

Book Reviews

Ioan-Aurel Pop, *Hunedoreștii. O istorie europeană* [The Hunedorești Family. A European History], Cluj-Napoca, Editura Școala Ardeleană, 2020, 428p.

The book written by historian Ioan-Aurel Pop not only offers a comprehensive perspective on the destiny of a family with a significant resonance within the history of the medieval kingdom of Hungary and its province of Transylvania, but it also illustrates the political, social, confessional and cultural evolutions from this area of central and south-eastern Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries. Thus, the book is at the boundary between a historical monograph dedicated to the Hunedorești family and a synthesis of the history of the Transylvanian Romanians from the Middle Ages. In fact, the history of the Romanians from Transylvania during the Middle Ages represents the research field preferred by the aforementioned historian, a theme that accompanied a prodigious academic career.

The reconstruction of the history of the Hunedorești/Corvin family, as the author of the book, I. A. Pop, emphasises, is not a unique endeavour. Since the Middle Ages, such histories have been compiled, and the popular culture had birthed myths and legends around this family, while the modern historiography has made new worthy contributions to this subject. However, professor Pop's book pleads for a historiographic reconstruction that fits into a historical concept exemplified on many occasions by the author. This historical concept follows two coordinates – on the one hand, history should reflect the lives of the people of the past and must not be written “according to any criterion other than that of the humanly possible truth”¹ (p. 11), and, on the other hand, the author assumes this historiographic exercise from the perspective of a Romanian historian (“I wrote this book as a Romanian historian”, as I. A. Pop confesses), unlike other contributions on the same subject belonging to the historiographies from Central Europe (the Hungarian, Austrian, German ones). In both of the situations above, the author resonates with the values of the contemporary historical approach. Thus, in the epilogue of a tome that aimed to describe a panorama of the historical studies from the beginning of the third millennium, Felipe Fernandez-Armesto noted, among other things, that historiography inclined towards the reconstruction of all aspects of life in the past (*nihil humanum alienum*) and towards accepting multiple discourses about the past, the

¹ Original text: “după alt criteriu decât cel al adevărului omenește posibil” (If not marked otherwise, all translations were made by the author of this text).

perspectivism of historical writing circumscribed to the available sources and to the historian's views and values (Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, *Epilogue: What is History Now?*, in vol. *What is History Now?*, edited by Davide Cannadine, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p. 151 and 154). In professor Pop's case, the perspectivism is assumed within a cultural view, the author defining himself as "a Romanian historian".

For an adequate understanding of this book, we must also emphasise another observation made by the author, namely that it was not compiled according to an initial, standalone, autonomous plan; it came into being "step by step", along the trajectory of the historian's research endeavours, merging a series of studies and articles that approached the historical problematics of the Hunedorești family, or of the period in which its illustrious representatives lived. Thus, what must once again be specified is that the reconstructive endeavour carried out by the historian was each time based on new sources, or lesser-known historiographic sources, in his attempt to decipher the social mechanisms of the transformation of the individuals and of the society ("Historians are, however, meant to decipher history based on the sources, and even to explain the transformation of certain figures from the past into national heroes or into legendary characters."²)

Despite the merger of several studies and articles (which the author modestly divides into scientific approaches and essays that "emerged from a long experience of a historian and of a man living among the people"³, p. 14), historian I. A. Pop managed to offer an overview of the issues thus displayed, following a thematic structure that illustrates not only the acts of the key figures from the Hunedorești family (John Hunyadi and Matthias Corvinus), but also the epoch in which they lived and their posterity, with the birth and the dissemination of the myths that support the contemporary knowledge about the Hunedorești. The studies and articles previously published in scholarly journals – for this reason, known by the specialists in particular – underwent a process of additions, of stylistic chiselling, and thus, within the book, they have become accessible to the wider public that is passionate about history. A distinctive feature of the volume signed by historian I. A. Pop is the author's intention to make history intelligible to the general public, to perpetuate the dialogue between the historian and his contemporaries in a cultural context freed from constraints and ideological dogmas.

² Original text: "Istoricii au, însă, menirea să descifreze istoria în funcție de surse și să explice inclusiv transformarea unor personalități ale trecutului în eroi naționali sau în figuri legendare."

³ Original text: "ivite dintr-o îndelungată experiență de istoric și de om trăitor între oameni."

In the spirit of the contemporary historical discourse, historian I. A. Pop rejects the “scientific jargon” and opts for a clear and explicit language and an academic and elegant style. As the aforementioned historian, Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, also noted, “communicability is the mark of good historical writing” (p. 152); in this sense, professor Pop’s text does indeed follow the rigors of today’s historical writing. In the same way, the historian deciphers and explains the facts and processes of the past by comparing them to the present, emphasising his belief that the Middle Ages and the medieval society represent “another culture”, that the people of that time “did things differently” (*Ibidem*). This communicability and presence of history within the contemporary popular culture is that much more valuable, as in Romania, as well as in other countries, history has become a “Cinderella” of the school curriculums (*Ibidem*, p. 150-151). In the book under scrutiny, the final chapter specifically profiles this type of affinity between the past and the present, in the terms of the relation between “the Hunedorești and us”⁴ (p. 357-384).

In accordance with the reference grid that we have repeatedly called upon in order to emphasise the features of professor Pop’s book, i.e., Felipe Fernandez-Armesto’s text, we can also highlight an important characteristic of the work. Namely, the book approaches the theme of the “family history”, that of the Hunedorești family, a focal historiographic genre that corresponds with the taste and demands of the contemporary popular culture.

Built as a history book that, among the reading options of the contemporary popular culture, rivals any other literary genre, it assumes a historiographic discourse that does not directly aim to legitimise a national identity (although the author claims this cultural affiliation), as in the case of the romanticism historians of the 19th century, or to present the history of the Hunedorești family and their epoch through the filter of the Marxist ideology from the second half of the past century; however, it is rather an exercise in reconstructing and explaining the lives of the people of the past from a dual perspective – of history as a *magistra vitae* and of the patrimonial functions with which history is invested today. The historian offers the history of a family with controversial origins and ethnicity, but he also proposes a reading grid in the spirit of the contemporary times, thus reconstructing the history of a “European family”. In fact, the historian places the historiographic reconstruction on two intertwining planes: the historical research on the relation between the individual and the power structures in the Middle Ages on the one hand, and the relations between the

⁴ Original text: “Hunedorești și noi.”

community and the power during that epoch on the other hand. The first plane contains the biography of the protagonists of the Hunedorești family, John and Matthias, while the second contains the relations between the Romanian community from Transylvania, and from the Hungarian Kingdom in general, with the power structures. On the one hand, as a historical biography and, on the other hand, as a history of the Romanian community from the Hungarian Kingdom in the Middle Ages, the historian explains the social, political, confessional and cultural mechanisms that define power in its medieval limits in this kingdom from Central Europe. In this sense, the biography of John and Matthias represents a mark of the prestige and an illustration of the power that the Romanians from the Hungarian Kingdom were able to obtain. In other words, from a “powerless” community, that of the Romanians, in the Middle Ages, illustrious figures emerged and were assimilated by the culture of the dominant power.

At the end of these brief remarks, as a result of the observations above, once again calling on a note made by the historian from the University of London, Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, we may conclude that the book dedicated to the Hunedorești family, to the epoch in which they lived and to their posterity, their relation with “us”, offers a broader perspective in understanding the Middle Ages in Hungary and Transylvania (thus “broadening the mind”) and allows us to become more tolerant and open to one another, thus becoming “better people” – as such, history proves its moral effects on those who read it (Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, p. 154). Professor Pop’s book provides this very opportunity.

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Antal Molnár, *Confessionalization on the Frontier. The Balkan Catholics between Roman Reform and Ottoman Reality* (Rome: Viella, 2019)

In rather original manner, this book deals with Catholic confessionalization in the Balkans, a topic that has benefited from limited attention in extant literature. The choice of subject seems to have been stimulated by the fact that the Catholics, despite being the smallest religious community in the Balkans, were beyond doubt the most significant, a view supported by their commercial and diplomatic contacts with the west and by the strength and liveliness of their cultural expression in the region. As the book deals with confessional minorities, such as the Catholics in the Balkans,