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THE MEDIEVAL TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM OF
NORTHERN TRANSYLVANIA
(12TH – 16TH CENTURIES)

- ABSTRACT -

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Historical geography, historical landscape, road, navigation, communication network, toll-collection point, upkeep and administration, travel conditions, economic history, transportation means, material culture.

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ABSTRACT

One cannot understand the subject of medieval transportation system, without enquiring for its various facets, ranging from matters of historical geography, to some regarding physical features or even legal aspects. The transportation system is comprised by both the medieval communication network (made up of routes, along with the main focal traffic points located along them) and the means used for transportation, as well as the activities of certain social or economic groups with direct involvement. Furthermore, the operation of medieval transportations needs to be looked into according to the legal frame it was bound to. The social effects can be pointed out by the emergence and gradual evolution of certain pertaining professions. Another compulsory approach perspective is set by the material aspects of roads, the travel conditions they generated and the obvious effects on the specialisation of certain types of transport.

The chronological boundaries of the research are meant to define a generous time frame, suitable for looking on eventual changes that might have occurred in connection with the transportation system. It allowed us to identify the constancy of some features and ever-changing nature of others, as an effect of certain political, social or economic phenomena.

The geographic area subjected to analysis is mainly represented by the northern region of the Transylvanian voievodeship, made up of the medieval counties Cluj, Dăbâca, Inner Solnoc and Bistrița District (including the Rodna Valley). These, more or less, overlap with the water catchment area of the Someș River System. The territorial divisions that we have selected are mostly based on geographical unity, rather than on the administrative one. This resulted in rendering the communication network mostly from the point of view of the natural landscape.

The research of the transportation means has also taken into account data from the neighbouring areas due to the scarcity of information at hand for our selected territory alone. The extensive use of such vehicles is a motivating argument for our choice, because of their territorial mobility.

Though we have not exhausted all the aspects pertaining to the present topic, we have tried through four major chapters to come up with a general reconstruction of most of these, while also highlighting and detailing some particular aspects, which have so far been neglected by the Transylvanian historiography.

The first chapter (*Introduction*) is meant to group various introductory aspects of the subject, including a motivation, a short presentation of the research phases and some observations on previous scholarly literature on the subject. Nevertheless, we also included an outline of the three major contexts that have influenced the existence of the transportation system: geographical features, administrative context and economic factors.

In the second chapter (*Sources and research methodology*) we took on the task of clearly analysing and pinpointing the methodological problems and the variety of sources (written, cartographic, archaeological, toponymic, iconographic and ethnographic) one needs to consider while conducting this type of research. We opted for a detailed presentation of each type of data that the available sources might offer, while bringing forth some relevant examples from other European areas. We made use of the same examples to illustrate the more recent and interdisciplinary investigation methods. However, it becomes clear that the present research stage is highly limitative when it comes down to an archaeological approach of the subject and mixing together historical geography and landscape archaeology. All in all, the work frame we discussed clearly shows the potential and perspectives of a long-term analysis directed at the present subject, as long as future archaeological research will also be taking into consideration the documentation of certain aspects, relevant from the point of view of the medieval landscape and environment.

The third chapter (*The roads of northern Transylvania*) is firstly comprised of a detailed study related to the medieval terminology of roads. These appellatives play an important part when it comes down to classifying medieval communication ways and stand proof of the great variety of road types, ranging from spatial criteria (distance) and hierarchy, to legal aspects, functionality (economic, military, religious role) and physical features. The types of roads we managed to identify are not only a particularity of the Transylvanian area, but can be found in sources referring to other medieval European territories. It thus becomes obvious that many of the regional routes we analysed have, simultaneously or successively, fulfilled several roles. We could also note the importance of the local perception over these road tracks, as quite often the local communities introduced special road names.

While reconstructing and mapping the medieval routes (mainly using written and cartographic sources) data related to the landscape features belonging to historical roads has also been referred to, as well as the relation between some medieval sites and the communication routes.

The inland transportation connected to the salt extraction and shipping was discussed in a separate subchapter. We analysed the navigation conditions on the Someş River and the

organisation of the so-called 'salt rafting'. It becomes quite obvious that the land routes often alternated with the water ones, while in some cases we can admit the existence of a double route, both on land and water, as well as the intense use of the water ways. Due to financial reasoning, the water routes were preferred for salt transportation, during a certain time of the year, when the water levels were favourable. We would like to emphasise that salt was not the only product shipped downstream. It is natural to assume that some important elements of the medieval material culture were also moved by boats or rafts. Data on the construction wood used for the rafts shows that it was sold in the final transshipment points located in the Great Hungarian Plain. At the end of the 13th century lime was also being shipped on the Someş from the quarry to the construction site. This must have been the case of most building material intended for use at construction sites along the major rivers. Nevertheless, during upstream navigation, other products could have been brought from outside Transylvania, as some 13th century charters seem to imply.

Communication routes have integrated the North Transylvanian territories in the wider regional structures of the kingdom and the continent, but because of the area's specific features, they favoured a certain isolation of the voievodship, outlining several access paths whose control offered advantages. Therefore, we may add that the Roman roads, whose extensive reuse only remains an assumption in this research stage, have had a very small contribution in facilitating the medieval communications of Transylvania (especially towards the exterior). Internally, the skeleton of the territory appears to have been the Roman network (in the areas of the major river corridors), although it was oriented north-south (due to the need for communication with the provinces south of the Danube). In the Middle Ages, however, it has been supplemented by new routes, directed east-west, towards Hungary and the Germanic territories. It is a fact that a series of main roads developed at a provincial scale and determined the area's territorial individuality. The geographical features isolate Transylvania from the neighbouring regions, and one cannot say that the former Roman roads were of very much help when it came down to geopolitical perspectives. If the observation is correct, then we must add that this aspect also fuelled voievodship's specific political structure.

Despite the impression of instability of medieval roads (especially because of the fact that during this period there are no records of major road construction work), they were not randomly oriented and the track changes were not a frequent occurrence. Although some roads have a number of variants, all of them converged to certain control points that helped maintaining the consistency of a route.

The reconstruction of the paths followed by the regional medieval routes could not be detailed in several cases. One obstacle was the lack of detailed studies regarding landscape archaeology, focusing on small areas. We tried, to some extent, filling this void, in the subchapters dealing with the upkeep of roads. Overall, we managed to indicate the main routes used at the time, thus emphasizing their economic and military role, as well as highlighting their role within the hierarchy of roads.

The importance of the natural environment in the development of the communication network is obvious and, in some situations, the strategic positioning of some roads on the hilly heights, or on high terraces (therefore, avoiding the flood plains) is clearly noticeable. Evidently, it was the main river valleys of the area (those of the two Someș Rivers) that sustained the main traffic axes, but, in addition to these, a series of east-west oriented routes were meant to connect the economic settlements, or to facilitate communication with central Hungary and Moldavia.

As for the relation of the settlements situated along the regional routes, and the traffic lanes themselves, it was often impossible to determine solely on the basis of the documentary and cartographic sources. However, a certain tendency of aligning the possessions according to the path of the traffic channel has been noticed, as many charters are locating roads at the borders of the estates. In most of these cases it was the traffic channels which underwent higher areas. However, the reversed situation has also been noticed, as the roads followed the main valleys and the settlements were withdrawn, being connected to the main roads via secondary roads.

Chapter IV (*Transportation means from Transylvania and the neighbouring areas*) consist of a presentation of the medieval means of conveyance. Detailing on typology, chronology and construction techniques of the vehicles, on the possibilities of pursuing certain types of transport, have been incomplete or at all discussed so far, therefore requiring a completion and a review of the conclusions previously reached.

The reconstruction of the transportation means was performed in parallel with their ordering into categories, by corroborating information from all available types of sources. The most complete description has been made for the most common wheeled vehicle, the cart, in all of its variations, because of the data abundance. We have also detailed a number of technical issues related to the use of some vehicles, in the attempt to answer a series of questions regarding their hauling capacities or the types of transport they were intended for.

A major objective of our research was to make good use of the archaeological data. By analysing the metal parts uncovered on a rather wide territory, the standardization of these

utilitarian objects became obvious. This stands proof of the fact that the transportation means were constant across the centuries in terms of their structure and form, as it was previously argued only based on iconographic and ethnographic data.

The watercrafts obviously represent the most problematic transportation means due to the fact that the archival data is far from sufficient when it comes to their structural and technical features. As a consequence, a clear demarcation cannot be performed in the current state of research. Some information could be retrieved on the existence of the unsophisticated rafts, the logboats, and maybe on the possible existence of boats with tripartite structure, indicated by the terms *carina* and *naves rostratae*. Apart from the logboats, no direct archaeological evidence is known for any of the above mentioned watercrafts.

It seems almost impossible to establish a chronological sequence for the appearance and evolution of the transportation means, as both written and iconographic sources have documented pre-existing situations and the archaeological data is lacking the relevant contexts of discovery for precise dating. Moreover, the high similarity between artefacts dated several centuries apart is an important clue that there was little technical innovation over long periods of time. Even if one could identify some changes in terms of technical features, it is still hard to say whether the phenomenon was local or it took place in a wider socio-economical context.

The second hypothesis could be partly verified by analysing the changes recorded in connection with the professions associated with the construction and use of transportation means. By looking at the construction techniques and the written records we noticed that, in time, several craftsmen categories emerged and were associated with the production of certain types of components. On a social scale, the importance of various professions is backed by the numerous privileges the craftsmen were granted and by the ascending demand for some of their products.

It must be noted that there has been a clear connection between the use of transportation means and the expansion of certain social and economic sectors in the northern-Transylvanian area, such as salt extraction. Even though, the medieval sources tend to connect the vehicles to some aspects alone (mining activities, trade traffic, obligations of the lower social groups, travels of some state officials and tradesmen), we cannot oversee the fact that they are elements of medieval material culture connected to every social class and type of settlement. The importance of land and water vehicles is directly connected to the basic necessity of movement in nearby areas, as part of everyday activities, and to the outside world.

The last main chapter of the thesis (*Traffic and transport organisation*) is comprised of the analysis of measures employed for organising transports and of the evidence available on the travel conditions.

The subject of the fifth chapter allowed us to enquire, in a detailed manner, for the juridical and administrative aspects previously illustrated through the analysis of the medieval terminology used for roads. From a legal perspective, we noted the large number of toll-collection points (mostly meant for traffic taxation) which highly influenced the emergence and stabilisation of the medieval road network, as well as the importance of some routes as opposed to others. There is a clear connection between the traffic tolls and the most important settlements situated along the road, indicating the main travel stages, though, the toll-collection points, have emerged in some locations lacking any strategic or economic significance. Their longstanding existence was due to the beneficial location along the routes, the high interest of some communities (such as the Saxon ones) towards the efficiency of the transportation system, which lead to their active involvement regarding such matters. However, as they evolved into important income sources for the mobility and clergy, a continuous phenomenon of generating illegal toll-collection points appeared and the perpetration of abuses on travellers became more frequent. The attempts at abolishing these negative tendencies form an important chapter of the legal and administrative areas of the Hungarian realm. The royal interest in the road network was first demonstrated in respect of the salt trade and the arteries of this commerce continued to play an important role in shaping the road network. During the late medieval period, increasing interest was shown in organizing traffic on the other major routes in Transylvania and in integrating this into the long-distance trade routes. The salience given in the surviving material to the so-called great or royal roads suggests the confluence of royal and commercial interests. Nevertheless, on the ground there was a lack of control. The actions of government were not always sufficient to halt this adverse development. The intervention of the central authorities was backed by sworn men assembled for this purpose on a county level.

An important discussion was aimed at issues regarding the material aspects of roads, namely the road tracks. As opposed to the general impression of neglect towards medieval roads, one can observe through archaeological, cartographic and written data that they benefited of construction and upkeep work. Apparently, the recording of maintenance work on roads was generated by exceptional situations. It has become clear that the various types of interventions were done, depending on the physical features of the site and the importance of the respective road tracks. The concern of the medieval communities in maintaining the

communication ways was done only in special cases. Even bridges (more complex features of the road network) or former Roman roads have seldom been recorded by the archival sources.

Despite the general “fear of roads”, due to the dangers awaiting the medieval traveller, road tracks as landscape elements were also a familiar sight in areas otherwise unaffected by human activity. Even though, any member of a medieval community was making use of the communication ways, the available sources tend to give more details on some social or economic categories when it comes to travel. Some groups were obviously mobile due to the nature of their trade and functions (merchants, messengers, royalty), while others were travelling because of their obligations (serfs).

Consequently, it becomes obvious that the present subject is far more broad-based as it has been thought and presented by scholarly literature. When it comes to reconstructing the road network and identifying on the field its specificities, we must state that this work merely represents a base for future research on the topic, by pointing at the various possibilities it presents for large scale studies. Outlining the main characteristics of the transportation system is a contribution to the reconstruction of the historical geography of northern Transylvania, which, in the future, can provide data on the territorial structures, by defining a suitable framework for other similar subjects.