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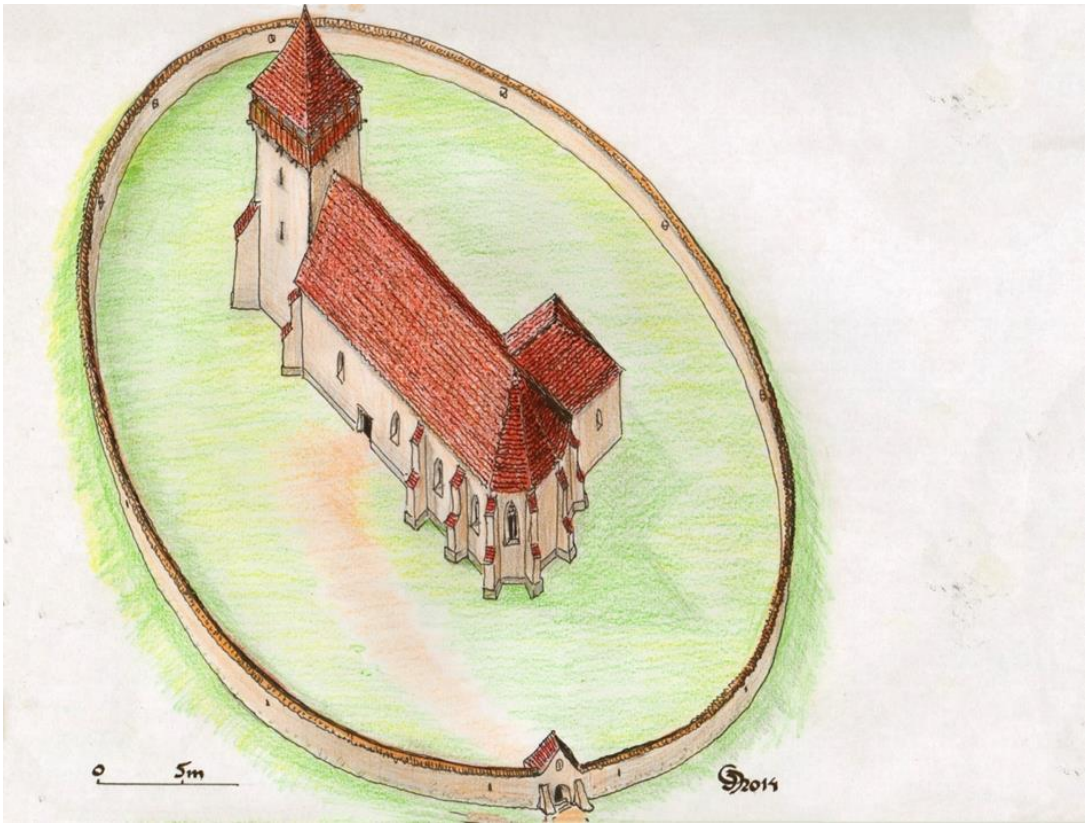

PHD THESIS

SUMMARY

Abandoned churches and chapels in the medieval and early modern Seat of Odorhei

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Keywords : seat of odorhei, arheology, lost churches, ecclesiastical history, medieval age, chapels, topography

Abstract

The main goal of the dissertation was to collect all the data that could indicate the presence of an abandoned church of the seat of Odorhei. Accordingly, chapels were also included into the data collection, along with the small churches built in the 18th-19th centuries of the Modern Era, which were abandoned after short periods.
Churches receive important roles in the histories of settlements because their sizes, the quality of their workmanship, and their appearance are an indirect indication of the local community's material background, demography and even social structure.
The study of medieval churches can often produce the earliest finds in a village and their appearance is in itself an indicator in the analysis of the settlement's emergence.

As such, archaeological excavations can offer new details not just on the age of the monument itself, but they can also shed light on the earliest stages of the formation of the settlement. Our process of collecting data sources on abandoned churches focused primarily on church archive collections, of which we have analysed all the relevant materials.

During our research we studied a total of 134 monuments, 19 of which were parish churches, one medieval monastery and priory church, 11 dating to the Principality Age, 9 to the Modern Age, as well as 8 suspected church locations. We studied and documented a total of 53 wooden churches, based on existing sources. Besides these, we also analyzed a total of 22 medieval chapels, 11 Modern Age chapels, and 5 chapels appearing in lore but without reliable sources backing them up.

The structure of the thesis

The settlements of the Seats of Odorhei evolved inside the narrow valleys formed by the numerous branches of the Târnava rivers and their tributaries. These rivers cross the area flowing from the eastern part of the Transylvanian Basin, from the foot of the volcanic plateau. The Târnava Mare follows a winding course in an east to west direction, forming the widest basins. The most important of these basins are those of Odorhei, of Mugeni and Cristur, inside which the three largest settlements of the seat have formed, with Odorhei and Cristur having earned market town status by the end of the Middle Ages. The larger creeks pouring into the Târnava, such as the Nicoul Alb, the Goagiu-creek, the Archita-creek, etc. played important roles in the histories of nearby settlements. In the southern part of the seat, the more important valleys are those of the Homorodul Mare and Homorodul Mic, Vârghiş and Cormoş-Creek, all of which are tributaries of the Olt. After the basins of the Târnava, these were the earliest to be settled. The valleys of Cuşmed-Creek and Iuhod-Creek, both of which flow into the Târnava Mică, have fewer settlements. The larger ones of the already mentioned streams have numerous smaller secondary branches and secondary valleys, which makes this area have an exceptionally large number of creeks crisscrossing it. The abundance of villages and their limited sizes, are due to the geographical environment, the narrow valleys, limited arable land and pastures, which characterize this region. By the end of the Middle Ages, no less than 138 settlements, representing the largest number of settlements among the Székely Seats, emerged within the small basins and valleys scattered among the hills.

We do not have written sources on the network of settlements found in The Seat of Odorhei during the Arpadian Era and therefore its reconstruction represents a huge undertaking for archaeological research and surveys. The collection of data through archaeological means on the beginnings of certain settlements is mostly ongoing but the image is still far from being complete. Despite this, certain tendencies are already visible, which enable us to sketch out certain moments and draw some conclusions. It's actually the excavation of churches and their surrounding cemeteries which add new details and important information to the existing research data. During the excavations, if it is possible to identify the earliest burials, or their funeral objects, then we can date these through both archaeological as well as natural science methods (we will go into further details about this later). Most often this method represents a more certain starting point that the usual dating

made through the analysis of pottery. Because we do not yet have an internal chronology developed for medieval pottery typology, we can only establish dates within wide limits.

The term *Seat of Odorhei* appears for the first time in sources from diplomas only relatively late, in 1448. The researchers studying this topic believed that the reason for this was the fact that it borrowed the name for its secular role from the Telegd deanery, mentioned in the diploma written between 1270-1272, and that the name was changed later on.

The writings of Balázs Orbán pointed the attention of scholars toward certain monuments found in Székely Land, and this led to the fresco restoration work done by art historian József Huszka at the end of the 19th century, during which several frescos were entirely uncovered and immortalized in bright watercolors. He uncovered the frescos found in the churches of several villages in the Seat of Odorhei: Mugeni, Biborţeni, Mărtiniş, Daia, Dârjiu and Filia.

László Dávid, the renowned researcher of medieval monuments in the Seat of Odorhei, must have noted about most monuments that *with regard especially to their beginnings, it is a great pity that the church's archaeological and monument excavations were not yet made*. Thanks to the archaeological work done in recent decades, his statement is no longer valid for numerous monuments. At the same time, researchers could also focus, not just on the study of still standing buildings, but also on finding completely destroyed monuments and revealing their histories. This present study compiles these results using the sometimes scarce, other times abundant sources provided by archive, topography and archaeological research.

Churches receive important roles in the histories of settlements because their sizes, the quality of their workmanship, and their appearance are an indirect indication of the local community's material background, demography and even social structure.

The study of medieval churches can often produce the earliest finds in a village and their appearance is in itself an indicator in the analysis of the settlement's emergence. Following the archaeological investigations, the determined chronological horizon indicates that some churches were already built by the middle or during the second half of the 12th century (Avrămeşti, Mugeni, Lueta, Cuşmed, Feliceni, Daia), while other examples seem to indicate that they might have emerged even as far back as the turn of the 11th-12th century

(Brădeşti). In the case of Mugeni, the burials dating back to the middle of the 12th century were preceded by earlier settlements.

As such, archaeological excavations can offer new details not just on the age of the monument itself, but they can also shed light on the earliest stages of the formation of the settlement. Earlier, based on the evaluation from the perspective of art history, on the description of architectural elements and layouts of churches which are still standing today, these could be dated back only to the 13th century at best. During the archaeological excavations, not only was the dating of the monuments determined but the different construction phases were also identified along with any changes made to their layouts. Furthermore, the excavation of the cemeteries surrounding the churches offered unique insights by yielding bone material for analysis.

This work is not just scientifically important, as it can also have potential value in areas such as tourism, heritage protection and education. In some cases the abandoned medieval churches were the village's first stone buildings and the construction of these can date as far back as the 12th century. Following the archaeological excavations they can be displayed to public audiences and by bringing the wall sections to surface and conserving them, it is possible to create unique and attractive touristic spots.

Because of the fact that the topography of most of the prairie churches is entirely unknown, they are exposed to extensive damage, especially the ones found on arable land (such as the ones in Sântimbru, Brădeşti and Mereşti etc.), as well as the ones found on cemetery grounds still in use today (such as Văleni, Nicoleni, Sâmbăteşti etc.).

The main goal of the dissertation was to collect all the data that could indicate the presence of an abandoned church. Accordingly, chapels were also included into the data collection, along with the small churches built in the 18th-19th centuries of the Modern Era, which were abandoned after short periods.

During our research we have also taken into consideration the denomination changes that followed the Reformation, when no less than six different religions were attempting to organize their structure. Because no similar research was undertaken up to this day, based on existing data we attempted to map out the appearance of medieval ecclesiastical structures and to determine exactly which village churches held mother church roles and which ones were filial. Based on this we generally observed that in most cases the construction of the mother church and its maintenance, were done with the support of their two filial churches. In

some exceptional cases larger church communities were also formed, and in our researched area Mărtiniș was one of the mother churches with most filial churches, with six such churches tied to it. Occasionally the relationship between the mother and the filial churches was a key indicator for the dynamics of the settlement and for the number of inhabitants it had. In the case of Mărtiniș, where the large medieval church was built, we must consider a larger settlement and population than in the villages with filial churches, found further away. From this point of view, the location of the medieval church is key. When two settlements with relatively matching populations and economic potentials collaborated, their church was build halfway between them, in the countryside (like in the case of Ulieș and Iașu). When in the Modern Era the balance of power shifted, the church was demolished and moved into the larger village.

The Catholic ecclesiastical roster was kept in most cases even after the Reformation, as long as there was a single active denomination present in the village. The organization of the ecclesiastical roster was determined based on sources, the dating of the ecclesiastical buildings as well as by relying on the numerous accounts found in local lore. This reconstruction was also done for the Modern Era, which shows very well the diversity and the separation between different denominations. This led to the fact that the small divided settlements also wanted to achieve the independence of their churches and so they each build their own. The earlier church fortune was either divided or the newly formed parishes had to provide it and therefore the standards of priests declined greatly.

During the 17th century several settlements became independent. In these cases we could also obtain quality data on the Reformation itself. We believe this was initially quite chaotic. The Protestant congregations not only preserved their old ceremonial objects but also their traditions during the first half of the 17th century. This is probably how, for example, the church in Teleac, built for the Reformed congregation in 1614, was built facing east and burials were made inside of it. In the cases of some villages, the Reformation did not hold up to its promises and they reverted to their old beliefs during the pastor elections. We can see such cases in Zetea, Dealu and Atia etc.

During our research we have collected all the causes which could have led to the construction of new churches and respectively to the abandonment of the earlier ones. These were most likely varied, with most important among them being the natural causes, as resilient stone buildings could not be built on inappropriate surfaces. We can also mark this

as being among the most common causes for the abandonment of churches. On the other hand, the changes in local conditions also often led parishes to change the location of their church. Most often, churches built back during the Middle Ages no longer satisfied more modern expectations and furthermore, the demographic increase also contributed to the need for new buildings.

During our research, we first discussed the monuments in their chronological order, beginning with the medieval parish churches. These were indicated by Papal records, or by burials uncovered in their vicinity. If a church possessed the right to make burials then it had at least partial parish level authority.

The following category is represented by later Principality Age buildings which came after the Reformation. In terms of their layout, these still followed medieval patterns, often also forming the outlines of triumph arches. Another group of monuments came into being during the Modern Era. For these, however, we employed a different type of classification, based on the materials used for the construction of the churches. During our research it became obvious that numerous smaller, transitional, shorter term buildings also existed in our area. Compared with our earlier knowledge, according to which there were 10 to 15 monuments, our data gathering revealed the existence of wooden churches in 53 different cases. This was achieved through archive sources, local history and the military maps. By studying the monuments, we may also conclude that the construction of wooden churches cannot be considered to be specific to only certain denominations. The two religious denominations with the most numerous followers within the seat, the Reformed Christians had 17, the Unitarians 16, and the Catholics 6, while the Romanian denominations, the Orthodox had 4, and the Greek Catholics had 8 cases when wooden churches were built.

An additional criteria, which led to another classification of the buildings, was the ecclesiastical role they fulfilled. Traditionally, the smaller buildings of filial churches were designated as chapels. Chapels, serving various roles, could also be built within settlements which already had a parish church. We elaborated in detail on these, discussing separately the issues of function and origin. My dissertation presents in detail the sources used during the research as well as their availability and the extent to which they have been researched. An entirely separate chapter deals with the medieval and modern ecclesiastical organization, discussing chronology of the construction of the churches, and their roles within medieval society. Another chapter deals with the presentation of the conditions following the

Reformation and the construction of the church networks of the newly formed parishes. The next chapter turns to the research of the cemeteries found around the churches, to their history, and finally their abandonment, after which public cemeteries made their appearance. The following chapter discusses the process of church building, relying especially on Modern Era sources, which reveal what a huge undertaking the building of a new church actually was for the parish.

Our process of collecting data sources on abandoned churches focused primarily on church archive collections, of which we have analyzed all the relevant materials. Out of these, the most valuable sources proved to be the reports created during official church inspections, which occasionally contain descriptions of churches, that were later on abandoned, including inventories, their interior furnishing, even their ceremonial objects, ceremonial objects, and their bells. On rare occasions they even note the important documents found at the time in the archive of the respective church. Beside the inspection reports, the donation request letters meant to help out with the construction of the churches, also represent very valuable sources. These were subjected to secular regulations, and their drawing up required the input of a commission which had to evaluate the state of the old church in order to justify the need for the new building.

Occasionally we have also added to our sources church documents from the national archive. On rarer occasions we reached out to the parishes and by processing their entire archives we found valuable data on some churches. However, due to time constraints we unfortunately couldn't extend this meticulous investigation to all settlements, and we also found that some archives were destroyed over time. These contained unprecise unique documents because, while inspection reports were copied and placed in archive collections, the contracts made with craftsmen, or the notes created during construction only had single examples preserved in the settlements.

The data collected for the dissertation can be further enriched through the meticulous research of these archives, however, newer monuments can no longer be discovered in significant numbers. The starting phase of the data collecting extended to every settlement within the Seat of Odorhei, so that we possess relevant information on all the church histories. Meanwhile, the 18th century military maps worked well as a verification method, which could also be used to filter out abandoned churches or churches which were moved from one location to another.

During our research we kept an eye out for works on the local history of relevant settlements, while at the same time comparing the data appearing in the works of 18th – 19th century historians with our own. We dedicated special attention to the descriptions written by Balázs Orbán because in some cases he could have even seen some of the monuments, and while his descriptions also mislead us in many cases, we have taken this opportunity to make some corrections.

Together with the collection of the archive sources we also gave priority to on the spot field surveys for more precise locating and for evaluating their state. In order to determine their current state we also made topographical measurements when the situation made this necessary. Military maps gained an important role during their locating, along with local lore and the analysis of local toponymy. Frigyes Pesty played an important role in this, as well as the collections of Atilla Szabó, from which we could often use the mention of certain locations with churches or chapels as sources.

During our research we haven't studied in detail the patronages of nobles because this is such a vast and entirely unstudied area where we only have some very general guidelines to direct us.

However, it is not wise to overlook the nobility because with their monetary contributions parishes were able to build larger churches that were up to higher standards. The most recent historical and archaeological research on medieval Székely Land has indicated that the feudalization of society occurred much earlier that initially believed. The beginning of this process was believed by earlier scholars to have occurred during the 13th-14th centuries, with its completion being placed within the 15th century. As such, some families must have played very important roles during the gothic reconstructions. Regarding this, however, we have data indicating that such occasions were very rare. In the case of the Reformed church in Mugeni, during the restauration an inscription was uncovered in which János Bögözi, the nobleman living in the village, refers to himself as the direct builder of the church. The year appearing in the inscription is 1509, which marks the end of the gothic reconstructions. This data, which already constituted a rarity, was further completed by the new information yielded by the excavation of the rich graves.

The families that contributed donations received the right to be laid to rest in places of honor, such as the church sanctuary. During their lives they were also ensured privileged

sitting spots during mass in order to differentiate them form more common folk as well as to indicate their role within the village.

In the cases of abandoned churches we can often find examples of specially designated burial spots, the family crypt, which was used for longer periods of time. An example of this was found in Văleni, where the floor of the Ferenci family crypt was paved with bricks.

By analyzing the late medieval and Principality Age censuses we can see that nobles lived only in a few villages. In a 1602 census of the Seat of Odorhei, without the Seat of Cristur, in a total of 92 settlements, 16 nobles were counted in 14 different settlements. The philanthropy of noble families is preserved by ceremonial objects which often had the benefactor's name carved into them. Similarly, we can also find benefactor names constantly carved into furnishings. Similar observations can also be made when studying bells.

Noble patronage, however, was limited in most cases. The parish built the village church with the contributions from its members. The practice observable in counties, of a nobleman building a church from his own initiative and covering its maintenance thereafter, is actually not typical here. Even so, we can still find such examples in the area we are researching. In Beclean, during the beginning of the 16th century, the nobleman Péter Geréb had a chapel build on his own land, had a priest brought there, had a house build for this priest and even covered his daily expenses. Later on, the chapel became the village's parish church. We can observe another similar case in Filiaş, where a different branch of the same Geréb family had a private chapel built next to the parish church. We can see similar cases in several settlements, however, we do not have any certain sources for these.

The reconstruction of the settlement network is even more difficult if we are studying the Arpadian Age. During this period settlements had a loose structure, so the sites found during field surveys can only be connected hypothetically with the names under which settlements are known today, so we cannot exclude the possibility that several smaller settlement clusters later fused together to form the villages we know of today. We analyzed the toponym types in a table, also containing the years to which the earliest sources on the churches or villages date back. Their analysis is quite important because, when projecting this data on a map, it is very obvious that the churches and villages that date back to the 12th century are uniformly distributed on the territory of the Seat. Early settlements formed not

only in the basins found along the bigger streams such as the Homorod Rivers and the Târnava Rivers, but also in smaller more hidden valleys.

During our research we studied a total of 134 monuments, 19 of which were parish churches, one medieval monastery and priory church, 11 dating to the Principality Age, 9 to the Modern Age, as well as 8 suspected church locations. We studied and documented a total of 53 wooden churches, based on existing sources. Besides these, we also analyzed a total of 22 medieval chapels, 11 Modern Age chapels, and 5 chapels appearing in lore but without reliable sources backing them up. During the analysis of the 134 monuments, the most significant sources for the medieval and Modern Age histories of the settlements emerged, and during the presentation of these, when justified, we also covered the church representation activities undertaken by the settlement's noble families.

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