

SIMION MEHEDIŢI – FOUNDER AND ORGANISER OF MODERN ROMANIAN GEOGRAPHY

DAN BĂLTEANU*

Key-words: Simion MehediŃi, Romanian geographer, planetary global system.

This year the Romanian geographers are commemorating 50 years since Simion MehediŃi (1868-1962), the founder of modern Romanian Geography, passed away. After having completed his studies in Paris, Berlin and Leipzig with Paul Vidal de la Blache, Ferdinand von Richthofen and Friedrich Ratzel, MehediŃi was nominated Professor of Geography at the University of Bucharest in 1890. In his fundamental work written in Romanian – *Terra, Introduction to Geography as Science* (1931) and in other of his writings, the Earth is viewed as a complex system within which the four planetary covers are interacting both in terms of static's (spatial distribution) and dynamics. In his opinion the complex relationships among the four geospheres are reflected in such planetary circuits as regular winds and Ocean currents.

Man is considered to be one of the most active agents increasingly more involved in changing the relationships among the geospheres, thereby radically influencing the evolution of the Earth System. MehediŃi was not only the founder of modern Romanian Geography but also the organiser and promoter of secondary and university studies of Geography.

In the 20th century, Romania could boast the presence of men of science and culture whose works were known and appreciated abroad. We would recall Constantin Brâncuşi (1876–1957), promoter of modernism in sculpture; Henry Coandă (1886–1972), inventor of the jet-airplane (scale model) presented in Paris at the second International Salon (1910), later on, the playwright Eugen Ionesco (1909–1994), philosopher Emil Cioran (1911–1995) and some others, among whom Simion MehediŃi (1868–1962) the founder of modern Romanian Geography (Fig. 1). Unfortunately, his work is not known abroad as it should.



Fig. 1 – Prof. Simion MehediŃi, founder of Romanian Geography, at 60 years of age.

* Professor, member of the Romanian Academy, Institute of Geography, Romanian Academy, Dimitrie RacoviŃă Str., no. 12, 023993, Bucharest, igar@geoinst.ro.

This year, which marks half a century since the scholar passed away, has been declared “Simion Mehedinți Year” by Romanian geographers, as an opportunity to highlight his valuable scientific contributions in various fields of Geography and, not least, in Teaching, Sociology, Ethnography, Philosophy and Literature even.

EARLY BEGINNINGS

Simion Mehedinți was born on the 18th of October, 1868, at Soveja, a village situated in the hilly area of the Curvature Carpathians, a place priding itself with old ethnographic traditions. After having graduated the first two primary school classes (1875–1878), his father – a psalm reader at the village church – and his relatives decided to send him to study Theology and get a high-school training first in the town of Focșani, and next in Bucharest, where he successfully passed his school-leaving examination in 1888 (*Chronological Table – Tufescu, 1994*). That very year, he obtained a scholarship at the Higher Normal School, set up in Bucharest after the Paris School model, and enrolled at the Faculty of Letters, Bucharest University. His BA thesis, presenting “*J.J. Rousseau’s ideas on education*”, reflects the close relationship between Bucharest University and the French School, as well as the steady interest shown by Simion Mehedinți in teaching matters.

After having finished his academic studies in Bucharest, a grant offered by the Romanian Geographical Society enabled him to further his scientific preoccupations in Paris, with Prof. Paul Vidal de la Blache. His interest focused on the concept of Regional Geography and the range of man’s influence on the environment, with reference to a series of homogeneous structures, the so-called “pays” (lands). Later on, another of de la Blache’s students, namely, Emm. De Martonne, was to become one of the best experts on the Romanian Carpathians.

One year later, Mehedinți would continue his studies in Germany. At Berlin University he attended Prof. Ferdinand von Richthofen’s courses that gave him a sound knowledge of Physical Geography and, at the same time, opened up new vistas in the object and methods of Geography. Also in Berlin, he attended courses in Ethnography, which made him approach this scientific domain from a geographical perspective.

In 1895 he moved to Leipzig University, an institution that had been promoting German-Romanian relations as early as the 18th century. Leipzig was the town where Dimitrie Cantemir’s work *A Historical-Geographical and Political Description of Moldavia*, written in Latin (published in German first in Hamburg, 1769) and D.D. Philipide’s *A Geography of Romania* (in Greek) were put out in 1771 and 1816, respectively (Bălțeanu, 1998). Simion Mehedinți would advise some of his students, among whom George Vâlsan and Constantin Brătescu, to study at that same University.

While in Leipzig, Mehedinți would attend Prof. Friedrich Ratzel’s seminars, the Professor being also the supervisor of his Ph.D. dissertation on “*Über die Kartographische Induction*”, presented in 1899 (Fig. 2). Prof. Ratzel, considered to have initiated some fundamental directions in Human Geography, was also a promoter of *Geopolitics and Political Geography*.

FOUNDER AND ORGANISER OF MODERN ROMANIAN GEOGRAPHY

Back in Romania, the leadership of the Bucharest University assigned Mehedinți the task of setting up the first Geography Chair at the Faculty of Letters. Geography chairs would later be established in Iași (1904), Cluj (1919) and Cernautzi (1922) – now the town lies on Ukrainian territory. His opening lecture titled the “*Object and definitions of Geography*” represented a synthesis of ideas circulated worldwide at the time and an integrated systems definition that is still topical today.

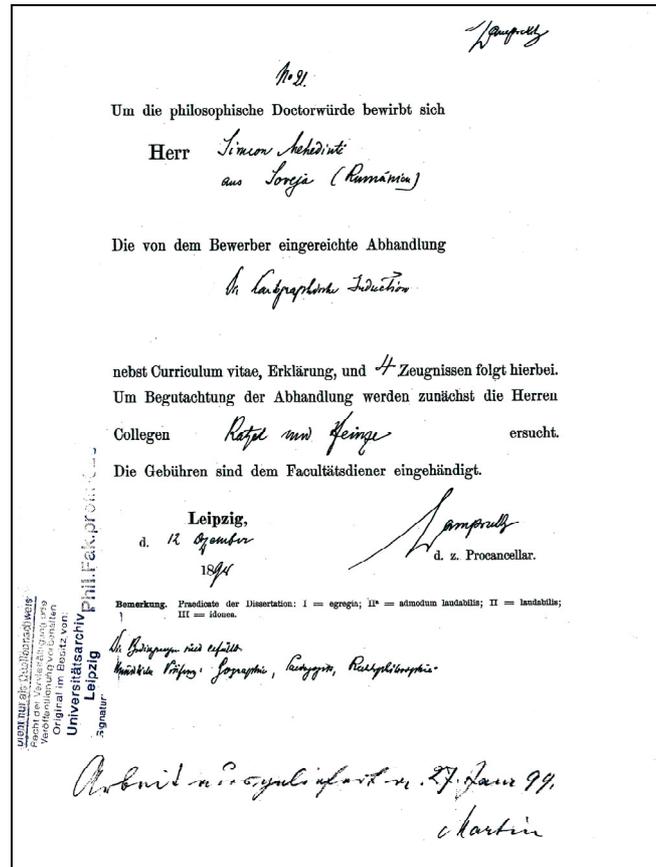


Fig. 2 – Attestation of the Ph.D. title obtained by Simion Mehedinți in 1899
(Source: Archives of the Leipzig University Library).

In early 20th century, the object of geographical study was just going to be defined, but many diverging ideas on the relationships between General Geography and Regional Geography were in the air.

Simion Mehedinți played a decisive role in organising academic geographical education. It was he who introduced the German system of seminars, practical works and applied field investigations for students, new geography courses (Fig. 3), and monthly scientific colloquia that were being held for a 30-year period (Orghidan, 1967; Ielenicz, 2004). This system formed numerous generations of geographers active in higher education, secondary education, and research institutes. Noteworthy among them were George Vâlsan (1885–1935) and Constantin Brătescu (1882–1945) who further developed Physical Geography and Geomorphology; Vintilă Mihăilescu (1890–1978) – Regional Geography, Human Geography and Theoretical Geography; in 1944 Vintilă Mihăilescu founded the Institute of Geographical Research (presently the Institute of Geography of the Romanian Academy); Ion Conea (1902–1974) – Historical Geography and Toponymy; Nicolae Orghidan (1881–1967) – Geomorphology, and Nicolae Gheorghiu (1886–1967) – Cartography.

As regards the necessity for having a national geographical research institute, Mehedinți used to say that Romania needs such an institute. He made an overriding contribution to the development of pre-university education, publishing Geography school-books (*Geography of Romania, Anthropogeography*, etc.) that appeared in numerous editions. These manuals were written in an attractive style, and had a modern scientific content very different from the former simplistic descriptions and endless place-names. With a view to updating Geography teachers' scientific background, the Professor organised annual Congresses held on a regular basis between 1904 and 1937. The high level

of academic education was being maintained by geographical periodicals like the *Year-book of Geography and Anthropogeography* in Romanian (1910–1914). He also co-ordinated and supervised the publication of the newly-structured Bulletin of the Romanian Geographical Society, which was to contain the most important scientific articles written in the inter-war period.

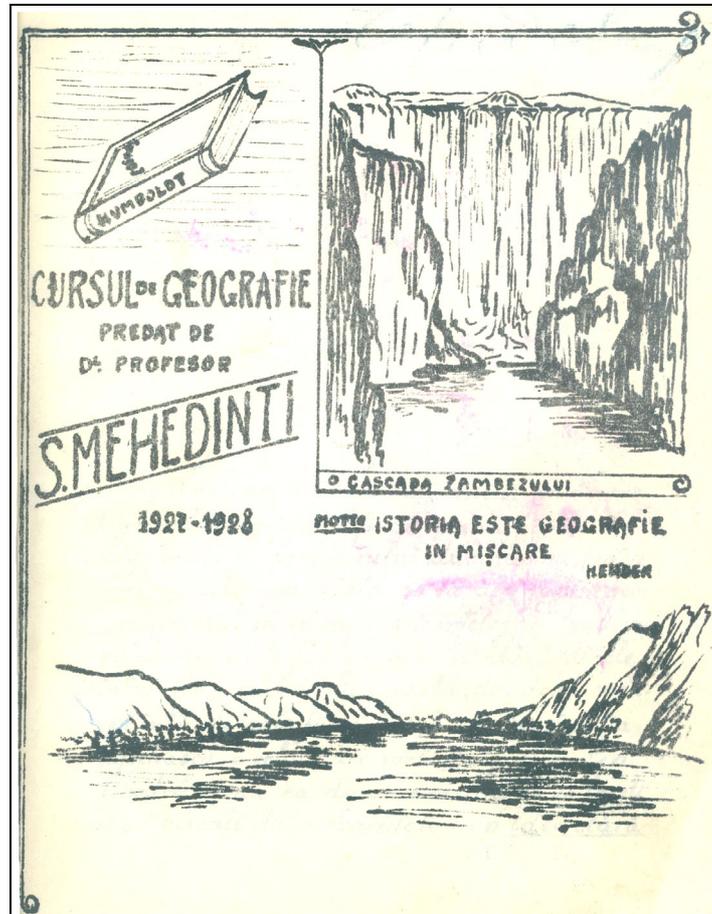


Fig. 3 – One of the courses held by Simion Mehedinți at the University of Bucharest.

Defining the object of Geography is one of the controversial issues of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Making an analysis (*Mehedinți, 1901*) of the concepts of differentiation of the solar system formulated by Kant and Laplace, and furthermore on Ritter's definition of Geography as "*science dealing with the relationship between man and the face of the Earth*", the Romanian scientist advanced his own viewpoint with emphasis on a particular feature of Geography, that is, the Earth Science dealing with "*the static (spatial distribution) and dynamic (temporal transformation) relation existing among the masses of the four planetary covers*".

Subsequently, this definition was further developed in his fundamental work *Terra. An introduction to Geography as Science* (1931), in which he affirms the necessity for geographical studies to focus on three elements: *mass, real complexity and localisation within the concrete space* (Fig. 4). Only a knowledge of these aspects, says Mehedinți, "*can explain the aspect of each planetary cover in each region, and the relations between one cover and the other*".

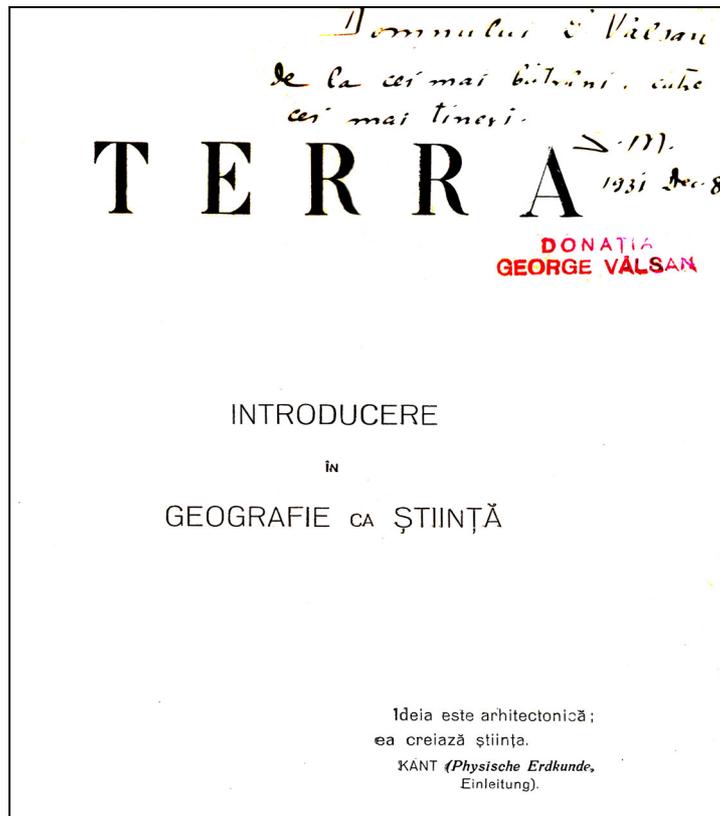


Fig. 4 – *Terra – Introduction to Geography as Science*, published in 1931.

Topicality of Simion Mehedinți and his work.

All in all, the work of Prof. Simion Mehedinți has contributed to “*discovering the philosophical meaning of modern Geography as science of the whole Earth and to finding out the theoretical and practical modalities of disseminating this concept*” (Mihăilescu, 1967). *Terra. An introduction to Geography as Science* can be considered one of the first works underlain by a global systems outlook (Bălțeanu, Șerban, 2005).

In the scholar’s view, the Earth is a complex system made up of four planetary spheres, whose relations rely on the following interdependent principles: progressive complexity of spheres; causal subordination of planetary covers and causal subordination (on the horizontal) of geographical zones.

Simion Mehedinți insisted on the complex assessment of phenomena and, to this end, he suggested using some static and dynamic categories. Speaking of geographical phenomena the scientist asserted that “*the order of scientific description should follow the order of causality of natural phenomena*” (Mehedinți, 1931).

The static categories themselves show quantitative (*form, dimension and position*) and qualitative (*composition, density and colour*) differences. The dynamic categories feature direction, intensity and rate of development, highlight motion and interaction between various phenomena. The assessment of these categories underlies the relationships among geospheres, as well as “*action centres*” and “*convergence formulae*”, enabling a coherent statement of inter-geosphere connections (Mihăilescu, 1967).

Obviously, examples in the *Terra* volume and specific detailings show the level of knowledge reached in the first half of the 20th century.

In his opinion, the complex connections established among the four geospheres reveal the influence of change in one cover on all the other covers and are reflected in such planetary circuits as regular winds and Ocean currents. Moreover, the author used to underline now and again that “*these covers do depend one upon the other, just as body parts do*”. Therefore, it is not by chance that the exemple used refers to the increase or decrease of CO₂ in the atmosphere. Thus, if CO₂ content were doubled, the consequence would be a 4°C temperature rise on the globe, a change in the zoning of the climate, vegetation and fauna that might trigger major transformations in the hydrosphere.

Mehedinți considered that the Earth should be viewed as an organism that has a specific internal organisation and modifications liable to affecting it in the course of time (Mihăilescu, 1967). Initially, following Ratzel, his master, Mehedinți considered that the population belongs to the biosphere and, as such, man-environment relations can be studied under Biogeography (Tufescu, 1967). The scholar, also author of *Anthropogeography in Romania*, has often emphasised the essential role played by Man in the global change of the Earth. His preoccupation for the diversity of relations between man and the environment, as well as the constant interest for ethnographic studies gradually led him to approaching economic and social aspects related to the influence of human activity upon the Earth.

Sometime later, Mehedinți would steadily repeat that man should be viewed both as part of the biosphere and as socio-historical structure because societal relations make him interact with the environment in a distinctively different manner, depending on the social-economic development level of each stage.

Speaking of the hydrosphere, Mehedinți contends that building dams and other protection devices turned man into the strongest agent involved in changing stream channels. The Professor also emphasises the human impact on land cover, as a result of expanding farm land, changing land use and causing the extinction of numerous plant and animal species. In works by Simion Mehedinți one finds lots of examples on the role of deforestation in the intensification of present-day geomorphological processes.

Making a detailed analysis of human impact on the atmosphere, hydrosphere, lithosphere and biosphere, the scientist reached a global conclusion on the last sphere, in particular: “*the role man plays is indeed very important; in what regards the status and dynamics of the planetary spheres, perhaps there is no other agent whose influence can be, if not greater, at least neither more diversified than man’s*” (Mehedinți 1909, republished in Mehedinți 1967).

In another of his works devoted to Ratzel, Mehedinți (1904) points out the very moment when the global impact upon the Earth began, namely, in early 19th century, once the industrial revolution got momentum.

Man acts upon the geosphere in a special way by the huge force of his intelligence, thereby modifying the global environment as a whole. As one of the most active agents in changing inter-geosphere relations, man “has not as yet reached the ultimate limit” in doing it (Mehedinți, 1904b).

Emphasising the human impact upon the Earth in the 19th and 20th centuries (after the industrial revolution), The Professor wonders “whether man’s irresponsible actions do not make the millions-year old evolution of our Planet diverge from its normal course” (Mehedinți, 1904a).

As a conclusion, it can be appreciated that, based on the early 20th century knowledge existing in his time, Mehedinți outlined the following aspects which are significant also for current geographical and environmental research:

- issues specific to the first part of the Anhpocene, a period which international research programmes define as corresponding to the ever stronger global human impact on the Earth in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution (Syvitski 2012).
- inter-connected inter-geosphere relations and the possibility for certain planetary thresholds to be surpassed, as recently documented (Steffen *et al.* 2004; Gafney 2009).

- outline of the post-1800 period of accelerated decrease of biodiversity.
- the necessity for interdisciplinary research into the natural phenomena causality order related to the complexity of natural and social phenomena, as outlined in State of the Planet Declaration (2012).

Although the work of Professor Mehedinți is relatively little known abroad, yet some praiseworthy references to the two *Terra* volumes have been made. For example, the 1934 issue of the Italian *Scientia* Journal pointed out that *Terra* is "... a very well-documented work devoted to defining the object and methods of Geography with a view to improving Geography. It is a very elevated scientific synthesis, worth being translated into a language of broader circulation" (Mihăilescu, 1967).

After 1948, when the communist system in Romania was forcibly imposed, despite the fact that Mehedinți was recognised as founder and organiser of Romanian Geography, the school created by him was labelled "a bourgeois school based on geographical determinism and the pseudo-scientific thinking of geopolitics" (*Monografia Geografică a Republicii Populare Române*, 1960).

Subsequently, the post-1960 period of limited liberalisation made it possible to partially acknowledge the work of some forerunners of the Romanian scientific school, among whom Simion Mehedinți. Some of his works were published and the role he had played in the development of Romanian Geography was being accepted (a special issue of *Analele Universității București* 1969, and other articles in various Romanian journals, occasioned by 100 years from the birth of Simion Mehedinți).

After 1990, all of his work was being reconsidered, a 2nd edition of *Terra*, his fundamental achievement, was put out (1994) and a number of foundations, bearing his name and publishing his works, have been set up. It is the case of "Simion Mehedinți" Association in Focșani Town, which published scores of volumes on the author.

The "Simion Mehedinți" Foundation set up under the aegis of the National Geography Committee and the Institute of Geography organises annually a session for young researchers and an International Summer School at the Station of Natural Hazards Research in the Curvature Carpathians, close to the Professor's birthplace.

In his will, Simion Mehedinți bequeathed the dwelling-house, where he lived and had written his works, to the Institute of Geography of the Romanian Academy. In this place, a symbol of the traditions of the Romanian School of Geography, the National Geographical Committee and "Simion Mehedinți" Foundation are developing their activity.

Acknowledgements: The elaboration of this paper was made under the National Geographical Atlas theme (1.1) of Research Plan of the Institute of Geography of the Romanian Academy.

Related documentation was made at the Institut für Länderkunde and the Leipzig University Library during a DAAD research stage (2007).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bălțeanu, D. (1998), *Die Tradition Leipziger geographischer Publikationen über Rumänien in Leipzig*, e. V, Leipzig.
- Bălțeanu, D, Șerban, Mihaela (2005), *Modificările globale ale mediului. O evaluare interdisciplinară a incertitudinilor*, Edit. Coresi, București.
- Bălțeanu, D, Sima, Mihaela (2007), *Modificările globale ale mediului. Hazarde naturale și tehnologice*, Edit. Credis, București.
- Gafney, O. (2009), *A Planet and the edge*, Global Change, 74, Stockholm.
- Ielenicz, M. (2004), *Simion Mehedinți – savantul predestinat unui moment crucial pentru dezvoltarea geografiei*, in Volum Omagial Simion Mehedinți, Edit. Universitară, București.
- Mehedinți, S. (1901), *Disertația inaugurală. Obiectul geografiei*, in *Opere Alese*, editor V. Mihăilescu, Edit. Științifică, București.
- Mehedinți, S. (1904a), *Pământul ca operă a voinței omenești. Introducere în Geografie*, București, republicat în *Opere Alese* editor V. Mihăilescu, Edit. Științifică, București.
- Mehedinți, S. (1904), *Antropogeografia și întemeietorul ei – Fr. Ratzel*, in *Opere Alese*, editor V. Mihăilescu, Edit. Științifică, București.

- Mehedinți, S. (1931), *Terra. Introducere în geografie ca știință*, 2 vol., editor V. Tufescu, Edit. Națională S. Ciornei, București.
- Mehedinți, S. (1967), *Opere alese*, editor V. Mihăilescu, Edit. Științifică, București.
- Mihăilescu, V. (1967), *Omul și opera*, in *Opere Alese*, editor V. Mihăilescu, Edit. Științifică, București.
- Orghidan, N. (1967), *Școala geografică românească formată de Simion Mehedinți*, in *Opere alese*, editor V. Mihăilescu, Edit. Științifică, București.
- Steffen, W., Sanderson, A., Tyson, P.D., Jager, J., Matson, P.A., Moore III, B., Oldfield, F., Richardson, K., Schellnhuber, H.J., Turner II, B.L., Wasson, R.J. (2004), *Global Change and Earth System. A planet under pressure*, Springer.
- Syvithski, J. (2012), *Anthropocene: An epoch of our making*, *Global Change*, **78**, Stockholm.
- Tufescu, V. (1967), *Concepția și metoda în opera geografică a lui Simion Mehedinți*, in *Opere alese*, editor V. Mihăilescu, Edit. Științifică, București.
- Tufescu, V. (1994), *Simion Mehedinți. Viața și opera*, Edit. Enciclopedică, București.
- State of the Planet Declaration (2012), *Planet under Pressure*, London 2012, available at: http://www.planetunderpressure2012.net/pdf/state_of_planet_declaration.pdf
- *** (1960), *Monografia Geografică a Republicii Populare Române*, Edit. Academiei Române, București.

Received April 23, 2012