

MEDIEVAL ROADS IN TRANSDANUBIA

– the methods and potentials of Their historical and archaeological investigations

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In medieval times, roads represented the veins of administration, economic and social life, and the backbone of the settlement system. The most important tasks of medieval road studies are to demonstrate how the different centres and the surrounding settlements formed one hierarchical spatial unit and to identify the human and natural factors that contributed to the formation of these routes. Initially, the medieval road system was only studied as part of the discipline of history in Hungary. In the past few decades, however, there has been an increasing interest in roads in medieval archaeology as well, in part owing to the growing application of landscape archaeological methods.

In Transdanubia, the archaeological investigation of ancient Pannonian roads has a long history, going back to the later nineteenth century. The remains of these roads can be easily identified in cultivated fields as wide strips of gravel scattered by ploughing. In uncultivated areas, even the pavement and embankment of these engineered roads have been preserved relatively intact.¹ In contrast, the roads of medieval Hungary are usually simple paths or dirt tracks that developed as a result of constant use. The medieval origin of these roads and tracks can only be demonstrated directly in the landscape in exceptional cases. Very often, their identification and dating requires the combined use of many different strands of evidence such as written documents, early modern maps, toponyms and the like in addition to the archaeological record and the information provided by aerial photographs, field surveys and excavations.

In Hungary, medieval roads could be archaeologically investigated in two types of environments: in peatlands and in towns. From prehistoric times onward, bogs and swamps were often made passable by the construction of causeways or plank roads set on posts.² The wet and anaerobic environment of peatlands provided ideal circumstances for the preservation of the timber for many centuries. The remains of such trackways – dated partly to the Middle Ages – were often discovered accidentally during peat extractions around Lake Balaton and Lake Fertő.³ In addition to waterlogged areas, one can find formally constructed medieval roads within urban context. In the towns, timber-surfaced streets and log roads covered with

¹ For a recent study on the ancient Roman roads of Transdanubia with an exhaustive bibliography, see Endre Tóth, *Itineraria Pannonica. Római utak a Dunántúlon* [Roman roads in Transdanubia] (Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum, 2006).

² Several roads of this type dating from various periods are known from Ireland and Northern Europe. See, for example, Barry Raftery, “Archäologie der vor- und frühgeschichtlichen Bohlenwege Irlands,” in *Die Welt der Europäischen Straßen von der Antike bis in die frühe Neuzeit*, ed. Thomas Szabó (Cologne: Böhlau, 2009): 139–153; Ingolf Ericsson, “Wege, Wegbegleiter, Furten und Brücken Straßen des Mittelalters im archäologischen Befund,” *ibid.*, 155–171

³ József Csalog observed a whole network of posts that he interpreted as the remains of timber trackways and corduroy roads in the peatland that once formed a bay of Lake Balaton, west of Zalavár (County Zala). József Csalog, “Híd- és dorongutak Zalavár környékén” [Trackways and corduroy roads around Zalavár], in *A Göcseji Múzeum Jubileumi Emlékkönyve (1950–1960)*, ed. Imre Szentmihályi, (Zalaegerszeg: Zala Megyei Tanács Végrehajtó Bizottsága, 1960), 137–149. See also, *Magyarország Régészeti Topográfiaja* [The Archaeological Topography of Hungary] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1966) Vol. 1, 184, Site 59/12 (hereafter MRT). At Vindornyaszőlős (County Veszprém), the oak posts and planks of a presumably medieval wooden road were uncovered during the peat extraction in the Vindornya Lake area in 1966. MRT 3, 256, Site 64/9.

gravel enabled travel under all weather conditions.⁴ During the works on the drainage system in Győr, Sopron, and Kőszeg in the 1970s, roads of this type dating from the seventeenth century were discovered.⁵

In the areas between settlements, where medieval roads lacked paving and other constructed features, landscape archaeology is a more efficient method of road investigation than excavation. In uncultivated areas such as hillsides and forests, medieval roads are sometimes preserved as sunken roads hollowed out by rushing water during the centuries.⁶ These sunken roads can rarely be dated by small finds such as coins and pottery sherds because the erosion that deepened their track also washed out the finds from their original context. However, the associated features of the landscape survived and thus, for example, a medieval bridge across the road or an abandoned medieval settlement or the ruins of a church, a monastery or a castle to which the road led to obviously date the road to the Middle Ages.⁷

In most cases, our initial knowledge of medieval roads comes from the period's written documents, post-medieval maps and toponyms, well before their remains have been archaeologically identified in the landscape. Several good examples can be cited for illustrating how the different strands of evidence complement each other. The road uncovered by Endre Tóth and Gábor Kiss at the so-called *Vas kapu* [Iron Gate] across an earthen rampart south of Vasvár (County Vas) could be identified as the long-distance road which in the written documents was designated as the Italian road (*via Latinorum*, 1274) and the Mura road (*via media, que ducit ad Muram*, 1236; *via, per quam itur ad Muram*, 1313; *via magna Murauta*, 1326) after its farthest and closer destination points (Fig. 1). This road appears as *Katonák útja* [Soldiers' road] on post-medieval maps and in toponyms.⁸ The 2–3 metres deep hollow-way observed by Csilla Zatykó north-east of Szakácsi (County Somogy)⁹ (Fig. 2) was part of the road described in the

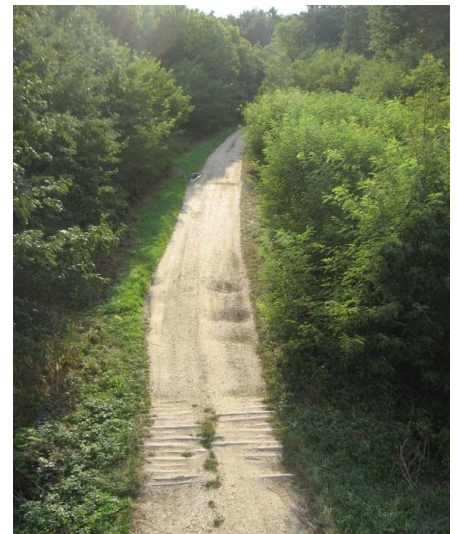


Fig. 1. The so-called 'Katonák útja' leading to a medieval gate south of Vasvár in County Vas (photograph by M. Szilágyi, 2011)



Fig. 2. Hollow-way leading to the Pauline monastery of Szakácsi in County Somogy (after Zatykó 2011, 391, Fig. 3)

⁴ For Western European analogies, see Johannes Litzel, "Holzweg und Steinpflaster. Konstruktion und Unterhalt von städtischen Straßen in Mitteleuropa," in *Die Vielsichtigkeit der Strasse. Kontinuität und Wandel in Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, ed. Kornelia Holzner-Tobisch, Thomas Kühtreiber, and Gertrud Blaschitz (Vienna: ÖAW, 2012): 375–393.

⁵ János Gömöri, "Faburkolatú utak maradványai Sopronban és Győrött" [The remains of timber-surfaced roads in Sopron and Győr], *Arrabona* 17 (1975): 91–107; idem, "Újabb dorongútmaradványok Sopronban és Kőszegen" [New remains of corduroy roads in Sopron and Kőszeg], *Soproni Szemle* 39 (1985): 170–177.

⁶ For analogies from England, see Christopher Taylor, *Roads and tracks of Britain* (London: Dent, 1979), 116–130; Michael Aston, *Interpreting the Landscape. Landscape Archaeology and Local History* (London: Routledge, 1997), 141; Paul Hindle, *Medieval roads and tracks* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2008), 36–40.

⁷ Cf. MRT 1, 106, Site 25/5; MRT 3, 37, Site 7/1; MRT 3, 100, Site 18/11.

⁸ Gábor Kiss and Endre Tóth, "A vasári 'Római sánc' és a 'Katonák útja' időrendje és értelmezése" [The chronology and interpretation of the 'Roman rampart' and the 'Soldiers' road' at Vasvár], *Communicationes Archaeologicae Hungariae* 1987, 101–137.

⁹ Csilla Zatykó, "Reconstruction of the settlement structure of the medieval Nagyszakácsi (Somogy county)," *Antaeus* 27 (2004): 367–431; eadem, "Integrált

1382 perambulation of Szakácsi as leading from the settlement to the Pauline monastery (*via ... quae duceret de dicta Szakács, ad predicum hermitorium*, 1382).¹⁰ This road also appears on the map of the Second Ordnance Survey (Collo XXV, Sectio 60) with sections of its sunken track. Finally, a part of the road today known as *Barát út* [Monks' road] connecting the Benedictine monasteries of Bél (County Veszprém) and Pannonhalma (County Győr) in the Middle Ages survived as a hollow-way in the Bakony forest.¹¹

Medieval written documents are invaluable sources for dating roads and, more importantly, the terms used in them reflect how the period's peoples used and viewed their roads better than any other type of data. Since roads most often appear in perambulations as boundary markers, which evidently had to be clearly identifiable in the landscape, they are often mentioned together with one or both end-points. On the basis of their length and importance, four main road types can be distinguished: long-distance roads leading beyond the borders of the realm, provincial roads connecting several counties, regional roads connecting several parishes, and local roads found within the boundaries of a settlement.

The greatest part of the medieval terminology used for roads refers to their function. These terms fall under the following main groups: military (e.g. *váruta* [castle road], *hadiút* [military road]; *via castris/exercituum* [castle/army road]), ecclesiastic (e.g. *halothordó út* [funerary road]; *semita ad ecclesiam* [church road]), trade (e.g. *vásárút* [market road], *sóút* [salt road], *borhordóút* [wine road]; *via forensis/ad forum* [market road]), agricultural (e.g. *csordaút* [livestock road], *malomút* [mill road], *szénahordó út* [hay road]; *via gregis / molendinaria* [flock/mill]), and industrial routes (e.g. *kőhordó út* [stone transporting road], *erdőlő út* [timber transporting road]; *via lignaria* [timber road]). Second, in terms of ownership and legal authority, the charters differentiate between public (e.g. *via publica / libera / regia*), common (*via communis*), and private roads (*via privata*). Third, regarding the modes of travel and transportation, there are references to footpaths (*gyalogút*), bridle-ways (*szárguldóút*), wagon roads (e.g. *szekérút*; *via currium*), and even sledge roads (*szánút*). The charters also contain information about the physical properties of the roads, describing their surface and material (e.g. *agyagosút* [clay road], *kövesút* [stone road]; *strata terrea* [earth packed], *via lapidosa / saxosa* [stony road]), as well as their morphology (e.g. *horhó* [gully road], *mélyút* [hollow-way], *hochstraße*, *via caverna* [hollow-way]). There are also references to the vegetation covering the surface of roads (e.g. *füvesút* [grassy road], *via graminosa* [grassy road], *via herbosa* [meadow road]) and the vegetation around them (e.g. *nyárút* [poplar road], *sásút* [sedge road]). Finally, charters occasionally also provide clues to the relative chronology of roads by calling them old (e.g. *óút*; *via antiqua / vetus*) and new ones (*via nova*).

Medieval roads linked castles, monasteries, markets, villages, fields and various other elements of the human and natural landscape into a single living system. The intricate and constantly evolving network of roads served as the backbone of various economic and social interactions. Roads were indispensable for the transportation of goods (agricultural products, natural resources, handicraft products, etc.) from their site of production to distribution points and from there to their location of consumption. Moreover, roads enabled people to access various destinations, be it someone's house in their neighbourhood, a parish church in the next village, or a university in a distant town. The main goal of medieval road studies is to reconstruct the road system of a given territory and to identify general patterns, as well as the geographical, social, economic and political factors contributing to the emergence of the road system and the impact of roads on the period's communities and the landscape.

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¹⁰ Zsuzsanna Bándi, "A Szakácsi pálos kolostor középkori oklevelei" [The medieval charters of the Pauline monastery of Szakács], *Somogy Megye Múltjából* 17 (1986): 27–65, esp. 30.

¹¹ Péter Szabó, *Woodland and forests in medieval Hungary* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2005), 140–141.

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