Conclusions

This study evolved out of a research project that investigated census-like population registers completed in Wallachia in 1838, now in the Romanian national archives. These lists were very detailed and gave the names and ages of all household members and proceeded to indicate both their “nationality”, that is to say ethnicity and their main occupation. The registers also included economic data such as the amount of land cultivated and the crops grown, as well as how many horses, oxen, sheep, goats and pigs were kept, if there were beehives, the size of orchards, what fruit trees were tended and how large were the vineyards, etc. The lists were made for each village by local officials. A few of the lists are missing, but the archived material covers most of Wallachia. An article based on the analysis of more than 12,000 households classified as Țigan has been published concerning the living conditions of “Gypsy” slaves (Gaunt and Rotaru 2021).

Studying the preserved registers revealed 800 households classified as rudar. Because the modern Rudari have been the object of much research and speculation, we decided to undertake this separate study on these households to see if the register could cast further light on the development of this group. There are many reasons why the Rudari have attracted researchers. Although considered by their neighbours as marginalized outsiders, mainly because of their lifestyle, which has meant they have been constantly treated as part of the Romani or Gypsy ethnic community, most Rudari reject the Romani identity and for this they give many reasons. Particularly, those Rudari interviewed in Romania by linguists and ethnographers during the twentieth century, do not speak Romani čhib but rather an archaic variety of the Romanian language. Also, the very name Rudar is an older Slavic term for miner, even though at present they work mostly with wood. Hence, it is possible to interpret them as a case of the fluidity of socio-professional identities coupled with flexible ethnic identity. Our research expanded in order to gain increased knowledge about this group: when and where did the Rudari change from extracting precious metals along Wallachia’s sub-Carpathian rivers into carving wood throughout the Balkan countries? How did this community maintain self-identification as Rudar despite no longer prospecting for gold? When, where and indeed did they ever begin to distance themselves from the Romani community? When did they begin to migrate out of Wallachia?

Ethnologists, folklorists, linguists, and social anthropologists have dominated studies of modern Rudari and they describe various aspects of groups of wood-carving people who have cultural traits that mix elements taken from...
many different ethnicities and religions. The bulk of modern ethnographic studies have been made about Rudari groups who live outside Romania in other Balkan countries and who make wooden household utensils and speak Romanian language. Most of them insist on not being Gypsies or Roms. The informants who have been interviewed give widely differing narratives about their origins, but many relate a legend of descent from the ancient Dacians. Few ethnographic studies have investigated Rudari communities actually living inside Romania.

Our investigation led us back in time, using as many Romanian historical sources as possible. Our hypothesis, based on evidence indicated by linguistic research, was that the Rudari originated in Wallachia and that they later spread to other Balkan and Central European regions. A constant migration of Rudari to Transylvania is evident from the onomastics. Samuel Köleséri junior, inspector of mines in Transylvanian in 1692, mentioned a locality named Ruda where gold was panned. During the same period, naturalist Grisellini referred to the village Rudâria on Almăj river (Grisellini 1984: 301). The Hapsburg conscriptions of nomadic tax-payer Gypsies mention Stoica Rudaru (1744, 1749, 1752, as Sztojka Rudally in 1753), 1756, and 1785), Rudar/Rudan Mucsindu (1761, 1781, 1785) (Zsupos 1996). A few Rudari would return to Wallachia, as shown in the case of one Rudar lumberjack, Toader sin Ioniță Lezpezeanu, a boyar slave belonging to the aristocratic family Brâncoveanu, and who is recorded in 1828 as having returned from Austria.

The sources used here were difficult to subject to normal historical source criticism. Comparison with other statistics proved impossible. The population and economic resource register completed in 1838 was a solitary occasion. There are very few contemporaneous documents to compare it with. We have presented a source critical examination (Gaunt and Rotaru 2021) and shown some categories of Gypsies were excluded from registration, for instance the so called “Turkish Gypsies” (Rotaru 2021). However, some useful older documents concerning the Rudari are in the archive of the medieval Cozia Monastery, also deposited in the Romanian national archive. Most useful for our purposes are two volumes of transcripts copied in the second half of the eighteenth century. The monastery delivered these to the prince of Wallachia when asking confirmation for all previous privileges and donations of property and slaves given by the Wallachian princes. Some of these documents concern a dispute over who actually “owns” the Rudari and who controls the collection of their taxes paid in gold. These documents are difficult to examine source critically,

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1 See for instance Sorescu-Markinović 2011: 10–24 and for a hazy identification with the Gypsies see Marushiakova and Popov 2021: 37–73.
Conclusions

since the original privileges and donations, some of them dating from the fourteenth century, have not been preserved, and we therefore only have the version supplied by the monks. Also, in the dispute over “ownership” of collecting the Rudari tax, no protest written by the Rudari or their representative has been found, so their side of the story has to be filtered through Cozia’s interpretation.

Investigation of the Cozia Monastery archive reveals much concerning the history of the Rudari. Many documents show that for a long time the monastery was considered responsible for “all” Rudari in Wallachia. In 1388, prince Mircea the Elder donated 300 Țigan households to the monastery. This was one of the first ever mentions of Țigani in a Romanian territory. Wallachia had recently emerged as a principality after defending itself in a long series of wars with its neighbours and nomadic invasions. By the late fourteenth century, it achieved stable territorial boundaries, an unchallenged dynastic succession in the Basarab family and it established an orderly chancellery and taxation, and a system of military defence. Cozia situated in the Vâlcea County along the Olt River began being built in 1388. It is unclear whether the Țigani donated that year were intended to move to the monastery and help with its construction, which is unlikely, or if the donation merely concerned the delivery to the monastery the money of 300 Țigani’s taxes, which is more likely given conditions at the time. The document gives no indication where the donated families were living, who was their leader, who was their previous owner, and this gives a possible indication that it was not the physical persons but rather the tax money that was donated to the amount that 300 households would be expected to pay. Gold dust and flakes washed out from sand deposited along the riverbanks was one of the few domestic economic resources of medieval Wallachia, which was sparsely populated by pastoralists. The fourteenth century was an era of general economic boom throughout the Mediterranean region, thereby giving all supplies of gold and silver an increased value. This continued even after, in the mid-fifteenth century, Wallachia became a semi-independent vassal-state subjected to the Ottoman Sultan and committed to paying an annual tribute.

Other medieval documents transcribed by Cozia’s monks indicate that the original donated Țigani were working as gold prospectors, gold-panners and gold-washers along Wallachia’s rivers. Further the monastery had the right to appoint vătafs (headmen) to collect their taxes. Throughout the Middle Ages they had been identified by the Romanian language term aurari. However, in the sixteenth century there was a change, and the Wallachian gold prospectors began to be called Rudari. This was a Slavic term used in Serbia and Bosnia for the miners working in gold and silver mines. The Serbian rudar miners were famous for their self-governing regulations, inspired by German models. It has
not been possible to determine if the transition from aurari to rudari reflected other changes to the gold prospecting community. It might be that the legal framework of the Wallachian institution of slavery was itself changing, from a loose sort of “ownership” over the product of the slave’s labour to a tighter control over the slave’s person, who, in being a “Țigan”, was becoming equal to being a slave.

The issue of slave “ownership” came to a head in the eighteenth century when Hapsburg Austria defeated the Ottomans and was in 1718 granted Oltenia, the western part of Wallachia, which was kept until 1739. This was the province in which Cozia was located and it also included some of the richest gold sand reserves worked by the Rudari. In contrast to Wallachia, the Austrians did not have a legal institution of slavery and it was in a period marked by political enlightened despotism. This meant that Cozia’s claim to ownership over the Rudari as slaves was not recognised. The gold prospectors were treated as freemen for the two decades that the Austrian occupation lasted. Austria had renewed control over Oltenia in 1769–74.

The Austrians began a process of economic modernisation and placed great importance on mining, which resulted in some expert geological surveys of mineral resources, which sometimes included descriptions of gold-washing methods and living conditions. Two major changes took place during this time. The first was that the Rudari became free from the constrictions of Wallachian legal slavery and the second was that Cozia was no longer recognised as the receiver/owner of their taxes. Instead, their taxes were paid to the Imperial Treasury. Inside of the Hapsburg Empire, they were free to move away from Oltenia and particularly to regions that had been devastated and depopulated during the Austrian-Ottoman wars. Thus, they could and did settle in Banat, Bačka, Slavonia and Croatia, particularly in the southernmost districts that formed part of the Austrian military frontier (now parts of Hungary, Serbia and Croatia), where the need for re-population was acute, and officials encouraged movement in by all sorts of ethnicities and new settlers had privileges and benefits. These were places where the newcomers found washing river sand for gold not possible, but there were many forests available for those skilled at carving wood. Another direction of migration of the Rudari was eastwards to Moldavia. There is explicit mention of the migration of the Rudari here by 1792.² They enjoyed the status of Princely Gypsies, a status different from being slaves to the monastery or to private owners.³

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² See doc. nr. 32 in the Appendix.
³ See doc. nr. 33 in the Appendix.
Thus, in the eighteenth century the Rudari experienced the liberty associated with being reclassified as State Gypsies. This might have helped their group identification and dissociation from the “Țigan” community which implied the bondage of slavery.

At about the same time the Austrian administration tried to stop migration northwards and set up the well-known signs prohibiting entry into Austrian territory proper and made entry for Gypsies punishable by death. Those Gypsies who already lived inside the Austro-Hungarian core territory were subjected to a series of restrictions aimed at destroying their culture – language and clothing became forbidden; children were taken from families to be brought up as Austrians – in an effort to make them “useful” to the state. Thus, it became risky to self-identify as Gypsy. The Rudari who lived in Wallachia’s eastern province of Muntenia were unaffected by emancipatory impulses coming from Austria. But as Cozia was in occupied territory it was unclear how the monastery could exercise its still-legal control and receive the taxes collected inside Wallachia.

The Rudari experience of living in the Austrian Empire is part of the background to their conflict with the Cozia Monastery. After Oltenia was returned to Wallachia, the monastery was eager to resume its control over gold extraction and tax collection. The two archive volumes containing a selection of privileges and donations is part of its campaign to regain its “ownership”. Almost without exception previous Wallachian rulers on their coronation had confirmed previous donations to Cozia and its privileges. Now the monks made the claim that the 1388 act of donation meant that the 300 Țigan households given then were “inalienable property”. Hereby, one can suspect a change of meaning in what slave “ownership” in Wallachia meant from a loose control through appropriation of taxes, to that of chattel slavery permitting harsh discipline and personal inherited servitude. The Rudari contested this “inalienable property” interpretation as not applicable to them, given that they were not țigani. In fact, the Rudari had already made this ethnic/legal distinction in the seventeenth century, with the Austrian experience only reinforcing these separatist feelings. By the start of the nineteenth century, Cozia was no longer the sole legal owner, but ownership was shared with the state in the form the State Treasury collecting taxes, and then paying an amount to the monastery.

In 1838, in the aftermath of a Russian occupation that re-organised Wallachia, an inventory was made of its population and its taxable economic resources. Typically for its time it demanded details on ethnicity or nationality. Studying this enormous multi-volume inventory resulted in information on more than 12,000 households classified as Țigani with nearly 50,000 inhabitants. It also revealed 800 households of the Rudari practicing various occupations and
belonging to various types of owners: 173 (21.6%) were gold-washers and belonged to the state, while 122 (15.3%) were spoon-makers and belonged to the state for the greatest part (102) and the rest to the Cozia Monastery (18), while only two were registered as being owned by the boyars.

The Rudari were not the only ones to prospect for gold. The 1838 census registered also 52 Țigani households who practiced gold-washing in the rivers, and who belonged to the state. A small group of 47 households were registered as Țigani spoon-makers, belonging for the greatest part to the state (28), the rest belonging to monasteries (10), private owners (3) and 6 of them were free taxpayers.

Thus, overwhelmingly, the gold-washer Rudari and Țigani were registered as belonging to the state, and so was the majority of the Rudari who had converted to spoon carving and the Țigani spoon makers. Only a few Rudari and Țigani spoon-makers were still in the hands of monasteries, among others Cozia. The cases of private ownership over these two categories were very rare.

Geographically the gold-washer Rudari and Țigani lived in large or medium-sized communities along certain rivers and tributaries flowing down from the Carpathian Mountains. Very few Rudari lived in the Wallachian plains, and those that did were, of necessity, engaged in occupations other than panning for gold. The large communities enabled the Rudari to work in large teams tending complicated wooden apparatus for washing and cleaning the sand.

However, the same 1838 inventory shows that the Rudari were in a process of transforming into making a living from carving wood, carpentry, making wheels and so on. This had previously been a side-line of making gold-washing tools and apparatus, but now evolved into the main source of income. While gold-washing was confined to certain bends in rivers, wood working could be done in many places where forests gave suitable wood. Wood carvers also needed to be mobile in order to peddle their wares door-to-door or in market towns and fairs.

The two ways of making a Rudari living split the communities and polarised them. In 1838 more than 300 of the 800 Rudari households no longer panned for gold. They had a large range of occupations, but the majority were making products out of wood. The gold-washer Rudari appear in the inventory as relatively rich by Wallachian standards. They possessed land, sometimes sizeable areas of which were cultivated; they could also have many animals, and a few had orchards. This indicated permanent settlement. In contrast, the wood-carvers with few exceptions are relatively poor; few had land and those who did, had also small holdings, few animals and hardly ever orchards. It might be possible to see them as having been marginalised out of Rudari society and proletarianized. One of our early hypotheses was that the group registered in
the inventory as *zlătari* (metallurgists and/or goldsmiths) could have been an off-shoot from the gold-washer communities. This seems not to have been the case. In contrast to the gold-washers they were very poor and lived in the Wallachian plains as solitary households or in small groups. They belonged to only a handful of boyar noblemen, some of whom were extremely powerful. There was no evidence that the Zlătari goldworkers and the goldsmiths had any relation to the Rudari. If there ever had been it must have been far back in time before the transfer to boyar ownership and their movement into southern Wallachia.

Two special investigations of other groups listed in 1838 have been made. One of Lingurari spoon-makers and the other of Țigani who were attributed the occupation of gold-washers. The aim was to see if there were any connections to the Rudari. This connection seemed to hold in both cases. Like the Rudari, the spoon-makers could in some instances live in very large communities and possess land and animals. Their settlements were located similar places as the gold-washers. One could see that the most prosperous spoon-maker communities were grouped in deeply forested areas close to the town of Buzău in north-eastern Wallachia. This may be the cradle of Rudari woodworking. In the case of just over 50 households of “Gypsies” being gold-panners, one can see certain similarities with the Rudari in the form of settlement patterns, occupation and economic resources. The census-takers seem to have recognised ethnic distinctions, since some villages are recorded as containing both Rudari and Țigani among the gold-washers.

The decline in alluvial gold forced people to find new ways of earning a living and new places to live. By the end of the nineteenth century the Rudari in Wallachia made the transition for which they are now known: working with wood. They are now dispersed throughout the world. Not just to the former Austrian military frontier region, but far and wide. Our investigation cannot answer all questions about the origins of the Rudari, but one can indicate somewhat better the chronology of various transitions of occupation, legal status and self-identification. What one finds is a fluidity of ethnicity marked by migration and multiple ways of making a living, together with a solidity marked by keeping the name Rudari despite forgetting their gold prospecting past.