

About Brăila's Beginnings

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Abstract:The paper deals with the dawn of the urban life in Brăila, one of the most important Romanian medieval towns, located on the Lower Danube, not far from the Black Sea. Brăila occupies a special position among Romanian towns in what concerns the process of medieval urban genesis in the outer-Carpathian area. The main features emphasized here are the absence of any interference from the state political authorities and the sheer importance of the international trade in the town's early evolution.

Brăila represents the typical kind of town formed without the direct intervention of some authority. However, despite the truth of this fact, it would be all the more erroneous to completely deny the contribution of the great political actors of the time in ensuring an adequate environment of favorability for the stimulation of the settlement's economic potential and general development.

The first direct documentary mention of Brăila – in the commercial privilege act that the Wallachian ruler, Vladislav Vlaicu, offered, on January 20, 1368, to all the merchants of Brașov (*DRH*: p. 87) – gives a special feeling compared to the way the medieval towns of the North-Danubian area are mentioned in similar documents. Thus, in this commercial privilege act, Brăila does not appear as town, but is invoked as a terminus point of a commercial road, mentioned as such: “drumul Brăilei” (“Brăila's road”).

This fact – corroborated with other suggestions, made by the above-mentioned act and also by an older one (*DRH*: p. 72) – compels us, which is not at all easy, to treat extremely prudently the aspects referring to the beginnings of Brăila **town**.

C. C. Giurescu, with the readiness specific of his scientific personality, dared to decide on an exaggerate ancientness of Brăila, as a habitat with assured urban features. For the reputed Romanian historian, the passage of Brăila to the stage of **town** occurred “*before the foundation of Wallachia*, namely before about 1300”. Moreover, “its transformation was an accomplished fact during the reigns of the princes Litovoi and Seneslav (1247)”, and this situation existed “as well at the end of the preceding century, during the time of Petru and Asan” (C. C. Giurescu 1968: p. 36).

Today, the archaeological research achieved on Brăila's territory **no longer** allows the affirmation of its urban character before the middle of the 14th century (I. Căndea 1993: p. 29). Actually, exactly two decades ago, in response to the categorical statements of C. C. Giurescu, the late researcher S. Baraschi noted the following: “even if the portuary settlement was already founded during the above-mentioned century... it could not have been some

significant port, as it was to become during the 14th and the 15th century, when the politico-economic circumstances changed" (S. Baraschi 1987, p. 221).

In fact, correlating the political events that marked the history of the Carpatho-Danubian area by the middle of the 14th century, with the indications offered by the two privilege acts emitted within an interval of just ten years (1358/1368), we will be able to carefully decipher the fundamental landmarks of this evolution.

A remarkable synthesis of the historical circumstances that favored the increase of the settlement from Brăila can be found at Papacostea, in the pages of one of his most inspired studies: "The settling of the Genovese at the mouths of the Danube as a dominant power and the effort of the Angevin royal power from Hungary to open a commercial connection with the Black Sea through its territories in the interest of its own trade and in order to assure its part in the benefit from the merchandise transit between the Occident and the Oriental world lay at the origin of the main Wallachian road, the one connecting Braşov to Brăila and from there to the entire Black Sea basin. In 1358, Louis d'Anjou creates a customs immunity area between Ialomiţa and Siret River, to the benefit of the merchants of Braşov, the main agents and beneficiaries of the new commercial itinerary; the following year a new stage of the Wallachian-Hungarian conflict begins, in which an important role was held by the fight for the control of the road segment between Braşov and Brăila, and of course, for the territory it crossed. At the end of this conflict, during which Wallachia reaches its historical boundary in the east, completes its independence and endows itself with the institutions of an autonomous state, the commercial road from Braşov to Brăila was under Wallachia's control. In 1368, a significant moment in the long-term settlement of the relations between Wallachia and Hungary, the privilege of the merchants from Braşov concerning their circulation and trade on Brăila's road is renewed, but not by Louis, as in 1358, but by Vlaicu. In the fight for the control of the segment between Braşov and the Lower Danube of the significant European continental road connecting Central Europe to the Black Sea, via Hungary and Transylvania, "Wallachia managed to make its right recognized" (Ş. Papacostea 1988: p. 200-201).

We have, therefore, two important documents, which have to be integrated, for their good understanding, both into Hungary's and Wallachia's general politics conditions and into the particular, mainly economic interests of the two parties.

Thus, the first document, that of 1358, appears, not at all by coincidence, during the very year when Louis d'Anjou managed to take away the possession of the Dalmatian coast from Venice, consequently opening Hungary's trade to the Adriatic Sea, by means of the merchants of Braşov and especially of Sibiu. This fact took place in the context of the conflict with *Serenissima* – who desperately demanded the control over Dalmatia – and of the Hungarian-Genovese alliance concluded precisely as a gesture of co-interest against the Venetians.

At the same time, on the second *front* of the same junction of politico-economic interests (in the area between the Carpathians and the mouths of the Danube) – under the favorable circumstances of the gradual Hungarian takeover of the control over the regions neighboring the river, at the expense of the Mongolian domination – there appears the possibility of opening an important commercial road connecting Central Europe, via Hungary and Braşov, to the black Sea basin, by means of the Genovese merchants who had recently settled in Chilia as well. This is, actually, the moment that marks the irrevocable fall of Vicina – abandoned, a year later, by its last metropolitan bishop – and the rise of the settlement situated on the right bank of Sfântu Gheorghe (a branch of the Danube River), namely Chilia, which was beginning to become a true bastion of the Genovese trade at the mouths of the Danube River.

But, just ten years before the moment when it was able to fully benefit of its participation to the great international trade –**thanks to the agreement with *Demetrius*, the**

renown ruler of the “Tartar zones” – Hungary had to content itself with the attempt, which proved to be half-failed as well, to open, in the *exclusive* favor of the merchants from Braşov, the road towards the market town from Brăila, via the Valley of Buzău. As Ş. Papacostea was right to notice, however firm Louis’s assurances may have seemed, his actions had to face the determined opposition of the reigning prince Nicolae Alexandru, who could not allow anyone to take away his control over a trade road with such a significant potential.

Consequently, though the *transit* commerce in the direction of Brăila will be activated **on this occasion** – providing the necessary circumstances for an assured, yet discontinuous evolution, from a portuary market town towards a habitat with a higher status, namely urban, for Brăila –, the way the Angevin king wanted to instate his interests would determine major frictions between the two parties, culminating with the crisis from December, 1367, solved by the emission of the privilege act of January, 1368.

A careful analysis of this act subtly highlights realities that, in our opinion, have not yet been adequately underlined in the historiography dedicated to this problem:

On the one hand, the document does not guarantee at all, as it was stated, the exaggerate ancientness of the functioning of *Brăila’s road* and, implicitly, of the specific circumstances that ensured the growth of the portuary settlement from the left bank of the Danube. The fact that the document mentions the considerable ancientness, “*from our old men’s time*” (“din bătrâni”), of the liberties enjoyed by the merchants of Braşov, liberties that Vladislav-Vlaicu promises to *keep*, refers to the liberties specific to **other commercial routes**, either of transit or local, used by merchants from times out of mind. Actually, the very fact that these routes are mentioned gives consistence, at least *quantitatively*, to the privilege act of 1368, with the specification “the lawful customs of yore” (“dreptelor vămi de demult”), inexistent as far as *Brăila’s road* was concerned.

On the other hand, by virtue of the stipulations from the document under our attention, the economic activities related to this **new** commercial road, **recently** introduced, will no longer function only in favor of the merchants from Braşov – this, only in case it really used to happen **this way** at some point in time – even if, *de facto*, the privilege act had been drawn in the royal chancellery, and the reigning prince Vladislav-Vlaicu was only to approve and authenticate it. The formulation from the document – “when these merchants set out with their merchandises **on the above-mentioned road of Brăila**, to foreign countries, they will have to pay us the customs only once, **in Câmpulung**, not on their way out, but on their return” (“când acești negustori purced cu mărfurile lor pe **pomenita cale a Brăilei**, spre țări străine, vor fi datori să ne plătească numai o dată tricesima, **la Câmpulung**, nu la ducere, ci la întoarcere”)– leaves no room for doubt concerning the exclusion of any previous functionality of the *illicit* attempts of going to Brăila through the Valley of Buzău, a fact that would have exempted the merchants of the “due” customs they had to pay in Câmpulung. On the contrary!

Moreover, beyond the temptation that determined most researchers to see in the mention of this very discussed *preferential* customs regime (*they will have to pay us the customs only once, in Câmpulung*), the clearest sign of the imposition of the Angevin *suzerain’s* interests on his *vassal* from the south of the Carpathians, the reality is totally different. Not only did Vladislav-Vlaicu guarantee a *porto-franc* regime for Brăila, as it was already hypothesized (P. P. Panaitescu), a regime certainly advantageous for this habitat – solving at the same time the problems appeared in the relation with the Hungarian Kingdom, after 1358–, but the Wallachian ruler also proved, on this occasion, an extreme ability in finding a solution, favorable for himself, to the problem represented by the adequate management of the *transit* trade on Brăila’s road.

We underlined the *transit* character of the trade of the merchants from Braşov on this route because understanding the circumstances that this type of commerce supposed, at the

epoch we refer to, represents the key to the whole range of problems concerning the so-called *compromise* accepted by Argeș. Thus, the Wallachian ruler knew very well that, of the products the merchants had with them on the road of Brăila, the really valuable ones, on which they could obtain consistent customs, were the Oriental merchandises, *taken over* from Brăila and transited *towards* Brașov, **via Câmpulung**¹. That is why he will content himself with the customs paid in Câmpulung, “*not on their way out, but on their return*”.

This is the context in which the modest fishermen settlement from Brăila, endowed with a portuary market that would stimulate its economic potential, starts – timidly, beginning with 1358, and in an accelerated rhythm during the following decennia – to acquire, thanks to the international transit commerce evoked above, those urban characteristics that allow it to be included among the Romanian medieval towns *formed* towards the end of the 14th century, in the extra-Carpathian area.

To all these, we will only add one more remark: since its beginnings, Brăila’s evolution depended on the moments when Hungary’s access to the great Genovese trade, supported by Chilia, was blocked. We notice, consequently, that *Brăila’s road* was activated in 1358, when the Hungarian Kingdom had not succeeded, despite the progresses acquired, to penetrate deep enough in the regions from the north of the Delta, which would have ensured its access to the commerce that took place through Chilia.

The zone was still under the Mongolians’ control, and only in 1368, thanks to the agreement with *Demetrius*, was the Angevin monarch able to guarantee the merchants of Brașov an undisturbed passage to Bugeac. It is not a coincidence that immediately after this event, under the assurances offered by this interesting commercial alliance, Louis dared to attack Vladislav-Vlaicu, though the Wallachian ruler had accepted, at the beginning of the same year, the conditions stipulated in the privilege act offered to the merchants of Brașov.

Under these circumstances, Brăila will have a slow evolution, especially during the first years of its “awakening”. This fact is confirmed as well by the remarks of the notary Antonio di Ponzò (1360-1361), in whose pages the portuary settlement situated on the left bank of the Danube had not yet found its place. However, what saved it, during the years of tough concurrence coming from Chilia, from the viewpoint of the great international commerce, was its quality of significant fishing center, highlighted by numerous documents of that epoch².

¹ The fact is confirmed, a bit later, by Johann Schiltberger – a participant to the failed Nicopol crusade (1396) –, who, crossing Wallachia, saw “a town named Brăila (*Uebereyl*)”, where “**the vessels and ships on which the merchants bring merchandises from the pagans lie**” (*Călători străini despre țările române* / Foreign Travelers on the Romanian Countries, vol. I, p. 30).

² Alexandru cel Bun himself, in the famous privilege act he gave to the merchants of Liov (1408), mentions the sum and the place where the customs to be paid by the merchants that went “**to Brăila, for fish**” (M. Costăchescu 1932: p. 635-636).

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