

THE GENESIS OF MEDIEVAL TOWNS IN TRANSYLVANIA

RALUCA MARIA MANOLIU
TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY OF IAȘI

BOOK REVIEW OF

Niedermaier, Paul (2016) Geneza orașelor medievale în Transilvania, Editura Academiei Române, București, (The Genesis of Medieval Towns in Transylvania)

Communication: Raluca Maria Manoliu E-mail: ralucamanoliu@gmail.com
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The *Genesis of Medieval Towns in Transylvania* is a monumental work authored by Paul Niedermaier, which addresses the evolution of urban planning in Transylvania from the Early Middle Ages to the early modern period. The book is extremely detailed and well-documented, with its main objective being to elucidate the process of formation and development of Transylvanian medieval towns, within the context of an in-depth analysis of their structures and morphology. The book is complementing an earlier work by the author, *Medieval Habitat in Transylvania* (2012), aiming to clarify previously underexplored issues and open new research directions.

The study covers a vast period ranging from the post-Roman period and the decline of ancient urban centers to Transylvania's inclusion in the Habsburg Empire, tracing the phases of urban development starting with the habitat during the migration period, moving through the beginnings of early medieval urbanism, and culminating in its apex during the period 1242–1347, a phase that marks the formation of the key historical centers of Transylvania. Subsequently, between 1348 and 1541, urbanism was dominated by the development of suburbs and durable constructions, while in the early modern period, although the first modern urban trends emerged, changes were less significant.

The volume examines around 40 significant urban centers of medieval Transylvania, categorized as either “cities” or “market towns,” alongside the genesis of over 100 smaller settlements. These include ecclesiastical, administrative, mining, and commercial centers from regions such as Banat, Crișana, Maramureș, and Ardeal. In each case, essential historical data on the functionality of the settlement, its population, and spatial evolution are analyzed. Urban structures are assessed in terms of their compositional complexity and the layout of households and streets relative to the size of the settlement.

The book is structured into six main parts, each addressing essential stages in the evolution of urban planning in these regions, starting with the research methods.

The research methodology employed by the author is based on the morphogenetic types of habitat. It establishes the conceptual framework and theoretical boundaries necessary to trace the evolution of settlements and urban centers. The methodology combines the study of historical documents with the analysis of maps and urban configurations. Niedermaier focuses on identifying planimetric and parcel typologies, drawing clear distinctions between historical periods and the specific influences of each era. Plans and graphic rep-



Figure 1. Niedermaier, Paul: *Geneza orașelor medievale în Transilvania* (*The Genesis of Medieval Towns in Transylvania*), Book cover.

representations are central tools in the analysis, developed from old maps and supplemented with sketches and isometric views to depict the configuration of settlements in different historical stages. These graphic materials, including the Josephine surveys of the 18th century, present certain limitations, such as inaccuracies due to small scales or missing details. To compensate for these deficiencies, the document proposes supplementing data through the interpretation of parcel textures and general planimetric structures. Essential elements of the plans, such as parcel boundaries, fortifications, and watercourses, are prioritized, while insignificant details, like boundaries between private courtyards, are omitted to ensure analytical clarity.

Niedermaier classifies medieval Transylvanian settlements into three distinct morphogenetic types that reflect unique adaptations to geographical and economic conditions, as well as the cultural and political influences of the period. Scattered settlements, associated with livestock farming, are characterized by large distances between parcels, irregular shapes, and a clearly defined nucleus. In contrast, compact settlements and linear settlements—results of the Saxon colonization of the 12th century—exhibit rigorous organization and strict parceling rules. The second type, loose-knit settlements with small, nearly square parcels located in close proximity to each other, reflects modest economic beginnings and early urban organization. By contrast, the third type includes linear settlements with elongated, regularly arranged parcels, a hallmark of colonists' planning that was later widely adopted in Transylvania. This classification is not only descriptive, but also explanatory, providing a solid foundation for understanding subsequent urban evolution. The study demonstrates that while these settlement types underwent transformations over time, they formed the structural basis of medieval towns in the region.

The Mongol invasions of 1241 and later Ottoman incursions had a significant impact on the structure and organization of towns. Nevertheless, Niedermaier highlights the persistence of certain archaic elements within urban structures: for instance, the street networks of major towns like Braşov and Cluj remained relatively stable, and central marketplaces continued to play a crucial role in urban spatial organization. These marketplaces, along with fortifications and durable constructions, contributed to the consolidation of Transylvanian historical centers.

The impact of Saxon colonization on Transylvanian urbanism was significant, as the settlers introduced new spatial

organization rules, reflected in settlements such as Mediaș, Bistrița, and Sebeș. Land parceling, functional zoning and the construction of fortified churches are among the defining features of this process. These transformations profoundly influenced the cultural and urbanistic identity of the region, shaping the development of towns well into the modern period.

The expansion of towns was influenced by natural boundaries—such as rivers or terrain—as well as by economic and strategic factors. Suburbs, which emerged as zones of expansion, were gradually integrated into the urban structure, contributing to the diversification of street networks and the creation of new functional spaces.

Chapters dedicated to the classical and late medieval periods emphasize the economic role of towns. Niedermaier analyzes marketplaces, inns, and crafts, highlighting how these activities drove urban dynamics and contributed to the prosperity of commercial centers. Sibiu and Brașov are presented as emblematic examples of towns that benefited from regional and international trade.

Although *The Genesis of Medieval Towns in Transylvania* by Paul Niedermaier provides an exhaustive analysis, it is worth noting that some recent archaeological discoveries and certain aspects—such as urban influences from outside the Transylvanian region—might have warranted a more extensive exploration. Additionally, while the cartographic analysis is highly valuable, additional maps or diagrams could have further supported the author's arguments.

Nevertheless, the work remains a fundamental reference point for Romanian historiography, filling a significant gap in the research on medieval urbanism.