URBAN IDENTIFICATION AGENTS AND HISTORICAL DISCOURSE IN A FRONTIER CITY. CASE STUDY: BRAŞOV DURING THE 16TH AND 17TH CENTURIES

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ABSTRACT

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The city of Braşov represents the prototype of a frontier urban settlement. Its geographical position of a border city created a particular environment with its specific lifestyle marked by conflict and symbiosis. The article focuses on three objectives: developing a terminological background of the frontier city, presenting the evolution of urban identification agents and tracing these elements in the historical discourse produced in Braşov.

The 16th century is the age of dissolution of medieval geographical frontiers, as a result of which new ones come to replace them. In the case of Braşov, after the Ottoman Empire erases the Kingdom of Hungary from the political map, the city seeks refuge in German identity, looking towards Ferdinand of Habsburg as a suitable sovereign. This dream, however, is short-lived and the Saxon city gives up on its long-distance relation with the Habsburg territories.

After the Reformation the city is powerful enough to assume its own identity, not a foreign one but an autochthonous one. Rather than being hospites in Transylvania, the Saxons try to prove that they had been there all along. This is the first step towards the integration of the local identity into a greater one: the national identity.

The cultural production of Braşov offers a variety of sources: diaries, mural inscriptions, notes and urban chronicles. They represent different types of historical writings concerning various aspects and moments in the evolution of the identity discourse. Most of them are a mixture of political, historical and confessional elements, thus revealing the complexity of urban identity at the Transylvanian border.

Keywords: Identification Agents, Alterity, Frontier/Borderland, Centre-periphery Relation, the Transylvanian Principality, Saxon Autonomy, Regionalism

Słowa kluczowe: tożsamość – czynniki, innośc, granica/pogranicze, stosunki centrum-peryferia, Księstwo Siedmiogrodu, autonomia saska, regionalizm

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The medieval imaginary abounds with legends and myths concerning the origin of peoples and their perilous journey from the birth place to The Promised Land. The latter represents the current Heimat\(^2\) of these peoples, a place where they would settle down forever and fulfill their destiny.\(^3\) Starting with the 19\(^{th}\) century, German historians stressed the importance of the origin-destiny myths in the process of legitimating and building a national identity. However, the term of “national identity” must be used with extreme caution, when approaching the Middle Ages and the pre-modern times.

This article aims at determining the main elements which define the identity of the city of Brașov. Situated at the south-eastern border of Transylvania, the city allows the observation of specific identification agents, typical for a frontier environment. Restricting the research to city, instead of an extended area provides the study with an in-depth view on how the identification process occurs. By resorting to the micro-frontier as the object of study, the paper also analyzes the connections between urban, regional and “national” identity (in its pre-modern sense).

The subject of this paper is constantly under debate in current historiography, due to its complex nature and terminological ambiguity. Taking these aspects into consideration we resorted to structuring this study into three parts. The first segment focuses at establishing a rigorous terminological toolkit. Notions such as “identity,” “frontier” and “nation” represent complex areas of research. Moreover, their modern meaning does not correspond to the pre-modern one. Thus a detailed definition is required.

The second part of this study examines the identification agents which contribute to the self-image of the frontier city. This process involves various aspects: political, confessional, cultural and psychological. By encountering the “Other” the city of Brașov builds its identity. However, this identification process occurs in a particular environment, which is the frontier. In such a context, the actions and reactions of the city are distinct from the norm regulated by the centre. These differences constitute one of the main points of interest of this study.

The final section tracks the introduction and evolution of the identification agents within the historiographical discourse produced in Brașov during the 16\(^{th}\) and the 17\(^{th}\) century. This type of analysis emphasises the conceptualisation, dissemination and the political instrumentalisation of the above mentioned identification agents.

\(^2\) The German notion of Heimat cannot be translated into English. The closest English equivalent is “natural habitat.”