Muslims in Romania

Regional issues

Romanian principalities, once known as the ‘gates of the Levant’, have a history of religious and ethnic di-
versity. In Romania today, the Muslim population tradi-
tionally lives together with the Romanian ma-
jority (Christian-Orthodox) in an area called Dobrud-
ja, a territory bordered to the east by the Black Sea, to
the west and north by the Danube River and to the
south by the Romanian-Bulgarian frontier.

The Muslim community from Dobrudja, which is Sunni, Hanafite rite, is composed of
two major ethnic groups: the Tartars and the Turks. Nowadays, Muslims from Dobrud-
ja or from abroad live in all the important
Romanian cities, being structured in more or less sta-
ble communities. According to the
official census of 1992, there were 25,533
Turks and 24,649 Tartars registered, mean-
ing that the Turks as well as the Tartars rep-
resent each an approximate percentage of
0.1% of Romania’s 22,760,449 inhabitants.

Ottoman presence

The Muslim presence in Dobrudja is ex-
plained by the fact that this territory was
under the domination of the Ottoman Em-
pire for almost five centuries. The Ottomans
conquered Dobrudja in several stages. The
first stage is represented by the conquest of
the strategic points of Inişala and Iaçsca by
the Sultan Bayezid I (1389-1402). After a short
re-conquest of these territories by the
voivode of Wallachia, Mircea the Old, most
of Dobrudja was conquered by the Sultan
Mehemet I between 1419-1420. This marks
the second stage in the process of setting
Ottoman power in the region. The third and
last stage is represented by the conquest of
the fortresses Chilia and Cetatea Alba by
the Sultan Bayezid II (1481-1512) in 1484. As a
result, Dobrudja became a constituent of
the Ottoman Empire, belonging to the great
kayserbaykal of Rumelia. Dobrudja had been
under unceasing Ottoman domination until
1877 when, after the Russian-Ottoman-Ot-
toman War, Romania gained independence
as a state, subsequently acknowledging Do-
budja’s annexation by the Treaty of Berlin
(1878).

The first Muslims – a group of 10-12,000
Anatolian Turkomans led by Sari Saltik - set-
tiled down in Dobrudja in 1263-1264. The fa-
mous Arab traveler, Ibn Battutah (1334-1377),
made the first documented attestation of
Turks living in this area. According to the
discovered traces, the first groups of Tartars,
as part of the empire of the Golden Horde,
seem to have settled here during the time of
the Tartar leader Noghai (1286-1316), who
ruled over the northern side of the Balkan
Peninsula up to Dobrudja. The name of
Noghai assumed by a part of Dobrudja Tar-
tars must have its origins in the colonization
of that time. Sultan Bayezid I brought Tartars to
the area of Babadag. Later on, Sultan Mehmem
(1413-1421) colonized in Dobrudja both
Tartars and Turkomans from Asia Minor. An-
other stage of the colonization in Dobrudja is
connected with the Russian-Turkish War of 1877-78. There were 12,000 Tartars who have
remained in process up to the present
day, the number of functional mosques
in Dobrudja is about 80. All mosques in
Muslim graveyards has also decreased from
300 to 108, which are still in use.

Apart from the Turks and the Tartars,
other Muslim ethnic groups can also be
found in Romania, such as the Albanians
who emigrated in great number after World
War I from regions of the Balkan Peninsula.
According to certain studies, there are
approximately 3,000 Muslim Alban-
ians in Romania. They are fully integrated
into the Turkish-Tartar community, not only
by means of marriage, but also through
the bonds of custom and tradition and by the
sharing of mosques and graveyards. This
makes it very difficult to establish their
exact number. A fact that is worth mention-
ing is that the first translation of the Koran
into modern Albanian (written with Latin let-
ters), entitled Korani (Kendimi) was publi-
ished by its Mitko Qafqazi – an Albanian from
Romania – in 1921 in Ploiesti.

Another Muslim group in Romania is com-
prised of Muslim gypsies living in Dobrudja.
These are local gypsies who converted to
Islam during the Ottoman domination, or Muslim gypsies who emigrated from other parts of
the Ottoman Empire. Some of them seem
to have mixed with the vagrant Anatol-
ian Turks who were present in Dobrudja,
becoming an ethnic group now called ‘Turk
gypsy’. Their number is not exactly known
as they generally declare themselves Turks
in the census. Since 1989, new Muslim ethnic groups appear-
in important cities of Romania such as
Bucharest, Iasi, Cluj, and Timisoara. Some
of these groups are the Arabs (who came mostly
from the countries of the Arab Mashriq like
Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine); the
Iranians; the Kurds; and some from north-
ern Iraq and south-eastern Turkey, etc.

Some of these communities have their own
mosques, schools (such as the Igeli School
in Bucharest), bilingual periodicals (Roman-
ian-Arabic) such as Al-‘Ubbu Al-‘Arabi (The
Arab Week), and cultural and religious cen-
ters (especially in Bucharest). These new
communities have not joined the old Mus-
lim community in Romania, the two groups
living almost parallel lives. Very few of these
newcomers to Romania have obtained Ro-
manian citizenship and those that have, genera-
ly did so through marriage; most of them
emigrate to Western Europe after they
have remained in Romania for a while, which
makes these communities very unsta-
ble. On the other hand, many Turks from
Turkey have joined the old Turkish commu-
nity in Romania and consolidated it. There
is also a small number of Romanians that
have become Muslims, yet have not
formed a unified community.

Culture and education

Muslims in Romania and the Turks are the vestiges of the
Ottoman domination period, such as mausoleums and tombs of some Muslim
and Turkish individuals and families. The most
notable one is found at Iaçsca, Cernavoda and Babadag. In Medgidia are the ruins of one of the old-
est Muslim schools (medresas) in the region. There are also some mosques, still in use,
which are real masterpieces of architecture, such as Esmael Sultan Mosque in Man-
galia (constructed in 1598) or the Ar-Rasa
Mosque in Babadag (constructed in 1522); and Hunikar Mosque (constructed in 1870) and
Anadolu Mosque (constructed in 1860) in Constanța. During the Ottoman times, education was mostly religious. In
Dobrudja, the oldest medresa was built in 1529 by Sultan Bayezid II. After 1878, the Romanian State
reorganized the educational system in Do-
brudja and Wallachia and introduced the
Romanian language in schools. The the-
ological seminary in Medgidia, which had been moved from Babadag in 1903, was abolished in 1965. School education in Tur-
key was gradually eliminated after 1959, and the study of these languages became optional. After the fall of the
communist regime in Romania in 1989, the Tur-
kish language was reintroduced as study lan-
guage for both Turkish and Tartar commu-
nities in the schools with Tartar and Turk-
pish pupils. Furthermore, in 1993 the Muslim theological and pedagogic secondary school
in Bucharest was reopened, continuing the tradition of old seminary.

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There are two monthly publications, issued in
Constanța, worthy of mention: Haikas (in Romanian and
Turkish) and Din istoria tatarilor (in
Tartar: Din istoria turcilor), București,
2003, both published by the
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University of Bucharest and the
Center for Turkish and Turkic
Languages, Turkish and Tartar. In ad-
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Department of the University of Bucharest and
research fellow at the Center for Arab Studies,
Bucharest, E-mail: grigorge@hotmail.com
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The King Carol I Mosque in Constanța

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Georges Grigore