THE LADS' BANDS FROM BARCĂU UPPER VALLEY.

ORIGINS OF THE TRADITION

Ruxandra-Cristina Silaghi (Scridon)
PhD. Student, University of Oradea

*Abstract: The ritual – **lads of the village** - from the Upper Valley of Marca follows a pattern spread throughout the country.*
Archaicity is demonstrated by the recurrence of agrarian, vegetal or floral symbols. The Roman winter holidays, the Geto-Dacianlegacy, the Greek-Latin mythology, the initiation rite and the popular belief and religious belief also impress the ritual. No interference from Saxons or Szeklers is recorded.

Keywords: bachelors, inheritance, archaic, greeting, initiation.

Researching the actions and the cultural motives handed down by lads' bands found in Barcău Upper Valley, we discover the synchronism of the tradition and the perfect articulation with the dynamic Romanian ethno-folk landscape: the studied fellowships consist of bachelors and require specific male groups, acting during Christmas holidays; the accompaniment provided by musicians doubles the carols and parties; the repertoire includes specialized carols; at the houses with young unmarried women a dance takes place involving the young girl and neighbours' girls; There are gifts to be received (ring bread, money).

We will often use the generic term –„band"- in order to connect to the specialty literature, and not because the title would cover a ritual recognizable reality at the entire studied area studied. The dedicated name is the ***lads of the village,*** this terminology covering, of course, a socio-ethnographic existence specific to Romanian folklore culture.

Archaic substratum

The agro-pastoral calendar, sponsored by the cult of the sun is the unit time after which the archaic societies guided their existence. Formerly, the ceremonies and rituals were grafted on customs and spring festivals, because the winter season was designated for leisure, inactivity, energy recovery. The year onset was associated with arrival of spring.

While the ***lads of the village*** were performing carols in the middle of winter, it strikes the incidence on the references to land, the vegetation abundance, the polychrome, the recurrence of certain symbols (flowers, apple) observable both in the text itself, and the choruses as well as in the ring bread's greeting. The ethnographic realities support symbolic metamorphosis, accepting new semantics. The theme consists also of surprising and occupations typical to patriarchal societies: hunting and grazing. The common denominator is certainly, the **Archaic Year.**

Ancestral influences are reflected in the young men's outfit: flowers and green stems (rosemary, buxus sempervirens) often adorn the hats worn by the band's members, functioning as distinct elements within the community; on boys' shirts and collars are sewn geometric motifs only, while on the shirts of maiden girls, floral (rose, tulips) and zoomorphic (cuckoo, ram horns) elements appear.

Roman Winter Holidays

Saturnalia (17^{th} of December – 23^{rd} of December) and **Kalendae Januarii** (beginning of January) are characterized by joy and extravagant freedom embodied in parties, love feasts, games, visits, exchanges of gifts, offerings to deities, cutting pigs, choosing a king etc.

BDD-A28005 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:04:25 UTC)

Echoes of Latin celebrations are breaking also through the ritual performed in the Barcău Upper Valley: greetings converge on the idea of wealth and prosperity; the presence of young people is waited and is considered auspicious; in the houses of marriageable daughters and on the streets there are parties/dances; the noise is accompanying the troop everywhere; the performance is rewarded by the host; the content of carols recalls exchange of gifts; a final feast is organized, preserving both elements, augur and funeral (ring bread).

Compitalia and **Larentalia** - less noisy and less familiar celebrations - were held in the month of December, being tributes brought to the souls of the dead. The latter one was celebrated mostly in villages when the memory of the dead was reminded, and among the offerings to this solar cult we can find the wheat ring breads present also in the Romanian tradition.

On Christmas Eve, young unmarried women put on the table for the band members ring breads adorned with ribbons and greenery, braided in crown shape. Locally (Cerişa, Drighiu and Marca), the most beautiful ring breads collected during Eve will be taken by the lads bands at the church the next day.

After the Mass, commemoration liturgy for the village's young men who died too soon is officiated; the ***lads of the village*** „were entering along carol-singing the Birth doxology[...]; putting artifices and a handful of money in the middle of the ring bread [...] about one hundred, one hundred and something lei"[1]. To be noted the striking similarity between the ring bread present in the funeral ceremony and the young men's ring bread – "linked as here to funeral"[2]; the differences consist in a more complex way of braiding, in two, for the ring bread given by the young unmarried women and the different destination of each.

Although of Asian origin, in early Christianity, **Dies Natalis Solis Roman** enters the Roman world, a ritual worshipping Mithras, the sun god. The date of celebration - December 25 - will coincide with the feast of Jesus Birth. The feast catalyses and defines most of the fellowship actions we studied.

The image of Virgin Mary with Jesus in her arms, commonly referred to in the carol performances of the ***lads of the village*** of these villages, may be the replica of a similar representation carried on the streets and worshipped by the participants in processions dedicated to Mithras.

Another common feature is contained by the form of the ring breads received by the young men who seem to take the solar, round form „recalling the nimbed head of Mithras"[2]. But it can be only about a few points of contact, because, before Mithraicism became the official religion of the Empire, the Roman troops were withdrawing from Dacia Felix territory.

Geto-Dacian influence

In Marca, at the foothills of Plopiş Mountains, the remains of a Dacian impressive fortification were preserved, a strategic point in the way of the invaders; Roman imperial coin found here postulated the links between trueborn Dacians living on the "Cetate" and the other areas under foreign occupation

If our ancestors have demonstrated the ability to use the topographic advantages or the „materials" provided by nature, the peasants, at their turn, turned the wool into bicolored bags and the wood into ornamented bats, worn by the band members and intended for gifts; the Dacian sandals are transferred to their successors which continue to inhabit these lands, bringing them a series of functional and aesthetic improvements; the hat often elevates the young men from the settlements located on the Barcău Upper River, keeping its paramount importance as sign of distinctness.

[1]Inf. Zdrite Pavel, priest, 68 years old, Marca, 15 May 2015
[2]Al. Rosetti, *Colindele religioase la Români şi slavi*, Bucureşti, 1920, p.16

BDD-A28005 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:04:25 UTC)

The analysis of the magic and teaching elements specific to the ***lads of the village***(calendar dates, the structure of the band, carol-singing ceremony) projects the direct Geto-Dacian legacy and even the Thracian one. The ancestral archetypes will be resorbed over time and revalorized by carols' poetry and tradition of ***lads of the village***. The famous breeds grown by Dacians – bull and horse - occupy a prominent place in the compositions performed by the band members. The ceramic found at "Cetate" falls under the peasant and pastoral character - domestic[3].

The circular shape of the ring bread given by the young unmarried women to the groups members can be seen as a remembrance of the solar symbol, star adored by the brave inhabitants of the Carpathian-Danubio-Pontic area.[4]

The bands of the Barcăului Upper Valley are relatively open societies, because their structure and operation do not support the esoteric nature confessed by the typical fellowships of dedicated areas; otherwise, operating and behaviour rules are not written down, whose exact application to become an imperative of sustainability and tradition. The custom, as elsewhere, aims at the acquisition of a new status for the neophyte, but we cannot see any sequences of ancient initiation rituals extremely well kept nor any form of organization becoming more standardized over time. However, the number and the positions of the young men are generally still the same, so is the itinerary planned for Christmas Eve.

In most Romanian villages we studied, we can find the young men's arrangement „in circle, next to the table, to achieve the best harmony when singing"[5]; this position of the band members can be seen also as a replay of celestial symbols geometry and of architectonic symbols of Dacian sanctuaries[6].

During Middle age, the fortress of Marca continued to be inhabited not only by groups of fighters, but by families as well[7]. The toponyms "Marca" and „Porț" are suggestive for explaining the strategic importance of the said localities. A persistence of those ages is the preference for the typology illustrated by the young protagonist in the specialized carols - a twinning between feudal noble virtues and the features of a commoner.

Mythological substratum

The search for the extremely deep roots of the tradition cannot circumvent the comparative-mythological type of interpretation. The perspective converges towards polytheism and magical thinking, defining for the pre-Christian period. The „appetite" of Greek-Latin mythology for subjects showing hierogamies, metamorphosis, psychopomp presences, cosmogony or chase in the mountainsof some deer (Hercules and Cerynite) or of some nymphs (Apollo and Daphne) is known.

The protagonists of the „carols" addressed to the young man and the girl are often mythological animals: ox, deer, bull etc. The young man voluntarily undertakes a hunting expedition; route involves the hunt, capture or killing the beast. The ox/bull or aurochs (carols for the young unmarried women), which carries the young woman between horns seems to be a replica of the mythical masks ridden once, present in the processions typical for the year-end[8]; the image of the girls who gather flowers in a meadow, the menacing male presence, the abduction of a maiden, the storm waters, the cosmogony, the *axis mundi*s status of a tree

[3]*Idem*, p.13
[4]Petre P. Panaitescu, *Istoria românilor*, Reeditare a Ediției a VI-a (Iunie, 1942), Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, București, 1990, p.16
[5]Inf. Zdrite Pavel, priest, Marca, 68 years old, 15 Mai 2015
[6]Mircea Eliade, *De la Zalmoxis la Genghis-Han*, Studii comparative despre religiile și folclorul Daciei și Europei Orientale, Editura Humanitas, 1995, p.63
[7]S. Dumitrașcu, V. Lucăcel, *Op.cit.*, p.10
[8]Mihai Coman, *Studii de mitologie*, Editura Nemira, București, 2009, pp.76-77

BDD-A28005 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:04:25 UTC)

under which lies a character every time a silk cradle is hung, the animal - guide for the soul, etc. underlines the same affiliation.

Initiation rite

Specific sequences to the rites of passage from childhood to manhood can be observed also in the ***lads of the village***case, in associations made up of singles, as social or behavioural prescriptions appear; to these neophytes, a kind of doctrine dictated by the philosophy of and ancient peasant community is forwarded - orally - because they acquire a ritual.

The young people who will form the lads band/ bands begin their initiation into the world. A first step is selection in view of acceptance in the association; the skills (performing skills, the ability to organize and to memorise carols, physical strength, the degree of networking etc.) have to be proven. The "maze test" continues during carol-singing with getting through a road strewn with obstacles (weather challenges, refusals to be received in the houses, temptations, etc.) and ends with organizing community parties.

The hero of some carols for young men seems created within the prototype of a „civilizing hero", the dedicated warrior, ready for marriage. Any initiation involves detachment from the contingent, entering another universe that operates by its own laws; the hunting act is based on the young man-animal binomial with multiple symbolic connotations; the sacrifice becomes here the builder of a new life (wedding) and compulsory (the texts recall of capturing, killing some mythical animals, totem-animals of archaic societies).

From an ethnological, ethno-sociological and ethno-psychological point of view, the phenomenon of young men bands is therefore integrating part of the rites of passage.

Popular belief and religious belief

Religious texts are samples of penetration of Christianity on Dacia Felixterritory. The Christianization process of our ancestors was superimposed on a native monotheistic background, so not an antagonistic one, but one open to the new religion.

The fellowships of young men, at Christmas and band of „căluşari" dancers, at Pentecost, are possible over time mirrors of the prophets and missionaries crossing the borders at the beginning of the Christian era; the conjectures find support in the activities performed by such travel-officiants, who taught - temporarily - within a community or for the services to the community, they were rewarded with gifts[9].

The Church transformation into a strong institution attracts sometimes the attempt to remove the old pagan practices considered „pagan". Recourse is made to the *Bible, Life of Saints*, pseudo-apocryphal and apocryphal writings. In Barcăului Upper Valley, as well as throughout Transylvania, the number of carols developing religious subjects is higher than in the rest of the country, due to the ecclesiastical approach implemented by clerks and pew singers.

A single case is recorded in Valcău de Jos, a village in the Barcăului Upper Valley. Christian dogma or administrative programme does not prohibit performing some carols, but a few band members which consider that the texts narrating something else than the Nativity flagrantly contradict the Christian spirit – „those were not carols [...]. It was not about the birth of Christ, they had other verses"; hypercorrectness causes self-censorship, thus replacing the old compositions considered „pagan" with a number of religious compositions.

Moreover, along with band's tradition, the zealous young men introduce a new ritual, in which they co-opt some of the young men who already had their apprenticeship within the brotherhood. The emergence of a brotherhood marks a new historic moment, caused also by the loss of the internal cohesion of rural culture and the emergence of the ambiguity of value criteria establishing social statuses.These nine youngsters freshly arrived from the army – „the Gallants" - put in scene from house to house, on Christmas Eve, a religious play – „we were

[9]Sabina Ispas, *Colindatul în cadrul culturii tradiționale românești*, în „Tabor", Nr.9, decembrie 2010, p.17

BDD-A28005 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:04:25 UTC)

all discharged young men [...]. We party as carol-singers"[10]. But they do not retract from musicians, who, as always, have the role to accompany the protagonists and entertain. Hosts reaction is not one of rejection of dramatization, nor the battle to maintain the archaic forms of ritual, for „we were all expected"[11].

One of the favourite ornaments of band members with individualized role within the community of origin, is the peacock feather stuck in caps or hats. In the Christian view, the peacock „symbolizes the solar disk, being, for this reason a sign of immortality; its tail evokes the starry sky"[12]; through these young men, a link between the profane and the transcendental is created; Moreover, due to them, the contingent succumbed to „plagues" attracted by the year-end is hallowed.

When referring to the link between the rural Christianity forms and the major holidays: Christmas, New Year and Epiphany, we cannot ignore the carol-singing as Christian tradition. The magic-religious syncretism (pre-Christian and Christian elements) marks the tradition itself, as well as the poetry of the carols. The patriarchal conceptions of rural society will be reflected by ***lads of the village***through the preference for a particular theme: the moral attitude of the protagonists, the structure of the relationships between the actors, conflicts motivation, involvement of the entire rural community[13]. The carols take a local, original touch, the sacredness of the Nativity moment. God is confused with old Santa, the saints wear the attributes of totemic animals, but transpire Christian spirit, hope, love of neighbour and not pure paganism.

The administrative authority, in turn, can react extremely brutal. Most papers published during communist era, because of socio-political conditions, remember only tangentially the Christian influences without presenting them objectively, or circumvent, in truth, the phenomena. An influence is chosen either unidirectional (naming the different positions) or to recognize the presence of some characters, themes and Christian motifs only as appanages of ancient, primitive beliefs, or for the coercive character of Christian ethics (behaviour change of characters and resolution). In 1972, the collection ***Du-te dor și vino dor*** appears in Zalău, having Stephen Goanţă and Ion Piţoiu as coordinators. The scientific nature of the work was challenged from the outset[14]; modification and truncation of the texts are heading the bill for the accusations brought to the them. Very few carols typical to the youth groups from Sălaj are inserted.

Other influences: Saxons, Szeklers

In 1930, the folklorist Ion Muşlea claimed that the existence of the bands of young men would own the area of Ardeal, the tradition being of Saxon origin[15].

Our thesis provides the creation of some male groups whose functions relate to the Christmas holidays in afolk area that did not been considered in depth until now. Nor the Saxon origin can be claimed in the case of the brotherhoods from Barcău Upper Valley.

Despite the Austro-Hungarian protracted occupation and Magyarization of indigenous population attempts, the Romanian ethno-demographic structure proved homogeneous for centuries in a row.

---

[10]*Idem*
[11]*Idem*
[12]Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dicționar de simboluri*, Vol. 3, P-Z, Editura Artemis, București, 1995, pp.59-60
[13]Ilie Bădescu, Ozana Cucu, Gheorghe Șișeștean, *Tratat de sociologie rurală*, Codrina Șandru, Subcap. *Cetele de feciori*, Editura Mica Valahie, București, 2011, p.595
[14]Popa Nicolae, *Du-te,dor, și vino, dor*în „Năzuința", Organ al Comitetului Județean Sălaj al P.C.R. și al Consiliului Popular Județean Provizoriu, Anul VI, 14 decembrie, 1973, p.2
[15]Ion Muşlea (coordonator George Vârsan), *Obiceiul Junilor Braşoveni: Studiu de folklor*, (Din lucrările Institutului de Geografie al Universităţii din Cluj, extras - Cluj, 1930), Institutul de arte grafice „Ardealul", p.61

BDD-A28005 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:04:25 UTC)

The only citadel built on these lands in Middle Age and mentioned by ancient chronicles is that of Valcău/Walko (nowadays the village Subcetate), the domain belonging for centuries in a row to the princes or Hungarian nobles[16], and certainly not to the Szeklers or Saxons. In fact, the citadel has not had a major role, easy noticeable in the simple architectural forms.Only in localities Leşmir, Ip, Zăuan, Nuşfalău, Boghiş and Valcău de Jos the Hungarian population is in majority, but the band tradition is foreign to the typical ethnic cultural events.

An old tradition, the ***lads of the village***, succeeds in revealing to the modern spectator relevant symbols, motifs and themes whose origins recall long gone realities. However, a careful scrutiny allows absolution and decryption of the archaic meanings. Over time, groups of unmarried young people managed to maintain the ritual and enforce its closest adherence to the original matrix. The bands continue to be perceived in the world of Romanian traditional village as a school of traditions and decency, but also soldierly and hieratic bands of young men[17].

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bădescu, Ilie, Cucu, Ozana, Șișeștean, Gheorghe, *Tratat de sociologie rurală*, Codrina Șandru, Subcap. *Cetele de feciori*, Editura Mica Valahie, București, 2011

Chevalier, Jean, Gheerbrant, Alain, *Dicționar de simboluri*, Vol. 3, P-Z, Editura Artemis, București, 1995

Coman, Mihai, *Studii de mitologie*, Editura Nemira, Bucureşti, 2009

Dumitrașcu, S., Lucăcel, V., *Cetatea dacică de la Marca*, (Jud.Sălaj), Muzeul de Istorie și Artă Zalău, 1974

Eliade, Mircea, *De la Zalmoxis la Genghis-Han*, Studii comparative despre religiile și folclorul Daciei și Europei Orientale, Editura Humanitas, 1995

Herseni, Traian, *Forme străvechi de cultură poporană românească*, Editura Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1977

Ispas, Sabina, *Colindatul în cadrul culturii tradiționale românești*, în ,,Tabor", Nr.9, decembrie 2010

Muşlea, Ion, (coordonator George Vârsan), *Obiceiul Junilor Braşoveni: Studiu de folklor*, (Din lucrările Institutului de Geografie al Universităţii din Cluj, extras - Cluj, 1930), Institutul de arte grafice ,,Ardealul"

Nicolae, Popa, *Du-te,dor, și vino, dor* în ,,Năzuința", Organ al Comitetului Județean Sălaj al P.C.R. și al Consiliului Popular Județean Provizoriu, Anul VI, 14 decembrie, 1973

Panaitescu, Petre P., *Istoria românilor*, Reeditare a Ediției a VI-a (Iunie, 1942), Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, București, 1990

Rosetti, Al., *Colindele religioase la Români şi slavi*, Bucureşti, 1920

Rusu, Adrian, Andrei, *Cetăți medievale timpurii din Sălaj*, în ,,Acta Musei Porolissensis", II, Muzeul de Istorie și Artă, Zalău, 1978

INFORMERS

Lada Nicolae, 82 years old, four classes, Valcău de Jos, 31 January 2017

Topai Florica, 69 years old, twelve classes, Drighiu, 11 August 2016

Zdrite Pavel, priest, Marca, 68 years old, 15 May 2015

[16]Adrian Andrei Rusu, *Cetăți medievale timpurii din Sălaj*, în ,,Acta Musei Porolissensis", II, Muzeul de Istorie și Artă, Zalău, 1978, pp.96-98

[17]Traian Herseni, *Forme străvechi de cultură poporană românească*, Editura Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1977, p.263

BDD-A28005 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:04:25 UTC)