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DOCTORAL THESIS SUMMARY

Mounted Forces in Medieval Transylvania (13th – 15th centuries)

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Summary

Keywords: *heavy cavalry, light cavalry, horseriders, knights, milites, war horses, military obligations.*

The purpose of this thesis consists in the analysis of the ways in which mounted troops existed and operated in Transylvania between the 13th and the 16th centuries. Moreover, it aims to establish if, and how the military organisation of Transylvania in terms of mounted troops was any different from the bordering regions.

The chronologic framework within which this research has been conducted starts, at its lower limit, in the 13th century. This threshold marks profound social, political, and especially military changes – not only in the Kingdom of Hungary, but in Europe at large. The upper chronological limit was set at the collapse of the Hungarian medieval statehood, when the defensive system was overwhelmed and subsequently obliterated by the Ottoman expansion, the Pannonian Plain being occupied, and Transylvania turned into an autonomous Principality. Although all these events spanned decades, the conventional “standard” limits considered were the issuing of the *Andreanum* privilege in 1224, and the 1526 Battle of Mohács, respectively.

The geographic framework was set within the limits of medieval Transylvania, which included the Seven Counties (Interior Solnoc, Dăbâca, Cluj, Turda, Alba, Târnave, Hunedoara), as well as the Saxon and Szekler seats. The modern-day equivalent of these counties and seats would be, with approximation, the counties of Cluj, Bistrița-Năsăud, Mureș, Harghita, Covasna, Brașov, Sibiu, Alba and Hunedoara.

The primary sources used in this investigation are first and foremost the written evidence, especially with regards to the military obligations and the research of chivalry in Transylvania (including royal decrees, general insurrection letters, privileges, but also wills, juridical documents from court proceedings, etc.). With regards to the study of horses used between the 13th and the 16th centuries, I also consulted archaeological and zooarchaeological sources.

Research methodology. I approached the topic of mounted forces in Transylvania from three distinct directions: the study of horses and their importance for the Hungarian society, an analysis of how Western chivalry was received and implemented locally within Transylvania and the kingdom of Hungary at large, as well as an investigation of the particularities that characterised the military organisation of Transylvania, and the involvement of Transylvanian mounted forces in battles.

The first direction of research involved an attempt at understanding of how horses (and especially war horses) were regarded by the medieval society, and how this image evolved throughout the centuries. Furthermore, I used an archaeological and zooarchaeological approach, with a focus on skeletal pathologies and associated inventories, in order to assess the faunistic remains from archaeological excavations, and thus create a comparative landscape of the various types of horses used in Transylvania.

With regards to the study of chivalry and its manifestations in the kingdom of Hungary and, more specifically, in Transylvania, I first tried to explain (starting from the 1988 seminal study signed by Ágnes Kurcz) the existence of knights based on the use of the term *miles/milites* in the primary sources. For this endeavour, I employed Stephen Morillo's *vectors of meaning*. Furthermore, I tried to see where did the knights from Transylvanian sources fit into the landscape of the local military organisation, and whether this was a purely imported Western model, or one adapted to local realities.

Lastly, the most extensive part of the thesis deals with the military organisation of Transylvania. For the counties belonging to the Voivodeship I drew parallels with other well documented counties from the rest of the kingdom, the royal decrees having universal applicability in these situations. When it came to the privileged communities (*terra saxonum*, *terra siculorum*), I investigated separately the military obligations reflected in royal charters and orders for the general insurrection. Some aspects of these military obligations and their evolution have already been addressed in the scientific literature; however, their synthesis with the aim of analysing the broader particularism of this military organisation has received relatively limited attention in historiography.

The conclusions of the research have confirmed the central hypothesis, namely the existence of a local particularism. It has been demonstrated that, at least on a regional level, the military traditions of the steppe peoples left a strong imprint on both the collective mentality and the legal regulation of military obligations. Horses—especially warhorses—

were among the most valuable assets in Hungarian society, particularly in Transylvania, where the Székely communities resisted complete cultural assimilation into the broader, westernised Hungarian majority. Protectionist laws governing the horse trade were aimed primarily at those breeds suited to a mode of warfare characteristic of the Eurasian steppes, with light cavalry constituting, for a long time, the backbone of the mounted forces.

Furthermore, it became evident that there was no unified Western model for horses used in heavy cavalry; rather, regional developments sought to adapt Eastern breeds through selective breeding to create animals with a more robust, powerful, and imposing stature. A typical horse used by light cavalry can be characterised as relatively short—up to 135–136 cm at the withers—of a Tarpan-like type (likely mixed with Akhal-Teke), and possessing hard hooves. In contrast, the horses used in heavy cavalry were hybrids, originating from Eastern stock but crossbred with Western cold-blooded horses, reaching over 140 cm in height, stronger, yet with softer hooves, and capable of carrying heavy loads over long distances.

With regard to the expressions of chivalric culture, the investigation began by analysing how people of the time perceived and related to this phenomenon. By examining the evolution of chivalry on a European scale, and drawing on studies by Ágnes Kurcz, it was established that as early as the thirteenth century, knights of the Kingdom of Hungary were identified by the same Latin terminology as their Western counterparts—the most significant being *miles/milites*, used to define their identity. Tracing this term in local documents, alongside the historical context of chivalric ideals introduced especially during the Angevin dynasty, the study shows that the situation in Transylvania formed an integral part of the kingdom's broader framework. Knights mentioned in local sources belonged to the court nobility and, in nearly every reference, the social vector of the term *miles* is readily discernible. Moreover, this cultural current appears to have extended beyond the Carpathians, with the extra-Carpathian principalities adopting local forms of chivalry in preference to Western models.

These conclusions proved significant in the final stage of the research, which focused on the military organisation of Transylvania. While the military involvement of county soldiers was clearly regulated over time—whether in reference to the organisation of castle serfs inherited from the early Árpád period, noble insurrections, or even general mobilisation—the role of the Saxon troops has generally only been addressed tangentially.

Most studies have concentrated on other aspects of the obligations codified in the *Andreanum* diploma, but the use of the term *milites* within this document—set in the context of an otherwise remarkably generous privilege—suggests that the Saxons’ earliest codified military obligation was to contribute with their mounted elite, likely accompanied by armed retinues. This finding thus necessitates a re-evaluation of the Saxon participation in warfare.

Fortunately, recent years have witnessed increasing scholarly interest in the military landscape of medieval Transylvania, including the Saxon *seats* and towns, and our conclusions fit well within this emerging historiography. The military obligations of the Székelys have already been explored by earlier scholars, some of whom even attempted to estimate the number of troops potentially available for military campaigns. The findings of those studies have been incorporated here to complete the colourful and distinctive picture of Transylvania’s military organisation.

Last but not least, the most extensive section of the work is devoted to the analysis of the military organisation of Transylvania. Whereas in the case of the voivodal counties I have drawn parallels with the organisation of counties in the rest of the kingdom – here the royal decrees being of universal applicability—, in the case of the privileged communities I have examined, in turn, the military obligations reflected either in the royal charters of privilege or in the letters of summons to arms. Some of these military obligations, as well as their evolution, have already been discussed in the secondary literature; however, their juxtaposition for the purpose of analysing, in broad terms, the particularism of this military organisation has not been the subject of much debate in historiography.

The conclusions of the research have confirmed the principal hypothesis, which posited the existence of local particularism. It has been possible to demonstrate that, at least at the regional level, the military traditions of the steppe peoples left a profound imprint on the collective mentality and on the legislation governing military obligations. Horses, and in particular warhorses, constituted one of the most highly prized assets of Hungarian society, especially in Transylvania, where the Szekler communities resisted complete cultural assimilation into the largely Westernised Hungarian mainstream. Protective laws concerning the horse trade targeted primarily those breeds suited to a mode of warfare characteristic of the Eurasian steppes, light cavalry having for a long time constituted the bulk of mounted forces. Furthermore, it has been observed that there was no established Western prototype for horses intended for heavy cavalry; rather, each region developed its own methods of adapting

Eastern horses through selective breeding, with the aim of producing animals of greater mass, strength, and presence. A light cavalry horse may be portrayed as shorter in stature, measuring up to 135–136 cm at the withers, of the Tarpan type (probably also intermingled with Akhal-Teke stock), and possessing hard hooves. Horses bred for heavy cavalry were mixed, originating from Eastern stock but crossed with Western “cold-blooded” horses, standing over 140 cm, more powerful yet with softer hooves, and capable of carrying substantial loads over long distances.

With regard to the forms in which chivalry manifested itself, the analysis began with an examination of contemporary perceptions of, and attitudes towards, this phenomenon. By tracing the development of chivalry at the European level, it was possible—following the studies conducted by Ágnes Kurcz—to establish that, as early as the thirteenth century, the knights of the Kingdom of Hungary employed the same Latin terminology as their Western counterparts, the most significant being *miles/milites*, which defined their identity. By tracking this term in local documents, and correlating it with the historical context of the implementation of chivalric principles—particularly during the Angevin dynasty—I showed that the situation in Transylvania formed an integral part of the structure of the entire kingdom. The knights mentioned in local sources belonged to the court nobility and, moreover, in almost every reference to them one can readily discern the social dimension of the term *miles*. Furthermore, this cultural current appears to have extended beyond the Carpathians, with the extra-Carpathian principalities adopting local forms of chivalry in preference to their Western counterparts.

These conclusions proved significant in the final part of the research, namely in the analysis of the military organisation of Transylvania. Whereas the participation of county troops in warfare was successively and clearly regulated—whether in the form of the organisation of *iobagionis castris* inherited from the earliest Árpadian phases, of the noble insurrection, or even of the general insurrection—the involvement of Saxon troops has almost always been addressed only tangentially. Most studies have discussed other aspects of the obligations stipulated in the Andrean Diploma; however, the use in this document of the term *milites*, within the context of an otherwise exceptionally generous privilege, leads us to believe that the first military obligation formally imposed upon the Saxons in fact required them to take the field with their mounted elite, probably accompanied by armed retinues. This, in turn, compels a reinterpretation of Saxon participation in warfare. Fortunately, recent years have witnessed a growing interest in the military landscape of medieval Transylvania,

including that of the Saxon *seats* and towns, and our conclusions in this respect fit well within the framework of this new historiography. The military obligations of the Szeklers have already been addressed by earlier scholars, some of whom have even attempted estimates of the possible number of troops available for military campaigns; the conclusions of these studies have been incorporated here to complete the varied and distinctive picture of Transylvania's military organisation.

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