Medieval Society in East-Central Europe in the 11th to 13th Centuries: An Introduction from the Example of the Kingdom of Hungary

Pavol Hudáček

Abstract

HUDÁČEK, Pavol. Medieval Society in East-Central Europe in the 11th to 13th Centuries: An Introduction from the Example of the Kingdom of Hungary.

Within social and economic history, research on medieval society has long enjoyed the attention of medievalist scholarship. The choice of topics and the quality of their treatment has often been dependant on the development of historical sciences and individual theoretical concepts. The emphasis has typically been centred on describing the internal organisation, social stratification and social transformations, which are closely linked to the formation of new social classes in royal, ecclesiastical or secular estates. Power, political and above all, economic factors were often taken into account, which had a significant impact on social transformations. In researching higher and lower social classes, historians have addressed a wide range of topics, including the question of freedom and unfreedom, the formation of the nobility, privileged communities and the burghers, slavery and its demise, the social status of economic dependents, as well as the relations of landlords with their subjects. The above-mentioned statements are also valid for research into the formation and internal organisation of medieval Hungarian society, which was also undergoing professed transformations in the 11th to the 13th centuries.

The formation and transformations of medieval societies are among the key topics historians have long been interested in. Issues related to these complicated processes are the subject of research in social and economic history, but also form part of a broader framework of interest in medieval culture. When reconstructing the internal organization and transformations of medieval societies, historical discourses investigate the relations between the ruler and the ruled, the forms in which power was exercised, the legal status of the different classes of people, social hierarchy and stratification, social mobility, etc.

Medieval society

In the Early and the High Middle Ages, many social transformations were a result of changing political and economic conditions, which varied across regions and time periods. Other dynamic elements include population growth, the large-scale settlement of
Peripheral parts of the country and the acquisition of new arable land at the expense of forests, which led to social transformations, after the arrival of new settlers for example, or to changes in the economic status of the original inhabitants. The factors that influenced these social transformations in the period ranging from the 9th to the 13th centuries are still the subject of debate and polemics.\(^1\)

Historians are tackling many important questions including inadequate methodologies, persisting older historiographical concepts,\(^2\) confusion over the interpretation of some Latin terms denoting particular social categories,\(^3\) the demarcation of developmental periods (e.g. the transition from slavery to “feudalism” and from “feudalism” to capitalism),\(^4\) and overgeneralization when trying to classify social classes accurately when describing medieval societies.\(^5\) Having become aware of these shortcomings, a new generation of medievalists of the last decades of the 20th century began to question earlier interpretations of social transformation which they thought could not be substantiated in medieval sources.\(^6\)

---


In an attempt to avoid overgeneralization, some historians sought to address these deficiencies by focusing on smaller regions, where the development of local society was investigated as it was transformed by the political and economic changes of the 11th and 12th centuries, (the liberation of slaves, settlement, economic development, demography, etc.). These new approaches made a significant contribution to our knowledge of medieval societies and offered detailed probes into the structure, development and transformations of these predominantly agrarian communities. However, when trying to describe the broader social, economic and political contexts that ultimately led to the collapse of previous social orders and their replacement by new social relations (e.g. the disappearance of slavery, the free peasantry and its relationship to the emerging medieval nobility, etc.), some authors could not avoid simplification.

When analyzing earlier societies, historians reasoned about the changing forms of supremacy, mostly in terms of “ruling classes versus ruled,” i.e. those who wielded influence and exercised dominion (potentes) versus those who had no share in power (pauperes). In their interpretations, modern concepts and sociological and anthropological approaches were often employed, even in research on the Middle Ages. However, they did not always manage to sufficiently describe or explain the functional processes of the communities of that time and understand the significance of important political and economic turns that had a major impact on social order. Contrary to modern society,

---


some earlier researchers viewed medieval society as static, one in which no major transformations took place. However, in contrast to the prior emphasis on the “continuity” of social order, historians gradually pointed out an important factor: change and development. Some researchers hold the opinion that in certain pivotal periods (Marc Bloch spoke of the period from 1050 to 1250 as the so-called “second feudal age,” for example), these processes took the form of “revolutionary” transformations and were also connected to significant changes in social order.

Today, historians clearly point out that in individual medieval societies, significant and very important transformations of social structures were taking place and depending on the exercise of power, these often led to a different type of development and unique forms, like regional differences and cultural variations. Such changes also affected wider social relations, which manifested themselves in the coexistence of social categories, or even in long-lasting conflicts and problems between them. When investigating smaller regions, several historians have considered not only the earlier development of the varied social classes and influences from their vicinity, but have also examined the significant changes in the lives of people with different statuses and degrees of freedom that stemmed from their provision of services and subordination to the upper class. These social transformations appear in the written sources mostly only when disputes and conflicts arose between older and newly forming social classes, between “serfs” and landlords or when new social ties were being born.

Medieval societies were characterized by dynamic processes that were related to general developmental trends, manifested in the transformation of social structures and especially, in the birth of new socio-economic categories. These processes were influenced by a wide range of political, economic, technological and economic innovations in the Middle Ages (development of markets and the money economy) which took place mainly in agriculture and crafts, also largely influenced the changes and status of the people of agrarian communities, on
military, social and cultural factors, which were often related to the decisions and needs of the rulers or holders of secular and ecclesiastical power. Such dynamic developments were accompanied by changes in the legal or economic status of the lower strata, which can be first observed in ecclesiastical and royal estates, where former slaves were liberated and new, “transitional” social classes with different degrees of freedom gradaul emerged.\textsuperscript{18} Moreover, political and economic factors were also closely linked to the increase of—or exemption from—renders in kind, manual labour and taxes for free or subordinate people. These either led to dissatisfaction and disputes with the upper class or escalated into the emergence of serfdom and into new forms of economic dependency, which arose from land tenure with well-defined obligations towards the landlord and were often accompanied by a restricted right to free movement.\textsuperscript{19} These transformations were related to the gradual disappearance of the original free peasants and the improved social status of former slaves, who were granted land by their masters under well-defined conditions. This ultimately led to the complete disappearance of slavery, depending on the country and time period.\textsuperscript{20}

It should also be borne in mind that the landlords had an eminent interest in the “formation” of new social classes, especially of economically dependent people as they significantly benefited from the monetary payments these people made to them in the form of land rents and taxes on agricultural products. In the 13\textsuperscript{th} century, free peasants and the new, economically dependent “serf” strata—most of whom became tenants of lands owned by landlords—were still internally differentiated, mostly on the basis of economic criteria.\textsuperscript{21}

According to Werner Rösener, in the Early Middle Ages, there was no concept that would have corresponded to what we now call peasants because, when
describing the rural population, the sources of this period used only the terms \textit{liberi, liti,} and \textit{servi} (free people, semi-free people and serfs). He notes that we can speak of medieval “peasants” as a social class only from the eleventh or the twelfth centuries onwards. The word “peasant” did not appear until people engaged in agriculture began to be legally differentiated from “professional warriors” and from the privileged inhabitants of the emerging cities. Consequently, a new social division into \textit{milites, cives,} and \textit{rustici} began to appear increasingly in the sources.\footnote{RÖSENER 1992, pp. 11–14, 20–21.}

To a large extent, tracing the transformations of social structures in the Middle Ages depends on the state of written sources. Several sources suggest that over the 11th to 13th centuries, minor or even major changes were occurring in the social status of free and semi-free people in different countries. In research on the development, disappearance and emergence of new social categories, it is therefore essential to take into account sources from a longer time frame so that we can better understand the transformations of different social strata and the emergence of new social distinctions.

In contrast to the formation and transformations of elites, privileged classes and the “lesser nobility,” which constitute a separate chapter within social trends with their own particular research matters,\footnote{DUGGAN, J. Anne. Introduction: Concepts, Origins, Transformations. In DUGGAN, J. Anne (ed.) Nobles and Nobility in Medieval Europe: Concepts, Origins, Transformations. Woodbridge : The Boydell Press, 2000, pp. 1–14. See also: POLY – BOURNAZEL 1991, pp. 87–118; BOUGARD, François – BÜHRER-THIERRY, Geneviève – LE JAN, Régine. Elites in the Early Middle Ages. Identities, Strategies, Mobility. In Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales, 2013, vol. 68, no. 4, pp. 735–768.} information on the lower social strata is considerably more difficult to locate. Across the regions, these strata took different forms, were often more differentiated and underwent a certain development which cannot always be sufficiently traced in the sources.\footnote{On social changes, differences, and identities within a region or smaller territory, see: e.g. WISZEWSKI, Przemysław. Region as a Fluid Social Construct in Medieval Central Europe (11th–15th C.). In PLESZCZYŃSKI, Andrzej et al. (eds.). Imagined Communities: Constructing Collective Identities in Medieval Europe. Leiden : Brill, 2018, pp. 279–292.}

Moreover, these classes had different legal and economic statuses. Although they appear in the written sources under several names, these names sometimes acquired different meanings over the centuries and the differences between them may be difficult to determine, as it is not always entirely clear what their social stratification stemmed from.\footnote{BOSL 1957, pp. 194–197, 206–214; BOSL 1963, pp. 7–12; BOSL 1987, pp. 80–83; DYER 2005, pp. 419–425; GELTING 2005, pp. 343–347.}

To understand the processes of transformations, it is therefore extremely important to “correctly” interpret the meanings of the various Latin or local terms that were used to designate and distinguish social classes in the sources. At the same time, the period in which they were used and the types of sources in which they appeared (e.g. chronicles, charters, etc.) should also be taken in account.\footnote{DREW, Katharine Fischer. Legal Materials as a Source for Early Medieval Social History. In DREW, Katharine Fischer. Law and Society in Early Medieval Europe: Studies in Legal History. London : Variorum Reprints, 1988, pp. 33–39.} Historians must also consider the political and economic situation of the time, the social conditions on royal or ecclesiastical estates and the practices
of medieval institutions when recording legal and social relations, i.e. the historical context in which these terms were used. Where there are sufficient written sources, the development of the same term can sometimes be documented even with reference to a new class of dependent people, and this reflects the social changes that were taking place at the time.27

The issue of freedom (libertas) and unfreedom, on which the social status, rights and obligations of the different classes of people depended, is a crucial point in research in early and high medieval societies. In these periods, society was most often divided into the free and the unfree (expressed in the contrast between liber and servus).28 Because of social changes, there were also classes of so-called semi-free people within this division, but we have so far only a scant knowledge about their legal and economic status. According to Karl Bosl, the marked contrast between the free and the unfree within the lower strata began to disappear much earlier in the Kingdom of France, from the 10th century onwards, than in the Holy Roman Empire where the social differentiation of the Carolingian period persisted among its main characteristics until as late as the 12th century. It should also be borne in mind that “aristocratic” libertas were probably distinct from the liberty of the lower strata because, in the Early Middle Ages, they still required royal protection ensured by the payment of a special tax for liberty (census de capite).29

The social status and liberty of subordinate people underwent various legal changes across countries—such as the transformation of free peasants into serfs for example—which were primarily related to land tenure, fixed land rents and the right to move, i.e. the freedom of movement. Nevertheless, some “transitional” social classes of people with personal liberties were still sometimes required to perform services for the landlord, and these services even determined their degree of economic dependence and specific social status.30

Medieval people lived in clearly defined social classes and individuality did not play as strong a role as it does today. Therefore, historians often view pre-modern societies as a more or less closed world of communities (communitas),31 characterized by clearly defined social stratification but interconnected by

28 A very good annotated overview of the state of research on this topic is SUTHERLAND 2020, pp. 1–12.
similar political and power interests, ways of life (occupation or work) and in many cases, even by certain types of privileges or privileged statuses. It was these social structures that severely restricted individuality in the Early and High Middle Ages. Although the modes of government and the exercise and enforcement of power determined the strict hierarchization of social order, the barriers between legal and socio-economic categories were not impenetrable. In fact, several sources document how the services and duties expected of the subordinate strata were changing or improving side by side with the ongoing social transformations and crises. In some cases, the structure of society also changed significantly during these processes, as some categories disappeared or transformed into other classes, and the earlier privileged and unfree strata acquired new forms and more favourable legal or economic positions.

The fundamental factor determining these changes was social mobility, i.e. the possibility of gaining a better position depending on political and economic circumstances. This may have resulted from longer developmental processes or it may have been an immediate response to previous social crises. It mostly concerned individuals or their families, but sometimes would even apply to smaller classes from the lower social strata who lived on royal or ecclesiastical estates. The materialization of this mobility within closed social classes could arise from the decisions of rulers, the improvement of the management of royal, ecclesiastical or noble estates, the need to increase the number of warriors—which often manifested itself in the emergence of a “lesser nobility” formed from a dependent servant strata—changes in agriculture, population growth and settlement of the country, the efforts of the landlords to prevent the uncontrolled departure of their serfs to other estates and the formation of new privileged classes (e.g. the burghers).

An equally important reason for the social rise of the lower free or dependent classes was service to the ruler or to a secular or ecclesiastical landlord, which entailed social prestige, proven merit, personal qualities and special skills or knowledge. Social mobility between individual classes and statuses most often happened upward. However, there were also cases where the opposite occurred, such as when freedom was lost or previous military obligations were cancelled, for example. These cases gave rise to “social interdegrees” of legal designation, which also underwent transformations over time. Shifts from one class to another or within one class could be initiated by rulers or landlords by decisions from above, or such social movements could be extorted by the subordinate strata by exerting pressure on the upper classes during periods of crisis or unrest or in response to ongoing socio-economic changes in the country, for example.

---


Some earlier researchers presumed that in the Early Middle Ages, the “communities of free warriors” were closed classes in which no major changes took place. Although their members had the same legal status, they were not always cohesive social communities as there were significant differences in wealth between their members. The increase in wealth among the free warriors and the other lower strata of freemen was often related to their aspirations for higher social status and a share of power, which may have raised fears of increased competition among the higher-ranking people. It was during periods of favourable political and economic circumstances that the upward social mobility of some individuals with sufficient wealth and prestige from these classes increased.34

New forms of dominion and control tied to the power-related or territorial aspirations of secular or ecclesiastical lords who together formed the backbone of medieval society in the 11th to 13th centuries could be discerned in the diversity and complexity of the processes of the fading and the formation of social classes, as well as in matters of service, freedom, freedom of movement and social mobility.

**Medieval society in the Kingdom of Hungary—A brief outline**

Research on the formation, internal organization and transformations of medieval Hungarian society in the 11th to the 13th centuries was an important subject, especially in 20th century Hungarian historiography. Today, topics falling into the sphere of social history—this does not apply to economic history35—tend to be a marginal area in medieval research. Some still topical issues such as the status of freemen, the emergence of the “lesser nobility” and of new social categories on royal and ecclesiastical estates, or the formation of the serf (peasant) strata36 can only be addressed through detailed research and

---


36 Probably the first work on the shape of medieval Hungarian society (especially towards castle warriors, nobles, royal servitors, servants and slaves) dates back to 1783, see: KOLLARIUS, Franciscus Adam. Historiae et varia publici regni Ungarie amoenitates 2. Vindobonae : Typis a Baymeisterianis, 1783, pp. 73–154. One of the first works dealing specifically with the medieval Hungarian peasantry was written at the beginning of the 20th century ACSÁDY, Ignác. A mag-

Several conflicting opinions have arisen within the debates on the transformation of medieval societies in Western European countries, partly related to terminological problems and unresolved questions on the meaning of freedom in the Early and the High Middle Ages, the disappearance of slavery (the transformation of slaves—servi to freemen—libertini), social mobility or the genesis of social classes. This also applied to earlier, predominantly Hungarian, historiography in the late 19th century, the first third of the 20th century\footnote{These debates between historians sometimes became “sharp” exchanges of opinion, as was the case with the famous dispute between Károly Tagányi and László Erdélyi. See: e.g. Vardy, Bela Steven. The Hungarian Economic History School: its Birth and Development. In Journal of European Economic History, 1975, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 129–130.} and after the Second World War—in line with the Marxist interpretation of history—which dealt in detail with the development and transformations of social structures, the theoretical concepts of the emergence of “feudalism” in the domestic conditions, the origins of private property and class struggles in the Kingdom of Hungary.\footnote{For example of economic history research, see: Laszlovszky et al. 2018, pp. 24–31. Specifically, on Marxist historiography, see: Pók, Attila. Hungarian Medievalists under the Spell of Marxism. In Nodl – Węczowski – Zupka 2024, pp. 50–67 and Thoroczkay, Gábor. Marxist Historical Theory in the Research of the Árpádian Period in Hungary (1000–1301). In Nodl – Węczowski – Zupka 2024, pp. 353–359.}

Due to the existence of the earliest Hungarian law codes, most historians have focused mainly on the period of the 11th and the 12th centuries, but because of the situation with written sources, the transformations of the medieval Hungarian society can be traced much better from the early 13th century onwards. At that time, the number of issued charters increased significantly and these contain a lot of information on the different social classes, not only revealing earlier developments, but also reflecting the socio-economic transformations that were under way at the time.

When describing medieval Hungarian society, many researchers have mostly treated the following research areas: the terminology for naming the various categories of people, the portrayal of society in the works of medieval chroniclers, probes into social organization, legal regulations and the status of the various social categories of people, the forms of the transformation processes, the formation of the elite (the Hungarian nobility), the establishment of privileged population classes when towns came into being, theories about the transformations of “feudalism” and power relations, issues of personal freedom, the emergence of a class of serfs, or free peasants, etc.

Contrary to Western Europe, domestic historiography lacks works that deal with social transformation in smaller territories or analyze the developments of individual manors or monastic estates. One exception is Ferenc Maksay's study


44 This study will not specifically deal with the formation and transformations of the medieval Hungarian nobility. For that, see specific works on “castle warriors” (*iugiones castri*) and “royal servitors” (*servientes regis*), for example ZSOLDOS, Attila. A szent király szabadai. Fejezetek a városháborúig történetétől. Budapest : MTA Történettudományi Intézet, 1999; VARGA, János. A királyi serviers. In *Levélárú közlemények*, 2006, vol. 77, pp. 1–32.

on social transformations on the estate of the Tihany Abbey in the 13th and 14th centuries. According to him, the situation in agriculture, social mobility and the status of monastic “peasants” began to change in the first half of the 13th century, and these changes lasted for about a hundred years. At that time, social stratification on monastic estates was changing (e.g. former servi were being liberated and given land for use) and clearly defined duties of monastic serfs were introduced (e.g. former services and renders in kind were being replaced by monetary payments). The acquisition of new land for the “serfs” of the monasteries during the settlement process of outlying areas went hand in hand with the extensive deforestation of the surrounding countryside.46

Research on medieval Hungarian society in the 10th to 13th centuries should also be approached in the broader context of the specific political and power development of the “Carpathian Basin,” in which the Kingdom of Hungary was gradually formed under the rule of the Árpád dynasty. After the adoption of Christianity and the integration of this territory into the community of the Latin West, a “European-style” Hungarian monarchy emerged, and this disrupted the previous political and power structure of this nomadic society.47 After the arrival of the Hungarian tribes, there was not only population transfer, which came with conflicts, but also coexistence with the local ethnic classes. In the 10th century, the old Hungarian society was undergoing major changes as a consequence of military incursions into neighbouring countries, slave trade and the formation of local power centres. The transition of the Hungarian tribes from their original nomadic way of life to a settled one also caused certain property differences among free warriors.48


In the early 11th century, the Kingdom of Hungary was known for its ethnic, religious (Christians, Jews, Muslims, pagans) and linguistic diversity. This was a result of its intensive contacts with foreign countries, the arrival of foreigners at the court of the ruler and their settlement in important power and trade centres. Foreigners (hospites) with different economic and technological experience and different social statuses and legal customs arrived in the Kingdom of Hungary from the neighbouring countries. This manifested itself most prominently in the mass arrival of Walloon and German guests in the 12th and 13th centuries, who played a major role in the birth of medieval towns as they had been traders, craftsmen, miners or peasants in their homelands. The Árpáds granted privileges to these communities of guests to improve their economic status—the formation of the Hungarian burghers—and promoted domestic and foreign trade and a better use of the land in the settlement of higher and mostly woodland areas. These circumstances also contributed to the transformations of medieval Hungarian society, which was socially, legally, religiously and ethnically diverse throughout the reign of the Árpád dynasty.

From the mid-12th century onwards, the question of the influence of agriculture and of the social organization of the Slavs on the Hungarian and other nomadic communities that settled in the “Carpathian Basin” in the late 9th century and over the 10th century has also been a part of the debate on the form and transformations of the medieval Hungarian society. The questions of what

---


lived on from the Great Moravian period and how the local Slavs\textsuperscript{53} might have influenced the medieval Hungarian society that was forming in the 10\textsuperscript{th} and 11\textsuperscript{th} centuries—in terms of the coexistence of agrarian and nomadic communities and the emergence of new military and power elites—have still not been sufficiently answered.\textsuperscript{54} Two theories can be mentioned with respect to the birth of the Kingdom of Hungary, and these are largely marked by the traditions and concepts of individual national historiographies. Adherents to the first theory are mostly Slovak historians and some Polish researchers, who claim that the Árpáds drew on the political and power structures of Great Moravia. Their claims are based on the concept of a so-called medieval servant organization and model of the Central European type of state, according to which medieval Bohemia, Poland\textsuperscript{55} and the Kingdom of Hungary embodied certain specific characteristics in the 10\textsuperscript{th} and the 11\textsuperscript{th} centuries that were different from the earlier organization of Western European political formations. However, convincing arguments to support these earlier historiographical concepts are still absent.\textsuperscript{56} Some medievalists believe that it was on the territory of former Great Moravia—which they consider to have been a “proto-feudal” or “feudal state”—that the remnants of the economic and administrative structure of the West Slavic ethnicity survived, especially in the form of the so-called castle system and the economic organization of the prince manors (curia, curtis, villa), and this framework was utilized when power in the Kingdom of Hungary was emerging and consolidating.\textsuperscript{57} Some Hungarian researchers, including János


Karácsonyi and later primarily Marxist historians like Erik Molnár, Emma Lederer and Lajos Elekes, admit to a certain Slavic role in the formation of the Kingdom of Hungary. Some of them reject the theory of a servant organization, a characteristic economic model of the Slavic principalities in the 9th and 10th centuries, as this theory is based only on local names from the 13th century and for this reason, it has serious methodological flaws. With respect to the formation of the reign of the Árpáds in the 10th and the 11th centuries, they tend to speak of a specific economic development without the use of any Great Moravian or Slavic models (e.g. Gusztáv Heckenast, György Györfy and others).

A much more important factor influencing the form of medieval Hungarian society in that period was the adoption of Christianity, which significantly disrupted the earlier organization, hierarchy and stratification of free men. With the spread of Christianity and the formation of new ecclesiastical structures, foreign clergy, scholars, magnates and warriors arrived in the Kingdom of Hungary, especially in the court of the Árpáds, and their presence in the country not only influenced the local elite, but also played a role in the transformation of society. However, with respect to the consolidation of power of the Árpád dynasty and the transformation processes that were taking place in the 10th and 11th centuries, we should also bear in mind local specificities, as these may have been different from the political and power situation in the West or in neighbouring countries. The presumed “cultural influences” appear to have been adapted to the local conditions and needs.


63 HÓMAN, Bálint. King Stephen the Saint. Budapest : Sárkány Ltd., 1938, pp. 20–21, 31–32; MAK-
When investigating Hungarian society in the Early and the High Middle Ages, the state of the extant written sources should also be pointed out, as there are far fewer than in Western or Southern Europe. In some cases, this makes it impossible to adequately trace the social transformations and the emergence of new social classes over a longer period of time, e.g. from the 11th to 13th centuries. Nevertheless, compared to medieval Bohemia or Poland, royal law codes and synodal decrees did survive from the Kingdom of Hungary and these enable us to reconstruct the form of medieval Hungarian society and the matter of the freedom or unfreedom of the various social classes in the 11th and 12th centuries. Very few royal or private charters are extant from this period and many historians have mainly analyzed the earliest legal monuments. In describing the form and the transformations of medieval Hungarian society, they drew on the law code of Stephen I, Ladislaus I and Coloman.

Research into the social and economic history of the Kingdom of Hungary in the Early and the High Middle Ages has certain specificities, as historians work with only a limited number of sources yet have to deal with a large number of interpretations. Therefore, it becomes necessary to verify earlier concepts and try to better explain the terminological ambiguities when labelling the various classes of people. This complex of issues investigated earlier will have to be re-evaluated and new solutions proposed if necessary. The very lack of sources from the 11th and 12th centuries, the inconsistent and often ambiguous terminology that refers to both the upper and the lower social strata and the social transformations still pose considerable complications today. This is partly because foreign scholars active in the court of the Árpáds used Latin based on the written practice of their own cultural milieus. Consequently, the terms they chose may not have always captured the actual form of medieval


Hungarian society in the 11th and 12th centuries.\(^6\) It should be noted, however, that although the choice of terms to label the various classes was not always uniform in scribal practice, the “scribes” of those times most probably knew what social category they were referring to.

In their research on social classes on royal (e.g. *udvornici, condicionarii, populi*, etc.), castle (e.g. *civiles, cives, castelanni, castrenses*, etc.) and ecclesiastical estates, historians have encountered a varied mix of dependent servants.\(^7\) They wondered, for example, what the term *servus* denoted in the 11th to 13th centuries and whether it also referred to otherwise legally or economically dependent servants aside from slaves during that period,\(^8\) how to interpret *liber* and *libertinus*, who the *ministri* were, what duties they had, etc. The social development and the transformations, which were also reflected in the different labelling of the social classes, should always be taken into account here.\(^9\) In this context, it is interesting to trace what type of social class was meant by the generic Latin term *rusticus*, which already figured in the law code of Ladislaus I, appeared in charters of the first third of the 12th century\(^70\) and can even be encountered in the first half of the 13th century.\(^71\) When Béla IV confirmed


\(^{71}\) CDSI I., p. 146, no. 190, p. 268, no. 375; HÓMAN 1912, pp. 74–75; TAGÁNYI 1922, pp. 218–220.
privileges of the Archdiocese of Esztergom in 1256, his charter mentioned the various socio-legal classes of the inhabitants living on the archdiocesan estates at that time. These were *cives*, *nobles exercitantes*, *condicionarii*, *hospites*, *rustici*, *villani*, and *inquilini*. It is questionable, however, whether the order of these ecclesiastical “people” also reflected the hierarchy, legal or economic status or the degree of freedom of these various inhabitants of the archdiocese at that time. The last three terms may have referred to peasants in general cultivating ecclesiastical land and most likely paying rent, with no major differences—or none whatsoever—between them.

Slaves occupy a special place in research on Hungarian medieval society and several historians have dealt with them in the past. In its interpretation of the terms *servi* and *ancillae*, which appear in sources from the 11th to 13th centuries, domestic historiography did not question the existence of slavery in the classical, “ancient” sense of the word denoting people considered to be *res* or “movable property,” who could be purchased, sold and inherited and had to perform whatever work or services were demanded from them. The debate was mostly about the extent and scope to which slave labour was used on royal, ecclesiastical and magnate estates, and why these “slaves” suddenly ceased to appear in the sources by the early 14th century. A second, unanswered question is how to explain the fact that the sources even contain references to *servi* who had their own house and family, cultivated land under fixed conditions and were more similar to economically dependent peasants than to “real slaves.” Their status, or rather the extent of their agricultural and service burden, also depended on whether they lived directly in an economic centre, in an important manor or on an outlying estate of a landlord. Today, historians tend to presume that depending on the period and the type of property, the above term did not always refer to real “slaves.” In fact, from the 11th to the late 13th centuries, in the context of the economic and demographic changes and improvements in the living conditions of unfree people—the sources record frequent flights or unauthorized departures of *servi* to other estates—slaves (*manumissio*) were being liberated and subsequently becoming freemen with personal liberties (*liberti*)

73 For earlier literature and a detailed overview of the perspectives on this subject, see: SUTT, Cameron. *Slavery in Árpád-era Hungary in a Comparative Context.* Leiden; Boston : Brill, 2015, pp. 64–71; SUTT 2022, pp. 265–269.
74 On *servi* in the earliest Árpádian law codes and charters, see: SUTT 2015, pp. 54–108.
When investigating medieval Hungarian society and its transformations, it is also very important to consider what estates the economically dependent lower strata lived on. That is, whether these were royal, castle, ecclesiastical or “private” estates of the magnates, because that is what the social designation, the legal or economic status and the degree of freedom of the various classes of the population often depended on. These types of estates differed not only in their organization, but also in their rules for land use and for the fulfillment of defined duties and services. Consequently, the living conditions of subordinate or dependent people were also different, and socio-economic changes manifested themselves differently and often with a considerable time lag. It is generally accepted that royal and ecclesiastical estates were more “advanced” and therefore changes occurred on them much earlier and more frequently than on the private estates of the magnates, where older forms of economy—including the use of slave labour—persisted longer. This can be seen in the case of the aforementioned classes of people labelled servi who, depending on the type of estate (royal, ecclesiastical, magnate), lived and farmed in very different conditions and therefore cannot all be considered indiscriminately as “slaves” in the classic sense of the word.

In Western Europe, the 11th and 12th centuries saw major socio-economic changes, which “took place,” or rather manifested themselves, in the Kingdom of Hungary only in the 13th century. Hungarian medieval sources outline a relatively dynamic picture of social transformations from the turn of the 12th century onwards as a number of new categories of privileged and semi-free social strata emerged. The source material from this period provides historians with sufficient resources for qualitative research on social structure and documents the organization of society and its transformations much better. This period of prominent social changes—some historians even speak of a “social revolution” or high medieval transformation—has many characteristics that suggest developments from previous centuries. These earlier processes, accelerated by major economic transformations (technical innovations in agriculture, the arrival of foreign guests—hospites, the settlement of the country, the formation of medieval towns, etc.) and population growth, manifested themselves fully and culminated only in the 13th century. Prominent shifts took place in this period...
in land ownership on royal and ecclesiastical estates as, contrary to the previous periods, the land was now worked mainly by free, semi-free or economically dependent people with clearly defined duties and a fixed land rent. On the one hand, some freemen became economically dependent serfs (jobbágy in Hungarian), whereas some would fall back among the lower strata.

The reasons that led to these processes were mainly related to a change in the way of life of the subordinate strata—people with personal liberties and economically dependent classes—and this applied primarily to land ownership, land use and a modification of the duties and services due to the landlord. In this connection, new property differences within the same social classes also emerged. At the same time, increased social mobility can also be observed as on the one hand, some freemen became economically dependent serfs, whereas some would fall back among the lower strata.


82 HÓMAN 1912, p. 78.


84 ERDÉLYI 1915, pp. 76–80, 132–139; DOMANOVSZKY 1979, pp. 219–222. An important source that documents social stratification and disputes over the status of castle and royal servants in the first third of the 13th century is the Oradea Register (Regestrum Varadinense), a collection of records of the so-called trial by ordeal (judicium Dei), which were held before the representatives of the Oradea Chapter. The local scribes were most probably well acquainted with the various social classes and clearly distinguished them using contemporary and up-to-date Latin names in their register. RAUSCHER, Rudolf. O regetu varadinském. K dějinám božích soudů v Úhrách. In Bratislava. Časopis Učené společnosti Šafaříkovy, 1929, vol. 3, pp. 307–326; LÉDERER 1957, pp. 84–105. On this see, the study in this issue of Forum Historiae by LYSÝ, Miroslav. On the Social Structure of the Kingdom of Hungary According to the Records of the Regestrum Varadinense.

other hand, thanks to their military merits and service, some of the castle or royal servants were socially elevated to the so-called “lesser conditional nobility” or directly to “royal servitors” (servientes regis) and occasionally even “real or true” nobles of the kingdom (puri/veri nobiles or nobiles regni).  

According to Gyula Kristó, the major economic and social changes of the 13th century bear witness to the fact that for the first time in its history, the Kingdom of Hungary approached Western Europe. Because of the so-called “new institutions” (novae institutiones) introduced at a “revolutionary” pace during the reign of Andrew II and the subsequent reforms of Béla IV, all these had a significant impact on the majority of the society and also manifested themselves in the transformations of social structures. Moreover, the important changes that took place in warfare and armaments, to which the more frequent grants of royal estates as rewards for loyalty and military services were also related, should also be borne in mind.

Several 13th century sources illustrate the multifaceted nature of social changes, which manifested themselves in the migration or flight of servi, semi-free, or economically dependent people to other estates (so-called internal migration), as well as in the increased social mobility of predominantly free or dependent classes on the ruler’s initiative. Thirteenth-century charters bear witness to a number of disputes between social classes, and most of these arose because of confusion over their legal or economic designation. In the territory of castle county (comitatus), disputes over the resolution of the “unclear” status of local people trying to improve their position—mainly by gaining a more favourable freedom—were common in the first half of the 13th century. For some classes of “serfs,” these conflicts manifested themselves after the Mongol invasion (1241–1242) as a consequence of population decline and the destruction of several villages. Moreover, it is important to note that social transformations in this period were also strongly influenced by the large-scale settlement of the country and the arrival of predominantly German-speaking communities from abroad.


We should bear in mind, however, that although the 13th century was characterized by prominent socio-economic changes, this image may be related to a certain extent to the increased use of writing and the survival of written sources. Thanks to the royal chancellery and the spread of written culture, record-keeping of the legal, property and family affairs of the various population classes increased significantly. As legal documents, charters gained much more importance in this period. From this perspective, the 13th century does appear to have been revolutionary as a lot more prominent social transformations took place at that time than in the previous centuries. While the significance of this period cannot be denied, it should also be pointed out that changes had already been taking place in the 11th and 12th centuries, although there are considerably fewer written documents describing these presumed processes from the Hungarian environment. According to György Székely, the 12th century was a revolutionary period in agricultural innovations, changes in land ownership and military armaments, and these were related to the emergence of the upper and wealthy strata (the so-called nobiles) from among the broader class of freemen and to the improved status of royal and ecclesiastical servants. The importance of social transformations in these periods is indicated by the fact that it was in the early 13th century that more diverse categories of people with different social statuses appeared more frequently in the sources, and this points to their earlier socio-legal development. This often led to considerably confusing terminology. Social categories were becoming unified and more complex, involving several classes of freemen. The designations of magnates, the broader nobility (middle and lesser nobiles), privileged classes and royal serfs were changing, with some earlier terms acquiring different meanings. In the early 13th century, people who had previously had a subordinate status and a lower degree of freedom could enjoy a more favour-
able social status. It is mainly from this period that several charters issued by the king, ecclesiastical institutions or nobles have survived, in which they granted or regulated the rights and duties of their servants, “serfs” and guests. Depending on the conditions, the settlement situation and ownership rights on the individual estates, some privileges were extensive, whereas others were merely refinements and modifications of the original customs. Due to disputes with neighbours or the complaints of some “serfs” about being unjustifiably burdened with renders in kind, taxes or services, even their earlier rights and duties would often be laid down.

In Hungarian historiography, the question of freedom and unfreedom was of primary importance for the assessment of social stratification in the 11th to 13th centuries. Several medievalists who investigated society in the period of Stephen I drew on the general division to liberi and servi, i.e. the free and the unfree. This basic difference in terms of origin and status could also be expressed in opposites: the rich vs. the poor (dives–pauper), the wealthy vs. the commoners (valens–vulgaris) or simply descriptively as the major ones vs. the minor ones (maiores–minores). In the context of the period, liber was a person who had personal liberties, was not owned by anyone and possessed the right to fight. Within this large class, certain differences could be seen in the first third of the 11th century, which were most probably related to the earlier, pre-1000 development and stemmed mostly from the wealth and the social status of the various classes of freemen (such as the comites, the milites, etc.). It was these new property relations that gradually created the preconditions for later socio-legal differences within the initially uniform class of freemen.

Social mobility also existed in this period, since a liber could lose his freedom in certain cases and a servus could gain it. While a move between these two classes was possible, it is questionable to what extent and how often these social transfers actually took place. According to Sándor Domonkosvzky, the earliest domestic laws of the first third of the 11th century in fact document the earlier transformations of medieval Hungarian society—new ways of life, differences in property, the adoption of Christianity by the social elite, etc.—which were apparently met with dissatisfaction by the free warriors with the implementation of these “innovations” from above. He also suggests that these prominent social transformations were very intense during

the reign of Stephen I. Although these processes may have begun earlier, the disintegration of previous social structures was first recorded in writing only during Stephen’s reign.100

Some earlier researchers held the opinion that the *liberi* had initially been a uniform and indivisible class of freemen. According to some others (Károly Tagányi, Bálint Hóman, György Gyorffy), this social category also included various classes of so-called semi-free men as early as during the reign of Stephen I.101 According to most historians, however, the basic division of *liberi* and *servi* applied only in the first half of the 11th century. Towards the end of the 11th and in the early 12th centuries, individuals appear in the sources who cannot clearly be assigned to any of these two classes. Researchers believe that from that time onwards, medieval Hungarian society was internally divided into free warriors ("nobles"), semi-free people and slaves. From the early 12th century on, some freemen had to pay a special tax, the so-called “pennies of freemen” (*denarii liberorum*, later *liberi denarii*), which implies that the term liber no longer denoted only completely free people, but also the semi-free. According to Ilona Bolla, only freemen living and working on foreign—mostly royal or ecclesiastical—land paid this tax, while freemen cultivating their own land were exempt from it.102 The difference between these two classes, within the same legal status, thus lied in property. Although these new property relations and the extent of wealth had already been developing the conditions for an internal differentiation of freemen, these transformations were not immediately reflected in the use of different terminology in the sources of the time.103

According to the legal code of King Ladislaus, medieval Hungarian society was no longer divided into the free and the unfree, but into *nobiles* and *ignobiles*. This new division reflected the fact that only the higher and wealthy social class of freemen with their own property and better armaments, who fought for the king and held positions in the ruler’s court and castle county, were referred to as *nobiles*. This newly formed community of freemen no longer included other classes of *liberi* with personal liberties but no wealth, most of whom did not fight. Because of this new categorization of freemen, it became necessary to distinguish these “higher-ranking” and wealthy *liberi–nobiles* from the other common *liberi–ignobiles* in the sources.104

The freedom of the royal condicionarii—the semi-free royal servants farming the dynastic estates of the Árpáds—illustrates the social transformations of the 13th century.\(^{105}\) The social status of these royal people came with certain rights and duties, and the term liberi homines did not denote only completely free men (holders of the so-called plena, perpetua, and aurea libertas)\(^ {106}\) who could move without any restrictions, but also a wider circle of people with different degrees of freedom. The plurality of the meanings of libertas\(^ {107}\) is well-known as in that period, the term denoted not only the completely free but also people who enjoyed so-called limited, relative, incomplete or conditional freedom, or those who had a better social status within their community. The most important and most distinctive criterion that differentiated the completely free men from the other free people was their right to free movement, i.e. the possibility to move anywhere at any time. Royal condicionarii did not achieve the level of complete freedom and had only bound or conditional freedom, which was related to their use of dynastic or castle estates. Although they enjoyed personal liberties, they did not own land, as they only cultivated rented royal land hereditarily and had to render special services in return. Unlike unfree people (slaves, servants, and maids), they maintained a better social status because they used the land under clearly defined conditions. For this rented land, they paid land tax, made renders in kind and rendered various services according to their expertise or specialization. The king or his representatives (counts, comites etc.) were not allowed to demand anything from them beyond their agreed obligations. If the ruler exempted his condicionarii from rendering services, they remained on the same land but could leave at any time, depending on the stipulated rules. One of the most common ways to improve the socio-legal status of royal condicionarii was to grant them special privileges or exemptions, thus changing their servant status (servilis condicio) to completely free (libera condicio).\(^ {108}\)

**Conclusion**

The present introductory text on the forms and transformations of medieval Hungarian society in the 11th to 13th centuries aims to briefly introduce the basic literature on the topic, outline research possibilities and limits, and point out the terminological pitfalls in the interpretation of medieval Hungarian sources. Even though several medievalists have already carried out research on medieval Hungarian society, the topic is still open to new possibilities of treatment. However, in addition to analyzing the sources, potential researchers will

---

\(^{107}\) On freedom in general, see: PATTERSON 2007, pp. 36–47.
also have to deal with earlier historiographical concepts and re-evaluate some of the remaining influential hypotheses of some researchers. Due to the low number of extant sources from the 11th to 13th centuries, research on medieval Hungarian society offers a good opportunity to treat this topic comparatively within a broader East-Central European context too.