

EXPLORING *STIHII*.

THE JOURNEY OF A TERM IN THE ROMANIAN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

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Abstract The purpose of this article is to trace the journey of the term *stihii* within the Romanian language, focusing on its evolution from the early modern period to the 19th century. Deeply connected with the Byzantine theology and philosophy, *stihii* traditionally refers to the four fundamental elements of nature (air, earth, fire and water), and their inherent powers. The study examines the term's progression from representing the four classical elements to embodying more abstract notions such as spiritual or incorporeal entities. Through an analysis of predominantly theological sources, the article explores how *stihii* served as a lens through which the natural world was understood and interpreted in harmony with theological thought. The research highlights the transformation of these elemental concepts within Romania's culture, underscoring their role in shaping language, practices, and beliefs. The article aims at providing a broad cultural analysis, encompassing language, mythology, ancient philosophy, theology, anatomy, folklore, and literature, to explore the multifaceted significance of *stihii* in the Romanian ethos.

Keywords Stihii, fundamental elements, untamed forces, spirits, Early Modern Romania

1. Introduction

While the ancient naturalistic perspective on cosmogony diffused, reaching far beyond its Greek origins, it found a unique expression in Romania, where ecclesiastical scholars sought to reconcile these ancient philosophical concepts with their theological doctrines. In the historical provinces of Romania, due to the prerogative of the Church in education, classical texts underwent meticulous reinterpretation to align with ecclesiastical teachings. This scrutiny led to a notable transformation of naturalistic philosophical concepts, with Romanian scholars

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emphasizing divine creation from primordial elements – water, earth, air, and fire – as fundamental substances from which the universe and life emerged. Initially embraced by the educated classes of Wallachia and Moldova, where Greek was spoken among the elite, the ancient theory of the natural elements disseminated further across the region, undergoing significant evolution. Within this context, Romanian ecclesiastical scholars, drawing from both ancient Greek philosophy and Church doctrine, reimagined the cosmological theory not only as a metaphysical system but also as a theological narrative harmonizing with the creation story central to their faith.

The Greek term στοιχεῖον (*stoikheîon*), translated into Romanian as *stihie* (via Old Church Slavonic, which was the ecclesiastical language), held significance in pre-Socratic Greek philosophy, particularly among naturalist thinkers such as Thales of Miletus, Empedocles, Anaximander, Anaximenes, or Heraclitus of Ephesus, who extensively pondered the four primary elements of the cosmos. As such, *stihie* represented a generalised concept likely familiar to educated individuals in the Romanian provinces during the high middle ages and early modern period. Consequently, it is unsurprising that the term *stihie*, with its etymological connotation of 'primary elemental components of the cosmos', gained early traction among scholars and eventually permeated popular usage.

Building upon this historical backdrop, the Romanian term *stihii* emerges as a salient concept that expanded beyond its original meaning ('element'). The term is rich in connotations, spanning from the primordial components of creation to the unleashed forces of nature, vital bodily humours, spiritual entities, or malevolent manifestations.

In the subsequent discussion, I will explore the multiple interpretations of *stihii* within the Romanian cultural and philosophical thought, with a focus on the early modern period. I will thus draw upon a range of sources from early chronicles and ecclesiastic texts to folklore and apocrypha, as well as literary and medical texts. By examining the diverse contexts in which *stihii* appears, including creation myths, folk beliefs about natural phenomena, and philosophical discourse, we can unravel its significance in Romanian culture and its evolution over time. Through references and examples gleaned from these sources, we will gain insight into how *stihii* has been used to convey different associations and reflect broader cultural and philosophical currents.

2. Methodology

In this study, a multi-disciplinary approach is employed to investigate the significance of the term *stihii* in Romanian culture. Drawing from linguistic, historical, literary, philosophical, and medical sources, the analysis employs a diverse array of investigative approaches. Through textual analysis, diverse historical texts are examined, including chronicles, ecclesiastic writings, folklore, apocrypha, literary works, and medical treatises, to discern patterns of usage and meaning associated with *stihii*. Furthermore, a comparative approach is adopted to investigate the varied usage of the term across different genres and time periods, shedding light on its evolution and nuanced connotations. Historical contextualization offers both a

diachronic and synchronic perspective on the usage of *stihii*. Thus, the present inquiry explores the reciprocal influence between *stihii* and perceptions of nature, human existence, spirituality, and cosmology during the Romanian early modern period.

3. Linguistic background

As previously mentioned, in the high middle ages through to the early modern period, the cultural landscape of Romania was shaped by a convergence of linguistic influences. Following the Hellenization in the Byzantine Empire, Moldavia and Wallachia underwent significant linguistic influence from Greek, either through direct contact or indirectly through Old Slavic texts. The elites were primarily versed in Greek, or, in the 18th century, were dominated by Greek Phanariotes, while the liturgical language was Old Slavonic. Starting with Cyril and Methodius in the 9th century, numerous biblical texts were translated from Greek into Paleo Slavic. Over time, it gained prominence as a literary language across Slavic regions, with its cultural influence extending into present-day Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Serbia, Croatia, Russia, and even non-Slavic territories such as the Romanian Provinces and Lithuania. This two-fold linguistic influence left a lasting mark on the Romanian vernacular, and the Romanian word *stihie* is just one example reflecting the blending of Greek and Slavic linguistic elements within the Romanian language.

The term *stihie* (plural: *stihii*) traces its etymology to the Byzantine Greek word στοιχεῖον (*stoikheion*), meaning ‘element’, partially through the Old Church Slavonic стихию (*stichija*). In Romanian, *stihie* is a feminine noun that encompasses various meanings, from the primordial elements of creation to the unleashed forces of nature, and extending to bodily humours, spectral apparitions, malevolent spirits, and desolate places. Although *stihie* has largely fallen into disuse, with its prevalence waning after the early 20th century, its etymological doublet, *stafie* – meaning ‘ghost’ – remains active in the modern lexicon. In the Aromanian dialect, *stihiu* diverged from its original meaning of ‘element’ to specifically denote spectral figures, akin to one of the meanings in Romanian. In Lithuanian, *stichija* conveys meanings similar to Romanian *stihie*, such as classical elements and natural disasters, as well as distinct types of spaces. Equivalents for ‘element’ in other Slavic languages include Belarusian: стыхія (*stihia*) and Russian: Стихий (*stihii*).

In the *Thesaurus Dictionary of the Romanian Language*, the primary definition listed under the entry for *stihie* is: (archaic and popular) one of the four elements (fire, water, air, earth) historically considered to be the foundational constituents of all natural substances and phenomena. Drawing upon some of the earliest sources, it references a passage dated before 1654 which likens the four heads of an asp to the four *stihii* that compose the human body. A passage dating back to before 1683 reveals that the visible world was formed from these same four *stihii*.¹

¹ *Dicționarul limbii române (DLR)*, Serie nouă, tomul X. Partea a 5-a, Litera S (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 1994): 1586, *stihie*.

In Samuel Micu-Klein's *Dictionarium Valachico-Latinum*, a manuscript completed in 1801, the term *stihie* is translated as 'elementum (ex graeco).' This term appears in the *Lexicon* of Buda (1825), where *stihie* is defined as 'element.' Notably, it is not included under the *Slavic elements* section in Alexandru Cihac's *Dictionnaire d'étymologie daco-romane* (1870, 1879). It is also absent from Laurian and Massim's *Dicționarul limbei române* (Vol. II, 1876), which aligns with the authors' preference for Latinization (instead, the term 'element' is present in Volume I, defined as principle or fundamental substance of matter).

Lazăr Șăineanu's *Dicționarul universal al limbii române* (1929) attributes two meanings to *stihie*: an element and an elementary spirit. Likewise, in Ion Aurel Candrea's *Dicționarul enciclopedic ilustrat* (1931) the term is associated with the meanings of primordial element and apparition (*stafie*). August Scriban's *Dicționarul limbei românești* (1939) also defines *stihie* as an element, an apparition (*stafie*), and a spirit.

Surprisingly, only in the 20th century did dictionaries start documenting secondary meanings of the term *stihie*, such as spirit, force of nature, or wilderness, despite their much earlier use. The comprehensive recording of these denotations occurred in *Dicționarul limbii române literare contemporane* (1955-1957), where the primary definition of *stihie* was 'a natural phenomenon that manifests itself as an irresistible force.' The second meaning was catalogued as 'element' in the classical philosophical sense. The subsequent recorded meanings were: evil spirit; chimera, apparition; desert place.

4. *Stihii*: the natural elements of creation

Early Romanian literary works on the genesis of humanity showcased a blend of Christian theology and naturalistic concepts, intertwined with Byzantine culture, local folklore, and distant echoes of Far Eastern ideas: "Under the aegis of the Church, certain literary works emerged, ostensibly presenting a moral and ecclesiastical character. However, upon closer examination, they reveal an underlying secular nature. So-called 'popular books,' these works garnered widespread readership among the Slavonic-literate populace within the Romanian provinces. A notable instance of such literary texts is the novel *Varlaam and Ioasaf*, based on the Indian narrative of Buddha, which is preserved in the 15th-century manuscript no. 132 housed at the Romanian Academy and Manuscript no. 158 located at Mount Athos, also dating from the same century."² The narrative, reissued in 1921 by Ioan Mihălcescu, articulated the concept of the primordial elements (*stihii*) constituting the universe, as orchestrated not by enigmatic forces but through divine ordinance, as understood by Christian faith: "How could these disparate and conflicting elements have coalesced to form the world, and how could they abide together rather than descend into chaos if not for the intervention of the Almighty?"³

² Petre P. Panaitescu, *Manuscrisele slave din Biblioteca Academiei RPR* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Române, 1959): XV (my translation).

³ Ioan Mihălcescu, *Varlaam și Ioasaf* (Bucharest: Tipografia România Nouă, 1921): 63 (my translation).

In the 16th-century work *The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son, Theodosius*, Neagoe Basarab, the Voivode of Wallachia, mentioned the four elements that compose the human body (the translation from Old Slavonic into Romanian, circa 1650, uses the term *stihii*).⁴ In a similar vein, Metropolitan Varlaam (17th century) articulated the creation of humanity through the lens of the four fundamental elements (*stihii*), according to the Hellenic philosophical legacy. Yet, he diverged from the notion of an impersonal creative force, such as Anaximander's concept of *apeiron* – the boundless, infinite source of all existence. Instead, Varlaam emphasized a theistic interpretation, asserting that it was by divine command that humanity was formed: “God made man from the four principles” (“De în patru *stihii*, pre om Dumnezeu I-au zidit”), thus framing creation within the context of divine will rather than as a consequence of primordial chaos.⁵

The apocryphal book *The Wisdom of Solomon* makes mention of the transformative nature of the primordial elements, as exemplified in Chapter 19, verses 17 and 19 (*New International Version*, hereafter referred to as NIV), which describes an interchangeable mutation of the elements: “For the elements changed places with one another” and “Fire even in water retained its normal power, and water forgot its fire-quenching nature”.⁶ The first Romanian translation of the Bible (referred to as the *Cantacuzino Bible*⁷ henceforth), dating back to 1688, used the term *stihii* to denote these elements (“Pentru că, pren sine *stihii*le împreunându-se ... Focul au putut în apă, peste puterea sa, și apa stingătoarea ei putere uita”). Similarly, in the New Testament, the Second Epistle of Peter depicts the eschatological end, where the heavens succumb to fire and the elements – *stihii* in the *Cantacuzino Bible* – melt in the fervour of divine judgment.

In the dedication of the Romanian Psalter, printed in Bucharest in 1694, Antim Ivireanul refers to *stihii* as the basic elements and the primordial origins of all creation.⁸ In his homilies, particularly in the ‘Teaching on the Epiphany,’ he elaborates on the concept of *stihii*, stating that these four elements are the fundamental components from which humans and the entire world are crafted. He posits that humanity will ultimately dissolve back into these elements until the second coming of Lord Christ, at which point a reconstitution will occur.⁹ Furthermore, Antim Ivireanul extends the meaning of *stihii* beyond the classical elements to include celestial bodies, suggesting that the sun, transcending other planets (*stihii*), bestows its

⁴ Neagoe Basarab, *Învățăturile lui Neagoe Basarab către fiul său Teodosie* (Chișinău: Litera Internațional, 2001), 121.

⁵ Kir Varlaam, Mitropolitul Ugrovlahiei, *Cheia înțeleșului* (Bucharest: Mitropolia Bucureștilor, 1678): <https://tiparituriromanesti.wordpress.com/2014/07/22/cheia-intelesului-bucuresti-1678/> (accessed on 16 April 2024).

⁶ -- *The Holy Bible*, New International Version®, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission.

⁷ *Biblia adecă Sfânta Scriptură ale cei vechi și ale cei noao leage* (Bucharest: Mitropolia Bucureștilor, 1688): [https://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/Biblia_\(Biblia_de_la_Bucure%C8%99ti\)](https://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/Biblia_(Biblia_de_la_Bucure%C8%99ti)) (accessed on 10 April 2024).

⁸ Antim Ivireanul, *Didahii* (Chișinău: Litera, 1998), 251.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

affection upon the modest Earth.¹⁰ This dual application of the term reflects a nuanced understanding of the natural and divine order in Antim's works.

Between 1703 and 1705, Dimitrie Cantemir wrote *A Hieroglyphic History*, comprising a lexicographic endeavour (*Scara numelor*), where he offered a definition, directly referencing the Greek language: “*stihie* – (Greek) the beginning of a thing made of matter, some say there are four, others three, others more, others only one.”¹¹ Furthermore, in *The Divan or the Sage's Dispute with the World or the Litigation between Soul and Body*, eschatological images are presented: “Therefore, after you die and the *stihii* of your body, each different from the other, shall separate, and the body shall be parted from the soul...”¹² The term ‘elements’ is also used interchangeably with *stihii* in a similar context.¹³

In the 19th century, the theory of the four elements, or *stihii*, was still widely accepted. For example, Zaharia Carcalechi's article *Pentru Atmosferă, adecă Văzduh* (‘On Atmosphere, or Air’), provides scientific explanations to common inquiries. To the question “What is Air?” he responds that it is one of the four elements (*stihii*), exceedingly fine, sparse, and in constant motion; a clear substance vitally necessary for life, for the flame of fire, for light, for hearing, and for the breathing of animals.¹⁴ This answer mirrors the era's prevailing scientific beliefs, reflecting the still prevailing natural philosophy of the time.

Even in the 20th century, the concept of *stihii* as the four elements found its way into poetic expression. An example of this can be seen in the epic poem *Țiganiada*, (published in the 1920s). The lines in question read: “High in the darkened sky, / There lies a place (as written in the book) / Which philosophers call chaos, / Where an unending battle rages, / Element (*stihie*) upon elements (*stihii*) in strife!...”¹⁵ This passage illustrates the enduring influence of the ancient concept of the elements, portraying them not just as passive components of the world, but as active participants in an eternal conflict, embodying the idea of *stihii* as both fundamental elements and powerful, unleashed forces of nature.

Romanian folklore also preserved the biblical narrative of man's creation, which found its way into wedding “pardons,” poetic compositions where the bride, through a designated speaker, sought forgiveness from her kin. Initially stemming from literary sources, these pardons evolved over time, incorporating new elements influenced by contemporary trends. The tale of human creation, drawing from Byzantine and Slavic traditions, found a place in

¹⁰ Ibid., 202

¹¹ Dimitrie Cantemir, *Istoria ieroglică* (Chișinău: Litera, 2000), 24 (my translation).

¹² Dimitrie Cantemir, *Divanul sau Gilceava înțeleptului cu lumea sau Giudețul trupului cu sufletul*, (ed.) V. Căndea (Bucharest: Editura pentru literatură, 1969), 235 (my translation).

¹³ Ibid., 234.

¹⁴ Zaharia Carcalechi, “Pentru Atmosferă, adecă Văzduh,” *Revista Biblioteca românească*, partea IX, Buda, 1834.

¹⁵ Ion Budai-Deleanu *Țiganiada: poemă eroi-comică în 12 cânturi* (Bucharest: Editura Librăriei Leon Alcalay, [192?]), 45 (my translation).

popular literature.¹⁶ In the High Middle Ages and early modern period, translations of Byzantine texts led to a proliferation of theological and philosophical ideas, some of which were assimilated by the general populace. Notably, a late 17th-century chronicle describes the creation of man from eight elements. Additionally, a 15th-century manuscript published by Barsov lists seven elements, all of which feature prominently in wedding pardons.¹⁷ This correlation underscores a clear similarity between the concepts of creation found in apocryphal texts and those embedded within Romanian folklore. However, amidst these diverse interpretations, the number four retains its significance: it is consecrated in both the composition of the universe and the constituents of the human body. Classically acknowledged as air, earth, water, and fire, these four elements persist as fundamental components in most ecclesial and cultural Romanian writings.

5. From elements to humours

In the early modern period, Hippocratic principles governed medicine, conveyed through the clergy. This canonical approach persisted until the 17th century when advancements in anatomy and chemistry spurred a shift towards secular medicine. But while Western European universities started to emerge in the 13th century, Romania's path to medical secularization was more protracted. The establishment of its first university in 1860 marks a significant delay in embracing scientific medicine independent of ecclesiastical authority, indicating a gradual shift from religious to secular medical practices. In the early modern period, church authorities initially directed medical thought following the paths laid out by Christian dogmas and teachings. In 1646, Vasile Lupu's *Pravila* ('Code of Law') detailed the duties of healers and their relationships with patients and judicial authorities. This code of law was copied into Matei Basarab's *Pravila*, also known as *Îndreptarea legii*, printed in 1652. However, Matei Basarab's *Pravila* also included additional teachings drawn from the Holy Apostles, Synods, and Church Fathers, blending Hippocratic concepts with religious doctrine to address questions of life, death, and the soul, thus bridging scientific and spiritual inquiries.

Therefore, in the Byzantine tradition, the term *stihii* sometimes referred not only to the four elements but also to humours. Tudor Pamfile explains that the Byzantines correlated the creation of the world from the four *stihii* with the composition of man. They posited that "Man is woven from the four *stihii*, namely from blood, phlegm, and yellow and black bile. Thus, man's blood, being hot and watery, is derived from air; the yellow bile, hot and dry, comes from fire; phlegm, being cold and watery, is from water; and the black bile, cold and dry, is from earth. Such is the weaving and embodiment of man."¹⁸

¹⁶ I. Aurel Candrea, *Folclorul medical român comparat. Privire generală. Medicina magică* (Iași: Polirom, 1999), 135.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 136-137.

¹⁸ Tudor Pamfile, *Povestea lumii de demult după credințele poporului român* (Bucharest: Librăriile Socec & Comp și C. Sfetea, 1913), 47-48. ["De omul încă iaste din patru stihii urzit, adecă den sânghi, den flegmă și

Matei Basarab's *Pravila*¹⁹ also echoes this concept, presenting a detailed correlation between the four humours – blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile – and the four elements (*stihii*) of heat, humidity, cold, and dryness. These humours, also referred to as *stihii*, are not only linked to specific organs such as the liver, spleen, kidneys, and lungs but also vary according to the seasons and the individual's age, analogous to the accounts found in Hippocrates' *Nature of Man*. The text describes how each humour resides in a particular location within the body and possesses distinct qualities: blood is warm, moist, and sweet, yellow bile is hot, dry, and bitter, black bile is cold, dry, and somewhat sour, and phlegm is cold, moist, and salty. These *stihii* increase and grow in their own time and are divided among the four stages of a person's life, with each stage dominated by a different humour. Furthermore, the *Pravila* notes that while blood and phlegm are visible, yellow and black bile are not, and all were created by God, aligning with the four elements: blood with fire, phlegm with air, cough with water, and yellow bile with earth due to its dryness. It also states that death occurs when these four *stihii* that compose the human body separate, with the blood being the first to dissipate, hence why corpses lack blood. The heart dies after the other organs, and with its death, the soul departs. Dimitrie Cantemir, in *Divanul*,²⁰ also discusses the balance of the humours, though he identifies seven life stages, emphasizing the importance of moderation in maintaining health.

The term *stihii*, understood as humours, also appears in the earliest known Romanian translation of *Alexandria* (second half of the 16th century), a popular romance written in Hellenistic Egypt around the 3rd century BC and falsely attributed to the historian Callisthenes, hence sometimes referred to as *Pseudo-Callisthenes*. Widely disseminated throughout Europe, the romance entered Romanian literature through a Serbo-Croatian Slavonic translation. The translation mentions that as one approaches forty years, the four humours (*stihii*) of the body – green bile, white phlegm ('cough'), red blood, and sharp 'twinge' – draw near as well.²¹ Thus, the ancient perspective on human anatomy and health, based on tetradic correspondences, was evidently widespread in Romania during the early modern period.

The relationship between *stihii* and the soul presents an interesting hypothesis: the soul resides in the blood, which acts as its carrier. This idea is supported by the term 'arteria,' coined in Ancient Greece, which became associated with the concept of the soul's departure from the body through the blood. After death, as arteries were found to contain nothing but air, it was believed that the soul, once housed in the blood, had left the body. In the context of death, Matei Basarab's *Pravila*²² reflects this belief, stating that when a person dies, it is the

den heară galbănă și niagră. Deci sângele omului cum iaste herbinte și apătos iaste den vânt; hearea galbănă iaste herbente și uscată, iaste den foc; flegma iaste reace și apătoasă, iaste den apă, iară hearea cea neagră, reace și uscată easte den pământ. Atâta iaste urzirea și întruparea omului.”] (My translation).

¹⁹ -- *Îndreptarea legii*, 1652, Edited by the Romanian Old Law Collective (Bucharest: Editura Academiei R.P.R, 1962), 572-574.

²⁰ Dimitrie Cantemir, *Divanul sau Gilceava înțeleptului cu lumea sau Giudețul trupului cu sufletul*, 253, 269.

²¹ -- *Alixăndria*: <https://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/Alix%C4%83ndria> (accessed on 17 April 2024).

²² -- *Îndreptarea legii*, 1652, 572.

stihia of blood that departs, for among the four *stihii*, blood represents fire. Consequently, dead bodies are devoid of blood, yet contain phlegm, cough, and bile, illustrating the ancient and enduring connection between the elements and the human soul.

6. Unleashed forces of nature and evil spirits

While the integration of the classical theory of the four elements with the Christian doctrine of Creation found widespread resonance, it was not a universally held view. Divergent theories continued to flourish, particularly those that sought to explain the cosmos through different lenses. Thus, certain contrasting perspectives on the composition of the cosmos sharply diverged from those of the pre-Socratic philosophers. In the early 18th century, chronicler Nicolae Costin noted, “Some believed the world emerged from chaos, or from the combination of substances and elements (*stihii*).” In his initial chapter, *Pentru zidirea lumii*, he succinctly reviewed the main hypotheses of ancient Greek thinkers concerning the primary constituent principle among the four elements. Subsequently, he affirmed that only Plato, regardless of his pagan beliefs, had come closest to the scriptural verity – that ordered existence originates from God, who shaped man from the dust of the earth.²³

In a sermon concerning the earthquake, Antim Ivireanul articulates such a position too, although in other works he adopts a cosmogonic interpretation based on the amalgamation of the four elements. Diverging from the tenets of pre-Socratic Greek philosophy, he posits that earthquakes cannot be attributed to the *stihii* (understood here not as the four elements, but as wild natural forces). According to him, philosophers such as Anaxagoras, Aristotle, Democritus, and Anaximander omit God’s role in their explanations of natural phenomena. Conversely, Antim Ivireanul elevates the prophet David’s assertions, advocating the view that seismic activity is an act of God, thereby reinstating a theistic dimension to the discourse on natural events and disasters.²⁴ The 17th century officially records a semantic shift in the evolution of the term *stihii*, as it begins to acquire a new connotation, that of turbulent element, fury of nature. This interpretation, while not recognized by lexicographical sources until the 20th century, gradually gains acceptance and prevalence in usage. The term comes to embody the unpredictable and violent forces of nature, reflecting a shift in understanding and articulation of natural phenomena during this period.

Therefore, the term *stihie* holds a secondary meaning in Romanian, as noted in the *Thesaurus Dictionary of the Romanian Language*, which describes it as a natural phenomenon that manifests with irresistible force; an unleashed force of nature. This interpretation has been attested since the 17th century, with Dosoftei referencing “the great *stihie* that will rise

²³ Nicolae Costin, *Letopisețul Țării Moldovei de la zidirea lumii până la 1601*, vol. I, (ed.) Svetlana Korolevschi (Chișinău: Editura Hyperion, 1990), 30-31.

²⁴ Antim Ivireanul, *Didahii*, (Chișinău: Litera, 1998), 169.

on the last day” in an apocalyptic description.²⁵ It was also present in the early 18th century, as seen in the works of Antim Ivireanu. The frequency of this usage increased throughout the 19th century and peaked in the early 20th century. Particularly expressive, it was employed in poetry and literary descriptions, used by poets such as Eminescu, Arghezi, Blaga, Barbu, and writers like Bogaș, Camil Petrescu, Sadoveanu. An example is found in Alexandru Vlahuță’s descriptions in *România pitorească*, where he writes: “Suddenly, from out of the blue, a terrible storm broke loose, and all the *stihii* were stirred up.”²⁶

7. *Stihii and stafii*

The semantic transition from element to malevolent spirits and phantoms, or *stafii* in Romanian, was a natural one, facilitated by various popular beliefs such as the one described by Dimitrie Papasoglu in his history of the founding of Bucharest.²⁷ According to Papasoglu, the term *stafia* originates from the Greek ‘stihion,’ meaning ‘element’ (*stihie*). In construction, elements were used to build any structure, and it was a common practice to embed the measure of a person’s shadow within the walls – an act feared by many, as it was believed that if the builders captured one’s shadow, one would die. By combining the four elements – earth (brick), water, lime (through fire), and wind (air) that dries – you could construct a building, church, or house. Craftsmen believed that incorporating the measure of a person’s shadow into a wall would make the structure last longer. The person whose shadow was taken was thought to die, which is why all *stihii* became frightening, and thus people transformed the concept of *stihie* into *stafie* (ghost).

The term underwent a semantic shift by the beginning of the 18th century, as noted by Dimitrie Cantemir, to signify malevolent spirits: “for prolonged rest serves the evil spirits (*stihii*).”²⁸ This darker connotation of *stihii* as evil spirits became prevalent in 19th-century literature, often mentioned among other perilous apparitions. For instance, in Alecsandri’s theatre (1851), a character laments that “at night, all ghosts (*stihii*) besiege me, alongside the undead, vampires, werewolves, and demons...”²⁹ Similarly, Russo’s memoirs (1835) evoke *stihii* as weavers of misfortune, included in a litany of night terrors that filled both the young and old with dread.³⁰

²⁵ *Dicționarul limbii române* (DLR), Serie nouă, tomul X. Partea a 5-a, Litera S. (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 1994), 1586, *stihie*.

²⁶ Alexandru Vlahuță, *România pitorească* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1943), 86. (My translation).

²⁷ Dimitrie Papasoglu, *Istoria fondărei orașului București* (Bucharest: Tipografia Universul, Luigi Cazzavillan, 1891), 114, 115.

²⁸ Cantemir, *Divanul sau Gilceava înțeleptului cu lumea*, 359

²⁹ Vasile Alecsandri, “Doi morți vii: Vodevil în 2 acte,” in *Opere* vol. 5 (Bucharest: Editura Minerva, 1977), 135 (My translation).

³⁰ Alecu Russo, “Amintiri,” in *Piatra teiului. Scrieri alese* (Bucharest: Editura pentru literatură, 1967), 128.

8. Exploring other metaphorical meanings of *stihii*

A more abstract, spiritual interpretation of *stihii* is found in Paul's Epistle to the Colossians (2:8), where the term 'elemental' metaphorically symbolises the mundane and corrupt spirit of the world that Christians are urged to eschew: "Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world." These elemental spiritual forces, termed "rudiments" in the *King James Version*, are also translated as *stihii* in the *Cantacuzino Bible*. The evolution of the word *stihii* to encompass the concept of 'spirit' marked a significant semantic shift. This transition was further reinforced by the emergence of the etymological doublet, *stafie*, which is more commonly used to denote 'ghost' or 'apparition'. Moreover, the use of *stihie* in an abstract sense to mean 'truth' or 'the spirit of the law' reflects its expanded versatility and depth as a term. In the *Cantacuzino Bible*, *stihie* is employed to convey foundational truths, akin to the 'elementary truths' mentioned in the NIV® translation (Hebrews, 5:12). This metaphorical usage aligns with the broader semantic shift of the term from concrete elements to more ethereal concepts like principles or truths. It signifies a layer of meaning that goes beyond the physical to encompass fundamental, often moral or spiritual, tenets.

In the 18th century, Dimitrie Eustatievici Braşoveanul's work, *Gramatica rumânească*, introduces a further figurative use of the word *stihie* in relation to grammar. He posits that grammar, derived from the Greek γράμματα (letters), is fundamentally about the correct arrangement of these letters, which are the true *stihii* – the foundational elements of syllables and words. Thus, in this context, letters are conceptualized as the primary components, the essential building blocks, of linguistic forms. Thus, by the mid-18th century, *stihie* extended its application from physical elements to foundational principles in various domains, including language and grammar.³¹

In his 1925-1926 course on metaphysics, Nae Ionescu attributed a metaphorical significance to *stihii*, drawing from its established connotation as a spiritual entity. In his exploration of the angelic hierarchy, Nae Ionescu employs the term *stihii* to articulate the celestial orders, positing that within this sacred framework, the seraphim are elevated above the cherubim. This usage of *stihii* emerges from its secondary meaning as a 'spiritual dimension' or 'spirit,' signifying a departure from its classical association with the elements and moving towards a representation of the various echelons of spiritual beings.³²

9. Conclusions

In early Romanian literature, various influences converged to shape cosmological, theological, and anatomical understandings, blending naturalistic observations with Byzantine legacies,

³¹ Dimitrie Eustatievici Braşoveanul, *Gramatica rumânească, 1757. Prima gramatică a limbii române*, Compiled and edited by N.A. Ursu. (Bucharest: Editura Ştiinţifică, 1969).

³² Nae Ionescu, *Metafizică - Problema salvării în Faust-ul lui Goethe. 1925-1926*, in lithography. (Bucharest: Universitatea din Bucureşti. Facultatea de litere şi Filosofie, 1926, 3rd edition 2000), 202.

Christian teachings, folklore, and apocryphal texts. The term *stihie* encompassed diverse concepts stemming from this eclectic heritage. It denoted primarily the four elements identified by ancient thinkers, but soon developed a secondary meaning, that of the raw forces of nature. Additionally, it extended to signify the bodily humours and ventured into abstract realms, representing ghosts or malevolent spirits.

This scholarly endeavour sought to elucidate the dynamic evolution of *stihie*, drawing from historical accounts and dictionary entries to trace its shifting definitions and contextual nuances. Through this exploration, we witness the unfolding of Romanian thought, which maintained continuity with ancient philosophical, theological, anatomical, and naturalist traditions, notably through the lens of tetradic correspondences. This study showed how the evolution of the term *stihie* mirrors, in microcosm, the sheer evolution of Romanian thought.

The persistence of these ideas into the early modern period not only reflects the enduring legacy of Hippocratic thought but also speaks to the cultural and intellectual landscape of the time. Such concepts permeated various textual genres, from theological treatises to legal codes and literary works, weaving together medical theories with religious doctrine and embedding them within popular narratives. Through the evolution of *stihie*, we glimpse not only the transformation of language and cultural concepts but also the enduring resonance of classical thought in shaping Romanian identity and intellectual discourse.