
NOTES

An Old Roumanian Tax with a Byzantine Name: «Pîrpărul»

Constantin C. Giurescu

University of Bucharest, Member of the Academy of Social and Political Sciences
of the Roumanian Socialist Republic

The Byzantine gold coin *hyperperon* (ὑπέρπερον) first definitely appearing in documents in the year 1093, under the rule of Emperor Alexios I Comnène¹ was highly appreciated not only inside the Empire but also throughout the basins of the Mediterranean and Black Seas. Its theoretical value was 1/72 of a Byzantine pound (318.69 grams), *i. e.* 4.426 grams, and its title was 22-21 carats, *i. e.* 916-875% of precious metal (gold), the rest being copper.² The *hyperperon* — the name means « mixed by fire », *i. e.* « refined by successive meltings »³ — succeeded the ancient Byzantine gold coin which had in turn succeeded the « solid » coined by the Emperor Constantine the Great in the years 304-324.

In the Carpatho-Danubian region, particularly in the Walachian plain and on the right bank of the Danube, large quantities of *hyperperi* — or *perperi* as their name was abbreviated by the Roumanians — have been found. Twenty-nine monetary discoveries of this kind are known so far, one of them in Bucharest itself where a *perper* was found on the Podul Calicilor (Now Calea Rahovei) in 1812.⁴ Other *perperi* were discovered at Turnu

¹ OCTAVIAN ILIESCU, *Despre hyperperii ad sagium Vicinae* (On hyperperii ad Sagium Vicinae), MS. 1961, pp. 13-14.

² *Ibidem*, p. 3.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 1-2.

⁴ It is a *perper* from Mihail VIII Paleologue, coined in Constantinople after 1261 and before 1282 (communication by Octavian Iliescu, head of the Numismatic Office of the Academy of the Socialist Republic of Roumania). For the bronze Byzantine coins found in Bucharest, see the same author, *Despre un tezaur de monede bizantine din vremea Comnenilor, găsit în București* (On a treasure of Byzantine coins from the time

Severin, Celeiu, Turnu Magurele, Giurgiu, at Novaci on the Danube line (South-south-west of Bucharest), at Păcuiul lui Soare, at Stoenești, in the Braila lagoons, at Enisala (near the bank of the Razim in Dobrudja), at Oțeleni and Manoleasa in Moldavia, at Gherla, Lugasu de Sus and Varias in Transylvania, etc.⁵ A real treasure of 600-700 perperi — of those coined in the town of Nicaea (now Isnik) east of the Sea of Marmara between the years 1222 and 1254 — was found at Dîrstor or Silistra — the ancient Durostorum — in 1936.⁶

The expression « iperperi ad sagium Vicinae », which recurs in several documents of the year 1281, led to the supposition that gold perperi had also been coined in the town of Vicina on the Lower Danube (where Isaccea now stands),⁸ but later researches showed that they were coined at Nicaea where the Byzantine Empire continued (1204) after the conquest of Constantinople by the Crusaders.¹⁰ The expression « ad sagium Vicinae » is to be interpreted in the sense that the *perperi* had to be checked with the weight in use at Vicina.¹¹

The Byzantine *hyperper* or *perper* played a role of outstanding importance in the monetary economy of the Lower Danube; it was the dominant currency in the 12th and 13th centuries, and in the two following centuries (14th and 15th it was used together with the ducat.¹² In the trading privilege granted the merchants of Brașov (southern Transylvania) by the ruling prince of Walachia, Mircea the Old, on August 6, 1413, the *perper* is considered to be a usual currency. It is mentioned, in fact, that a *fertun*, i. e. 24 silver ducats, shall be paid as customs duty for a *vilar* or cloth of Ypres and one *perper* or 18 silver ducats for a *vilar* of Louvain.¹³ For colonial wares

of Comnens, found in Bucharest) in « Studii și cercetări de numismatică » (Numismatic Studies and Researches), III, 1960, pp. 493-495.

⁵ OCT. ILIESCU, *L'Hyperpère byzantin au Bas-Danube du XI^e au XV^e siècle*, in « Revue des études sud-est européennes », VII, 1969, 1, pp. 116-118.

⁶ Information given by Octavian Iliescu.

⁷ To locate Vicina, see CONST. C. GIURESCU, *Intemeierea Mitropoliei Ungrovlahiei* (Founding of the Ungrovlahian Metropolitan Church), in « Biserica Ortodoxă Română » (The Romanian Orthodox Church), LXXVII (1959), nr. 7-10, pp. 680-685.

⁸ See GH. I. BRATIANU, *Vicina I. Contributions à l'histoire de la domination byzantine et du commerce génois en Dobrogea*, in « Académie Roumaine, Bulletin de la Section Historique », t. X, Bucharest, 1923, pp. 113-189; by the same author, *Vicina II*, in « Revue Historique du Sud-Est Européen », XIX, 1, pp. 133-182.

⁹ See, for example, V. LAURENT, *La domination byzantine aux bouches du Danube sous Michel VIII Paléologue*, in « Revue Historique du Sud-Est Européen », XXII, p. 191.

¹⁰ OCT. ILIESCU, *On hyperperii...*, p. 16.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 22 and 24.

¹² CONST. C. GIURESCU, *Istoria pescuitului și a pisciculturii în România* (History of fishing and of pisciculture in Roumania), Bucharest, 1964, p. 60.

¹³ I. BOGDAN, *Documente privitoare la relațiile Tarii Românești cu Brașovul și cu Tara Ungurească în sec. XV și XVI* (Documents concerning the relations of Walachia with Brașov and the Hungarian Land in the 15th and 16th centuries), Bucharest, 1905, pp. 3-5.

— pepper and saffron — cotton, materials of camel's hair, lamb-skins (of the Astrakhan type) and other goods from overseas, *i. e.* from the Levant, the customs duty was to be three *perperi* on one hundred *perperi*.¹⁴ Finally, for fish from the Danube exported to Braşov the customs duty to be paid at Braila was to be one *perper*¹⁵ for a «*maje*» — to begin with this meant a boat-load and later the load of a cart drawn by six oxen.¹⁶

Thus the *perper* was the usual currency of the Lower Danube at the beginning of the 15th century and still more so in the 14th and 13th centuries when the Byzantine Empire was a greater political and economic power.

But in Walachia the *perper* was not only the usual currency, it was also a *duty or tax*, a tax on fish and wine to be precise. The name of this tax is *pîrpar*, the romanized form of the Byzantine word *perperon* which was the abbreviation of *hyperperon*. In this romanized form we meet it for hundreds of years from the 15th to the 19th century.

As far as fish is concerned the *pîrpar* was the duty collected at the ford or fishery station — the loading places on the Danube or its lagoons — for each big unit — vessel, large cart, cart- and horse-load of salted or fresh fish. The first documentary mention in this acceptation is to be found in the deed of January 15, 1467 with which the *Voievode* Radu the Handsome consolidated the rights of the Monastery of Cozia over all its Danube lagoons and from the Sapatul¹⁷ to the mouth of the Ialomiţa, inclusive of all incomes therefore. Listing all the Borcea¹⁸ loading places for the fish of these lagoons — Steanche, Bordusani, Facaieni, Vladeni, Blagodesti and Corneni — the *Voievod* specifies that in each of these places «the monks shall be free to collect the customs duty and the *pîrpar* and nobody else shall interfere, neither the *pîrcalab* nor the chief magistrate of Floci¹⁹ nor anyone else». ²⁰ From the document dated April 30, 1502 issued by Radu the Great we know the exact amount of the *pîrpar*. In confirming the rights of the Monastery of Tismana to the Danube lagoons from Bistreţul to Severin, the *Voievod* adds: «those wishing to salt fish from these lagoons shall pay 30 *aspri* per ship, 15 for a big cart, 4 for an ordinary cart and 2 for a horse-

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ I. BOGDAN, *op. cit.*, p. 5. For other references to *perperi* in the documents of the 14th and 15th centuries, see OCTAVIAN ILIESCU, *L'hyperpère byzantin...*, pp. 114-115.

¹⁶ CONST. C. GIURESCU, *Istoria pescuitului* (History of fishing), pp. 261-264.

¹⁷ Sapatul is not the place of as the lake of Calarasi as P. P. Panaitescu maintains in «*Mircea cel Batrin*» (Mircea the Old), Bucharest, 1944, p. 62, but an artificial channel — whence its name — of the Fetesti island (CONST. C. GIURESCU, *Istoria pescuitului* (History of Fishing), pp. 68-69).

¹⁸ It is the west branch which marks the bounds of the Fetesti island.

¹⁹ A town situated near the place where the river Ialomiţa flows into the Danube and existing prior to the foundation of the Walachian State.

²⁰ *Documentis Romaniae Historica B.*, Tara Româneasca (Wallachia) vol. I, Bucharest, 1966, pp. 223-224.

load».²¹ The same figures are to be found in the further confirmations of April 1, 1526²² and September 5, 1568,²³ the only difference being that in the 1526 document « *maja* » is replaced by « boat ». On April 18, 1622, when confirming the same Monastery's rights over half of the Bistretul lagoon, Radu Mihnea specifies that the rights concerned are those connected with « the lagoon and pastures and the *perperi* for chariots and all other dues », this being an ancient right and privilege.²⁴

The *pîrpar* as a tax on the fish loaded at the river ford may also be found in the second half of the 17th century. In June 22, 1654 the Voievod Constantin Serban Basarab confirms the right of the Radu Voda Monastery of Bucharest to the customs duties on fish caught in the Kiselet²⁵ lagoon and the right to levy the *pîrpar* from anyone passing through the river ford at Kiseletu « according to law and usage ».²⁶ By the end of the 17th century however, under the reign of Constantin Brincoveanu (1688-1714), the *majaritul* seems to have been collected instead of the *pîrpar*. In the ledger of the Voievod of the period we find the following order to those collecting duties on fish: « they may also levy *majaritul* from merchants carrying salted fish through towns and villages, whether they are subjects of the Voievod, the boyards, the monks or anyone else, on all cart oxen at the rate of ugh, 1.20 per ox, according to tradition. They are also entitled to collect duty at the rate of 120 *bani* per chariot from merchants carrying fresh fish by cart through towns and villages and to collect the same duty as for fresh fish from persons salting fresh fish at river fords ».²⁷ At the time of Alexandru Ipsilanti (1774-1782) one thaler and 12 *bani*, i. e. 132 *bani* — plus three *oca* of fish — were levied on each cartload of fresh fish. A cartload of salted fish had to pay more, namely 220 *bani* for each pack-animal. Fish from the ponds or the river Dimbovita brought to Bucharets in smaller quantities — not by cartloads — did not have to pay the *majarit*.²⁸ The same regulations are to be found also at the beginning of 1792²⁹ and in the year 1807.³⁰ This tax derives

²¹ *Documenta privind istoria României. Veacul XVI. B. Tara Românească* (Documents concerning the history of Roumania. 16th century. B. Wallachia). Vol. I, Bucharest, 1951, p. 14.

²² *Ibidem*, vol. II, p. 4.

²³ *Ibidem*, vol. III, p. 287.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 17th Century, vol. IV, p. 106.

²⁵ Near the Danube, south-east of the district of Ilfov.

²⁶ CONST. C. GIURESCU, *Istoria pescuitului* (History of Fishing), p. 281, note 50.

²⁷ *Anatefterul. Condica de porunci a vistieriei lui Constantin Brincoveanu* (Anatefterul. Book of Commandments of the Constantin Brincoveanu Treasury) ed. Dinu C. Giurescu, in « Studii si materiale de istorie medie » (Studies and Documents of Middle-Age History), t. V, p. 375.

²⁸ V. A. URECHIA, *Istoria românilor* (History of the Roumanians), I, p. 114.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, IV, p. 263.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, IX, p. 533.

But the *pîrpar* was not only paid on the large quantities of fish loaded at the fishery stations. It was also levied on *wine casks*. On June 4, 1497 its name from the word *maja* the meaning of wick has been explained previously.³¹

Radu the Great, the Voievod of Walachia, when granting the Monastery of Tîrgsor exemption from customs duty, added: «and no matter how many casks of wine they buy from the vineyards, or from Tîrgoviste or from the Danube, in no place shall anyone presume to claim the *pîrpar* from them for I myself have exempted them therefrom».³² The document of January 13, 1505, also issued by Radu the Great and referring to the Sapatul ponds of the Monastery of Cozia states that the *pîrpar* was collected for a cartload of fish as well as for a cask of wine. The Voievod then orders: «and the *pîrparii* ("perperii") on the cartloads of fish or the casks of wine or anything else sold at the farms or ponds belonging to the holy Monastery such as the products of apiaries, vineyards, gardens or orchards, the *pîrpar*, customs duties and taxes on wine shall all be paid to the holy Monastery. And moreover every ship navigating on the Danube and crossing the Monastery's land shall be obliged to pay the *pîrpar*s to the monks at the rate of one *perper* per cask».³³ This document also states the amount of the duty to be paid for a cask of wine sold at the *pond* on the monastery's land: one *perper* or *pîrpar*. Assuming the *pîrpar* to have kept the same value as in the days of Mircea the Old, which is mentioned in the privilege granted the inhabitants of Brasov, the *pîrpar* paid for a cask of wine — *i.e.* 100-125 decalitres³⁴ amounted to 18 ducats or silver coins.³⁵ Evidence of the fact that the *pîrpar* had the character of a tax levied also on wine is provided by a document dated November 8, 1523, in which the Voievod Radu dela Afumati confirms «Bishop Ilarion's right to receive the perpers of Aninoasa and the towns as well as from all persons possessing vineyards on the land owned by the Father Bishop in Aninoasa, bestowed upon him by myself to strengthen the holy Metropolitan See».³⁶

³¹ See p. 3 above.

³² *Documenta Romaniae Historica B*, vol. I, pp. 448-449.

³³ *Documente B, Veacul XVI* (Documents B, 16th century), vol. I, p. 25.

³⁴ For the size of casks, see CONST. C. GIURESCU, *Istoria podgoriei Odobestilor* (History of the Odobesti Vineyard), Bucharest, 1969, p. 117.

³⁵ See p. 2 above.

³⁶ *Documente B. Veacul XVI* (Documents B. 16th century), vol. I, p. 177. A similar donation was made on the 20th of February 1512 when the voievod Neagoe Basarab confirmed to the Cutlumuz monastery of Mount Athos the ownership of several villages in Walachia granting «as help the bucketful and the tithe from the bees, wine-taxes due to the voievod and boyars and the perpers and for each vineyard possessed by the peasants of the monastery from the country as well as from the town situated within the boundaries of the holy monastery, the holy monastery shall receive these taxes upon wine» (*Documenta Romaniae Historica, B. Vol. I*, pp. 337-341).

The *pîrpar* duty on wine continued for a long time and is still to be found in the second half of the 18th century. For example, a document dated May 14, 1775 confirming the right granted Cozia to collect the taxes on wine from several villages in the districts of Ilfov, Vilcea, Romanati and Mehedinti, contains the words « out of ten pails of wine, one and the *pîrpar* according to tradition ».³⁷ And in the document of October 8, 1797, confirming to the monastery on Patmos Island (in the Aegean Sea), « where a Greek school also exists », the gifts granted by the preceding Voievods, namely the tax on wine from 27 *popoare* (peoples) in the Dolj district, we again find « 2 *bani* for a pail and the *pîrpar* according to tradition ».³⁸ It must be explained that *popoare* — the word is a Roman inheritance — may include the inhabitants of several villages. Thus the « people » of Cotesti in the Rimnicul Sarat district, included the inhabitants of Golestii de Sus, Calicul, Valea Cîrciului and Slugii³⁹ and the « people » of Brosteni in the same district included the inhabitants of Pitulusa and Faraonul.⁴⁰ Finally, we find the *pîrparul* mentioned at the beginning of the 19th century when 4 *parale* or 12 *bani* were paid under that name for an « oak cask » and 2 *parale* or 6 *bani* for a « spruce cask ».⁴¹

The fact that the *pîrpar* was levied on the country's main products — fish and wine—, that in 1467 it is already mentioned as an ancient tax well known to everyboy and needing no explanation and, finally, that it bears name of Byzantine origin, i. e. the same of the Byzantine coin minted in the 11th century and highly appreciated in the Lower Danube, leads us to conclude that this was one of the most ancient taxes in the Carpatho-Danubian region prior to the foundation of Walachia (c. 1300) and dating from the time of the political formations — *voivodates* and *knezates* — mentioned in the Ioanitian Diploma in 1247. The tax is thought to have been first levied on the fish of the Danube — sturgeon, sheat-fish and big carp — exported to Constantinople and other harbours of the Byzantine Empire.⁴²

³⁷ V. A. URECHIA, *Istoria românilor* (History of the Roumanians), I, pp. 636-637.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, VII, pp. 330-331.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, VII, p. 339.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, XB., foot-note on p. 137.

⁴² These exports are also documented by the testimony, in 1299, of Theodor Metochites Byzantine ambassador to the court of the Serbian king Stephen Miliutin where he was served at meals even on fasting days, « dishes made of the largest and fattest salted Danube fish which in our Country, in Constantinople, are rarely to be found; we particularly seek such fish, but not always successfully ». (Dr. P. NIKOV, *Tatav - bălgarski odnosjenica prez sredni vekove* (Tartar-Bulgarian relations through the centuries...), in « Godišnik na Sofijskies Universitet. Istoricko-filologiceski Fakultet » (Annuaire de l'université de Sofie. Faculté d'histoire et de philologie), XV-XVI, 1919-1920, pp. 1-95). If at the end of the century these big fishes represented a rather rare merchandise in

Fish exports provided the Lower Danube regions with a constant income from ancient times, through the Middle Ages, until late in the 17th and 18th centuries.⁴³ The salted fish from the Danube was not only sent southward, it also travelled north, to Galicia, as documents from the 12th century attest. In my opinion it was also sent to Transylvania as early as the 13th century, *i.e.* prior to the foundation of Walachia. The tax on large units of exported fish — ships, boats or cartloads — would normally have been paid in the gold coin most appreciated in the Carpatho-Danubian region: the *hyperper* or Byzantine *perper*.

Later, of course, the tax was also raised on another important export product — *wine*⁴⁵ — sent mainly northward to Poland and Russia, but smaller quantities of which also went to Transylvania and even south of the Danube.

The history of the *pirpar* tax sheds light on the economic life — exports, currency and tax system — of Walachia prior to the foundation of the state as well as in the first two centuries of its existence.

the Capital of the Byzantine Empire, prior to that time *i.e.* until the year 1186 when the Danube was a border of the Empire — the Bulgarian State have been abolished in 1018 by the emperor Basil the Bulgaroctone — these fish were sold for the delight of connoisseurs in Constantinople.

⁴³ For these exports see CONST. C. GIURESCU, *Istoria pescuitului* (History of Fishing), pp. 47-49, 56-57, 251.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 57-58. CONST. C. GIURESCU, *Tirguri sau orase si cetati moldovene din secolul al X-lea pina la mijlocul secolului al XVI-lea* (Moldavian Towns and Fortresses from the 10th century until the Middle of the 16th century), Bucharest, 1967, pp. 28-30.

⁴⁵ See also ST. STEFANESCU, in *Istoria poporului român* (The History of the Roumanian People), Bucharest, 1970, p. 131.

⁴⁶ For wine exports see CONST. C. GIURESCU, *Istoricul podgoriei Odobestilor* (History of the Odobesti Vineyard), pp. 126-136.