

Babeş-Bolyai University  
Cluj-Napoca

**Habilitation Thesis**

**Church, Literacy and Society  
in Medieval Transylvania  
1250 – 1550**

**- Abstract -**

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## A b s t r a c t

The present thesis of habilitation summarizes the main academic achievements accomplished over the last decade, since the completion of my doctoral degree. These results are now presented in the first part thematically, while a separate section focuses on the career development plan. During the last ten years, my research interests, combined with my teaching activity deriving from research, converged into three main topics, all within the larger and more complex ideas defined by the intersection between church history and the development of a literate mentality in medieval Transylvania: (1) methods and theoretical solutions concerning the analysis of the written historical sources, (2) the medieval church's involvement in Transylvanian society and (3) the assessment of literacy and literate behaviour at a provincial level. There are certain features common for all these cultural manifestations. As a typical frontier area, connecting large paradigms of civilization, cultural phenomena such as literacy and book-collecting, among other cultural reflections, have been slow to manifest themselves in pre-Reformation Transylvania (the easternmost province of the medieval Hungarian Kingdom), and with less intensity. Literacy expressed itself more clearly starting with the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, in fewer diverse ways than its Western-European counterpart. Written culture in medieval Transylvania reveals a deeply pragmatic pattern, motivated by daily requirements: legal, social, economic, or related to daily devotion. Thus, book-use, either manuscript or printed, must be interpreted, and comprehended within a specific context, determined by practical considerations. Finally, history of written communication, as well as its connection with the institutions of the Latin Church, are closely linked mostly with those Transylvanian areas that were inhabited from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards by Western colonists, especially of German provenance. Consequently, my academic activity has constantly revolved around the varieties of literacy experiences that can be documented in the privileged territories populated by the so-called "Transylvanian Saxons", mainly related to mendicant convents and the parish network that existed in these regions. Precisely the urbanized form of society as promoted by these *hospites* sets the stage for a rich and complex intersection between church and literacy.

## **Part I. Academic achievements**

### **I. Premise. Methodology and the analysis of the written historical sources**

#### **I.1. Considerations concerning the analysis of manuscript texts as primary sources.**

A constant preoccupation of my academic effort has been to balance the research on documentary texts – traditionally, much more present in the work of historians – and the investigation of medieval books, manuscript and printed alike. Such a broader approach to the written sources, unusual for a medievalist working on different subjects related to the medieval West, is motivated, on the one hand, by the scarcity of pertinent information that has survived in Transylvania, and on the other hand, by the fact that both document and book are artificially separated in modern scholarship, while they were naturally used in the Middle Ages by the same members of an intellectual elite. There are so many examples of personalities who made a name as authors of literary texts, working at the same time as scribes, notaries, and clerks in the service of various institutions. In the case of medieval Transylvania, what appears initially to be a disadvantage, the already-mentioned scarcity of the written sources, turns out eventually to open challenging opportunities, because it allows a comparative investigation of several writing media simultaneously. One can see, for example, the previously unsuspected connections between manuscript and printed texts, between public and private writing activities, between urban and rural contexts of writing, between ownership of books and building of archival collections, between literate education and professional career, and much more. Due to the overwhelming transmission of sources in certain areas of the medieval West, the inquiry into various manifestations of the written culture (pragmatic or literary) cannot be done except in a strictly circumscribed manner. From an international research perspective, this is precisely what Transylvania can now offer to international scholarship: an integrated overall picture of the various expressions of literate behaviour in one of the borderlands of the medieval Latin world.

Certainly, the Latin Church is the main actor in medieval Transylvania on the stage of literate communication. It creates and develops the framework for education (from parish schools within the province, to universities abroad) and it offers through its network of parishes, chapels, and convents “employment” or a field of expression for the emerging intellectual elite of the land. Even the first and timid reflections of literate mentality of the laity are almost exclusively manifested in relation with the church.

The core and key-element of my research activity is the continuous pursuit of understanding the rules that governed the formation and development of handwriting in the Latin Middle Ages, the so-called morphology of scripts. This descriptive and analytical method

of investigation can furnish a “diagnose” of a writing sample that must immediately raise additional questions concerning the historical contexts that generated a particular type of writing: the function of a script, as well as the graphic education of a certain scribe.

Writing analysis alone can provide considerable information, usually neglected or overlooked by historians. However, it is of crucial importance to bring together conclusions and results provided by the palaeographical-morphological observations with information supplied by other philological or historical perspectives. A critical history of institutions with a constant writing activity, such as chanceries and their personnel, or prosopographical reconstructions, can confirm, continue and complement the data retrieved with palaeographical methodology.

For research and teaching purposes alike, assigning a date to handwritten texts of the Middle Ages is one of the essential yet most arduous tasks of manuscript studies. Part of my academic activity has constantly been the effort to find those solutions and methods that must be taken into consideration when dating medieval manuscript texts kept in Romanian libraries and archives. A distinction needs to be made between biographical and text-critical elements, nongraphical (i.e. diplomatic, codicological and historical) details and graphical (palaeographical and decorative) elements.

Dating and localizing manuscript texts according to intrinsic criteria (of palaeographical, diplomatic and codicological nature) are even more important when dealing with medieval texts in Latin writing transmitted only as fragments, when any other form of information is extremely limited.

## I.2 Autography as a research topic in medieval studies.

Most of the medieval scribes and notaries (and authors of original texts, as well) will forever remain anonymous. At the same time, many names of persons known for copying books or documentary texts cannot be related to individuals whose life and career are somewhat better documented. For this reason, any context that allows a positive identification of a “scribing hand”, associated with a name and some details about that person are truly valuable examples for writing analysis within the cultural environment that generated an individual form of literacy. Either professional, or private and incidental, the inquiry of autographs allows a better understanding of writing development in medieval times, precisely because of the collateral prosopographic and contextual information involved. Such an investigative method proves to be a valuable research tool, especially when dealing with reconstruction of careers or with critical queries concerning the source materials.

### I.3 The medieval book in Transylvania as a historical source.

The history and evolution of all book collections and libraries throughout Europe are intimately linked to the Western medieval church. The “classic” medieval period of the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially through the university, created an important breach in the educational monopoly previously enjoyed by monastic or cathedral environments, thus generating the prerequisites for securing access to the written culture, a phenomenon recorded in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and especially in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. This cultural evolution concluded with the emergence of the printing press, the new medium of communication, marking through its complex series of implications the end of an epoch and the opening of new perspectives.

Reading, preserving, collecting and writing books in Late Medieval Transylvania – a geographical and political notion used under the present circumstances according to its actual historical meaning before the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century – were phenomena that have failed to attract well-deserved attention from scholarly circles, either international or local. The reasons for this rather limited interest must always be sought in the ideological background that dominated the entire academic life in Romania, and even more in the field of humanities, during the five decades after the Second World War, when the communist regime, absolutist and nationalistic, forcefully imposed a profoundly anti-clerical and Romanian-centric view on the historical past of the land. However, the marginal role played by non-documentary sources in Latin (perceived anyway as less important in comparison to the Slavonic and Cyrillic texts) used in historical-philological academic circles has much deeper roots, back to the political significance of the investigation of historical phenomena during the Enlightenment (18<sup>th</sup> century) and Romanticism (19<sup>th</sup> century). Even the critical understanding on the reconstruction of the historical past, a view shared in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, overlapped Romanian historical writing with major political and territorial transformations, translated in the philological-historical research context as an effort to recover the previously neglected past of the Romanians, who, as predominantly Christians of the Orthodox “Commonwealth” had no impact on the creation of a Latin culture in south-eastern regions of the European continent. I dare to argue now that all these factors: the special geographical position, the economic consequences deriving from it, the ethnical structure, the particular forms of local or regional administration and so on, influenced decisively the history of literacy in this area of major cultural contacts and conflicts. So, I would claim that Transylvania can be regarded now as a true ‘Schreiblandschaft’, a literacy landscape, as defined successfully on a theoretical level with respect to other European regions from northern Germany and the Baltic areas.

#### I.4 Digitization: tool and resource for palaeographic investigation

The current scholarly field of „computer-assisted” or „artificial palaeography” represents the small tip of an iceberg or a pyramid: its massive base assembles the digitized heritage of „European” handwriting (that is, based on the Latin alphabet, with initiatives that also take into consideration Greek and Coptic, or Hebrew) with all its quirks and features. A large part of the medieval texts preserved in archives or libraries all over the world has been intensively digitized during the last two decades. Today, virtually every single larger librarian and archival collection from Austria, France, Germany, Italy (with the Vatican state), Switzerland (to name only a few) has its own digitization project, on various levels of development but comprising tens of thousands of scanned units with uncountable number of pages. The construction of such impressive digital libraries required so far technical solutions and skills and usually neglected or undervalued the traditional scholarship based on palaeography and textual criticism. Experts in the latter disciplines were always a scarce resource and now with the changes in the educational system are even more difficult to find. Recent opinions even suggest that such experts are obsolete due to their subjective, dogmatic and authoritarian perspective, and plead for objective criteria in palaeography, by generating a set of measurements which can ultimately be statistically analysed and compared by computers.

## II. Church and society in medieval Transylvania

### II.1 Bishops of Transylvania as issuers of charters

Transylvania’s document-emitting institutions during the Middle Ages (authentication places, cities, administrative and fiscal offices) have produced a significant amount of records, however the most important, from a social and juridical point of view, were the chanceries of the Voivode and that attending the office of the Bishop. Although they had the same internal structure – a prothonotary/chancellor as head of the chancery, two or more subordinate notaries and a variable number of scribes – the two institutions had different ways of organizing their activity. The staff of these institutions was at first recruited based on their relationship with the head of the office, Voivode and Bishop, but this criterion soon gave way to the professional skills of these literates (*litterati*), who thus became the first professional clerks in Transylvania. The authenticity of an autograph, in these specific conditions, is given by the use of the formula *datum per manus* (given by the hand of...), together with its related styles: *manu propria/propria manu*, *scripsi*, *subscripsi*, followed by the name of the writer. This type of authentication mark had its origins in the papal chancery, where, toward the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, it became customary in certain documents to mention in the final clauses the name of

the scribe responsible for the drawing up of the document. However, this “fashion” can only be found in the local praxis, with notable exceptions, starting with the last years of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

## II.2 Church and society: the perspective of anthroponomy

Another research direction aims to determine and circumscribe the study of proper names of the Romanian and Saxon settlers before 1400 in Transylvania, with a special regard to isolating the specific anthroponomical elements, the analysis criteria and the limits of such an approach. Current studies dedicated to the Saxon and Romanian anthroponomical corpus have been focused on the family names of higher class individuals, especially members of the clergy; the analysis of names was based without exception on case studies or “monographs” of some particular anthroponyms or assessments made with respect to practices that determine the denomination within a family, or was intended to provide additional evidence for a specific historical argument. In dedicated papers, I have cast a new light on medieval documents containing Saxon and Romanian names in Transylvania, formulating a number of considerations and explanations on the structure of Transylvanian names in the 14<sup>th</sup> century (single or double), the sequence of names in the family, the relationship between names and social structure or area of practice and anthroponomical geography. Such a renewed view of the anthroponomical Transylvanian theme raises several issues that either require review and nuance, or a more intense step in investigating the factors of influence that have shaped the anthroponomical identity of medieval Transylvanians.

## II.3 Notaries public – pragmatic involvement of the church in society

The introduction in the 14<sup>th</sup>-century and the further development of public notaries in Transylvania – almost exclusively in urban communities inhabited by German population – can be regarded as a peculiarity of the medieval legal system from Hungary. Therefore, it has been my aim in various papers published or presented recently to international academic circles to open a field of discussion regarding the subject, starting in the first place with general considerations concerning the level of literacy reached in the province and the reception of the written law in Transylvania.

# III. Literacy in medieval Transylvania

## III.1 Written culture in the parish environment

The parish church is the most important agent of literate behaviour in medieval Transylvania, especially the parochial network established by the Transylvanian Saxons. Most manuscripts or printed books that are now extant in Romanian repositories or in libraries



abroad, were used or even produced by the secular clergy from the parishes. Moreover, the history of university education indicates the parish clergy as the most important category of Transylvanian students. In terms of documentary and pragmatic literacy, the output of the parish setting is extremely interesting, a crossroad of official, institutional, and private texts.

### III.2 Registers of lay administrators of parish churches

The financial reports of a churchwarden (*rationes vitrici*) represent a rare occurrence among the sources related to the history of the parish church in medieval Transylvania. Such registers are a valuable link between the literacy of the laypeople and the written communication within the church, adopted both by the important urban institutions and by the rural parishes alike. Curiously enough, the best-preserved register of this kind sheds light on the history of a small village in northern Transylvania, Jelna, from 1455 to 1571.

### III.3 Local collections of books (1350-1550)

An accurate evaluation of the book collections owned in the Middle Ages by Transylvanian institutions and individuals in terms of numbers and chronology of the volumes, type of texts and contexts of transmission cannot yet be formulated. The following figures can be suggested now with certain precautions: a little over 100 manuscripts, at least 500 incunabula copies and more than 2000 volumes containing texts printed in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and presenting material and documentary evidence of local use immediately after their production. However, such estimations – especially for the printed material – will soon have to be revised, as important historical libraries have not been thoroughly investigated. At the same time, special perspectives of investigation have been adopted in relation to this topic: the book trade, book binding, or book decoration in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### III.4 “Fragmentology” – future perspectives in investigating literate mentality.

Medieval book fragments in Romanian collections constitute important sources to the history of book culture and the Latin literacy of Europe. Neglected and ignored, the fragments of medieval books from Romanian collections are now, by definition, at-risk pieces of cultural heritage; some of these frail pieces of parchment have not survived to this day. Case studies examining manuscript fragments published recently cannot replace systematic research, a discrete investigation that requires funding and team-effort.

## IV. Reception of European urban legislation in medieval Transylvania. Case study: *Codex Altemberger*

Despite being considered one of the most prestigious medieval manuscripts related to the medieval past of Transylvania, *Codex Altemberger* had been until now only superficially

examined. A thorough analysis of several aspects – textual structure, writing and, especially, decoration – has shown that the legal compilation was most likely compiled in Prague around 1360 in a highly active workshop, famous mostly for illuminating liturgical works. This conclusion opens the path for new interpretations concerning the role played by this famous code of law in late medieval Transylvania.

## **Part II. Career Development Plan**

The future development of my academic career takes into consideration three main directions: a pedagogical component, a didactical-administrative dimension, and a management-research aspect. The pedagogical factor, currently focused on the BA and MA courses of Latin palaeography, history of medieval Transylvania, but also the book history and education in the Latin Middle Ages, is being expanded starting with the new academic year 2020/2021 with a new course, dedicated to MA students, offering an introduction to the terminology and analysis of legal texts of the Latin Middle Ages, focusing on the integration of concepts borrowed from the history of law in medieval research. Additionally, a web portal is presently under construction, whose main objective is to create a digital platform, hosted by the UBB server, containing the basic elements of the course “Latin Palaeography” (teaching modules, bibliography, useful internet links), along with a series of interactive transcription exercises and analysis of some medieval documentary texts regarding Transylvania. This complex concept, presented for the first time in Romania, integrates research solutions and resources in the form of an advanced digital platform for modern teaching of Latin palaeography: the transmission of specific tools and skills necessary to read, date and interpret a handwritten source. The platform will integrate several interaction modules with samples ranging from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, providing an original source image which can be read in parallel with its transcription. True to the principles already discussed above, I included in this computer-based tool manuscripts and printed texts, documentary scripts and book-hands. On completion of this course, the students will be able to decipher Latin text-hands and glossing-hands from ca. 1200-1500, identifying scripts and approximate dating; describe the construction and codicological features of a manuscript book; understand the way in which manuscripts and printed texts are used to produce critical editions; acquire the expertise needed in the study of manuscripts and early printed books in their cultural context, time and space.

In close relation to the pedagogical activity, the continuation and development of some didactic-administrative directions is considered: member in commissions for granting didactic degrees and academic titles, member in doctoral guidance commissions at the Doctoral School

“History. Civilization. Culture”, Babeş-Bolyai University, member in doctoral commissions (internal, but also external referent at European universities). These aspects are supplemented by the coordination and management activity as director of the inter-disciplinary research entity “TRANS.SCRIPT. The Centre for Diplomatic and Medieval Documentary Palaeography” a structure of the Faculty of History and Philosophy of Babeş-Bolyai University, affiliated to the “Institute of National History”. The research interest of this centre, defined as a *smart specialization* unit, is represented by the endorsement of the cultural heritage transmitted in written form on the territory of Transylvania in the Middle Ages, in close relation to the historical evolutions on the Romanian territory.

To conclude, medieval Latin palaeography is, in my view, a defining attribute of professionalism and excellence in the field of history, an appropriate means of identifying and educating students who demonstrate skills for research activities, but first and foremost a new perspective in understanding the cultural and intellectual history of medieval Transylvania. The general principles on which palaeography operates – the allegiance to the historical source, the spirit of observation and analysis, the attention to detail – are just a few of the elements that can be transmitted to larger groups of students, disseminating in this manner the right impulse for the establishment of correct professional attitudes.