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**BANDITRY IN THE KINGDOM OF HUNGARY IN THE MIDDLE AGES.  
CASE STUDY: SOME GANGS ON THE “ROYAL LAND” (15TH  
CENTURY)**

**Abstract:** The aim of this article was a simple one: to show that in this medieval ”far-east” nothing was different from the rest of the world as we know it. Hungary and Transylvania had its outlaws, even in this period of time, and if they were not so famous as the legendary Robin Hood and his merry men from Sherwood, they were driven by their ferocious traits to harm, plunder or kill for profit and, maybe, why not?, for fame. I wanted to underline another simple fact in this study: beyond historiographical disputes, in which I am not interested at all, a pure historical truth remains: bandits are alike in every region of Europe, whether we speak of Spain, Italy, France or the Western Balkans.

**Keywords:** bandits, banditry, Middle Ages, outlaws, crimes, homicide, Hungary, Transylvania.

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Broadly speaking, we mentioned the few “gangs” of criminals in our PhD Thesis,<sup>2</sup> but since that was part of a greater whole, at that time we did not subject the information in the sources to a more complex analysis. We limited ourselves to presenting the facts in a concise summary and to mentioning the area in which these notorious criminals operated in the 1410s-1460s – the region of Sibiu-Făgăraș.

A chapter pertaining, par excellence, to social history, banditry – which is rather romantically referred to as *outlawry* in Romanian scholarship, in keeping with the development of the mannerist-romantic Romanian literature of the 19th century – was very frequently approached in Marxist-oriented historical writing in the 1940s-80s and not only. Almost a decade ago, we noted that the “followers” of the new history imported from Moscow, but paradoxically promoting a nationalism that was predicated on “class struggle” as the engine of societal evolution, discussed with “martyrial satisfaction” the struggle for “social and national emancipation” of the “Romanian people, beset,” *in perpetuitas*, by the “atavistic oppressor” of a Romanian Transylvania.

We wrote then that: “In this context, Ștefan Pascu published a study in 1947, focused on highlighting the strong character of the class struggle that dominated Transylvania, as a part of the Kingdom of Hungary. Basically, a whole series of documents published subsequently in the DIR series came to illustrate

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<sup>2</sup> *Proscriși și infractori în Transilvania în secolele XIV-XVI*, PhD Thesis, Cluj-Napoca, 2007, currently in press at Argonaut Publishers in Cluj-Napoca.

that conflictual process. This study received a harsh review several decades later, in one of Maria Holban's works."

"In fact, Șt. Pascu's study was the first – ostensibly in-depth – approach to this subject, even though its inconsistency and falsehood were subsequently exposed in plain view."<sup>3</sup> We also stated that: "ultimately, [we want] to have an image that is as close as possible to what the documents reveal (beyond any subjectivism or the obsession of a particular interpretation) of this phenomenon, an image that avoids (for both the Carpathian and the Transylvanian space) the romantic clichés of Romanian fairy tales, legends, ballads or novels, including those of popularization texts about outlaws. A tremendous role in this representational endeavour, with reference to well-documented brigand characters of the modern era, was played by Romanian cinema, in particular the films produced after 1947, which permanently entrenched a classical portrait of the outlaw as a social hero in the collective mind-set, an image that may prove rather difficult to debunk. The first films that tackled this topic in Romanian cinema were those signed by Horia Igiroșianu in the 1920s."<sup>4</sup> What we wrote then still holds true today. Studies approaching this issue are rather few<sup>5</sup> and, many a time, they provide merely oblique interpretations of this topic. Romanian historiography is still reluctant to research the phenomenon of banditry and its most profound underpinnings.

Of course, as readers and even as researchers, we may refuse to observe these facets, because, usually, the evil-good duality of social outlaws, especially in the more distant time periods, compels us to cautious approaches and historical analyses, preventing us from acquiring a full picture of the context that generated banditry in each era. Furthermore, contemporary or medieval and modern socio-economic frustrations have always impelled us to seek the figure of a social vigilante, a *maschiach* of absolute righteousness, from a *golden age* of ideal justice, whether he was called Robin Hood of Sherwood Forest or William Kidd, Jesse James, and Billy the Kid in the Anglo-American space, or Pinteia, Horea, Iancu Jianu, and Bujor in the Romanian space.

In the area north of the Danube, the figure of a charismatic leader could encapsulate the same need for justice, albeit one provided, this time, by a

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 48-50. In the footnotes we explained extensively all the endeavours of the propaganda of the communist regime to impose a standard image, which could then hardly be "maculated"/ "debunked" at the level of the social imaginary and the collective mentality.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 23-24.

<sup>5</sup> See the more recent study of Adrian Magina, "*Cum manibus armatis*. Facets of violence in the medieval Banat," in *Banatica*, 24/II, 2014, pp. 47-64, "Răufăcători sau...schismatici? Statutul ortodocșilor bănățeni în jurul anului 1400," in *România în Europa medievală. Între Orientul bizantin și occidentul latin. Studii în onoarea profesorului Victor Spinei*, Brăila, 2008, pp. 283-293. More specifically, for Cluj, starting from the 16th century, László Pakó's seminal studies deserve mention: "The Inquisitors in the Judicial Practice of Cluj at the End of the 16th Century," in *Transylvanian Review*. Vol. XXI, Supplement No. 2, 2012, pp. 181-198 and "Bíróság elé került boszorkányvádaskodás Kolozsvárt, 1592-1593" [Witchcraft-accusation at the Law-court of Cluj from 1592-1593], in *Korunk*, XVI/5, 2005.

legitimate power-holder: Vlad Țepeș (the Impaler) is invoked nostalgically in the romantic lyrics of M. Eminescu from *Letter III*: “Rise once more, oh, Țepeș! Take and divide these men / As lunatics and rogues...,” just like in Central Europe, in the 18th century, the myth of the “good emperor” as the *maschiach* of the peasantry emerged and developed.

Some poems that rewrite the mythologized folk figure of the bandit or the robber, with all his above-mentioned avatars, failed to immortalize this duality, as can be seen in the poem “Groza” by Vasile Alecsandri:

“On an old board, thrown outside,  
Groza was lying, sleeping his last;  
And no one would dare, in their mourning, weep ![...]   
But softly, by his side, they’d whisper these words:  
Could this one be Groza, of widespread repute,  
The blood-thirsty plunderer?!  
Could this one be Groza, who, like a beast,  
Without a care for his dark sinful error,  
Dealt many a death blow and broke the law?![...]   
And, kissing the dead one, the old man  
Sighed and plodded away with his staff.  
And the crowds were wailing a sorrowful chant:  
May God forgive his sinful seeds!”<sup>6</sup>

The people – divided between wonder and disgust, yet entranced by the narrative of the old orator – found goodness where there seemed to be no such feeling and, under the impulse of the moment, “sorrowfully” (the crowd experienced a change of heart) requested the deity to absolve the fierce bandit from his sins.

Reminiscing about the existence of these anti-heroes, Radu Rosetti also noticed the fact that “from this bunch of thieves only Bujor has remained in the memory of the people, because he was brave and outspoken. He would not do harm to the poor people and even helped them in times of need: only very rarely would he kill anyone. [...] I was also told that she [his wife, *our note*] was allowed to give him a Christian burial, on the very evening of his execution, even though it had been decided that his body should be left exposed, hung from a fork for several days.”<sup>7</sup>

Horia Mazilu considered that Baba Novac, Pinteza Viteazul, Ștefan Bujor, Iancu Jianu, Ion ăl Mare, Gheorghită Gheorghilaș, Tunsul, Grozea were bandits who fit the definition of “outlaws” (brigands – protectors of the poor; a blend between a vigilante hero and a highwayman).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere complete. Poesii. Volume I. Doine-Lăcrămioare.Suvenire-Mărgăritărele*, București, Editura Librăriei Socescu et Comp., 1896, pp. 42-45.

<sup>7</sup> Radu Rosetti, *Părintele Zosim și alte povestiri*, Seria Vintage, București, Editura Humanitas, 2014, pp. 55-56.

<sup>8</sup> Dan Horia Mazilu, *Lege și fărădelege în lumea românească veche*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2006, pp. 310-311.

A classical study on the problem of banditry is the work of Eric Hobsbawm, which was published in three successive editions and was based, according to the author, on literature, in particular folk literature, which may have been uncertain as a source, but captured the “flavour” of banditry.<sup>9</sup>

Hobsbawm noted that banditry tended to become an epidemic during periods of impoverishment and economic crisis,<sup>10</sup> and the most important pool of banditry was provided by the rural world, where employment opportunities were too few or where not all the labour force could find jobs; in other words, bandits were recruited from the surplus of the rural world.<sup>11</sup>

In the documents of the medieval period, one of the Latin terms used for bandits acting in complex groups was *latrunculi*,<sup>12</sup> applicable, for instance, to the bandits plundering in the Rodna Valley in 1479.

This term was derived from the root *latro* (common noun, masculine) (meaning mercenary, thief, brigand), to which the suffix *-culus* (male) was added to obtain a diminutive form: *petty mercenary* would be a form as close as possible to the meaning of the Latin original. In other words, this was an individual who was skilled in the profession of arms and who sold/rented his skills in more modest conditions than a true mercenary.

Du Cange also insisted on the militarized sense of the term used in medieval texts: “*Excursores, præcursores exercitus, seu potius milites, qui in insidiis latent*,”<sup>13</sup> i.e., the troops of scouts who marched in front of the troops or the soldiers who preferred to attack by ambushing the enemy and by staying hidden in protected places.

Charlton T. Lewis translated the term thus: “a highwayman, a robber, a lone bandit or brigand,”<sup>14</sup> but his references were made to ancient Latin.

In his excellent study on banditry in the Roman Empire, Thomas Grünewald explained the fact that the term had different functionalities and meanings for the Roman writers, which are obscure to us, modern readers.<sup>15</sup> The fact is that this broad umbrella term could refer to various individuals: “common *latrones*” and “noble *latrones*,” and according to their specialization: bandits,

<sup>9</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, revised edition, New York, Pantheon Books, a division of Random House Inc., 1981, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> *Documente privitoare la Istoria Românilor culese de Eudoxiu de Hurmuzaki*, vol. VIII [1376-1650], *Documente culese, adnotate și publicate de Nicolae DENSUSIANU*, București, Editura Socec, 1894, doc. 181, p. 102

<sup>13</sup> Ch. Du Cange, *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis*, éd. augm., Niort: L. Favre, 1883- 1887, tom 5, col. 038b, entry: *latrunculi*.

<sup>14</sup> Charlton T. Lewis *et alii*, *A Latin Dictionary. Founded on Andrews' edition of Freund's Latin dictionary, revised, enlarged, and in great part rewritten by Charlton T. Lewis, Ph.D. and Charles Short, LL.D.*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1879, entry: *latrunculus*.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Grünewald, *Bandits in the Roman Empire. Myth and reality*, trans. By J. Drinkwater, Routledge, London-New York, 2004, p. 2.

rebels, rivals or avengers.<sup>16</sup> In the Hungarian language, the common term that came into use was *rabló*, either via the English *rabblor*, or the German *Räuber*.

In the case of the examples that we will bring into discussion here, the following terms could be used: *malefactores* and *spoliatores* under the command of a *capitaneus* (1417), *malefactores* (1428) and, respectively, *malefactorum* (1453).

The term *malefactor* appeared quite early in the Hungarian diplomatic sources. Among the first documents to make such a reference was a charter of *jus gladii* issued by King Andrew II in 1209.<sup>17</sup> The term *spoliator*, with the meaning of plunderer of another's goods, was used in 1309, in the case of a conflict between two noble families.<sup>18</sup>

1. The gang of Kardos Janos (1417)<sup>19</sup>

Data about the “troop” of this *capitaneus* have come from a single document, dated to 1417 by the editor of the collection. The issuer was the Vicevoivode of Transylvania, Lorandus Lepes, and the letter was addressed to the leadership of the town of Sibiu. In the document issued by the representative of voivodal power, this bandit was referred to as *kardosyanos*, from where we can infer a Christian forename in a Hungarian variant (Ianos/yanos), that is, the Hebrew *Yochanan*, with the Latin variant: *Iohannes (Ioan)*. The attached sobriquet comes from a Turkism (*kard* = sword), which in Hungarian gave an “occupational” designation, that of “sword wielder” (*sabreur*, swordsman), that is, *kardos*. Thus, we know that this bandit was a local Hungarian, called “the swordsman” because of his obvious sword-bearing skills, a man who had gathered around him several villains, together with whom he robbed mostly the merchants of Sibiu, that is, the *saxones*.

The document is preserved on the original paper, with a seal of green wax applied to it. It was issued on April 26, 1417, in Deva, by the Transylvanian vicevoivode. This *littera* is part of an epistolary series, which ought to have comprised a minimum of two documents. The first document will have been issued by the administration of Sibiu, presenting the problem and implicitly seeking help. Both (the preserved and the vanished) documents should be seen as part of the series of *littera clausa* of the *missiva* type, including a demand/request (which has been lost) and a response to the request (which is stored in the archives of Sibiu).

Lorand Lepes wrote to the townsmen of Sibiu, “honest brothers and honoured friends,” that “today” [on April 26] he had received their letter (*hodie habuimus litteras vestras*) in which they informed him about how “criminals” and

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Georgius Fejér, *Codex diplomaticus Hungariae ecclesiasticus ac civilis*, Tomi III, Vol. 1, Typis Typogr. Regiae Vniversitatis Vngaricae, Budae, 1829, pp. 86-87.

<sup>18</sup> Imre Nagy, *Anjoukori okmánytár. Codex diplomaticus Hungaricus Andegavensis*. I (1301–1321), A M. Tud. Akadémia Könyvtáráé Hivatala, Budapest, 1878, doc. 167, p. 181.

<sup>19</sup> Gustav Gündisch, *Urkundenbuch zur Geschichte der Deutschen in Siebenbürgen*, vol. 4 (1416-1437), Hermannstadt, 1937, doc. 1807, pp. 34-35.

“looters” had caused them many damages through the robberies they committed (*machinando*). The Saxon population, but also other *nationes* had been pillaged by those who were led by: *capitaneus principalis esset Kardosyanos*.<sup>20</sup> From this description we can draw the conclusion that the gang in question was extremely powerful; it was a motley assortment of individuals, who nonetheless recognized the authority of that swordsman, Ioan.

The vicevoivode remarked the fact that the people of Sibiu had “begged” his help or that of his master, the voivode, which is all the more reason to suspect that this was a gang of bandits organized on military bases, which the local authorities had failed to disband through their own forces.

Lepes excused himself and his ruler for not having answered their desperate requests, because they had both been away in the service of the king. They were still unavailable (*et sumus de presenti*), but they would come to protect the Sibiu townsmen “with all that we have to offer immediately and on the spot.”<sup>21</sup>

“And you should know that today we will write to our familiars” to show up that Friday [on April 30] in Sântimbru, where the vicevoivode and his retinue also intended to arrive on Thursday [April 29], “from where we want to continue on our path through those areas of Sântimbru, without a doubt, so that is why you should send emissaries from among your consuls,”<sup>22</sup> to be present in the county seat on Saturday. Lorand requested these envoys “*pro habendo colloquio*” in Sântimbru, so as to come to their aid, since “we must and want to give you sound advice” regarding the defeat of Ioan’s gang. In the closing sentences, he informed the Sibiu townsmen that he would include their letter (*transumpt*) in his own letter to the voivode. Unfortunately, at least other three letters have been lost: the original letter of the people of Sibiu, the vicevoivode’s *transumpt* and his explanations, and the voivode’s answer.

The original of the Sibiu townsmen will have included the formula of address and the presentation of the facts: “To the noble man....You should know that....followed by a list of the wrongdoings committed by Ioan’s gang....,” and we do know the vicevoivode’s answer and indications to the locals. On the same day a missive was written to the vicevoivodal familiars in the County of Alba and the surroundings, informing them that they would have to reach Sântimbru within two days. Then another *littera clausa* was sent to the ruler, in which a *transumpt* was attached, as well as, perhaps, what was intended to be done, the vicevoivode requesting a formal agreement for his action. The voivode will have answered that he had received the letter of his familiar and was probably going to send a missive to the townsmen of Sibiu to inform them that he had delegated his servant to help them, following their requests for aid. Unfortunately, only a part of this rich epistolary exchange has survived, which is of little help in rearranging the puzzle, other than signalling it to us.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> Consuls = magistrates.

It is possible that in May 1417, the vicevoivode's troops of familiars, together with the troops of the Sibiu locals put an end to the existence of Ioan's gang. It is difficult to believe that these military professionals would have allowed the gang to continue its brigand. The fact that we have no more news about it from the years that followed entitles us to reach such a conclusion.

## 2. The gang of the "Făgăraș" bandits from 1428.

Information about this "gang" comes from a royal warrant of July 4, 1428, issued from *commisio own domini regis* at Kewy [Kubin], near Semendria, in Serbia. The emperor was on a military campaign against the Ottomans, for on May 27, he was in the military camp near the fortress of Golubac [*Galambocz*, Taubenburg],<sup>23</sup> and from June 28 on, he was at Kubin [Kewy].<sup>24</sup> The document was drawn up on parchment,<sup>25</sup> and the seal was imprinted in red wax. Underneath it is the note of the chancellery: *commisio propria domini regis*. The monarch stated that the nobles of Moha [*Muckendorf*, the present-day Grânari, Brasov County] in the County of Alba had requested his help:<sup>26</sup> Georgius, son of Jacobus of Moha, for himself and for his relatives, including the condivisional ones: Georgius, son of Georgius, Nicolaus, Valentinus and Zyrmus, all of Moha, Iohannes, son of Michael of Dalya, the noble lady Anna, daughter of Batha of Moha, and the wife of Georgius, the claimant. They requested the re-issuance of their documents, because on 27 March 1428 [the Saturday immediately preceding the Sunday of *Ramispalmarum*],<sup>27</sup> "some Romanian *malefactors* from the district of Făgăraș [...] had raided that estate, with its house, setting fire to it and burning it down [...] at night, in silence," four children of Georgius, son of Georgius, being burnt alive in that house, together with all the ownership papers.

Beyond the possible *vendettas* that were specific to the Middle Ages, with acts of vengeance being carried out between the families various socio-professional or ethnic groups, these pyromaniac gestures, committed in the dead of night, could only be conceived of as acts of banditry. The association of those Romanians who were driven by a criminal purpose may have stemmed from the violence that was *customary and specific to the medieval times*, but in that age, much like at present, this was a well thought-out, organized, premeditated wrongdoing, conducted, most likely, out of *revenge*. The fact that the rest of the estate was also set on fire indicates such an act of banditry. The burning alive of the sons of Georgius, during the fire caused by the band of the brigands from Făgăraș, suggests the fact that the family woke up too late and were driven by the immediate impulse to escape from the disaster caused by that unexpected attack, in the middle of the night. The *modus operandi* also indicates the fact that the

<sup>23</sup> Gustav Gündisch, *Urkundenbuch*, 4, doc. 2043, p. 348.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, doc. 2044, p. 349.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, doc. 2049, p. 358.

<sup>26</sup> Situated in the north-west of the present-day County of Brașov, along the coordinates: 46°02'25"N 24°58'25"E, within the present-day village of Jibert. The name is related to the presence of mosquitos or flies: "the mosquito village" or "Țânțăreni," in a loose translation.

<sup>27</sup> Palm Sunday.

perpetrators in question had acted like that before, for such a deadly attack required at least some military knowledge, typically associated with deeds of espionage or sabotage, which could not be executed by someone who was not familiar with handling weapons, especially at night. The bandits must have studied the habits of the house and known how to perfectly orient themselves at the scene of the place. The time was early spring, on the eve of a major religious holiday, so they must have taken into account various scenarios and the presence of other people there. They attacked the houses of weapons professionals, at least one of whom was participating in a military campaign. This suggests that those *quidam malefactores Volachi* were not some poor serfs or *hospes* who wanted to take the law into their own hands and do themselves justice because of abuses committed by the nobles. In fact, as we know and have demonstrated in several other studies, if an estate was damaged in a *factum potentie*, then, most often, those directly affected were led in the act of revenge by the noble or his familiars, that is, by other white arms professionals.

We should also note that there were differences between these bandits, acting with a clear purpose, and mere serfs, like those Romanians who got drunk and, under the influence of alcohol, set fire to a forest in the county of Doboka in the 15th century.<sup>28</sup>

### 3. The gang of the priest Coman from Făgăraș (1453).

In 1453, the outline of a petition letter to the voivode, concerning events that had occurred in the area of Făgăraș, highlighted certain disputes and a mild state of local anarchy, especially between the Saxon seats and, it appears, the Romanians. It also mentioned the gang of a priest called Coman, who, for unknown reasons, had threatened to set fire and wreak revenge, as well as to commit murders. That gang may possibly have set fire to some houses in Agnita; that man and his gang had been sending death and arson threats to Blasius, Benedictus and notary Nicolaus in Cincu.<sup>29</sup>

The draft letter states verbatim that the priest Coman “and his associates...have been threatening to set fire and to take revenge, by killing...” In Agnita, if he and his gang were guilty, then theirs was indeed an act of revenge. This petition is a draft, written on paper, an original after which a letter was probably written and sent to the voivode and to H.M. the king. It contained many *gravamine*, which had led to this suite of complaints.

A few lines below it is stated fact Coman surrendered to the king (probably in exchange for royal forgiveness), and that the voivode should know that all the goods in his possession would be returned to him. From here it follows

<sup>28</sup> András Kovács, *The history of the Wass the Csege family*, Edmund Siemers-Stiftung, Hamburg, 2005, pp. 47-48. The forests were located in the Silvaș area, near Légen [Legii, Cluj County] and in Mohaly [Măhal, Cluj County], but they burned to the ground, as shown in the inquests conducted by the noble judges. The serfs belonged to George Lack of Santău and came from the village Mikola [Nicula, Cluj County], Moró [Morău, Cluj County] and Szombatelke [Sâmboleni, Cluj County]. As the document shows, they were “*repleti vino et crapulati, ex preconcepta rancoris malitia*” [full of wine and inebriated...].

<sup>29</sup> *Documenta Romaniae Historica*, seria D, București, Editura Academiei RSR, doc. 321, pp. 437-439.



that the royal dignitary was directly interested in the activities of this bandit, and that the latter surrendered to the king with all his loot in order to avoid being sentenced to the gallows. Coman was questioned, however: based on his testimony, a list of his accomplices and the goods he had stolen and returned was drawn up. Basically, the head of the gang dissociated himself from his former “companions” and agreed to cooperate with law enforcement in exchange for his social reintegration, which we can surmise, for no punishment was mentioned for this offender.

In the long draft of this complaint we can identify also other armed actions, as well as the names of some offenders:

- a. The parish priest in the region *Byrgeschbach* [Bârghiş], the village of *Isopis* [Ighişul Vechi] had four horses stolen, and a servant [*famulus*] of his was killed. The suspected killers were: Barbath [Bărbat] and Cyganwst [Țigănuş].
- b. The parish priest in Broller [Bruiu] had his horses forcibly taken away by Barbwl Knech [Barbul Cnezu] and his accomplices: Borcza [Borcea; the editors translated his name as Borza], Kalagor [Călugăr] and Aaradwl [Aaradu; the editors preferred *Radul*].
- c. Skwrtwl [Scurtul] robbed several estates and requested some kind of protection tax from the surrounding villages.

We would not want to be perceived as biased, anti-Romanian, and so on. Far from us such thoughts, for history, divested of all sorts of parti pris or -isms, is what is revealed to us, not what we would like to believe that it was. The truth is quite simple, at least in this case: banditry was a quotidian reality in this border region from the south-east of the Kingdom of Hungary, where alongside the more numerous and more indigent Romanians, there were also Hungarians and others (e.g. gypsies) who, as Hobsbawm noted, were, generally speaking, more willing to engage in criminal activities due to the non-employment of all the labour force in specific activities.

Thus, we can state, without fear of exaggerating, that this border territory evinced the same phenomenon that is described in universally valid theories of medieval banditry. Fortunately, this frontier region was no different from other border areas (and not only), in Italy, Spain, France or the Western Balkans.