

MAGDOLNA SZILÁGYI

On the Road: The History and Archaeology of Medieval Communication Networks in East-Central Europe

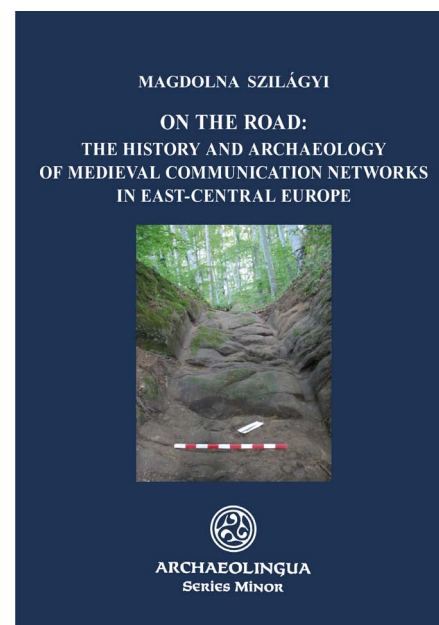
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The freshest volume coming out of Archaeolingua Publishing's Series Minor discusses the medieval network of roads. It fits into the trend in Hungarian archaeology that focuses on the system of relationships between sites, their links to the landscape and communication between communities, in addition to examinations centered on the actual archaeological sites. While the approach of landscape archaeology is also gaining more ground in the elaboration of archaeology dealing with the Middle Ages, only a few results from smaller study areas and hardly any thematic publications reviewing the research methods have appeared in recent years. From this perspective, this one work discussing the history and archaeology of medieval roads can be seen as making up for an oversight.

However, the surveying of the history and archaeology of medieval roads, as well as the outlining of the possibilities and trends in medieval road research does not just represent a long-awaited synthesis of this topic for archaeology, historical studies and historical geography, it also moves into the practical issues of Hungarian methodology in research not centered on sites. The temporal and spatial boundaries found in the title of the book and defined in the preface, as well as the main groups of sources used in the work – medieval written sources, archaeological observations, ethnographic analogies and manuscript maps from the 18th–19th centuries – delineate the context for the examination of medieval roads.

The work, aside from the summary chapter, is divided into three major sections. For the most part the first, introductory chapter presents the previous history of the research, concentrating on a few specific segments of the topic or representing regional investigations. In addition to this we get a thorough review of the sources and methods for medieval road research. Along with the introduction of the various types of written sources (perambulations, land grant deeds) and maps (the First and Second Ordnance Surveys of Hungary, 18th–19th century manuscript maps, cadastral surveys) and their value as sources, attention is also given from a practical standpoint to a listing of the publication of sources that can be of use from the point of view of this topic. The sometimes mosaic-like discussion of the archaeological sources and methods clearly shows that the medieval roads, which often were not constructed but instead only existed as paths, can only be successfully examined in part and within well defined circumstances of excavation/observation (urban environments, the anaerobic conditions of flooded areas), or through the use of interdisciplinary methods adapted to the actual research conditions (written and early cartographic sources, landscape archaeology, remote sensing, soil tests, etc.).

The presentation of the surviving Roman roads that had an influence on the development of the medieval road network appears as a separate chapter. This is not only due to the fact that the book – as a further



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development of the author's PhD dissertation – is overwhelmingly based on written sources from western Hungary, and therefore a greater deal of emphasis is placed on the former area of Pannonia, but also shows a typical characteristic of research into the Middle Ages; previously for the most part its results appeared in the literature in connection with the issue of continuity in the far more developed field of research into Roman roads. Richly supported by medieval source data, the author presents the roads of Roman origin appearing in the documentation, whose provenance is indicated in the varied terminology of these deeds either with certainty (*öttevény*) or with probability (*antiqua via*, *via lapidea*, *via parata* etc.). The possible connections between Roman roads or boundary stones, which survived in the Middle Ages as landmarks or idols, and the medieval seats of lords or estate boundaries highlights their significance in the development of the settlement structure. In addition, this is also a clear example of the essence of the approach of landscape archaeology, in which the landscape is an archaeological phenomenon that preserves changes that build upon one another through many eras.

The third chapter of the book, which makes up its backbone, attempts to formulate a typological system for medieval Hungarian roads, in part adapting results of international research to Hungarian conditions but primarily based upon domestic written sources and the designations of the roads. Since under the present circumstances of medieval road research it is written sources that provide the greatest amount of data, the typology developed does not provide a classification from an archaeological point of view. Instead it orders them according to their denominations, which indicated their function, their legal status, the role they played in the hierarchy of roads or their construction techniques. Of course, the individual categories often overlap in reality, so for example a road for transporting salt could be both a *via publica* and a road suitable for wagons, and particular sections of a road could also represent different sub-types within one category. Nonetheless, the author properly resolves this general typological problem by considering the types as a descriptive and not a categorical system. Through this, placing the Hungarian data in an international context, the diversity of medieval roads is shown, as well as the interdisciplinary aspects of the research. The well structured subsections present the individual types based on abundant data from sources supplemented by archaeological and cartographic data and medieval depictions. They also provide a glimpse of related topics such as the role of pilgrimages, marketplaces and mills. Since the dating of roads in the period between the Roman and Modern eras is most often quite difficult, just as with research into other phenomena of landscape archaeology the interdisciplinary application of sources and methods is indispensable, including the combined use of medieval written sources, modern era maps, landscape archaeological observations and present-day place names. In the analysis of the various types of roads the author appropriately employs a diverse list of resource groups, although we can make one minor critical observation in terms of the management of sources. From time to time the precise dating and the understanding of the conditions of the Árpád Period and the Late Middle Ages is made more difficult due to the fact that in some cases it is not properly emphasized to which period within the Middle Ages the data from certain sources, and more importantly the conclusions made from these data, are related. Landscape archaeology for all intents and purposes is the attempt to strip back the landscape elements that are built upon one another, so it is important that in each case the temporal relationships of the sources used and phenomena examined remain clear, in the interest of making proper conclusions and discovering valid connections.

Overall this work, which is illustrated with abundant, high-quality pictorial material and cites a great deal of professional literature, provides a thorough and clear review of a field that had previously only been investigated in a sporadic manner, making it an indispensable publication not only for experts dealing with the medieval network of roads, but also for those involved in landscape archaeology.