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Dissertation abstracts

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The Korlátkövi family (The History and Political Role of a Wealthy Noble Family in the 15th–16th centuries)

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I.

Due to the medievalist researches of the past decades the close connection between political power and the ownership of castles in medieval Hungary has become obvious. Thence it follows that even the study of 'general history' may not be devoid of such thorough examinations that put those families in the limelight which had a share in power, that is the representatives of the baronial stratum and the castle-owning nobles. The family history approach in the case of these two strata will doubtlessly provide us with political history results beside socio-historical ones. In my dissertation I have examined the history and political role of such a wealthy family a member of which was a baron in the Jagellonian era, thus played a significant role in the government of the two Jagellonian kings. The dissertation demonstrates the events of exactly a century from obtaining their first and eponymous castle in 1446 until the dying out of the male line in 1546.

There were several reasons for choosing the Korlátkövi family. Naturally I was mostly influenced by my own curiosity in social history, since I intended to deal with the political power and social position of the castle-owning nobles. This social group – the members of which were referred to as *egregii* from the beginning of the 15th century even if they did not hold the required offices – was different from the medium landowners residing just below them in social hierarchy, because the former usually owned a few forts and hundreds of villein households and often had access to the royal court rarely obtaining barony. After being raised to the western style peerage in the early modern times these families quickly became absorbed in the Hungarian aristocracy of the modern times. On the other hand it seemed obvious to me to begin this examination with a family belonging to this stratum; a family that is from the north-western region of Hungary (Nyitra county to be more exact), that I have been studying for years. At the end of the middle age the Korlátkövi family had – partly due to demographic reasons – the biggest wealth among the other castle-owning

families (Apponyi, Cobor, Gimesi Forgács, Keselőkői Majtényi) in the county, and doubtlessly the biggest influence owing to Peter, steward of the royal household, who was killed at Mohács. Another fortunate reason for a historian is that the family died out two decades after the year that is traditionally considered to be the end of the middle age, therefore it is not necessary to create artificial periods when examining their history. Whilst it is indisputable that Nyitra county is in a favourable position as far as family history researches are concerned, I find it important to mention that the *Elefánthyak* from Erik Fügedi, which is considered to be a classic in Hungarian historical literature, could not provide control material for me. While the Elefánthy's were significant medium landowners in the late middle ages, the Korlátkövi's were a castle-owning family, who later became barons with such wealth and power that their endeavours were completely different from that of the Elefánthy's.

Therefore I had two main objectives: while studying the history of the family I put an emphasis on their political role, along with striving to give a relevant, accurate social background to it.

II.

The research method I used in the course of making the dissertation was a simple but rather time-consuming one: I conducted data acquisition aiming at completeness. In compliance with the special properties of middle age sources I primarily aimed at the families who later obtained the settlements and with them parts of the Korlátkövi archives; on the other hand I examined the authoritative local and town archives near their estate, several family archives in Upper Western Hungary and the *Neo-regestrata Acta*, which is the biggest collection of middle age documents. This huge amount of data gained this way was grouped around the following thematic units: biography of the heads of the family (their offices and duties, their roles as retainers, barons or at the court, obtaining

castles, family relations), their estate and concerning affairs (which is demonstrated by a data store) and socio-historical aspects.

Since my dissertation deals with the events of a century, from the point of view of a family at that, I could not linger over a significant political event. In these cases I rather concentrated on the role of the family members. It was not my aim either to write such a traditional piece of family history that deals with possessory actions (often lasting for many years) – which may easily be charted due to the properties of middle age sources – in details, and demonstrates the history of the family in question in chronological order. I only made an exception in cases arising in connection with castle affairs that I considered worthy of setting forth in details because of their significance in political and social history.

Since the estates of the family were inherited by several families on the female line and the Nyáry's, their scattered archives subsist in various places: most of their documents were preserved in the Apponyi collection of the Battyány archives, but important documents are held in the Korlátkő archives of the Motesiczky, the Novák archives of the Majthényi, and the partly ruined Bashalom, Óvár and Turócdivék archives of the Pongrácz families. The sources found here are fairly completed by the pieces of information gathered in authoritative local collections, in the archives of the chapters of Pozsony, Nyitra and Esztergom in particular – though I greatly missed the lost archives of the Nyáry family. The biggest difficulty, however, is caused by the selection presumably carried out in the 16th century rather than the destruction and disappearance of the documents in the modern times. The new gift impetrated by Oswald Korlátkövi Jr. in 1498, which listed almost all the estates of the family, seems to be an important dividing line: a significant part of documents – dated before that age – dealing with estate affairs disappeared. Nevertheless, one might say: although there are not so many sources available to write the history of the Korlátkövi's than in the cases of the Gersei Pető, Kállói or Kisvárdai

families, it seems that we still have enough information to outline tendencies due to the relative abundance of data.

It has to be underlined that this dissertation is a *family history* in spite of the numerous research aspects: its aim is *not* to draw generally acceptable socio-historical conclusions about the noble families of the late middle ages. Although I tried to compare my findings concerning the Korlátkövi's with the phenomena observed in the case of other castle-owning families of Nyitra county, a summarizing work may only be written after an examination has been made of several families having such power as the Korlátkövi's.

III.

The dissertation has eight chapters. The first chapter includes the objectives, a brief description of the research methods used, and a summary of the Hungarian and Slovakian special literature about the family. The second chapter deals with the origin of the family. The Korlátkövi's were called Bucsányi before obtaining their castle because their predecessor – descending from the Szegi lineage of the Hontpázmány kindred – settled in Bucsány (a village near Nagyszombat, Nyitra county) at the end of the 13th century. In the 14th century the Bucsányi family broke up into three lineages – Bodok, Gecse and Korlátkövi – among which only the Korlátkövi's could obtain significant power in the county.

The third chapter deals with the life of Oswald Bucsányi Sr., who established the wealth of the family. He was a simple nobleman with not much wealth since his father's estates had been confiscated by the king following an uprising in 1403. He served Stibor of Stiboric and – after his death – Nicholas Újlaki, banus of Macsó, who appointed him to be the deputy banus of Macsó in 1443 gaining significant power the help of which he could redeem the castle of Korlátkő (Nyitra county) that he had been given by his master in 1445 with the obligation of redemption.

The castle, situated in the Lesser Carpathians near the Moravian-Hungarian border, played an important role in the region nearby in the confused period following the death of King Albert, since one of the most important trade routes of the country was under its control. This dissertation demonstrates the history of the castle unlike the specialized literature so far. In 1443 a Moravian robber knight called Jan Mesenspek z Helfštejna raided the country with his troops to capture Pöstyén (a market-town with ford of strategic significance on the river Vág) from Nicholas Újlaki referring to a debt. It has been rendered probable by the author that Újlaki gave Korlátzó (an estate of lesser value obtained in 1439) to him in exchange for Pöstyén, because Korlátzó was considered a Bohemian estate right after then. In 1444 the castle was obtained by another Moravian adventurer, Jan z Moravan (or Janda as he was called by his contemporaries), who must have been a retainer (*familiaris*) of Pongrác Szentmiklósi, who owned several forts nearby. The castle was redeemed by Oswald Bucsányi in March–May 1446 for 4000 goldpieces – according to relevant sources –, that greatly contributed to peace in the region as well as the rise of the family.

In the company of Újlaki Oswald Bucsányi participated in numerous political events. For example in 1448 he – together with László Töttös – was sent to Szendrő to negotiate with the Serbian despot about the release of governor John Hunyadi, who had fallen into captivity after the battle of Rigómező. Bucsányi was a deputy banus until 1452, captain of Visegrád between 1450 and 1455, then (deputy) *comes* of Nyitra from 1454 until his death. He died in 1456, a little after he had set off from Nyitra towards Nándorfehérvár with his troops maintained by himself.

The fourth chapter is the biography of his youngest son, Oswald. After the death of the deputy banus there were hard times for the family. Their estates were put in pledge one after the other and Stephen, the eldest son – who was a castellan of Sirok (Heves county) as a retainer of Michael Ország and married

into the baronial Kompolt family of Nána – died in 1471 at a very young age. However, the real disaster came in September 1473 when King Mathias ordered Ladislav Podmanicki to capture the castle of Korlátkő inhabited by rogues. Nothing is known about the antecedents but it seems that it is not in connection with the Polish raid in 1471. Later sources referred to the disloyalty of Michael, second son of Oswald deputy banus. Nevertheless, the siege was successful – it is known, for example, that Pozsony sent eight harquebuses and a hundredweight gunpowder – and the family lost its eponymous castle for a quarter of a century. It was first owned by Georg von Stein, the governor of Lower Silesia, then by Johann Plankner von Königsberg, a royal knight and his family. Oswald Jr. had only three or four villages left and was bound to leave the castle and move to his manor in Szák (Komárom county).

Although the author finds it possible that Oswald Jr. served the Rozgonyi family in the 1470s and 1480s, his carrier was owing to Ulászló II. (1490-1526). He was a royal steward (*dispensator regius*) between 1492 and 1498 and as such he claimed Korlátkő back by 1498 the latest and even got the castle of Hegyesd (Zala county) as a gift from the king in 1492. In 1498 he was appointed the castellan of Tata and *comes* of Komárom by the king, but he was notwithstanding considered a courtier (*aulicus*). Although he held these offices until his death the king gave him additional titles: in 1500 he was given the right of *decempersonatus*, on the basis of which he could retain the war-tax collected on his estates in order to maintain an own banderium. His political power is demonstrated well by the fact that sometimes he was referred to as an advisor to the king. Between 1506 and 1510 he travelled to Poland and Moldova several times as an envoy; the text of the Polish-Moldovan peace treaty in 1510 was partly the result of his mediation.

Although Oswald obtained the Hegyesd estate by 1504 he immediately forwarded it to Ambrus Sárkány, later royal judge (*országbíró*); the reason of this step was that Oswald was given the Berencs estate (next to Korlátkő, Nyitra

county) as a gift in 1502, the right of pledge of which was held by George Mekksei, provost of Szepes. To redeem the castle – that succeeded only in 1511 – he had to sacrifice the remote Hegyesd among others. Eventually Oswald died in 1511 bequeathing two neighbouring estates and other significant lands to his four sons.

The fifth chapter is the biography of Peter Korlátkövi, a Steward of the Royal Household and Master of the Doorkeepers. Peter was born around 1480 from the first marriage of Oswald Jr. and held the offices – no doubt owing to the help of his father – of royal chamberlain (*cubicularius*, from 1502) and treasurer (*tavernicus*, from 1509). The king placed such confidence in him that in the beginning of 1512 he inherited the titles of his father (castellan in Komárom and Tata and *comes* in Komárom). In May 1515 the king made him the Steward of the Royal Household, which provided him with baronial rank in the governing circles. The wish of the old monarch is in connection with the fact that emperor Maximilian had made Korlátkövi an imperial baron in the same year and gave him the castles of Komárom and Tata with the reservation that he might not sell them until his son's coming of age.

The dissertation analyses the baronial work of Korlátkövi, the background of his new position as High Steward of the Royal Household (*supremus magister curiae*, gained in the 1520s), his frequent governmental *ad hoc* commissions and diplomatic duties ensuing from his office as an advisor. Apart from his baronial function his contribution as the *comes* of Komárom and *tavernicus* is also dealt with along with his military work. There is a separate sub-chapter devoted to his political orientation and allies. The author does not agree with a later idea that Korlátkövi might have been a secret ally of John Szapolyai, voivode of Transylvania. Although on the basis of relevant sources the political power of Korlátkövi gradually increased from 1521, he was never part of the primary governing élite. While – like other members of the political élite – making every effort to gain more power, he was a loyalist striving to

strengthen the power of the king apparently being a true servant of him. There are separate sub-chapters about how he obtained the castle of Lak (Somogy county), about the lawsuits he pursued to gain power over Éleskő (Pozsony county) and how he put in a claim for an estate (a part of which was considered to be a part of Hungary by contemporary sources) in Moravia.

The sixth chapter analyses the work of Dorothea Ország, widow of Peter and his younger brother, Sigismund Korlátkövi after 1526. In this confused period the wealthy baronial widow could not keep the estates obtained by her husband and even her brother-in-law initiated proceedings against her. Therefore in 1534 – presumably with the support of her nephew, Master of the Table, Ladislas Ország and King Ferdinand – she had her younger daughter, Elizabeth betrothed with the talented hussar captain of the Habsburg sovereign, Francis Nyári of Bedeg. He promised to retrieve the remote estates and simply seized a significant part of the wealth owned by Korlátkövi. There was nothing left to do for Sigismund than to give half of the Korlátkövi property to Nyári contributing to his further strengthening. Although Sigismund seemed to husband his resources skilfully, he never participated in national politics. On the other hand he preferred using the title ‘independent baron of Berencs’ he had inherited from his brother. With his death in 1546 the male line of the family died out. There is a separate sub-chapter demonstrating the struggle of the female line for the family estates (1534–1551).

The seventh chapter is a data store showing the changes in the family property arranged by counties and settlements. The time limit was set to the dying out of the male line. Therefore only those 16th century census-like sources were dealt with – after 1546 – from which numerical data could be gained concerning the value (number of households) of each settlement. In fact this data store consists of one-sentence-long extracts, and the author is exempted from demonstrating the possessory actions of the Korlátkövi’s in details. The

properties of the family – although in a rather simplified form – are shown in the chart below:

Chart 2: Estates of the Korlátkövi family

	By hereditary right						By right of pledge			
	Castles	Mansions	Market-towns	Estates (villages)	Estate parts	<i>Predia</i>	<i>Predium parts</i>	Estates (villages)	Estate parts	<i>Predia</i>
Estates of Oswald I. in 1456	1			9	1	4		2	4	
Estates of Oswald II. in 1511 and joint estates of his sons until 1526	2		1	21	16	8	4			
Estates of Peter in 1526 (without the joint estates with his brothers)	1	2	2	16	17	1	2	4	1	1

The eighth chapter deals with socio-historical questions. It analyses the residence habits of the castle-owning nobles in Nyitra county as well as the function of their castles and their changes between 1450 and 1550, detailing the permanent residences of the Korlátkövi's. It also examines the erudition and mother tongue of the family members. They were much more educated than an average noble family: Oswald Jr. studied at the University of Pozsony, while one of his sons attended the University of Krakow. It is also without doubt that they were bilingual, that is they mastered both Hungarian and Slovakian languages, therefore it is no accident that they were often called *Korlátsky*. One of the sub-chapters demonstrates their retainers and their social status.

The dissertation ends with an appendix consisting of four chapters, which contains the unedited epistles (13 documents between 1450 and 1532) of the

family members, their testaments (5 documents between 1456 and 1546) the itineraries of the male family members and two genealogical tables.

IV.

List of publications concerning the subject matter of the dissertation

1. Választott nemesi esküdtek Nyitra megyében (Az 1486. évi 8. tc. végrehajtása). [*Elected Noble Jurors in the County of Nyitra. The Execution of Act 8 of 1486.*] Századok 139. (2005) 261–290.
2. XVI–XVII. századi várleírások Korlátkőről. [*16th–17th Century Castle Descriptions about Korlátkö.*] Castrum. A Castrum Bene Egyesület Hírlevele. 1. szám. Szerk. Feld István, Szatlóczky Gábor, Domokos György. Budapest, 2005. 23–30.
3. Éleskő várának felújítása 1536-ban. [*Renovation of the Castle of Éleskő in 1536.*] In: Castrum. A Castrum Bene Egyesület Hírlevele. 3. szám. Szerk. Feld István, Szatlóczky Gábor, Domokos György. Budapest, 2006. 79–86.
4. Helynévváltozások a késő középkori Nyitra megyében. [*Changes in Settlement Denomination in Nyitra County in the late Middle Ages.*] In: A Duna vallomása. Tanulmányok Käfer István hetvenedik születésnapjára. Szerk. Ábrahám Barna–Pilecky Marcell. Piliscsaba, 2006. 48–56.
5. Nyitra megye hegyentúli járásának kamarahaszna-összeírása 1452-ből. Sajtó alatt. [*The Roll of lucrum camerae in the Tramontane District of Nyitra County in 1452. Under publication.*]