



The Public Defense of the Doctoral Dissertation in Medieval Studies

of

Tamás Pálosfalvi

on

The Noble Elite in the County of Körös (Križevci) 1400 - 1526

will be held on

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Central European University (CEU)

Nádor u. 9, Budapest

Examination Committee

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Doctoral Thesis Abstract

The dissertation aims at identifying and examining a group within the nobility of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary on the example of one particular county. This layer of the nobility, generally thought to have formed the top layer of the „common nobility,, (Hung. *köznemesség*) has been variously termed in Hungarian historiography so far, but, without one exception, no efforts have been made in order to define and analyse it from a number of approaches in any section of the Hungarian middle ages. Historians thus generally speak about the characteristic features of a social group without having a clear idea of what that group meant in practice. My aim was therefore to establish a number of criteria, along which it would be possible to identify such a group within the nobility, and then subject it to a social analysis in order to see whether or not the existence of such a group, relatively clearly distinguishable from other layers of the nobility both above and below, can be demonstrated. The area to be studied was the county of Körös (Križevci in modern Croatia), one of the greatest counties of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary, situated in the former *regnum Sclavonie*, and exceptionally well enlightened by written sources. The period between 1400 and 1526, although forming the focus of the dissertation, was not treated rigidly.

Chapter 1, divided into three sub-chapters, at first reviews previous scholarship related to the question of an elite nobility in late medieval Hungary, and lists the difficulties involved by these approaches. It is also here that the scholarly literature dealing with the late medieval Hungarian nobility in general and with that of Slavonia in particular is overviewed. The final section of the chapter analyses the difficulties presented by the sources and their nature for any attempt at examining late medieval noble society and establishing different categories therein; a problem generally stated but often left out of consideration in socio-historical analyses.

Chapter 2, again divided into two sub-chapters, establishes the criteria alongside which it is possible to identify the group of nobility that is suitable for a further social analysis. The basic feature selected was title (*egregius*), although titles of nobility in medieval Hungary did not constitute a well-defined system in the manner to be observed in the kingdoms of France and England, for instance, and thus the difficulties in using them are more numerous. Title was then completed by further criteria based on landed wealth and office-holding, which, again, presented problems which seem to be typical of late medieval Hungary. In the second part of the chapter, the longest section of the whole dissertation, I have offered biographical treatment of all the units selected on the basis of the criteria defined before. Although these biographies aimed at completeness, their length and comprehensiveness depended on a number of factors, the most important being the survival and nature of our sources. The great majority of the families and persons treated in the dissertation have never been studied before, which made it necessary to turn directly to the charters and collect the relevant information from there. Although important points must surely have remained in obscurity, in several cases I was able to find out the exact or probable origins of the units chosen, and also establish with relative certainty at least the major turning points in their history.

Chapter 3 carried out a social analysis of the units whose histories were set out in detail in the preceding chapter, in six sub-chapters. At first I analysed their origins, identifying the most important ways in which the top layer within the nobility in Körös county was recruited. The most important conclusion was that horizontal mobility played a much more important role in this respect than vertical mobility, and that, whereas until the early 15th century royal power was dominant in relocating noble landed wealth, thereafter two other factors, service and marriage, came to the fore and remained decisive in the emergence of new families within the ranks of the leading nobility in Körös. In the second sub-chapter I tried to establish a hierarchical list of wealth comprising all the entities. In the absence of exact numbers of tenant plots, the use of fortifications and market towns as indicators of status has proved

rather helpful, although the problematic points were several. Practically all the entities chosen on the basis of title could be shown to have possessed either a fortification or a market town, more frequently both, and several among them more than one of each, either constantly or at least temporarily. Since outside the group of families identified by title, very few other noble families had any fortification, and none had a market town, this line of demarcation appeared to be a very clear one in trying to distinguish between different levels within the nobility. Moreover, the possession of castles and/or several *castella* very evidently correlated with the group of nobility regularly decorated with the *egregius* title, and is thus a useful indicator of a further break within the top group of the nobility generally characterised by the possession of fortifications and/or market towns.

The examination of the ways and means of acquiring and losing landed wealth yielded several important conclusions. The most important concerns the role of royal authority in the transmission of noble wealth below the level of barons, or, rather, the lack of it. Another important conclusion is that, whereas alienations of land could profoundly alter the relations of wealth within the nobility, above a certain level these changes rarely proved irreversible; it was generally the families which had recently joined the top group of the nobility for whom the loss of property proved fatal.

In terms of service (3.3), some fairly clear patterns have emerged, but, here again, the picture is far from clear. The clearest divisive line seems to separate those families which never appear in subaltern positions such as royal men, elected jurors and *szolgabírák*, and only take on service for the king or the barons and magnates. This group comprises mostly those families which are also distinguished by the regular application of the *egregius* title and the possession of castles and/or several *castella*. But the relationship is not automatic, and the status of an individual family can change a lot in the course of a long period of time. Since *familiaritas* itself could be conditioned by a great number of individual considerations, the exceptional cases are especially numerous here, and the underlying motivations very difficult to examine. A crucial point to emphasise is the decisive influence that the rich nobility in the county of Körös had built up over the appointment to the office of viceban from the

middle of the 15th century; this influence had gradually turned into a virtual monopoly, to the point that the assumption of the office of viceban could be no more regarded as a “traditional” form of *familiaritas*.

As regards the relationship between the court and the nobility (3.4), the strict opposition between “court nobility” and “provincial nobility” is not a working model for the period after 1437. The king and the court did continue to matter, but the kind of radical separation, in terms of both space and social prestige, of a so-called court nobility from the noble masses which would have remained isolated from the centre of power back in their homeland, is out of place. After the dissolution of the immense royal domain the favours available *only* through the court shrank as a matter of fact, and the competition for what was still available became ever more acute. On the other hand, new forms of participation in the workings of the royal court appeared, while others (such as court *familiaritas*) were transformed as the country came under increasing Ottoman pressure. Some of these court functions, especially under king Matthias, involved very real governmental powers; others, on the other hand, served merely to demonstrate the incumbent’s closeness to the court and thus increase his prestige locally.

The analysis of marriages (3.5) has generally confirmed the traditional picture of “like with like”, that is, families of roughly the same social standing married with each other. I have encountered, however, some interesting exceptions to the rule. Firstly, in the top level of the local nobility there are more or less clear examples of upward marriages, with women who came from families we can label as aristocratic. However, with one possible exception, none of these cases can be regarded as marking the definitive adoption of the given family into the ranks of the aristocracy; as the possession of castles, such a marriage is rather a mark which helps to distinguish them from the nobility below. Secondly, “downward” marriages in an otherwise socially constant series of alliances can sometimes indicate a clear decline in the history of a family. And, inversely, a marriage with a consort from a family above may be, like the construction or acquisition of a fortification, the sign of a successful “social climb”, in a sense marking the end of the journey.

What could be learnt about the role of the Church (3.6) in terms of career possibilities has confirmed the traditional view about the meagre importance of it in late medieval Hungary. On the one hand, it was generally the middling offices in the ecclesiastical hierarchy that were available for the leading nobility in the county of Körös. On the other hand, in the few cases when someone managed to make his way to the rank of prelates, church career apparently remained isolated and involved no consequences at all for the family of the cleric concerned.

And, finally, to the question of whether the group of families analysed from various standpoints in the dissertation can be regarded as an elite within the nobility or not, the answer was rather elusive. What seems certain is that, in terms of title, landed wealth, service, officeholding and marriage alliances it is possible to identify at any given moment within the period between 1400 and 1526 two groups of differing sizes within the upper ranks of the nobility, the contours of which, however, cannot be established with absolute certainty. Nor it is possible to draw the demarcation line below, for it is always a matter of personal decision of what to regard as a feature which allows to count someone as “outstanding” from the noble masses undistinguished in any respect. Classification, moreover, is hindered by intrafamilial differences, and by factors which cannot be measured at all on the basis of the source material we have. Nevertheless, following a model elaborated for the study of the medieval English nobility, it was possible to detect, from the second half of the 15th century, the formation of a family group which, by the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries, can be seen as constituting a fairly homogenous elite in terms of social and political dominance.

The findings of the dissertation are summarised in **chapter 4**, followed by appendices which list the persons who turn up as representatives of the Slavonian nobility in the late Middle Ages, and the archontology of Slavonia between 1423 and 1526. The dissertation is completed by genealogical trees and a map of the county of Körös in the 15th century.

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Degrees:

1994: History, Hungarian five-year degree, Department of History, Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem, Budapest, Hungary

1995: Medieval history, Diplôme des Etudes Approfondies, Centre d'Etudes Supérieures de Civilisation Médiévale, Université de Poitiers, France

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Research fellow, Institute of History, Center for the Research of the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences (1996-)

Research interests:

Social and political history of Hungary in the 15th and 16th centuries, the history of Slavonia

Related publications:

„Cilleiek és Tallóciak: küzdelem Szlavóniáért (1440-1448)” [The Counts of Cilli and the Tallóci: Struggle for Slavonia (1440-1448)]. *Századok* 134 (2000): 45-98.

“Vitovec János. Egy zsoldoskarrier a 15. századi Magyarországon” [John Vitovec. A Mercenary Career in 15th-Century Hungary]. *Századok* 135 (2001): 429-472.

„Grebeni Hermanfi László alnádor. Egy tekintélyes szlavón köznemesi politikus pályaképe. Első közlemény” [Deputy Palatine Ladislas Hermanfi of Greben. The

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„Bajnai Both András és a szlavón bánság. Szlavónia, Európa és a törökök, 1504-1513” [Andrew Both of Bajna and the Banate of Slavonia. Slavonia, Europe and the Turks 1504-1513]. In *Honoris causa. Tanulmányok Engel Pál tiszteletére*. Edited by Tibor Neumann and György Rácz. 251-300. Budapest-Piliscsaba: MTA Történettudományi Intézete – Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem Bölcsészettudományi Kara, 2009.

„A Szencsei és Pekri családok a 15. században és a 16. század első harmadában” [The Szencsei and Pekri Families in the 15th Century and the First Part of the 16th Century]. *Turul* 86 (2010): 65-78.