

# “PLAGUE SHIRT” AND PLAGUE COMMEMORATION AMONG THE ROMANIANS OF OLTENIA AND TIMOK VALLEY

*Natalia Golant*

*PhD, Senior Researcher at the Department of Europe Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia*

*e-mail: natalita1977@yandex.ru*

**Abstract:** The article considers mythological representations and ritual practices associated with the personification of the plague among the Romanians of Oltenia (Romania) and the Romanians (or Vlachs) of the Timok Valley (Serbia). It is based on materials from the author’s field research in south-western Romania and eastern Serbia. The custom of organising the plague commemoration on different calendar dates is analysed. Along with it, the author consistently examines the ways of making a “plague shirt” (Rom. *câmaşa ciumii*), the spread of this ritual practice, and the contexts of its use as a protection against diseases (plague and cholera) and death during the war, as well as correlations between the practice of making a “plague shirt” and the custom of the plague commemoration.

**Keywords:** eastern Serbia, Oltenia, plague, Romanians, symbolic objects, Timok Valley, Vlachs

## Introduction

During field studies in Romania and in the Romanian settlements of the Timok Valley in eastern Serbia, the author of the article repeatedly recorded mythological ideas about diseases, primarily about the plague. The article considers mythological representations and ritual practices associated with the personification of the plague among the Romanians of Oltenia (Romania) and the Romanians (or Vlachs) of the Timok Valley (Serbia). It is based on materials from the author's field research conducted in 2011 in southwestern Romania (in the villages of Ponoarele, Şipotu, Cracu Muntelui and Gărdăneasa of the Ponoarele commune in the Mehedinţi district in Oltenia) and in 2014, 2021, and 2022 in eastern Serbia (in the villages of Bukovče and Kobišnica of Negotin municipality of Bor district and in the villages of Gradskovo, Halovo, Mali Jasenovac and Šipikovo of Zaječar municipality and Zaječar district). Residents of the listed villages in eastern Serbia are native speakers of the Oltenian subdialect of the Romanian language. In Serbia, this subdialect is called Tsaran.

## Personifications of the plague and calendar dates associated with it

Inhabitants of the Ponoarele commune, in the Mehedinţi district (Oltenia, southwestern Romania), imagined the plague as an old, ugly woman who could enter any house. The barking of dogs for no reason was considered a sign of her appearance. According to some locals, the plague came during the wars with the Turks.<sup>1</sup> The notion of the plague as an ugly old woman was also recorded during field research in the Buzău district (Muntenia, southern Romania) (Golant & Plotnikova 2012: 361–427).

Among the Vlachs (Romanians) of eastern Serbia, the author came across the idea of the personification of the plague in the form of several women bringing the disease (in the village of Halovo, Zaječar district). According to a legend spread in the Ponoarele commune, in the Mehedinţi district of Oltenia, the Plague once came to the house of a widow who had a sick child (during the plague epidemic) and asked the widow to sew a shirt. The Plague promised to keep the widow's child alive and to leave the village if the widow

sewed the shirt overnight. The widow called the women of the neighborhood, and together they weaved, cut, and sewed all night, and by morning the shirt was ready. One of the local place names is inspired by this legend (a hill located near the village of Ponoarele is named Shirt Hill, Rom. *Dealul Cămăși*). There is also a saying: “Works like on a ‘plague shirt’” (Rom. *Lucrează ca la cămașa ciumii*). This saying, widely known among Romanians, is used when talking about a person who is fervently working to complete a task.

The inhabitants of the Ponoarele commune also associate the celebration of Plague Friday with the events described in this legend. Plague Friday (Rom. *Vinerea Ciumii*) is both a family and, at the same time, a public holiday. Each village of the Ponoarele commune celebrates its own Plague Friday – in the period from the Day of St. Elijah (July 20) until St. Paraskeva’s Day (October 14). Many families organize a feast on Plague Friday, which is attended by relatives and friends from neighboring villages. Traditionally, meatless dishes are served at this feast because Friday is a fasting day. However, at present, many locals serve both meat and meatless dishes on this occasion. In the Sălaj district, in Transylvania, a holiday called *Vinerea Ciumea* (Plague Friday) was celebrated on the first Friday after Christmas. (Vilcovschi 2020).

It should be noted that the calendric period that includes Plague Fridays in the villages of the Ponoarele commune also includes a number of traditional Orthodox Church holidays associated with diseases and various disease preventive measures in the Romanian folk calendar. These are, for example, St. Pantaleon’s Day (Rom. *Sfântul Pantelimon*, July 27), the Transfiguration of Jesus (Rom. *Schimbarea la Față, Obrejenie* or *Pobrejenie*, August 6), the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (Rom. *Ziua crucii*, September 14), and St. Paraskeva’s Day (Rom. *Vinerea Mare*, October 14). St. Pantaleon’s Day is associated with the plague in the Romanian popular mind (Burgehele 2003: 406). Veneration of St. Pantaleon as a healer is also common among Bulgarians and Greeks. The notion of the connection of this saint with the plague is reflected in the rite of expelling diseases (plague and smallpox) from the village, which is practised on St. Pantaleon’s Day by residents of the Belogradchik municipality of the Vidin district in northwestern Bulgaria (Popov 1999: 369). However, in a number of areas inhabited by Romanians, a winter holiday is associated with the plague in the folk calendar: St. Charalambos Day (Rom. *Sfântul Haralambie* or *Ziua ciumii*, ‘Plague’s Day’) on February 10 (Stahl 1983: 212; Arapu 2019). Romanians have a tradition of depicting St. Charalambos on icons holding the

Plague, represented as a chained dog or a monster. For example, on icons from Transilvania, the Plague is sometimes represented as a monster with a human head, sheep ears and the body covered with scales (see, e.g., Muzeul Constanța 2019). Residents of Romanian (Vlach) villages in the Bregovo municipality of the Vidin district in northwestern Bulgaria call St. Charalambos Day “Holiday of the Plagues” (Romanian dial. *Praznicu ciuimilor*). On this day, they bake and eat a loaf of bread for the health of family members, domestic animals, and crops, so they would not be struck by the plague – “so that there are no plagues on livestock” (Rom. *să nu fie ciume pe vite*), “so that there are no plagues on the wheat” (Rom. *să nu fie ciume pe grâu*). They break the loaf in pieces that are eaten for the health of specific people or specific domestic animals (horses, donkeys, chickens, etc.) (villages of Bregovo and Kosovo, Bregovo municipality, Bulgaria) (Golant 2014: 235). The association of St. Charalambos’ Day with the plague also exists in the Bulgarian tradition. In some regions of Bulgaria, for example in Thrace, this day is known as the Plague Day (Bulg. *Чумин ден*) (Plotnikova 2009: 23; Trefilova 2012: 280–281).

As a parallel to the Oltenian custom of celebrating Plague Fridays, one can mention the custom of organizing plague commemoration, which is known in the villages of Gradskovo, Halovo, Mali Jasenovac, and Šipikovo in the Zaječar municipality, in eastern Serbia.

The custom, in which the “plague shirt” and plague commemoration are simultaneously present, existed in the village of Gradskovo (Zaječar municipality and Zaječar district). Here the plague commemoration is called *pomana la ciumā*, ‘alms for the plague.’ The Romanian word *pomană(-a)* can be used in the meanings of ‘funeral meal,’ ‘funeral gift,’ ‘the coil bread that is given at funerals,’ ‘funeral boiled wheat porridge’ as well as ‘alms’ (Ciorănescu 2007 [1954–1966]: 619). In the subdialects of the village of Gradskovo and the other Romanian villages of the Timok Valley studied by the author, this word is used only in the context of funeral and memorial rituals. The only exception encountered by the author is the use of this word in the expression *pomana la ciumā* (or *pomana ciumii*), where it denotes the gifts (food, drinks, etc.) that people present to the Plague so that it does not enter their homes/villages. In the villages of Halovo, Mali Jasenovac and Šipikovo (Zaječar municipality and Zaječar district), there are also customs associated with the plague commemoration. However, in these settlements, unlike in Gradskovo, these customs are not connected with the making of the “plague shirt.” In Šipikovo

and Mali Jasenovac, the plague commemoration is called *pomana ciumii*, while in Halovo, it is called *pomana ciumilor*. Residents of Mali Jasenovac organised *pomana ciumii* in every neighborhood of the village on Maundy Thursday (Rom. *Joi Mari*). A small round table was set at crossroads, on which treats were placed: Lenten pastries (Rom. *colaci, ghibanițe*) and eggs. During this commemoration, an old man played the flute (rom. *fluier*), and women danced. The participation of a man in this rite was motivated by the fact that, traditionally, only men played musical instruments among the Romanians of the Timok Valley. Apparently, the age of the musician did not matter. However, during the period to which informants referred, an old man played the flute in the village of Mali Jasenovac. According to informers from this village, the plague commemoration was organized in order to prevent children from contracting the disease. It should be noted that the offering of eggs as a gift is typical for the ritual of Maundy Thursday throughout the Carpathian-Balkan region. Among the Romanians (in Romania, in the historical regions of Oltenia and Muntenia, and in eastern Serbia) and the Greeks, on Maundy Thursday children or young people collect eggs from the henhouse, for the Easter celebration (Golant 2017; Kabakova 1989: 200–201; Zaikovskaia & Zaikovskii 2001). In addition, Maundy Thursday rites are associated with the commemoration of the dead, both among the Romanians (Vlachs) of eastern Serbia and among the Romanians living on current Romanian territory. On this day, they visit cemeteries and burn bonfires “for the dead” (Golant 2017).

In Šipikovo, women left Lenten food “for the Plague” at the crossroads. The informers from this village could not name the holiday nor the exact date on which this commemoration was held, but they claimed that it was organized in the spring. In Halovo, the plague commemoration was organized in the summer. Apparently, there was no specific day. In this village, the memorial meal was prepared by three women named Floarea or Stana. They baked bread in silence and cooked meals for the commemoration, and then in the evening they took the food, as well as a new table and chair, to the bank of the pond named *Lacu lu Ghigă* located on the outskirts of the village.<sup>5</sup> In the morning, empty, overturned plates were found there. The custom of giving away a table or other pieces of furniture as a memorial gift to the soul of the deceased is characteristic of the funeral rites of the Romanians (Vlachs) of the Timok Valley. It is believed that the deceased will thus receive these items in the other world. It can also be noted that among the Romanians of the Timok Valley, some rites related

to the commemoration of the dead can be performed outside of the cemetery, mainly at crossroads (for example, in some Romanian villages of the Zaječar district, on Shrovetide (Rom. dial. *Stămâna Albă*, ‘White Week’) bonfires for the dead are lit at crossroads (this custom is called *priveghi* ‘vigil’).

Residents of the villages of Bukovče and Kobišnica in the Negotin municipality of the Bor district, in Serbia, similarly organize “monster commemoration” or “snake commemoration” (Rom. dial. *pomana alilor*). The word *ală* or *hală* (from Serb. or Bulg. (x)ала) can be used in Romanian to mean monster, demon, or storm (DEX 1998: 442). In Oltenia, this word means ‘dragons’ (Rom. *balauri*), which are connected with storms in legends. In the Romanian subdialects of eastern Serbia, the term *ală* (-a, pl. *ale, alile*) can also be used to mean a snake or (figuratively) a gluttonous person. The phrase *ala plaiului*, which can be translated as ‘demon of the hill’ or ‘snake of the hill’ was recorded in Kobišnica and Bukovče. *Pomana alilor* in these villages is dedicated to the week of St. Theodor (Rom. *Sân-Toader, Sân-Toager*) at the beginning of Lent. During this period, in Kobišnica, women left Lenten food at the spring, while in Bukovče, corn and beans were cooked in large cauldrons, in the square situated in the center of each neighborhood.<sup>6</sup> This funeral meal, according to local residents, is arranged to protect the area so that these demons or snakes (*alile*) do not bring misfortune. According to the Serbian ethnographic literature, the Serbs in the Danube region have the custom of holding a cholera commemoration (Serb. *daħa kolери*), combined with the making of a “one-day shirt.” Cholera was offered bread, cooked/roasted chicken, and a spinning wheel with wool and a new spindle. These offerings were left at the crossroads outside the village (Radovanović-Zatonjac 1984: 67–68). A similar meal, intended for the Plague but timed to coincide with St. Charalambos Day, was found among Bulgarians – for example, in the town of Tvarditsa, in the Sliven region (the historical region of Upper Thrace), women go to the field on this day and leave a Lenten treat for the Plague in the thorny thickets – bread, green beans, and halvah (Trefilova 2012: 280).

## Sewing of the “plague shirt” and its usage in different contexts

During field research in eastern Serbia, the author recorded the presence of ideas about a “plague shirt” in the village of Bukovče of the Negotin municipality, of the Bor district, as well as in the villages of Šipikovo, Mali Jasenovac, Gradskovo, and Halovo of the Zaječar municipality and district.

Dara Ivanović, who lives in the village of Bukovče of the Negotin municipality, in eastern Serbia, told the author the following information about the “plague shirt”:

*Once upon a time, three old women made a shirt overnight to save a sick child. When the shirt was ready, one of these women put it on so that the Plague would leave the child and go after her. Soon after, the child recovered, and the old woman who put on the “plague shirt” suffered a mental illness which remained for the rest of her life.*

According to another informer from the same village, the “plague shirt” was made in one night, not by three but by nine old women, and this shirt was small (it could only be worn on a baby or a doll). In the 1980s, the informer herself bought a small “plague shirt” in order to be cured of infertility because she could not get pregnant for a long time. The author has not yet found information about the purchase of a plague shirt in other villages. The article by Milorad Dragić provides information about the making of a “plague shirt” in the village of Bukovče in the late 1930s. This shirt was to be made by nine old widows. According to observations of M. Dragić, collected in the 1960s, the inhabitants of Bukovče could use this shirt to protect people in the event of an epidemic, newborn babies from any disease and danger (especially often in those families where children died), as well as to cure nervous diseases and protect soldiers from enemy bullets. For apotropaic purposes, adults crawled through the “plague shirt,” while children were pulled through it (Dragić 1969). Pulling newborns through the “plague shirt,” according to M. Dragić, was also practiced in the Romanian village of Boljetin (Majdanpek municipality, Bor district of Serbia) (ibid.).

The custom of making the “plague shirt,” with the purpose of warding off diseases and epidemics, was recorded by the author in the village of Gradskovo,

in the Zaječar municipality and district. According to Mila Đorđević, a resident of the village of Gradskovo, in the first half of the twentieth century, local women would gather and make a small “plague shirt” in one night. Then, taking this shirt with them, together with some food, they went to the crossroads. On the way, they sang, shouted, and rattled dishes. The shirt was thrown into the wind, and the food was left “for the plague, for diseases.”

In the villages of Šipikovo, Mali Jasenovac and Halovo of the Zaječar municipality, the “plague shirt” was made for men going to war or simply serving in the army, but not for warding off diseases or epidemics. A particular situation was encountered in the village of Mali Jasenovac, where all operations involved in the making of the “plague shirt” had to be performed in one night by six widows who had the same name: Stana.

Currently, “plague shirts” are no longer made, but one such shirt was kept, until recently, in the village of Šipikovo, by a family nicknamed *a lu Ciupitu*. A young man sent to the army or to war could crawl through the “plague shirt,” or he could take a shred or a thread from this shirt with him. Vencislav Dujnović, a resident of the village of Šipikovo, who served in the army in 1991, during the Bosnian war, crawled through the “plague shirt” three times and took with him a thread. According to his recollections, the “plague shirt” did not look like a real shirt, but like a cut hemp sac (according to informers, the “plague shirt” in the village of Mali Jasenovac looked the same way). Vencislav performed the ritual of crawling through the “plague shirt” with the help of his neighbor, Dobrila *a lu Rumânu* (Dobrila (of the) Romanian, Serb. *Dobrila Rumunski*). In 1999, during the Kosovo conflict, another resident of the village of Šipikovo, police officer Miroslav Dubrić, who was sent on a mission to Kosovo, also crawled through the same “plague shirt” three times and took a thread from it with him.<sup>2</sup> Later on, he handed over the thread from the “plague shirt” to his colleague, also a policeman, with him in Kosovo.<sup>3</sup> All of these people, who served in war zones and had previously performed manipulations with the “plague shirt,” returned home safe and sound. In her article on the custom of making a “one-day shirt” in Serbia, Suzana Antić reports a case that also occurred in 1999 involving a resident of a Vlach town in the Braničevo district. The man was drafted into the army and was supposed to be sent to Kosovo, but upon arrival in the city of Požarevac, was sent back home due to an error in his documents. His compatriots were convinced that this was due to the fact that before leaving for the army he crawled through a “one-day shirt” (Antić 2001).



Serbian and Romanian ethnographic literature reports that the custom of making a “plague shirt” also exists in other settlements of eastern Serbia where Romanians (Vlachs) live. The existence of such a shirt, for example, has been documented in the villages of Kobišnica (located near Bukovče), Jabukovac of the Negotin municipality of the Bor district, and Mosna, Boljetin and Donji Milanovac of the Majdanpek municipality of the Bor district (Šolkotović 2018–2019). There is also information about the existence of the “plague shirt” in Romanian (Vlach) villages of the Braničevo district (Antić 2001).

The idea of the “plague shirt” is found almost everywhere among Romanians – not only in Oltenia and on the territory of the distribution of Romanian subdialects in the Timok Valley, but also in Muntenia, Dobrogea, Transilvania, Maramureş and Bucovina (this was written, for example, by Tudor Pamfile (1916), Adrian Fochi (1976), Ion Aurel Candrea (1999 [1944]), Ion Ghinoiu (2001), Camelia Burghel (2003), and other researchers). The first mention of the “plague shirt” in Romanian lands is found in the book *Istoria delle moderne rivoluzioni della Valachia* by Anton-Maria del Chiaro, published in Venice in 1718.<sup>4</sup> Making a “plague shirt” was thought to be the most common way to stop the plague epidemic. All operations for the making of a shirt (spinning, weaving, cutting, and sewing) had to be performed within one day or one night (Evseev 1994: 31, 37; Candrea 1999 [1944]: 166–167; Ghinoiu 2001: 49). In some areas of Oltenia, such a shirt could be called *câmaşa de izbândă* ‘victory shirt’ or ‘success shirt.’ According to T. Pamfile, this shirt was made to avoid cholera: “When the shirt is ready, two or three people go on the road or to a larger place in the middle of or on the edge of the village. People follow them, and while one of them holds this shirt ... all the men and women crawl through it to avoid cholera” (Pamfile 1916: 332). In his monograph, published in 1944, Ion Aurel Candrea cites information on the existence of the “plague shirt” in many parts of Romania (in particular, in Transilvania, Oltenia, and Dobrogea), which implies that practices associated with it were still in use during World War II (Candrea 1999 [1944]: 166–167). Adrian Fochi describes the Romanian custom associated with the making of the “plague shirt” as follows: “The women gather, make a rag doll in the shape of a woman, then make a blouse at night, which on the same night is woven and sewn, and dress the doll with it ... The doll dressed in this shirt is then buried in the morning near the village crossroad and the women mourn as if it were a dead person” (Fochi 1976: 83–84).

The custom of making a shirt within one day during an epidemic is also found among Bulgarians, Serbians, Hungarians, and Transilvanian Germans (Tolstaia 2004; Candrea 1999 [1944]: 166–167; Antić 2001). Bulgarians in the Pirin region and Macedonians in the western part of present-day North Macedonia had the custom of making a canvas in one night (Bulg. and Maced. *чумино платно* ‘plague canvas’), in order to protect themselves from the plague. All villagers were supposed to crawl under this canvas (Verković 1985: 96; Popov 1994: 388; Tolstaia 2004). Belarusians considered the “one-day towel” to be an effective remedy against the epidemic. All the villagers walked under this towel, after which the towel was burnt (Tolstaia 2004).

There is a report about making such a shirt for the Serbian prince Miloš Obrenović, dated 1874:

*In the year 1837, a plague appeared in Jagodina. Prince Miloš immediately issued the strictest orders to limit the spread. However, in Požarevac, where he was at the time, he ordered nine old women to secretly sew and weave a shirt by the light of the hearth, without a candle, naked as the day they were born, in one night [only]; Prince Miloš, all his family and all the soldiers in the barracks crawled through it. Heard from an eyewitness in Požarevac in 1874. (Milićević 1894: 324)*

The making of the “one-day shirt” (Serb. *једноданка кошуља*) among the Serbs of the Danube region was meant to protect against the cholera epidemic (Radovanović-Zatonjac 1984: 67–68). The making of a small “one-day shirt,” similar to the “plague shirt” used among the Vlachs in the village of Bukovče, is also characteristic of the Serbs (it was mentioned, in particular, in the village of Beli Potok near Belgrade) (Antić 2001).

The joint making of the “plague shirt” by several namesake women, which was recorded in the village of Gradskovo (Zaječar municipality), is found among Romanians in the territory of Romania. For example, in the Făgăraș region, such a shirt was made by seven women named Maria (Arapu 2021a: 150). In addition, in the village of Gradskovo, custom dictated that these women should be widows. A similar condition existed in some areas of Romania, in particular in Țara Lăpușului (Maramureș) (Bradea 2018).

As previously stated, according to the information recorded in Šipikovo, Mali Jasenovac and Halovo, the “plague shirt” was not meant to fight the epidemic, but to ward danger away from a person leaving for the army or a war.

There is an assumption that this contamination of meanings was originally due to the fact that, in the past, wars and epidemics were closely connected, and most soldiers who died in wars died not from wounds but from infectious diseases. Tihomir Đorđević wrote about this in connection with the previously mentioned plague epidemic, which began in 1836. He also mentioned the ritual of making a “plague shirt”, which was carried out in Požarevac by order of Prince Miloš Obrenović, and the passage of all soldiers in the town through this shirt (Đorđević 1921).

The making of a “plague shirt” in order to ward off dangers which threaten a person in war is common among both the Vlachs and the Serbs. Serbs living in the vicinity of Pirot (in eastern Serbia) made a “one-day shirt” when it was obvious that war was approaching. All men leaving for the front crawled through this shirt to save them from death and injury (Tolstaia 2004). In addition, among the Serbs, a “one-day shirt,” or a shred of, or a thread from it was sewn into the belt of a young man leaving for the army. This custom was mentioned, in particular, in the vicinity of Belgrade (the village of Beli Potok), in the Knjaževac municipality of Zaječar district (the village of Koželj), etc. (Antić 2001).

## Conclusions

In the studied villages of the Ponoarele commune, in Oltenia, the custom of making “plague shirts” among the Romanians has disappeared, primarily because the plague epidemics now belong to the distant past. However, there is a custom celebrating the memory of this past with a feast and reception of guests during a certain calendric time of the year. Among the Romanians (Vlachs) of the Timok Valley – at least in the villages of the Negotin and Zaječar municipalities in eastern Serbia – an artefact called the “plague shirt” is still preserved in some families, although no one is currently making such shirts. Despite its name, the “plague shirt” among the Romanians (Vlachs) of the Timok Valley is today not directly related to the corresponding disease. It is instead used to treat other diseases or conditions (such as infertility, as in the village of Bukovče) or to ward danger away from a person about to go to war (as in the villages of Šipikovo, Mali Jasenovac, and Halovo). However, the expansion of the apotropaic functions attributed to the “plague shirt” appeared long before

recent days. One may recall the list of functions that the “plague shirt” could perform, according to the inhabitants of the same village of Bukovče, recorded by M. Dragić in the late 1960s: protection against epidemic diseases; protection of newborns from diseases and other dangers that threaten death; protection of soldiers against bullets, etc. (Dragić 1969).

The wide spread of the last purpose attributed to the “plague shirt” is probably associated with the specifics of the recent history of Serbia (and the military operations that accompanied the disintegration of former Yugoslavia). In addition, the emergence of such a purpose might have been facilitated by the influence of the customs of the neighboring Serbian population from Pirot, whose “one-day shirt” has long been used precisely to ward off dangers that a person can expect in a war. However, the custom recorded among the Vlachs in the Zaječar district, in eastern Serbia, also resembles the custom described by Tudor Pamfile in connection with the making of *cămașa de izbândă* ‘victory shirt’ among Romanians of Oltenia (Pamfile 1916). The revival of magical practices associated with the “plague shirt” during the hostilities that accompanied the collapse of former Yugoslavia can be compared to a similar phenomenon that occurred during the Balkan Wars, the First and Second World Wars (Dragić 1969).

The people from eastern Serbia who were interviewed for this study did not understand the connection between wars and past epidemics (that was evident for contemporaries of Miloš Obrenović). This may be explained by a general increase of medical and healthcare knowledge throughout Europe.

The author assumed, when she started to collect field materials on this topic, in 2021, in the Timok Valley (in the villages of the Negotin and Zaječar municipalities in eastern Serbia), that she would hear about the use of the “plague shirt” to fight the coronavirus pandemic, but until now, such information has not been found. One might conclude that the belief in the healing function of “the plague shirt” no longer exists.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The idea that the plague came with the Turks was widespread in the territories inhabited by Romanians since the Middle Ages until modern times. It was believed that the plague came with Ottoman ships arriving in the Danube ports. There also were accusations of outbreaks of the plague due to the arrival of other foreigners: Tatars, Jews, and Armenians (Arapu 2021b: 5–6).

<sup>2</sup> Miroslav Dubrić is the son of Dobrila, and he performed the ritual with her help.

<sup>3</sup> This policeman was from another Romanian village in eastern Serbia, in the Negotin municipality.

<sup>4</sup> A.-M. del Chiaro was the secretary of the Prince of Wallachia, Constantin Brâncoveanu (Stahl 1983: 211).

<sup>5</sup> This pond is considered symbolically unclean by the locals. According to them, ghosts were seen several times near it. One of the informers, Jovanka Gacović, recalled that during her youth (in the 1960s–1970s) an old man went to the pond with the special purpose of teasing the “Plagues”, considering the pond to be their habitat.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that Lenten food is discussed in this case, as in the case of Plague Fridays in Ponoarele (Mehedinți district, Romania) and of the plague commemoration in Šipikovo (Zaječar district, Serbia).

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## “Plague Shirt” and Plague Commemoration Among the Romanians

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**Natalia Golant**, PhD, is a Senior Researcher at the Department of Europe, Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg, Russia. Her research interests include the ethnography of the Carpathian-Balkan region, traditional culture of the Eastern Latin peoples, calendar rites and mythology beliefs.

natalita1977@yandex.ru