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Methodological Aspects for the Analysis of Transylvanian Censuses in the First Third of the Eighteenth Century*

Throughout history, tax revenue has been a significant source of income for the state. Direct taxes composed a crucial part of the state budget, along with revenues generated from trade and other economic activities. Since the Early Modern Times, taxpayers have been registered before tax collection to estimate income and determine applicable taxes for households.

In the Middle Ages, censuses taken in the Kingdom of Hungary aimed to register the taxpaying population, mainly serfs, while excluding the tax-exempt nobility and ecclesiastical order. The Ottoman conquests led to changes in the tax system, with the occupiers building a well-organized system adapted to local social conditions in the territory under their rule. Despite the Viennese court's financial administration reforms, medieval taxation methods persisted for decades in the remaining part of the Kingdom of Hungary. Tax collection procedures in the Principality of Transylvania also followed medieval customs, although the Transylvanian government introduced changes in defining taxpayers and tax units, similar to the reform in the Kingdom of Hungary.

In my study, I examine the censuses (*conscriptioes, connumerationes*) carried out in Cluj and Turda Counties from 1713 to 1733. My research focuses on the structure and content of these sources, as well as their methodological implications and potential for data interpretation and application.

Keywords: history of Transylvania, censuses, tax assessment, tax system, demography, methodology



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Taxation and the practice of taxing have been present since ancient times. Early censuses were mainly conducted to determine the number of taxpayers and assess the military power of the state. As a result, many social groups, including women, and children were excluded from these investigations. This approach, which focused solely on economic and military aspects, continued during the Medieval and Early Modern periods.¹

In the Middle Ages, censuses taken in the Kingdom of Hungary aimed to register the taxpaying population, mainly serfs, while excluding the tax-exempt nobility and ecclesiastical order. The Ottoman conquests led to changes in the tax system, with the occupiers building a well-organized system adapted to local social conditions in the territory under their rule. Despite the Viennese court's financial administration reforms, medieval taxation methods persisted for decades in the remaining part of the Kingdom of Hungary. Tax collection procedures in the Principality of Transylvania also followed medieval taxation customs, although the Transylvanian government introduced changes in defining taxpayers and tax units, similar to the reform in the Kingdom of Hungary.²

Following the Rákóczi's War of Independence (1703–1711), tax assessment procedures became more standardized.³ Unlike previous centuries, we have numerous sources related to tax levying practices that provide insight into the tax system and a broader understanding of the economic and social conditions of specific counties and settlements.

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¹ KOVACSICS 1957. p. 7; SZÜCS 2006. p. 7–8. Initially, the serf population paid taxes by providing agricultural crops. However, starting from the thirteenth century, this method of taxation was gradually replaced by paying with money. Regarding the development and certain elements of the medieval Hungarian tax system, see SZABÓ 2017. p. 42–44.

² In the sixteenth century, the government considered the financial status of individual households during tax assessments. However, from 1609 on, serf households were no longer taxed based on their financial situation. Instead, the heads of households were required to pay the tax per person (known as head tax). ÁGOSTON – OBORNI 2000. p. 155; DÁNÉ 2016. p. 24–25; MAKKAI – MÓCSY 1986. p. 488–489.

³ The recently implemented “calculus system” brought a change in the method of how the government distributed the levied money. The amount was split into 100 equal parts, which were then distributed proportionally among the three nations, as well as the cities and market towns. For further information, see PÁL 2009. p. 13–14.

Censuses in the Principality of Transylvania in the First Third of the eighteenth century

After the Rákóczi War of Independence, which concluded with the Treaty of Szatmár [Satu Mare, RO] in 1711, a time of peaceful development commenced in both the Kingdom of Hungary and the Principality of Transylvania. In the latter province, the Habsburgs implemented governmental reforms aimed at enhancing taxation and census procedures, to optimize the economic potential of the newly acquired territory. In order to impose taxes, it was necessary to have a thorough understanding of the financial status of households, which meant conducting frequent censuses to examine their living conditions.⁴ Despite these considerations, there has been limited research on the censuses in Transylvania during this period. Hence, the interpretation and publication of these censuses are still pending, with only a few exceptions.⁵

In the National Archives of the Hungarian National Archives Section F 49 Mixed Censuses, complete census series for multiple counties are available for the examined period. More than a dozen censuses were conducted in Cluj and Turda counties during the period in question. Each of the censuses was included in a separate volume. The tomes are almost identical in terms of volume, except for one, which only contains a table of the settlements. The volumes are also identical in terms of content and are evenly distributed over time. The first census, which was the most comprehensive, was conducted in 1713 and included both districts of Turda and Cluj County. In 1720, the upper district of Cluj County and the lower district of Turda County were investigated. Censuses were also taken in the lower and upper districts of Cluj County in 1722. In 1723 and 1724, censuses were conducted in both districts of Turda County. Lastly, in 1733, the population of the lower district of Cluj County was recorded.

During the period under study, the national diet ordered the censuses, but the execution was always the counties' responsibility. The census was conducted and the catalogue was prepared by jurors in each county. The commissioners went to every village and summoned their superiors to give recorded testimonies under oath.⁶ During the assessment, the commissioners were required to follow specific guidelines (i.e., *instructio*), but they did not consistently adhere to them.

Structural and content elements of the censuses

The sources present a diverse picture in terms of structure and content. However, there are also many similarities in the structural elements. Although there are differences in their content, each of the censuses that were examined

⁴ MAKKAI – SZÁSZ 1986. p. 894; PÁL-ANTAL 2009. p. 15.

⁵ The data from censuses were primarily used for demographic research. To view published data regarding the censuses of Cluj and Turda, see ACSÁDY 1896. p. 210–212, 214–216. To the potential uses for the data, see DÁVID 1957. p. 159; MISKOLCZY 2013. p. 32; VERES 2002. p. 75–108.

⁶ PÁL-ANTAL 2009. p. 15.

has some form of title page. It is possible that certain volumes were given their titles at a later date, as part of an archival reorganization, such as the censuses of both the lower and upper districts of Cluj from 1713 which only mention the examined county and year.⁷ On the other hand, several volumes provide a detailed title page including the exact name of the area being examined, the year of examination, and sometimes a list of settlements.⁸ In some instances, the volume also includes the decision order. For instance, in 1720, regarding the census of the lower district of Cluj, the decision specifies the administrative unit, the year, and most importantly, the authority that ordered the assessment (so-called Royal *Gubernium*⁹ of Transylvania)¹⁰ Some volumes contain an instruction (*insctructio*) that outlines the process of data collection and investigation criteria. The content of these instructions varies, with some being more detailed than others. For example, the census of the lower district of Turda from 1720 had an instruction that was particularly specific and detailed. It required delegates to assess the impact of a recent epidemic on the number of victims and on agricultural production.¹¹ However, in many cases, the instruction was not included. There are also some differences in the way the tables are presented. As the tables are the most important part of the censuses, they provide the majority of the data. The commissioners usually organized the data in a table format, but there are some instances when they wrote it out in descriptive form instead. Some tables only display the number of specific social groups (e.g., *jobbagiones, inquilini, vagi, viduae, unius sessionis nobiles, nobiles sub taxa, aulici servi, aulici vagi*)¹². However, certain datasets provide not only the number of individuals but also the names of the heads of the household. Some volumes also contain a summary table (*generalis extractus*), which cumulates the data of each settlement in tabular form. On the closing pages, apart from the official general *formula*, in a few cases, we can also find the signatures of the commissioners.

Regarding the content, the tables offer the most pertinent information, but other parts of the volumes also have useful details scattered throughout. For example, the analysis of the instructions can assist in comprehending the tax levying methods and practices of the examined period. Additionally, the guidelines found within provide insight into the unit on which the tax was imposed and help interpret official terms used during the era. It is also

⁷ CONSCR. COM. COL. PROC. INF. 1713, CONSCR. COM. COL. PROC. SUP. 1713

⁸ CONSCR. COM. THORD. PROC. INF. 1713, CONSCR. COM. COL. PROC. INF. 1722, CONSCR. COM. COL. PROC. SUP. 1722. The title page of the 1713 census of the lower district of Turda includes the following elements: the title (Investigatio Seu Conscriptio Incliti Comitatus Thordensis Processus Inferioris de Anno 1713. Cum legati authentia (sic!)), and the list of the examined settlements. In the 1722 census of Cluj's lower and upper districts, only the title appeared on the title pages. (Conscriptio Comitatus Colosiensis Processus [...] Anno 1722.

⁹ EMBER 1983. p. 70–72; MAKKAI-SZASZ 1986. p. 881–885.

¹⁰ CONSCR. COM. COL. PROC. SUP. 1720

¹¹ CONSCR. COM. THORD. PROC. INF. 1720.

¹² Serfs, cottars, vagabonds, widows, nobles with one parcel, taxpaying nobles, court servants, court vagabonds

important to underline the brief descriptions included below the table of taxpaying households for each settlement. These descriptions provide valuable context to the data presented in the table by highlighting geographical features, natural landscapes, and economic conditions of the settlements. The summary tables also provide valuable information on legal categories distinguished by contemporaries for different social groups. Last but not least, by analysing the signatures, we can gain information regarding the commissioners, as well as the personal composition of the counties' officials.

Methodological aspects for applying early modern Transylvanian tax censuses in economic and social history research

When evaluating the accuracy of the sources, it is important to consider the motivations of both the government and taxpayers. The government's primary aim was to register the taxpaying population for financial purposes, while taxpayers aimed to pay the least amount of tax possible due to additional military supply costs. This clash of interests can result in biased data, particularly in datasets related to the economic status of households. It is also important to exercise caution when examining population statistics, as the exact number of inhabitants in a household may not be certain. Nonetheless, the data can still be useful for monitoring demographic trends.¹³

Moreover, socio-historical data obtained from censuses can provide useful insights into the social structure of the county and its villages, as well as the internal social relationships and geographical distribution of trades. By analysing these elements, we can gain a comprehensive understanding of demographic changes of that era. Additionally, the descriptions of the geography and agricultural practices of each settlement also offer valuable data. Sometimes, relevant data that could provide new insights is often overlooked in historical research when compared to economic figures. However, it is important to examine data regarding natural resource exploitation, agricultural production, and population conditions. It is crucial to be cautious while using scattered data since they may not be entirely accurate. Nevertheless, incorporating them into the examination could help us gain a more comprehensive understanding of various economic and social phenomena.

Summary

The integration of the Principality of Transylvania into the Habsburg Empire brought about new opportunities for the country's economic and social development. Despite retaining many of its outdated features, such as its fragmented public administration system, Transylvania also adapted to meet the needs of the imperial government. The process of tax assessment underwent changes, which were primarily economically motivated, as the

¹³ KOVACSICS 1957. p. 16.

government wanted to conduct a thorough evaluation of the financial situation. However, these changes also provided information about the social circumstances of taxpayers, offering insight into the social history of the era, the agricultural system, and the internal relations of village communities.

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