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**Hungarian Noble Women's Last Wills from the Late
Middle Ages (1440-1526)**

Történelemtudományi Doktori Iskola

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SOURCES AND THE METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

My doctoral thesis summarizes the results of the researches on the last wills of noble women's of the late Middle Ages. The last will as a type of document is the basic source of the researches of the Middle Ages, it informs us about the traditions, religiousness, material and intellectual culture of the age, and about the testor as a person, their family and social connections.

The research aims to introduce the contemporary women's everyday life and connections, their religious life and articles for use and to describe the possible similarities and differences in their life, thinking and financial situation.

This research tends to elaborate the last wills presented in the collection of family records, in the documents of convents and ecclesiastical bodies entrusted with notarial functions or preserved in the *regesta* volumes of charters and publications of county archives. The basis of sources used for the research was the charters of the Database of archival documents of medieval Hungary (DL-DF) of the National Archives of Hungary. First the last wills were selected according to their type. Then publications of different type were examined since testaments can also occur in them. Documents of cities eg *protocollum* sometimes include noblemen's last wills, too. The special literature has to be also mentioned for it can refer to a source not known before.

135 testaments were examined using the above mentioned methods and they appear in 189 sources. This does not mean that they refer to 139 different women, since 2 women made their 2 different last wills at 2 different time, consequently the total number of the testors women is 133.

The examination of the last wills from the Middle Ages includes the examination of almost all the layers of the society and also the subsequent researches. It was András Kubinyi who started to introduce the systematic collection of the noblemen's last wills remained from the Jagellonian era and surpassing the research of the individual persons, however, the investigation of the customs of making last will by the members of the nobility started to come to the front only recently. The reason behind it must be, that it is more difficult to collect the sources in the case of noble last wills than the civil testaments. The researcher of civic last wills has more favourable conditions since the last wills of burghers were put down in *protocollum*. Making last wills in written form in the world of noblemen became frequent only in the 15-16 centuries and the noblemen's last wills differed from the one of the burghers mostly in the sense, that they had to fill much looser requirements. The burghers seem to have had much more last wills, but it is difficult to calculate the exact number of either the noblemen's or burghers' last wills. However, it

is obvious, that women also made less last wills than men in the world of burghers, too.

THE LAST WILL

The legal definition of the last will is the following: it is an individual, alterable, defeasible disposition of definite form made in case the testator dies and its validity is examined by ecclesiastical court. At the same time it is a personal document, reckoning the end of life. It is widely known that the noblemen were free to make their last will from Saint Stephen's laws on the one hand and the fact that the contemporary church encouraged as many people as it was possible to offer soul donation. One of the main aims of the middle age-people was to insure their own and their family's salvation. The one, who died without last will, *intestate*, was considered like a person having died without confession. Consequently, specifying the ecclesiastical institution(s) or person(s) as legatee was a very important part of the last will. The resolutions of the Council of Veszprém in 1515 declared the conditions of the last will, however, the law of making last will was not passed until 1715. The Council resolutions guaranteed the salvation of the dying person, their other-worldly happiness and redemption of sins.

THE RIGHTS OF NOBLE WOMEN AND MAIDS OF THE MIDDLE AGES

The research into women's history in Hungary does not belong to the most favourable topics compared to the popularity of the *gender studies* widely spread in Western Europe, although the researches already began at the end of the 19th century and the topic has become an independent field of historical science by now. In the preliminary of a volume introducing the women's cultural history of the Middle Ages and published in 2013, Kim Philips answering the question „*Why do we know so little about women of the Middle Ages?*” reaches the following conclusion: the topic has not actually been examined much till now. In connection with introducing an English noble woman's life at the end of the 14th century and at the beginning of the 15th century Fiona Swabey declares: „*Medieval women are most visible when dead.*” The statement expresses his criticism both to the contemporary sources and the elaboration of the sources on the one hand, and the image the society created about the women and the women themselves created about themselves - they are presented only in their last wills in the everyday life – on the other hand.

As for the Hungarian researches, Sándor Takáts's work, 'Hungarian Noblewomen' has to be mentioned which dealt with the topic already at the beginning of the 20th century, however, it is less known at present. He relied on his archival researches in Hungary and Vienna in his book. Nowadays the examination of the women's history generally occurs in connection with researching the individual families (in genealogical works), nevertheless the analysts of the

history of the citizens and cities also do researches into the topic. Numerous Hungarian scientific researches on the early modern times also assist researching into the Middle Ages.

In accordance with the researches, the well-known cliché of the women's subordinate position before the 20th century does not correspond to the facts, they were in a protected status with regard to their weakness in fact. The rights of noble maids are clarified in Tripartium and they include the following: *ius puellaris*, *allatura*, *res paraphernales*, *quarta puellaris*, and *dos/dotalicium*. The full right succession of the possession by maids was assured by the process of accepting a female in male company as equals, when the family died off on male line. The criterion of the process was the king's authorization.

THE WOMEN MAKING LAST WILL

The knowledge of the testor as a person and of their social and financial situation and their families is the basic condition of analysing the last wills. The reason of introducing Kanizsai Dorottya's social status - she was married to two palatines - and the length of her testament – it includes 18 folios compared to the 1-2 folios of the others – accounts for introducing her last will in a detailed way. testament in a detailed way

Kanizsai Dorotta was born about 1478, her birthplace is not known and there are debates about her parents. Her first husband was Péter Geréb, palatine (1500-1503), a relative of King Mátyás. They contracted the marriage in 1500 and Péter died in 1503. Second time she got married with Imre Perényi, the subsequent palatine (1505-1519), one year later. He died in 1519. The woman had no children in either marriage. After the death of the husbands she unified the Kanizsai and Geréb's arms and got an arm-giving charter. Her famous deed was, when after the battle in Mohács she employed 400 people to bury the dead decently and simultaneously she wanted to find the corpse of Ferenc Perényi, the bishop of Várad, who was her stepson. The time of Dorottya's death is not known, it might have happened in the first half 1531.

The authoritativeness of Dorottya Kanizsai's last will is undoubtful, inspite the fact, that it exists only in an unattested copy. Meanwhile her donation to Bajcs maintained in a charter confirmed by the king and palatine. The last will consists of several parts. After the introduction she prescribes the masses for her soul after her death, thereafter her donations to the different ecclesiastical institutions succeed and finally she decrees the donations to the laymen. The following churches were donated: the All-Saints' Pauline friary and its side chapel in Bajcs, the Saint Michael Benedictine abbey in Báta, The Saint Ladislav castle chapel in Valpó, the Saint Wolfgang church in Balf, the Blessed Virgin church in Füzítő and the Saint Leopold church of Neuburg-am-inn. The donations had their reasons: she wanted to be buried in the monastery of Bajcs where she had a chapel built for burying-place after 1519, Valpó was the family's

possession, and the shrine of the Saint Blood in the abbey of Báta was respected all around the country. The church in Füzítő was also founded by her and in Neuburg her kinsman, János Kanizsai was buried. The preferred secular inheritors were the daughters of the Styrian Gáspár Stubenberg, Erzsébet and Eufémia who grew up in Dorottya's court. The further beneficiaries belonged to the woman's household, among them there were Bernát Henyei, the castellan in Valpó, László Macskási, the woman's servant, Dorottya, the major-domo woman and the young maids and henchmen brought up in her court.

Regarding the other last wills, it is important to mention, that the introduction of the women's life needs genealogical researches examining both the women and their husband, kinship. In case of 133 women it cannot be the subject of this dissertation. However, it has to be emphasized, that numerous member of the noble families of different social and financial status made their last will, eg. the women of the Rozgonyi, Frangepán, Alsólendvai, Bánfi, Hédervári, Csáki, Litvai, Horvát, Várdai, Gersei Pető, Gimesi Forgács, Bajmóci Noffri, Lapispataki, Semsei, Putnoki, Károlyi, Csatári.

The dissertation describes the life of the women belonging to 6 families: the most distinguished Rozgonyis, the high middle-class Várdais, the medium landowner Semseis and Putnokis, and the less well-off Csatáris and Laki Kacors in Zala county.

5. THE FORMAL CRITERIA OF THE LAST WILLS

Approximately a slightly more than the half of the examined last wills remained in their traditional form, the other part of them is known from the records of interrogations and the remaining part was born as a consequence of the complaints and lawsuits occurring in the course of the execution or owing to the lack of execution.

The language of the last wills is Latin in most cases, and German turns up in two cases. Hungarian expressions often appear in the descriptions of the objects in the Latin texts, eg. the last will of the three wives, belonging to the Várdai family contains a prominently high number of the Hungarian expressions

While making the last will the majority of the women uses the common formula of *licet in corpora egra tamen in mente per omnia sana* declaring that they are fully aware of their action, consequently the decrees are undisputed.

Approximately the half of the testaments demonstrates the general practice of offering donations for both ecclesiastical and profane aim. Exclusively pious offerings appear only in 16 percent of the last wills, while the women donated for profane aim in 32 percent.

PIOUS DONATIONS

Since women were the family's memories keeper, they participated actively in the commemorations of the dead, and it is not surprising, that the majority of the introduced women gave instructions about their burial, or offered their soul to God or Virgin Mary at least. Thinking about the time after their death the women often ordained commemoration masses to read or sing for their sake. Dorothy Kanizsai gave the most detailed description in her last will, she ordered to celebrate commemoration masses 1 month and subsequently a half a year after her burial and on its anniversary. Regarding the burial place the women generally chose the resting place of the family and gave donations for the expenses of the burial.

The women donated 142 different ecclesiastical institutions or their members altogether. The parish churches had a slightly bigger share in the donations than the monasteries. The women generally preferred the churches of which they were the patrons or lived in the vicinity. The high number of the donations to the monasteries can be explained by the fact, that these institutions could accomplish the ordered masses, since the masspriest could celebrate an only mass a day. Among the different holy orders the Franciscan and Pauline ones were the most popular. It is worth to mention, that the women hardly ever supported the nunneries, maybe because they were small in number. Mentioning not only the church itself but also its staff, among them the most frequently their confessor also expresses the women's personal relation to the church.

The Semsei family's members, who made their last will can demonstrate the family traditions of donating the churches. All the four women gave offerings to the Saint George parish church in Pazdics, furthermore the Franciscan friaries in Céke, Sívár and Homonna, which illustrates the strong bond between the family and church.

The pious offerings in the last wills list 669 items altogether. Almost the half of them enumerates different objects, while the money grants amount to the third of the total items. Instructions about the possession appear only in 16 percent and about the animals and crops not more than in 10 percent. One part of the land-grants generally include only the woman's *dos* and engagement present. The richest donation was left to the Pauline friary in Zengg by Dorottya Alsólendvai Bánfi. Dorottya Kanizsai was almost the only one whose donation contained liturgic requisites among the pious offerings, the other women ordered different pieces of clothes and articles for personal use to retailor or sell. The hearse horse represents an essential element of the animal donations and is connected to a Hungarian custom, when after leading the funeral procession it got offered to the church. The tradition only appears in the last will of Anna Dengelegi who was the widow of Lőrinc Kállai Lökös.

There are donations among the ecclesiastical ones in the last wills which recall the custom of dressed Virgin. It became practice later in the age of Baroque. Margit Kenderes and Katalin Hédervári gave their beads to put on Virgin Mary's neck and Margit offered a veil for Virgin Mary's head.

SECULAR DONATIONS

Besides pious donations the inheritance of the the goods and properties was also important for the noblewomen. There are 498 persons altogether who are mentioned as an heir, and the 45 percent of them were the kinsfolk of the ladies. Another 50 percent of the heirs were mostly the servants and the remaining persons were the the neighbours, whose connections to the noblewomen have not been cleared. The beneficiaries are often women's relatives, mostly their own or adopted and foster-children, their proportion is 20 percent. Within the family, the husbands are mentioned also often. The last will of Erzsébet Druget describes the household of a noblewoman. She donated her three senechals, servants and four maids at the same time. The less well-off Anna Dengelegi shows also the number and sphere of the servants who lived in the household. Anna listed her senechal and eleven of her servitor, and moreover, five maidens.

The secular donations add up to 1040 records in all. The two third parts of these grants was an article, than the possessions and money. The offertories concerning to the properties generally do not let out any details. From the wealthiest eg. the widow of Zsigmond Frangepán donated her daughter, the widow of Vuk despot her possessions in Tribliane, Zriane, Lubcsice and Koscsice in Busan county.

The majority of the offertories are articles, and it can be established that the pieces of furnitures and table-linen were the most popular since the proportion of the donated jewelleries and clothes was similar. There are altogether 332 pieces of furnishings are mentioned. These articles were the part of the everyday life, and as the pieces of clothing were the indicator of the family's wealth. The bed-linen occurs also in a great amount, which can be explained by the fact, the it was the part of the trousseau. The main part of textiles which decorated the whole house was the tapestry

There are mentioned 245 clothes and the most common was the tunic (*tunica, szoknya*), than the chemise decorating the house among them the several types of headdresses are the most numerous. The objects for sacral use, but donated to secular persons also belong to this group; crosses and beads worn often as jewellery for instance. In addition to this, it must be mentioned that Dorothy Kanizsai donated to her adopted daughters their trousseau (*jegyruha*), which contained mainly clothes, bed-linen and gold or silver jewelleries.

Arms are mentioned only twice: Barbara Kálnai and Márta Bocskai demised the weapons remained with her from their first husband to their son.

9. THE LAST WILL OF THE OTHER PARTY

Comparing briefly the women's and men's last wills to/with each other led to the following result. Among the husbands of the above demonstrated women 12 appear whose last will is known. The husbands, very similarly to their wives, gave pious offerings, although the objects of both the ecclesiastical and profane donations differed from the ones of the women. The men donated possessions and money in much bigger proportion due to their legal position than their wives. The men definitely list the pieces of men clothes - if they mention them at all - although it has to be mentioned that the women at the same time offered them to be sold in several cases. In the case of the women's donations the dominance of women jewellery can be seen.

10. CONCLUSION

Objects generally appear in the most women's last will. This phenomenon does not depend on the testator's property. However, both their material and quantity expresses the financial situation of their owner. The last will of the women who represent the different branches of the Rozgonyi family illustrates this statement. The last will of Erzsábet Mainberki originated from abroad and the wife of the Lord Chief Justice directs about mainly the possessions while the women of the less well-off branches of the family list lead and copper objects. Dorottya Kanizsai who belongs to the wealthiest families supports both her adopted daughters and the churches very generously, She did not give objects to alter them, but finished, devotional articles, since she could afford the possession of articles not only for everyday use.

Finally, we should refer back to the sentence in the introduction „*Women are only visible when dead*”. Is it true indeed? If one of the propositions of researching last wills is accepted, ie. the examination of testaments assists in exploring the material and intellectual culture and everyday life of a certain age, then the conclusion can be reached that women played a role as important as men in the everyday life, although these roles were not manifested in the common/collective history but in the ordinary routine of the family life. That is why they appeared in the sources much less than men. However, in their last will they could manifest their roles when they as traditionally god-fearing, devout women implored salvation via their pious

offerings on the one hand, or appeared in the role of the provident mother and housekeeper offering their articles as donations on the other hand.

Summarizing, first, it can be stated that making last wills in the case of noble women was not an extraordinary practice in the Middle Ages. Literacy was already spread in the world of women, too in the late Middle Ages; it is enough to think only about their extensive correspondence within the family or in business. Second, the noble women due to their properties and extended social connections were definitely interested in arranging the fate of their properties. Third, supposedly, people generally made last will in this period, declaring their preparedness for death, whilst the priest was obliged to ask them when he administered the extreme unction, if they had already made their last will. Finally, it has to be mentioned that the examination of last wills and testators can inform the researchers and the public on the life of several layers of the society through the people and relations of different type appearing in the last wills.

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