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The History of the Carthusian Order in the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary

The Settlement and Establishment of the Silent Monks

Theses of the Doctoral Dissertation

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I. The subject matter of the dissertation

The history of the Carthusian Order first raised the attention of the scholarly public in the nineteenth century. The first monography dealing with the Order was written by Lajos Dedek Crescens in 1889. His ideas had exerted a formative influence on the view of the Order in the Hungarian historical scholarship until as late as 1967, when Péter Németh published his first paper, based on both archival and archaeological evidence, about the monastery of Tárkány. In recent decades, several authors have dealt with the eremitical orders, and more precisely with the Carthusians, such as László Koszta, Gábor Sarbak, Edit Madas, Péter Csengel and József Török. The reason for the renewed attention paid to the topic was formulated by Beatrix F. Romhányi, who stated in relation to the history of the Pauline monks that the past of the hermits is still covered in balladic obscurity. While this could be simply explained away as part of the mystery inherent to their chosen lifestyle, it would nonetheless be more reasonable to undertake a fresh research into their written legacy, and start a new page in the research of the Hungarian past of the Carthusian order, with the help of the most recent international scholarship. For it is „well known” that the monks floated in complete silence, although they were merely obligated to limit their utterings to the most necessary things. One also „knows” that they opted for anonymity, but this only characterises part of their literary activity.

Although the sources of medieval Hungarian history are far from abundant from a Western European perspective, the researchers of the Carthusian order are favoured to the extent that the silent brothers, as the Cistercians, were a centralised order, and consequently the blank spots of their past can to a certain degree be enlightened with the help of European analogies. Moreover, the digitization of the medieval charters has made available a great number of hitherto unused documents concerning the history of hermits. An international conference held in September 2007 in the Chapter of Szepes, in the Republic of Slovakia, revealed plainly the difficulty of determining the place of the monasteries that had functioned in the medieval Kingdom of Hungary on the family tree of the Order – a difficulty mainly caused by the lack of recent research. Although several papers in the volume entitled *Central European Charterhouses in the Family of the Chartusian Order* also dealt with various aspects of the history of the houses located in the Szepesség, in general it can be stated that references to Hungarian connections in the foreign literature are extremely sparse. This lack of references is especially conspicuous in the case of Seitz in Carinthia, albeit it was from here that the

hermitage of Menedékszirt, and indirectly those of Dunajec and Lövöld, were founded. It is thus evident that a more profound knowledge of the past of the Hungarian Carthusians is needed, and this need explains my effort at a reassessment of the history of the Hungarian Carthusian houses, and before all of their settlement there. One of the basic aims of the present dissertation was accordingly to prove that an exploration of Carthusian history with modern historical methods adds plenty of new information and contexts to the ecclesiastical history of medieval Hungary in general. I wanted to enlighten the background to the establishment of the Carthusian monasteries, their structure, internal life, as well as the everyday life of the monks, and the complexity of their social networks. Another intention of the dissertation was to prove that, while the monks indeed abstained from the local political world, it by no means meant that they were completely closed off from all external influences: they promoted the *devotio moderna*, and did so in such complete compliance with the prescriptions of the order as to remain smoothly integrated into the activities of the other monastic orders. The Hungarian houses of the Carthusians were integral parts of the European family of the order.

II. The Structure of the Dissertation

Having surveyed the relevant scholarship, the next phase preceding the writing of the dissertation was one of the longest ones, involving a hopefully full scrutiny of the available source material. I started with the medieval online database of the Hungarian National Archives, as well as the published charter collections. Then followed the exploration of foreign source publications and the non-Hungarian scholarly literature. Almost 130 years have passed since the publication of the first monography about the Hungarian Carthusians, and in the meantime several Western European sources have been made available, which shed new light on the life of the eremitical monks.

In the second chapter of the dissertation, a summary of general works about the Carthusians is followed by an overview of the scholarly literature that has so far dealt with the Hungarian houses. Through the works presented there, the reader is offered a glimpse of the past of the four Hungarian Carthusian houses to the extent it is currently known. In the Middle Ages, the order had four settlements in Hungary: Menedékszirt, dedicated to Saint John the Baptist, Lechnic or Dunajec, consecrated to Saint Anthony the Hermit, – both in the Szepesség –, and Lövöld in Veszprém county and Tárkány or Segedelemvölgy in Heves county, dedicated to Saint Michael and Saint Nicholas respectively. Both hermitages in the

Szepesség, founded at a distance of some fifty kms from each other, became symbols of escape and penitence among the predominantly German population. The third chapter contains a sketchy presentation of the general history of the Carthusian order: the career of the founding churchman, the settlement of the first monasteries, and later, thank to the growth of the order's popularity, the role of the General Chapter are examined in turn. Here I present those main events of medieval Carthusian history which influenced the Hungarian foundations. What played a central role in the life of the Hungarian monasteries was not the central house of the order, but the Carinthian monastery of Seitz – it was from there that the first priors arrived to the Hungarian foundations, a topic dealt with in the fourth chapter.

The first attempt at founding a Carthusian monastery in Central Europe can be connected to king Béla IV, who in 1238 transferred to the order the Benedictine abbey of Ercsi. This no doubt late foundation yielded no success, however, for Ercsi was eventually taken by the Cistercians. The first Carthusian house in Hungary was finally established in 1299 in the land of the Saxons of Szepes, which became the easternmost foundation of the order. The count of the Saxons, the titular bishop of Szepes, and the ruler were all involved in the beginnings. The construction works were supervised by a rector, divine service was performed in a chapel until the church was consecrated, and, in accordance with the rules, the General Chapter was sent notice when the work had been completed. The monastery was established on a site hard to access on foot, the monks did no pastoral work, but founded a hospital along the wall and built a chapel close to the entrance for the worshippers. They had difficulties in making their living, however, which explains protests raised against the establishment of another monastery. Despite the initial worries, the settlement of Dunajec/Lehnic developed into an important ecclesiastical institution. The founder, master Kakas, provided gradually for the establishment of the house: after a conflict that ended with homicide, he was judicially obliged to perform beneficial deeds in favour of the church. He consequently donated to Menedékszirt a settlement established on his estate, where the construction of the new house began. The monastery of Lechnic was established along the Polish-Hungarian border, near a busy trading route, in accordance with the openness initiated by the *devotio moderna*. This attitude is perfectly reflected by the donations made in favour of the house, the flourishing estates, and the connections maintained by the monastery with the students of Cracow university. A special case even among the sparsely documented Carthusian houses is that of Segedelemvölgy, near Tárkány, which lived in the shadow of its founder. The information that survives about its past is so scarce that even its ruins have been only accidentally discovered in the course of a road construction near Eger. Modest and retired life, devoted to

silent prayers, was characteristic of all monasteries. Nevertheless, it seems that in the case of Lövöld material welfare also determined the destiny of the foundation: the monastery provided loans to neighbouring noblemen, abbeys and even the ruler, and complied with its military obligations by setting up a banderium of its own. At the time of its establishment, Lövöld was given former royal estates, which continued to yield considerable profits throughout the Middle ages. The fame of the monastery has been maintained by the manuscript of the Carthusian Anonymous, a codex which, for all its relevance for literary history, is most important as the only known Hungarian Carthusian vestige of the *devotio moderna*.

The fifth chapter contains a charted list of all estates owned by the Hungarian houses. The foundations charters make it possible to determine the core landed wealth of the individual monasteries, with the exception of Segedelemvölgy, where the estates can only be reconstructed through an examination of minor lawsuits. The order regulated centrally the goods owned by the houses, and not only their number or value, but also their geographical location. The efforts of the monks to form contiguous landed estates through purchase and exchange, preferably in the vicinity of their monastery, can be traced for the Hungarian houses as well. Most of the sources related to the Carthusians were made in the course of cases of disputed landed property. As these rarely provide relevant information about the order itself, the chapter mainly offers a short presentation of the estates and the time span of their possession by the order. In handling the legal cases concerning their property, the monks occasionally left their house, an act which left traces in the documentation. The evidence contained in such documents have enabled me to add new information to what was known about monks already identified, and complete their list with hitherto unknown persons. The reconstruction of the personnel of the monasteries was attached to the description of the individual houses (in the course of the research, some priors who have so far remained unknown in the scholarship were successfully identified).

The sixth chapter examined the everyday life of the monks. It is thanks to the strict rules of the order that the daily routines of houses located in such an imperfectly documented region can be reconstructed. The General Chapter was not only a central forum where the priors discussed the most important issues regarding the individual settlements, but it also supervised through visitators compliance with its orders. What makes information about the everyday life of the monks living in the Carthusian hermitages available is the close supervision to which the silent monks were subjected by the central monastery of the order. The daily routines of the monks can thus be reconstructed on the basis of the practice known

from other European houses. The monasteries were established in lands with various facilities, and in political environments that frequently differed from the French sample, and yet they were expected to solve emerging problems in a way that did not upset central direction with unified rules. According to the rules, access to the order was tied to the fulfilment of strict conditions. The candidate had to be at least twenty years old, and, after a probational year dictated by the harsh conditions, the monks were expected to make a judgement on his ability for the Carthusian life. However the Carthusian monks favoured isolation, and however completely they closed themselves off from the external world, knowledge of their way of life inevitably spread around. As their emphasis was on the spiritual goods, their ways and customs attracted brothers from other orders as well. The Carthusians of Szepes maintained close contacts with the Cistercians of Savnik, and the two establishments mutually helped each other, spurred at first by geographical proximity, and later by the drive for survival. This connection, however, cannot even be compared to the relationship the Carthusians entertained with the Paulines. Lövöld is sometimes referred to as the „most Hungarian” monastery, for it attracted flocks of Paulines in quest of stricter rules. A separate sub-chapter deals with the donations made by the patrons. As the rules of the order expected the monks to concentrate on prayer, they were not prone to being transformed into sacral centres of their benefactors. A great amount of help during the construction works of Menedékszirt was provided by Hedvig Szapolyai, the greatest supporter of the monastery. Yet the surviving sources give no reasonable explanation for the closeness of the relationship between her family and the order. She came from the polish Piast dynasty, and paid a good deal of attention to the Carthusians of Menedékszirt and Dunajec. Her activity as a maecenas is far from unparalleled in the Kingdom of Poland, and nor are the connections of her family with the Carthusians, for it was the Piasts who founded in 1423 the monastery of Legnica in Silesia. The next thematic unity of the chapter is devoted to the literary activity of the Carthusians, for the monks regarded the sriptor’s work as of paramount importance. Even in the time of printed books they remained acknowledged illuminators. Under the impact of the *devotio moderna*, the order created a special form of spiritual readings in the fifteenth century, strongly combining their theological message with the peace of the soul that was indispensable for a living faith, and offering advice and examples to the readers whereby to reach the expected quietude. Thus they offered insight into their own everyday life of prayer, bringing the readers close to their way of life, and holding up a mirror to ordinary people – from that point their message was public. In the last sub-chapter of the dissertation I examined the healing activities of the monks, who paid great attention to the cure of the infirm members

of their own community, built a growing number of infirmaries for their sick, and hospitals for the pilgrims and the poor. Since the Carthusian settlements were located far from the densely populated regions, they were rarely visited by foreigners. With the emergence and spread of monasticism, the care for the sick was given an almost institutional framework, for the founders of orders always expected their followers to provide for the poor. A method frequently applied by the Carthusians as well was venesection. Prior Guigo set a precise procedure for it in the order's customs: it was applied six times a year. The knowledge and use of medicinal herbs were of crucial importance. Authors dealing with the order's history repeatedly refer to the fact that the Carthusian estates boasted medicinal plants that existed nowhere else. After the universities had taken over medical training, the science of the monks was limited to traditional care based on experience, with the help of medicaments made of natural herbs. The monks also put emphasis on the observance of a balanced diet. Healthy meals and the use of baths amounted to a natural miracle, which also cured the soul of the sick. The foundation of abbeys in the vicinity of healing springs was far from uncommon: while the order's rule did not expressly allow for the visit of medical and thermal baths, nor did it exclude it completely.

III. Conclusions and Chief Results

An examination of the activities of the Carthusian monks in medieval Hungary showed that members of the order complied with the strict rules both within the walls of their respective houses – the contrary is attested only exceptionally – and towards the external world. Besides the handling of their legal affairs, the Carthusians appear neither in the secular church nor in other positions of power in the surviving sources – in a marked contrast to other orders. The life of the four hermitages that functioned durably in Hungary was determined by the natural faculties of their settlements: even without recourse to Western European analogies it can be stated that they were unable to build up self-sustaining economic units. Already at the start they needed the help of their patrons, before all the royal family, for the income generated by the estates belonging to their houses failed to support eremitic life. Moreover, the lands they did have frequently caused them to clash with their neighbours, a situation which, while favouring the late historian by the evidence it generated, prevented the silent monks from completely shutting themselves off from the external world. In the dissertation, I wanted to draw attention to the possibilities of further research on the order which shortly before still appeared as covered in „balladic obscurity“. Yet the examination of the Carthusians should

not be limited to the Hungarian sources, for these yield only fragmented information on their physical features. The life of the monks was determined by spirituality; the everyday experience of their faith was of such importance to them that they withdrew to silence from before the external observers. They opined that the matters of the soul, and relations with God, demanded a life deprived of care for things unconnected to the pure faith. Consequently, they denounced superfluous talk and close personal contacts, prayed for the salvation of all human beings, and prepared religious readings for their less educated brothers. Complete anonymity was of course excluded by administrative reasons. The names of the monks were recorded in chapter registers and charters, and their origins were likewise frequently known. They pursued healing activities, cared for those living on their estates, maintained churches, initiated fairs: they thus by no means isolated themselves from the events of the world, but simply refused to play an active role therein. The General Chapter, which linked all the monasteries, established the European family of the order, of which the history of the Hungarian houses constituted but one slice. Their past can be studied through the network of general prescriptions and working conditions. The Carthusians lived their lives within the walls of their monasteries..

Thanks to the particular structure of the Carthusian order, it is possible to have an insight into the everyday life of the monks through the acts of the General Chapter. For, besides the daily order, the tasks, competences, functional responsibilities and possibilities of the office-holding brothers were also determined centrally. It was the prior's duty to secure the functioning and provisioning of the house, thereby enabling the monks to concentrate on their work undisturbedly. The *procurator*, who practised the rights of the leader in case the latter was incapacitated, could only cross the double border of the monasteries with a special license. The cook, the baker, the shepherds and the other *conversi* contributed through the fulfilment of their own particular duties to the smooth working of the monastery, strictly observing the rules themselves. It was this disciplined organisation that made the life of the silent brothers attractive to the other orders, members of which frequently applied for entry to the monastic hermits. Yet the Cistercians, Paulines and secular clerics were only admitted after the order consented to their habilitation in the presence of a visitor. It was during the long awaiting time prescribed for the novices that they became familiar with the carefully elaborated Customs. The tools needed for the scriptorial work performed by the monks were also produced in the monastery. In the course of copying and translating the monks relied on their own well-equipped libraries, and used the same books for preparing their own works. Indeed, when writing his chronicle, the author at Menedékszirt also studied the charters

preserved in their library. A similar conscientiousness characterised their healing operations. Alongside popular practices, they were also acquainted with medical books, and, while providing for a balanced diet and sufficient hygiene, they also took care of pilgrims' souls. The production and use of medical herbs led to the establishment of apothecaries. The maintenance of these, however, needed considerable material resources. Mass stipends and smaller land grants are only occasionally reported on, the royal court generally providing the Carthusians with material goods. The greatest benefactor of the monks was duchess Hedvig of Teschen, whose family, among others, had also founded a Carthusian house in Silesia. While the Hungarian sources offer several examples of a given family's commitment to a monastic order or church, the donations made by Hedvig in favour of the silent monks at first sight to almost resist reasonable explanation. Upon examination of the order's acts and necrologia, as well as the Polish sources, her grants become perfectly comprehensible.

Among the hermitages established in the Hungarian Kingdom, that of Menedékszirt can be said to have followed most closely the Carthusian traditions and prescriptions. It was founded in an inhospitable region, difficult to approach. The activity of its inhabitants was strictly confined to the administration of legal affairs in its immediate neighbourhood, even if they maintained fairly regular contacts with the brethren of Dunajec and the Cistercians of Savnik. The monks of Lechnic, on the other hand, living their life on the border between two realms, profited from the flow of commercial activity that passed through their settlement to gain material security and more extensive popularity. These factors must evidently have played a role in the emergence of the workshops of the Carthusians at Dunajec as one of the scriptoria of the University of Cracow. Yet the strategic location of their house proved rather inconvenient in the course of the Hussite wars and the domestic conflicts after 1526. After the devastations caused by the Hussites, it was the civil wars following Mohács that blocked definitively the revival of the Carthusians in the Szepesség. While the everyday life of the house of Segedelemvölgy cannot be separated from the chapter of Eger, on account of their baths and book reproductions they constituted an important part of the Carthusian family. As for Lövöld, it stood out for two reasons. On the one hand, in the eyes of outside observers it was regarded as one of the richest ecclesiastical establishments of the kingdom; on the other hand, besides the intensive literary activity of the monks, its priors maintained close contacts with the General Chapter, a relationship evidently made possible by their splendid material resources.

The Carthusian monks in Hungary failed to revive their old settlements in the Kingdom of Hungary. Although in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries they tried to

return to the country several times, all their attempts aborted. As in the case of other orders, the monasteries were tried to be restored from abroad, but neither Seits, nor Brunn and Mauerbach succeeded; they did not even manage to care sufficiently for their previous possessions. The landed assets of the monasteries in the Szepesség turned up frequently in later lawsuits, ending up in the hands of the Camaldulians, and long remained in ecclesiastical property even after the dissolution of the latter order. The estates of Segedelemvölgy were yet again taken over by the chapter of Eger. Those of Lövöld were rented by the chapter of Veszprém, and in the seventeenth century they were integrated into the landed wealth of the reorganised bishopric.

The dates when the Carthusian monasteries belonging to the Upper Alemannian province ceased to exist clearly show that their destruction was caused by the Hussite wars and the Ottoman conquest. Those houses which survived the spread of the Reformation, fell victim to the policies of Joseph II – their archives and libraries were dispersed, and most of their buildings crumbled. It has to be emphasised that the Carthusians lost their estates due to external influences, contrary to the Benedictines and the Cistercians, whose survival was seriously menaced by their internal problems (let it suffice to call attention to the commendatorial system from the fifteenth century on). Although the number of sources concerning the Hungarian houses is limited indeed, with the inclusion of foreign analogies their placing on the family tree of the order is unproblematic. Most of the sources offers information about the estates and grants that secured a living for the monks. It is the narrative sources that give an insight into life in the monasteries, but the everyday life of the monks can only be reconstructed through the acts of the General Chapter. The order, divided into provinces, was subjected to central direction, thereby providing the Hungarian Carthusians with a „European” existence: for the Grand Chartreuse the geographical location of the houses had no importance, for the activity pursued in the monasteries and the spirituality of the *devotio moderna* knew no boundaries.

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