

# Aspects Regarding the Genesis of the City of Suceava, a Medieval Capital of Moldavia

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**Abstract**—The city of Suceava, one of the most important medieval capital of Moldova, owes its urban genesis to the power center established in its territory at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Freed from the effective control exercised by the Emir Nogai through Alanians, the local center of power evolved as the main representative of the interests of indigenous people in relation to the Hungarian Angevin dynasty and to their representatives from Maramures. From this perspective, the political and military role of the settlement of Suceava was archeologically proved by the discovery of extensive fortifications, unrivaled in the first half of the XIV<sup>th</sup> century's Moldavia. At the end of that century, voivod Peter I decides to move the capital of the state from Siret to Suceava. That option stimulated the development of the settlement on specific urban coordinates.

**Keywords**—Moldova, Suceava, voivod, capital.

## I. INTRODUCTION

AMONG the settlements of special significance for the history of the Carpathian territory, although only later on attested in documents of the time, Suceava (Fig. 1) has benefited from a deep and constant interest for archeologists from the early decades of the second half of last century on. The measure of this interest is given by the fact that Suceava became early in those years the true landmark of the Romanian new school of medieval archeology, created under the guidance of Professor I. Nestor. Among the specialists trained in a direct connection with the excavation in Suceava, one would notice M. D. Matei, to whom we owe the most important early contributions to deciphering the history of the city [1].

As a result of these commendable efforts, a certain degree of continuity was revealed, both within the territory of the future settlements Suceava, but mostly in the surrounding areas of habitation, starting from the first centuries of the millennium [2]. Without entering into details, one should emphasize the fundamental importance of these findings for a thorough understanding of the particular features of the process which led to the genesis of Suceava, with specific reference to the favorability of certain economic and demographic circumstances [3]: "Considering the material data, which may serve as major stages for benchmarking the millennial history of the human settlement that would become the medieval city of Suceava, a fact of fundamental importance comes into light: the uninterrupted continuity of life, within or in the immediate surroundings of the future city,

since at least the first two centuries of our era. Important primarily because it emphasizes the permanence of some favorable conditions for the ever upward march of any human community, this finding becomes all the more important in the particular case of Suceava, precisely because the city, through its geographical position, appeared as an outcome of the action of multiple factors, which involved resources from an extensive region, Suceava's genesis ultimately being the result of the historical evolution of the whole Romanian society from this part of the country." [4].

From such a perspective, Suceava's example might appear as an expressive illustration of how a medieval site, located on a major river, in a geographical area with a high economic and demographic potential, manages to become the *center of convergence* of the entire region. This happened in the spite of the city's quite unfavorable, somewhat withdrawn positioning in relation to the principal axes of the international trade [5].



Fig. 1. The geographical position of Suceava on the present map of Romania

## II. PREMISES FOR THE MOVING OF MOLDAVIA'S CAPITAL TO SUCEAVA

The archeological investigations focused the attention to a peculiarity, which undoubtedly made the genesis of the city in question quite special. Thus, from the perspective of the archeological inventory, the poor findings corresponding to the XI<sup>th</sup>-XII<sup>th</sup> centuries unequivocally disqualify the future settlement of Suceava in the competition with their counterparts in the region. For example, in comparison to the exceptional discoveries from the nearby locality, Vorniceni Mari [6], those from Suceava's territory appear totally inconsistent.

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However, the host settlement for the recently moved court from Siret was not to be the old hearth of Vorniceni Mari, but Suceava. The explanation of this strange choice lies in a significant fact, attested by archeology: at the beginning of XIV<sup>th</sup> century, Suceava's territory indicated a clear concentration of the inhabited space [7], sheltered by a fortress of considerable size, consisting of a palisade and the associated ditch. In fact, the settlement extended over a considerable area of about 3 hectares and was surrounded by a complex and costly fortification, an obvious material expression for the existence of a center, on which a local ruler exercised his authority, using the stronghold primarily as a focus for his military attributes [8].

As in Arges, one of the medieval capitals of Wallachia, the political factor prevailed over the economical background in the genesis of the medieval settlement, positively redirecting the vectors of the interdependent relationship between the two "competitors". Stressing this highly significant process for understanding the circumstances of Suceava's birth gives the opportunity to mark a similar type of urban genesis for the territory east of the Carpathians. This model does not apply with such clarity for any other case.

The status of a *voivodal center* [9] for Suceava, aggregating multiple political, administrative and religious functions, naturally stimulated the economic velleities of the settlement, making it the "turntable" of the regional trade. Consequently, these developments offered Suceava the conditions for a further growth, pushing it towards the end of XIV century in the position of the main candidate for the status of capital for the by then politically and religiously emancipated Moldavia.

#### A. A controversial episode: the Otto of Bavaria's detention in Suceava

According to some important Romanian historians, opinion which it will be also followed here, at least as an hypothesis, the "Voivodship of Suceava" [10] has been already been noted on the stage of international political history, even before known residential movement initiated by Petru I Mușatinul (1375-1391). One should specifically refer to the episode mentioned by Ottokar of Styria in his *Rhymed Chronicle*. The text, which was widely debated in the Romanian and foreign historiography, mentions one "Romanian" (*Walachen*) from "beyond the mountains" (*über walt*), "in all matters master of the others" (*Herr ob den andern was*).

In order to understand the passage in question, an interesting outline of the general historical framework will be reproduced here, which was done by A. Armbruster: "... in early 1301 King Andrew the III<sup>rd</sup>, the last Arpadian bearing the St. Stephen's crown, dies. The first to claim the vacant crown is the minor son of the powerful King of Bohemia, Venceslav; after four years of incessantly challenged reign, Venceslav withdraws from the competition (1305). The issue of Hungarian succession is actually reopened, although Venceslav surrendered the crown and the royal rights to the Duke Otto of Bavaria, who was even crowned and anointed in

Alba Iulia. Pope Clement V intervened and assigned the apostolic crown to Charles Robert of Anjou, excommunicating Otto of Bavaria in the same time. Seeking to strengthen his seriously threatened position, Otto came to Transylvania in order to ally with the powerful Transylvanian prince Ladislas, who, however, harbored his own hopes for the royal dignity. Therefore, the voivod arrests the crown pretender and confiscate the crown and royal insignia, refusing to surrender them to the representatives of the Pontifical Seat, especially sent for that purpose in Transylvania. Charles Robert had therefore to be contented to be crowned with an ad-hoc made crown, pending for the genuine St. Stephen's, the only one who gave full legitimacy to the act of coronation.

Otto's fate turns dramatic. The Voivod Ladislas transferred him from his captivity in the custody of Romanians; after a second detention, this time among Romanians, Otto is issued and sent, according to his will, to a relative, namely Prince Iurii of Halicz; from here, after he married at Glogau, Otto reached Bavaria, where he will hold the title of King of Hungary until his death (1312)" [11].

Avoiding entering into the details of the controversy [12] regarding the location of *herr's* country, one should consider some reasons which give credit to the Moldavian version of this identification [13], and which in terms of the reported archaeological realities in Suceava gains a considerably stronger position. The identification of the famous *herr* from Ottokar's *Rhymed Chronicle* with the voivod from Suceava, proposed by M. D. Matei [14], seems credible.

In order to support this thesis, the following data and interpretations must be taken into account:

a. The vicinity of the Romanians "beyond the mountains" with the Halicz principality, suggested by the fact that Otto, just released from prison (1308), expressed the desire to go to Halicz, but also by the reaction of the Romanian ruler, who instantly arranged the king's safe travel to Russia.



Fig. 2. Fagaras Country in its geographical relationship with Transylvania and Wallachia

It is difficult to accept, in the light of this information, that Otto of Bavaria would have preferred, if the case of his detention in Fagaras Country or Wallachia (Țara Românească) (Fig. 2), to make such a detour on his way home.

Moreover, it is really hard to see the Romanians from these countries, located on both sides of the Southern Carpathians

and therefore much further south, as being in the position to accompany the king “safely to the Russians” in a long and dangerous journey.

However, the Wallachian alternative on the detention of Otto, also supported by several important historians [15], cannot be entirely dismissed. The identification of Negru Vodă/Thocomer/Toktomer with the *herr* mentioned by Ottokar can be supported by some plausible arguments: the geographical location of Wallachia (“über walt”) in relation to Transylvania; its location close to the power center from Deva, the residence of Ladislas Kan [16]; the “*herr*” status (i.e. “*primus inter pares*”), as highlighted in the chronicle; although he was the “master of all others,” the *herr* did not simply impose his will, the final decision being taken after the consent of all Romanians. This latter perspective is consistent with the naturally expected relationship between Toktomer, the founder of the Wallachian Country, and his boyars, local voivods, particularly if we consider that he came from Fagaras Country [17] and he was at the beginning of his reign.

Yet the mentioning of the neighbouring Halicz principality, as shown in the chronicle, clearly weakens the Wallachian variant in this “identification competition”, unless the arguments advanced by Serban Papacostea would prove valid. He suggested that Wallachia stretched its possession at that time to the East of Carpathians and thereby came into direct contact with the area under the hegemony of the Halicz principality [18]. This possibility should not be excluded and it can actually be reinforced by the fact that both Toktomer and his son, Basarab, were at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries vassals of the Mongol Golden Horde, which from may have received the southern Moldavia and the Bugeac area. The latter territory was actually called Bessarabia (i.e. Basarab country) during the Middle Ages, the name being extended to the entire Romanian territory beyond the Prut later on, in modern times.

b. The specific requirement of the Haliczian neighborhood, which considerably reduces the chances of other countries to be identified as the *herr*'s, is corroborated by the fact that soon after the arrival of his relative in Halicz, the Prince Iuri ordered a campaign Romanians country, as a retribution for the humiliation suffered by King Otto from their behalf. Thus, if the scenario noted above, the rule of Toktomer in southern Moldova, would prove to be false and the information in the chronicle of Ottokar would be real, then it seems almost impossible to admit that Iuri would have sent troops a long distance expedition against Wallachia. In what concerns the probability that this campaign, regardless of where, has actually taken place, although largely irrelevant for our purpose here, one should favor the idea that this episode is rather the echo of a simple intention, never materialized, if not simply the creation of author's imagination.

c. The mentioning of the ruler from “beyond the mountains/forest” seems to finally eliminate the *Terra Blacorum*/Fagaras Country from this investigation. Even if the argument of A. Armbruster (*über walt* = “beyond the forest” and not “beyond the mountains”) could be allowed, the

specification of *herr*'s ethnicity precludes his identification with the Fagaras master (1291), the Hungarian Ugrinus from the strong Csák family [19].

Even this documentary evidence should be treated with caution, as it is very likely that after the year 1301 - which marks the disappearance of Andrew the III<sup>rd</sup>, the last representative of the Arpadian dynasty and protector of Ugrinus - the Fagaras Country has entered again in the possession of Toktomer, who was expelled from there a decade before. That would have been possible in the context of his alliance with the voivod Ladislas, absolute ruler of Transylvania, which peacefully deprived Ugrinus from his Fagaras estates [20]. From a historiographical perspective, may the above scenario be confirmed it would prove the validity of A. Lukács' intervention [21].

Only one indication from the *Chronicle*, which served A. Armbruster as an element of probation for the identification of the Fagaras Country with *herr*'s country, could apparently threaten the integrity of the argument favoring Suceava. It concerns the status of the Romanian population, as it appears in the context of persuasive intervention of the Transylvanian voivod: in the famous letter sent by Ladislas to the famous *herr* and his Romanians, in which he was asking them to take Otto, they were promised “eternal grace and gratitude of the new king”, to whom were still *owe* such a service, as their were “his subjects”.

Thus, adding this clarification to the other information provided by Ottokar's chronicle, it may be concluded that the most likely location of Otto's detention could actually be the Maramures Country (Fig. 3), possession of the Hungarian crown and also placed in the close proximity of Halicz [22].



Fig. 3. Territory of Maramureş on the present map of Romania

However, as it will be shown in the following lines, some very special circumstances made the territory East of Carpathians entering at least nominally under the Hungarian control, precisely in the time of Otto's detention.

#### B. The rise of the local center of power

Although a comprehensive understanding of the Eastern Carpathians realities from the beginning of the XIV<sup>th</sup> century

is not allowed by the known records, some available data indicate, however, expressly for the start of this century, the dawn of some special political circumstances able to stimulate the development of the local centers of power, previously subordinated to foreign forces.

*On one hand*, the elimination by force (1300-1301) of the Emir Nogai and of his sons by the Great Khan Tokta, to whose authority the former refused to comply, has removed the Danube Delta Gates, much like all of the Outer Carpathians Romanian territory from under the effective domination of the great Mongol commander.

The same event led to a precipitated movement of the the Alanian warriors (1302), previously under the command of Nogai, to the better protected Moldavian northern territories, sheltered from the fury of the great Khan. Among them, one must include, of course, the group of Suceava [23], previously responsible for overseeing the important road nearby, which forks in Iacobeni and leads to Maramures and Transylvania [24].

The Alanian exodus freed Suceava, as the entire area north of Moldova, from the effective authority of the Golden Horde, causing serious disfunctions to the Mongol defensive system. Speculating the newly created situation, the Hungarian Crown promptly intervened in order to take political control over the Eastern Carpathians. The fact was recorded in the anonymous description of the Eastern Europe from 1308, according to which the Siret and Prut rivers were in the composition of Transylvania [25].

It should be stressed, however, that this subordination could only have been a nominal one, the scale of military and political initiatives of the Kingdom being undermined by internal struggles for the throne.

Only after Charles of Anjou manages to impose himself as a king, restoring the situation in Transylvania, the Angevine armies took military actions of some importance – see Phynta de Mende's campaign in Moldova ("Tartar country") [26] –, without notable outcomes, given the fundamental change in the balance of power East of the Carpathians. Thus, after 1313, the presence of Özbek Khan on the throne in Sarai brought the reactivation of the hegemonic ambitions of the Golden Horde and, once more, the integration of the Eastern Carpathian territories under the Mongol authority.

*On the other hand*, precisely during the years of Otto's imprisonment (1307/1308), the Khan from Sarai turned his full combative capacity towards eliminating the Genoan presence in Caffa [27], which inherently distracted him from the political evolution of the Carpathian-Dniestr area.

It was therefore this void of a foreign authority from the first decade of the fourteenth century, which has allowed to a local ruler, issued from the pressing tutelage of Nogai's loyals, and from the formal obedience to the Hungarian royalty, to assert his political ascendancy, documentary captured in the Ottokar of Styria's chronicle. The carefulness with which the requirements were addressed by the powerful Transylvanian prince is in itself evocative for the purely nominal character of this suzerainty.

In the light of the data presented above, one would estimate the raising of the fortification from Suceava probably to the middle of the first decade of the fourteenth century. The fact is indisputable, provided that the fortification in question was not the creation of the Alanians previously quartered in the area, and which from might have been taken as such, after their departure in 1302.

### *C. Archeological and documentary contributions to the understanding of the evolution of the Suceava voivodship until the state's establishment*

Following the already mentioned episode, direct information regarding the Suceava voivodship's evolution is missing. Nevertheless, there is an interesting, although adjacent documentary evidence which could be related to the subject of our analysis.

Jan Długosz mentions the participation of the Vlachs, alongside Ruthenians and Lithuanians, to the military expedition organized by the Polish king Vladislav Lokietek against the Markgraf of Brandenburg (1326). Specifying an important attribute of the three allies ("neighboring populations" [28]) resulted in opinions sustaining the Moldavian origin of the Vlachs pointed out by Długosz [29], and even their recognition as belonging to the Suceava's voivod [30].

One archeological clue brings forward questions of possible relationships between key characters - such as Dragoș, the founder of the Moldavian province subordinated to Hungary, his successor Sas or Bogdan from Cuhea, Moldova's redeemer -, with the voivodal center from Suceava.

Archeological material collected from the moat's filling confirmed that in the last quarter of the XIV<sup>th</sup> century, specifically during the reign of Petru I Mușatinul, the moat was filled and not in use. Consequently, the researcher made a crucial observation: "the lack from the moat's filling of archeological materials (ceramics or coins) belonging to the early XV<sup>th</sup> century indicates a rapid process of filling, which sealed the moat, probably commanded by the voivod, who had recently placed its court in Suceava" [31].

Therefore, in the middle of the XIV<sup>th</sup> century, during the great political changes leading to the formation of the state, there was an active princely center, with a stronghold which was used for a long time, even under the reign of Petru I Mușatinul. Keeping this in mind, what exactly could explain the fact that all three characters involved in the political evolution of the future Moldavian state avoided Suceava, and focused on Baia, Siret, or Rădăuți?

The answer to this complex historical equation seems mainly related to Suceava's political and military potential, revealed by the complex fortification surrounding the settlement, which supports the proposition of a scenario, briefly detailed below.

Firstly, there are no historical evidences towards aggressive actions initiated by Dragoș against the local Moldavians, as the former has every reason to keep good relations with Suceava's political authority, which could have guaranteed

not only a local peaceful climate [32], but also an easy access to the important military center from Baia. Thus, the compromise assured Dragoș the control over the Moldova Valley, whose security was of uppermost importance, both in terms of defending the northern passes to Transylvania, and in protecting against the conquering intentions of the Angevine kings.

Without living up to his predecessor's diplomatic achievements, Prince Sas made a fatal mistake: giving up the *status-quo* policy embraced by Dragoș, and also endangering the very mission which he was entrusted with, namely keeping the Baia center unharmed, he tried to expand his control in northwestern Moldavia, by installing his court to Siret. To the Suceava's political authority, caught between two centers controlled by Sas, this action represented a declaration of war. Thus, normal consequences followed: Bogdan from Cuhea received support in brutally replacing Sas and setting Baia on fire, which inevitably and definitively compromised the Angevine presence in the former defensive Moldavian province.

Indebted to his ally, whose support was still indispensable, due to future inevitable Hungarian retaliation, Bogdan choose not to affect the integrity of Suceava's center. Being the first voivod in the recently freed Moldavia, his attitude is especially notable, because of the dominant orthodox feature of Suceava center, which could have been a more suitable host for a representative of the Romanian Orthodoxism than the catholic settlements of Baia and Siret [33].

Assuming the orthodox character of Suceava center requires further specifications. Firstly, unlike Siret (*Cereth*), and Baia (*Moldavia*), Suceava was not listed among "the houses" of the 1345 *Russia's Franciscan Vicariate* [34].

On the other hand, a few years later attested facts revealed the picture of a deeply orthodox settlement of Suceava, which had jurisdiction over not only one, but two Greek monasteries [35], protected by the logothete Iațco [36], who has recently been linked as an ethnonym, to the Suceava community of *ițcani* [37]. In fact, their name designates the Alanians' population in the Ruthenian language.

Moreover, following the logical line of events, the very transfer of the capital to Suceava, thus the distancing from the catholic center of Siret, makes its inclusion among the settlements spiritually managed by the Franciscans more difficult. This opinion is also substantiated by M. D. Matei, who, as coordinator of the excavations at Suceava, noticed the lack from the layer preceding the movement of the princely court by Petru I Mușatinul of any materials belonging to Western colonists [38].

### III. THE MOVEMENT OF THE MOLDAVIAN CAPITAL TO SUCEAVA AND THE ROLE OF THIS DECISION IN THE URBAN EVOLUTION OF THE SETTLEMENT

At this point, the discussion can be fully devoted to the decisive event in the urban development of Suceava, namely

the installation of Petru I Mușatinul (1375-1391) main *Royal Moldavian* court.

Suceava, whose first attestation goes back to 10<sup>th</sup> of February 1388 [39], was, undoubtedly for a long time, an interesting objective for the voivod: chronologically, as stated by M. D. Matei [40], it is more than likely that before establishing his residence in Suceava (which implied moving also a great number of personnel, starting with his closest advisors, the soldiers of the garrison, to the last servants), the voivod Petru I Mușatinul initiated in Suceava the building of two objectives of uppermost importance: the Princely Court (the private residence of the voivod and its family) and the fortress on the western side of the town, known in the literature as the Șcheia Fortress (Fig. 4). Subsequently, within a very short time, the princely fortress was to be built (Fig. 5).

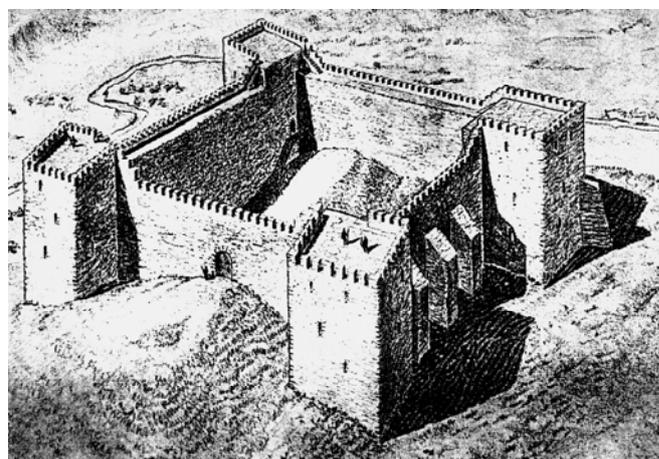


Fig. 4. Proposition for the reconstitution of the Șcheia fortress (after Dinu Teodorescu - architect)



Fig. 5. Suceava. Current image of the princely fortress

Without any reappraisal of already presented arguments [41], one should fully agree to M. D. Matei's assessments of the 1384-1387 interval, as representing the period in which Moldavia's capital moved from Siret. Although the available

information does not allow a detailed explaining of the circumstances in which Petru I replaced the former voivod authority in Suceava, one can surely state that the time of the replacement coincided with the dismantling of the old fortification, which encompassed a space too narrow for the new foundations' purpose.

Corroborating this "destructive" operation with the reasons behind the distancing from the catholic background in Siret, one could figuratively speak about a genuine break with the past, on which Petru I Mușatinul's decision was based, guaranteeing Suceava a hastened evolution toward becoming a city, recognized as such in its contemporary literary sources [42]. Thus, the mentioning of Suceava in the *List of cities* from old Russian chronicles dated between 1388 and 1391 [43] is of outmost importance.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

Because most inferences on the historical evolution of Suceava is based on archaeological evidences, the conclusions herein would rely upon arguments of the archaeologist responsible for such evidences, M. D. Matei [44], who is admittedly the preeminent scientific figure involved in deciphering the city's genesis.

1. As for the economic life of the settlement, the last quarter of the XIVth century witnessed a standardized production, and also the marginal establishment, due to the continuous use of fire in specific crafts, of manufacturers' area;

2. The big construction initiatives in Suceava attracted a large number of specialized German manufacturers, attested through the discovery of the famous *grey ceramic* [45], in workshops near the Princiarly Court;

3. The circulation on the Moldavian commercial road favored Suceava's inclusion in the international trade circuit, which developed the urban traits of the settlement;

4. The establishment in Suceava of the newly founded Moldavian Metropolis [46] strengthened the city's function as a spiritual centre;

5. The persistent presence of the Royalty and the Country Council, together with the necessary garrison, led to the formation of the city's main functions: *political, military, administrative, religious*, and last but not least, *economic*.

Alongside the factors listed above, the city benefited from the establishment of the Armenian colony [47] and the granted right to deposit goods sold by foreign merchants [48], as a consequence of the position already gained; thus, a quite clear picture emerges, which points both to the consistency of Suceava's urban structures in the beginning of the XVth century, as to the decisive role of Petru I decision from the last quarter of the previous century.

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