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The Genesis of Outer Carpathian Romanian Medieval Towns according to Nicolae Iorga

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Abstract: The Genesis of Outer Carpathian Romanian Medieval Towns according to Nicolae Iorga. The paper analyses the effect of Henri Pirenne's economist theory in the crystallization of Nicolae Iorga's conception about the decisive features involved in the urban genesis in outer Carpathian area. The core of the great Romanian historian's view stands in the importance of commercial routes and foreign merchants in both state formation and Romanian medieval towns' genesis.

Key words: Iorga, medieval towns, Moldavia, Pirenne, Wallachia.

In a study previously published in this very same journal (D. Căprăroiu, 2003), we noticed that, despite the delayed sketching of the criteria according to which one can state the urban character of Romanian medieval settlements, the Romanian historiography witnessed an early beginning of the discussion on the town concept's content. In this context, Romanian historians generally adopted one of the two opposite positions: either totally denying the Romanians' capacity of creating their own towns, or viewing the urban centres as an illustration of the high level of development of the Romanian society going towards feudalization.

Although adverse, these opinions had a common misleading conception of the town as a basically economic phenomenon. Consequently, no matter the relationship between the feudalization of the Romanian society and the genesis of medieval towns, Romanian historians constantly highlighted their economic role (M. D. Matei, 1997). One single difference is to be noted between pre- and post-World War II historians: the first consider the *commercial* role of urban centres as an essential one, while the later insist on the towns' position as *producers of goods*, in the middle of "the process of segregation between craftsmanship and agriculture".

The quote is illustrative of the guiding lines imposed to, and unfortunately entirely embraced, by the Romanian historical research after the World War II; also, the ill-fated opposition outlined above was highly favoured by historical circumstances. Thus, while for the pre-World War II historiography some errors might be due to the lack of archaeological data, the post-World War II period allowed the Marxist paradigm (M. Roller, 1951; 1952) to profoundly alter the normal track of the historical research, way too often and frequently willingly forcing the adoption of false premises (A. Mihalache, 1999).

Without turning it into an excuse for the Romanian historical research, one fact remains: for all European historiography it is only later that reassessing the relationship between political structures' evolution and the urban phenomenon genesis became a fundamental issue (G. Jehel, Ph. Racinet, 1996). This constantly delayed need to detail the structural relationship connecting the political factor to the premises of medieval urban life might appear surprising, or even inexplicable, if one ignores the consequences of the profound and persistent rooting of the *economist* view in the historical thinking on the European medieval towns' genesis (M. D. Matei, 1997).

Due to the fundamental unity of the medieval towns' genesis in Western Europe, the influence of H. Pirenne's economist theory (H. Pirenne, 1917, 1928, 1929) on Western historiography (H. Sée, 1929; L. Febvre, 1922; F. Rörig, 1955) is understandable. However, ignoring regional peculiarities and variability, this seeming homogeneity – which actually proved inaccurate even in Western contexts – appeared deceiving for other European areas. Such a procedural error allowed imposing general and consequently inadequate models on particular circumstances. A typical case study provides the adopting of Pirenne's model by the inter-war Romanian historiography.

This is not the place for a detailed view of the Belgian historian's thesis. However, one can keep in mind the basis of his theory, namely the pre-eminent role of merchants and trading activities in European medieval towns' development. In his view, no civilization hosted urban life independent from trading and industry, no matter the epoch, climate, peoples, or religion. An urban gathering survives through importing food and exporting manufactured products as payment for food. Necessity explains the towns' universality; much like an effect derives from a cause, medieval towns originated directly from the commercial revival. There is actually a striking coincidence between the commercial and urban revival. Thus, one easily notices that "as the trading advances, the towns multiply along the natural routes used in commercial activities, thriving, so to speak, under their steps. At the beginning, we can only see them on seashores and river banks. Then, as the trading expands, towns are also established along direct roads between those first activity centers" (H. Pirenne, 1928, p. 117-118; 2000, p. 87-88).

Through his undisputable competence and strong formulations of this thesis, H. Pirenne managed to put together a school of thought, becoming one of the most important historians in the world. Accordingly, he and his work became a point of reference for contemporary Romanian historians as well. Unfortunately, the unmitigated transfer of his historical conclusions to the outer Carpathian Romanian realities was one of the first big mistakes of our historic research on the matter.

Pirenne's view that the oldest urban centres of the Middle Ages are the direct

outcome of international trading – "*Les centres le plus anciens de la vie urbaine ... ont été créés par les marchands*" (H. Pirenne, 1917, p. 114) – was very popular among inter-war historians (M. D. Matei, 1997, p. 15-19) such as N. Iorga, Gh. Brătianu, and, with some annotations, P. P. Panaitescu. In the following, we will only present N. Iorga's thesis, as he was the "patriarch" of the pre- and, in many respects, of post-World War II Romanian historical research as well.

Following sustained researches on the political and economic realities in the Black Sea Basin and neighbouring continental areas, N. Iorga postulated a direct relation between the establishing and development of commercial routes and the genesis of the Romanian medieval states: "Alcătuirea politică îndoită, adică Țara Românească și Moldova, o cereau și mari nevoi de viață economică universală, care au prezidat la unificarea târzie a vieții țărănești libere în jurul celor două centre domnești." (N. Iorga, 1912, p. 7). Eight years later, he would express the same opinion: "țerile românești au fost întemeiate și din [...] nevoia de a avea un păzitor al drumului [...] care trecea prin teritoriul nostru. Atunci domniile noastre au fost fondate și cu mijloacele materiale date de drumeții negustori pe aici." (N. Iorga, 1920a; 1928, p. 6; 1981, p. 62), to which also returns in 1924, in a more categorical note: "La ligne de commerce du Danube inférieur créera un État, et l'autre ligne de commerce, de la Crimée, de Caffa, tout en accroissant l'importance de la Pologne, de la nouvelle Pologne, qui est tout-à-fait distincte de l'anciennes, dans la mouvement économique, créera un autre État parallèle avec celui qui s'établira d'abord dans les Carpathes pour descendre bientôt jusqu'à la ligne du Danube. Telle est la nécessité de la fondation, avec la race roumaine, d'une principauté valaque, d'une côte, pour desservir la ligne du Danube inférieur, et celle de la création, après quelques dizaines d'années, vers 1.350-1.360, de la principauté de Moldavie, dans les vallées du Dniester, du Pruth, du Séreth." (N. Iorga, 1924, p. 93-94). In 1928, the title of one of his conferences stated his beliefs even more loudly: *Drumurile de comerț creatoare ale statelor românești/Commercial routes creators of Romanian states*.

As already pointed out – and as I also intend to show in detail into a future contribution – N. Iorga's thesis will gain support among the

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next generation of Romanian historians, of which the most representative were Gh. Brătianu and P. P. Panaitescu (cf. Ș. Papacostea, 2001). Moreover, N. Iorga also opened in the Romanian historiography the conceptual debate on the Romanian medieval urban phenomenon's origin and meaning (L. Lehr, 1965), often delivering wavering and even contradictory opinions on the decisive factors of the urban genesis. Following Pirenne's thinking, and also inferring on his convictions on commercial routes' role in state formation, N. Iorga placed a big and often critical question mark upon the Romanian origin of our first medieval towns.

In fact, since 1920 the researcher specified that the royalty *found out* the towns (N. Iorga, 1920a; 1928, p. 106; 1981, p. 115); in the same year, he gave supplementary explanation in a conference held at the *National Bridges and Roads School*: the commercial routes linked to the beginnings of the political life in both Romanian countries were travelled by so many merchants that at the location of their halting places Moldavia and Wallachia towns were established (N. Iorga, 1920b). For example, "drumul moldovenesc era bătut de Germani din orașele Poloniei, căci și Cracovia și Lembergul au fost întemeiate de Nemți – sub scutul regelui polon, dar cu coloniști –, și acești Germani au contribuit să creeze orașe și în părțile noastre, pe când altele au fost întemeiate de sașii din Ardeal." (N. Iorga, 1920b, p. 11).

Several years later, he stated the same conclusion more firmly: "Românii n-aveau la început târguri și orașe. Acestea poartă ici și acolo mai mult nume străine, care ne luminează asupra originii lor..." (N. Iorga, 1922, p. 213; 1985, p. 137). "Peste tot întâlnim în aceste orașe străini care au venit cu dreptul lor, cu constituția orășenească obișnuită în patria lor pentru a întemeia colonii asemănătoare pe pământ românesc." (N. Iorga, 1922, p. 262; 1985, p. 161). Thus, "...nu e nici o îndoială astăzi că orașele noastre nu sunt întemeiate de români"/"there is no doubt today that our towns were not established by Romanians". Some of them, such as Baia, Siret, Suceava in Moldavia, Câmpulung or Târgoviște in Wallachia were established by Galicia Germans, Saxons, or Armenians (N. Iorga, 1927, p. 30).

N. Iorga's work discloses his special cherishing of the Armenians. In the 1935 *Choses*

d'art arméniennes en Roumanie paper, he stressed the XIVth century documentary support proving Armenian presence in Moldavia even before the state's formation. As the Moldavian state was formed through trading, those practicing trading collaborated in forming the national state in Moldavia, so the Armenians might be somehow thought of as "Moldavia's parents" (N. Iorga, 1935, p. 10).

Although N. Iorga advocated resolutely his opinions, his work does not lack, however, ambiguous statements. As already mentioned, one can identify bounteous oscillations between clear-cut and prudent ideas, even in chronologically close papers; such is the case of the commercial roads vs. Romanian outer Carpathian medieval states timetable.

In the famous 1920 *Old Roads* conference he noted that the establishing of Romanian states, first of Wallachia, at Argeș, around 1.300, then of Moldavia, at Baia, around 1.360, could be connected to the existence of a north-south commercial route going through Wallachia, and also to other two such routes going through Moldavia (N. Iorga, 1920b). Later on, his opinion slightly shifted: the Moldavian commercial route predates the state, and therefore it was the commercial necessity which shaped the political formula. This was not the case of Wallachia, where the commercial route was activated after the state formation (N. Iorga, 1939). Moreover, in a conference published after his death, the very role of commercial routes in the states' genesis was questioned, stating that it would be wrong to consider only trading routes as generating our medieval states (N. Iorga, 1943).

Even when talking about the occupations of the first town residents, N. Iorga hesitated in the same paper, *from one page to another*, between *merchants* and *craftsmen*: while at first he gave the pre-eminent role to the merchants (N. Iorga, 1927, p. 30), he clearly stated later that in both countries most of the first town residents were the craftsmen (N. Iorga, 1927). His opinions on their ethnic characteristic are also somehow equivocal: in Suceava's case, he first chose prudence, admitting an influx of Germanic population from the "Transylvanian island of Bistrița", which only *contributed* to the importance and the prosperity of the Moldavian capital (N. Iorga, 1889, p. 1); then, three decades

later, he included Suceava among the settlements established by the Galicia Germans, the Saxons, or the Armenians (N. Iorga, 1927, p. 30). Further on, his ambiguities turn into genuine historical contradictions, like is the case of granting a local character to some Moldavia and Wallachia settlements, while previously excluding this possibility: although “*nu e nici o îndoială astăzi că orașele noastre nu sunt întemeiate de români*”/ “*there is no doubt today that our towns were not established by Romanians*” (N. Iorga, 1927, p. 30), still, Roman, Chilia, Cetatea Albă, Iași, Argeș and even București *originated from a fortress built by the ruler*, around which gathered later on craftsmen and merchants (N. Iorga, 1927, p. 30).

To conclude, all wavering and contradictions aside, N. Iorga thought of trading as being a decisive feature of society’s evolution in all fields, political and urban structures included. The great historian adopted this view, even realizing that its immediate consequence was the exclusion of Romanians as agents from the complicated historical equation being formulated. This is what he would clearly state, more than once, either non-equivocal – “*comerțul nostru și viața noastră orășenească nu vin dintr-o dezvoltare proprie a poporului românesc*”/ “*our trading and our urban life did not emerge from a development of the Romanian people*” (N. Iorga, 1925, p. V) –, or in a more romantic way: “*Aici, ca și peste munți, se arată neînclinarea neamului românesc de a trăi într-un oraș închis, bogat, unde e muncă regulată și unde trebuie ținută o gospodărie econoamă. Românului îi trebuie spațiu, aer, cer, natură, libertate; acestea-i sunt cele mai de samă trebuinți; ele stau la baza sufletului său și răsună în cântecele sale.*”/ “*Here, as well as over the mountains, is obvious that the Romanian kin does not incline towards living in a closed, rich town, doing regular work and taking care economically of a household. More than anything, the Romanian needs space, air, sky, nature, freedom, as those are the foundation of its soul and songs.*” (N. Iorga, 1922, p. 263; 1985, p. 161).

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