

At the Boundaries of Two Worlds: Sibiu (Hermannstadt) in the Middle Ages

Sibiu is located in southern Transylvania, nowadays Romania, and like most settlements in Central Europe bears more than one name: it is called Hermannstadt in German, Nagyszeben in Hungarian, and Cibinium in the Latin medieval charters. The town was founded in a strategic geographical position on the valley of river Olt, close to the Turnu Rosu (Roten Turm, Vöröstorony, Turis Rubea) pass in the southern Carpathians.

First of all, allow me to honestly admit that while choosing the topic of this paper I was biased by the political and economic context of Central and South-Eastern Europe in the sixteenth century, that is after the Ottomans had defeated and then occupied a large part of the former medieval Hungarian kingdom – which included Transylvania as a vojvodate within the Hungarian realm, and which became an autonomous principality under Turkish suzerainty –. This period is directly connected to the topic of my PhD dissertation which analyses the trade of Sibiu on the basis of the customs registers from between 1500 and 1597. One of the questions I will answer after my investigation into the history of this trade has to be the role and position of Sibiu's trade in the international framework. The opinion of Romanian economic historian Bogdan Murgescu is that this region, namely the principality of Wallachia and the Saxon towns with which Wallachia was engaged in an active trade were not truly integrated in either the European economy or the Ottoman one, being a periphery for both areas. Sibiu in the sixteenth century therefore lies on the borderline in every sense of the word between the expanding European economy and the political and economic influence of the Ottoman Empire. How did things stand before the sixteenth century? Did Sibiu become a town between two worlds only after 1526?

The answer is straightforward negative. The natural border of the Carpathian Mountains did separate worlds before. Nonetheless, these worlds were somewhat

different from the ones in the sixteenth century. Since the twelfth century, when the “town of Herman” was founded, the political, religious and economic map of the region changed constantly. The main task of my inquiry into the past is to identify, despite the historical turn of events, the two worlds that Sibiu was on the boundaries of throughout the thirteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century (1526 more precisely), the period which represents the medieval age of the town.

Defining and describing the two worlds I will refer to in this paper is not as facile as it appeared to me at first. The categories I had in mind were however of political, religious, economic, and geographic nature. The boundaries that separated them are first of all natural: the Carpathians were the borders of the Hungarian realm which included Transylvania, and remained as such despite the momentary expansions of Hungarian dominance and influence beyond these mountains. This means that on the long run the political frontier also stayed stable along the natural borders, and it was the role of the borderline inhabitants of Transylvania (Saxons and Szeklers) to ensure its permanent defence. The established and institutionalized medieval Hungarian state, with its crystallized political, administrative, economic, social, and religious apparatus, is one of two worlds under discussion here. The second world which lied south (and east for that matter) of the Carpathian mountains actually represents the challenge to the region’s medieval history and to my paper as well. Before analyzing the exciting history of the area between the Lower Danube and the Carpathians, a brief introduction into the founding of Sibiu is necessary to set out the main phases of its becoming the most important urban centre of the Transylvanian Saxons.

The history of Sibiu begins sometime in the late twelfth century with the settlement of colonists of German extraction into the Transylvanian vojvodate, which was a geographical and administrative component of the medieval Hungarian kingdom. Actually, the completion of the German colonization in Transylvania was correlated to the integration of this region within the boundaries of the Hungarian realm. The settlement of the population that would be later referred to as Saxon consisted of several stages and waves of colonization. The main purpose of the Hungarian kings was to insure

the military protection at the borders on the Carpathians, who were exposed to attacks, and also the further conversion to the catholic faith in the regions beyond the mountains.

Within the limitations of this paper, the fascinating issue of the German settlement in Transylvania can only be sketched up in a few words. The establishment of Sibiu was believed until the nineteenth century to have had a mythical founder figure in the person of Hermann from Nürnberg, who set the foundations of the town in 1160.¹ In the early charters, the town was referred to as *villa Hermanni*.

The political and administrative evolution of Sibiu is very interesting to follow in the long-term perspective. The town was since its beginnings the center of the Sibiu province, that is the administrative, juridical and ecclesiastical center of all Saxon inhabited territories and of the different groups of colonists. Some historians believe that the hegemonical role of the town was sought from the start, and their assertion is based on the very particular early topography and type of settlement employed in Sibiu. The reconstruction of the original parcellation, consisting of smaller lots of only 500-1100m², together with the initial surface of the settlement, significantly larger than the ones found in neighbouring villages, indicate that Sibiu was intended to have a somewhat different purpose than the average colonist settlements.

In 1190, King Béla III mandated the founding of the Saint Ladislas Provost (*praepositura*) in Sibiu, with the aim of coagulating around it the ecclesiastical community of the Saxons, and this is practically the first mention of the town as such in the medieval charters.² All these conjectures about the early supremacy of the town of Sibiu over the entire community of new settlers are confirmed in the 1224 charter, named *Andreanum*, in which King Andrew II compiled the rights and the duties of the Saxon guests, which were to become “*unus populus*” under the jurisdiction of the Sibiu county.³

Since its early phases, Sibiu was configured into an Upper and a Lower town⁴. The Upper town was built around the aforementioned Provost, and was supposedly

¹ Ioan Albu. *Inscripții der Stadt Hermannstadt aus dem Mittelalter und der frühen Neuzeit*. (Sibiu: Hora, 2002). xii. (Introduction).

² *Urkundenbuch zur Geschichte der Deutschen in Siebenbürgen*. I vol. doc. no. 2 (Sibiu: 1892): 2. (Hereinafter: UKB)

³ UKB, I, doc. no. 43, 32-35.

⁴ Paul Niedermaier, Dezvoltarea urbanistică și arhitectonică a unor orașe transilvane din secolul al XII-lea până în secolul al XVI-lea. *Studii de istorie a naționalităților conlocuitoare din România și a înfrățirilor cu națiunea română. Naționalitatea germană*. vol. 1. (Bucharest: Editura Politică, 1976), 132.

surrounded by wooden fortifications. The Lower town eventually grew to the extent that eventually melted together in the second half of the thirteenth century because of the extension of the lots. Building strong fortifications for the town was an aim pursued with much effort and consistency all throughout the Middle Ages: stone walls, towers and bastions surrounded the inner part of the city. The edification of these strongholds was partly commissioned by the Hungarian kings, and partly a local policy of the Saxon community.

The primary role of the new inhabitants of the Hungarian kingdom was a military one: in the late twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century, the territories south and east of Transylvania were under Petchenegue and Cuman influence. At the same time, the Saxons were to play an active part in the very dynamic and expansive policy led by the Arpadian dynasty of Hungarian kings. The military protection of the far eastern and southeastern borders was insured by the Saxons together with the Szeklers who inhabited the Eastern Carpathians. Sibiu was chosen as the residence of the union of *Gräfen* – leaders of the colonist communities –, and a certain *comes Iwachinus de Cibinio* was to lead a military unit against the Bulgarian town of Vidin between 1211 and 1213.⁵ The energetic policy of the Hungarian Kings against the Cumans dominating the regions south and east of the Carpathians was also strengthened in the first decades of the thirteenth century by the brief stay (1211-1225) of the Teutonic knights in Burzenland, at the curve of the mountains. (The fortifications built by the Teutonic order and their effective military actions gave a serious blow to the Cuman Empire.⁶)

The thirteenth century was a period of consolidation of Sibiu within the community of Saxons and Transylvania, but at the same time, it brought about political and military movements that directly affected the town. These changes and shifts occurred in the “second world”, that is south of the Carpathians. The major political event that shook Southeastern Europe was the fall of Constantinople in 1204 during the fourth crusade, and the rise of the second Bulgarian-Vlach Tzarate/state, which presumably

⁵ Gustav Gündisch, “Patriciatul din Sibiu în evul mediu” (The patriciate of Sibiu in the Middle Ages). *Transilvania și sașii ardeleni în istoriografie* (Transylvania and the Transylvanian Saxons in history writing) (Sibiu: Editura Hora, 2001), 128. ⁶erban Papacostea, “Geneza statelor românești: schiță isotriografică și istorică”, *Geneza statului în Evul mediu românesc* (Bucharest: Corint, 1998), 27.

⁶ ⁶erban Papacostea, *Românii în secolul al XIII-lea. Între cruciată și imperiul mongol* (Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 1993), 32-5.

extended its influence north of Danube as well, cooperating with the Cumans that dominated the region. As I mentioned before, *Black Cumania* was destroyed by the Teutonic knights, who acted on behalf of the Hungarian king. The policy of the Hungarian monarchy was strongly oriented southwards and its persistency aimed to penetrate the Balkans, having Vidin as a strategic centre. This southern direction had both a political and a religious component: the Hungarian kings were participating in the crusades to prevent the reconquest of Constantinople by the Byzantine emperors and to convert the schismatic orthodox faithful and the pagan Cumans to Catholicism. The archbishop of Esztergom obtained in 1227 the papal mandate to create a Cuman bishopric outside the Carpathians.⁷ On the opposite side of the area, after the failed attempt of conquering Vidin, prince Béla (son of Andrew II) created the banate of Severin (*Szörényi*) in the region between Danube and the river Olt, in 1233.⁸

The struggle between the Hungarians and the Bulgarian state ended abruptly in 1241, when the Mongols invaded the Hungarian kingdom after defeating the White Cumans in the northern steppes of the Black Sea earlier on.⁹ The Mongol raids affected first of all Transylvania, the Saxon inhabited territories and Sibiu included. As suddenly as they appeared, the Mongols retreated after a year from Hungary, hearing the news that the Great Chan Ögödei had died in Karakorum.¹⁰ The Mongols threatened to invade Central Europe for the second time in 1259-1260, but another dynastic crisis within the Mongol Empire prevented them from carrying out their European plans. However, they succeeded in occupying the northern region of the Black Sea and in controlling the Lower Danube. In the last decades of the thirteenth century, the Mongols successfully attacked Hungary and the northern Balkans again.

The brutality of the Mongol invasion in 1241 had however positive consequences for the evolution of Sibiu. First, it vanished the presence of the Cumans in the region between the Carpathians and the Danube on one hand, and pushed back for certain decades the Hungarian pressure in the region between the Danube and the Carpathians.

⁷ S. Papacostea, *Romanii*, 67.

⁸ *Erdély története*. vol. I., ed. Makkai László (Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1986). 306.

⁹ Historians, both Hungarians and Romanians seem to be very emotional in evaluating the Mongol invasion. The latest historical treatise of the Romanian Academy consistently names it on the same page: “a colossal historical accident”, “a devastating storm”, “a cataclism”. *Istoria romanilor*, vol. IV. ed. Stefan Stefanescu, Camil Muresan. (Bucharest: Editura Academiei, 2001). 32.

The history of this particular area in the thirteenth century cannot be followed in depth. It is certain that the Mongols had control over it, and the charter of 1247 issued by King Béla IV in favor of the Hospitable knights mentions two political units to the right and to the left side of river Olt, which the Romanian historiography considers to be “prestate formations” of the Romanians. In 1285 another charter mentions a certain *cneaz* Litovoi who ruled over the land on the river Olt and rioted against his Hungarian suzerain. The emergence of Wallachia, one of the medieval states of the Romanians, is one of the most disputed events in Romanian history writing. The medieval Romanian chronicles speak about a Black Voivode who descended from Transylvania with his people, together with Saxons, Hungarians, and Catholics and founded the new country. Historians however argue that the creation of the Romanian state was a result of a long evolution which led the maturing of the inner political forces which eventually united under the rulership of Basarab I, the founder of Wallachia, in the 1330's. The contribution of the descending Transylvanian Romanians is integrated into this paradigm in the sense that momentary conflicts with the Hungarian authority prompted them to flee south. The early history of the Wallachian state shows that the liberation from the Hungarian suzerainty was not achieved immediately after the historic defeat of King Karl Robert by Basarab. The Romanian voivods continued to be vassals to the Hungarian kings until a greater power began to advance into the Balkans. The presence of Transylvanian Saxons in the region that would become Wallachia is undeniable: the towns south from the Carpathians such as Campulung and Targoviste were founded before the official appearance of Wallachia, and they were *avanpost* of the political and religious policy of the Hungarian kingdom.

With the emergence of an institutionalized state between the Lower Danube and the Carpathians the “second world” coagulated in an articulate shape. The new state of Wallachia, however still under Hungarian political and economical influence in the first century of its existence, had particular political and religious features that made the difference weigh more than the similarities. After decades of turmoil, the Romanian Voivodes adopted orthodoxy as their state religion and the Old Church Slavonic as their official language of the chancellery. The particular organization of the state which melted together Byzantine and Balkan institutions prompted Nicolae Iorga, the most prominent

¹⁰ Papacostea, *Romanii*, 97.

Romanian historian, to state that Wallachia and Moldavia together with the other orthodox states in the Balkans, took over the inheritance of Byzantium, and constituted – in his most fortunate formula that had long outlived his author – *Byzantium after Byzantium*.¹¹

But most important of all, in my opinion, it was the fact that allowed the shifting of the role of the city at the boundaries: since its military purpose had lost its primary meaning, having Wallachia as a buffer state between the Hungarian monarchy and the Balkans, the town evolved into a very important manufacture and commercial centre of Transylvania. This trend was strongly and consistently promoted and supported by the new economic and defense policies of the Hungarian Kings of the fourteenth century. For Sibiu, this resulted in a sum of special commercial and trading privileges. King Louis the Great and then Sigismund of Luxemburg encouraged through a consistent economic policy the trading activity of the frontier cities in northern Hungary and southern Transylvania as well. For Sibiu, this resulted in a number of privileges that granted the staple right and depositing place to the town on the one hand, and promoted and encouraged the Sibiu merchants to trade freely all throughout the Hungarian kingdom to Vienna and to Dalmatia in spite of Buda's staple right.¹² From the second half of the fourteenth century originate also the first mentions of the customs points that were established on the border with Wallachia nearby Brasov and Sibiu.

The consolidation of the Wallachian state under Hungarian more or less formal suzerainty constituted the political and institutional framework for the opening of the land trade routes that passed through the Romanian state. It is not the place to discuss this fascinating issue here, the reputed historian Șerban Papacostea has already established the main turning point of the commercial policy of the Romanian voivods, who reciprocated the decisions of the Hungarian kings in favor of the Saxon merchants and later on behalf of their local Romanian traders.¹³

¹¹ The most recent book discussing the Byzantine inheritance in the Romanian medieval states is Andrei Pippidi, *Tradiția politică bizantină în țările române în secolele XVI-XVIII*, 2nd ed. (Bucharest: Corint, 1999).

¹² Zsigmond Pál Pach, „A Levante-kereskedelem erdélyi útvonala I. Lajos és Zsigmond korában” *Századok* 1 (1975): 3-32.

¹³ Șerban Papacostea, “Începuturile politicii comerciale a Țării Românești și Moldovei (secolele XIV-XVI). Drum și stat” *Studii și materiale de istorie medie X* (1983): 9-56.

Although disputed in the early twentieth century historical writing, now it is established the one of the major Levantine trade routes passed through Wallachia and the Saxon towns from southern Transylvania, and that these roads played an important role in providing Central Europe with oriental goods, especially with spices. In the fourteenth and fifteenth century Sibiu remained a forepost for the Hungarian kingdom, who maintained its hegemonic control over Wallachia. The vivid correspondence of the Romanian vojvodas with Sibiu and Brasov testifies for the intensity of the exchanges of information, goods, services, or threats. Romanian merchants found in Sibiu a rich market and source of liquidity, but the town was also a refuge for escaping rulers and nobles.

Within the Saxon community, Sibiu also preserved and strengthened its leading position. The continuing efforts to fortify the town brought about many positive consequences: the minting chamber of Transylvania was transferred in 1427 to Sibiu due to the Ottoman threat, and this fact again had crucial influences in the economic growth of the town. The mayors of Sibiu eventually monopolized the office of the minting chamber in the period between 1444-1499, and even started to farm out intermittently the minting of the coins.¹⁴ After an almost three century long process of maturization, Hungarian King Matias Corvin reinforced in 1486 the privileges in the *Andreanum* and instituted at the same time the existence of the autonomous juridical and legislative unity of the Transylvanian Saxons, the Saxon University – “Entirety of Saxons” as Konrad Gündisch has put it¹⁵ – (*Sächsische Nationsuniversität, universitas Saxonum*).¹⁶

By the middle of the fifteenth century, the Saxon towns began to farm out of the *regalia*: the customs, the coin minting, which was explained by the fact the the Saxon patricians who filled the most prominent political, administrative and economic positions were able to exploit best the entire administrative apparatus of the Saxon community.¹⁷

The emergence of the Wallachian state which in a way ensured the protection of Sibiu from south was simultaneous to the appearance of another oriental military power

¹⁴ Huszár Lajos. *Az erdélyi fejedelemség pénzverése*. (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1995). 9, 23.

¹⁵ Konrad Gündisch, *The History of Transylvania and the Transylvanian Saxons*, <http://www.sibiweb.de/geschi/7b-history.htm>.

¹⁶ Konrad Gündisch. “Autonomie de stări și regionalitate în Ardealul medieval” *Transilvania și sașii ardeleni în istoriografie. Din publicațiile Asociației de studii transilvane Heidelberg*. (Sibiu: hora, 2001): 33-53.

in the region: the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans managed to conquer the Balkans in the fourteenth century after harsh struggles with the Christian states of the Serbians and the Bulgarians, and unsuccessful crusades led by the Hungarian kings with the blessing of the Pope. In the fifteenth century the Ottomans also incorporated Wallachia under their political influence, with the obligation of the Romanian state to pay the annual tribute to the Sultan. Sibiu was not exempted from repeated attacks from the Turks in 1432 and 1437. In 1438 Sultan Murad II fruitlessly sieged the powerful town for eight days, succeeding only in damaging the walls of the town and the Dominican monastery that was situated outside them.

Owing to its position, Sibiu also became an important information centre, mediating the transfer of information with regard to the Turks to Buda and Viena as well, sending spies to gather the news. The conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans in 1453 came as a great shock to the Christian community, and the mayor of Sibiu proudly wrote to the city of Vienna that his town was a shield to the Hungarian kingdom and to the entire Christianity.¹⁸ Nonetheless, the Ottomans eventually managed to break into Central Europe and conquer Buda in 1526, disturbing the old status-quo of the region and setting out new developments for the provinces that belonged to the medieval Hungarian kingdom.

The medieval history of Sibiu cannot be separated from the history of the region. The town grew and shaped its historical evolution in close connection with the political, economical, military and religious changes that occurred in South-Eastern Europe since the foundation of the city in the last decades of the twelfth century.

¹⁷ Kubinyi András. "A nagyszebeni pénzverde 1524-ben" *Numizmatikai Közlöny* LVI-LVII (1957-58). 21.

¹⁸ UKB, V, doc. no. 2911, 446-7.