

Identifying Material Culture Transfer in Medieval Elites: Preliminary Sketches for a Medieval Regional Identity in Transylvania

Abstract:

After a brisk assessment of the failure of previous historical research to address properly the role of elites in stimulating or participating in the transfer of material culture in Transylvania, this essay is going deep into discussing fundamental questions regarding mechanisms and factors of cultural influence at regional level. The article emphasizes the instability of ethnic attribution of objects, which could be named variously in the written sources, according to origin, place of purchase, identity of the merchant, etc. It asserts that before the fourteenth century there was a very slow development of local elites. The fourteenth century was the time when the use and quantity of artwork increased and the transition from late Romanesque to Gothic was accomplished. The article discusses the search for the traces of knightly culture and knightly objects such as harness, spurs, girdle belts, shields, armour, coats-of-arms, and their representations on frescoes or in the last wills. Then it deals with the vehicles of spreading material culture, namely royal court's peregrinations in the realm and the royal officials who were appointed in various offices within the provinces. All of them moved with their belongings offering occasions for contact with different and fashionable garments, furniture, libraries, altars, jewellery, etc. The slow reception of Renaissance culture, in spite of the efforts of king Matthias Corvinus, represents an example of the material and cultural limits which prevented quick cultural changes. The development of demand-supply relations and the money based exchange economy shifts the focus of the study to the role of the Transylvanian towns in providing certain prestigious goods, the influx of German skilled craftsmen and the competition which maintained high standards of production common throughout Central Europe starting from the fifteenth century. The goods produced by Transylvanian craftsmen were consumed by Transylvanian noblemen as well as the landed elites across the Carpathian Mountains. The question about the role of the artist versus patron in the artistic work and whether artwork recorded local material culture at all is discussed. In the end, the essay offers several considerations regarding the changes of the period 1450-1550, when the Oriental character of the Turkish art and culture became dominant, a change that had lasting influence on this region as well. The fall of Buda in 1540 further influenced the amount of material transfer at least in terms of quantity. After 1550s, Transylvania came to be influenced increasingly by Orientalism. The article's conclusion is that several phenomena indicate a "globalization" of local material culture which makes very difficult to indicate a building or artefact which could legitimately be declared invented or perfected in Transylvania. Moreover, the author concludes that Transylvania was not a cradle of medieval material culture, but one that imported outside models by constant transfers of goods, techniques and craftsmanship.

Keywords: material culture, Transylvania, knighthood, Orientalism, nobility, knez.