

Theses of doctoral (PhD) dissertacion

**THE ECONOMY OF THE BENEDICTINE ABBEY
OF KOLOZSMONOSTOR IN THE LATE
MIDDLE AGES**

Noémi Gyöngyvér Szabó

Supervisors:

Beatrix F. Romhányi, Ph. D.
László Solymosi, Ph. D.



UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN

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Aims and subject delimitation

The original objective of my doctoral dissertation was to explore the late medieval style of economy in Benedictine monasteries settled in the Kingdom of Hungary. However, while doing a preliminary research, I soon realized that much of the work would go beyond the scope of the thesis. On the other hand, spurred by another research topic, I recognized the large difference in management system between the Transylvanian Benedictine abbey of Kolozsmonostor and the other Benedictine communities.

I found the topic interesting, besides it was promising to get new results from data reprocessing that could give us a better appreciation of the late medieval farming practices in Benedictine communities. For all these reasons therefore I undertook to study in my dissertation the management system of the Abbey of Kolozsmonostor and to describe it in depth limited only by the availability of sources.

The study is timely also because a plethora of documents are available on Kolozsmonostor, which provides a good basis for deeper investigation and there are many high-quality studies available on the history of the community. Although these studies claim to be monographs on the Abbey, they behold a rather narrow aspect on the life of the monastery and place the emphasis on describing landholding cases (i.e. on the history of the Abbey estate) and on creditor activities. But the documents contain more than dry facts, so I thought it is worth preparing a modern description about the abbey's economy based on the available data – even though most of the sources I used are the same that was used in earlier studies. The overall picture might be sketchy, but it could bring us one step closer to the better understanding of the Benedictine abbeys' management system.

Methods, sources related to the topic of the dissertation

The collection and publishing of Transylvanian diplomas have quite a long history, and – though the work is far from complete – the results offer a good basis for research in Transylvania. I omit here the complete list of documents; instead I identify those ones that deserve particular attention with respect to the Abbey of Kolozsmonostor. Chronologically, the earliest of such publication is the series of *Urkundenbuch zur Geschichte der Deutschen in Siebenbürgen*, which was launched in 1892, and seven volumes were published until

1991 covering the period up to 1486. Unfortunately, the publication supplies only short abstracts in German – especially the important 15th century charters. Elek Jakab offers additional valuable data in his collection of diploma attached to the monograph on Kolozsvár, too. Antal Beke published in the journal *Történelmi Tár* the archives of Kolozsmonostor convention, which contains a number of references related to its economic history. Resources titled "C. Transylvania" of the Romanian *Documenta Romaniae Historica* series are published explicitly on the history of Transylvania, which provides the Latin text with Romanian translation. The thoroughness of the work is demonstrated by the fact that the fifteen volumes so far released reached only the end of the 14th century in their discussion. The *Erdélyi Okmánytár* edited by Zsigmond Jakó, and later by Géza Hegyi és András W. Kovács was launched in 1997 that extracts the sources into regesta. The *Zsigmondkori Oklevéltár* contains useful data for the 15th century. The two volumes of *A kolozsmonostori konvent jegyzőkönyvei*, published by Zsigmond Jakó provides a valuable resource for the late Middle Age's, particularly for the 15-16th century's, history and economy of the abbey.

Looking through this list and considering the extent of the Hungarian National Archives' online database it is obvious that nowadays researchers are in a much more favorable position than the predecessors. About six hundred diploma are available that are valuable for the study of the Abbey of Kolozsmonostor's history. This amount of material already provides a solid basis to better appreciate the management system of monasteries in general.

The source base of my thesis is well known, largely because I also made use of the same diplomas that were used by the authors who – to a certain extent – discuss the history of the Abbey of Kolozsmonostor, like János Eszterházy, Lajos Csomor, Pongrác Sörös és Zsigmond Jakó. However, these later studies are more focused on the abbey's history and its litigation, less attention was paid to evaluate the deeper connotations. Since these trials were the scope of several previous works I will touch upon these themes only to the extent as it is necessary to the general understanding.

The same characteristics apply to the sources of Kolozsmonostor, as to the Benedictine abbeys normally. Namely, legal documents constitute the overwhelming majority of diplomas, which fact must be taken into account in this study as well. Typically, data related to landholding can be recovered from these files. These include references to e.g. alienation of properties, "illegal" land uses, violence and their consequences. Under circumstances, we can

learn what type of abbey land the neighbor had occupied, or what was done on the estate. These shed light on the nature of abbey lands, and on their usage by analogies – in cases where the date of looting is known.

Another group of violence are offences against the serfs of the abbey. These provide insight into the farming practices of serfs. The attacks on serfs and the incessant complaints suggest that the abbey kept its lands under its own control, and got its own serfs to cultivate them. The continuous harassment, as the estate became a battlefield, hit the monastery's economy seriously.

Thus, legal documents inform us about land management in the first hand. However, in many cases, the data had to be supplemented by ethnographic analogies so as to become meaningful and systematic in a way. Similarly, litigations give us an opportunity to learn about the vineyard management of the abbey in general, and the relationship between the monks and the citizens of Kolozsvár in particular.

Lease agreements are typically limited to mills of the abbey, and demonstrate by which means the monastery financed the parishes under its jurisdiction. These contracts, however, give us only brief insight into this mode of management of mills, as references are sparse and therefore less useful to reconstitute a longer period of time.

Pawn transactions provide a broader insight into the economic pillars of the monastery. There are data that the abbey pawned the estate, but also that the father was the pawnbroker of an estate, a house, or a pond. Nevertheless, these data do not provide guidance as to the period of prosperity or material difficulties during the years of existence of the abbey. In my opinion, favorable investment opportunities and asset management considerations prompted the council to conclude such deals.

Wills and diplomas issued on completion of transactions offer insight into the urban real estate development strategy of the monastery. These surprisingly indicate that – in contrast to other religious communities – Kolozsmonostor did not strive to acquire and retain municipal houses.

Four additional inventories helped me to explore the economy of the abbey. One of them is a list from Antal Abbot in 1427, the most significant fragment of which contains the chapter of diploma extracts on real estate that includes numerous valuable economic data. The other three sources are 15th century wine-tithe lists, from which we can get an idea of the extent of the abbey's revenue through wine-tithe (or wine-ninth?). All three statements are from the second half of the 15 century (1453, 1457, 1469). Unfortunately, these lists are largely incomplete, among them the one from 1453 can be considered as reliable, as it records both the size of the vineyards and the quantity of wine handed over. Thus, it includes 65 vineyard holders' vineyard totaling 83.5 acres, which shows that 379.3 akó (20,376 liters) was the wine tithe for the abbey. The second list wrote up 146 vineyard owners' totaling 228 acres of land without mentioning the amount of tithe. The last list from 1469 gives the figure of the 58 vineyard holders' land size incompletely (at least 48 acres), on the other hand the tithe was very high as 467 akó was delivered to the abbey's wine cellars. Albeit the small data set prevents me to draw far-reaching conclusion, still it illustrates that the Abbey made a great profit out of wine-tithe. The quantity of wine (20,000 liters or more, per annum, per vineyard) was just too much to cover the needs of the convent, therefore I think that most of this was sold on the abbey's land – and being an innkeeping rights holder – in the taverns. I include the three above mentioned lists as attachment to this work.

Overall, sources that can be utilized with respect to the abbey's economy are pretty fragmented and uneven, but their quantity is already enough to learn more about such activities of the community. Having said that, I must point out that the sources are often silent on the specific management methods. These must be inferred from other sources.

In my work I aim to reveal the abbey's management system based on carefully collected sources. Therefore, I combed through the available written sources again, and identified even the smallest points related to economy – by sectors in the first hand. Concerning land usage I relied primarily on lawsuits filed upon violences and I further differentiated the information obtained from them (meadow agriculture, crops). Data relating to the workforce of the abbey's lands were treated separately, so the identity and role of the personnel could be established, further the major elements of private economy of the serfs could be identified.

The core of my dissertation is divided into three major parts: the first explores the revenue side of the abbey economy, and the second examines the expenditure side. The third section examines Kolozsmonostor's wage situation. In this chapter, I attempt to determine

Kolozsmonostor's perceived "rank" of the period, its place among the abbeys by analyzing the abbots 'career' (from which abbey he arrived, and where he left after Kolozsmonostor).

From the late medieval figures I review the dominant source of the monastery's revenue (cash or naturalia). Then again, I do not attempt to determine the exact figure of the abbey's cash income due to the fragmentary nature of the data.

The patchy nature of the available information and the incomplete data set make it difficult to explore Kolozsmonostor's economy, because lawsuits usually give insight into just a few details. For example we hardly have data on monastic estates management, so a lot of shortcomings were rectified – where it was possible – by giving analogies, and by comparing with results of ethnographic research. The existing bibliographic data – except for grapes – is basically relevant only to the landlord's own economy. Thus, I was unfortunately not in a position to write about serf economy proper since I have found few references but many complaints on stolen goods in these diploma.

Of course, the resulting image can only be fragmentary: first, it is not the amount, but rather the nature of the abbey's revenue that can be learned from these. Unfortunately, we do not have such a statement – even though we know that it was prepared – which would show the amount and kind of revenue the abbey was able to collect from its divers possessions, and what type of services and payment obligations the serfs were obliged to do in favor of their clerical landlords. In general, sources are silent on how much income from a given real estate monks withdrew. The fragmentary information in case of the vineyards is even more obvious, as the conflicts often dragged on and prior or subsequent agreements are not known. Frequently, we can only deduce their existence, especially if an unprecedented – and thus unclear – case arises. On the other hand, much less data are available the on expenditure side of the monastery, and these rather illuminate the type of "investment" the abbey made. As neither the income nor the expenditure side is clear, not even approximately, it is difficult to determine the economic balance of the abbey in the long run.

The results listed in theses style

As far as the Abbey of Kolozsmonostor is concerned, mostly diplomas related to its possession remained. Predominantly, legal documents (protests, bans, complaints) are available, but boundary-delineating diplomas also survived in large numbers. Due to the

peculiarities of the sources, investigators carrying out research on the history of the abbey inevitably write the chronicle of the abbey's possessions instead of actually writing its true story. We almost know nothing about the internal life of the monastic community. Zsigmond Jakó took an important step, because he examined the abbey from a social perspective, and he corrected his predecessors' mistakes in many respects, but he did not go beyond the classic "monastic history" approach. He used diplomas for the same reasons as the abbots did in the past: to prove the ownership by the abbey. However, his observations about the monastery's management were based mainly on previous literature's generalizing approach, therefore I disagree to some extent with his statements.

So the scientific interpretation of Kolozsmonostor's estates and the multitude of lawsuits associated with them seem to be completed, yet there was no declared interest from the scientific community so far towards questions like economical aspects of the abbey. I myself have often used and quoted the sources mentioned above, but I also selected and arranged them based on the amount of information recoverable from them. First, I focused on resources that shed light in some way on the abbey's economy. The material is extremely fragmented however, and in many respects it does not give an answer to certain methods of management.

The merit of the study lies in the fact that it finally established – not just by giving analogies but by supporting with data – that this religious community, like the monastic communities in general heavily relied on possession of lands. The monastic estate portfolio was relatively scattered – although it is obvious that the abbey sought to concentrate its lands – and individual acreages were not too large. The abbey held firmly in his hand these lands, cultivated it by serf labor, unlike many other Benedictine abbeys that sublet the majority of their estates. In their charges filed against violent neighbors they often claim attacks on their serfs and complain that serfs had already left or they were about to leave the estates. The decline in labor force hit hard the monks. Despite of these hardships they did not bring their estates to the market, rather they tried to lure peasants to stay or settle. Sources inform us more about feudal economy, less about serf economy: mostly farm animals and tools are mentioned in the diplomas, details of the serf economy, i.e. land structure, plot size, etc. are not mentioned. Accordingly, it is not possible to reconstruct the guiding principle of how serfs cultivated the lands, which plot was sown and which was fallowed, and the system of land usage was not documented either. To answer these questions we need to cover a larger number of sources, such as from neighboring landowners. We know that serfs owed to the

abbot different type of duties: cash or payment in-kind, and labor force. To our knowledge, the amount and modalities of these cannot be determined. Abbot Antal wrote down the obligations in 1427, but the document save its title was lost.

The custody of the properties was placed in the hands of intermediary officers who came from local nobilities. Their active presence is apparent in several cases; they coordinated not only the daily business tasks, and acted as judge over their subordinates, but also protected the estates. This later activity is well illustrated by documents that arose from violence by neighbors. Being an officier was a dangerous job, as in one case, data indicates that one of the abbot's man was killed in such an attack.

In most cases, plough-lands are mentioned in general terms, while the frequent reference to meadows, pastures and hayfields indicate intensive livestock husbandry. During times of violence horses, oxen, sheep, goats and pigs were often stolen from the serfs of the abbey but the diplomas barely mention livestock that were directly owned by the abbey. The number of animals must have definitely been higher than what the sources mention. There is only one data that the cattles of serfs grazed together with the ones of the abbey, but that this source has survived has a lot more to do with chance than with conscious selection.

The dipomas of the abbey often mention forests, which show the importance of forestry. The harvested wood was primarily used to cover their own needs (timber, firewood), by both the monks and the serfs, there is however a data on timber sale, too. Forest was also important because of game living in it, though the sole reference to hunting is in a letter from 1581, at the end of the Benedictine era.

The rare mentioning of fishponds demonstrates that monks could only cover their own needs; plus because of the proximity of the river Szamos and its abundance of fish it might not have been worth to maintain and guard the lakes. However, it might worth be examining the relationship between the abbey's mills and any associated ponds more thoroughly – via topographical method or fieldwork.

Abbots paid more attention to vineyards – which were located in Kolozsvár and Kolozsmonostor. The monks repeatedly got into dispute with citizens of Kolozsvár due to outstanding debt not paid for vineyards, partly demanded in cash. Unfortunately I could not

find any information if part of the large quantity of incoming wine has been sold or not. Mills played an important role in the economy of the abbey; monks often sublet them – as it was a common practice in the Middle Ages. At the same time it is obvious that a mill did play a significant role not only in the monastic economy. Often, mills were allotted to parishes under the jurisdiction of the abbey. Unfortunately, sources do not mention what these mills ground, but they probably processed grains, they were likely not weaving mill or tanning mills.

Monks did not see much fantasy in having urban real estate, so they tried to get rid of them. Rent from a house in Kolozsvár is known, in which the monks had a share in the long term, but the income must have been very low, as they had to split the six forints per annum with two other religious institutions.

Tithes to the abbey were mainly derived from in-kind goods (grain, wine, wax, etc.), cash inflows from customs, and possibly from market, but the magnitude of income from the latter is hard to estimate. We also do not know how the income from banking activities was allocated between the abbot, the monastic community and the office staff. It is also conceivable that the creditor activity was operationally separated from the abbey. In any case, the banking activity contributed to the financial stability of the convention, since revenues from these sources were secure.

Later data suggests that the abbey invested a portion of the revenue into land acquisition or mortgage transaction, or launched construction works; other specific expenditure is less known. We do not know how much they spent on the table of the convention, but certainly less than on the one of the abbot.

The history of the abbey's late medieval management is rather problematic. Zsigmond Jakó points out correctly that the abbot's dignity – separated from the convent – became benefice after 1501 (from the beginning of Pál Tomori's governance). Monarchs at times treated the monastic properties as government properties controlled by estate managers. Still, we can see that in the 16th century monastic life did not die out, but they became surprisingly active in economic affairs. From these times increased number of evidence indicates that – replacing the abbot – the convent decides on certain economic matters under the guidance of custos (like selling land, vineyard, cashing in endowment, prohibiting selling real estate or vineyard).

Regarding the estate managers (they are called *officiális* or from the 16th century increasingly officer of the abbey's income) it is worth noting a phenomenon that very few of them acted on matters concerning the abbey's estate. Whereas the majority of data suggest that these administrators acted in private matters as a private citizens, or as representatives of a hierarchical superior or the monarch.

The evaluation of the accessible resources in such a way – in spite of the many uncertainties – was not in vain. The fragmentary nature of the material sheds light basically on the management system, nevertheless it provides a good comparative basis for further research.

The author's publications in the subject

The social relations of Benedictine abbeys in the 14th-16th century's Hungary. In: *Micae Mediaevales. Tanulmányok a középkori Magyarországról és Európáról.* (ELTE BTK Történelemtudományok Doktori Iskola Tanulmányok – Konferenciák 2.) Eds. Sophia KÁDÁR, MIKÓ Gábor, Bence PÉTERFI, András VADAS. Budapest, 2011. 133–147.

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Writing ecclesiastical history: trends, locales. With special respect to the medieval Hungarian church history. *Vallástudományi Szemle* 5 (2009/2). 107–132.

The author's further publications: published or accepted for publication with confirmation letter

The church and community organizations of Pata's Deanery in the Middle Ages. In: *A táj változásai a Kárpát-medencében – az erdélyi táj változásai.* Eds. György FÜLEKY. Gödöllő, 2008. 87–93.

Benedictine (financial) management of the late Middle Ages: An example of Garamszentbenedek. Accepted for publication in the volume of the ecclesial conference held in October 2010, entitled: „Örökség és küldetés. Bencések Magyarországon”.

15th century wine-tenth lists of the Abbey of Kolozsmonostor. Accepted for publication in the *Fons* journal.