

Traces of German settlement in the contemporary cultural landscape

Abstract

Most of the articles in this volume focus on German settlement in the Carpathians. The opening article provides a comprehensive overview of the subject, offering readers a thorough introduction. Two in-depth studies examine the Polish Forest German community, which traces its origins to medieval German settlers, while another explores the well-documented Saxon colonization of Romanian Transylvania. The final two articles are more loosely connected to the main theme of the volume – one discusses settlement in the Carpathians (more precisely in the Western Beskids, in the area of the former Silesian duchies on the border of Silesia and Lesser Poland) without a German context, while the other addresses German colonization but in a different geographical area, focusing on Pomerania in northern Poland. This volume thus provides a broad perspective on the issue of German settlement in the Carpathians – also in the context of other social changes that took place in past centuries.

Keywords

German colonisation • relics • cultural landscape

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Mediaeval German colonisation and the spread of German law (not always synonymous) occurred essentially beyond the eastern boundary of the Germanic world. These processes ushered in a profound transformation of the cultural landscape, accelerated development, and contributed to a thorough reform of social, economic, organisational and legal relations in the countries of Central Europe. Implementing tried and tested systemic solutions in towns and villages established under German law (consequently, nurturing an energetic and efficient burgher class, and giving the peasantry the opportunity to organise themselves into communities that were to a certain extent autonomous), technologically transforming agriculture and craft at a profound level, and exhibiting exceptional skills in arranging space made German colonisation and German law the great flywheel for the development of civilisation in Central Europe. In certain regions, these profound transformations also acted in concert to bring about political changes and, over time, ethnic changes. These were mostly obliterated as a consequence of World War II. German colonisation and the spread of German law into areas occupied by Slavs, Hungarians and Balts can therefore be considered one of the major socio-economic and political developments that set boundaries and shaped the space and individuality of Central Europe (Higounet 1989; Piskorski 2005, 2001, 2006).

These incomers created islands of German settlement in Central Europe that were extensive and lasting to a greater or lesser degree. The cultural changes that occurred within them consisted in adapting to the local ethnic substrate while implanting cultural elements specific to the German-speaking areas of Europe. This set the course for both a large-scale history and several smaller local histories. Communities of towns and villages populated by colonists developed unique cultural systems. Their functioning can be viewed both from the

standpoint of several microhistories and, in broader contexts, involving processes and events of far-reaching significance over time. Their manifestations are noticeable in the local language (Germanisms in colloquial speech; toponymy and anthroponymy derived from German), cultural landscape, architecture, art and other areas of life. Viewed from today's perspective, these vestiges are an obvious and indisputable element of the culture, which stems from centuries of social and cultural syntheses.

However, there is also a dark side to German history – one that weighs heavily on any attempt to interpret and evaluate the Mediaeval German colonisation of the East. Specifically, German nationalism, which revealed its criminal face in the 1930s and 1940s, cast a pall over the enterprise. With all its crimes and atrocities, World War II, which Germany started, affected virtually all the islands of German settlement in Central Europe. As a consequence, most of the descendants of the mediaeval settlers fled or were expelled from land that their families had cultivated for generations (sometimes on account of their complicity in the German machinery of crime). Over the following decades, political and economic pressure forced many of those who had remained behind the iron curtain to leave the areas of Central Europe east of the Oder. In communist Poland, the legacy of the war, along with political calculations, also favoured diminishing the role of German colonisation and German law in the development of the Polish state. Immediately after the war, Zdzisław Kaczmarczyk wrote: 'It is time to take a sober look at the issue of German colonisation and reject all the German insinuations that have been disseminated, even in serious academic literature, since the 19th century. Familiarising ourselves with the course of colonisation will not only free us from foreign borrowings and elucidate ambiguities but will give us a weapon with which we will successfully overcome all our old uncertainties' (Kaczmarczyk 1945, p. 6).

The civilisational achievements of Mediaeval German pioneers, farmers, craftsmen, miners, merchants, knights, clerics, and their descendants who co-built Central Europe, still weighs against the piles of victims of criminal Nazism. Which prevailed? Was it even valid to place these considerations on the same scale? However, perhaps we can at least take an unencumbered look at the civilisational leap that occurred in this part of Europe that was brought about by Mediaeval German colonisation and under German law?

Most of the articles in this volume concentrate on the Carpathians, one of the eastward routes of Western culture, whose mighty arch, stretching 1,300 km from the Vienna Forest to the Iron Gate, was a borderland between several tribal or state entities in the early Middle Ages. It can be surmised that this natural barrier of heavily forested mountains and foothills was intentionally left uninhabited until the 12th century when the economic significance of the Carpathian wilderness was realised and expansion into neighbouring territories got underway. Thus, the Carpathians were an extraordinary arena of contact between civilisations and cultures over the following centuries. Pastoral tribes, identified by the umbrella term 'Vlachs', roamed the ridges from the south and the east. Their culture was enriched

by Orthodox Ruthenians. Their territory was marked by onion-domed churches. Germans and partly Germanised Western Slavs from Germania Slavica followed from the West, extending the boundaries of Gothic art and architecture eastwards. Peter Jordan's article in this volume gives a comprehensive overview of German settlement in the Carpathians. Three detailed studies are devoted to the well-documented Saxon settlement in Romanian Transylvania, and two discuss the Polish Forest German community arising from German colonists from the Middle Ages. Although Forest Germans who had been completely Polonised remained in their Polish Carpathian dwellings, government and scientific policy consigned them to oblivion.

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