A type of urban genesis in Romanian outer-Carpathian area: the Mongol Towns

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Abstract: The Tartar invasion in the Eastern Europe and the mid XIIIth century formation of the Golden Hoard led to, among others, the inclusion of the Romanian outer Carpathians area amid the regions ruled by the Mongols. While the areas between the Carpathians and the Prut River, as well as those which later formed Walachia were controlled by the khans through Alani warriors or through autochthonous rulers, the Prut-Dniester interfluve was directly ruled by the Golden Hoard. Consequently, the Mongol authorities raised urban settlements like Costeşti and Orheiul Vechi. Nevertheless, the towns preserved a strongly artificial character, as they depended extensively on the actual presence of the Mongol rulers. Thus, once the Lithuanians took control of the area in the second half of the XIVth century, these urban centers disappeared.

Key Words: Mongols, the Golden Hoard, Orhei, Costeşti, Dimitrie, town.

1 Introduction

While profoundly attached to their traditional way of life, basically the equestrian nomadism, and repeatedly involved in conflicts with the sedentary populations, the Mongols have manifested a deep loathing towards the urban phenomenon in all its forms. However, throughout the history of their fulminate expansion they faced new, rapidly assumed realities. As a consequence, the Mongol notions on the urban life were not immutable and rather experienced a structural evolution.

At first, during the campaigns of Genghis Khan (1206-1227) and of his successors, the Mongols’ attitude towards the cities was a destructive one, in order to gather the preys and to inspire terror; shortly after consolidating their immense empire, they allowed the rebuilding of urban centers destroyed, and also encouraged the reappraisal of income entailing commercial and craft activities.

In fact, as already asserted, the lack of interest for the urban life as well as the conservative maintaining of the traditional way of life led the Mongols to avoid a direct implication in rebuilding the ravaged cities, leaving it to the conquered populations. Beginning with the first years of the expansion, the contact with the Chinese civilization influenced the character of the Mongol reign. The Mongols fully comprehended that protecting the productive activities of the conquered populations was in their own interest; consequently, not only they put together a complex administrative system for collecting taxes, but they also counted up the entire empire’s population, as an initiative of the great khan Möngke (1251-1259); the exceptional character of his initiative highlights the importance given to the optimal collecting of resources.

Unlike their relatives settled in China, the Golden Hoard rulers did not benefit from exploiting a prosperous civilization. The succeeding invasions from the Xth-XIth centuries affected deeply the antique glamour of the north Pontic areas, so the new conquerors faced the difficult task of restructuring the urban and commercial status. Thus, the effort of the nomad conquerors in overcoming their condition is all the more commendable; the Volga khans fulfilled their responsibilities admirably: "The Golden Hoard did not adapt to a superior civilization, it created through its own forces new civilization centers, thus renewing the course of action disrupted by the first Turkic invasions of the precedent epoch.”[2].

2 The new urban centers set up by the Mongols in the Prut - Dniester interfluve

Within the already mention category, one could find the cities Orheiul Vechi (Old Orhei) and Costeşti, from the Prut - Dniester area (Fig. 1).

The Mongol rulers founded Orheiul Vechi on a promontory also known as Peşterea, on the lower...
The Răut River, between the present-day villages Trebujeni and Butuceni, about 13 km away from its flowing in the Dniester. The river’s bed, 15-20 m wide and 4-7 m deep, surrounds the settlement to the north, south and east. The opposite bank is high, so the landscape has the appearance of a crater (Fig. 2), thus ensuring the protection of the settlement. Archeological researches identified Upper Paleolithic, Cucuteni-Tripolje Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Age settlements, and also Iron Age and medieval fortifications.

The exact circumstances of the settlement’s genesis could be explained through the natural environment. So, "looking back to the roads situations in the former county Orhei, we could assume that the urban settlement on the Peştera promontory started near a group of important shoals on the Dniester, where settlements like Ustia (corresponding to Dubăsari, on the left shore), Molovata, and Vadul lui Vodă were formed; also, there were some important roads in the area, like Tighina-Hotin and Iași-Dubăsari. The city’s position recalls residences of the Golden Hoard like Sarai-Batu (Old Sarai) and Sarai-Berke (New Sarai) on Ahtuba, a lateral course of the Volga. Their advantageous position allowed the control of the river traffic and ensured the proper distance from the possible floods; it was the typical urban planning of the Mongol khans, who intended to settle for a long time in the area between the Prut and the Dniester." [7].

The Costești urban settlement on both shores of the middle Botna lied in a low altitude area, with gentle slopes, extending to more than 4 km². Because the terrain was not well adjusted to natural defense, there were two rectangular mud fortifications in the north and in the east, one contemporary to the town, the other dating to the end of the XIVth century.

"Arising in the central area of Bessarabia, among high hills and what is still nowadays – despite the irresponsible deforestations from the Tsarist occupation – a rather dense forest cover, probably even more compact at the time, the two towns were not easily accessible. One easy way of reaching them was through the south-east, from the Dniester Valley along the Răut and the Botna Rivers, which is rather meaningful for their orientation. The avoidance of the steppe area of Bugeac, traditionally the living area of Turanic nomad herders, and the choice of the northern hilly area, with different economic orientation and different demographic component seem equally important. Reiterating the seasonal migration routes of the late Turanic populations, which left funerary complexes along Răut and Botna Rivers and also along their tributaries, the Mongols had the time of prospecting locations for their urban settlements. In the area, the Romanian ethnic component was quite important, abidingly rural and sedentary, practicing a mixed economy, both agrarian and pastoral."[12].

Although the Mongolian authorities attracted and even coercively transferred in the newly founded towns numerous craftsmen from the eastern areas of the Golden Hoard, the local population had a significant part in the towns’ development and establishment of particular functions. There are several important discoveries attesting intense agrarian practices, which could not have been the work of the conquering Mongolians or the Anatolian and North Caucasian craftsmen, but surely belonged to the Romanian autochthonous population.

For example, one big agrarian items deposit from...
the middle of the XIV\textsuperscript{th} century was discovered in Orheiul Vechi, dating from the time of the Golden Hoard rule; among others, it consisted of 68 plowshares and 42 plow knives, the biggest discovery of its kind in the whole Eastern Europe.

The constant presence of the Christian autochthonous populations in the Mongol towns could be also asserted through the funerary complexes discovered. In Costeşti, alongside the Muslim graves, there were also cemeteries with west-east oriented inhumations, following the Christian ritual. In Orheiul Vechi, out of 116 graves from the second necropolis, 70 were also west-east oriented.

Apart from the ethnic component of their inhabitants, the Costeşti and Orheiul Vechi settlements are profoundly urban in character, according to the archaeological data on their organization: the central area was occupied by public edifices and spacious stone buildings, belonging to the officials and the urban aristocracy; towards the periphery, generally there were simple houses, cottages, and most of the workshops; the cemeteries, organized according to the religious confessions, laid outside the habitable area.

The most populated area of Costeşti exhibited several stone households with more than one room, some of them provided with a system of water supply from Botna River, through ceramic tiles joined by calcareous mortar. At the periphery, alongside stone houses, there were mostly simple, wood, clay, and wattle houses. At one of the town’s margins there were also many kilns for producing ceramics, thus suggesting the existence of a true pottery craftsmen neighborhood.

One of the most important ceramic types discovered in the Prut - Dniester area is the reddish-yellow pottery with superior technical characteristics produced in the Mongol centers, inspired from the prototypes in use in the lower Volga Basin or in other Golden Hoard areas.

Archaeological researches in Costeşti did not fully highlight the urban evolution of the settlement, but in Orheiul Vechi, the researches were indeed fruitful.

The medieval settlement from Orheiul Vechi was established before the Golden Hoard effectively took hold of the area, as indicated by the Christian graves identified in the center of the site, and also by the existence of an anterior mud ditch-mortar-stockade fortification.

The original name of the town the Mongols founded remains unknown, but in the second half of the XIV\textsuperscript{th} century, when the town became an important administrative and economic center of the region, the currency issues with Arabic engravings mention the names of Şehr-al-Djedid, and İanghi-Şehr ("The New City"). Over one thousand coins were discovered in Orheiul Vechi, out of which about 99% represent Mongolian currency issues.

Located on the Răut promontory, near the Dniester, Orheiul Vechi resembled in many ways the residences of the Volga khans. Ever since its beginnings, there were monumental brick edifices: two mausoleums, and, probably, a mosque, still unidentified archaeologically.

After the khan Abd-Ullah (1362-1364), who played a part in the power struggles within the Golden Hoard, came to the New City, the latest became the main Mongolian residence, enriched with new stone edifices (hammam-type baths, and a caravansary), having a more pronounced Anatolian character (Fig. 3).

Most of the buildings in the city are clearly influenced by the Islamic cult centers in the Persian and Seldjuk areas; this is not surprising, as in 1356 the Golden Hoard took over the regions formerly ruled by the Ilkhans, and the Mongols also gained effective control on the Seldjuk Turks from Dobrogea, who only nominally remained still obedient to the Byzantine Empire. All these circumstances facilitated the cooptation of the needed craftsmen in the urban program of the "New City".

The vernacular architecture of Orheiul Vechi is very diverse, including mostly deepen households, but also surface ones, and even elements pertaining to the nomad life, faithfully reflecting the variety in the ethnic component of the population; besides the autochthonous, the latter was formed by inhabitants and craftsmen from Central Asia, Caucasus, and Asia Minor.

A new stage in the history of Orhei began with the destruction of the second mausoleum and its replacement with a new complex, structured...
according to central Asian inspiration sources. This construction stage included raising an oriental fortified stone enceinte to replace the old clay fortification, and also the building of a stone church; both could be related to the initiatives of the Christian emir Dumitru, mentioned as "dominus Demetrius, princeps Tartarorum" in the documents of the time [3]. This person might have been precisely the founder of the church, according to the architectural details, suiting the epoch, and also to the identification in the pronaos of two rich graves which, considering the later desertion of the town, could have belonged to Dumitru and his wife.

Confronting the few data at our disposal only strengthens the above-mentioned statement. The fact that a document from 1368 mentioned this important Christian person, prince of the Tartars east of Carpathians, and also that an important Mongol, also a Christian, died and was buried in the church from Orheiul Vechi at a time marked by the last currency issued in the town, in 1368, cannot be merely coincidences.

3 The historical context of the disappearance of the Mongol towns in the Prut-Dniester area. The Moldavian avatars of Orheiul Vechi

The demise of the urban settlements from the Prut-Dniester area came as a consequence of the political crisis within the Golden Hoard, immediately after the disappearance of the khan Berdibek (1359/1360).

Thus, taking advantage of the favorable conjecture, the Lithuanian knez Olgerd claims an important victory at Sinie Vodî ("Blue Waters") in 1362/1363, against some modest local troops, ran by three Tartar princes. The situation reflected the high dissolution stage the Golden Hoard experienced. Those three Mongols commanders left interesting trails in the regions they crossed.

According to the chronics, immediately after the battle Kadlubeg, Dimitrie, and Kaczibei ran across the rivers Tanais and Tyras. As for Kaczibei, his name is almost identical with the name of the former Kociubei harbor, the future Odessa. Kadlubeg (Kutlubuga/Cotloboga) stopped for a while north from the Danube’s mouth, leaving there the name of a well known place in Bugeac, Cătălăbuga; afterwards, he was mentioned as being in Crimea, with important political business. The most "spectacular" of them, the Christian Dimitrie is particularly interesting, because he must be that "dominus Demetrius", an influential political character, who made a deal with Ludovic the Great, in 1368, about mutually advantageous commercial relations; being admitted as "princeps Tartarorum", he must have had a residence suitable to his status, a Mongol residence, but also one which could fulfill the needs of his orthodox denomination.

Alongside the archaeological discoveries from Orheiul Vechi, all these clues point to an almost mandatory identity between Dimitrie and the person buried in the pronaos of Orheiul Vechi church, founded by the same Dimitrie during the short time span following Abd-Ullah’s leaving. So, in the equation there is a Mongol khan leaving Orheiul Vechi in 1363/1364, and also leaving room for a Christian prince of Tartars (which had just ran away from the Lithuanian Olgerd in 1362/1363); there is also an Islamic mausoleum replaced by the princely residence of the Christian Dimitrie, dated exactly in the same time span. Moreover, the commercial treaty with Ludovic the Great was signed in 1368, precisely in the year of the latest currency issued from the "New Town", announcing the incoming collapse of its urban life, but nor before the burial in the church’s pronaos of its last supporter. The facts speak for themselves.

The archaeological discoveries point to the fact that the settlement – which was about to became a true Moldavian town in a few decades – continued its precarious existence even after it was left by the Mongols. The repeated propriety exchanges between the Moldavian officials, regarding domains from around the old city indicate the possibility that it served as a landmark (Fig. 4, 5).
new fortification on the ruins of the stone enceinte, and a wooden church nearby. The governor of the stronghold appeared for the first time in the documents in 1470, as well as the name Orhei, probably meaning an old, ruined city. Sometime towards the end of the same century, or even at the beginning of the next one, the stronghold was abandoned, and the title of governor transferred to the civilian settlement bearing the same name, located on the centre of the present-day town Orhei. Both the transfer, as the coexistence of the stronghold Orhei with the new town supported all the confusions which delayed the identification of the old Mongol residence.

Fig. 5 Ruins of an Oriental-styled bath from the XIVth century (after Istoria Românilor)

4 Conclusions

All of the above considered, the Mongol urban centers appear like having a distinct artificial character. Unlike the urban settlements issued from an autochthonous initiative, Orheiul Vechi and Costești were nothing more than simple initiatives of the conquering foreign political authority, meant to fulfill its economic, political, military or administrative requirements. In the middle of the Romanian population from the Prut-Dniester area, these intended creations brought together diverse ethnic elements, as foreign to the locals as the founders.

The latter are to be credited with building specific constructions, and producing clearly oriental ceramics and art objects. Moreover, the discovery of approximately 4 m diameter circular yurts, with slightly deepen stone foundation at the periphery of Orheiul Vechi reveals the presence of populations used to the semi nomad living. Also, some pieces of harness belonging to late nomads were discovered in the same settlements, which proves the presence within the urban center of warrior horsemens groups, usually encountered in the steppe area. A whole series of other discoveries from Orheiul Vechi and Costești – Arabic engravings, Muslim graves, mosques, mausoleums, caravansaries, and oriental baths – highlights the ethnic amalgamation in the cities. Thus, the poor assimilation of the autochthonous within the social and economic life, as well as the short existence of the cities seems less surprising.

Despite their rapid development and prosperity in the middle of the XIVth century, Orheiul Vechi and Costești evolution faithfully followed the decline of the political authority which supported them, coming to an abrupt end between the seventh and the eighth decades of the same century. This outcome recalls the fragile relationship between the Mongol cities and their rural surroundings, very different, for example, from the solid social and economic relationship established between the Byzantine urban centers on the lower Danube and the autochthonous element. These contingencies owe their specificity as much to the cultural affinity with the rural surrounding world, as to the interdependency between the town inhabitants and the villagers, each category completing the other.

On the contrary, the relations between Mongol cities from the Prut-Dniester area and the Romanian autochthonous element were quite the opposite: city products’ circulation in the rural area was brief and spatially restricted, while the influence on the rural production was almost inexitent. Both situations reveal the absence of any common cultural tradition among the autochthonous population and the foreign urban dwellers, thus highlighting the artificial character of the conquering Mongols’ cities.

References:


