discuss below suggests that actually two fathoms were established now as standards, of Șerban Cantacuzino and Constantin Brâncoveanu.³³ From now on it is legitimate to talk of

³¹ Potra, 1634-1800, 'Introduction', p. 9. For the economic and demographic development of Bucharest at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries see Constantin C. Giurescu, *Istoria Bucureștilor*, [History of Bucharest] 3rd edition. (Bucharest: Editura Vremea, 2009), pp. 223-245.

³² *Pravilniceasca condică* [The Legal Register], Editura Colectivul pentru vechiul drept românesc al Academiei R.P.R. (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Romîne, 1957), p. 140.

³³ Apparently both fathoms had had old and new variants, to which the text of the Legal register refers. For instance, in 1797 a tract of land in Bucharest is measured

standard fathom(s) which the central power decreed and tried to implement.

Yet the duality of the standard only caused other problems. Hence, in 1815, Prince Ioan Caragea demanded the boyars of the princely council to investigate and chose between the fathom of Șerban Cantacuzino and that of Constantin Brâncoveanu, 'because many litigations occur because of the fathom used to measure the estates'; significantly, he also demanded a solution 'to preserve the measure so as to be always trusted and without doubt'.³⁴ For the first time in the history of Wallachia, the idea that a measure was to be established and then preserved as a standard was formulated.

In 1818, the Law of Caragea incorporated this choice of the princely councillors. Chapter 3, ruled that all properties have to be delimited from the surrounding properties. The plots were to be measured by the fathom mentioned in the title deeds, namely that of Constantin Brâncoveanu or Șerban Cantacuzino; if the acts did not mention explicitly which fathom was used previously, it was to be measured with the fathom of Șerban Cantacuzino.³⁵ And the Law of Caragea adds: '[h]enceforth in the acts of boundary settlements and the contracts of sales of estates the fathom of Șerban Vodă is to be mentioned.'³⁶ Thus, the fathom of Șerban Vodă Cantacuzino was declared the official one and all measurements of plots had to be expressed in this fathom.

The Organic Regulation from 1831 is much more succinct on the subject of the weights and measure. Only one paragraph touches on the measurement of land plots, in the section dedicated to the 'reciprocal rights and obligations between owner and villager'.

The customary measure in the country is the acre [*pogonul*] which is 24 poles [*prăjini*] long and six poles wide, each pole measuring three princely fathoms; the fathom of Șerban Vodă being considered established measure.³⁷

'both with the old and the new fathom of Brâncoveanu' (*cu stânjănul Brâncoveanului, atât cel vechiul cât și cel nou*), Potra, 1594-1821, p. 610.

³⁴ Vasile Alexandrescu Urechia, *Istoria Românilor*, [The History of Romanians], vol. X, part B (Bucharest: Institutul de Arte Grafice Carol Göbl, 1902), pp. 203-204.

³⁵ *Legiurea Caragea* [The Law of Caragea], ed. Aurel C. Sava, (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Romîne, 1955), p. 18.

³⁶ *Legiurea Caragea*, p. 43.

³⁷ *Regulamentele organice ale Valahiei și Moldovei* [The Organic Regulations of Wallachia and Moldavia], eds. Paul Negulescu - George Alexianu (Bucharest: Întreprinderile "Eminescu" S.A., 1944), p. 38.

What is interesting is the tone of the text. If in the previous legal texts the standard measure was something to be achieved and implemented at the expense of other fathoms, now, the fathom of Șerban Vodă is simply considered the standard length measure, without references to other fathoms. It is simply considered 'established measure' (*măsură statornicită*).

According to the new legislation on the fathom, the principedom tried to impose the new measure in concrete measurements. Standard fathoms were not distributed at once throughout the country, as it will happen after 1831, but delivered on an ad-hoc basis. The domain in which official fathoms are best documented – and probably most needed – was that of land measurement, either in case of adjudication of litigations or of real estate transactions. The official measure was demanded either by local officials or by one of the parties involved in a litigation or transaction. The 'princely' fathoms authorized by the central power and bearing signs of this validation – the sigils of the principedom impressed on metal measures or hanging like a seal – were sent with princely officials who took active part in the operations of measurement. Hence already in 1777 and 1779 princely sealed fathoms were brought from Bucharest by princely officials who had to adjudicate litigations over land boundaries.³⁸

In 1780 two boyars – together with several merchants, priests and 'town elders' – measured the land from Craiova belonging to the bishopric of Râmnic 'with the sealed fathom sent from Bucharest, which is called the fathom of the late Constantin Vodă Brâncoveanu'.³⁹ More interestingly, in 1780 a plot of Radu Vodă monastery is measured again 'with the fathom of the late Prince Constantin Vodă Brâncoveanu which was used during his reign when the plot was measured, as the title deed [from 1696] of the monastery proves'.⁴⁰ Apparently, the document testifies to the existence of the fathom of Constantin Brâncoveanu at the end of the 17th century. Yet, the title deed from 1696 contains no mention of an official fathom.⁴¹ The original measurement was done in the reign

³⁸ *Acte Judiciare din Țara Românească 1775-1781* [Judicial Documents from Wallachia 1775-1781], eds. Gheorghe Cronț et al. (Bucharest: Editura Academiei R.S.R., 1973), pp. 345-347, pp. 444-445, pp. 716-717.

³⁹ 'Documente de proprietate ale Episcopiei Râmnicului asupra caselor Bănești din Craiova' [Documents Attesting the Ownership of the Houses of *Bănie* by the Râmnic Bishopric], *Arhiva Olteniei* VI (1927): 53.

⁴⁰ Potra, 1634-1800, p. 282.

⁴¹ Potra, 1634-1800, pp. 112-113.

of Constantin Brâncoveanu and this is probably the origin of an invented tradition of a standard fathom of this prince, related to the efforts of standardization already under way.

Standard measures are required not only for settling boundary disputes but also for putting land transactions on a firmer footing. After 1780 the references to official measure multiply, in the form of the fathom of Șerban Cantacuzino or of Constantin Brâncoveanu. It is obvious from several documents that the two measures were associated with various neighbourhoods, which usually belonged to one landlord (monastery, boyar, prince) who employed one sort of measure to delimit the property. For example, the land sold and rented by Maria Bălăceanca or her foster son in the Sfântul Dimitrie neighbourhood, in 1793, 1796 and 1798 respectively, was measured with the 'fathom of Șerban Vodă'.⁴² A property rented out by Colțea monastery to a townsman in 1799 was measured with the same fathom.⁴³ Conversely, similar transactions in Tîrgul Cucului were done with the fathom of Constantin Brâncoveanu in 1797, and 1802.⁴⁴ In the last decade investigated here, the fathom of Șerban Cantacuzino seems to have gained pre-eminence in the transactions in Bucharest, probably as a consequence of being declared the official fathom in the Law of Caragea (1818).⁴⁵

Who had the initiative of asking an official fathom? Sometimes the officials demanded it. Hence, in 1793 the *Caimacam* of Craiova requested an official central *stânjen* and was given a positive response (October 22, 1793) announced the delivery of two ells, "halves of poles", one after the *stânjen* of the prince Constantin Brâncoveanu, the other after the *stânjen* of the prince Șerban Cantacuzino. Both of the two

⁴² Potra, 1594-1821, p. 575; pp. 599-600, p. 614. In 1805, the Zimnicile and Fântânele estates (Teleorman county) of Princess Safta Ipsilante, the wife of the prince Constantin Ipsilanti, were measured with 'the fathom of the defunct Prince Șerban Vodă Cantacuzino', Urechia, *Istoria Românilor*, vol. VIII (Bucharest: Tipografia și Fonderia Thoma Basilescu, 1897), pp. 575-580, 581-586.

⁴³ Ion Ionașcu, *Documente bucureștene privitoare la proprietățile mănăstirii Colțea* [Documents from Bucharest regarding the properties of Colțea Monastery] (Bucharest: Fundațiile Regele Carol I, 1945), pp. 270-271.

⁴⁴ Potra, 1594-1821, p. 610, p. 611, pp. 611-612, pp. 634-635.

⁴⁵ Potra ed., *Documente privitoare la istoria orașului Bucharest (1800-1848)* Documents concerning the History of Bucharest (1800-1848) (Bucharest: Editura Republicii Socialiste România, 1975), p. 191; pp. 213-215; pp. 318-319 (hereafter, Potra, 1800-1848).

measuring sticks were authenticated by the *vel vornic* and the *vel logofăt* ⁴⁶ and sealed with princely seals at the both ends.⁴⁷

Equally, the official fathom is requested by the subjects, usually by boyars who want to protect their investments from subsequent litigations. In 1779, the great boyar Manolache Brâncoveanu asked to have a tract of land purchased in Bucharest, in the Popescului neighbourhood (*mahalaua Popescului*) measured with the princely fathom so as to avoid „dispute with the neighbours”.⁴⁸ For instance in 1793 Ioan, the son of *stolnic* Gheorghe Cernovodeanu, auctions his estate Prejba from Teleorman county. The deal is struck with the *vel spătar*, Ianache Văcărescu, the two agreeing to a price of 40 taller per fathom. Yet the buyer does not trust that the acreage of the estate – 1200 fathoms – as showed by the old acts of ownership (*sineturile vechi*) is correct. So, the organizer of the auction, the grandmaster of the merchants’ guild, asks from the central authorities to send an authorized fathom with which the estate was to be measured. In his resolution (May 5, 1793), the prince announces the delivery of “the princely fathom”.⁴⁹ Similarly, in 1816, the boyar Nicolae Glogoveanu addresses a petition in which he demands to have his estate Flocești ‘delimited with the fathom of the deceased Constantin-Vodă Brâncoveanu’.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Customarily, the *vel logofăt* had judicial competence in settling property disputes, Valentin Al. Georgescu - Ovid Sachelarie, *Judecata domnească în Țara Românească și Moldova (1611-1831), Partea I. Organizarea judecătorească, vol. II (1740-1831)* [The Princely Justice in Wallachia and Moldavia (1611-1831). Part 1. The Judicial Organization, vol. 2 (1740-1831)] (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1982), p. 134. The *vel vornic* received attributions in identical matter towards the end of the 18th century when his general judicial competence was reduced in favour of the *ispravnici* and the judicial departments, Georgescu - Sachelarie, *Judecata domnească*, part 1/vol. 2, p. 128.

⁴⁷ Urechia, *Istoria Românilor*, vol. V (Bucharest: Tipografia si Fonderia de Litere Thoma Basilescu, 1893), p. 187. Urechia mentions another delivery of an official *stânjen* in October 22, 1793, but he does not publish the document, Urechia, vol. VI, p. 632.

⁴⁸ Potra, 1634-1800, pp. 272-273.

⁴⁹ Urechia, *Istoria Românilor*, vol. VI (Bucharest: Lito-Tipografia Carol Göbl, 1893), pp. 484-85.

⁵⁰ Nicolae Iorga, *Situația agrară, economică și socială a Olteniei în epoca lui Tudor Vladimirescu. Documente contemporane* [The Agrarian, Economic, and Social Situation of Oltenia in the Age of Tudor Vladimirescu. Contemporary Sources] (Bucharest: Editura Ministerului de Agricultură, 1915), p. 77.

A more interventionist state – as the Wallachia state became during the 18th century – coupled with an agrarian economy could not but favour the resort to standard measures. In June 5, 1784 the regulation of farming out the tobacco tax (*tutunărit*) and the letters of authorization rule that the tax-farmer has to proceed “according to the custom” and “to measure the acres with the sealed fathom which is given from the treasury”; the tax is 4 taller per acre (*pogon*) and an extra fee of 80 per individual.⁵¹ In 1811 the wording of such letters is even more explicit: the tobacco plots were to be measures “with the fathom of eight princely palms which would be given from the Treasury stamped”.⁵² The same rule applied for the assessment of the wine tax of the foreigners (*pogonăritul străinilor*).⁵³

Finally, during the 1820s a new fathom appears in documents: the “timber fathom” (*stânjenul cherestelii*); its name resulted most probably from the measuring of the wooden planks used to pave the main streets in Bucharest, but was most likely the fathom of Șerban Cantacuzino. However, in documents is mentioned in contexts in which the construction rules were infringed. Hence, according to the princely regulations the road “has always to be 4 fathoms wide, measured with the timber fathom” and nobody has the right to infringe this width ‘regardless of the rank’ (*oricine de orice treapta va fi*).⁵⁴ The last mention is of utmost importance. Although it was understood that the standard fathom was valid for everybody, this is the first explicit proclamation of the equality in front of the fathom.

⁵¹ Urechia, *Istoria Românilor*, vol. I (Bucharest: Lito-Tipografia Carol Göbl, 1891), p. 412. An identical letter was issued on July 9, 1785. The same methods of assessment of *tutunărit* are established in 1786 and 1787, Urechia, *Istoria Românilor*, vol. III (Bucharest: Tipografia “Gutenberg” Joseph Göbl, 1892), pp. 630 and 82 and in 1816, Urechia, *Istoria Românilor*, vol. X, part B (Bucharest: Institutul de Arte Grafice Carol Göbl, 1902), pp. 140-151.

⁵² Urechia, *Istoria Românilor*, vol. XI, (Bucharest: Tipografia și Fonderia de Litere Thoma Basilescu, 1900), pp. 566-568.

⁵³ Urechia, *Istoria Românilor*, vol. X, part B, p. 151.

⁵⁴ Potra, 1800-1848, pp. 290-292; pp. 294-297. The supposition that the timber fathom was the same with the fathom of Șerban Cantacuzino is supported by the mentioning of a princely fathom used to assess the price of the planks for the pavement of the road in Bucharest in 1823, Potra, 1800-1848, pp. 121-122.

Standardization and state making.

Where to situate this process of metrological standardization? How to interpret it? And above everything, what was its impact on the mode and capacity of rule and on the way the state was imagined and perceived?

The increasing control of the fathom documented especially from the last quarter of the 18th century indicates the transition towards a modern form of political power. The standard measures were part of the wider process of standardization inherent in the modernization of the Wallachian state. As students of organizations have showed, the activity of bureaucracies is facilitated if their activity and their instruments of work are standardized. Not only can they process more information but also the amount of information - that is of physical work - which they process is reduced by the reduction of "variance of inputs, outputs, activities, and behaviour".⁵⁵

To return to our case, the standardization of the fathom fulfils the same function of facilitating the working of the Wallachian judges. As the litigations over land - with the inherent problems of measurement - multiplied, the using of local fathoms became inefficient; not only that the adjudication had to be preceded by measurement, but the expression of land surfaces in the documents pertaining to litigation was uncertain unless expressed in the standard fathom. In this sense we have to read the repeated attempts by the central power to impose a standard fathom, more ambiguous in 1780 but then more clearly in 1817 and 1831. Hence, the standardization of an instrument favoured the standardization of the incoming and outgoing information handled by the judicial instances. Of course, this does not amount to a wholesale bureaucratisation of the Wallachian state apparatus, but to a fraction of its activity and an early stage of this process, a stage in which the central power had to struggle with the local custom on which the local fathom was based. The change is nevertheless significant.

Following Witold Kula's insight I referred to at the beginning of this paper, I also claim that the authority which arbitrated metrological disputes gained prestige. But how did this happen? I read prestige here

⁵⁵ Jane E. Fountain, *Building the Virtual State. Information Technology and Institutional Change* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2001), p. 54; James R. Beniger, *The Control Revolution. Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 15.

as 'symbolic power', a notion I borrow from Mara Loveman to denote the capacity to make something appear natural and not a product of political decision or political struggle; when a state possesses 'symbolic power', its actions and prerogatives in a certain area of the social reality are legitimate, are not questioned anymore and go without saying, at the same time denying other competing claims.⁵⁶ This brings back Pierre Bourdieu's idea that the state is not only an organization, but also an authorized and therefore legitimate perspective upon social reality. By enacting a single legitimate fathom, the state asserts its monopoly in the field of measurements. Yet, in this process of monopolization, the state itself is constructed.

The measurements made by princely officials armed with the princely sealed fathom were all instances in which the subjects encountered the "state" embodied in the official, universal measure imposed by an authorized official. The implementation of the standard fathom on an estate is not just an illustration of the state action; it is a performance which actually constitutes the state, both as subjective perception and objective representation. As the princely official, wearing princely uniform⁵⁷, accompanied by other lesser officials or a small armed retinue, endowed with a princely letter of authorization, comes on an estate carrying a princely fathom which he uses to settle a land dispute, he proclaims the latter as the official and legitimate measure in land matters. By the manipulation of the official and universal (measure), he enacts the state at local level.

This enactment of the state has three interrelated dimensions. First, it asserts the power of the officials by invoking the universal, that is the impersonal and objective, which the officials control and manipulate. Secondly, this can be done only in the name of an entity which is presumed to have the same attributes. "Disinterested" officials can impose standard that is, neutral, measures only if they speak and act on behalf of an entity which is thought of as equally neutral and detached from sectional interests and having a certain "thingness", an objective existence. By such actions, the state is brought into the daily life of the subjects and constituted as legitimate power. Thirdly, such metrological

⁵⁶ Mara Loveman, 'The Modern State and the Primitive Accumulation of Symbolic Power' *American Journal of Sociology*, 110/6 (May 2005):1651-1683.

⁵⁷ Such a uniform is mentioned in 1801, when the peasants from Slăvești, Vlașca county, beat a princely agent and tore his uniform received from the principedom (*mondîrul ce i s-au dat de la domnie*), Urechia, *Istoria Românilor*, vol. VIII, p. 217.

practices institute dyadic relations - centre-periphery, central-local, state-subjects, official-unofficial, legitimate-illegitimate etc. - which reify the state and constitute its "others".

It is important to keep in mind that the effect of these enactments is not automatic; people don't fall immediately or obligatorily in the "trap" of the 'idea of the state', but only through a historical process. It would be very difficult to measure this transformation and it was not the aim of this paper. Nonetheless, a measure of the success of this accumulation of symbolic power is the request of the princely fathom by local officials or by parties in transactions or litigations. The former acknowledge the need of a standard measure for a legitimate action; the latter accept the right of the state to impose an official fathom. This is the sense in which the Wallachian state was transformed, a transformation which the habitual concentration of historians on corruption and lack of administrative fine tuning obscured.