

DR. HARRY LEACH AND THE KUSTENDJIE CHOLERA EPIDEMIC (1865)

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Received: July 6th, 2024

Accepted for publication: August 15th, 2024

Abstract: During the 19th century, Europe, Asia and North Africa were severely hit by cholera pandemics, a relentless disease that claimed millions of victims in every state, regardless of the level of development it had reached and regardless of the social status of the sick. One of the epidemics that devastated the city of Constantza (Kustendjie) was the one in the summer of 1865. In this short study, we present, for the first time in Romania, the testimonies of the British doctor Harry Leach ((1836-1879), a pioneer of international maritime medicine, who arrived on the western Pontic shore as an employee of the British company Danube Black Sea Railway and Kustendjie Harbour (DBSR). At that time, DBSR was exploiting the small Port Kustendjie, after, between 1857-1860, it had built the Kustendje-Tcerhavoda railway. In his articles and works, Dr. Leach describes the city of Kustendjie and the devastation caused by cholera, both among the British community living here and in the rest of the multiethnic city, which was at that time under the rule of the Ottoman Empire.

Keywords: Dr. Harry Leach; cholera epidemic of 1865; Dobrudja; Kustendjie (Constantza); British community; DBSR

The 19th century was a century of modernization, of great inventions in various fields, of military conflagrations that redrawn the political and economic map of the world. Despite medical inventions, terrible epidemics continued to wreak havoc across the globe, taking the lives of tens, hundreds of thousands and millions of people, from various countries, and regardless of the social status of the victims. Cholera was the disease that destroyed numerous destinies, and the 19th century was dotted with pandemics of this infectious bacterial disease. Digestive disorders led to the patient's dehydration and death in a very short time, from a few hours to a few days. The century of modernization saw no less than six pandemics of this disease, affecting all continents of the Earth.

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In this article we will only refer to the fourth cholera pandemic, which took place between 1863 and 1875, and more precisely to the epidemic that broke out in 1865 and which also affected Dobrudja. In the region between the Danube and the Sea, there were few sources of drinking water, the summers were hot, and swamps were everywhere, or all these elements led to the creation of an extremely favorable terrain for the spread of this terrible disease. In 1854, during the Crimean War (1853-1856), Dobrudja had already experienced an epidemic that claimed thousands of victims among the locals, but especially among the French (especially) and English soldiers. 11 years after that tragic episode, Dobrudja was again seriously affected, with cholera wreaking havoc in the western Pontic cities, including Kustendjie.

At that time, Kustendjie was a small town in Dobrudja (*Dobruca-eli*) that was part of the Danube vilayet, an administrative-territorial unit of the Ottoman Empire. Severely affected during the Crimean War, the settlement began to recover after 1857, entering an upward path in terms of economic development. This was due to the fact that a British company, *Danube Black Sea Railway and Kustendjie Harbour* (DBSR) obtained a double concession from the Sublime Porte: the construction of the Kustendjie – Tchernavoda (Bogazchioi) railway, inaugurated on October 4, 1860, and the exploitation of the Kustendjie port. To achieve these two objectives, the consortium from the United Kingdom moved a solid group of specialists to the small Black Sea settlement. They came accompanied by their families (wives and children) forming a community of approximately 80-100 members. The British built permanent houses on the north-western cliff of the Peninsula (today Old Town of Constantza), facing the harbor, in an area they called *New Town*, a "colony" adjacent to the so-called *Turkish Town*.

The British would remain in Kustendjie for a long time, until 1882, when the Romanian state would buy back the two aforementioned concessions for a heavy price, 16.8 million pounds. In the 25 years of its existence, the British community encountered numerous problems, including ravaging diseases that resulted in numerous victims. One of the darkest years was 1865.

That year, for the first time, cholera attacked Europe, not by the usual land route, but by sea, with ships connecting the continents carrying the disease and rapidly spreading it to various areas of the globe¹. Many contemporary sources mention that the epidemic began in Egypt, but its origin seems to be different.

Thus, in a report read on April 6, 1868, at the plenary session of the Royal Epidemiological Society in London, the renowned specialist John Netten Radcliffe (1826 - 1884) reconstructed the "route" of the 1865 epidemic (which

¹ Anne Hardy, *Cholera, quarantine and the English preventive system (1850-1895)*, in *Medical History* 1993, vol. 37, p. 251.

also affected London a year later)². It all started in March, when two British frigates, *North Wind* and *Persia* left Singapore, bound for Jeddah (Jeddah)³. Today the largest city in Saudi Arabia, Jeddah was also then a major port on the Red Sea and the main gateway for Muslim pilgrims going to the Holy City of Islam, Mecca, located 65 kilometers to the east (a.n. 40 English miles). Most of the passengers were Javanese (today the island of Java, under the administration of the Indonesian state, with its capital in Jakarta). Islam had become the dominant religion in the region of Java since the late 16th century. The two British frigates had taken over the pilgrims from Singapore, a city that had been founded by the English as a port and trading post since 1819. It has been established that, throughout the 19th century, several cholera epidemics broke out in South and Southeast Asia, in India (the Ganges River area and in the Bay of Bengal) and then in the archipelagos in the area.

In 1865, the British frigates *North Wind* and *Persia* were carrying 145 Javanese pilgrims. The first cases were recorded on board the ships after a stopover in the port of Makalla (now Mukalla, Yemen, in the Arabian Sea - northern part of the Indian Ocean)⁴. Cholera was contracted by both passengers and British crew members. In the second half of May, the two frigates had reached the Suez Canal, where numerous other ships were bringing Muslim pilgrims⁵. The epidemic could no longer be controlled, and British ships "carried" cholera north, even after the Muslim pilgrims landed at Jeddah. On June 11, 1865, the first cases were officially reported in the port of Alexandria, and cholera spread throughout Egypt over the next month and a half⁶.

The deadly disease had reached the southern shores of the Mediterranean, and from there it was easy to spread to Constantinople, the capital of the Ottoman Empire, and then throughout Europe. The first case of cholera was recorded in Constantinople on June 28, after the frigate *Moukibirsurur* (coming from Alexandria, Egypt) arrived in the Turkish port⁷. Two people had already died during the voyage, and in the Ottoman capital 12 crew members were confirmed with cholera, and another 11 with cholera, a milder form of the disease⁸.

In the capital of the Ottoman Empire, a regular quarantine system was in place and in such situations, Turkish specialists managed to isolate such cases. This time, in 1865, this did not happen again, although the patients on

² J. Netten Radcliffe, *Report on the Recent Epidemic of Cholera (1865-1866)*, published in Transactions Epidemiological Society of London, vol.III, p. I, London, 1869, p. 232-245.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

⁴ J. Netten Radcliffe, *op.cit.*, p. 238.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

⁸ Gavin Milroy, *Notes of the Cholera Epidemic of 1865-1866 in Europe and America*, London, 1868, p. 167; J. Netten Radcliffe, *op.cit.*, p. 241.

the *Moukebiri-surur* had been admitted to the Maritime Hospital in the port. At the beginning of July, the epidemic spread and encompassed the entire city. It was later established that the disease (supposedly isolated in the Turkish hospital) was contracted by some workers who had their barracks very close to the Navy Hospital, and who then carried the cholera to the civilian area of the metropolis⁹.

Mortality reached horrific levels in Constantinople between August 1 and 15, with 12,000 deaths from cholera recorded in a population of 800,000 (15,000 deaths according to other sources)¹⁰. The epidemic spread throughout the Bosphorus and the Sea of Marmara, and it is known that on July 31, a death was recorded in the town of Therapia (today Tarabya, Istanbul), on the European shore of the Bosphorus, right near the entrance to the Black Sea¹¹. Soon cases were registered in Burgas and Varna, and then in all the cities on the western coast and in particular, in Sulina (where the European Danube Commission operated) and in Kustendjie (Constantza)¹². Two or three days after the appearance in Sulina, numerous cases began to be registered in Kustendjie as well¹³.

As we mentioned earlier, at that time Kustendjie was a small town that owed its development to the British presence. Thanks to the sons of United Kingdom, the settlement had developed and became a locality where Turks, Tatars, Greeks, Bulgarians, Romanians ("wallachians" in British sources of the time), British, as well as other nations lived. All these inhabitants and residents of Kustendjie worked in the port or on the railway, or had related activities (they were subcontractors or supplied the area with various products). In the summer of 1865 Kustendjie was seriously affected by cholera, which claimed numerous victims, both among the resident British and among the inhabitants of various ethnicities. There were already a few doctors in the locality, good specialists, but too few to keep the situation under control. Moreover, the Ottoman administration of the city had lax rules and did not impose living, supply, and hygiene standards that would combat the terrible attack of intestinal disease.

The British colony, which lived in relative autonomy from the rest of the city, had only one doctor, Henry William Cullen, a renowned specialist and a passionate collector of antiquities¹⁴. The Greek doctor Papasaul, a specialist of the Ottoman Empire's International Commission for the control of pilgrims

⁹ Gavin Milroy, *op.cit.*, p. 167.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*.

¹¹ Gavin Milroy, *op.cit.*, p. 167.

¹² *Ibid.*.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

¹⁴ Cristian Cealera, *W. H. Cullen, primul medic englez din Kustendjie (1858-1878). Chirurg, naturalist și colecționar de antichități tomitane*, article published in *Analele Dobrogei - 100 de ani. Centenarul Încoronării de la Alba Iulia*, *Analele Dobrogei* Seria a III-a, An IV, 2022, p. 45-64.

going to Mecca, had also settled in Kustendjie¹⁵. For this reason, he was nicknamed the "quarantine doctor", but his duties were strictly aimed at treating pilgrims and he did not always have time to take care of the local sick. However, there were other Greek doctors in Kustendjie, Kefalas (father and son) and Vallindas, who treated members of the Greek community, but also the rest of the inhabitants, when time allowed¹⁶. Also in 1865, an Italian doctor named Lanzeroni is recorded in the archives, who would stay in Kustendjie for six years, before returning to Rome¹⁷. Despite these specialists, the 1865 epidemic was impossible to stop. The much larger number of colleagues in Constantinople and major cities around the world had failed to cope.

Alarmed by the worrying news coming from the Middle East, the British doctor Henry William Cullen requested help from Great Britain in the summer of 1865 to fight the inevitable cholera epidemic. The doctor from Kustendjie also needed help to treat other ailments. However, his help came at the end of the summer, in the person of an English specialist named Harry Leach (1836-1879).

We have extremely important details about his experience in Kustendjie from an article (actually a letter) published in the British medical journal *The Lancet* on September 23, 1865. The letter signed by Leach was entitled *The cholera in Eastern Europe*, was addressed to the editor of the journal and dated "September 11, 1865 Kustendjie, Turkey".

The 29-year-old doctor wrote the following: "Sir. It might be useful to your readers to know the present situation regarding cholera in Eastern Europe and especially in the vicinity of the Lower Danube and the Black Sea. I left London on the 2nd (a.n. September 1865), by order of the DBSR, who considered it necessary to send more medical personnel to this country, and I traveled as quickly as I could, via Vienna and the Danube. On reaching Tebernava to take the train to Kustendjie I learned that two recent deaths had already occurred there... The number of English residents is small (a.n. at Kustendjie), and the condition of their houses is not very sanitary. I arrived in the town on the night of September 7. Many of your readers probably already know that this locality has been affected by cholera several times. The disease seems to have reached this place from Constantinople and began here on August 5. Since then (a.n. from August 5 to September 7) there have been 20 cases among the English residents, of which 11 have been fatal. The number of cases in the whole town is uncertain, but it is known that, in all, 121 have died. There are only 84 British people living here, so the mortality is very, very high, despite the enormous and professional efforts of Dr. Cullen, the English medical resident and company officer. I am sure that without him the death toll would have been much higher... The English houses are not in

¹⁵ Hector Sarafidi, *Medicina în Dobrudja*, article published in the anniversary volume „Dobrudja 1878-1928. Cincizeci de ani de viață românească”, *Analele Dobrogei*, an IX, vol. I, 1928, p. 743.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 744.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*.

a very good situation, but they all stand on the edge of a cliff guarding the beach, which ensures natural drainage. However, a few mistakes have been made, the way in which the closets were built and the fact that the pigs are kept near the house. These things should be remedied, to avoid future attacks... The cholera ceased suddenly, immediately after my arrival, both among the British residents and in the Turkish city..."¹⁸

The information provided by Harry Leach is extremely important and likely to help us reconstruct the picture. The 121 deaths recorded throughout the settlement (11 British and the rest locals and refugees) show us how devastating the epidemic attack was, given that the population of the city was probably around 2000 inhabitants at the time. The mention of Dr. Cullen is also very important, a proof of his presence and activity, and especially of his professionalism.

Leach's testimony is not a singular one. An English engineer who worked on the Constanța-Cernavoda railway, Henry C. Barkley, also mentioned Dr. William Henry Cullen, but referring to cholera epidemics prior to 1865: *"Fortunately, we had a very intelligent doctor who took care of the company's employees, very skillful, persevering and of all the employees he worked the hardest and in dangerous conditions, which make him worthy of the Victory Cross"*¹⁹.

The epidemic of 1865 ceased in Kustendjie in September, as Leach tells us. It continued to strike in the following years, with varying intensity. British specialists have come to the conclusion that the effects of the epidemic were also due to another factor, the fear, the panic induced by the disease. One of them even quotes Dr. Leach in this regard: *"Referring to the last epidemic in Turkey, Mr. Harry Leach says the following: 'There is no doubt that panic increases the intensity of the epidemic in many cases and brings, very quickly, initially simple cases of diarrhea, into the serious form of cholera'"*²⁰.

After his Dobrudja experience, Harry Leach returned to Britain and continued to work as a doctor in the Merchant Navy. However, he did not forget the land of Dobrudja or Kustendjie and in 1877 he published a short travelogue, entitled *A bit of Bulgaria*²¹.

In this he gives us some other interesting details about Dobrudja and Kustendjie, which he had not mentioned in the letter published in the medical journal *The Lancet*. They are basically impressions collected during the trip made in 1865. We reproduce some fragments from this work: *"We arrived by boat at Tchernavoda, a small village on the right bank of the Danube and the terminus of the Kustendjie - Black Sea railway... We were part of a group consisting of a Turkish pasha, a Russian officer who had just left the house and a German merchant. We found out that we*

¹⁸ Harry Leach, *The Cholera in Eastern Europe*, in *The Lancet*, 23 sept 1865, p. 350.

¹⁹ Henry Charles, Barkley, *Bulgaria before the war during seven years' experience of European Turkey and his inhabitants*, John Murray, Albemarle Street, London, 1877, p. 125.

²⁰ John Chapman, *Diarrhea and Cholera - their nature, origin and treatment through the agency of nervous system*, Trubner & Co, London, 1866, p. 171.

²¹ Harry Leach, *A bit of Bulgaria*, Simpkin, Marshall & Company, London, 1877.

*had just missed the train but a friendly Scotsman who was in charge of the works telegraphed to Kustendjie asking them for a new train*²².

He continues his story and talks about the first impressions created: *"We arrived in Kustendjie after midnight. After cautiously descending a steep slope, the town and the harbor appeared in the moonlight and we stopped at the only truly English hotel in the provinces of Turkey (a.n. New Railway Hotel). Clean, comfortable and airy rooms are adjectives that you can rarely apply to hotels in the Ottoman Empire and it is not at all empty praise to say that this hotel in Kustendjie surpasses all the others, without exaggeration"*²³.

*Situated on the top of a hill (the hotel) overlooks a crescent of rock, with the peaks pointing towards the sea, including the broad harbour and the railway; the native village is clustered on the left and there, further on, is the Lighthouse (a.n. Genovese Lighthouse, built in 1860-1861 with DBSR money). The houses of the English residents are scattered on the ridge, on the same level as the hotel. About half a mile inland are two cemeteries which bear the sad marks of the ravages of cholera, for Kustendjie suffered more than any colony in the east"*²⁴.

Dr. Harry Leach very well intuited the potential of the small port town and even gave us valuable data on its economic importance: *"...Another main object of the railway is to transport grain from the Principalities and other districts around the Danube, direct to the Black Sea, for loading and transportation. There is no doubt that the final result of this part of the traffic will be a great success and I am sure that the following statistics will show how much the trade at Kustendjie has increased since the opening of the railway. The quantity of grain exported increased in two years, from 2000 quarters of grain, to 45,000. In 1864, 283 vessels left the port and the quantity of grain exported that year amounted to 576,444 quarters, 3/5 being produced in the Principalities and the rest from the areas surrounding Kustendjie. It is certain that the success of the company (DBSR) must be depends on the facilities of this fast export and Kustendjie thus wins over the ports of Ibrăila and Galatz"*²⁵.

The young British doctor is impressed by the mosaic of ethnicities found on the Dobrudja land, by the diligence of the Crimean Tatars, who have recently settled here²⁶.

Multiethnicity is obviously also valid for Kustendjie, but Leach prefers to write about the problems the town has with drainage and especially with drinking water, but he also offers solutions: *"There is no talk of drainage, not even of its ghost. An infinitely small sum (invested) would remove all the unwanted material from the soil and immediately carry it to the sea... I rode inland for a few miles and found a large lake (a.n. Siutghiol) whose waters would be a boon to the inhabitants of the town and to the railway employees. In the middle of this lake is a small island around which mystery and*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*.

²⁵ Harry Leach, *op.cit.*, p. 9.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p 12.

*notoriety float because it is said that this was, for a few years, the home of Ovid. Wild birds abound here, of all kinds, and there is much work for a skilled hunter..."*²⁷.

Harry Leach only stayed a few days in Kustendjie²⁸, but he managed to capture new aspects of the life of the town, elements presented in the letter in *The Lancet* and later, in the travel brochure.

It is now well known that, after 1865, Dr. Harry Leach became famous thanks to the work carried out in his native country. Starting from the letter published in *The Lancet* we learned data from the biography of this doctor, as well as about his huge achievements, which is why it is worth presenting him as he was, a pioneer in British maritime medicine in the 19th century.

Harry Leach was born in 1836, in Wisbeck (now Wisbech), Cambridgeshire, into a respectable family²⁹. He attended St. Albans School (one of the oldest schools in the world, created in the 10th century), and in 1853 he entered St. Bartholomew Hospital, a teaching hospital in London, from which he graduated after five years, obtaining a degree in surgery (MRCS - Member of the Royal College of Surgeons) and a degree in pharmacy (LSA - Licences of School of Apothecaries)³⁰. He worked for a while at the Peterborough Infirmary, after which he left and sailed as a naval doctor, and in 1862 became a resident physician on the hospital ship *Dreadnought*³¹.

Over time, he traveled to various parts of the world, as is the case with his Dobruja adventure in 1865. In 1873, he became chief physician on the hospital ship *Dreadnought*³², and in 1873 he became the first Chief Medical Officer of the Port of London³³. In 1875 he fell ill with tuberculosis and, despite recommended treatments in South Africa, he failed to recover³⁴. He died of tuberculosis, aged only 43, in November 1879, at his residence in Westminster³⁵.

Despite his early demise, Leach left behind extraordinary things. He is still considered one of the pioneers of maritime medicine and one of those who

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ Harry Leach, *op.cit.*, p. 13.

²⁹ G.C. Cook, *Harry Leach MRCP (1836-1879), Control of the Scurvy in the British Mercantile Marine and the First Port Medical Officer for the City of London*", published in *Journal of Medical Biography*, 08. vol.8 2000, ISS 3, p. 133.

³⁰ *Ibid.*.

³¹ G.C. Cook, *Scurvy in the British Mercantile Marine in the 19th century and the contribution of the Seamen's Hospital Society*, *History of Medicine*, p. 226; Anne Hardy, *op.cit.*, p. 257.

³² *Ibid.*.

³³ Anne Hardy, *op.cit.*, p. 257.

³⁴ G.C. Cook, *Harry Leach MRCP (1836-1879), Control of the Scurvy in the British Mercantile Marine and the First Port Medical Officer for the City of London*", published in *Journal of Medical Biography*, 08. vol.8 2000, ISS 3, p. 136.

³⁵ Anne Hardy, *op.cit.*, p. 257.

contributed decisively to the disappearance of scurvy that was ravaging commercial and military ships³⁶.

He published dozens of articles and letters in specialized journals (such as *The Lancet*), as well as several exceptional books. In 1867, in the *British Medical Journal*, he published several articles gathered under the title *Report of the hygienic condition of the Mercantile Marine and on the preventable diseases of merchant seamen*³⁷. On this occasion he wrote about the need to inspect all ships coming up the Thames and about the importance of sanitary control in ports. He campaigned for improving living conditions on British ships, for the ventilation of ships and for improving the diet on board³⁸.

In 1868 he published a major work, *The Ship Captain Medical Guide*, a book that later became mandatory on all ships of the British Empire³⁹. This work led to the requirement that each ship should have its own stock of medicines and a pharmacy. Articles about his experience in 1865 were collected in the book *Brief notes on the last epidemic of cholera in Turkey*. He also published *Pocket Doctor for the traveller and colonist* (1875) and *A bit of Bulgaria* (1877)⁴⁰.

Beyond his work as a doctor and his major work to eradicate diseases on commercial ships, Harry Leach also remains in the history of Dobrudja, through his lines written about Kustendjie, during the cholera of 1865...

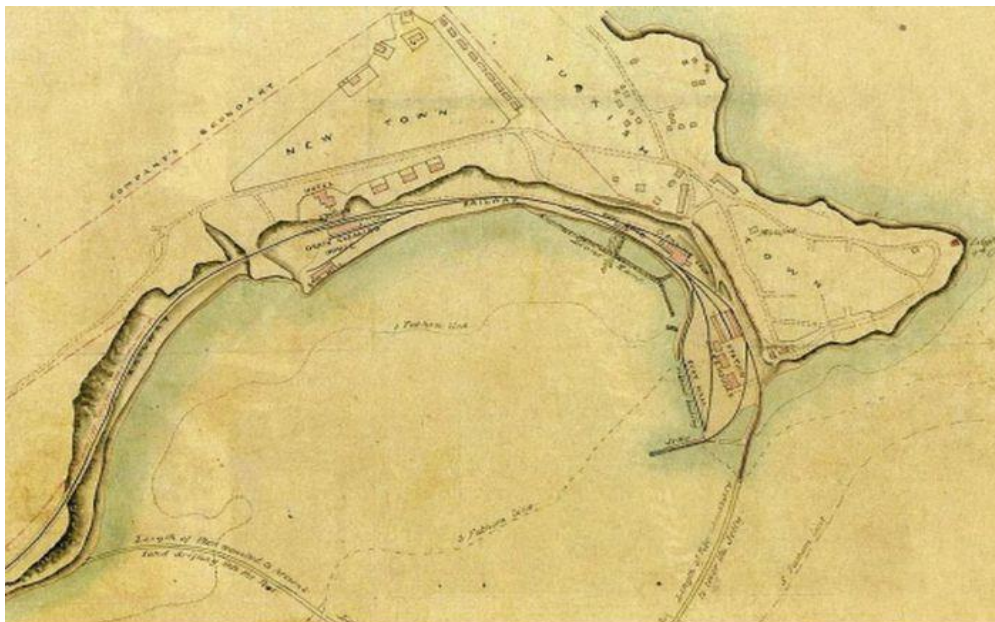
³⁶ Susan Isac, *Sailing the seven seas and other tales of Navy medicine from the UK MHL*, July 20th 2018, in Royal College of Surgeons of England, <https://www.rcseng.ac.uk/library-and-publications/library/blog/sailing-the-seven-seas/>

³⁷ Susan Isac, *op.cit.*; G.C. Cook, *Harry Leach MRCP (1836-1879), Control of the Scurvy in the British Mercantile Marine and the First Port Medical Officer for the City of London*", published in *Journal of Medical Biography*, 08. vol.8 2000, ISS 3, p. 133-139.

³⁸ G.C. Cook, *op.cit.*

³⁹ Susan Isac, *op.cit.*

⁴⁰ G.C. Cook, *Harry Leach MRCP (1836-1879), Control of the Scurvy in the British Mercantile Marine and the First Port Medical Officer for the City of London*", published in *Journal of Medical Biography*, 08. vol.8 2000, ISS 3, p. 133-139.



Map of the port city of Kustendjie in 1863, with the specifications of New Town (the area of the British community) and Turkish Town (the Turkish town itself) (source – map by John Stokes, <https://www.revistatomis.ro/2023/09/06/constantia-si-urmele-orasului-de-sec-xix/>)