



BOOK REVIEWS

At Europe's borders: medieval towns in the Romanian principalities by *Laurențiu Rădvan*, Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands, 2010, 672 pp. ISBN 978-9-0041-8010-9.

In European urban historiography, the Romanian principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia play a very small role. Yet for most of the period since the Roman Empire they have held a vital position between different powers and cultures. They took shape between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries AD at the margins of the Kingdom of Hungary, the Bulgarian, Byzantine, and Mongolian Empires, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Kingdom of Poland, and the Ottoman Empire. Here the various dominions, cultures and religions met and, to some extent, mixed.

At present, Wallachia is part of Southern Romania, whereas Moldavia is divided between eastern Romania, Moldova and south-western Ukraine. The old port towns of Byzantine origin, such as Cetatea Alba and Kilia, which were located on the Danube and in the delta where the Danube and Dniester rivers flow into the Black Sea, managed to remain more or less independent of Wallachia and Moldavia for a long time. Between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries more towns began to appear. But it is still largely unknown how this came about, as written sources are very poor. However, Rădvan provides a convincing reconstruction of what happened. In his view the principalities developed out of Hungarian buffer states. New towns were created under the Hungarian princes of Wallachia and Moldavia, who promoted market villages and founded new towns, mainly occupied by settlers from Transylvania and Poland. Rădvan's interpretation is mainly based on analogy to what is known of contemporaneous urbanization in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, to which the first part of the

book is devoted, and on 47 case studies of towns in Wallachia and Moldavia.

A valuable overview is provided of the formation of urban settlements in Central and Eastern Europe during the Middle Ages. Until now most literature on medieval towns in Eastern Europe has been written in Slavic languages, as the excellent bibliography of the book reveals, though there are two important older works in English on the history of spatial urban development in Eastern Europe (Gutkind, 1972a, 1972b). Concerning early urbanization in Wallachia and Moldavia sources in English or other Western European languages are almost absent, whereas the Romanian principality of Transylvania has received much more international scholarly attention. Hence, *At Europe's borders* fills a large gap in knowledge.

Since the author is a historian, the study is essentially historical in character, written materials being the primary sources. Hence, the book is mainly about administrative and institutional history, and the related terminology of the period. For most towns examined only very superficial spatial information is provided, mainly regarding the sites and trade routes and whether there was a church or a stronghold inside the settlements. There only are three maps and six town plans – all crude in their presentation – and there is no explanation of the character of the urban plans. However, Rădvan appears to know well the written sources on Romanian settlements, and his interpretations make sense. But the written sources are rare in comparison with those for Western Europe, and closer study of urban form would have provided valuable additional information on the past of the towns. In defense of Rădvan, many of the towns he studies have been substantially restructured in the twentieth century – though this is hardly mentioned in the book – and thus early urban structures are now difficult to identify. He tries to make the most of archaeological findings about early urban form,

but relevant excavations are rare. Discussion of morphology is very superficial. For a number of towns regularities of plans are mentioned. The characteristics of plots, parallel streets, and central rectangular market places suggest that there were new town foundations of a type known from the more north-westerly parts of Europe. But it is a major omission that this receives little explanation or illustration, and it would seem that no historical plans or maps were used as sources.

At the end of the book, Rădvan writes that his inclusion of 'topography' is a new addition to the historiography of Wallachian and Moldavian towns of the period. If this is true, his effort should be praised, although his method is crude and of limited scope. It is apparent that the discipline of urban morphology still has a lot to add to the study of Romanian and Eastern European urban history.

References

- Gutkind, E. A. (1972a) *International history of city development: urban development in Eastern Europe: Bulgaria, Romania, and the U.S.S.R.* (The Free Press, New York).
- Gutkind, E. A. (1972b) *Urban development in East-Central Europe: Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary* (The Free Press, New York).

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Rappresentare la città: topografie urbane nell'Italia di antico regime edited by Marco Folin, Edizioni Diabasis, Reggio Emilia, Italy, 2010, 477 pp. ISBN 978-88-8103-600-4.

For many years urban historical iconography has been employed as a tool to read a settlement's history, society and culture. Interest in this has increased owing in part at least to the recent renewed success of studies of cartographic history; for example, work on town atlases (Nuti, 1996), and administrative cartography (Quaini, 2007; Rombai, 2007; Valerio, 2007). Urban iconography has proven to be a very useful means for building knowledge of *civitas* and its structures across time. If maps not only represent the growth of cartographic culture but also provide over time a means to examine cities, then the essays collected

in Marco Folin's book are of great relevance. With attention placed on Italian cities such as Rome, Milan, Naples, Venice, Florence, Turin, Genoa, Parma, Ferrara, Imola, and Guastalla, 'monuments' to historical urbanism in Italy, and notably too places that have been the foci of Italian cartography, Folin offers a range of case studies, analysed with clarity and methodological rigour, to explain the significance of cartography to urban studies.

In *Rappresentare la città* maps offer a vehicle to closely read the design of towns and the different factors, for example cultural and technical, that have shaped their cartographic images. At the same time this book strives to contribute to a widening of urban historiography. For example, the examination of the map of Milan in the *Chronica extravagans* by Galvano Fiamma not only investigates it as an administrative document but as an historical-geographical work whose subject, even though belonging to a distinct time, in effect offers a visual text of the dynamic reality of Milan's evolution – its rise to the status of 'a great city'. Likewise the need to represent urban evolution does not appear in *Rappresentare la città* in merely abstract and theoretical terms. This is evident in the famous plan of Imola by Leonardo da Vinci, a great example of a very accurate drawing, but more precisely an unequalled masterpiece of renaissance scenery (p. 121). The map exposes the urban fabric with its blocks, plots and buildings. As such we should consider the plan of Imola as an urban morphological document, even though in reality it was drawn up with rough survey techniques albeit adjusted by Leonardo's incredible technical and architectural skill.

With reference again to Folin's attempt to widen urban historiography, *Rappresentare la città* provides a distinct interpretation of the origin of urban scientific geography as a tool for town reading, a reading shown to originate at the dawn of a new professional competence (p. 19) – a new professional know-how that, and not by chance, combined the town survey with elements of urban design, as the case studies of Parma and Guastalla demonstrate. Maps of these cities, particularly those crafted from the end of the seventeenth century, show a completely different perspective, as the essays by Ilaria Forno, Mario Bevilacqua and Brigitte Marin explain; one borne in part by the shifting cultural climate. In this period producing 'scientific' accuracy became the *manifesto* of the evolving cultural and political climate.

The maps included in this volume are only a selection of those that could have been examined.