

*Adinel C. DINCĂ:*

**Marcus Polnar (†1506)  
A Bright Star in the Constellation of a Transylvanian  
Family\***

The intention of the present paper is to re-evaluate the surviving records surrounding the career and activity of Marcus Polnar, member of an influential family of Transylvanian Saxons living in Sighişoara. Although many historical sources – pertaining to writing and imagery – reflect the constellation of Polnar family members, only some give a clue to the extent of Marcus' ascendancy over the destiny of his blood relatives. Furthermore, these sources have been misinterpreted over the last century and a half, leading to confusions among scholars. It will be argued now that Marcus started with a well-off lineage, to which he added, through academic background and social networking, a respectable public position, working his way into a true 'bright star' of his kin. By cooperating with his brother, Michael, and by endorsing the careers of his four nephews, Marcus Polnar contributed in a decisive manner to establishing and securing influence and authority for his family, beyond the status of a local Transylvanian urban elite.

*Keywords:* Transylvanian Saxons; urban elite; higher education; social mobility; family politics; legal mentality



When bishop György Klimó (1710–1777) entrusted in the mid-1760s provost József Koller (1745–1832) with the task of compiling a history of the episcopate of Pécs based on documents preserved in the local capitular archive and in Italian repositories,<sup>1</sup> the resulting material produced eight volumes<sup>2</sup> that even today arouse scholarly interest.<sup>3</sup> Among the vast amount of

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<sup>1</sup> BODA 2013.

<sup>2</sup> KOLLER 1784–1812.

<sup>3</sup> FONT – VARGHA 2003.

information encompassed by the aforementioned tomes, a particular piece stands out to the modern historian dealing with the intricacies of intellectual life in medieval Transylvania: the granting of an ecclesiastical benefice – the office of rector of Saint Andrew’s chapel<sup>4</sup> in Pécs cathedral church – by the Hungarian King Matthias Corvinus (1458–1490) to Marcus Polnar (†1506), an esteemed doctor of law and parish priest in Şaeş (Schaas),<sup>5</sup> as a reward for his services to the crown.<sup>6</sup> A second document issued a fortnight later by the bishop of Pécs, Sigismund Ernuszt of Csáktornya ([Čakovec, HR] in office from 1473 until his death in 1505),<sup>7</sup> and published in the editorial context mentioned before,<sup>8</sup> confirms the donation and instructs Michael of Feketh, canon and vicar of the said church, to institute Marcus Polnar into his benefice and associated revenues.

Straightforward as they may seem, these two documents have been at the root of historiographical confusions, hindering the configuration of a biographical portrait of one of the less-known members of the influential Polnar family from Sighișoara [Schäßburg, Segesvár]. It is therefore the intention of the present paper to reconsider these documentary pieces together with some other accounts from a fresh perspective, opening a discussion around the multiple aspects of prosopographical analysis and its ramifications in the social, political, and intellectual networking within the community of Transylvanian Saxons<sup>9</sup> around 1500, between the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times. Concurrently, this study also means to determine the current archival location of the original primary sources – most of them examined more than a century and a half ago and failing modern critical scrutiny –, to reassess their contents and to suggest new methodological frameworks for their interpretation, in accordance with recent historiographical developments and trends. To this end, several notions specific to sociological inquiry, such as ‘sociometric star’,<sup>10</sup> ‘family constellation’,<sup>11</sup> ‘social mobility’,<sup>12</sup> ‘network paradigm’<sup>13</sup> or ‘political friendship’<sup>14</sup> will be brought into

<sup>4</sup> The Gothic chapel of Saint Andrew may have been a significant edifice, built on the side of the cathedral (*ad latus ecclesie cathedralis*), damaged during the Turkish-Ottoman occupation of the town in the 16–17<sup>th</sup> centuries, see KIKINDAI – FEDELES 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Şaeş, Latin: *Segws, Segus, Seges, Segesd, Schaas*, is the name of both a Transylvanian village and a creek flowing through Şaeş village and the city of Sighișoara (Latin name: *Segusvar, Segeswar, castrum Sches, Schesburg*), see ROTH 2003. p. 186–190.

<sup>6</sup> KOLLER 1796 IV. p. 436–438, from 2 January 1487.

<sup>7</sup> KUBINYI 2001; FEDELES – KOSZTA 2011. p. 137–142.

<sup>8</sup> KOLLER 1796 IV. p. 439–440, from 16 January 1487.

<sup>9</sup> For a general historical overview of these German-speaking ‘guests’ who settled in the 12<sup>th</sup> century in Transylvania, see GÜNDISCH 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Within the pattern of interpersonal relations, a ‘sociometric star’ is defined as “the recipient of numerous and frequent choices from others who, therefore, holds a position of great popularity and leadership”, see SCOTT 2000. p. 10; see also MULLETT 2005. p. 258.

<sup>11</sup> WELLMAN – WETHERELL 1996; BÖLSKER-SCHLICHT 2004. More recently, the theoretical frameworks have been applied to the early modern communities of urban dwellers, see GÉRA 2019.

<sup>12</sup> CAVACIOCCHI 2009; VARANINI 2017.

<sup>13</sup> HITZBLECK – HÜBNER 2014; LEMERCIER 2015; BURKHARDT 2016.

<sup>14</sup> HASELDINE 2013.

the discussion with the purpose of bridging the analytical gap between the impact of higher education and its further effects on individual careers. When considering the analysis of medieval social networking in Transylvania, the question of firsthand testimonies must also be addressed: the prosopographical approach combines documentary (legal, administrative, religious) and visual sources (inscriptions, coats of arms, tombstones, donor portraits, seal imprints) into a multi-dimensional process that can be expanded from individuals to communities and places.<sup>15</sup>

The 'Polnar' (also sometimes spelled 'Polner') kin<sup>16</sup> dominated the urban and ecclesiastical landscape of Sighișoara from the 1440s till the second decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The driving force of the family of "new men" seems to have been Marcus' brother, Michael Polnar (†1497), an *alumnus* of Vienna University,<sup>17</sup> mayor of Sighișoara (1483<sup>18</sup>–1486,<sup>19</sup> 1491–1495) and royal judge, son of Michael Pellifex (†1445), a local wealthy and socially engaged furrier.<sup>20</sup> Michael Polnar's sons: Anthonius (†1514),<sup>21</sup> Petrus († c. 1493),<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, a similar approach at PREISER-KAPPELLER 2012.

<sup>16</sup> SCHULLER 1897; GÜNDISCH 1993. pp. 281–287; NUSSBÄCHER 1994; BALTAG 2016. pp. 47–50.

<sup>17</sup> TŪSKÉS 2008. nr. 2888 from 1442: *Michael Pellificis de Schespurg*.

<sup>18</sup> According to the inscription painted on the wall of the town's parish church: *Michel Polner Purgermeister 1483*, a charter issued by the Cluj-Mănăstur convent on 13 August 1483, original preserved at SJAN Sibiu, *Colecția de documente medievale*, U II. nr. 407, and a register, now lost, of the local 'Kalands Brethren', see FABRITIUS 1875. p. 250.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Polnar's term as mayor started not long before his first documentary mentioning, however, various authors have erroneously considered that his time in office began earlier. The confusion was generated by a succession of three mayors in Sighișoara, all sharing the name *Michael*. Documentary evidence mention that one *Michael artium baccalarius* was *iudex regius* (1473–1475) and *magister civium* of Sighișoara after 1476, see *Urkundenbuch* VII. nr. 4093. The name *magister Michael alias magister civium* (or *senex magister civium*) is present in various documents issued by the Sighișoara town council throughout the 1480s. Both *magister Michael* and *Michael Polner* are among the members of the town council on 29 September 1486, see *Urkundenbuch* VII. nr. 4668, thus clearly delineating the two separate individuals. Further historiographical confusion was due to the mentioning of *Michael Literatus*, Sighișoara's town notary in the 1470s, as mayor of the town in 1478, see *Urkundenbuch* VII. nr. 4282, a possible misinterpretation of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century documentary transcript.

<sup>20</sup> He was *iuratus civis* in Sighișoara in 1440, see GÜNDISCH 1993. p. 281–282. After his passing, his widow and children were allowed by the papal protonotary Georgius de Cesarinis to choose a suitable confessor, see *Urkundenbuch* V. nr. 2517.

<sup>21</sup> By 1487 Anthonius Polnar was already a member of the local council, recorded in Sighișoara's town book, mayor of Sighișoara and royal judge after the death of his father until his violent end during the peasant revolt of 1514, see GÜNDISCH 1993. p. 285–286.

<sup>22</sup> Dominican friar and abbot of Cluj-Mănăstur convent, attended the universities of Ingolstadt in 1478–1479, Köln 1479, and Paris in 1480, see CZOPPELT 1972; JAKÓ 1990. I. p. 95; HARASZTI SZABÓ – KELÉNYI 2019. nr. 32. In July 1493 his brother, Gabriel is already abbot of Cluj-Mănăstur, see SJAN Sibiu, *Colecția de documente medievale*, U II. nr. 531.

Gabriel (†1502),<sup>23</sup> Iohannes (†1504),<sup>24</sup> and Georgius († after 1521)<sup>25</sup> combined ecclesiastical and political offices from the mere positions of parish priests in Transylvanian Saxon villages to bishops of Hungarian dioceses, and from members of the provincial town councils to royal judges and treasurers. Additionally, their intellectual background and higher education perfected in Central and Western European universities led Gabriel and Iohannes, who were also Dominican friars, to the positions of royal secretaries. Besides King Matthias, further high dignities (even if not the highest grossing offices<sup>26</sup>), fuelled by the academic background and diplomatic skills of these representatives of the Saxon patriciate<sup>27</sup> and their political connections, were also granted by Vladislaus II, king of Hungary between 1490–1516. The family's interests were primarily focused on their hometown of Sighișoara: the town's parish church<sup>28</sup> together with the Dominican convent<sup>29</sup> were the main recipients of the Polnar's generosity both in terms of direct endowment, and by securing sources of income. The town citadel was also fortified during the Polnar administration, and economic advantages were secured for the townspeople (i.e. market rights).<sup>30</sup>

Within this hyper-active and socially involved family, the name of Marcus Polnar has been perceived as occupying a complementary position, as an appendage to Michael's set direction. Yet, it would be an overstatement to credit the acquired array of benefits entirely on the "visible" Polnar, even though Michael's name has endured in numerous documentary instances (although sometime misidentified!). In an intertwined interaction, the biographical details of both brothers, Michael, and Marcus, illustrate a complex reality dominated by the epoch's 'ideal pedigree': a well-off lineage, academic background, respectable public position, a 'modern' (or 'proper') devotional behaviour, and (cunningly articulated) social networking.

The first documentary instance to mention Marcus Polnar's name is the matriculation book of Vienna University,<sup>31</sup> where he registered in 1460 as *Marcus de Castrosches* and graduated in 1462 with the academic degree of

<sup>23</sup> Dominican friar and abbot of Cluj-Mănăstur convent, royal secretary and treasurer, bishop of Bosnia from 1493 and Syrmia from 1495. See DULDNER 1892; JAKÓ 1990. I. p. 95; GÜNDISCH 1993, p. 285.

<sup>24</sup> Studied in Paris (1489) and Bologna (1495), secretary of Queen Anna de Foix-Candale, canon of Oradea, bishop of Nitra (1503), parish priest in Saschiz (1500–1504), see HARASZTI SZABÓ – KELÉNYI 2019. nr. 279. See also GYÖRKÖS 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Parish priest in Cincu Mare [Nagysink] ca. 1521 and graduate of the Vienna University (c. 1500), see FIREA 2016. p. 248–252.

<sup>26</sup> FÜGEDI 1965.

<sup>27</sup> On the relationship between education and career, see an overview of the Saxon Transylvanian context in GÜNDISCH 2015; DINCĂ 2019a.

<sup>28</sup> Saint Nicholas parish church in Sighișoara, also called "the Church on the Hill", has been extended and decorated between 1480–1520 with ample support of the Polnar family, see NUSSBÄCHER 1983; POPA 1998–1999; JENEI 2004–2005.

<sup>29</sup> FABRITIUS 1861. p.11–12; SALONTAI 2002. p. 228–259; LUPESCUNE-MAKO 2004. p. 373–374; FÜLÖPP-ROMHANYI 2010.

<sup>30</sup> MÜLLER 1985. p. 22, 25.

<sup>31</sup> TONK 1979. nr. 1390; TÜSKÉS 2008. nr. 4070.

*philosophiae baccalaureus*.<sup>32</sup> Over the next 15 years, the young student from Sighișoara invested even more time abroad in his education, yet his whereabouts were not identified by scholars until recently: a record from 1472 places Marcus Polnar as student of canon law in Padua.<sup>33</sup> At that time, *Matthias Rwedel de Corona*<sup>34</sup> [Brașov, Kronstadt, RO] was asked to retrieve from Marcus a money debt and *unum librum Clementinarum* (a well-known collection of church legislation promulgated in 1317) that he had borrowed from his professor.

By 1476, Marcus was both *decretorum doctor* and parish priest in the village of Șaeș, the third wealthiest settlement in the land-chapter of Saschiz [Keyzd, Keisd]<sup>35</sup>. However, the 1476 account<sup>36</sup> has long been regarded with caution by historians, due to the precarious state of preservation of the parchment, where the name of Marcus is partially illegible.<sup>37</sup> There is no doubt of the interpretation of the distinct words: (following the genitive rendition of the original text) *egregii Marci, decretorum doctoris, plebani de Seghws*, together with the mayor of Sighișoara (*egregii Michaelis magistri civium civitatis castri Seghws*)<sup>38</sup> and another nine lay and ecclesiastical officials from Sighișoara and the surrounding settlements, secure an indulgence letter from the bishops of Vidin and Eger (the latter also *legatus de latere* for Transylvania) in favour of the parish church in Brădeni [Henndorf].<sup>39</sup> So far, the career of Marcus Polnar hardly raises any question marks: he followed in his older brother's footsteps as a graduate of the Vienna University, went on studying in Italy to earn the degree of doctor of law and chose an ecclesiastical career, acquiring – probably with the help of his relatives – the position of parish priest in Șaeș. He would occupy this office at least for a few more years, as corroborated by other documentary evidence from 1481.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Marcus Polnar's most recent analytical biography in HARASZTI SZABÓ – KELÉNYI 2019. nr. 1348. His academic route is also indexed by the RAG.

<sup>33</sup> Endre Veress (VERESS 1915) was the first scholar to investigate the Paduan archives in search for students from the Hungarian Kingdom who attended this Italian university, however, he found no record of Marcus Polnar. The newly retrieved information has been identified in the Archivio di Stato di Padova, Notarile, 232, f. 105v, where Polnar is recorded as a Hungarian student, see MARTELLOZZO FORIN 1999. p. 109, yet the detail was not put in context with Polnar's Transylvanian origin.

<sup>34</sup> Brother of Iohannes Ruedel, parish priest in Brașov (1446–1499), and former colleague of Marcus at Vienna University, where he registered in 1461 as *Matheus Ruedl de Corona* and graduated in 1464, see TUSKÉS 2008. nr. 4115.

<sup>35</sup> MÜLLER 1936. p. 40–42, 148–151; NUSSBÄCHER 1995a; NUSSBÄCHER 1995b.

<sup>36</sup> Document currently preserved by the SJAN, Sibiu, Colecția de documente medievale, Serie U V. nr. 1167.

<sup>37</sup> FABRITIUS 1875. nr. CX; Urkundenbuch VII. nr. 4125.

<sup>38</sup> Not to be confused with Marcus Polnar's brother, Michael! Documentary texts record *Michael artium baccalarius* as *magister civium* in Sighișoara in 1476, see footnote 19.

<sup>39</sup> A marginal yet active community that has invested over the entire 15<sup>th</sup> century in the decoration and fortification of their parish church, see FABINI 1998. p. 290–292. Two other indulgences for Brădeni church were issued in 1483 and 1497, see FABRITIUS 1875. nr. CXIV and CXL.

<sup>40</sup> “[...] *et Marcus doctor de Seges ecclesiarum parochialium plebani*.” – Original document at SJAN Sibiu, Colecția de documente episcopale, nr. 44 from 4 June 1481. A late 16<sup>th</sup>-century copy of this

The next piece of information brings together the two brothers, Marcus and Michael, in 1483,<sup>41</sup> expressing clearly their options in terms of devotional attitudes, when both are mentioned as the founders of a religious association in their hometown. By this time, Marcus had risen within the local ecclesiastical configuration to the position of *decanus*, head of the land-chapter of Saschiz, while his brother, the mayor, was actively supporting the interior decoration of Sighișoara's parish church<sup>42</sup> and representing the Saxon community at the royal court.<sup>43</sup> From this moment on, there is no other direct textual documentation surrounding the circumstances of the next few years to justify the reasons behind the granting of the royal benefice in 1487. However, indirect hints are provided by other records: less than a year before, on 6 February 1486, King Matthias had confirmed for the Transylvanian Saxons a 13<sup>th</sup>-century royal charter, thus extending a significant number of legal rights and privileges upon the entire German-speaking community of the province. The credit for this successful diplomatic undertaking went to Thomas Altemberger (†1491), the mayor of Sibiu [Hermannstadt] from 1471 to 1490, and erstwhile student of canon law in Vienna during the 1450s and early 1460s,<sup>44</sup> whose lobby campaign at the royal court settled in the Austrian capital city must have involved a larger number of Saxon representatives over a longer period. Michael Polnar was certainly no stranger to diplomatic relations at the court of king Matthias: in the autumn of 1486, he was present in the Austrian lands,<sup>45</sup> delivering the annual monetary contribution of the Transylvanian Saxons to the royal treasurer. This was probably the occasion for either Michael, or perhaps Marcus in person, to have requested a royal favour for the loyal subjects from Sighișoara. The charter issued by the king on 2 January 1487 repays the (unspecified) services of this *virum idoneum et personam bene meritam* with an ecclesiastical benefice – both a high dignity<sup>46</sup> and a significant source of income – in one of the wealthiest dioceses of the kingdom. Still, the designation by the Hungarian king of a canonical benefice in Pécs cathedral church, invoking a patronage right that has been discussed by

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document misspelled Marcus' name as *Maray*, a form that has created some confusion among modern historians regarding the identity of the mentioned individual. See also Urkundenbuch VII. nr. 4415.

<sup>41</sup> FABRITIUS 1875. nr. CCCXIV, pp. 250–251, with further details pertaining to this context on p. 251–257. A topic revisited by GROSS 2004. p. 141–149. and p. 164, footnotes 71–75.

<sup>42</sup> SARKADI NAGY 2016.

<sup>43</sup> Urkundenbuch VII. nr. 4536 from 25 August 1483.

<sup>44</sup> DINCĂ 2019b. p. 114.

<sup>45</sup> Letter from Retz, Austria, dated to 11 October 1486, Urkundenbuch VII. nr. 4676 addressed to Thomas Altemberger.

<sup>46</sup> By accepting this benefice, Marcus Polnar actually replaced Thomas Bakócz of Erdőd (1442–1521) in the office of rector of Saint Andrew's chapel, who had been designated bishop of Győr, see C. TÓTH 2018. p. 11; C. TÓTH 2019. p. 140.

scholars,<sup>47</sup> opened an ascending social path for the Polnars in terms of family politics.<sup>48</sup>

Both the royal document of 2 January 1487 and the related episcopal installation from 16 January of the same year raised a technical question: when publishing them, Joseph Koller indicated that these two documentary texts were transcribed later, on 10 June 1491, by the Cluj-Mănăştur [Kolozsmonor] convent, *primo loco*<sup>49</sup> and *secundo loco*.<sup>50</sup> This ambiguity concerning the exact preservation place and form of the documents has determined the Transylvanian Saxon, Lutheran pastor and member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Karl Fabritius (1826–1881), to re-publish in 1875 the Koller-version of both the royal and episcopal texts and only the 1491 Transylvanian-issued text confirming Bishop Sigismund's letter. The editorial choice prevented further attempts at pinpointing the original document(s), a task only partially solved until now.<sup>51</sup> Due to the extensive publication of archive material in printed and digital form, the original documentary pair has been identified in the holdings of the Hungarian National Archives.<sup>52</sup>

The unexpected death of King Matthias on 6 April 1490, and the subsequent political shift has produced large changes in the entire Hungarian Kingdom and in the Transylvanian Voivodship as well. In the days of turmoil, the Polnar family quickly pledged their allegiance to the new king, Vladislaus II, a gesture that would bring them immediate advantages: not only was Michael forgiven for his alleged fraudulent use of public funds, which almost cost him his head in the previous year,<sup>53</sup> but he also returned to Sighişoara in 1491, where he accumulated the offices of mayor and royal judge. His son Petrus, a Dominican friar, would be named abbot and administrator (*commendator*) of the Cluj-Mănăştur convent and place of authentication,<sup>54</sup> despite the opposition of the previous governor, the local landlord Matthias Pongrácz of Dengeleg.<sup>55</sup> From this position, Petrus would plead for peace and unity among the divided Saxons

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<sup>47</sup> FEDELES 2010. p. 110–112. See also general discussions on the topic in GALLA 1940; MÁLYUSZ 1959; ADRIÁNYI 1979.

<sup>48</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Mária Lupescu-Máko (Assoc. Prof., Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca) for granting me access to her manuscript *The Polnars* (hereafter LUPESCU-MÁKO 2008).

<sup>49</sup> Document issued by the Cluj-Mănăştur place of authentication on 10 June 1491, KOLLER 1796. IV, p. 460–461, *ex autographo*.

<sup>50</sup> Document issued by the Cluj-Mănăştur place of authentication on 10 June 1491, KOLLER 1796. IV, pp. 462–463, *ex autographo*.

<sup>51</sup> Several scholars, dealing either with topics related to ecclesiastical history or art history, have mentioned one document or the other, see ENTZ 1996. p. 435; FEDELES – KOSZTA 2011. p. 138.

<sup>52</sup> MNL OL DL 28332 is the shelfmark of the original Cluj-Mănăştur issued document transcribing King Mathias' designation of the benefice, while under the signature MNL OL DL 28333 the second original confirmation letter issued by the Cluj-Mănăştur convent is preserved, with the transcript of Bishop Sigismund's letter.

<sup>53</sup> FABRITIUS 1875. nr. CXXVI, p. 107–108. from 16 June 1490.

<sup>54</sup> MNL OL DL 36398, p. 18, nr. 1; JAKÓ 1990. II. p. 69. nr. 2712, from 14 September 1490. Peter would see from his personal finances to the maintenance of the convent, see MNL OL DL 36398. p. 92. nr. 1; JAKÓ 1990. II. p. 100. nr. 2822.

<sup>55</sup> SJAN Cluj, Fond fideicomisionar Jósika, Documente medievale, nr. 476 from 25 March 1495.

in the winter of 1491<sup>56</sup> and coordinate in 1492<sup>57</sup> the ongoing trial of the Transylvanian Saxon towns against the customs enforced upon their merchants by the episcopal town of Oradea [Nagyvárad]. The position of abbot and *commendator* will pass after Petrus' death in 1493 to his brother, Gabriel,<sup>58</sup> the Dominican friar and newly appointed bishop of Bosnia, who would in turn carry on as the king's messenger, negotiator, and ambassador among the Saxons. Furthermore, Gabriel also conveyed messages<sup>59</sup> of the newly appointed royal treasurer in 1493, the bishop of Pécs, Sigismund Ernuszt, the one who granted the benefice to his uncle. Some time before 1495 even the younger Polnar brother, Iohannes, was granted an ecclesiastical benefice in the Saint Cross church in Wrocław.<sup>60</sup>

It is difficult to measure the extent to which Marcus was involved in any or both decisions of the newly-elected king, yet, his connections at the royal court might have carried weight, as scholars have noted.<sup>61</sup> Marcus Polnar himself took steps to secure his granted benefice and had the two letters confirming the position of rector of Saint Andrew's chapel in the cathedral church of Pécs transcribed and authenticated by the institution under the administration of his nephew. Just a few years later, in 1494,<sup>62</sup> he obtained two more benefices, that of archdeacon of Pest and canon of Vác.<sup>63</sup> Between 1495 and 1500 Marcus may also have occupied the office of priest in Saschiz,<sup>64</sup> a well-endowed parish church that would also be passed on to one of his brother's sons, Iohannes, canon of Oradea<sup>65</sup> and Alba Iulia (Gyulafehérvár),<sup>66</sup> secretary of the queen and bishop of Nitra<sup>67</sup> (until his death in 1504). Over the next years, Marcus is documented as parish priest in Sighișoara (1500–1506), a trustworthy envoy of Sighișoara's town council (12 December 1502),<sup>68</sup> canon of Alba-Iulia (arch-

<sup>56</sup> SJAN Sibiu, Colecția de documente medievale, U III. nr. 80 from 17 December 1491.

<sup>57</sup> SJAN Sibiu, Colecția de documente medievale, U II. nr. 568.

<sup>58</sup> SJAN Sibiu, Colecția de documente medievale, U II. nr. 523 from 19 May 1493, and SJAN Sibiu, Colecția de documente medievale, U II. nr. 531 from 4 June 1493, see DULDNER 1892. p. 366–367.

<sup>59</sup> SJAN Sibiu, Colecția de documente medievale, U II. nr. 553.

<sup>60</sup> "Iohannes Polnar de castro Schess Transilvano cantor ecclesiae Sanctae Crucis Wratislaviensis." – FARA 2006. p. 128.

<sup>61</sup> GÜNDISCH 1993. p. 284; LUPESCU-MAKO 2008.

<sup>62</sup> FABRITIUS 1875. nr. CXXXVI. p. 113. from 5 March 1494, original document at SJAN Mureș, Fond Parohia evanghelică Sighișoara, nr. 14.

<sup>63</sup> A position that has not been acknowledged by historiography, see TÓTH 2015.

<sup>64</sup> FABRITIUS 1875. nr. CCXCIV. p. 224. footnote 1: the original document has been lost, but two 18<sup>th</sup>-century copies record the names 'Marcus' and 'Martinus', respectively, as parish priest in Saschiz. The chronological sequence of the church personnel was reconstructed as part of the project *Fasti Ecclesiae Transsilvaniae I*, developed by Ciprian Firea and Adinel C. Dincă, additionally supported by David M. Smith.

<sup>65</sup> JAKÓ 1990. II. p. 207. nr. 3213. from 19 September 1501; KRISTÓF 2014. nr. 126. p. 239.

<sup>66</sup> SJAN Sibiu, Colecția Brukenenthal, RS 1–10. nr. 529. from 15 March 1503.

<sup>67</sup> FABRITIUS 1875. nr. CLVII. p. 136–137. from 8 January 1503.

<sup>68</sup> FABRITIUS 1875. nr. CLVI. p. 135–136. from 29 December 1502, see SJAN Sibiu, Colecția de documente medievale, U V. nr. 1208.



deacon of Ózd, 1503),<sup>69</sup> dean of Saschiz land-chapter (1503)<sup>70</sup> and, together with his other nephew, Anthonius – by now mayor of Sighișoara – a legal representative (*procurator*) of the town of Mediaș [Mediasch] (18 July 1505).<sup>71</sup>

Although two other generations of Polnars appear casually in 16<sup>th</sup>-century documentary sources,<sup>72</sup> most historians consider that the eminent family concluded its illustrious public days with the violent and disgraceful death of Anthonius Polnar in 1514, during the Dózsa Rebellion. By this time, all its other representative members: Michael, Marcus, Petrus, Gabriel, and Iohannes, had already passed away. The Polnar ‘family constellation’ slowly faded away over the next decades, with no other bright star to polarize the concerted agency of its members.

So far, historical analysis has regarded the Polnars as deeply involved in the power system of their town and province, exercising authority not only as civically involved representatives of the urban patriciate,<sup>73</sup> but also due to their personal relations and services to the king(s). The four-decade influence of this family over a provincial town’s social web was fuelled by the income generated by land possession (income used in support of representative investments), merchant enterprises (such as the acquisition of saffron<sup>74</sup>) and matrimonial strategies (Michael married Catherine, a relative of the influential governor of the coin mint and salt chamber, later mayor of Sibiu, Nicolaus Proll,<sup>75</sup> while

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<sup>69</sup> FABRITIUS 1875. nr. CLVIII. CLIX. p. 139–142. from 1503, original SJAN Sibiu, Colecția de documente medievale, U V. nr. 35; 25 July 1503, original SJAN Sibiu, Colecția de documente medievale, U V. nr. 1875.

<sup>70</sup> FABRITIUS 1875. nr. CLX. p. 141–142. from 29 May 1503, original SJAN Sibiu, Colecția de documente medievale, U V. nr. 33.

<sup>71</sup> WERNER 1874. p. 308–311; FABRITIUS 1875. nr. CLXVI. Anthonius and his brother Iohannes were both named legal representatives of the Șeica district, see SJAN Sibiu, Colecția de documente medievale, U V. nr. 1879.

<sup>72</sup> A family tree in GÜNDISCH 1993. p. 284, 425; see also FIREA 2016. p. 249. One Gabriel Polner, registered at Vienna University as a student from Transylvania in 1510, parish priest in Noiștat between 1533 and 1549, and a relative of Laurentius Polnar from Baia Mare [Frauenbach] and Michael Polnar from Sibiu, may actually not be related (?) to the Sighișoara kin, see PAKUCS-WILLCOCKS 2016. nr. 94. p. 80. Another *Valentinus Pollner ex Schessburg* is registered in the matriculation books of the Vienna University in 1512, possibly a relative of the Polnar kin and mayor of Sighișoara at an unknown date, see TŪSKÉS 2008. nr. 6536. and FABRITIUS 1875. nr. CCCXIV. p. 240. A further *Valentinus Michaelis Polner de Megies, baccalaureus in decretis* and parish priest in Curciu who achieved his higher education in Kraków (1485) and Vienna (1498), is active as notary public in 16 November 1502, see DINCĂ 2020a. p. 80, 103. (nr. 102.) (see also footnote 104. of this paper for further details concerning this Valentinus Polnar).

<sup>73</sup> A Transylvanian Saxon urban oligarchy that rose to power mostly after the defeat of the former ruling class, the military-driven ‘Gräven’, in 1467 by King Matthias, following a revolt of these German landlords together with representatives of the Hungarian and Szekler nobility, see GÜNDISCH 1972; GÜNDISCH 1987. p. 182; FARA 2019. p. 79–82.

<sup>74</sup> SCHULLER 1897. p. 389.

<sup>75</sup> See also “*Circumspecto Michaeli Polner, marito alterius filiae, Catherinae*” – FARA 2020. p. 46. The name of Michael’s wife as ‘Geneloia’ – see TONK 1979. p. 75. – represents a misreading of the text *egregius vir Michael Polnar alias nostre civitatis magister civium praesentium ostensor unacum sua virtuosa geneloia*, FABRITIUS 1875. nr. CXXVI. p. 107–108; original document at SJAN Brașov, Primăria Municipiului Sighișoara, nr. 18. The correct interpretation of the text refers to *virtuosa genealogia*.

Anthonius' wife was a member of the 'Gräven' nobility, formerly married to a 'count of Merghindeal'),<sup>76</sup> and may have been based on instrumental relationships of clientage. The use of 'political friendship' networks is most visible in the case of Michael, whose cooperation with Thomas Altemberger from Sibiu transpires both in their common civic tasks (as envoys abroad<sup>77</sup> or supervisors of local affairs<sup>78</sup>), and within their correspondence. There is also a spiritual dimension to this process of authority construction, the entire family expressing overtly its piety towards the modern patterns of devotion promoted by the mendicant orders, emphasising once again the features and the religious behaviour of the new elite of the Transylvanian Saxons.<sup>79</sup>

The Polnars paid close attention to the edification, maintenance, and ornamentation of the Sighișoara parish church (Michael) and Dominican convent (Gabriel), Brădeni parish church (Marcus), Saschiz parish church (Iohannes), Cincu Mare parish church (Georgius), Cluj-Mănăstur convent and the Dominican convent in Cluj (Petrus). The wall painting in Sighișoara's "church on the hill" of a donor figure kneeling before Mary Magdalene has been hypothetically identified as Michael Polnar.<sup>80</sup> It has even been suggested that the Viennese style of the painted polyptych in the same church was due to Marcus' contacts with Austrian artists.<sup>81</sup> A heraldic shield identified on a stove tile from Sighișoara may have belonged to (Marcus or) Gabriel Polnar,<sup>82</sup> sharing the same imagery (a bull's head and a star) with a coat of arms preserved in Cincu Mare church,<sup>83</sup> where another member of the family was active. Perhaps it would not be too bold in this context to link the lavishly painted first page of Sighișoara's town book of 1487<sup>84</sup> to Michael Polnar's decorative disposition for symbolic public display of authority and prestige<sup>85</sup> – the commission for the illumination of the manuscript had been probably

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<sup>76</sup> SCHULLER 1897. p. 400.

<sup>77</sup> "Thomas Altemberger Cibiniensis et Michael Polner de Segeswar civitatum nostrarum magistri civium" – FARA 2020. p. 46, original document at SJAN Sibiu, Colecția de documente medievale, U II. nr. 408. from 25 August 1483.

<sup>78</sup> A modern copy from 1485: "Cibiniensi Thomas Altemberger et Michael Pölder Segesvariensi magistri civium" – Urkundenbuch VII. nr. 4591; original document preserved at MNL OL DL 36562. Further documents attest to their concomitant presence at various boundary-related events, especially over the next year: 3 July 1486: Urkundenbuch VII. nr. 4645; 4 July 1486: Urkundenbuch VII. nr. 4653, 4654; 4 December 1486: Urkundenbuch VII. nr. 4680.

<sup>79</sup> DINCĂ – SCHABEL 2021. especially at p. 59, with further details and bibliography.

<sup>80</sup> POPA 1998–1999. p. 181.

<sup>81</sup> The Schotten altar in Vienna was under construction around the same time when Marcus Polnar was attending the university there, a hypothesis put forward by SARKADI NAGY 2011. p. 90.

<sup>82</sup> RUSU 2008. p. 208–209; RUSU 2019. p. 275.

<sup>83</sup> FIREA 2016. p. 249–252.

<sup>84</sup> It must be noted, however, that Michael Polnar is not among the members of the town council recorded in the town book, only *magister Michael alias magister civium* and Anthonius Polnar, see DINCĂ 2016. p. 160; DINCĂ 2019c. p. 13–14, 16.

<sup>85</sup> A parallel social behaviour, that can be further investigated by art historians in relation to the family patronage networks of late medieval and early modern Transylvania is reflected in the papers gathered in the volume BROSENS – KELCHTERMANS – VAN DER STIGHELEN 2012.

made a few years earlier to a foreign artist, as contemporary artistic similarities have not been identified locally.

A personal portrait of Marcus Polnar is difficult to sketch at this moment due to the paucity of sources and the lack of any ego-documents to attest to his agency.<sup>86</sup> Except for the impression of his seal on some officially-issued letters – attesting to a Renaissance disposition commonly found in his contemporaries<sup>87</sup> of recycling antique Roman gems<sup>88</sup>, no other personal items belonging to Marcus have been preserved to this day. In this context, the over-Transylvanian dimension of ecclesiastical and lay contacts of Marcus' personal social web that indicates most probably an academic network (Viennese and/or Paduan), can only be inferred.

With the aid of prosopographical methods that correlate the individuals' biographical data within a well-defined group,<sup>89</sup> Marcus Polnar can be integrated into a larger category of ecclesiastical intellectuals, formed in the scholarly environment of Central European universities, who used their intellectual contacts as a lobby clique. According to the principle of 'homophily' (the tendency to affiliate and associate with similar people),<sup>90</sup> the Transylvanian scholar belongs to a prosopographical group that expanded over the entire continent, sharing personal interests by means of travel and correspondence. The extent of this structure could have ranged from a couple of strategically placed relations to a wide array of informal acquaintances, supported, in this case, by indirect evidence. However, Marcus' ties of kinship, professional affiliation and fidelity did not develop into parallel "ego-networks" of undifferentiated relationships, but mingled into a single, family-focused preoccupation.

Certain deductions about Marcus Polnar's intellectual network can be presumed from the limited data at hand. A first clue is offered by the 1476 indulgence charter, a document which places Marcus, then parish priest in Şaeş, ahead of all other petitioners, either clerics or lay officials: the mayor of Sighişoara, the parish priests of Apold and Brădeni, the *villicus* and various secular representatives of the recipient community, Brădeni. The bishop of Eger, Gabriele Rangone O.F.M. †1486, former bishop of Transylvania (1472–1475) and *legatus de latere* for this territory in 1476 and, at the time, a close and trusted advisor of King Matthias,<sup>91</sup> was one of the two ecclesiastical

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<sup>86</sup> A definition of the concept of 'agency' as the sum of individual choices of social action in EPURESCU-PASCOVICI 2021. p. 2–3.

<sup>87</sup> DINĂ 2020b; ŞTEFAN 2021.

<sup>88</sup> The impression of Marcus Polnar's personal (ring?) seal on green wax is preserved on two documents, SJAN Sibiu, Colectia de documente medievale, U V. nr. 33. and nr. 35. The design possibly illustrates the goddess Victory crowning an anonymous individual, probably an emperor, dating from the first three Christian centuries (a hypothesis put forward by Radu Ardevan, Professor Emeritus at the Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, to whom I thank for this suggestion).

<sup>89</sup> STONE 1971; BEECH 1992.

<sup>90</sup> A set of five rules that impact the social network analysis has been developed by CHRISTAKIS – FOWLER 2010. p. 17–26.

<sup>91</sup> HLAVÁČEK 2008; KRISTÓF 2019.

officials who granted this indulgence. A connection between Marcus and the former bishop of Transylvania is plausible, considering that the dynamic of social networks postulates the dispersion of ideas and shared interests beyond an individual's direct social ties – to this end, any member of the bishop's retinue might have been a direct 'friend' of Marcus Polnar, and influenced a favourable outcome for his supplication. The same supposition can be made about the 1487 royal benefice, considering not so much a close relationship with the Hungarian king – as modern historians have suggested –, but the similar intellectual profile of bishop Sigismund Ernusz: a former student of canon law in Vienna (1469) and Ferrara (1473) and analogously interested in Roman antiquities (a collector of relics, stones and inscriptions).<sup>92</sup> University-trained canons were mobile, regularly availing of ecclesiastical benefices in distinct dioceses, in addition to offices in local ecclesiastical administration, "where they typically served as bishops' officials, chancellors, and archdeacons".<sup>93</sup>

In 1483, Marcus, who must have been now in his early 40s', held the position of dean (*decanus*) of Saschiz land-chapter and founder of the local confraternity of the Kalands Brothers, where his older brother and mayor, Michael, was recorded as "the dean's brother" (*germanus decani*). All these clues lead to the opinion that the Polnars' rise to relevant local positions was made after the return of Marcus from his Italian academic sojourn and his involvement into the social and political life of the community of Sighișoara. Not only had he insinuated himself and his relatives into the local urban elite,<sup>94</sup> but he may also have guided the academic paths of his nephews who put on the mendicant robe. In this context one can also take into consideration the reciprocal influence of the Polnar family members, for instance Marcus' appointment as legal auditor in 1503 by cardinal Pietro Isvalies (†1511), legate for Hungary, Poland, and Bohemia: the latter had been present the year before in Buda at the wedding ceremony of king Vladislaus II and Anna de Foix-Candale,<sup>95</sup> whose private secretary was at the time Iohannes Polnar. The plurigenerational longevity of the interests in art patronage, diplomatic pursuits, ecclesiastical careers and patrimonial management<sup>96</sup> attest to the significance of family agency in the transmission of not only wealth but intellectual awareness.

Finally, Marcus Polnar was a Doctor of Law and as such, part of a network of legal professionals active in Transylvania and furthermore, in the entire

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<sup>92</sup> FEDELES 2009. p. XVI–XVII.

<sup>93</sup> BRUNDAGE 2008. p. 345.

<sup>94</sup> SHAW 2005; CAROCCI 2011. A recent analysis of family history and political elites, very useful from a methodological perspective, explores the development of the urban high-class of medieval Turin, see GRAVELA 2017.

<sup>95</sup> NEMES 2019. p. 80–81.

<sup>96</sup> For instance, the Polnars were reluctant to convey the large sum of money bequeathed by Gabriel to the Dominican convent of Sighișoara, which was later compensated by the donation of a farm and a garden near the town, see SCHULLER 1897. p. 373; FÜLÖPP-ROMHÁNYI 2010. p. 148–149.

Latin Christendom.<sup>97</sup> Documentary records place him between 1503–1505 in the position of ecclesiastical judge<sup>98</sup> and proctor for the town of Mediaș,<sup>99</sup> a double expertise (spiritual/material) that attests to his pragmatic use of legal proficiency. The complementary aspect of Marcus Polnar's activity – as beneficiary of a *stallum* in various cathedral churches, parish priest and dean, legal representative of a municipal structure – is further confirmed by his special envoy mission in the winter of 1502<sup>100</sup> to Alba Iulia, where he was to retrieve some privilege charters for Saschiz land-chapter and bring them to Sighișoara. His hometown officials supported this commission and furthermore stressed the weight of the task by asking the Sibiu municipality to lend assistance for safe travel. The importance of the interlocking of spiritual and secular forms of public action can be explained by the competing institutional groups in urban areas: churches, chapels, convents, and hospitals were closely tied to the generosity of secular and regular clergy, confraternities of professionals, lay officials, urban and regional elites. Marcus' involvement in spiritual management (from the pastoral care of souls to canonical arbitration and authority over the Church's temporal matters) was directed, as documentary evidence points out, towards the patrimonial enrichment of his family's patronage projects in Sighișoara and surrounding settlements.

A defining moment in this regard was the critical turn of April 1490 and the political change it generated: at that time, Michael Polnar was locked away in prison, awaiting sentence for his fraud indictment, and his children were scattered around Transylvania and abroad, holding no relevant offices. In this context, the functioning of a social network and exercise of legal mentality is evident: Marcus managed to obtain the pardon for his brother<sup>101</sup> corroborated with an advancement of his office to royal judge, secured in 1491 his ecclesiastical benefice in Pécs by having the donation charters issued by the former king authenticated and may have even contributed to the nomination of his nephew Petrus to the position of abbot and *commendator* of the Benedictine convent of Cluj-Mănăștur. The same year, Sighișoara's town council headed by Michael endorsed a donation of property in favour of Saint

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<sup>97</sup> MCSWEENEY 2019, p. 79.

<sup>98</sup> Cardinal Pietro Isvalies nominated two judges in this specific case, that would span over 1503 and produce a variety of legal instruments: Marcus Polnar and Barthomeus, *cantor* of Alba Iulia cathedral church, identified elsewhere as *iuris utriusque et artium liberalium doctor*, see SJAN Sibiu, Colecția de documente medievale, U IV, nr. 11, from 24 July 1502. On the jurisdiction of papal legates over judicial matters and delegation of ordinary authority, see KALOUS 2017, pp. 62–66.

<sup>99</sup> Nominated together with other Saxon parish priests with legal education: "... *Alexandrum de Mussna, Blasium de Insula Christiana plebanos ac legum et decretorum doctores*" and his former co-judge, "*Bartholomeum iuris utriusque doctorem, cantorem*" – see footnote 71.

<sup>100</sup> See footnote 68.

<sup>101</sup> A document issued by the town council of Sighișoara on 16 July 1490 attests to Michael's exemplary reputation and 'virtuous genealogy' (i.e. 'family') and makes reference to the support of his children and extended family, see footnote 75. See also DU CANGE, voice *Genealogia*. <http://ducange.enc.sorbonne.fr/genealogia>.

Nicholas parish church,<sup>102</sup> doubled by a confirmation of King Matthias' charter on the same matter by the new Hungarian king.<sup>103</sup> This concern for written authentication of privileges and patrimony-related documents reflects the solid academic background and awareness of legal issues, specific to Transylvanian Saxons' secular clergy in the decades before the Protestant Reformation.<sup>104</sup> Further prosopographical investigation into the generations of graduates of the faculties of law from Vienna and Padua,<sup>105</sup> with focus on the affiliations between scholars, their spiritual, social, and economic profiles, might expose a larger number of relationship constellations within the Transylvanian Saxon communities and beyond. As parallel investigations have shown,<sup>106</sup> a doctors' degree represented a boost element of a church career and contributed to the establishment of a highly educated, and very influential ecclesiastical elite of the Transylvanian Saxons, involved and participating actively in the life of their communities not only through the cure of souls, but also through a particularly complex intellectual agency, engineered around literate/legal communication and artistic patronage.

The extent of Marcus' ascendancy over the destiny of his blood relatives needs to be assessed in context: he was not a free agent with selfish goals, yet a dedicated member of his kin, in a complex reciprocal relationship with his sibling and nephews and, implicitly, with their own social networks. Academic, economic, political, ecclesiastical, and artistic interactions reveal the prominent role of Marcus, the 'bright star', in the social destiny of the Polnar family constellation over two generations. This brief re-examination of sources, together with the fortuitous clue pertaining to the academic formation at the University of Padua, endeavours to introduce an updated methodological approach to the study of elites and intellectual history at the periphery of Latin Christianity, by combining elements of diverse 'auxiliary sciences of history', prosopography, sociology, art history, and social network analysis into a interpretative framework that would allow an in-depth investigation of the top-tier ranks of the Transylvanian Saxons' intelligentsia before the confessional break with the Holy See.

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<sup>102</sup> FABRITIUS 1875. nr. CXXVIII.

<sup>103</sup> FABRITIUS 1875. nr. CXXX.

<sup>104</sup> DINCĂ 2021a; DINCĂ 2021b; DINCĂ 2021c.

<sup>105</sup> An initiative already under development by the Charles University Archive and Institute of the History of Charles University, Prague: 'Prosopography of Prague University of Law 1372–1419'.

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