

BOOK REVIEWS

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Review of:

Musteață, Sergiu, 2005. *Populația Spațiului Pruto-Nistrean în Secolele VIII-IX (The Population of the Territory Between Rivers Prut and Nistru in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries)*. The National Association of Young Historians of Moldova, South-East European Studies Society of Moldova Monograph 1. Chișinău: Pontos. 404 pages. ISBN 9975926436. Hardback €30.00.

In Moldova, the study of history and archaeology is an overt political activity. Fifteen years after the disintegration of the Soviet empire, of which the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic was the smallest geographical component, the multi-ethnic Republic of Moldova is still struggling to establish a sense of its national identity, together with an international status. In government, in academia and in society at large, the complicated history of Moldova is a subject of everyday significance. The existence of two autonomous regions within the boundaries of the Republic provides a vivid illustration of the divisions which have hampered Moldova's development: Gagauzia is an ethnic enclave sanctioned by the state, whereas Transnistria is a breakaway region, led by neo-Stalinists, which fought a brief civil war with the Republic in the mid 1990s.

Dr Sergiu Musteață is the president of The National Association of Young Historians of Moldova (ANTIM), a Non Governmental Organisation affiliated to several universities in the capital, Chișinău. This book has been published by ANTIM as the first of a planned series of monographs. For the most part, ANTIM's activities are concerned with the provision of opportunities to young academics and students of history and archaeology, whether in undertaking studies, participating in conferences or taking part in fieldwork at Moldova's premier archaeological landscape, Orheiul Vechi. The publication series is intended to extend ANTIM's role by promoting research and individual researchers. Bringing any book to market using local resources is an achievement in itself given that Moldova is judged by the UK Foreign Office to be "the poorest country in Europe" (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2006). At a time when the reformed communist government of the Republic is trying to establish controversial history curricula in schools and universities, this independent publication expresses some of the political dimensions of working in the field of Moldovan archaeology.

This book is ostensibly a synthesis of the Early Medieval archaeology of the territory of the Republic, although the study area encompasses part of Bucovina in the north and the Bugeac Plain in the south, both of which are part of modern Ukraine. However, this publication is more than just a contribution to the post-Soviet historiography of Moldova. It is a demonstration of academic independence of a kind that could have landed its author in trouble with the authorities in the Soviet era (Musteață pp.29, 194).

Sergiu Musteață's interpretation of settlement culture seeks to redress the pan-Slavist bias of former times. Attempts to reverse Soviet orthodoxies in regional history can veer into what Charles King has termed 'pan-Romanianism', which is itself politically charged (King 1995: 4). Nevertheless, Musteață is more sophisticated than Romanian political nationalists and one of his main arguments is that the material evidence of the eighth and ninth centuries in the Prut-Nistru area points to an "ethno-culturally heterogeneous" population. He rejects Soviet-school claims of a predominantly Slav presence in Early Medieval Moldova but does not exclude Slav influence on the "Old Romanian Civilization" of the area (pp.30, 194-5).

Although the greater part of this book is written in Romanian, Sergiu Musteață's work has an international focus and the book includes a 30-page English-language summary. Furthermore, there are English translations of the table of contents and the list of illustrations, which help to guide a non-native reader through the structure of the book.

Despite the relatively narrow focus implied by his title, Musteață's study is not limited to the eighth and ninth centuries, nor is the area of study confined by the Prut and the Nistru rivers. He considers settlements, economic life, religion and ethnicity in a regional context, seeking to place Moldovan archaeology within the wider context of the 'Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic space' and beyond. As an example, he cites the re-emergence of wheel-turned pottery in the Prut-Nistru territory in the late eighth and ninth century, of a kind found across Central and South-Eastern Europe, expanding the context for his analysis and denying traditional ethnic attributions based upon ceramics found within Moldova (pp.141, 220-1).

Similarly, in a fluid political era which predates the formation of the first Moldovan state by some five centuries, Musteață is not confined to the archaeology of two centuries. Indeed, he acknowledges difficulties in the chronological attribution of settlements (pp.143, 222). The study therefore looks back to developments from the sixth century onwards, as well as forwards to the formation of kingdoms and principalities in the wider region. The choice of the eighth and ninth centuries as the focus for the book is due in part to the availability of data and in part to the historical circumstance by which the Prut-Nistru area was relatively peaceful at this time. The period did not witness the movements of peoples associated with Slav, Magyar, and Tatar migrations and invasions (pp.19, 190). Musteață interprets the eighth and ninth centuries as a period of economic progress and cultural assimilation, presaging the later medieval processes of state formation (pp.30, 144, 195, 223).

Sometimes the English text requires careful reading because the translation is imperfect and the argument seems to be unclear. For example, the reappearance of fortified settlements in the Prut-Nistru territory is attributed to "socio-economic and political development", and also to "the danger coming from barbaric peoples arriving from the east and moving towards Central and South-Eastern Europe" (p.218). This appears to sit awkwardly with the depiction of the eighth and ninth centuries as a period of relative stability. However, the phrase "barbaric peoples arriving from the east..." [*popoare*

migratoare care înaintau dinspre răsărit] (p.138) translates better as “migratory peoples who advanced from the east”, and Musteață seeks to use the example of citadels to illustrate collective social effort within identifiable “territorial units”. Other examples of poor translation occur in the description of cemetery evidence: cremations are translated literally as “incinerations” and mixed rite burial and cremation cemeteries are translated literally as “biritual” (p.207); graves are “tombs” and cemeteries are always “necropolises”. Nevertheless, in general the standard of translation exceeds that of other recent publications in the field of Romanian and Moldovan Medieval history.

These reservations aside, the book provides a useful overview of evidence for settlement types, craft production, and developments in agriculture and animal husbandry. Musteață suggests that the evidence of house types, in particular, indicates a standard of living in the Prut-Nistru territory which was comparable with that in the rest of Central and South-Eastern Europe (p.219). Although the English text is probably not detailed enough for specialists, as most of the evidence is set out in Romanian, numerous illustrations referenced from the English summary compensate for this.

There are extensive black and white illustrations grouped together at the back of the book. These include distribution tables and diagrams, maps, site drawings and photographs. The drawings are particularly interesting, and include numerous metal, ceramic and bone artefacts as well as site plans and features from an array of excavations.

In practical terms, this book serves as an excellent resource for a non-native researcher of the Medieval history of South-Eastern Europe. It includes a lengthy bibliography of primary and secondary sources from Moldova, Romania and the former USSR, together with indexes of geography and authors cited in the text. More importantly, Musteață’s book illustrates the vibrancy of archaeological research in contemporary Moldova, despite economic and political difficulties.

References

Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 2006. Country Profiles: Moldova [<http://www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1007029394365&a=KCountryProfile&aid=1019672579768>]. [Accessed 05/05/06].

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