

Mentality of the Lower Nobility as Seen Through the County Elections of the Reform Age

Summary

The thesis examines the special occasions when representatives to the diet and county officials were elected by nobles of a county, in the last decades of the Hungarian Feudal Era. These events provide an excellent opportunity to look into the lives of members of the lower nobility. The thesis has chosen four major events that became ill-famed for their scandals and crimes: the 1833 elections in Heves County, the 1836 elections in Szabolcs County, the 1839 elections in Tolna County, and the election in Zala County in 1843. The main sources are the archival documents of these elections, but the thesis examines some other types of sources (the political press of the 1840s, literary works) and some further elections that give an opportunity to get a more detailed picture of the role of the lower nobility in the county elections.

Members of the lower nobility were in many cases ignorant, unaware of the questions that were at stake with the elections. A number of them had very little to get by, and lived in a landlord's dependence. These circumstances made them an easy target for the candidates to win their support. Oral and written argumentation, food and drinks, money, and in many cases threats were some of the means that could secure the vote of noblemen for a candidate.

In the abovementioned four counties canvassing and the elections lead to mass brawls and even murders. These events called for investigations, the documents of which have survived to posterity in the archives of the counties. The testimonies of these investigations and trials provide many details about members of the lower nobility: what these people thought about the current political issues, how they got to know them, how the canvassing and the elections affected their lives, what circumstances made them easy targets for bribe. In addition, the documents give an insight into the social life of the lower nobility and report on their relationship with their fellow noblemen, the commons, their leaders and the county officials.

When examining the sources, we always have to bear in mind that these documents do not reflect the 'reality' of the past, but they are political, moral and cultural representations of

what 'really happened'. So when reading the texts, we are not examining lower nobility 'as it was', but get a picture of how they wanted to be seen, how the county officials, the investigators, the writers etc. saw them.

We also have to bear in mind that the main subject of the archival documents, the press of the time, and the literary works were the cases and events that were out of the ordinary, the normal. What we can do with these special cases is to find the phenomena in common, or to look at their details as important data to the life of the lower nobility during the 1830s and 1840s.

There are some cases when more details can be found about a noble's life. When a person had been investigated before the elections, or when he died during the canvassing or at the election, the documents provide further details about their way of life and economic situation. These cases show the poverty of the lower nobility – as seen and represented by contemporaries and posterity. These nobles had nothing to lose, that is why they were easy to get for committing crimes.

'All nobles are equal' – that was the several-century old slogan that still determined the thinking of noblemen during the first half of the 19th century. Even though that equality did not exist in reality, both the lower and the upper nobility referred to it during canvassings and elections. There are a number of cases when members of the lower nobility refused to obey the order of a county official, saying that all nobles are equal and no nobleman has the right to order him anything. On the other end, candidates and canvassers used the slogan to gain votes, using the interpretation 'all nobles are brothers and should support each other'.

Usually, however, equality manifested as a deficiency in lower noblemen's thinking. They considered themselves less than a landlord, emphasized their innocence in the brawls, and pushed all responsibility on their lords, the canvassers or the officials.

Behind the ideal of equality, there were some real (economic, cultural, political) differences among groups of noblemen. The borderlines manifested during canvassing and elections for example in forms of address, clothing, and in choosing company during feasts.

Studying the documents of the county elections of the 1830s and 1840s not only give an opportunity to examine the role of individual nobleman and communities, but also show a path on which more details can be found out about a person, thus enriching our knowledge about the life of the lower nobility during the last decades of the Feudal Age.