

ANDREA FARA, *Economia e società in Transilvania nel medioevo (secoli XIV-XVI)* (Rome: Nella sede dell'Istituto, Palazzo Borromini, 2021)

Over the past few decades, a new generation of historians from outside Romania have showed an interest in the history of the Central and Eastern European space. The Italian historian Andrea Fara is among such historians, his most recent book reflecting an assiduous, systematic research project which is significant for the placement of the Transylvanian medieval realities within the context of the wider historiographic research endeavours. We must emphasise that this interest in the history of our space was supported by the historical research institutes in Italy – in the present case, the *Istituto Storico per il Medio Evo* in Rome also showed such interest and, as part of the “Nuovi studi storici” collection, under the coordination of professor Massimo Miglio, the director of the institution, supported the printing of Andrea Fara’s book. The work under scrutiny, authored by Andrea Fara, is a true historiographic contribution, based on an in-depth knowledge of both the specialised historical literature dedicated to the problematisation of economic and social history regarding the end of the Middle Ages, and of the scholarly literature on the medieval history of the Hungarian Kingdom, of Transylvania and of the “Saxon University” in particular. The first observation that emerges from reading the book regards the systematic research project, a project that prelaminated the drafting of the tome, a project that meant more than a mere compilation for the Italian readers of the historical literature dedicated to the medieval history of Transylvania published in the languages of the national historiographies of Central-Eastern Europe (Hungarian, Romanian, German); it emphasises a preoccupation with researching the primary historical sources found in the edited collections of documents that are more or less known, or investigating the documentary collections present in the libraries and archives from Hungary and Romania. Thus, the book contains an original historiographic contribution that must not be overlooked by the historians interested in the issues of medieval Transylvanian economic and social history, of the “Royal Lands” (the territorial autonomy recognised by the King of Hungary, for the community of Saxons/Hospites).

Andrea Fara defines his object of study as “an analysis of the economic and social structures¹” at the level of a regional history, of Transylvania as a frontier territory of the Kingdom of Hungary, as well as of Latin Europe. As such, the author researches “the development of the economy of a frontier region,²” with a particular focus on the problematic evolution of the production, trade and distribution structures. The aims of the research defined above, for the Italian historian, were to identify the moment in which the Transylvanian economy was integrated into the European economic system. The central theme of the work surrounds the analysis of the economic activities, particularly the commercial activities of the privileged community of the Saxons, considered by the author to be “the most dynamic reality of the region.” This lively commercial activity, associated with the international social networks of the Saxon during the medieval period “facilitated the integration of this faraway frontier territory into Western Europe.³” Andrea Fara emphasises the placement of the community of Transylvanian Saxons in the centre of “a vast trade network that extends from Central and Eastern Europe, from the German and Polish territories, all the way to Venice; from the so-called Byzantine *Commonwealth* to the Carpathians, including the territories of Wallachia and Moldavia, the Genoese Black Sea and the immense Muslim *Dar al-Islam*.⁴” By focusing the research on the economic issue, namely that of the commercial trades supported by the Saxons, the author does not overlook other issues regarding the social, institutional and juridic history specific to this community or to the Transylvanian region in general: the subject of the defence and of the multiplication of privileges and freedoms of the Saxons during the Middle Ages, awarded to them by the King of Hungary, the social evolution of the patriciate in the sense of transforming the Graeven into nobles or enterprising townspeople, of the patricians who had played an important role not only in the administration of the Saxon towns, but also in the integration of the commercial and entrepreneurial activities into the ensemble of similar activities of Europe at that time. Moreover, the Italian historian does not disregard the political context and conjecture of Hungary and the Carpathian-Danubian space in which the production of goods, the trades and the distribution took place. In his opinion, the main political events played a decisive role in “maintaining or transforming” the economic structures in the region. The political-military and confessional events

¹ Original text: “analiza structurilor economice și sociale.” If not marked otherwise, all quotes have been translated by the translator of the present paper.

² Original text: “modul de dezvoltare a economiei unei regiuni de frontieră.”

³ Original text: “a permis integrarea acestui teritoriu îndepărtat de frontieră în Europa occidentală” (p. XXV).

⁴ Original Text: “unei vaste rețele de schimburi care pornește din Europa centrală și cea orientală, din teritoriile germane și poloneze și până la Veneția; de la așa-zisul *Commonwealth* bizantin la Carpați, cuprinzând teritoriile Valahiei și Moldovei, Marea Neagră geneveză și imensul *dar al-Islam* musulman.”

from the 16th century – the division of the Hungarian Kingdom between the Habsburgs and the Ottomans and the affirmation of the Principality of Transylvania and the institutionalisation of the Reformed denominations – represented, in Andrea Fara’s opinion, a “rupture” in the Saxon=Transylvanian-Hungarian-European system.

The option for a regional history of the Transylvanian Saxons did not represent, in the case of Andrea Fara’s book, a presentation of an isolated case study, but quite the opposite, namely the placement of this community in the context of their relations with the Transylvanian space itself, as well as with the neighbouring areas, be they the Kingdom of Hungary, Central-Eastern Europe, Wallachia or Moldavia. In this sense, Andrea Fara is right to consider that: “E in fatti indispensabile ricordare che l’evoluzione della Transilvania e con essa delle comunita sassoni non avvenne in maniera isolate, ma al contrario si inseri in modo coerente e complementare nel generale e originale panorama politico della regione.” (p. XXVII-XXVIII)

Transylvania is understood and presented by Andrea Fara not merely as a region at the border of the Hungarian Kingdom, but as a “frontier region”, a region of mediation between different cultures, institutions and linguistic, confessional communities from the 16th century, as a frontier region with numerous other inner frontiers (“zona de mediazione tra sistemi e frontiera nella frontiera”, p. 317). Although this view is not the author’s own contribution, the concept of “frontier region” having already been discussed, in the case of Transylvania, by other historians, it proves to be quite stimulating from the perspective of the analysis carried out by the Italian historian. It is a region in which different cultures and civilisations meet – not only the Saxon, Hungarian, Romanian cultures, but also the Western Latinity and the Oriental Orthodoxy, the Christian and the Muslim civilisations.

The structure of Andrea Fara’s book is explained by at least two reasons. One of these reasons corresponds to a methodological option directly connected to the subject of the historian’s research: he follows the dynamics of the economic realities (production, commerce, distribution) over the 14th-16th centuries, identifying at least three major phases in their evolution, their expansion to the mid-15th century, followed by a period of crisis, as well as one of prosperity in the second half of the 15th century, while the 16th century is characterised by a “rupture” and a reorganisation of the economic life, influenced by the political-military events in the region, as well as by the more general economic issues with which the European continent was faced. In addition to this thematic-chronological division of the historiographic presentation, Andrea Fara also highlights one particularly decisive reason for his historiographic endeavour. The aforementioned second reason refers to the communicability of the scientific endeavour, to the accessibility and understanding of the issues presented by the historian. In this sense, each of the three parts combine a binary perspective, with a general part dedicated to the

evolution of the Hungarian Kingdom and of Transylvania, on the one hand, and another particular part which approaches the central problematic of the historical study, the Transylvanian institutions, economy and society, with a particular focus on the community of Transylvanian Saxons.

Following a detailed study and a systematic presentation of the economic evolution of Transylvania, of the Saxon community in particular, Andrea Fara emphasises their importance in the region, for the development of the urban civilisation, for the mediation between the western culture and the eastern culture, between what the historian regarded as “*civitas sassone*” and “*civitas europea*”, particularly after the German model. Consequently, the Saxons represented the European model in the Transylvanian Middle Ages.

With a comprehensive bibliography which includes the archival collections, the collections of documents and the historical literature, a series of maps and other annexes that facilitate the reading and understanding of the book, especially for the readers who are less familiar with the history of Central-Eastern Europe, Andrea Fara’s book stands out through the author’s efforts towards a “necessary recovery” of the “cohabitation heritage” from the Carpathian-Danubian space, in the ambience of the construction of New Europe. In this sense, Andrea Fara’s book, by presenting a particular case, namely that of the Transylvanian Saxons, militates for the idea of a European construction based on economic unity that would, at the same time, guarantee the peoples’ integration, following the historical, political and cultural specificities, in an “ample and common historical, political and cultural horizon.”⁵

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DOI: 10.26424/philobib.2021.26.2.15

⁵ Original text: “orizont istoric, politic și cultural amplu și comun” (p. 324).