# THE FOOD OF THE HAPPY ONES

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**Abstract:**
The paper aims to demonstrate the way food can reflect peoples' beliefs and mentalities. We analyze the myth of paradise through the legendary image of the *Blajini (the Gentle ones)*, an ascetic community which appears linked to the Easter celebration. We also bring into discussion the tale of Alexander the Great, the myth of *Pays de Cocagne*and some other Romanian and European writings which concern images of heaven and hell. Each food and each context of feeding presented indicate the different ways in which people understand happiness.

**Keywords:**
Food, folklore belief, celebration, mentality, the myth of paradise.

Food and the act of feeding oneselfhave always been essentially connected to the human nature both physiologically and culturally. Upon learning the different types of dishes a community consumes, one can discover specific information about its economy, geography and culture. A careful analysis of the food system belonging to a human group will reflect the material life of its members, on one hand, and, on the other hand, their spiritual life because, throughout time, food has evolved alongside the cultural element[1]. Taking all these aspects into account, in this present paper we intend to discuss the food that Romanians associate with the legendary community of the *Blajini (the Gentle ones)*, as to understand the beliefs that are behind this cult.

[1] Văduva, Ofelia. "Ritual Gifts and Offerings" („Daruri şi ofrande rituale") in Romanian Academy. Ethnography and Folklore Institute.*Images and Permanence in Romanian Ethnology: The Materials of The First National Symposium of Ethnology, Sighetul Marmaţiei, 12-15 September 1991*. Chişinău: Science Publishing House, 1992, p. 18.



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We find out about the existence of the *Blajini* in an episode of *Alexandria*[2], the fabulous written history of the emperor Alexander the Great, when he meets the people who live in Macaron Island. The *Blajini* or the "happy" folk are the gymnosophists (from the Greek γυμνοσοφισταί, *gymnosophistai*, i. e. "naked philosophers" or "naked sophists"), a certain community of men who practiced asceticism and lived naked[3]. Romanian Folklorist Simion Florea Marian[4] shows that some of the Romanians use the terms *Rocmani, Rochmani, Răgmani, Rogmani, Rugmani* and others the term of *Blajini* to describe the ascetic community. The *Rochmani* are present in the culture of Nord-Eastern Transylvania and ethno-cultural regions of Maramureş, Bucovina, Basarabia and in Northern Moldavia, being equally known by the Romanians, the Rusyns (Carpatho-Russians or Rusnaks) and the *Huţani* (Slavic minorities that live near the Siret river). In the Southern part of Moldavia and ethno-cultural regions of Banat and Muntenia, people do not recognise the term, they replace it with the word *Blajini.*

In her paper regarding The *Blajini*, Laura Jiga Iliescu[5] states that for Romanians, the terms *Nagomudri, Rohmani, Blajini* and *Urici* were partial synonyms up about 100 years ago. The first name appears in some versions of the *Alexandria*, but the direct speech has kept the attributes of nakedness and wisdom from the Greek name given to the people from the Macaron Island. For the second term, the author presents one by one the hypotheses regarding etymology. The first belongs to Elena Niculiţă Voronca and Th. Speranţia and practically has the shape of a folklore etymology (*Rohman* comes from *Roman* and *Romanian*). The second hypothesis is an Arabian one belonging to Lazăr Şăineanu. He speaks of *rachmîn* (which means "gentle", "mild") and *rachman* or *rohman* ("merciful"), pointing out that the last word is used especially in a religious context, as a divine appellative.

[2]*Alexandria or The History of Alexander The Great. A Book with Faces* (*Alexandria sau Istoria lui Alexandru cel Mare. Carte cu chipuri)*, Bucharest: "Library for All" Publishing House, no. 467-468, n.d., *passim.*

[3] Jiga Iliescu, Laura, *The Heaven's Reward. Written and Oral Documents of the Traditions Linked to the Blajini in the Romanian Territory (Răsplata paradisului. Filoane livreşti şi orale ale tradiţiilor despre Blajini în spaţiul românesc).* Bucharest: Romanian Academy Publishing House, 2006, p. 83.

[4] Marian, Sim. Fl., *The Holidays of the Romanian People. An Ethnographic Study* (*Sărbătorile la români. Studiu etnografic*). vol. 2, Bucharest: Romanian Cultural Foundation Publishing House, 1994, p. 244.

[5] Jiga Iliescu, Laura, *op. cit*., p. 83-94.



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Tal'lab thinks that *rahman* is rather a Hebrew term that has become Arab as there is no trace of itin the Arab languages before the *Quran.* Vasile Bogrea states the third hypothesis, which is an Indian one. He considers the term is linked to Brahman (from the Sanskrit *brahmana*, "the one who prays", "the one who officiates a religious service"). Last, but not least, Gabriel Ștrempel considers *Rohman* as a proper name. He studied the manuscript of a translation from an Ukrainian text, *Cetania lui sveti Zosima*, an apocryphal legend. Here, the monk Zosima comes to a land which is ruled by a certain King Rahma, after which the people have taken their name. These hypotheses, as author Jiga Iliescu indicates, revolve around the centre term *Rohman.*

If the previous term has no real meaning in Romanian language, being used only in thecontext of folklore beliefs, the word *blajin* is used in direct speech. It comes from Palaeoslavonic *blazelh* (which means "happy"), which lead into the Romanian version of *blajen*, which is accounted for in the 17th century, being the appellative with which Alexander The Great addresses to the King of the Macaron Island: "blajene Evante"[6]. Later transformations lead to the meanings of "good of heart", "clement", "humane" (about a person) and meanings of "kindness", "gentleness" (about human nature). In 1997 appears the meaning of "quiet", indicating a physical or psychical illness. In Russian language *blajenn* means "happy", but also "silly", "naive", while *blajnoi* means "stubborn", "mad". It is possible that the shade of meaning "silly" comes from contamination with the adjective *bleg*, which also denotesa person with protruding ears. There is a version in the Romanian mentality that says the *Blajini* and *Rugmani* are happy people, but also simple-minded[7]. The same Laura Jiga Iliescu links these specific characteristics of the *Blajini* (happy, saints, but dim-witted people) to the religious phrase "poor in spirit", which is often misinterpreted outside the church. The actual meaning of the phrase is that of a person who listens to the Word of God, therefore a wise man. To this we also add the sense of humbleness. These understandings strengthen the attributes of the *Blajini* that point out their holiness and wisdom, but noting that we are talking about the wisdom of the ones that are "taught of God"[8]

For the third case, Laura Jiga Iliescu shows that the word *Urici* has Slavonic etymology. It is equivalent to *Blajini*, being used as suchby

[6]*Alexandria…*, *op. cit*., no. 467, p. 86.
[7] Marian, Sim. Fl. *op. cit*., p. 241.
[8]*The Bible*, Thessalonians 4:9.



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Romulus Vulcănescu in *Romanian Mythology* (*Mitologie română)* because it points out their small dimensions, as opposed to giants. It is believed that the first would come after The End of the World, and that the latter had been presentat The Beginning of the World.

The analysis of the names linked to this community indicates an image of holiness attributed to the *Blajini*, which also includes attributes of happiness, kindness, generosity and wisdom. Jiga Iliescu[9] completes the portrait with oral and written resources regarding the *Blajini*. The result is the image of a monk, as it is represented in the Romanian folklore mentality. The main elements that describe them are holiness and wisdom; other characteristics are nakedness as a way of being ascetic and expressing the heavenly state in which they are living - and also the hairy aspect and the fact that they place themselves outside the contemporary world.

We now come to the capability of the *Blajini* of fasting a great period of time. It is said by some people, that they keep The Easter Fast as long as eight or nine weeks, while others say that they fast all the time, except for the Easter period. In *Alexandria*[10], King Evant offers Alexander the Great a round tray with white bread and a bowl of red wine, saying that the food of his people is different from that of the others. Food has a religious symbolism, the bread and the wine being The Body and The Blood of Christ. In this way the food demonstrates the holiness of their life and also the closeness that they have to the heavens. Romanian historical ruler, Neagoe Basarab tells his son, Teodosie, about the monks that cut themselves out of the world and eat "from that dry bead or uncooked vegetables and other plants and have just a little of the tree's bud, no more, as to only keep themselves alive... and with their prayers embodyingthe life of angels"[11]. Unleavened bread or "dead" bread is the kind of bread that lacks the vital substance of yeast. In the orthodox ritual only the leavened bread is used, in the form of the small breads from church that also represent The Body of Christ and the community with Him as the Saviour of mankind.

[9] Jiga Iliescu, Laura. *op. cit*., p. 116

[10] *Alexandria*…, *op. cit*., no. 467, p. 84.

[11] *Neagoe Basarb's Teachings to His Son, Teodosie (Învăţăturile lui Neagoe Basarab către fiul său Theodosie).* A text selected and established text by Florica Moisil şi Dan Zamfirescu. With a new translation from the orginal Slavonic by G. Mihăilă. Introductive study and notes by Dan Zamfirescu and G. Mihăilă. Bucharest: Minerva, 1971, pp.205-206.



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In the folklore tradition, the Romanians have dedicated a certain holiday to this community of happy folk. It is called The Easter of the *Blajini*, which is different from The Easter of the *Rohmani*. The first is associated to the Easter of the dead and the second, being separated from the funeral theme in the north side of the country. The Easter of the *Rohmani* is present in ethno-cultural regions of Bucovina, Năsăud, Maramureş and Basarabia, while The Easter of the *Blajini* is celebrated in the rest of Moldavia and in the region of Dobrogea[12]. Marian[13] mentions that this tradition is not known in the regions of Banat, Muntenia and neither in Hungary. The same author gives us a detailed description of the ritual, in the version that is most frequently practised. Most often it is celebrated in the Monday after St. Thomas Sunday, or even in that very Sunday, in the Thursday from the Bright Week, or two or three weeks after Easter, or on Wednesday, four weeks after Easter; the holiday may last from one day up to three days.

The ritual is performed by women, who have to gather the eggshells from the preparations of the Easter table, as well as the ones from the red eggs that have been consumed in the feast. These eggshells have to be thrown into a flowing water in the very day of Easter. According to folklore beliefs, all waters flow into the so-called Saturday Water, which reaches the land of the *Blajini*. Upon seeing the eggshells, they on the one hand, know that it is Easter and, on the other hand, feed on them; it is custom to leave a bit of egg white inside the eggshells. It is believed that the eggs become whole when they arrive to their land and so the *Blajini*, being so small, can feed 12 from one single egg.

For the happy ones, Easter is the only period when they marry and can be with their wives, the two groups living separately in the restof the year. We now observe that their image separates at this point from the Christian model of a monk. Thus, we can say that in the Romanian folklore mentality the ones who are happy are not bothered by the poor food, but they rather emphasize the connection to Divinity and the communion with others including their life partners. We can assume that this image reflects the way this culture understands the idea of being happy, the idea of being close to the sacred. Moreover, we can consider that the *Blajini* take upon themselves

[12] Jiga Iliescu, Laura, *op. cit*., pp. 163-164.
[13] Marian, Sim. Fl., *op. cit*., pp. 239-24.1



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the image of the Romanian peasant, who, throughout history, has encountered hardship in procuring his food, but who has enriched it with o series of meanings, attributes that, through the ritual, linked the food to the sacred.

For the Romanian people, the holiday is either a moment of funeral commemoration, including also the ones who have disappeared or have drowned or died in uncommon ways – either a moment of celebration and happiness. Therefore, the eggs are understood in many ways[14]: as a symbol of the Easter holiday and Christianity *par excellence*, of regeneration, of resurrection and immortality, their red colour indicating the blood Jesus shed for mankind on the cross. For the *Blajini*, the egg is a nutritive product, upon consuming it, they stop their fasting. Also, in this period, the egg is a central element of alms, which are performed in the memory of the dead.

Jiga Iliescu[15] presents the other customs related to this ritual, pointing out the difference between celebrating The Easter of the *Blajini* and The Easter of the *Rohmani*. Some people fast during The Easter of the *Blajini*, like the happy folk fast during our Easter. Other celebrate it by offering food gifts in the village and outside the village. In the first case, for The Easter of the *Blajini*, people prepare the dishes and visit their relatives, or the women visit one another, at each one's home, giving Easter cake, red eggs, cooked lamb. Sometimes, in the morning, women give eggs to the children by rolling them in the grass. In the second case, often festive meals with fiddlers are organised near a flowing water, where people eat Easter cake, red eggs, roasted lamb, bacon, boiled brandy with honey and wine. This second version relates to The Easter of the *Rohmani*. In the third case, the celebration is done at church and in the cemetery, sometimes the food gifts being offered before that, between neighbours. After the church service, there is a general commemoration of the dead in the cemetery, after which the priest passes to each grave, where he finds a towel with food: specific funeral bread (*colaci*), specific koliva (*colivă*), candles, red eggs, Easter cake, sweet bread made especially for Easter (*cozonac*), steaks, brandy, wine, small Easter cakes, especially cooked for the *Blajini*, according to the folklore beliefs regarding their size. After the religious ritual has ended, people make alms with red eggs, the small Easter cake and a candle. After

[14]Văduva, Ofelia. *Footsteps Towards the Sacred: of the Romanian Ethnology of Nourishment* (*Paşi spre sacru: din etnologia alimentaţiei româneşti*), Bucharest: Encyclopaedically Publishing House, 1996, pp. 67-69.
[15] Jiga Iliescu, Laura, *op. cit*., pp. 166-173.



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this, there is a big meal in which everybody participates, either in a special organised place, either each one at the grave of the dear ones. This version is common to The Easter of the *Blajini* and also relates to the customs performed in the funeral cult of the ancestors, for those who passed safely in the other world. The people commemorate also the dead from other families and those who have disappeared[16]. While in the second version that we described, food indicates perception of the feast as a ritual celebration, the third version is understood as a general funeral commemoration. The red eggs, the Easter cake and the cooked lamb are present in all versions of the celebration because they are representative elements for the Easter holiday. The steaks, the brandy and the bacon appear alongside the party with fiddlers, while the specific funeral bread (*colaci*), the candles and the specific koliva (*colivă*) – essential elements in the ritual props of the memorial service – we can only find in the cemetery commemoration.

In the European mentality, there is another myth of the happy people, *Pays de Cocagne*[17], a fictional country, which is characterised by a reverse set of values. Here there are no wars, nor inequalities, here one can find parties, gambling games, here one doesn't have to work, but tolaze. It is a country of abundance and comfort, where there is plenty offood for everybody. Some theories link the etymology of the word to old French (*pays de cocaigne* meaning "the land of abundance, of wealth"). The named used to indicate a small cake for children, which was once sold at a fair. In old English the term "*cockaigne*" seems to come from the verb "to cook". In other languages, the phrase has similar meanings: in German *Schlaraffenland* ("the land of milk and honey" – symbols of paradise), in Flemish Belgian *Luilekkerland* ("relaxing, attractive, delicious country"), in Spanish *País de Cucaña* ("fools' paradise") and in Swedish *Lubberland* ("the land of the lazy").

One of the oldest references to this myth is in *Carmina Burana*, where the priests venerate wine, love without barriers and gambling games. In the 13th century, George Ellis wrote the poem *The Land of Cockaigne*, where he describes the houses as made out of sugar and cakes, the streets are paved with pastry products and the shops give food for free. The myth is preserved

[16] Ciubotaru, Ion H. *The Great Passing. Ethnological Marks in the Funeral Ceremonial from Moldavia* (*Marea trecere. Repere etnologice în ceremonialul funebru din Moldova*). Bucharest: „Grai și suflet – Cultura națională" Publishing House, 1999, p. 187.
[17] Wikipedia. Available onhttp://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cockaigne at 29.06.2014.



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until our days. In 2001 Herman Pleji writes in *Dreaming of Cockaigne: Medieval Fantasies of the Perfect Life* about pigs that walk with knives in their backs, ready to be cut down and cooked, fried wild geese that fly and can anytime land in the mouth of the one who is hungry, readymade fish that jump out of the water to ones' feet and the wine flowing continuously. The myth appears also in Romanian's writer George Călinescu work, like the poem *I Was the Man that...* (*Eram bărbatul care…*) [18]. Here, the theme appears to implicate the hero chevalier, which decides to give up on life's hardship and become a hero singer.

We observe that this perspective is in contrast to that of the land of *Blajini* and the food plays an essential role in pointing out the difference. While the traditional Romanian mentality sees the happy folk as those who fast a lot or who fast all the time (except for Easter period), thus being close to heavens, the modern urban mentality perceives happiness as food abundance and heavens as a place of comfort, satiety and laziness.

Another Romanian writer that emphasized in his work the nourishment element as being full of meaning was Ion Creangă. In his tale, *The Story of Harap-Alb* (*Povestea lui Harap-Alb*), the different types of food play an important part in understanding the heroes' destiny and also indicate the presence of the myth of paradise. Harap-Alb is repeatedly helped by St. Sunday, as the time when he put the bear to sleep with milk and honey. These products symbolise the heavens and therefore the divine presence of which, according to folklore mentality, one can benefit because of his or hers good deeds. We observe an abundance of food in the Red King's palace. He wants to find a motive to kill the hero that came to claim the princess' hand in marriage. The king gives Harap-Alb and his friends a gourmand testing in which they have to eat until morning 12 carts of bread, 12 big fried cows and 12 butts of strong wine. The hyperboles with which Hungry and Thirsty (two fictional heroes of Ion Creangă) are characterised and with which Harap-Alb and his friends succeed in completing the task, have certain significance. Practically, their "gifts" point out the weakness of men, greediness, that is condemned indirectly with this test. In the final episode, at Harap-Alb's wedding, appears the myth of *Pays de Cocagne*. The forces of evil have been defeated and we have an idealistic image of the

[18]Călinescu, George. *The Pride of Things* (*Lauda lucrurilor*), Bucharest: Publishing House for Literature, 1963, p. 16.



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country, according to the earthly mentality, and in contrast to our world: "even the poor were eating and drinking with a happy heart! And the happiness went on and on for years to come, and it is still lasting; one who goes there eats and drinks. And here, one who has money eats and drinks, and one who doesn't, just looks and suffers"[19]

Food gives an image of heaven and hell also in *Ţiganiada* by Ioan Budai-Deleanu. It is written there that in hell the cruel tyrants drink hot blood from chalices, while devils prepare sausages and blood from their intestines. The greedy gathers a sack full of food, but cannot taste anything because all that they touch, turns into silver and gold. Devils toast with glasses of fuel oil, light resin and pitch. The shops sell for a cheap price spells and poison in cakes and muffins and the buyers pay with the price of their own soul. Each of the devilish food indicates the sin of the one who endures it. The tyrants are cut as pigs for their meat, the greedy cannot taste the food they've taken, and criminals trade their life in order to kill.

In contrast, heaven is pictures as rich in pomegranates, lemons, grapes and other well-tasted fruits. The rivers are of milk, the streams are of butter, the shores are of soft polenta, pie or bread, the puddles are of wine, one can find brandy and glasses to it on one's way. The hills are of cheese, of bacon or of curd and the mountains are of sugar, raisins or figs. On the trees' branches one can find bread, muffins, on the fences there are sausages, all things are good and so that the narrator exclaims: "Oh, what a holy and good bargain!/ You eat and drink without any burden!"[20]. The Gypsies see the heaven in the same way as the earthly mentality or the European myth of *Pays de Cocagne*. There is plenty of food for anyone everywhere.

Amongst the food the Gypsies find in the Turks deserted camp, there are a lot of types of meat: ox, ram, camel, but also different products as rice, barley, fish, sugar, bread; some of them are different from their normal nourishment and they don't try it. Vlad, the Romanian ruler, bribes the Gypsies with cornflower and bacon as to help him in his war against the Turks. Besides this, when the Gypsies get hungry on the road, they eat products of the land, like sponges. At Parpangel's wedding with Romica, the Gypsies boil cabbage with stale bacon and sliced onion, a type of dish

[19] Creangă, Ion. *Tales, memories and short stories* (*Poveşti, amintiri, povestiri*). Bucharest: Publishing House for Literature, 1969, p.147.
[20] Budai-Deleanu. I., *Ţiganiada*. 2 vols., vol 1, Bucharest: Publishing State House for Literature and Art, 1956, p. 117.



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the Gypsies appreciate, also polenta with cabbage sauce, smoked pork, stew, sour milk "and lots of other dishes/but who can count them all!"[21]. The wedding image reminds us of the heaven vision, but it has something in particularity; the food served here depends on the geographical, historical and cultural context. Here we have some traditional Romanian and Gypsy dishes, while in the heaven image besides polenta, bread and other specific national food, we also have exotic fruits. The heavenly food shows the limited knowledge regarding the types of dishes that the Gypsies had in that period. An argument for this idea is that despite their capture in the Turks camp, they prefer to cook the dishes they know in the wedding feast. After everyone has eaten to their own satiety, the author states a philosophy of the belly, that announces the debates that will take place in the Gypsy camp: "When the belly is full, / Then the mouth is talking a lot. / It gives a lot of advice, / Everybody gives advice... / But when the food is scarce/ I don't know how, but also the mind gets dumb/ And it doesn't have so good advice, / And the tongue is silent like a fish. / So it is in the full belly/ That the philosophy lies... / Tell me, what good thing/ Did the old monks do in the wilderness, / Who ate only herbs and poor roots/ Blackberries, sponges, peanuts and fruits, / With rags, blowsy and starving?"[22]We can clearly see the contrast between the philosophy of the belly, which is an earthly mentality, similar to the modern mentality regarding happiness, and the ascetic philosophy, that considers abstinence the right way to wisdom and happiness. Maybe in the end of the book the author gives us a sarcastic answer. After the Gypsies have enjoyed the richness of dishes, although at the council there have been stated important ideas regarding the community administration, the conclusion is a tragic and inconclusive one for the problems initially raised.

In studying food, one can understand the Romanian folklore beliefs and mentalities, which are strongly related to the Christian paradigm, and also other mentalities regarding happiness. The legendary community of the *Blajini* and the myth of the *Pays de Cocagne* are two distinct images and ways of understanding the myth of the paradise, regarding the cultural and religious context they are looked upon.

[21] Budai-Deleanu. I., *op. cit*., vol 1, p. 88.
[22] *idem.*, vol 2, pp. 124-125.



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