



# Onomastic mentions about the first “protected areas” in the Romanian space

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**Abstract.** The article aims to highlight the distribution in the Romanian space of the first "protected areas", attested in the Middle Ages. These mentions are toponymic highlighted by names derived from the word, with Slavic origin *Braniște*, which meant *the place where the cutting of the forest is forbidden*. These measures adopted both by the prince and by boyars and monasteries, had the role and purpose of preserving the hunting ground. Such names are frequent to the south and east of the Carpathians, in the medieval states of Wallachia and Moldavia, but appear both in southern and northern Transylvania and south of the Danube in the Serbian area of Timoc (that is inhabited by Romanians). In support of such measures are also the onomastic attestations derived from the word *cerbar* = *worker responsible for caring for stag*, highlighted both by anthroponyms and by toponyms. The collected data has been extracted both from medieval collections and from topographical maps made since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

**Keywords:** onomastics, protected areas, Romanian space, *Braniște*, *Cerbar*.

## 1. Introduction

The preservation of special natural areas has a long tradition in Romania, the first protected area, declared in 1906, by the Austrian administration of Bucovina being *Codrul secular de la Slătioara* (*the secular Forest of Slătioara*). But, not with a special legislation, initiatives of political or ecclesiastic authorities to protect some zones have existed since the Middle Age. This kind of initiatives are proved by numerous toponyms, such as the series of place names related to the term *braniște* (< old slavic бранити = "to interdict"), through which were highlighted in the past the fields of the

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great proprieties of princes, boyars or monasteries (especially forests, but not only), that could not have been used or deforested by the inhabitants, but only in the advantage of holder, that has saved many forests to our times.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Research Methodology. Problems

The methodology comprises the methods of data collection (the documentary sources) and the methods of analysis and interpretation of this data. Among the documentary sources used for the collection of onomastic information, we can mention, first, the collections of historical documents, the statistical-fiscal registers (catagrophies, conscriptions), the topographic maps, the censuses of the population, the yearbooks (general, geographic, phonebooks, etc.), and, for the recent period (especially after the Union of Romanian Principalities), the legislation related to the administrative changes, the modification of localities names, etc. Among the methods of analysis and interpretation, we mention the statistical method (which helped in preparing the database), the cartographic method and the geographical method.

Among the *problems* that we had to surpass, not only in the documentation, but also in the process of mapping the data, we mention, first of all, the fact that the historical documents are not published at the same level and do not include all the documents (the collections are stopped, in Wallachia and Moldavia to the XVII<sup>th</sup> century, and in Transylvania, the publication of documents end before 1400). Secondly, having in attention the frequent changes of the administrative limits, in time and in space, we used, for both the Romanian space and the Carpathian-Balkan space, the conventional basemaps: at the level of Romanian space we used a basemap for the Interwar counties, and, for the Carpathian-Balkan space, at the level of the actual regions of the states in this zone of Europe.

## 3. The distribution of toponyms related to *Braniște*

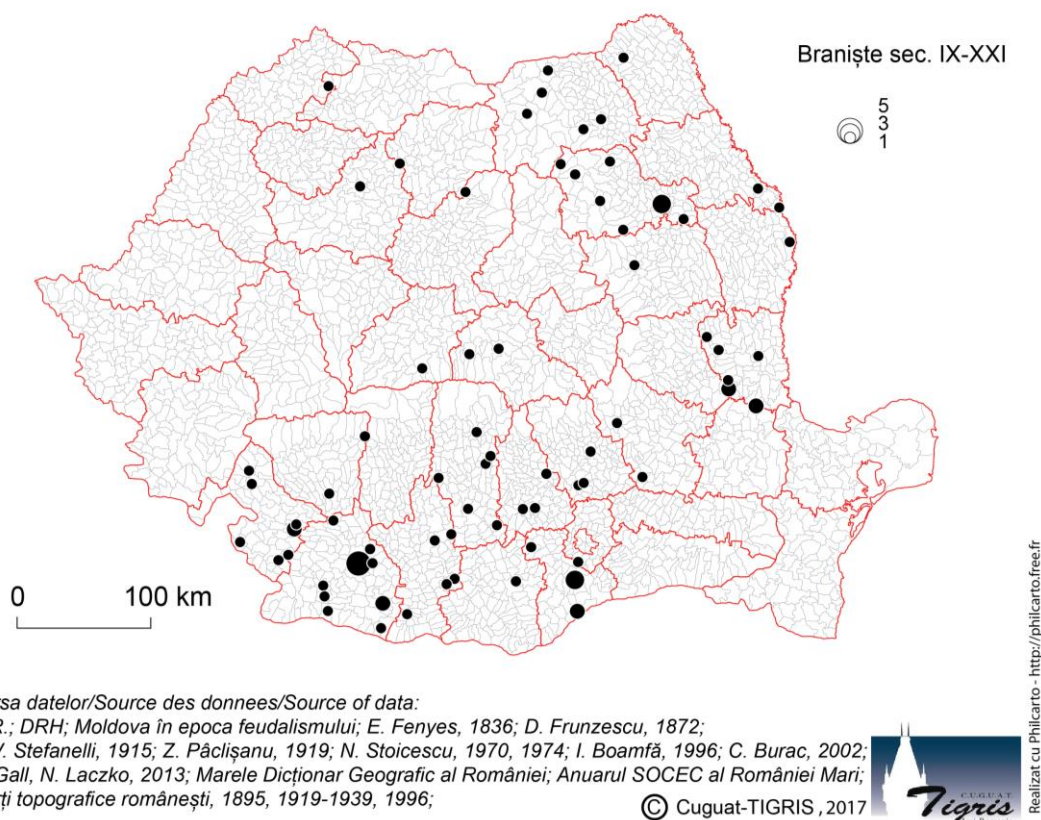
At the level of Romania, the repartition of this toponym is highlighted, at the communal level, in figure 1, and for the Romanian space, at the county level, in figures 2 and 3.

In Romania it is observed an important concentration of these toponyms in Moldova, in both areas – the northern and the danubian (southern), but also in Muntenia and Oltenia. If the presence of these names is not similar with the other regions, we noted many such name places western to the Carpathians, in Maramureș, and in the northern and southern part of Transylvania (figure 1).

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<sup>2</sup> A. Ungureanu, I. Boamfă, *Toponomastică*, Editura SEDCOM LIBRIS, Iași, p. 78.

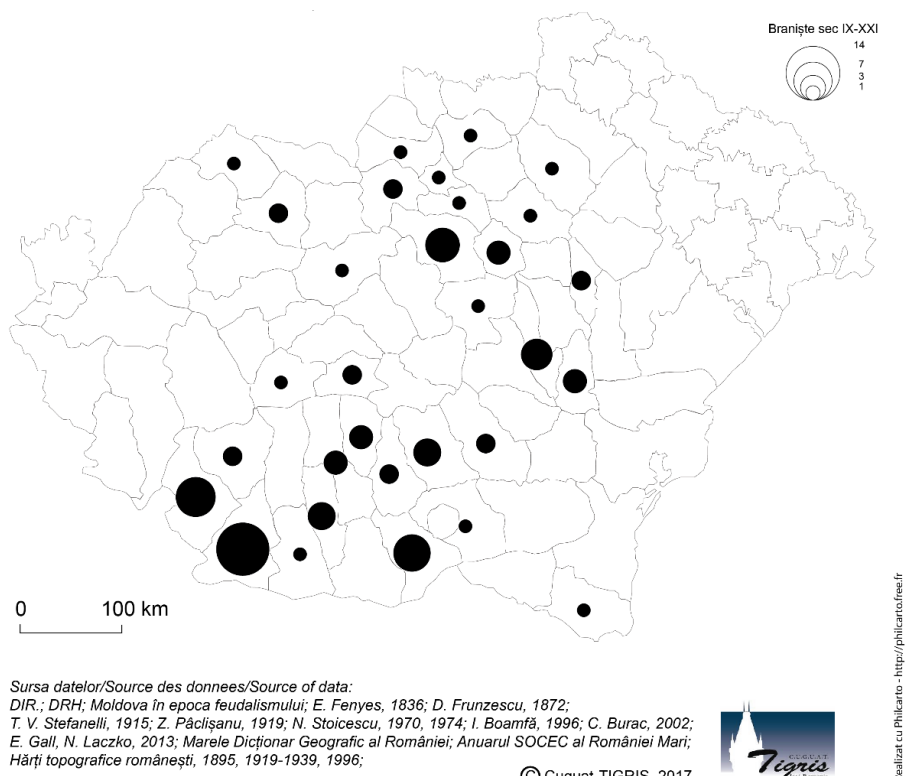
Distribuția spațială a toponimului *BRANIȘTE* în România  
 La distribution spatiale du toponyme *BRANIȘTE* en Roumanie  
 The spatial distribution of the toponym *BRANIȘTE* in Romania



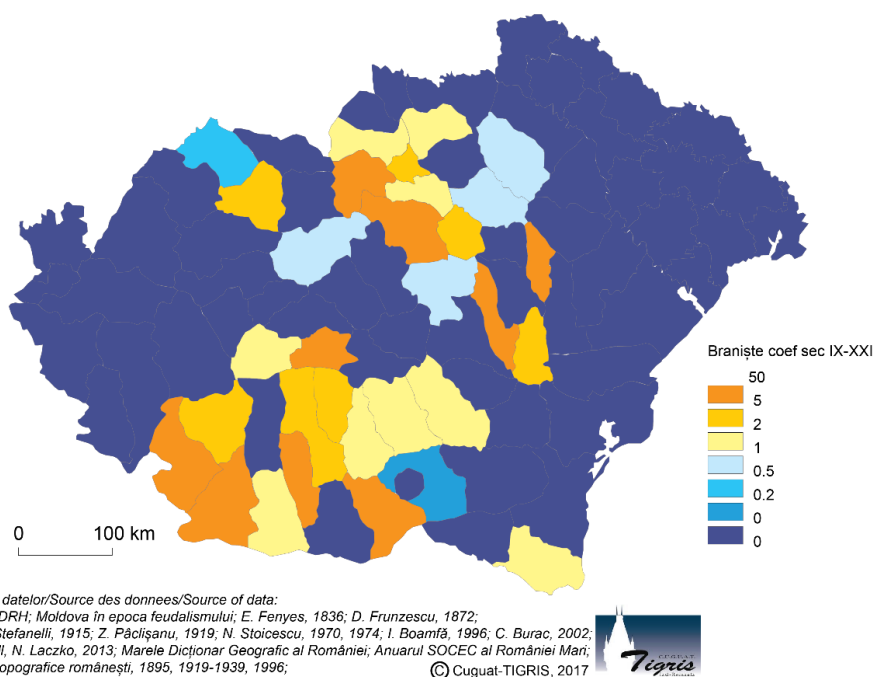
**Figure 1:** The spatial distribution of the toponym *Branîște* in Romania

If we refer to the entire Romanian space – that includes the regions that belonged to Romania in 1919-1944 period – the most frequent mentions are located in the south and especially south-west parts of the country, but the toponyms related to *Branîște* appear in historical Moldavia, including the eastern part – Basarabia (figure 2). We can mention, twice, the presence of this kind of names in the southern and northern parts of Transylvania and in Maramureș.

If we change the manner of mapping and we use the method of the coefficient of spatial distribution (figure 3), we observe that the greatest concentrations are registered in Oltenia, south and west of Muntenia, south and west of Moldavia, and in the north and south of Transylvania.



**Figure 2:** The distribution of name *Branîște* in the Romanian space



**Figure 3:** The distribution of name *Branîște* in the Romanian space. Coefficient of spatial distribution

The term *Braniște* has a Slavic origin, but the greatest frequency of toponyms (87 of 92 registered) is in the Romanian regions (including Basarabia). In rest, we note isolated mentions, especially in the Balkans (Bulgaria, Serbia – in Timoc, a zone with speakers of Romanian, Kosovo) and, rarely, in Central Europe (west of Slovakia). In fact, all these Slavic areas had had and/or still have important Romanian communities (figure 4). These things are related, according to our opinion, to the adoption of the term *Braniște* and of its significance by the Romanians, in the Romanian-Slavic period. After this adoption, this term was used for a long time and determined the creation of all these toponyms (and even more, because we are convinced that we could not have registered all of them).

Related to the Romanian space, there are noticed two important areas: in zones with extended forests (with hills, in depressions or plateaus), respectively in the areas of great rivers, that have *zăvoaie* – humid forests, that received a status of protected areas (long of Danube, Siret, Prut, Someș, Olt, etc.).

Distribuția toponimului *BRANIȘTE* în spațiul carpato-balcanic  
La distribution du toponyme *BRANIȘTE* dans l'espace carpatho-balkanique  
The distribution of the toponym *BRANIȘTE* in the Carpathian-Balkan space



Sursa datelor/Source des données/Source of data:

DIR.; DRH; Moldova în epoca feudalismului; E. Fenyés, 1836; D. Frunzescu, 1872;  
T. V. Stefanelli, 1915; Z. Păclișanu, 1919; N. Stoicescu, 1970, 1974; I. Boamfă, 1996; C. Burac, 2002;  
E. Gall, N. Laczko, 2013; Marele Dicționar Geografic al României; Anuarul SOCEC al României Mari;  
Hărți topografice românești, 1895, 1919-1939, 1996;

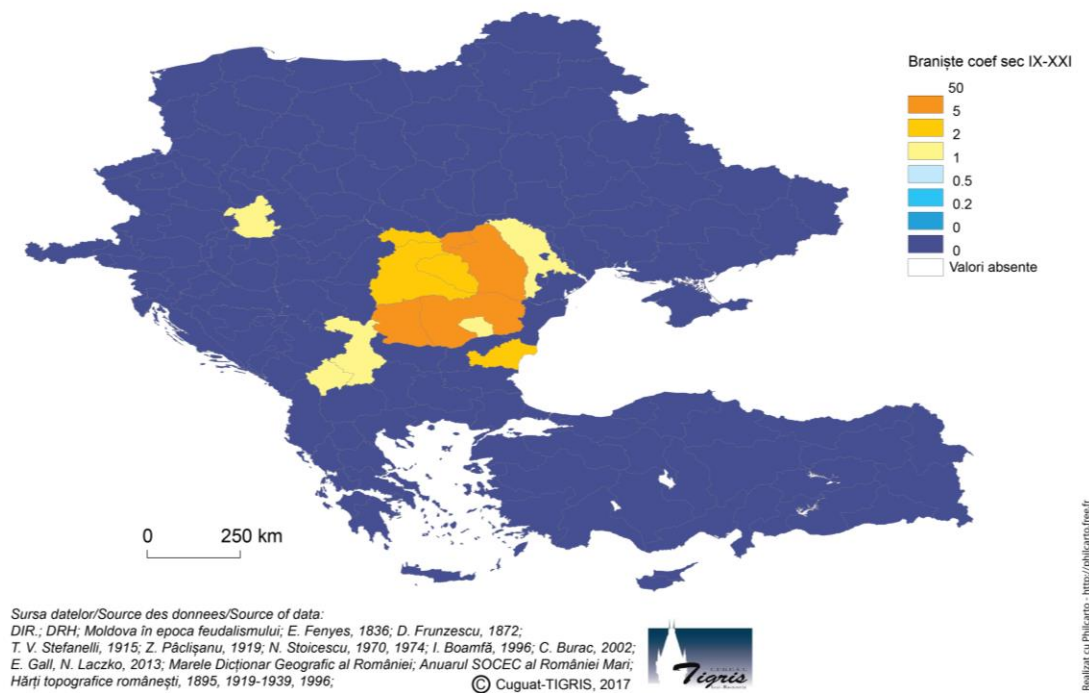
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**Figure 4:** The distribution of name *Braniște* in the Carpathian-Balkan space

Distribuția toponimului *BRANIȘTE* în spațiul carpato-balcanic. Coeficient de distribuție spațială  
 La distribution du toponyme *BRANIȘTE* dans l'espace carpatho-balkanique. Coefficient de distribution spatiale  
 The distribution of the toponym *BRANIȘTE* in the Carpathian-Balkan space. Coefficient of spatial distribution



**Figure 5:** The distribution of name *Branîște* in the Carpathian-Balkan space. Coefficient of spatial distribution

In the Carpathian-Balkan space, relating to the coefficients of spatial repartition, the most important concentrations of toponyms related to *Branîște* are located in Oltenia, Muntenia, Moldavia and south of Bucovina, proving the initiative of mediaeval Romanian authorities to protect not only the forests, but especially the animals from these forests (figure 5).

On the other hand, if the first documentary mentions, registered in the XIV<sup>th</sup> century (to the Siret Valley, in the Olt Country), confirm this intention of authorities to protect this kind of areas, we noted the toponyms registered in the area of *Dăbâca* commune, in the zone of a little river located in the vicinity of the ruins of the fortification of voivode *Gelu Românul* (IX<sup>th</sup> century). The Hungarian researchers (**Gáll Erwin, Laczkó Nándor**, 2013) noted, erroneously, maybe tendentiously, that the toponym has a „Slavic” origin. That opinion can prove that the Romanian presence in Transylvania in this period is an „error”. An error is the Hungarian assertion, because the extension of name, with the strong attestation in the Romanian regions (including Transylvania) prove the old presence here of the Romanian element. If the toponym dates from the IX<sup>th</sup> century (a hypothesis that we regard with caution), that



is the first historical mention of this type of toponyms, appeared in the final time of the Romanian-Slavic cohabitation (VI<sup>th</sup>-IX<sup>th</sup> centuries)<sup>3</sup>.

The presence of these *braniști*, with a protected regime, in the help of the protection of animals is proved indirectly, by onomastic mentions related to the caring of this kind of animals. We noted toponyms derived from the term *cerb* (= stag), registered in regions where today these animals do not exist anymore, such as in the Găvanu-Burdea Plain, where names such as *Cerbaru* and *Movila Cerbarului*<sup>4</sup> exist (a profession related to caring of the stags also existed = *cerbar*). This profession is attested in the eastern part of Transylvania, in *Szeklerland*, which we note, today, the *Cserbar* (clearly in a magyarized form)<sup>5</sup>.

## 5. Conclusions

We can highlight some aspects:

- The presence of these protected areas – by the princes, monasteries, boyars – in all the historical regions inhabited by the Romanians in the actual Romanian space (Transylvania, with Banat, historical Moldavia, Wallachia), the first mentions being registered in the age of the first Romanian voivodships in Transylvania (IX<sup>th</sup> century);
- The rare attestation of this kind of names in other areas with a Romanian presence (in the past and/or today), north of the Danube (Slovakia), or in the Balkans;
- The relation between the initiatives to protect the forests (the meaning of *Braniște*) and the caring of animals (the significance of the name *Cerbar*);
- The onomastic proves the existence of an old activity in the field of protected areas, attested in the Romanian space more than a millennium ago.

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<sup>3</sup> The assertions of Hungarian specialists does not have a basis, because they recognise they do not have competencies in the field of the origin of toponyms. The authors do not know the historical context in which the assimilation of Slavic element by the Romanians was produced. Probably, in a bilingual area, where the reigning element was Slavic, the Romanians had a numeric predominance, and a Slavic new-born learnt Romanian during his life, being bilingual, but in the final part of the life spoke Romanian with many Slavic words. Between these Slavic terms are *braniște*, that, after the entry in Romanian, had created toponyms (and anthroponyms). In this field it is necessary a very strong doze of caution and the common sense is welcomed!

<sup>4</sup> A. Ungureanu, I. Boamfă, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

<sup>5</sup> I. Boamfă (2004), *Aspecte din domeniul geografiei umane reflectate în onomastica Ținutului Secuilor/Aspects from the Domain of Geography reflected in the onomatology of the szeklers country*, in Forum Geografic. Studii și cercetări de geografie și protecția mediului, nr. 3/2004, Editura Universitaria, Craiova, p. 141.

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