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Royal Forests in East Central Europe: Merovingian ideas and local realities

Designated hunting grounds of the ruling elite appear in very different periods and geographical regions throughout human history: from Japan through Nepal and Russia to Great Britain; from early written records to the twentieth century. While the status of the ruling elite may vary from kings to communist party leaders, the hunting grounds usually share three basic characteristics: they have special legal status, serve representation through hunts, and offer some protection for wild game. One also often finds connections between sacred landscapes and hunting grounds.

In Europe, such hunting grounds were called Forests. The idea of Royal Forests originated in the early medieval period in the Merovingian Frankish territories. In the following centuries, it developed into a distinct concept and spread into other parts of the continent. Research into the subject has so far focused on Western Europe, although even here a basic common framework of understanding is still missing. How the idea was adapted in East Central Europe is little known.

Based mostly on a structuralist perspective, this paper will investigate what Royal Forests meant in East Central Europe in the Middle Ages and beyond, how they were managed, what were the common elements that made them similar to other Royal Forests, what were the peculiarities of this region, and how these fit into contemporary societies.