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## **The Social Structure of the Transylvanian Rural Society at the Beginning of the Eighteenth Century\***

The history of the Principality of Transylvania is one of the most popular topics in Hungarian historiography and is also of great international interest. Although our understanding of the principality has significantly improved in recent decades, the overall perception of the subject has not fundamentally changed.

The studies aimed at achieving a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the nations and communities of Transylvania have a long history; however, our knowledge remains incomplete in many respects. While we have detailed descriptions of the social structure of Transylvanian society and its unique self-organizing communities during the Middle Ages, there is a notable lack of analysis concerning social relationships in the centuries following the Battle of Mohács. This is particularly true regarding the structural composition of rural society.

This paper aims to analyse the structural characteristics of rural society and conduct a comparative examination of its composition in Cluj and Turda Counties during the early decades of the eighteenth century. By analysing the relevant data, we can gain a detailed understanding of the social relations within the rural communities of the period, while also providing a terminological framework for examining the conceptual development of given social categories.

*Keywords:* history of Transylvania, society of Transylvania, social structure, rural society, early modern period, early decades of the eighteenth century, censuses, social stratification, social categories



The demographics of Transylvania have been extensively studied by many scholars; however, several aspects remain unclear. While numerous papers have addressed the structure and composition of the Transylvanian nobility

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and orders, there is limited information available regarding the demographic conditions of rural households. This gap can be attributed to the scarcity of historical sources and a lack of thorough research. To advance our understanding and potentially revise previous concepts, it is essential to process the available sources.

Within the existing data, particularly from the first half of the eighteenth century, a more detailed picture emerges. Although the corpus primarily comprises economic data, it offers valuable insights into the structure of rural society and the living conditions of various social groups. The analysis of this information sheds light on the demographic processes affecting the rural population in specific administrative units over several decades.

In this paper, I will examine the structural characteristics of rural society in the counties of Cluj and Turda and compare their compositions during the early decades of the eighteenth century. By studying their social conditions, this research aims to make new contributions to our understanding of the social history of the period and partially address the existing gaps in the literature.

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

Regarding the Middle Ages, the social structure and unique self-organising communities of Transylvania are discussed in detail, however, our understanding of the centuries following the Battle of Mohács is quite limited.<sup>1</sup> As mentioned earlier, the primary reason for this gap in knowledge is the fragmentary nature of archival documents. Nevertheless, there are numerous sources from the period that provide insights into rural society relations.

Among these sources, censuses are particularly noteworthy. The censuses of this time are not only rich in data but also offer a more consistent picture of the population, and their frequency is less subject to chance. After seizing power, the Habsburgs implemented reforms aimed at improving taxation to exploit the economic potential of their newly acquired territory. Consequently, it was essential to gain a thorough understanding of the financial status of households, necessitating regular censuses to monitor living conditions.<sup>2</sup>

Section F 49 (Mixed Censuses) of the National Archives of the Hungarian National Archives contains entire census series for several counties during the studied period. In some administrative units, demographic data and population trends can be analysed over several decades. This paper focuses on the counties of Cluj and Turda, for which 13 censuses have been preserved, covering the years from 1713 to 1733. While some censuses record only the number of heads of households belonging to a specific social group, others

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the economic and social conditions of Transylvanian rural society in the eighteenth century, see among others BERLÁSZ 1958; MAKKAI – SZÁSZ 1986. p. 995; SURDU 1960.

<sup>2</sup> MAKKAI – SZÁSZ 1986. p. 894; PÁL-ANTAL 2009. p. 15.

provide the names of the heads of households.<sup>3</sup> This detailed information enables the reconstruction of the ethnic composition of various settlements.<sup>4</sup>

For the purposes of this analysis, the most useful data sources are those that compile recorded information into a summary table (*generalis extractus*). Unfortunately, of the 13 censuses examined, fewer than half include a summary table.<sup>5</sup> Yet, it is still possible to gain insights into the social structure of rural society. By analysing and comparing data from specific settlements, we can obtain a detailed picture of the social and economic conditions of that era.

### **The social structure of the rural society of Cluj and Turda County in the early eighteenth century**

The first social category listed in the censuses is that of serfs, often referred to as “jobbagiones” or “incolae” in the tables. A glance at the summary tables reveals that serfs formed the largest social group, both in terms of numbers and wealth. They owned the majority of the livestock in the settlement and possessed most of the arable land.<sup>6</sup>

In 1722, there were 945 serf households registered in the lower district of Cluj County, while the upper district had 856. The following year, in 1723, in the lower district of Turda County 703 serf households were recorded, and in the upper district 1,640 heads of serf households were registered.<sup>7</sup> In 1724, in the lower district of Turda County 924 serf households were counted, and the upper district 1,746 heads of serf households were registered. Overall, serfs constituted nearly half of the rural society in both counties.

Another important social category to consider is that of the cottars, referred to in censuses by their Latin name, “inquilini”. Typically, their numbers were about half that of the serfs. Most cottars owned a house lot, but their economic role was not particularly significant.

In Cluj County, there were 1,219 cottar households recorded in the lower district and 573 in the upper district in 1722. In the following year, in 1723, in Turda County 331 cottar households were reported in the lower district and 640 in the upper district. In 1724, the number of cottar heads of households in the lower district increased to 402, while the upper district reported 734.

Widows have a distinct category in the census data. They are identified as “viduae”, “viduae jobbagionalium”, or “viduae incolarum”. Although their

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<sup>3</sup> However, this does not mean that all the registered householders had their own house lot or property. See for instance the category of *vagi* or *fugitive moderni*.

<sup>4</sup> BANDI 2021. p. 23–29; BANDI 2021A. p. 196–200.

<sup>5</sup> CONSCR. COM. COL. PROC. INF. 1722. p. 1–3; CONSCR. COM. COL. PROC. SUP. 1722. p. 102–105; CONSCR. COM. THORD. PROC. INF. 1723. p. 154–156; CONSCR. COM. THORD. PROC. SUP. 1723. p. 190–192; CONSCR. COM. THORD. PROC. INF. 1724. p. 154–156; CONSCR. COM. THORD. PROC. SUP. 1724. p. 189–191. Some censuses and summary tables were partly published in ACSÁDY 1896. p. 210–212, 214–216; FENEŞAN 1986. append.

<sup>6</sup> For examples of the structure of serf families see URSUȚIU 1979.

<sup>7</sup> In this data table, they are listed as *incolae sessionati*.

numbers are not large, their inclusion reflects the delegates' commitment to being thorough and accounting for all households.

During the period under study, the number of widows changed as follows: in 1722, there were 161 widows recorded in the lower district and 58 in the upper district of Cluj County. In Turda County, 43 widows were listed in the lower district and 103 in the upper district in 1723. The following year, in 1724, their numbers increased to 73 in the lower district and 111 in the upper district of Turda County.

The category that raises many questions and is quite intriguing is the group known as "vagi". This term refers to people who are constantly wandering or roaming, often referred to as „vagabundi". The phrase "vagi sine sessione" was also used, alluding to their existential situation, as the members of this group generally did not possess a house lot or any arable land.

Our understanding of the "vagi" is currently very limited. We lack detailed information about their background and existential circumstances. In the available literature, some researchers have linked them to transhumant Romanian shepherds,<sup>8</sup> while others have associated them with gypsies.<sup>9</sup> This issue will be discussed in greater detail later.

Their number is considerable and sometimes even exceeds the number of the cottars.<sup>10</sup> As the summary tables show, their number was 525 in the lower district and 324 in the upper district of Cluj County in 1722; in 1723, in Turda County, there were 405 "vagi" in the lower district and 385 in the upper district; the following year, in Turda County, there were 429 in the lower district and 368 in the upper district.

Another social category included in the census is that of the "aulici servi", also referred to as "servi curiales", which translates from Latin to court servants. Unlike the "vagi" members of this group typically possessed a small house lot and some arable land.<sup>11</sup> The censuses recorded their numbers as follows: in 1722, there were 430 of them registered in the lower district and 162 in the upper district of Cluj County. In 1723, 86 court servants were reported in the lower district and 181 in the upper district of Turda County. The following year, 1724, there were 96 court servants in the lower district and 169 in the upper district of the same county.

There is also a category known as "aulici vagi". They were officially registered in Cluj County in 1722, with a total of 14 individuals in the lower district and 85 in the upper district.

In some censuses, the category of "fugitivi moderni" is included. This Latin term refers to individuals who have recently left their place of residence and have been registered in a new settlement. Due to their circumstances, they do not own any property, including house lots, arable land, or livestock. They were

<sup>8</sup> DÁVID 1957. p. 190; MAKKAI–SZÁSZ 1986. p. 995; TRÓCSÁNYI 1957. p. 280, 285–286, 307.

<sup>9</sup> NAGY 2019. p. 62, 67, 78, 85, 87, 90, 93, 96–98, 100–101.

<sup>10</sup> CONSCR. COM. THORD. PROC. INF. 1723. p. 154; CONSCR. COM. THORD. PROC. INF. 1724. p. 154.

<sup>11</sup> At least in terms of the Cluj County. In Turda County, they possessed only a limited amount of arable land.

only registered in the county of Turda in 1723. In the lower district of the county, 7 of them were recorded, while 10 were noted in the upper district.

The category of “pixidarii” only appears in one census. The Latin term refers to foot soldiers or armed guards. In Transylvania, this social category can be found among the Szeklers, where it is clearly defined within their society. In the upper district of Turda County, 48 “pixidarii” households were registered in the census conducted in 1723.

Additionally, nobles impacted by the tax are also included in the censuses. Although not legally recognized as such, they were part of peasant society due to their existential and economic status. In the censuses, they are categorized as “nobiles unius sessionis” or “unius sessionis nobiles”, “nobiles sub taxa”, and “nobiles sine sessione”. Furthermore, widowed noblewomen are sometimes listed separately. In 1722, there were 99 noble households registered in the lower district of Cluj County and 87 in the upper district. In Turda County, the delegates counted 452 of them in the lower district and 124 in the upper district. By 1724, in Turda County, 456 noble households were recorded in the lower district, while the upper district remained at 124 households.

Finally, the censuses also account for the clergy, who are liable for the tax. In the census, they are referred to as “popae extraordinarii”, indicating that they are members of the orthodox church. In 1722, their number in the upper district of Cluj County was 3.<sup>12</sup>

### The mysterious social category: the “vagi”

While we have considerable information about the role and existential situation of most social categories, there are also some aspects and groups that are not frequently addressed in the literature. The least discussed among these is the category of “vagi”.

Censuses provide valuable data that enhance our understanding of their social roles and existential status. If we examine the records of the “vagi” in Alsó- and Felsőzsuk (*Jucu*), Magyarkályán (Căianu), and Vajdakamarás (Vaida-Cămăraș) from 1713, we can see that they owned significant scale of land and primarily produced agricultural goods.<sup>13</sup> In the same year, the “vagi” recorded in Szamosfalva (Someșeni) had a notably large livestock, particularly their sheep stock was significant.<sup>14</sup> Although the “vagi” were also registered in Turda County in 1713, we lack comparable data due to the incomplete nature of the records.

The summary tables confirm the latter example. For households classified as “vagi”, “vagi sine sessione”, or “vagabundi”, livestock was the dominant factor, with only a limited amount of land suitable for arable cultivating. In

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<sup>12</sup> The volume compiled by Feneșan includes a summary table for the lower district of Cluj County, listing the orthodox priests. However, the figures and the structure of this table differ from the source I used, which does not provide such data. See FENEȘAN 1986. append.

<sup>13</sup> CONSCR. COM. COL. PROC. INF. 1713. p. 168–169, 180–183, 190–191.

<sup>14</sup> CONSCR. COM. COL. PROC. INF. 1713. p. 206–207.

1723, for instance, the 405 “vagi” registered in the lower district of Turda County owned a total of 1,317 sheep but only had 114.5 cubuli of arable land.<sup>15</sup> Similar trends can be observed when analysing data sets of “aulici vagi”.<sup>16</sup>

To address the disputed ethnic background and mother tongue, it is necessary to analyse tables of certain settlement. Unfortunately, recording by name is more of an exception than a standard practice; however, there are some examples that can help us draw conclusions. For instance, in 1713, János Kádár was listed as a “vagus” in Komjátszeg (Comșești)<sup>17</sup>. In the same year, six “vagi” were registered in Tordatúr (Tureni): Juon Katona, Péter Kádár, Márton Kovács, Kriszta Togyer, Ráduly Oltyán, Vaszilj Szilágyi.<sup>18</sup> In 1713, three “vagi” were listed in Szind (Sándulești): Mihály Nagy, Márton Oláh and János Székely.<sup>19</sup>

To summarize the data presented by the censuses, it is crucial to note that even with this new information, drawing any significant conclusions remains impossible. As we have seen, most individuals or households registered as “vagi” had substantial livestock holdings, especially a notably high number of sheep. This trend is common in Turda County; however, in Cluj County many of these households were possibly already involved in agricultural activities. The latter phenomenon is likely affected by the natural geography of the given administrative unit. Even so, most of them were primarily livestock keepers and possibly transhumant herders.

The data also vary in terms of ethnicity. Contrary to suggestions in the literature, the relevant data do not clearly indicate that those classified as “vagi” had Romanian as their mother tongue. Additionally, it also cannot be claimed that the “vagi” were composed of the Gypsy ethnic group.

Based on the data and findings from relevant literature, we can conclude that the term “vagi” referred to individuals who did not own a house lot, but resided in a particular settlement, either temporarily or, in some cases, for an extended period.

## Summary

The rural communities of the Principality of Transylvania entered the eighteenth century undergoing significant changes while still maintaining former structures. Despite facing demographic challenges, the communities of Cluj and Turda sought to build their society with hope for economic and social stability. The censuses from the era under study offer insights into their social stratification and structural formation. When we compare social categories and the structure of stratification, we mainly notice similarities. However, analysing the data regarding the total number of social categories reveals

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<sup>15</sup> CONSCR. COM. THORD. PROC. INF. 1723. p. 154–156.

<sup>16</sup> CONSCR. COM. COL. PROC. SUP. 1722. p. 102–105.

<sup>17</sup> CONSCR. COM. THORD. PROC. INF. 1713. p. 92–93.

<sup>18</sup> CONSCR. COM. THORD. PROC. INF. 1713. p. 94–95.

<sup>19</sup> CONSCR. COM. THORD. PROC. INF. 1713. p. 125–126.

several differences in various aspects. Among the administrative units examined, the upper district of Turda County had the highest population. Since the two counties are nearly the same size, this district can also be considered the most densely populated administrative unit. Furthermore, the number and proportion of cottars and court servants in the lower district of Cluj County are particularly noteworthy. Additionally, the dataset reveals a relatively high percentage of cottars in Cluj County, alongside a significant presence of nobles in the lower district of Turda County.

It is also important to emphasise that analysing the censuses reveals a more nuanced understanding of the role of social groups that may not be significant in number but are integral part of the given community. The category of “vagi” discussed above is one such example. Their study is crucial, as the data suggest that their presence and extensive livestock farming have likely affected various aspects of the community. Nonetheless, similar basic research is essential for achieving a broader understanding of the social structures and dynamics within rural society.

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