

**CONTRIBUTIONS OF ION TH. SIMIONESCU (1873–1944)
TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF ROMANIAN GEOGRAPHY**

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Ion Simionescu has been one of the outstanding personalities who shaped the academic environment in the field of Earth Sciences. With a complex contribution in the essential field of expertise geology, he also stood out for the constant support given to the development of the Romanian geographical school. At both administrative and institutional level and through his numerous works of scientific or popularizing nature, he laid the foundations of a long tradition, his role in consolidating the Iași geographical school remaining indisputable.

Keywords: Ion Simionescu, geographical school of Iași, directions of research, institutional relations

The personality of Ion Simionescu has been analyzed and detailed in many tribute or commemorative papers, primarily from the perspective of his career and contributions as a geologist. However, the cultural and scientific context of the period in which he lived and worked stimulated him to a dedicated and passionate approach of several other subjects from related disciplines, primarily Geography and Biology. Exceptional professor and didact, he stands out over time through his active involvement in the development of Romanian education, starting with the administrative tasks he performed within the Ministry of Education or at the universities of Iași and Bucharest. The prestige gained due to the quality of his scientific activity, starting with the moment of obtaining his doctorate in science in Vienna (1898), ensured him a place of honor in the Romanian Academy, the status of member being awarded to him in 1911, and later (between 1941–1944), that of president of the institution.

His contributions to the development of Romanian geography have been proved from several perspectives – administrative, didactic, scientific, publishing domains. In a period when Romanian geography has barely been institutionalized

as a field of academic interest, Simionescu used his vast experience in natural sciences and the special interest in social-cultural issues, brilliantly filling in the precariousness of geographical expertise at the Iași University.

Assuming administrative duties within higher education, including that of Ministry of Education, he supported the development of the Departments of Geography at the universities of Bucharest (founded in 1900) and Iași (founded in 1904), respectively, almost a century (1825), after the birth of the first dedicated university Geography chair in Berlin, on the initiative of Carl Ritter in a period of maximum interest for this discipline. A natural follow-up to the prestigious activity conducted by the Romanian Geographical Society, established in 1875, illustrated primarily by the publication of the Great Geographical Dictionary of Romania (1898–1902), the institutionalization of higher geographical education in the Kingdom of Romania created the premises for the establishment of a true Romanian geographical school, strongly anchored in the dominant scientific currents from the great Western universities. Fully aware of the importance of geography, Ion Simionescu contributed significantly to the organization of a specialized library at the University of Iași, through personal donations included. Unique volumes, many with signed dedications of famous authors from several European university centers, can be consulted even today in the library of the Faculty of Geography and Geology of Iași. Creator of the first Geography scientific laboratory at the University of Iași, Ion Simionescu had as objective the provision of optimal conditions to students, for the acquisition of knowledge and practical skills specific to Earth Sciences.

His first years of superior geographical didactic activity in Iași were marked by the difficulties to be faced after the premature death of its founder, Ștefan Popescu, and in the absence of adequate human resources in the Department of Geography at the University of Iași. Entrusted with this chair, within the Faculty of Sciences (1911–1914), he trained several students, among whom one that would later become a most prominent Romanian geographer, Mihai David. Ion Simionescu taught courses of Anthropogeography, Geography of Europe, which later formed the basis of a prolific publishing activity. Among other achievements, the *Geography of Romania* course was the basis of the book *Our country. Nature, people, work*, published in 1937 [1]. Concerned about the material base of the institution, Ion Simionescu also took an interest in the endowment of the Geography Laboratory he established, and in obtaining funds for the didactic-scientific applications intended for students, establishing a tradition preserved to this day. Although he left for Bucharest in 1914, initially for a ministerial mandate, he closely guided the evolution of the Iași geographical school, even after he transferred to the Bucharest University. The dotations acquired under his guidance and the training of younger researchers gave a boost and an indisputable contribution to the affirmation of the Iași school of Geography in the interwar period, leading inclusively to the introduction of the PhD coordination by Mihai

David and to an increased number of scientific publications. Through his overall activity, he can equally be claimed as a precursor in the development of both physical and human geography at the University of Iași, fully continued at the end of the interwar period by the prominent personalities of Mihai David and Gheorghe Năstase.

His scientific contribution to geography is a difficult task to evaluate. With regard to physical geography, the most relevant and recurrent aspects are to be found in his geological studies, but also in the papers meant at providing general notions about Romanian geography and its territory. The studies on the evolution of several areas of the country, such as paleontology topics, analysis of the origin of geological structures, the conglomerates from the Eastern Carpathians included, the green schists in the Dobrogea Plateau, the Badenian and Volhynian deposits in the north of Moldova, the limestones with Lithotamnium, offered information of geographical nature, some emerging from his own field observations. Among his contributions to the physical geography of Northeastern Romania, Ion Simionescu made various clarifications related to paleogeographical evolution, the methods of deposition and tilting of the sedimentary layers, with the presently known and accepted effects upon the landscape.

His organized, systematic analytical method, focused on the causes and mechanisms that determine the natural processes of landscape modelling in (not only) Eastern Romania, can be considered a model that later inspired many Romanian geographers. Leaving apart his contributions to geology and geomorphology, many of his written rows demonstrate a deep understanding of the physical geography of Moldova. Such mentions include the fact that “*the compact sandstones on the upper part of the hills contribute to weaker erosion, leading to a better conservation of the primitive (initial) heights*”. Also, he considers that the initial relief of this area must have been an extended, higher plateau, eroded by the rivers oriented, in the Quaternary period, towards South-East, as an effect of the monocline of platform deposits. Another interesting observation is about rivers’ cutting shallow valleys: “*dividing the plateau into hills with a vaulted surface, but with a steep northern edge*” (what is now commonly known as “cuesta”). With minor doubts, this is one of the first mentions about the geomorphological assymetry characteristic of the Moldavian Plateau, which probably gave a suggestion to his good friend Mihai David to continue the geographic observations in the area.

Regarding other geomorphological processes, Simionescu mentioned the effects of fluvial erosion resulting from meandering, leading to changes in the territorial surface between the Republic of Moldova and Romania, and the landslides in the Moldavian Plateau. Some observations of interest in the field of soil science are related to the upper deposits from the Moldavian Plateau, described as being made of a reddish-yellow clay “*with black tubes through it*” [2] (the presence of organic colloid neoformations), without a clear horizon separation, and

containing concretions of calcium carbonate. A remarkable statement for that period is the separation of these deposits from proper loess, the author observing that this name is improper, proposing the theory of a deposition in an aquatic environment, later combined with “*the weathering by the atmosphere of the bare rocks, and then the slow sliding of the originated mobile material towards the lowest parts of the landscape*” [2].

More than that, if Ion Hârjoabă considered gullying as one of the most characteristic geomorphological processes for the Tutova Hills, Simionescu notes the extremely important effect of surface runoff in the evolution of the Moldavian Plain: “*I hope to return to this quiet shaping of our hills, which, however, forming continuously and on large surfaces, is one of the most powerful agents of orographic change*” [2].

Moving from the local scale to a larger one, the article entitled *The Land of Romania* [3] published in the “*V. Adamachi*” Scientific Magazine, presents Simionescu’s concept of the harmony of the Romanian space, a term that became a leitmotif in later general geographical presentations.

His contribution in human geography (anthropogeography, according to the term of its times) or in theoretical geography is much more explicit, as proven by papers published starting from 1910, especially in the “*V. Adamachi*” magazine, a veritable scientific tribune, in which he expressed opinions on many issues of general scientific interest. Ever since the first issue, supporting the idea of popularizing science, Simionescu pleaded for a critical spirit based on scientific knowledge [4]. Concerned with the unity of geography, thought as “*not only the science of the earth, nor the science of man*” [5], he grasped one of the essential problems of geographical research, that risks, in many situations, to deviate excessively towards naturalistic or sociological studies. Departing from the idea of connecting the “*inanimate to the animate*” (*idem*), his view of Geography implied geographers treating any subject in a unified manner, regardless of their own perspectives. For this reason, his works in the field of physical geography integrate information related to human aspects, just as those of human-geographical nature abound in connections with data about natural systems. In fact, Ion Simionescu’s geographical contribution can be considered a model of regional analysis, in the spirit of the syntheses that will later form the basis of many doctoral theses in Geography. Even if tributary to the determinism of the period, he insisted on identifying close relationships even between Geology and Anthropogeography [6], in a paper discussing the close connection between the abundance of natural resources and the presence of population concentrations, with relevant examples from various regions of the globe. Such ideas had been previously presented from a paleontological perspective [7], when he synthesized the most *avant-garde* visions circulating at the time, on the evolution of the prehistoric man. From this perspective, the inter/ transdisciplinary character of his scientific concerns is surely

illustrated even by works that combine human geography with ethnography, such as the one relating to the types of houses in the Old Kingdom [8].

A strongly interdisciplinary vision is also reflected in the study on population movements in the Old Kingdom [9], in which he concludes that the morphology of the Romanian territory facilitated the movement of population, mainly through transhumance and the existence of areas of refuge, ideas congruent with the anthropological or ethnographic research of the period, which later became a common explanation of the unity of the Romanian nation. The same encyclopedic spirit, open to a broad vision of places and facts, characterizes his monographic articles, such as those dedicated to Sahara [10] or to the personality of Nicolae Milescu Spătaru, branded as “*a Romanian explorer in Asia*” [11].

Although not necessarily having a geographical relevance, some of his other works, approaching the state of higher education or Romanian research are a notable contribution. Campaigning for an active role of Romanian universities in the society [12], and analyzing the state of research in the field of Natural Sciences [13], he delicately observes the unhealthy attitude induced by “*the lack of confidence in our powers and the inclination towards everything that is produced abroad*”, a statement as valid today as it was in the interwar period. Until his passing away, he remained faithful to promoting the essential role of science in the progress of society, underpinning the favorable context for research in larger university centers, the constant financial support and, of course, the appreciation for those involved in such activities [14]. In his last paper, published posthumously in the journal that served as a forum for disseminating his ideas, he claimed that “*Iași’s environment remained favorable and even provocative for intense thinking, with an inclination towards intellectual work*”, despite the loss of human resources generated by the departure of many specialists, especially towards the capital of the country. Finding himself in this situation because of his transfer to Bucharest in 1914, he continued to show his devotion to Iași’s academic environment in which he was formed and to which he felt connected for life. His article, placed immediately after the obituary written by I.G. Botez, comes as a recognition of the capital role held by the University of Iași in the creation of a true scientific movement since the 19th century, as also emphasized in later monographs [15].

Simionescu’s publishing activity cannot be separated from the scientific one, the two being most often interconnected. The subjects covered in his studies were frequently translated from their scientific into a more accessible form, to facilitate the communication with and the understanding of the public. This is the case of his volumes related to Romania (*The Romanian Country* – 1922 or *Our Country* – 1937), those dedicated to personalities, the case of the collection *Selected People* (1921, 1926, 1937, 1942) or of the monograph entitled *Romanian Cities* (1925, 1929). To these, numerous volumes with travel notes, written in a style reminiscent of Alexandru Vlahuță or Calistrat Hogaș can be added, such as *Stopovers from the*

Tisa to the Dniester, Wandering through our mountains (1941), *Among the hills and through the plains* (1943), etc. In all these writings, the geographical information is essential, places, natural phenomena, landscapes, forms of anthropic territory planning being presented with the stated aim of popularizing knowledge, in this case that specific to geosciences [16]. Moreover, Simionescu also coordinated a collection entitled *Useful knowledge*, in which he published countless brochures and books in which geographical information was intertwined with historical, geological, economic, ethnographic or practical data.

A similar effort devoted to the spread of geographical information was materialized in the *Science Popularization Library. Geographical readings* series, published by Schools' House Press, explicitly intended for students. Even if their role was to make familiar the widest possible public with the diversity of geographical space, offering information not only about regions in Romania or European states, but also about more exotic spaces (South America, Oceania, or Asia, such as Afghanistan, Indonesia, etc.), the way in which the discourse is organized or the choice of topics of interest shows a thorough methodical, scientific training. His frankness and honesty always impress as, for example, in the work entitled *Yesterday's Romania* [17]: "*The few pages that will follow are written for the reach of children and those who do not know much about their country. It is a popularization book, without any other pretensions than to be clearly written*". Beyond this, however, the chapters are ordered in accordance with the scientific canons, their titles being expressive, from *The country's place under the sun* to *Romania's sky*, *The country's riches* and *The results of people's sweat*. Even if today such works may seem obsolete, they had a strong impact in the period they were issued, making known to the general public the geographical peculiarities of many places, imprinted as such in the memory of the generations to follow. Public appreciation led further to successive reissues of these volumes, in a constantly revised and added form. The proof of the value of this popularization work is represented by the volumes containing a selection of his most famous writings, such as, for example, *From Nature* [18] or *Selected Works* [19], or the re-edition of the two volumes of *Selected People* [20]. As he himself mentions in the preface to *Our country. People, places, country* [21], in all these works he used the most pertinent sources and indicated them accurately to ensure scientific rigor, even if "*without rigidity*", he presented the information intended for the public using, most of the times, the help in proof-reading of his good friend, the reputed linguist Alexandru Rosetti. Due to the wealth of information or the quality of their presentation, many of his works can be considered milestones for some geographical disciplines. Only one such example is the volume that presents the cities of interwar Romania, a veritable synthesis of urban geography. Its success led to its re-editing in 1929, because it drew "*the attention of foreigners to the particularities of our cities*", being a real useful guide for "*those leading school*

trips, who often lack any orientation” [22]. The need for such monographs was even more important in the context of the affirmation of Greater Romania, a larger, more diverse, and fuller of contrasts territory than the Old Kingdom.

The role of Simionescu's personality in the consolidation of the Iași geographical school remains indisputable. The most eloquent evidence is the consistency with which, over time, he enjoyed the attention of renowned geographers from Iași. The close ties with the places where he was born and trained as a researcher, despite the distance between Bucharest and Iași, created a model of academic conduct, as Mihai David emphasized in a memorial article [23]: *“The efforts of Professor Ion Simionescu have been crowned with great achievements and laurels, but he could not have achieved his life's goal if he had relied only on the qualities with which he was gifted by God. He made a cult out of his work. He worked enormously, all the time...and he never hesitated to urge those around him to do the same”*. Ion Gugiuman, Nicolae Barbu or Ioan Donisă, among others, had the same respect for his founding destiny and for the exemplary way in which he carried out his scientific activity. A destiny that he described himself, uniquely, through his professed passion for the heights of the mountains: *“Up here, man truly becomes a creature like the Creator”* [24].



Ion Simionescu (center) and Mihai David (standing) together with families (Archive of Professor Ion Donisă)

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