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An Interview with Professor Alexandru Simon



Alexandru Simon
(Photo: Suzana Simon)

About Prof. Alexandru Simon:

Alexandru Simon is a Romanian historian and professor specializing in medieval and early modern history, with a particular focus on Central and Eastern Europe. He is currently a research fellow at the Romanian Academy's Center for Transylvanian Studies in Cluj-Napoca. In 2008, he earned his PhD in history with a dissertation *East-Central Europe and the concept of the Gate of Christendom during the Late Middle Ages*. Professor Simon's research interests include medieval geopolitics, the dynamics of power relations between monarchs, and the interaction between states and their subjects. His work combines political, cultural, and

religious history. He actively participates in national and international research projects and frequently publishes works on topics related to European medieval studies.

To begin with, I would like to ask: how did your interest in the Middle Ages and the period of Humanism develop considering, according to your biography I read, that your initial research focused on the 19th and 20th centuries?

In Romania, there is a saying that smart people start with the Middle Ages and then move to recent history. I am evidently not one of them. But I adjust. I started with Aurel C. Popovici's *Die Vereinigten Staaten von Groß-Österreich* (1906), for this was, in 2000, a prerequisite for a fellowship at the Sorbonne. This turned out to be very useful, when working on the Middle Ages. I had a better understanding of the contexts in which major works were written and the vast majority of source editions were published. This does not necessarily mean that I liked all the "details" and the methods I therefore discovered. Still, it eased my comprehension of the goals for which the Middle Ages were "weaponized" and proper science often sidelined.

Given how "unstable" the concept of the Middle Ages is, do you think a specialist in the 15th century, like yourself, is better positioned to study the early medieval history (since both fall under medieval studies) or the early modern period (which is often treated as a separate discipline)? To what extent do you see administrative periodization in academia as problematic, and how can scholars challenge its constraints?

In (East-) Central Europe, in order to use post-World War I and World War II concepts, the 15th century is the gateway to the early modern period. In theory. In practice, you come to realize that a "master reset" occurred in the 1500s, following Mohács and the spread of the Reformation. This in fact leads to a more than significant divide. It can be bridged but only by turning to the sources, for, too often, people dealing with post-15th century histories took from the earlier periods only what was convenient for them, using already highly biased and/or politicized works. Under such circumstances, for many, it is easier to move downwards from the 1400s either because of the collapse of the Balkan states, or because the objects of their interests were rather young at that time (e.g. Wallachia and Moldavia date back only to the 1300s). Consequently, my approach to periodization would be different. A course covering the *long durée* (of course not until 1789) and seminars, held by various specialists, each dealing with narrower time frames. But this would mean more money and more jobs, so it is a "no go".

Romania and Croatia, though no longer even sharing borders, were historically (at least historical lands of today's Croatia and Romania) part of the same kingdom for centuries. Can we speak of a meaningful interconnectedness between them? More broadly, is it even possible to write the history of either country in the late Middle Ages without a transnational perspective?

I discovered Croatia in Venice back in 2005. First only on paper, in the registers of the Venetian Senate. Since the 1460s, the bureaucrats had the good habit of compiling indexes before opening a new register, usually on the Venetian New Year (1 March), meaning they planned ahead. For some 40 years (1496/1497–1534), one of the titles (“headers”) in the index read: *Hungaria, Polonia, Dacia et Crouatia*. At first (1489–1495), there was only *Hungaria et Polonia*. Then, in 1496, *Dacia* was added. When John Corvinus became a citizen of Venice (1497), *Crouatia* was inserted, initially by means of an *atque*. This made me realize that the histories of Romania and Croatia were closer intertwined than one would have expected. Hence, I can only say that I support transnational perspectives over limited national focuses, without blurring the specificities of each party, because this would be a more grievous mistake.

Since the period of Humanism is part of your research focus, could you elaborate on the extent to which humanist thinkers were connected with one another? Can we speak of an established network of correspondence, intellectual exchange, and interaction? In particular, how did such connections manifest among individuals active within the Kingdom of Hungary?

I think that we are still far away from understanding the complexities of those days and of their impact. This can be ascribed both to the abovementioned “master reset” and to the “darkness” that predated Humanism. I am, I have to be, more pragmatic. The main issue is the sources. Plenty of them have not yet been published and many that were published have been forgotten. This leads to us, at times, missing the obvious. In the case of the Kingdom of Hungary, you actually grasp the impact (political as well) of Humanism after the death of King Matthias Corvinus. Growing ideas and political turmoil apparently went hand-in-hand, if not all the way to Mohács and its immediate aftermath (up to 1540), then at least until the Congress of Vienna (1515). There you can see humanists and wannabe patrons trying to do their (selfish) best.

Given that you recently participated in the conference Intellectual History II and presented an intellectual biography of a historical figure, can a biography of a person from such a distant period achieve the same or similar level of precision, impact, and relevance as a biography of a modern or contemporary figure? Additionally, could you explain the significance of medieval intellectual history more broadly?

My approach to “intellectual history” is a bit different. I worked quite a lot on Italian *dispacci* because they turned out to be some of the best sources on events across the Adriatic, so to say. I looked at the authors, some of them we can easily call spies, of these *dispacci* and on their background. It was largely humanist and well-educated. This echoed in their reports. For instance, a battle was the main focus of the report. You had a depiction of the antique roots of the combatants (at least of some of them) and then you had a very down-to-earth description and analysis of the events. There was no apparent contradiction between these two “extremes”, according to modern standards.

The same applied in the case of the figure I presented last December in Zagreb: Francesco Pescennio Negro. In the Kingdom of Hungary, he was meddling in politics, fantasizing about ancient, almost impossible, roots and collecting manuscripts for Aldo Manuzio to print, while constantly gunning for revenues (he even admitted acting, rather unwillingly, so he said, as some sort of buffoon for Wladislaw II, the successor of Matthias). In sum, Negro comes across rather modern. But a biography of him would be highly personal. The same applies to some biographies of more recent figures, but for different reasons. The author of the biography has to choose which sources to use and which not, because the closer we come to the 1600s sources dramatically increase in number.

Since the theme of this issue of Pro Tempore is Myths and Narratives, one of the most prominent examples that comes to mind is the myth and narrative surrounding Vlad Țepeș, a figure you have also studied. While it may seem somewhat unconventional to ask a professional historian about popular perceptions of his persona, has the reception of these myths influenced your scholarly approach to him in any way? Whether in terms of your initial perspectives or through external biases you encountered?

I was never a fan of Vlad. Nevertheless, I ended up writing some sort of a book in a German collection *Forum: Rumänien* (Frank & Timme, 2021). Possibly, because I was neither a supporter of his, nor a detractor appalled by the “madman”, the work fared rather well, due also to some interesting sources in it, one of which came from the archives of Dubrovnik. Still, I must admit that I am none the wiser when it comes to understanding Vlad. Because the “reasonable conclusion” would be that, by nature, he was a killer and he put his skills to good (even though extreme) use, while around him Pope Pius II and Matthias Corvinus, his main admirers and accusers, unfolded their political plans with Vlad as some sort of peculiar “terminator” at the front. Such a “reasonable conclusion” would however fuel “conspiracy theories”. Nonetheless, this might not be as bad as it sounds, because this belonged already to Vlad’s age and not to ours. For instance, again in Venice, it was recorded that, in 1486, *Dracula* (who had passed away ten years earlier) defeated Sultan Bayezid II, something that no other Christian ever managed to do.

Continuing with the theme of Myths and Narratives, the perception of the Crusades is often centered on distant expeditions and the conquest of the Holy Land. However, in your work, you also highlight how the spirit of crusading extended onto the European continent, particularly in the context of defense and warfare against the Ottomans. When would you say the crusading movement ultimately “died out”, and what factors contributed most to its decline?

Crusading as a concept never died out, in fact, surviving even the Reformation that was usually deemed to have dealt the final blow to (Roman Papal) crusading. See for instance Dwight Eisenhower’s “crusader memoir”. This brings modern understandings and meanings onto the medieval world, a world that,

in all honesty, largely eludes us. If I was to attempt an explanation, I would therefore turn to the extant sources, to a German saying from 1471. Matthias Corvinus was '[...] a good Turk like his father [John Hunyadi] who had allowed the Turk [Mehmed II] to take Constantinople [...]'. John Hunyadi equaled anti-Ottoman crusading and Matthias promoted it. But, the goals of crusading were not actually in their favor. A partnership with the Ottoman Empire (kept at a distance, which proved to be rather wishful thinking) was more appealing to Christians (Greek rite too, as long as they were not under direct Ottoman rule).

The period of Humanism generated various myths and narratives, often rooted in antiquity. For instance, in your work, you mention the Ottomans as the reincarnation of the Trojans, while in Croatia, the Frankopan family traced their lineage to ancient Roman families, among other examples. Do you consider the period of Humanism to be particularly distinctive in its creative mythologization and narrative construction compared to the preceding Middle Ages?

The amount of humanist sources or sources from the so-called humanist period clearly outnumbers those from earlier centuries, for which we have to rely chiefly on chronicles, biased, by definition, to various extents (the same applies for Humanism in comparison, for instance, to Illuminism). Under these circumstances, if we do not view the times up to the 14th and, better, the 15th century as the embodiment of backwardness, the main accomplishments of Humanism are the “personalization” and the “nationalization” of the past for present gains. Art, architecture or letters were used to coin the positive appealing image of the Renaissance. The present-day lessons of Humanism rest, however, more with its practical and, often, artificial endeavors. Hence also, the hideous forms of “the past that justifies the present”.

Naturally, every historiography faces its own unique challenges: in medieval studies, we often lament the scarcity of sources, whereas the Croatian historiography remained relatively detached from modern scholarly trends until the 1990s, among other issues. Given that it is less familiar to us, what would you identify as the most pressing challenge in contemporary Romanian historiography? Or do you believe that historiographical challenges today are more European (or even global) in scope rather than national?

The main challenge of Romanian historiography is very 19th century-like: the publication and the analysis of sources. The problem nowadays largely is that, irrespective of orientation, too many books and articles are “methodological” rewritings of already existing books and studies. The ever-pressing problem of plagiarism has to be viewed in close connection to this issue. You cannot expect original (and quality) scientific work when too many “innovative contributions” are frequently a transparent reshuffling of information that has long been in circulation.

Finally, as an established researcher, and given that this interview is being published in a student journal, what advice would you give to young scholars aspiring to become medieval historians—not only in Croatia but more broadly? What key skills should they develop, and which research topics should they pursue? In short, is there a formula for success (if such a thing exists at all)?

Be “old school”. Learn the languages, learn the paleographies (or at least one paleography), learn how to deal with “big data” (like the learned men and women of old). In a global age (whether we like it or not) that is about to become a vassal to its creature (AI), with this set of skills, you will have more than a fighting chance, whether at home or abroad. This is as far as I would go because, on one hand, the meanings of success have changed over the past two or three decades (that I am more or less familiar with) and, on the other, more often than not, the youngest permanent employ in a research/educational institution is in average close to 40.

Thank you, Professor Simon, for this intriguing interview and the fresh insights offered here!

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