

Theses of the University Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

Dowries in Háromszék in the 19th century

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1. Objective of the dissertation, topic details

The „long 19th century” was a quickly spinning century that had launched and achieved the most intense changes in the society of *Székelyföld*, merged the traditional and civil culture; it was a century during which the region of *Háromszék* found itself in the crossfire of dominant Western influences. Prior to that Székelyföld had lived in an intensive social order based on rigid traditions with specific laws and regulations, a military based system of land tenure and also military stratification. There was no right of reversion to the king in this region and in jurisdiction, besides Werbőczy's *Tripartitum*, the Székely charters and military orders had an important role. While this region was up to a certain point closed from external legislation and royal interventions, separate ways and specific legal and administrative procedures had formed. In a society of patrilineal structure, the law of succession favored to a great extent the material welfare of men. The patrilineal succession order, as Max Weber has shown, was a characteristic of those societies in which land was acquired as a reward for military services by the basic population. Since the land was a reward for military services also in *Székelyföld*, its succession was dominantly patrilineal. In this rigid order the succession of girls had very rigid coordinates. Daughters could only inherit land through matrilineal succession, or land belonging to their mother, and the principal elements of heritage were objects. The key moment of matrilineal inheritance of big number of objects culminated in the custom of endowment.

The tradition of endowment, as well as the other domains of succession, was determined by interior laws, only those foreign decrees took hold that could be harmonized with the property keeping strategy of the Székelys. In this legal medium the endowment of young women had an outstanding role.

The components of female dowries could nowhere be tracked through history better than in *Háromszék* county of *Székelyföld*. This is due to the tradition of drawing up a list of dowry. Recording the wedding goods had

many reasons: according to a military decree making a record of wedding presents was obligatory, at the same time, divorces tolerated by the mainly protestant population made simple people be cautious about ensuring their material goods. These were complemented by the large scale use of written record in *Háromszék*.

This paper concentrates on a rare document type, the dowry documents that survived in relatively big numbers in *Háromszék*. I deal with the 17-18th century dowry documents only briefly, just to an extent necessary to introduce the topic; my research is based only on the 19th century.

The 117 pieces of dowry inventories collected from archives, through field-work and from researchers of the topic seemed to be a promising source-material for mapping their structural, constant components and ever changing elements.

While in the period before 1848 there was a well delimited social stratification in *Székelyföld* and the strict hierarchies were not easily crossed over or left out of consideration, my aim was to present the use of objects ensured by dowries in the first part of the century, to reveal the material circumstances to which the individual tried to accommodate or break out from.

In studying the period after 1848 it was the break of social order and the restructuration process started by it that I was interested in. So this is what I consider to be my main guiding principle in this period.

After 1875, the end of my studied period, by analyzing the items of dowries I'd like to see and present changes in dowries, process of formation of civic dwelling culture and habitat.

My aim is to study what rules influenced the content of dowries in the 19th century from the point of view of the individual and society, norms and practices, expectations and complying with the expectation, who and when brought changes, how long did it take for a new type of object to be accepted. I also try to detail who were present at the moment of listing the

dowry, who managed the recording of the objects, and what influence could the presence of these people have on the content of dowries.

I do not deal at all with the custom of taking the dowry away and the latter administration of the objects received.

Although in *Háromszék* the majority of inhabitants are ethnic Hungarians, the statistics revealed the existence of many other ethnic groups. If we take into consideration the still existing, ethnically delimitable groups for generations, in our region ethnic Romanian and Gypsy communities can be tracked throughout the history. Since archive researches did not reveal actual recordings of dowries for these two ethnic groups in the 19th century and the deadline for finishing my dissertation seemed not to allow a deeper research on this matter, I focus my paper only on Hungarian dowry documents.

Being a museologist I consider important to study the records of objects from the point of view of material history, that may give answers to how certain objects got rooted, in which direction did they spread and which social strata used them. This approach will continuously be present in my paper, since my aim is to gouge from the monotone, sometimes boring archive enumerations, laconic descriptions as many information as possible.

2. Methods applied

Since in my paper I intend to analyze and interpret historical source materials, I try to use different methods of analyzing historical sources, I do not stick to applying only one method. I start from the ground thesis, that not the method chooses through the researcher the theme that shall be analyzed, but the theme indicates the most suitable methods necessary for dissecting and interpreting it. Since in Hungary the study of object inventories is quite developed and in Transylvania this is only in bud, I've learned about the most important methods from Hungarian special literature.

For analyzing the period between 1800 and 1848 I have experimented methods initiated by social history. In my source analysis I used the *quantitative method* in several cases. Many researchers objected the quantitative analysis emphasizing that it fixes empirical data into numbers and it neglects the living, sensitive individual behind the numbers. I agree with this opinion, so I present my numerical data cautiously. I consider important to analyze the frequency of objects, while it helps me see how popular certain objects were and in which direction did they spread. Although, in my opinion quantitative ratio is related to history and I interpret tendencies of rooting and declining by breaking them into smaller time frames.

The different levels in social structures signaled to me from the beginning that it would be wrong to apply the quantitative method only. Society consists of a multitude of individuals also, and these individuals can rise to or slip back from different economic and social levels in any historical period. In parallel with their numerical presence, I also try to follow the nature of the objects. Because beyond the number of appearance it is mainly their nature that shows the social stratum, which the owners, families recording the dowries tried demonstrate by the use of the object. Thus, in my dissertation I use the method of historical anthropology, and within, the micro-historical method. I give an overview not only about the social strata and its specific object

using custom in a broader sense, but I analyze – by researching registers of birth, marriage and death, as well as conducting local history investigations – which families did daughters with dowries come from. I weight the economic and ecological potential that influenced the size of dowries and I try to reveal lack of cooperation or ideal functioning of families by glancing into family structures. Thus, I try to further analyze the *quantitative analysis data* in a *qualitative way*, by breaking them down to families and individuals.

Interpretative methods have always had a big impact on me, so during my research work I tried to proceed from the text, to interpret their enumerations/ lists from ethnographic point of view and to support my arguments by actual reference orders of the dowry inventories published in the annex. This way my evaluations are verifiable and may be checked up.

Although it is not fashionable today to speak about positivism because the term gained a pejorative meaning over time, I feel that the data-centered characteristic of this general direction of research had a great influence on me. I did not start from theories and hypotheses, but from concrete data, and these data indicated me the concrete lines of direction for theoretical statements.

The interdisciplinary nature of my topic hindered my research. I had to deepen my knowledge in legal history, in the most important problems related to history and economic history of the studied period, in order to clarify the meaning of some notions unknown to me I had to appeal to language history. Of course, since I am ethnographer, the ethnographic approach was the starting and ending point of my historical research in all cases. This means first of all that great deeds and historical turning-points rarely help me in dividing my research area into periods. In periodization I tried to take into consideration economic factors as well as dates of when the approach to a certain object had altered, changes in material history, as well as major catastrophes, droughts and wars, which brought changes in

some way to the components of material world. Historians are interested in grasping the permanent; ethnographers are interested in the process of changing. So I try following carefully the changing tendencies of the material system, how fashions start and become rooted.

Working as a museologist I consider items of the documents of dowries extremely important documents from the point of view of the material ethnographic research, I believe these laconic descriptions, schematic enumerations of types of objects bear important information from the point of view of material history, they are significant in assessing how objects appear, become symbols of status, root, spread widely or lose from their importance. Since inventories, besides simply listing the objects, in many cases paraphrase, identify these objects in order to make them recognizable, highlighting and interpreting these identification signs are also part of the methods I use. I believe that these, seemingly insignificant descriptions bring the culture in which the objects of dowries were selected and recorded much closer to us. From the point of view of material history I consider the identifiable object types – even if they are not closely connected to the objects of the family handing out the dowry – worth to be presented visually also as annexes to my paper in forms of pictures (taken of museum objects).

3. Listing of the results

I stated, as a summary of the overview of the history of science, which was the starting point of the dissertation, that written dowries were the type of inventory that had a special place among the administrative documents. While the compositional principles of testaments were mainly paraphrased by the Transylvanian formularies, the compositional principles of dowries bear evidence of interior development, their starting and ending formulas being engraved by custom. The recognizable compacting and grouping attempts in listing the objects show that the trousseau was considered a structured system even by those who made it; the starting point of composition was probably to create the necessary living condition for marriage. In the same time, this type of document was important also because it contained the type of objects characteristic for a certain gender (women) and age-group (young wives). Its outstanding significance in *Székelyföld* is proven by the fact that while in other geographical regions mainly the noble recorded dowries, in *Székelyföld* almost all the classes of society were implied in making recording. Dowry documents were not such frequent types inventories as inventories of estates, thus I consider the analyzing patterns consisting of the 117 inventories from the 19th century, collected on the territory of *Háromszék*, a significant corpus of texts. The biggest collection so far in special literature belongs to Kósa Szántó Vilma who analyzed 33 pieces of inventories; this number contains the total number of dowry documents found in *Székelyföld* (essay of Kósa Szántó Vilma from 1981). The source corpus of the inventories of estates is much wider from local and regional point of view. While these types of inventories cover the inventories of market-towns and royal towns and the ensembles of objects from villages remain obscure, a significant part of the dowry inventories studied in my paper reveal the elements of dowries characteristic to countryside, so it concentrates on a more traditional cultural group.

One of the important starting points of my dissertation was the overview of laws governing the distribution of dowries. I consider this extremely important because the paragraphs of *Székely* laws referring to it significantly determined the common mentality that urged families in *Háromszék* also to provide their daughters with material goods. While publications so far unilaterally emphasized only the influence of the Hungarian right of property in marriage even when analyzing the *Székely* custom system, which diverted its embedment in a wrong direction from legal history point of view, during my work I considered important to review and sum up the paragraphs of the specific *Székely* laws that refer to dowries. During my research work I examined closely those *Székely* laws too that can only be found in very old, rare books. I pointed out that in Transylvania besides Werbőczy's *Tripartitum*, military laws, *Székely* internal jurisdiction, *Székely* law-books were also used in parallel. A novelty of this legal history approach is that I found (the trace of) the military regulation that codifies dowry recordings. The dissertation also details the complicated interrelations of law and custom. In my opinion for common *Székely* people laws and rules were just a guideline, which they mostly knew through oral tradition. The village community developed internal rules and regulations for individuals that gave the individual the possibility of choice. The individual could chose from the different patterns available, and shifting between the interlocking regulations one was able to find the most suitable solution. Since the methods of application were not detailed the by writers on law, the community set them down in the form of specific legal customs.

The survey of dowries from the period before 1848 revealed the existence of five social strata. Closely examining the actual components of dowries grouped according to this criteria helped me identify those status-marking objects by which the most significant social strata from *Székelyföld* extrapolated their group identity in the region of *Háromszék*. In the same

time, I succeeded in identifying the prestige-goods (bear fur coat, jewelries, varnished furniture, chests of drawers, filled chairs) characteristic to the nobility, by comparing them to the material culture of other strata. I found extremely important the civic class in Kézdivásárhely (Târgu Secuiesc) because it represents a cultural group that had important role in mediating elements of fashion. Most of the dowry inventories survived among to the double layered military order (horsemen and infantrymen). These inventories show that the traditional furniture (cases and sideboards), the specific *Székely* homespuns (dyed rugs, multicolored skirts from cotton fiber or striped skirts */rokolya/*) had an outstanding role in the peculiar taste of this class even before the revolution. While in the spreading of western shop wares daughters of nobles, priests and school masters had an outstanding role, the most suitable class for making homemade and handicraft objects survive and spread was the military order.

By coordinating different data it became obvious from my paper that social expectations shaped the types of objects listed in dowries and the quantitative norms. It was known to all social strata which are minimums the community expected from a family and of what size should a dowry had been to be called “decent”. Due to their role in making the community conscious about the quantitative ratio, I consider the estimators very important. I think they made the community conscious about the material norms and as experts of the material world, contributed to set down the structural elements of dowries.

In my paper I highlight that even in the structured society before 1848 the dowry was not only an ensemble of objects characteristic to a certain class, but an expression of the individual level of taste and eagerness for accomplishment. I am convinced that besides the given status the individual level of accomplishment was the most important changing factor of the dowry. Speculators, opportunists initiated the outwitting the norms, family

tragedies and lack of cooperation started the process of reinterpreting the expectations. I consider the under- or over-performing families such social stimuli that fostered the crossings between the different strata and which started the revolution on the material level before 1848.

In the second part of the 19th century I laid stress on analyzing the realignment of social strata. I could only realize this by tracking the social stratification before 1848 of the owners of the dowries I had come across. I presented that this is the period when material world had widened. By the '60s even the poorest dowries had more objects than earlier rich daughters had had. Although the quick restructuration was hindered by extremely strong social consciousness and prejudice, starting with 1855 I could observe the awakening to conscientiousness and gradual enrichment of the military order. As a reason I pointed out the liberation from burdening military taxes and the positive effect of farming on one's own land. While in the period before 1848 a prestige object entered the dowry of the military order in 25-30 years, in the second part of the century I found this period shorter. As explained, the quicker access to material goods is due not only to the better material condition of the military order, but also to the upswing of the free circulation of western commodities, positive revaluation of trade.

Regarding the nuptial goods from the end of the century I grasped the elements of swiftly accelerating world and civic culture. The big number of cheap goods bought with money deprived dowries from their local characteristics. Instead of specific objects with regional identity, the general, urban identity that had no local peculiarity exteriorized on the level of the objects of dowries too. Starting with 1870 even in the economically underdeveloped *Háromszék* I could see the gradual development of consumer attitude. I pointed out that the commercialized *sets of services* got an important role in case of dowries too. While earlier the accumulation of the components of the made bed represented the wealth of maidens, by the end

of the century table hygiene became more important. While at the beginning of the century money had no value, in the dowry inventories from the end of the 19th century measuring wealth in money gained ground. The status-marking elements of the dowries gradually lose their importance. I consider this an equalizing social process. While earlier the richness of a dowry was in a close interconnection with the social position of the endowing family, by the end of the century there weren't as many differences in the material world that could have motivated the separation of so many different classes.

I considered the dowry as a material system, an extremely interesting type of inventory. I found it interesting primarily because it did not contain randomly recorded objects, but deliberately composed ensembles of objects. The objects were not juxtaposed randomly in dowries. Being aware of the local norms the family of the bride prepared, bought, and selected these items according to their social position. The loosely juxtaposed movables and the virtually enumerated estates provided a life program, dominantly outlined the life strategy that the family had pictured for the young housewife at the beginning of her marriage. While in the highlands the subdivided estates due to the big number of children did not ensure a secure living basis and neither did the unfavorable weather conditions promise a safe strategy of living based on farming, families imposed different directions for the young ones on their way to become independent. In this strategy, besides farming, animal breeding, forestry, linen-draping had also gained ground, facilitating the possibility to revalue the role of money.

To sum up I can state that I succeeded in pointing out the constant elements of dowries from the analyzed period covering one hundred years. These remained constant elements of structure even during changes in lifestyles, structural transformations. Some of them are, for example, the made bed (feather mattresses, pillows, bed-sheets, bed-covers), kitchen textiles (table-cloth), in the category of clothes: winter coats, shawls, skirts, cases for

transporting the dowry, cows and smaller lands. I consider these elements structural elements of the dowry, a skeleton which even in the ever changing material culture firmly determined the dowry-like characteristics of dowries. Even if their number, size, raw material and ornamental style were influenced by different trends of fashion in the course of the century, they had never been displaced (from the system).

In the same time we can see how fashion influenced the composition of material system. During my analysis I demonstrated that fashion was not merely the invention of the modern era. Dowries always had elements that represented the taste of the certain era, but which could not remain constant components of dowries for 3 generations.

While preparing my dissertation I felt that documents of dowries are such unknown types of inventories that publishing them as sources were just as important as the analysis itself. Thus I consider important to annex to my paper the analyzed source-material. The 117 pieces of dowries prepared to be published represent the biggest source corpus of the topic so far from a small geographical area.

Pictures annexed to my dissertation help us familiarize with dowries, help us in visually documenting those objects that had always been constant elements during the analyzed one hundred years. In the same time some of the pictures throw light on the social background of families whose inventories I analyzed in my dissertation.

4. The author's publications on the topic of this dissertation

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