The Disappearance of Servi in Hungary

The turning point in the use of servi in Hungarian agricultural labour was the thirteenth century. By the beginning of the fourteenth century, the village had overtaken the praedium. How did this process occur? What were the factors that led lords to abandon their complete control over their servi and replace it with a much looser control in which the villagers were in charge of the timing and amount of their labour in exchange for payments? The answers lie with the origins of the village community in Hungary. The evidence points to an external origin of the village from the groups of hospites who came to the kingdom during the period. There may have been some indigenous impulses to communal labour, however.

Before discussing the arrival of the village though we must look at the role of the church in ending slavery in Hungary. Debate has often focused on the church’s impact upon the decline of slavery in Western Europe, as we have seen in the first chapter. Indeed we will see that ecclesiastics did have a role to play in ending slavery in Hungary, but it was not through their teachings, but rather through the reorganization of labour to suit their own needs.

Ecclesiastical Influence upon the Position of servi in Hungary

As both Pierre Bonnassie and Marc Bloch have argued, the attitudes and actions of the church were themselves ambivalent as regards slavery.1 In general, the church took no action to upset the legal norms prevalent at the time and made no attempt to end slavery. In fact, as time progressed, the church’s teachings quickly evolved to support the institution. Pauline theology did emphasize the spiritual equality of the slave and the free, yet it did not demand that slave owners free their slaves, as evident in the oft-quoted passage from the letter to the Ephesians:

Slaves, obey your masters according to the flesh with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart as to Christ... with good will doing service as to the Lord and not to men (knowing that whatever good thing he does, he shall receive the same from the Lord, whether he is a slave or a free-man). And masters, do the same things to them, forbearing threatening, knowing that your Master also is in Heaven. There is no respect of persons with Him.²

The Church Fathers continued along this line of thought, emphasizing the equality before God of both slave and free, but concepts about the origins of slavery were added which were to have a significant impact even to the modern era.³ So for example, while Basil the Great reminded his readers that ‘indeed with men no one is by nature a slave’ (παρὰ μὲν ἀνθρώποις τῇ φύσει δοῦλος οὐδείς) and that all were equally slaves before God, at the same time he argued that some actually benefited from enslavement to another. There were some who, through their own weakness, had ‘no natural rule in themselves’ (ἐν ἑαυτῷ τὸ κατὰ φύσιν ἄρχον), and so, as a chariot is controlled by a charioteer, or a boat by a pilot, they were to be controlled by a master.⁴ Augustine argued that God did not create some men in the condition of slavery, but rather slavery originated as the result of sin, the first example of which he found in the curse of slavery decreed by Noah upon his son, Ham, for his sin against his father.⁵ Augustine further used the captivity of Daniel and of Israel to the Babylonians as examples of slavery as the result of sin.⁶ Attribution of slavery to the sinfulness of the individuals themselves became further rooted in the minds of Christian theologians. Gregory the Great wrote further that all men were by nature born equal, but a ‘hidden dispensation’ (dispensatio occulta) placed some after others.⁷ Divine justice determined this hidden hierarchy on the basis of each person’s merit, which is best exemplified by the curse of Ham (the youngest son of Noah and the one cursed by him).⁸ Slavery as the result

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² Ephesians 6:5 and 7–9.
⁶ Augustine, De civitate dei 19.15.