Southern Hungary and Serbia in al-Idrisi’s Geography

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The reign of the Norman Sicilian King Roger II (1130-1154) represented a significant rise for the Norman Kingdom. In their foreign policy, the Normans clashed for dominance in the Mediterranean with the Byzantine Empire, whereas internally, an economically stable, ethnically and religiously mixed country was being established. The Norman Kingdom owed its economic rise, above all, to the grain trade. In the time of Roger II and his successors in Sicily, the international trade in agricultural products was highly developed, first of all concerning grain, but also salted meat and commodities. Trading was most frequently done with Tunisia, and the Normans had an international trade treaty with Egypt.²

The kings of Sicily, especially Roger II, supported learned men of Greek or Arab descent. For example, the Greek scholar Eugenio resided on the island and was for some time involved in the Sicilian king’s administration work, while he also translated Ptolemy’s Optics from Arabic into Latin. Therefore, apart from his native Greek, he also spoke Arabic and Latin, the three most important languages in Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Orient at the time.³ Furthermore, also in Sicily, Enrico, named Aristippus after Socrates’ disciple, translated works from Greek into Latin. He translated Plato’s dialogues Meno and Phaedrus.⁴

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¹ University of Novi Sad, Serbia.
² For more details on Norman economy, see an excellent overview by David Abulafia, “The crown and the economy under Roger II and his successors,” in Italy, Sicily and the Mediterranean 1100-1400 (London: Variorum, 1987), 1-14.

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Apart from them, a crucial role at the court of King Roger II, in light of the topic of this paper, was that of traveller and geographer, Abu Abdullah Muhammad al-Idrissi.

Al-Idrissi maintained that, like many descendants of prominent Muslim families of the time, he came from the family of the Prophet Muhammad himself. One of his ancestors was Idrisi II, who was the ruler of Malaga in the eleventh century. However, he was most likely born in Ceuta in 1100, although a significant number of scholars treat with caution almost all the information in his biography, with the exception of the year he completed his voluminous work. There is one piece of circumstantial information with respect to the year 1100; namely, Idrisi, in his writings, explicitly states that he was 16 years old when he visited Asia Minor in the year 510 of the Islamic calendar (1115-1116 AD). Thus, one can infer the year of his birth. He was educated at Cordoba, which was at the time the centre of Islamic science and culture in Arabic Spain. He travelled extensively throughout Spain, toured North Africa and was also familiar with the Arabic East. It is not known exactly how and when he came to the court of King Roger of Sicily, but he closely worked with the king for 15 years to produce his work, thus receiving his epithet aš-Šiqillī. His famous work is entitled Kitāb nuzhat al-muştāk fi btīrāk al-afāk – The pleasure excursion of one who is eager to traverse the regions of the world, or shorter, al-Kitāb al-rağārī or Kitāb Ruğār – The Book of Roger, named after the king it was dedicated to. It is known in scholarly circles under its own name, which is still commonly used today – Geography. This work was completed either between 10 December and 20 December 1153, or in January 1154, or, as Idrisi states, in the month of shawwal of the Islamic calendar. Idrisi is believed to have died around 1165, though this information is also not entirely certain.5

5 For more details on his life see, Boris Nedkov, Bŭlgarija i sŭsednite i zemi prez XII vek spored geografijata na Idrisi [Bulgaria and its neighboring countries in the XII century according to the “Geography” of Idrisi]. Sofia: Nauka i izkustvo, 1960, 9-13; Elter István, „Magyarország Idrīsī Földrajzi művében,” [Hungary in the geogaphical work of Idrīsī] Acta universitatis Szegediensis de Attila József Nominate, Acta historica, tomus LXXXII (1985): 53-55; Giovanni Oman, “al-Idrīsī,” in Encyclopedia of Islam Vol. 3, ed. H. A. R. Gibb et al. (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 1986), 1032-1035; Ramazan Şenç, “İdrîsî Şerîf,” in Türkiye Diyanet Vakfî İslâm Ansiklopedisi: İbnü'l-Cezzâr-İbnû'n-Müslûmîn [Encyclopediаof Islam by Turkish Diyanet], ed. Süleyman N. Akççeşme (Ankara: TDV, 2000), 493-495. It should be noted that even this end date for The Book of Roger, as well as much of Idrisi’s biography, was massively criticized by Henri Bresc and Annliese Nef in their revision of
In his work, Idrisi describes many of the countries he travelled to, such as Lombardy, Sicily, and all of Italy. He also describes Eastern and South-eastern Europe, including Poland, the Czech lands, Hungary, Bulgaria, Serbia, and finally Byzantium. Upon his return to Palermo, Idrisi asked the king to help him draw up a map of the countries he visited. The king thus ordered that a large map be made of pure silver. The masters then drew seven climates (seven large sections travelled through by Idrisi), followed by cities, inhabited and uninhabited places, hills, forests, lakes, seas, and more. In order to complement this large disk, or rather, silver board, Roger II asked Idrisi to produce a book describing the cities and territories on the map, including their characteristics, typical food, representative types of cereals and plants, and trade. The work on the map took fifteen years to complete, probably starting in 1138, when Idrisi most likely came to the court of the Sicilian ruler. In the preface, Idrisi points out that his goal was to reach new insights. He critically studied the sources, but was not satisfied with them particularly because they did not offer new insights or contribute to the development of science. As he states, Idrisi also collected oral traditions, getting his information from ordinary people. However, the cartographic results of his research are relatively poor. The map composed in the court of King Roger II cannot be used for scientific purposes as a serious geographical work. Nevertheless, Idrisi’s work is crucial for cartography so its significance and precision cannot be denied entirely. Following Ptolemy’s model, he divided the regions he travelled into seven climates, i.e., seven lines of land extending north from the equator. Idrisi also delimits seven seas and he further divides each climate into ten sections, each of them being a geographical whole. Although he reports distances in miles, he also refers to them in days – so a day of light travel equals 23-25 miles, a day of more difficult travel amounts to 30-36 miles, whereas travelling by water makes about 100 miles a day. Of course, when making these calculations, the accessibility of the terrain should be

considered. Although he writes simply, his style aspires to art in a beautiful and harmonious Arabic.\(^6\)

Idrisi’s sources are diverse. First of all, he used all the Arab scholars, cartographers, and geographers available to him; the most significant being Ibn Hawqal, \(\text{al-Khwarizmi}\), and \(\text{al-Biruni}\). Furthermore, he used classical works, most significantly those of Ptolemy (both the Greek version and the Arabic translation); however, it is also worth noting that other ancient and Byzantine authors were available to him in the library at the Norman court. A significant corpus of his sources is composed of oral news he compiled from diplomatic missions at the court of the Norman king in Palermo; also, it was from these sources that he was likely able to learn a great deal about Hungary and events taking place in the kingdom. Lewicki believed that a number of documents were also available to Idrisi while he was preparing *The Book of Roger*. Idrisi himself aluded to using the royal archives. While he portrayed Asia and the Islamic world mostly on the basis of Islamic geographers and authors, he described almost all of Europe by mainly using oral sources from the Norman court and the navy of the Sicilian king. Finally, Ptolemy represented one of his primary sources as he portrayed most of the world according to him.\(^7\)

The information provided by Idrisi is well known in historiography. A critical edition of the Arabic text of his *Geography* was published in several volumes in Palermo.\(^8\) Among the editions of this valuable piece, a prominent version, authored by Tadeusz Lewicki, includes the Arabic


text with Polish translation and commentary. Over a century ago, Amédée Jaubert penned a translation of Idrisi’s Geography into French based on two manuscripts kept in Paris. The Hungarian translation of the fragments related to medieval Hungary was provided by Istvan Elter, while there are two Bulgarian editions – an older one by Boris Nedkov and a newer one by Stoianka Kenderova and Bojan Beševliev. With reference to certain areas of present-day Romania, Alexandru Madgearu provided an essential contribution on Idrisi.

In Serbian scholarship, parts of Idrisi’s Geography was published by Gavro Škrivanić – although this edition is incomplete and contains some errors, it is useful and provides a wealth of good data. More recently, Boris Stojkovski also investigated Idrisi, but this initial survey also had to be supplemented and some misconceptions corrected. Interestingly, an analysis of Idrisi’s writings reveals that he was much more interested in the other, than his contemporary Abu-Hamid al-Garnati. Idrisi in his work describes cities, places, peoples, rivers, as well as economic and social circumstances, flora and fauna. At the time of his visit to Srem (or at least chronologically close to it), another Arab travel writer, the said Abu-Hamid al-Garnati, also travelled through Hungary. However, the latter, being a devout Muslim, concentrated on the Muslim population. Although he provided almost no information related to settlements in Hungary, he is a first-hand source regarding the Muslims with whom he

10 P. Amédée Jaubert, trans. & ed. (1836–1840), Géographie d’Édrisi traduite de l’arabe en français d’après deux manuscrits de la Bibliothèque du roi et accompagnée de notes (2 Vols) (Paris: L’imprimerie Royale, 1836-1840). Along with a series of errors pertaining to the topic of this paper, the author mistakes Alba Iulia (Gyulafehérvár) with Belgrade, and Veliki Varadin (Nagyvárad, the present-day Oradea) with Petrovaradin.
12 B. Nedkov, България
13 Stoianka Kenderova, Bojan Beshevliev, Balkanski sfat połuostrov, izobrazen v kartite na Al-Idrisi Paleografsko i istoriko-geografsko izследване [The Balkan Peninsula, depicted in the maps of Al-Idrisi Paleographic and historical-geographical study] (Sofia: Nar. biblioteka “Кирил и Методий,” 1990)
14 A. Madgearu, ”Commentarii,” 137-159.
lived, both in Srem and throughout the Hungarian kingdom. Thus, the
two Arab authors complement each other.17

By using the aforementioned works, as well as others, a referenced
selection of the data related to the territory of southern Hungary and
Serbia in the period around 1154 is made here; in other words, this study
focuses on the information provided by the Arab geographer al-Idrisi
regarding the area of present-day Serbia. Serbia, also referred to as
Macedonia by Idrisi (a term used for the entire area from Belgrade to
Bulgaria), is described in the fourth section of the fifth climate, as well as
in the third and fourth sections of the sixth climate. Part of the sixth
climate and its third section also describe the Hungarian Kingdom and
its southern settlements, which are now part of Serbia; these will also be
discussed here. Climate sections V 4 and VI 4 describe both Bulgaria and
Macedonia (Serbia), including cities south of the Sava and Danube, all
the way south to Pirot. It should be noted that Idrisi is not entirely
accurate, and because of the Arabic place names, which were not always
translated consistently, it is challenging to identify the location of
individual settlements. For this purpose, advanced studies in the
refinement of individual toponyms have been used, namely the works of
Jaubert, Nedkov, Lewicki, and Elter, since they all treat the territory
examined here. However, when this was not possible, additional efforts
were made based on geographical and historical data to determine the
location of individual sites. Most of the locations have already been
designated by earlier foreign authors, but accurate data was often
missing, while in some instances, additional clarification of Idrisi’s data
was necessary. Since the general academic public has so far not had the
opportunity to learn in English the information provided by the Arab
geographer on medieval southern Hungary and Serbia (with certain
exceptions), this study can provide useful information on how this region
was seen and described by a representative of a different culture, who
came from the European and Mediterranean capital of science of the
time. Finally, it should be highlighted that this paper will not analyse
Idrisi as a cartographer, nor will it analyse the data related to other parts

17 Boris Stojkovski, Nebojša Kartalija, “The Other and the Self in the travel accounts of
Southern Hungary and Serbia in the works of Al-Idrīsī and Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġarnāṭī,”
Romano-Arabica XVIII 2018, Geographies of Arab and Muslim Identity through the Eyes of
Travelers, 207-215.
of the world where he travelled, but exclusively the data on southern Hungary and Serbia.

The first data regarding the region is provided by the Arab geographer in the fourth section of the fifth climate. There are some valuable observations about the area of present-day south-eastern Serbia:

From ‘.t.r.l.s\(^{18}\) (‘أتراليسة – Sofia) to the town of ’.t.r.b (‘أتروبي, أتروبي – Pirot) there is a day of travel. The town is located on a mountain-top, from whence the river of M.r.f (‘مورافا, مورافا – Morava) flows.\(^{19}\)

The Pirot region was part of Byzantium, and a trace of it was preserved in the later-named Galata-mahalla in Pirot. Moreover, and more significantly related to this subject, there are some clues regarding the existence of a fortification dating from the twelfth century. Archaeological data largely fill in the existing gaps regarding Pirot and the Pirot region in the Middle Ages.\(^{20}\)

From the aforementioned town of ’Atrūby and N.y.s.w (‘نيسو, نيسو – Niš) there is a day of travel. Niš is a city in the neighbourhood of a river, the aforementioned Mūrāfā. The river springs in the Serbian mountains.\(^{21}\)

This information is followed by the data from the third and fourth sections of the sixth climate, which contain several relevant pieces of information related to this topic.

From the town of ’.r.y.n.h (‘رينية, رنينة – Győr) to the town of B.k.ş.n (‘بفصين, بفصين – Bač) southbound along the river

\(^{18}\) The reference first includes the transcription that can already be found in the literature, primarily with Lewicki, Polska and Elter, “Magyarország.” Then it is followed by the form of the word or phrase observing the modern transcription rules, the Arabic name, and the modern name of the location.

\(^{19}\) Al-Idrīsī, 794.

\(^{20}\) The word-form Atrubi most likely comes from Turris, meaning a tower which was located at the site of Pirot since the late ancient period; for more on Pirot during the Middle Ages and Idrisi’s time, see Petar, “Ponišavlje u antičko doba [Valley of Nišava in ancient time],” Pirotski zbornik 8-9 (1979): 177-184; “Pirotski kraj u srednjem veku [Pirot region in the Middle ages],” Pirotski zbornik 8-9 (1979): 188-189; B. Nedkov, България, 115.

\(^{21}\) Al-Idrīsī, 794-795. B. Nedkov, България, 115-116. He believed that the form of the word Niš comes from the Greek declined word Νίσσο. 

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D.n.w (دنو Danaw / Dunū – Danube) there are 60 miles. Baqaṣīn is a famous town, one of the largest towns. There are squares, merchants, artisans and learned Greek people there. They have farms and arable land. Wheat, however, is very cheap because it is abundant.22

This information coincides with that offered by the Byzantine writer John Kinnamos. He writes that Baqaṣīn is the most important city in Sirmium, being also the seat of the archbishops. The name Baqaṣīn, similar to the ancient Hungarian name of Bagacı, is referred to as Παγάτζιον by Kinnamos.23 With respect to the church organization, it is a matter of disagreement in scholarship, further fuelled by the fact that Idrisi does not provide other information than that on learned Greeks or priests.24 This paper will not provide further details about the origin and development of the Archdiocese of Kalocsa-Bacs, but it should be noted that, at that time, there was probably already an archdiocese with two seats, one in Kalocsa and the other one in Bač; however, there are also claims about the existence of an older archdiocese in Bač. At the time when Idrisi wrote his Geography, there is a record mentioning an archbishop named Miko (from 1156 to 1165), while the first record of an archbishop in Bač dates from 1134. Thus, undoubtedly, one can speak

22 Al-Idrīsī, 884.
24 C.f. VINJ 70-71 where Jovanka Kalić (who also wrote a commentary of Kinnamos’ data in VINJ) puts forth her hypothesis as to which church had its seat in Bač: the Roman-Catholic one or the Greek one.
of a two-seat archdiocese in Idrisi’s time, the older one in Kalocsa and the other in Bač.\textsuperscript{25}

However, the remark that the Greek scholars, whom Idrisi refers to as \textit{ulamas}, live here, certainly indicates that this was also the seat of a Greek church. Therefore, Greek (Byzantine) priests were also present in the area. Another indication to support this claim is that when the Hungarians conquered and plundered Niš in 1071-1072, they took away the hand of Saint Procopius and brought it to Hungary. The hand was taken to Sirmium, the Church of Saint Demetrius, where it was located until 1164 when Manuel Komnenos returned it. At the same time, in 1071-1072, the Diocese of Sirmium was probably transferred to Bač, and was rebuilt by the Byzantines during the period when the Empire held Sirmium, between 1164-1180. This transfer of the diocese to Bač signifies the existence of a bishop, perhaps referred to as “the seat of the archbishops of these people” as mentioned by John Kinnamos, or perhaps being one of the \textit{ulamas} who speak Greek, as Idrisi claims.\textsuperscript{26}

Idrisi’s account of the city’s grain and its wealth is also accepted by other historians, as well as by some other authors who researched Bač and its past.\textsuperscript{27}

From the town of Baqaṣīn to the town of Қāw.n (قاؤن – Kovin) there are 60 miles due east. Қāw.n is a big, prosperous town on the river Danaw/Dunū, with squares and craft workshops. From the aforementioned town of ʼk.r.h (آقرة – Jegar) to the town of Қāw.n there are 160 miles.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{25} Attila Zsoldos, \textit{Magyarország világi archontológiaja} [The lay arhcontology of Hungary]. (Budapest: História-MTA Történettudományi intézete, 2011), 83 with additional references.


\textsuperscript{28} Al-Idrīsī, 884-885. T. Lewicki. \textit{Polska}, 129. Refers to Kovin as Қāw.n.
Kovin is mentioned as early as 1072 as urbs Keve in the *Illuminated Chronicle*, as the place where the Danube was crossed. Kovin was also the seat of the county that covers much of today’s Banat region. As Idrisī wrote about it 80 years after its first mention in other sources, when Kovin started to gain significance, his remarks about the town, including Bač somewhat earlier, are quite logical and correct.29

From the town of 'f.r.n.k b.y.l.h (Francavilla, ap. Ifrankabîlah – Mandelos) due north-east, there are 50 miles to the town of 'b.r.n.d.s (Abrandis – Petrovaradin, or the present-day Novi Sad). Abrandis is a civilized city with many squares and buildings. It is located beneath a hill, in a valley.30

Francavilla, the Hungarian Nagyolasz, refers to today’s village of Mandelos in Srem. This name, similar to the name of Fruška Gora, is a remnant of the Frankish administration of Srem from the time of Charlemagne.31 The town was also the location of the Holy Cross Monastery, and it was a place where, during the Middle Ages, inhabitants of Western (primarily French and Italian) descent settled.32

29 SRH I, 377; The Illuminated Chronicle, 210-211; Sima Ćirković, “Prilošci za istoriju Kovina u srednjem veku [Contributions to the history of Kovin in the Middle Ages],” *Zbornik Matice srpske za istoriju* 1 (1970): 83-86.; Dušanka Dinić-Knežević, “Slovenski živalj u urbanim naseljima srednjovekovne ugarske države” [Slavic population in the urban settlements of the medieval Hungarian state], *Zbornik Matice srpske za istoriju* 37 (1988): 25; Aleksandar Krstić, “Kovin,” in *Leksikon gradova i trgova srednjovekovnih srpskih zemalja* [Toponyms of the medieval Hungarian state], *Zbornik Matice srpske za istoriju* 37 (1988): 25; T. Lewicki, Polska 130, and Elter both use the name Ibrandis, with the exception that Elter places its location at Braničevo, Elter, “Magyarország,” 59-60, Lewicki refers to Franca villa as Ifrankabilla with respect to this location.

30 Al-Idrīsī, 885. T. Lewicki, Polska 130, and Elter both use the name Ibrandis, with the exception that Elter places its location at Braničevo, Elter, “Magyarország,” 59-60, Lewicki refers to Franca villa as Ifrankabilla with respect to this location.

31 VINЈ IV, 119, c.f. footnote 14 at 118-119; Konstantin Jireček, “Hrišćanski elemenat u topografskoj nomenklaturi balkanskih zemalja” [The Christian element in the toponographic nomenclature of the Balkan countries], *Zbornik Konstantina Jirečeka* 1, ed. Mihailo Dinić (Belgrade: Naučno zavod za udžbenike, 2010), 131-134, the information on p. 131 is relevant for this topic, holding the most complete list of references about this issue.

As for the other city, Abrandis, we can safely assume that it is not Braničevo, as Istvan Elter claims. Although he likely took this theory from earlier historiography, first and foremost from Tadeusz Lewicki, he surely cannot be referring to Braničevo, which also appears further on in Idrisi’s work under a different name, as will be seen later. It is also worth noting that Braničevo is not located in the northeast of Mandelos, i.e., area of Srem, but in the south-east. A further theory was put forth that Idrisi might have referred to Banostor, i.e. Petrik. Ban Belos owned this property in Idrisi’s time, where he built a Benedictine monastery that would become wealthy and famous during the Middle Ages and eventually the seat of the Diocese of Srem. Furthermore, sources reveal that the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Komnenos, in the campaign to Hungary in 1164, was opposite Titel, which in fact refers to Petrik, i.e. Banostor, or Hungarian Kő, which is the origin of the medieval name of this place.

Distance may be problematic here, as Idrisi states that there are 50 miles between Mandelos, or Francovilla, and Abrandis, whose location we are trying to identify. Perhaps, because of this and the shape of the place, this town should be identified with Varadin or Petrovaradin, which is the modern-day Novi Sad, on the left bank of the Danube, as opposed to Banostor. The word Ibrandis (Abrandis with Lewicki), as used by Idrisi, could be similar to Varadinus, Petrovaradinus, Peturvarad, Waradinum Petri, as well as to the adjective Waradiensis (of Varadin, belonging to Varadin) and similar forms encountered in the sources. Of course, all of this is adapted to Arabic pronunciation, where “v” becomes “b.”

Identifying Bovi Sad would be essential because it would enrich the history of the city by deeming it a significant hub of the time. Furthermore, it would be the first mention of Novi Sad as a well-organized and wealthy city, which coincides with contemporary and somewhat later sources. The fact that it is located below a hill can easily point to Fruška Gora. The letter from Pope Honorius III to the Byzantine Empress Margarita, the widow of Isaac II Angelos, refers to

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35 VINJ IV, 68-69, c.f. footnote 169; John Kinnamos, Deeds, 164-165.
36 Györffy, ÀMTF II, 230
Varod as one of the possessions she received from her brother Andrew II, King of Hungary. This letter, from 30 March 1223, as well as a charter by Béla IV, confirm the existence of Petrovaradin or Varadin on the left bank of the Danube, on the site of present-day Novi Sad. It came into Margarita’s possession after 1213, when it was confiscated from Ban Peter, after whom Petrovaradin was named. The charter also mentions the existence of a palace, which probably belonged to Ban Peter. Idrisi states that the location includes many squares and buildings, and reveals that the citizens of Petrovaradin and the whole surrounding area came by ferry to Stari Petrovaradin, i.e. present-day Novi Sad. Although this later information dates from a later period, the existence of the palace and the folk tradition, along with the name of the place, Vasáros-Várad, indicate that trade seems to have been developed in Idrisi’s time. One document indicates that there was a ferry on both river banks as early as 1267 and that Varad, i.e. Peturvarad, was a storage facility where the serfs of Bačka brought their duties, they were due to pay in agricultural products.

Based on the information above, one can hypothesise, but not conclude with certainty, that in Idrisi’s time, Novi Sad was a town which included a mayor’s palace (which would later be known as Peter’s palace), a ferry, as well as squares frequented by people from the surrounding areas. Considering that present-day Novi Sad was inhabited by Hungarians since its settlement, and before 895 by other populations, it is relatively safe to assume that Idrisi is referring here referring to Varadin, i.e. Novi Sad. This way, just like for Bač, the work of the Arab

37 Melhior Erdujhelji, *Istorija Novog Sada* [The History of Novi Sad] (Novi Sad: Izdalo opštinstvo slob. kr. varoši Novoga Sada, 1894), 44-46; Peter Rokai, “Iz srednjovekovne istorije Novog Sada,” [From medieval history of Novi Sad] Zbornik za istoriju Matice Srpske 11 (1975): 107-108, c.f. footnotes 15-25 with an extensive, somewhat earlier Hungarian bibliography and sources. The data from Peter Rokai and the Hungarian historians he refers to provide an even stronger basis for our assumption that Abrandis is Petrovaradin, i.e. present-day Novi Sad.


geographer significantly supplements the history of these places in the twelfth century.

Continuing his description of present-day Vojvodina, while traveling through it, Idrisi states:

From thence, by the river Danaw to the town of Qāūn there are 70 miles. Similarly, from the town of Abrandis to the town of Baqaṣīn there are also 70 miles. Baqaṣīn is west from Qāūn. Baqaṣīn and Qāūn are two famous towns, both with numerous inhabitants and plenty of traffic going in and out of them (both are busy towns).

To turn back to the aforementioned, it was said that from the town of B.d.wār.h (Budawārah – Buda) to the town of T.y.t.l.w.s Tit(al)ūs, Titel), by riverway due east there are 75 miles.

Titel dates from the eleventh century. From start, it was more significant than all of the other settlements at the confluence of the rivers Tisa and Danube. Its chapter of the canonical order of Saint Augustine and the monastery was of particular importance. The Titel chapter was also a site of the “public faith,” and as such, it undoubtedly had great importance because only the cathedral chapters and larger collegiate chapters had this right. Additionally, the chapter itself was dedicated to Saint Sophia, which is a unique case in medieval Hungary.

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40 Al-Idrīsī, 885.
41 This is the transcription according to Tadeusz Lewicki, T. Lewicki, Polska, 131.
42 Al-Idrīsī, 885. This is certainly south-east, since Titel is not located to the south of Buda, whereas the riverway most likely refers to the Danube.
We have already mentioned that from the town of Tītlūs to the town of Ifrankabīlah due south there are (missing data) miles. From the town of Ifrankabīlah to the town of Qāūn there are 100 miles. From the town of Ifrankabīlah to the town of Abrandis there are 50 miles. From the town of Abrandis to the town of Bān.y.h (بانيه) located on the river L.y.n.h (لينة) there are 75 miles. It is small, but it has town districts and fortifications on the river bank. The river debouches between Qāūn and Bālgradūn – Belgrade.44

Līnāh Elter identified this river as the Lim. We know that the Lim does not flow into the Danube, so it may in fact be the river Mlava, or even Jezava or some other smaller river. The town of Vānīah could perhaps be identified as Pančevo. However, later on, al-Idrīsī states that it takes five days to travel from this town to Belgrade, which would exclude the possibility that he would even Pančevo in his work. Tadeusz Lewicki, and via him Gavro Škrivanić, believed that this was Pribojska Banja, but it is unclear what sources they used.45 The fact is that there are several older buildings in the complex of the Monastery of Saint Nicholas in Banja near Priboj on the Lim, a temple that has been the seat of the Diocese of Dabar since 1219. However, the lack of written sources does not lend us the right to quickly reach a conclusion.46 In addition, if this

44 Al-Idrīsī, 887.
46 It appears that the first to point to the possibility that this is Banja was Konstantin Jireček, see Konstantin Jireček, “Trgovački putevi i rudnici Srbije i Bosne u srednjem vijeku” [Trade routes and mines of Serbia and Bosnia in the Middle Ages], in Zbornik Konstantina Jirečeka I [Works of Konstantin Jireček volume I], ed. Mihailo Đinčić (Belgrade: Naučno delo, 1959), 246, but he did not specify where in the sources he found this interpretation; for more on archaeological studies, c.f. Mirjana Šakota, “Prilozi poznavanju manastira Banje kod Priboja” [Contributions to the knowledge of the monastery of Banja near Priboj], Saopštenja 19 (1970), 19-46; Marija Janković, Episkopije i mitropolije srpske crkve u srednjem veku [Episcopates and metropolitanates of the Serbian church in the Middle Ages] (Belgrade: Istorijski institut: Narodna knjiga 1985), 175-177; Marina Bunardžić, “Manastir Svetog Nikole u Dabru-arheološka istraživanja trema”
were accepted as Pribojska Banja, the question of the river would still remain because the Lim is far from the Danube and does not debouch anywhere between Koviń and Belgrade.

Bānīah is thus likely to remain entirely unknown, as is the river, since the Arab geographer does not provide more information on their possible location. It could possibly be Ram, which was mentioned in 1128 as a place in which the Byzantines defeated the Hungarians, so it did exist two decades later, when Idrisi could have visited it. Ram, or Horom, or Hram is also mentioned in 1161 in connection with the conquering plans of the Emperor Manuel I Komnenos – thus, it coincides chronologically and to some extent geographically. Since the town is also referred to in different sources as Borona, Brana, Vrana, it is not impossible that Hram/Horom be the closest possible determination of Idrisi’s unknown toponym. The problem is that there are no written sources on Hram/Horom. It may be assumed that this were Kulič, or another town located on a smaller river, a tributary of the Danube, so that they are somewhat geographically close, but it is almost impossible to find any similarity to the names that Idrisi uses. However, the fact that the river flows into the Danube between Belgrade and Koviń reduces the possible choices to Kulič, or even to Smederevo, but it is still almost impossible to link the names, so perhaps these assumptions should already be rejected. As he later refers to a five-day journey, and a two-day journey from Koviń to Belgrade, it can be assumed that this is a town in today’s central Serbia, perhaps in the Morava basin, which might be the most accurate solution, if we look at how Idrisi described the regions he travelled through. In this case, however, the location identified as Petrovaradin would be wrong, and we would return to Istvan Elter’s basic idea that Abrandis refers to Braničevo. But the fact that there are more than 50 miles from Braničevo to Mandelos, makes the problem of the identification of the town and river even more complicated. This was probably an error made by Idrisi when he wrote his Geography, especially since the next town he mentions is Plana, stating it is 90 miles away, while Plana is a mining settlement near Kopaonik.47


47 With respect to Ram, see Mladen Cunjak, Ram i ramska tvrđava kroz vekove [Ram and Ram Fortress through the centuries] (Požarevac-Smederevo: Narodni muzej: Regionalni zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture, 2008), 37-39; c.f. also Aleksandar Deroko,
Of course, there may nevertheless still exist an extinct or unidentified fortress near or on the Lim River. However, the lack of both archaeological and written sources does not allow us to make safe assumptions. The Kovin Fort was located on the Lim River, but it is uncertain if it was built before the fifteenth century. In the end, almost no assumption can quite fit this issue, leaving the question open. Idrisi later mentions Bānīah in several places, indicating that this is more likely present-day central or southwestern Serbia, than a particular town on a river that flows into the Danube or that is located next to such a river.

From the town of Bānīah to the town of ’ablān.h (أبلانيا) ’Ablānah – Plana) there are 90 miles. This is a prosperous town.

As far as Plana is concerned, it was the place of an advanced mining region in the late Middle Ages where the Ragusan consuls were located. Although the first record of Plana in the Dubrovnik Archives dates to the fourteenth century, archaeological traces point to one century earlier, when mining thrived. Therefore, a town may have been located in the region even before the thirteenth century, which would continue to develop into one of the most important mining areas until the fall of the Despotate.

The distance between the town of ’Ablānah to the town of Rabnah is 120 miles. Rabnha is a large and prosperous town.

Ravno, today’s Ćuprija, is the ancient Horreum Margi. This city was located on an important route from the Roman times and was also mentioned by numerous Latin European writers, especially historians of the Crusades. Interestingly, Idrisi contradicts one of them, Arnold of

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48 With respect to Kovin on the Lim, c.f. A. Krstić, ”Kovin”, 130-131.


51 Al-Idrīsī, 887.
Lübeck, who described the Serbs as savages who did not like foreigners. The most likely reason for Arnold’s description is the Serbian attack on the Crusaders in 1172 at Ravno. In Idrisi’s time however, Ravno is a town that was already developed and well-known, and which had great strategic importance.\(^{52}\)

There is a four-day journey from the town of Rabnah due south to the town of Ġān.l (غابل Ġānal/ Ġānul Konavlje). This town was occupied and ravaged by the Venetians. The town is located on a large river, on which the city of Nīšū is also located. The distance between the two towns is crossed by land in four days, whereas it takes only two days to cross it by river.\(^{53}\)

It has been assumed earlier by Boris Nedkov that this passage refers to Konavle, although it may also refer to Hum, as was suggested by earlier editors of Idrisi’s workmbith Boris Nedkov and Jaubert. Konavlje is located by the sea, and is much further away than the four-day journey Idrisi suggested. At the time when Idrisi described these areas, Konavlje was, along with the entire Hum region, under the authority of župan Desa, which was preceded by a long period under the strong influence of the Byzantine Empire, so that in the ninth century the inhabitants of Konavle participated in the defence of Bari against the Arabs. What is further confusing is the fact that Niš and Konavlje are not on the same river. Therefore, the information must be erroneous. The question of which Venetian devastation al-Idrisi’s refers to also remains open.\(^{54}\)

The distance between Nīšū and Rabnah is 50 miles. The distance between Bānīah and the town of Bālğradūn due north is five days by land, and between Bānīah and the town of Qāūn is 100 miles. The distance from Qāūn to Bālğradūn is 70 miles, or good two days by foot, whereas it takes less

\(^{52}\) Aleksandar Uzelac, “Ravno,” *Leksikon gradova i trgova*, 234-235; idem, *Krstali i Srb* [Crusaders and Serbs] (Belgrade: Utopija, 2018), 125-126, 129-131, 139, 144, 159-160, 180 with detailed references of Western authors on Ravno.

\(^{53}\) Al-Idrisi, 887.

\(^{54}\) C.f. B. Nedkov, *Bŭlgarija*, 111-112. c.f. Radoslav M. Grujič, *Konavli pod raznim gospodarima od XII do XV. veka* [Konavle under various lords from the 12th to the 15th century] (Zemun: Makarije, 1926), 3-5. Jaubert even thought that this referred to Novi, Jaubert, *Géographie*, 379, but this fortress is known to have been built later.
by river. Bālğradūn is a prosperous town, with numerous inhabitants and beautiful temples.55

Belgrade was an important trading centre throughout the Middle Ages, and the Byzantine and Hungarian conflicts over Belgrade were in progress during Idrisi’s time. Byzantine historian John Kinnamos provides detailed records of the fight over Belgrade, the city that had a key strategic point in these conflicts. However, it is unclear to which temples Idrisi refers.56

The distance from here to ‘Af- rānīšfā (أمفرنيسفا) is 75 miles, two days by river. ’Afranīšfā is a large and prosperous town. The distance between Bālğradūn and Rabnah is 150 miles through the plains, between Rabnah and ’Afranīšfā there are good two days by foot, or, as stated earlier, 100 miles. This is a prosperous town in the plains. It is busy, the goods are cheap, fruit is always available, there is plenty of water supply from the river, it is located in a spacious flatland. Its commerce is ongoing, and there is opulence throughout. It is one of the towns of M.k.d.w.n.y.h (مقدونية Maq(a)dūnīah – Serbia).57

Hungary seemed to have a larger trade colony in Braničevo, a city where border trade flourished. Hungarian merchants even went to Constantinople via Braničevo also selling their goods there. The importance of Braničevo was further confirmed by the fact that the Byzantine attack on it in the late 1120s was the catalyst for the war
between Byzantium and Hungary at the beginning of the reign of Stephen II (1116-1131). At the time of the Second Crusade, the Crusaders also passed through Braničevo, but, unlike Idrisi, having visited it earlier, in 1147, they considered the city poor.

The distance between here and Nīsū is 50 miles. Nīsū is one of the cities of Maqdūnīah. Other parts of the country of Maq(a)dūnīah will be described if God gives us strength. From Qāūn to the country of ʾn.k.r.y.h (Ankriā/Unkarīa – Hungary) the road leads north. Due south, after eight days of travel by foot, the river Danaw flows between the towns of Baqaṣīn and Qāūn. The distance between Qāūn and the town of Š.n.t (Šanat – Cenad) is four days, it is west of the river. It is prosperous, charming and civilized. One of the towns in Maq(a)dūnīah is Nīsū. It is famous. There are plenty of fish, honey, milk at low prices. There is also plenty of fruit. It sits on top of a hill and next to the river Mūrāfā which flows from the Serbian mountains. There is also a large bridge across the Mūrāfā, which serves as an entry point to the city.

Niš had been a rich city even before Idrisi wrote about it. Many merchants gathered there, and luxury ceramics found there confirm this thesis. During the war between Hungary and Byzantium in 1071-1072, when the hand of Saint Procopius was taken away, the citizens of Niš gave bounteous gold, silver, and other precious gifts to the Hungarian King Solomon, a fact also confirmed by Illuminated Chronicle. Niš was, at Idrisi’s time, a wealthy city of great strategic importance. It was also along the route of the Crusaders, who stopped for supplies here, as this was the only city where they could get enough food during the Second

58 Istorija Mađara, 48-49.
59 Mihailo Dinić, Braničevo u srednjem veku [Braničevo in the Middle Ages] (Požarevac: Narodni univerzitet, 1958), 12; J. Kalić, Beograd u srednjem veku, 44, also c.f. footnote 41 on p. 350 for further bibliographical references.
60 Idrisi further in the text describes parts of Hungary which are not the focus of this paper, and, at the end of the paragraph, returns to the area described here. Al-Idrīsī, 888.
61 Al-Idrīsī, 888.
Crusade. Even the Emperor Manuel I Komnenos stayed in Niš around the time when Idrisi travelled and compiled his Geography; in 1150, he commanded the war with the Serbs and the Hungarians from Niš.63

The distance between Nisū and Atrūbī is 40 miles. Atrūbī is located on a small river, which springs from the Serbian mountains (جبال صربية), flows by Atrūbī in the east and into the river Mūrāfā, thus joining together into a large river. After this, the river flows on, until it joins with the Danaw/Dunū, in the vicinity of ’Afranīsfā. There are numerous watermills, gardens and vineyards along the river (Morava). The distance between Atrūbī and ’Atrālisā mentioned in the fifth section (climate) is 40 miles.64

There is a day’s journey between Nisū and (ربنة Rabnah – Ravno). Between Rabnah (Ravno) and ’Afranīsfā there is a day and a half of journey. ’Afranīsfā has many inhabitants and is located in the mountains overlooking the river Danaw/Dunū – Danube.65

Braničevo, alongside Belgrade, as the most important fortress on the Danube and Byzantium’s stronghold against Hungary, was the location of numerous battles and a place of great strategic importance. Interestingly, at the time when Idrisi wrote his Geography (around 1154),

64 Al-Idrīsī, 893, clearly provides relative reliable data here, since the Nišava does in fact merge with the South Morava, which in turn merges at Stalač with the West Morava and together make the Great Morava, which indeed, as it is well-known, merges with the Danube not far from Braničevo. Dragan Rodić, Mila Pavlović, Geografija Jugoslavije I [Geography of Yugoslavia I] (Belgrade: Savremena administracija, 1994), 144-145.
65 Al-Idrīsī, 795 and 894, in a somewhat abridged version which does not include references to distances. T. Lewicki, Polska, 129. Dunū is quite possibly a more accurate form of the word.
the Hungarian siege of Braničevo was underway, taking place probably at the end of 1154.\(^6\)

There is a two-and-a-half-day journey from 'Afranīsfā, along the river Danaw/ Dunū to the town of N.kstrū (نوكسترو – Novigrad). The town of Nūkastrū is located on a hill, next to the Danube, which flows here from the south. The mouth of the Morava is also in its vicinity. It is a nice, cheap town, with finely kept farms, and numerous vineyards.\(^7\)

It is very likely that this is the former Novigrad, and not Kladovo, as it was erroneously claimed by Boris Nedkov.\(^8\) Apparently, Idrisi also heard the word-form Novicastrum, or something similar. Kladovo was built by the Turks in 1524, but some scholars believe it was erected before that, as there is information about King Sigmund’s visit to the town in 1419. There are also foundations of an even older town, which Aleksandar Deroko, a Serbian and Yugoslav architectural historian, believes date back to Sigmund’s time. Therefore, Kladovo can be dismissed with considerable certainty for the period when Idrisi mentions it as a solution for the ubication in The Book of Roger. It is, however, very likely that this was a site near Čezava, identified as Castrum Novae, a late antique and early Byzantine site located 18 km downstream of Golubac. It may be assumed that this was the town that Idrisi visited and that survived until a later period.\(^9\) Here, however, the lack of other written sources does not give much room for new assumptions, but the relatively precise ubication by Idrisi, as well as the Latinized name of the place he mentioned, allows us to assume that it was Novigrad, i.e. Čezava.

This exhausts the information that al-Idrisi wrote in his Geography regarding southern Hungary and Serbia of his time, that is, the entire


\(^{7}\) Al-Idrīsī, 896-897.

\(^{8}\) Б. Недков, България, 69, 79, 133. He was at first correct in identifying it as Novigrad; however, he referred to older references and accepted the incorrect conclusion that this is Kladovo.

territory of present-day Serbia. Idrisi’s data are valuable albeit not always precise and accurate, but they are an important historical source that in some cases complements known data. At times, one might even say that he provides the first or even the only written source for some places, while other times his writings are difficult to comprehend and cannot be used in research. Certainly, Idrisi’s information on southern Hungary and Serbia merits an analysis from a geographical point of view, and his journey through these areas is a rare and, therefore, worthwhile case of a famous Arab author leaving behind a wealth of information about present-day Serbia.

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