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MODELLING CHRISTIANISATION

A GEOSPATIAL ANALYSIS OF THE
ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA ON THE RURAL
CHURCH NETWORK OF HUNGARY IN THE
11TH-12TH CENTURIES

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I. INTRODUCTION

Problems to be Considered in the Discourse

Due to the lack of sources and much ambiguity within those that exist, there is little factual knowledge about the presumably loose military confederation of the Hungarian clans that was probably multilingual and multiethnic. What is known is that the stabilisation of their power in the Carpathian Basin occurred at the beginning of the tenth century. Still, the transformation process of their political structures and the Árpád dynasty's rise to power over the clans during the tenth century is similarly obscure.¹ However, it is clear that the kingdom's foundation, intertwined with the Christianisation of the population, brought significant changes in political and power structures. To stabilise his power and integrate his realm into Christian Europe, Stephen I, the first king of Hungary, was baptised and crowned in the year 1000, and with his reign, a legitimate Christian state was officially born.

Obviously, the actual process was not so quick and straightforward. In 973, there is written evidence about Hungarian envoys in the imperial court of Quedlinburg, sent by their prince, Géza. However, their exact role is debated – it could have been connected to requesting missionaries or simply related to military and political issues. However, the marriage of Géza's son, Stephen, with the Bavarian princess Gisela, the sister of the future Holy Roman Emperor, about twenty years later reveals major political currents much more clearly. It is important to point out that the first steps towards an institutionalised Christianisation, namely the foundation of the Benedictine abbey of Pannonhalma as well as the foundation of the bishopric of Veszprém, preceded the coronation if only by a couple of years.² Ecclesiastical historians tend to agree that, following the coronation, the king wanted to construct the independent Hungarian church along Pseudo-Isidorian lines, which required a king, an archbishopric, and ten to twelve bishoprics. The foundation of these bishoprics was undoubtedly tied to the political interests of the ruler.

In contrast to the earliest bishoprics (Veszprém, Győr, and the archbishopric of Esztergom), that were founded in the core area, the positioning of newly founded bishoprics suggests that they were used to legitimise and secure the king's political power, such as in the case of the bishopric of Transylvania, founded around 1003 after the defeat of Gyula, Stephen's rival, who supported Byzantine Christianity. Thus, the introduction of Christianisation and the institutionalised Latin Christian church infrastructure,

something which had developed along the (re)organisation of secular power structures, strengthened and legitimised the political power of the new ruler.³ While the origins of this process may have rooted in developments at the end of the previous century,⁴ the official steps and the organised and institutionalised development were undoubtedly tied to the foundation of the kingdom in 1000, which marks the chronological starting point of the present work.

As the development of state power went hand in hand with the top-down Christianisation, institutionalised Christianity also meant the creation of the local church system. Local churches, the main focus of the present work, were crucial but often overlooked elements of this complex process. These churches were in contact with the masses of commoners and, therefore, influenced the largest segment of the population. The conversion of the people was vital not only for providing income for the Church but also for creating the 'body' of the Christian community which secured the ruler's power. Still, as their individual involvement in the larger events of Christianisation and state formation is negligible, there is little known about the common rural people. They were the largest segment of society by numbers, but tracing their role and involvement in these processes is challenging. Despite the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Hungary being of major importance regarding the foundation of the state, and concomitantly the formation of (secular and ecclesiastic) power structures, our sources about this period – which primarily consist of written evidence – are rather scarce, even regarding the most important people, institutions, and incidents. Rural people and their churches are practically non-existent in written records, the exceptions mostly being secular law codes.

The research followed this path accordingly. Christianisation and church organisation in Hungary are well and thoroughly researched subjects, though the process has been reconstructed using almost exclusively written sources.⁵ Written evidence, however, deals only with the topmost echelon of the institutions such as the foundation of bishoprics, archbishoprics, or certain monasteries. Local churches, the smallest but most numerous elements of the church system, almost never appear in written sources; thus, theories about the local church network have often lacked direct evidence. Although historians have made

¹ For a recent, critical synthesis on historiography and the problems of sources, see Berend, Urbańczyk, and Wiszewski, *Central Europe in the High Middle Ages*, 73–82; 103–109.

² Veszprém, 'Hungary's Conversion to Christianity', 76–78.

³ Kiss, 'A középkori magyar egyházszerkezet kialakulása', 105–108.

⁴ See an earlier example: Györffy, 'Die Entstehung der ungarischen Burgorganisation', 324–326. and the most recent work pointing out the uncertainty of the dating: Mordovin, *A várszerkezet kialakulása*, 98–99.

⁵ See for example: Érszegi, 'Die Christianisierung Ungarns anhand der Quellen.', 600–607.; Koszta, 'Fejezetek a korai magyar egyházszerkezet történetéből'; Kristó, 'Szent István püspöksége', 121–135.; Berend, *Christianization and the Rise of the Christian Monarchy*.

many relatively successful attempts to reconstruct the emergence of the future parish system, some areas need more comprehensive examination. The dominance of written records in the investigation of the Middle Ages is not a new phenomenon; the ‘tyranny of written records’ is also known in other areas of medieval archaeology.⁶ Yet, it has not proved possible to reconstruct the network of local churches, nor the involvement of the people belonging to them from the scanty body of written evidence.

In contrast to the textual situation, archaeology can provide large amounts of diverse data. While only a fraction of rural churches has been individually and deeply researched as monuments, many of them can contribute with other data – location, dating, and characterisation. Similarly, other sites, such as cemeteries or settlements, can be involved in the investigation. Separately, such sites do not offer much to archaeologists, and thus their study often does not go beyond an excavation report. However, when examined together, their comparative geospatial analysis with known centres and the landscape offers much more than that – they provide an excellent source base to investigate Christianisation and state formation processes. Having a more extensive source base allows one to uncover the networks of the earliest rural churches, cemeteries, secular and ecclesiastical power centres, along with their distribution patterns and relations to each other. By using the available sources, it is possible to create a picture of the network of local churches within the context of the emergence of the (future) parish organisation and thus, we see an image of Christianisation that is not influenced by the results of historical research based on textual sources but rather comes from the existing material evidence: buildings, archaeological finds, and features. Nonetheless, to draw comparative conclusions, the results of the analysis of these sites will be compared to the theories of the historical reconstruction of the same processes.

Contextualisation of the Historical Events in the Christianisation of Hungary

The Christianisation process of Hungary shows similarities with the neighbouring countries of the region. At the turn of the tenth and eleventh centuries, the states of Hungary, Bohemia, and Poland emerged as Christian monarchies as the result of state formation and Christianisation. The Moravian prince, Moimir, and several chieftains were baptised in the first half of the ninth century, and in 873, the first Přemysl ruler, Bořivoj, converted to Christianity too. Mieszko I, the first ruler of Poland’s Piast dynasty, and Géza, the prince of Hungary from the Árpáadian dynasty, were baptised one hundred years later, in the last third of the tenth century. Not surprisingly, a political agenda stood behind such conversions. Although the first Christian influences on Hungarians were Byzantine, as missions started already in the mid-tenth century, Géza, together with his son, Stephen, decided to be baptised according

to Latin Christian rite to oppose his competitor, Gyula. According to written sources, Latin Christian missions to the country started in the last third of the tenth century, with various outcomes. Sources tend to place emphasis on the missions of Adalbert who, in the later *Legenda maior* of Stephen, was claimed to baptise both Géza and Stephen. Except for his activity, no other missions are mentioned in eleventh-century sources, and so most probably, the impact and memory of their work disappeared.⁷

In the year 1000, the third year of his reign, Stephen (997–1038) was crowned with his wife, the Bavarian princess Gisela. Their earlier marriage (996/7) is also considered a tactical act towards the Christianisation of the country, negotiated by Géza, since when Stephen returned with the princess, she was accompanied by western military forces and missionaries. The first steps towards an institutionalised Christianity briefly preceded the coronation ceremony, starting with the foundation of the Benedictine abbey of Pannonhalma at the very end of Géza’s rule in 996. This was followed by the foundation, or rather the transformation, of the former missionary bishopric to the first regular Hungarian bishopric, Veszprém. However, it was probably under the authority of the archbishopric of Salzburg between 997 and 1000.⁸ The coronation, which was a crucial precondition to the creation of the independent Hungarian church, was soon followed by the foundation of the archbishoprics of Esztergom and the dioceses of Győr and Transylvania (the latter most probably only in the form of a missionary-like bishopric) by 1003. Until 1009, the organisation of the bishoprics of Pécs, Eger, and the archbishopric of Kalocsa took place. This step more or less completed the earliest system since, during his reign, King Stephen founded only one more bishopric, Csanád (today Cenad, Romania), and that was over two decades later in 1030.⁹ (*Fig. 1.*) After the reign of Stephen, the bishoprics of Vác and Bihar were soon established, the latter following a pagan revolt in 1045–46 in the same area. (*Fig. 2.*) The bishopric of Zagreb was founded in the last third of the century, and finally, Nitra was established around 1100.¹⁰ (*Fig. 3.*) According to László Koszta, this meant that the church organisation that developed in the first half of the eleventh century was further adjusted during the reign of Saint Ladislaus in the last third of the century, targeting the peripheries. Koszta also presupposed differences between the western and eastern half of the country – according to his analysis, in the eastern half of the country, the diocesan level of church organisation was only established towards the end of the eleventh century which was about 80 years later than in the Transdanubian region.¹¹ That notion would presuppose that the earliest bishoprics in this area had only nominal power, and the lowest level of ecclesiastical structure, the

⁶ See Austin, ‘The “Proper Study” of Medieval Archaeology’.

⁷ Berend, Laszlovszky, and Szakács, ‘The Kingdom of Hungary’, 327–330.

⁸ Koszta, ‘L’organisation de l’Église chrétienne en Hongrie’, 287–288.

⁹ Koszta, ‘State Power and Ecclesiastical System in Eleventh Century Hungary’, 2010, 68–71.

¹⁰ Berend, Laszlovszky, and Szakács, ‘The Kingdom of Hungary’, 351.

¹¹ Koszta, ‘Fejezetek a korai magyar egyházszerkezet történetéből’.

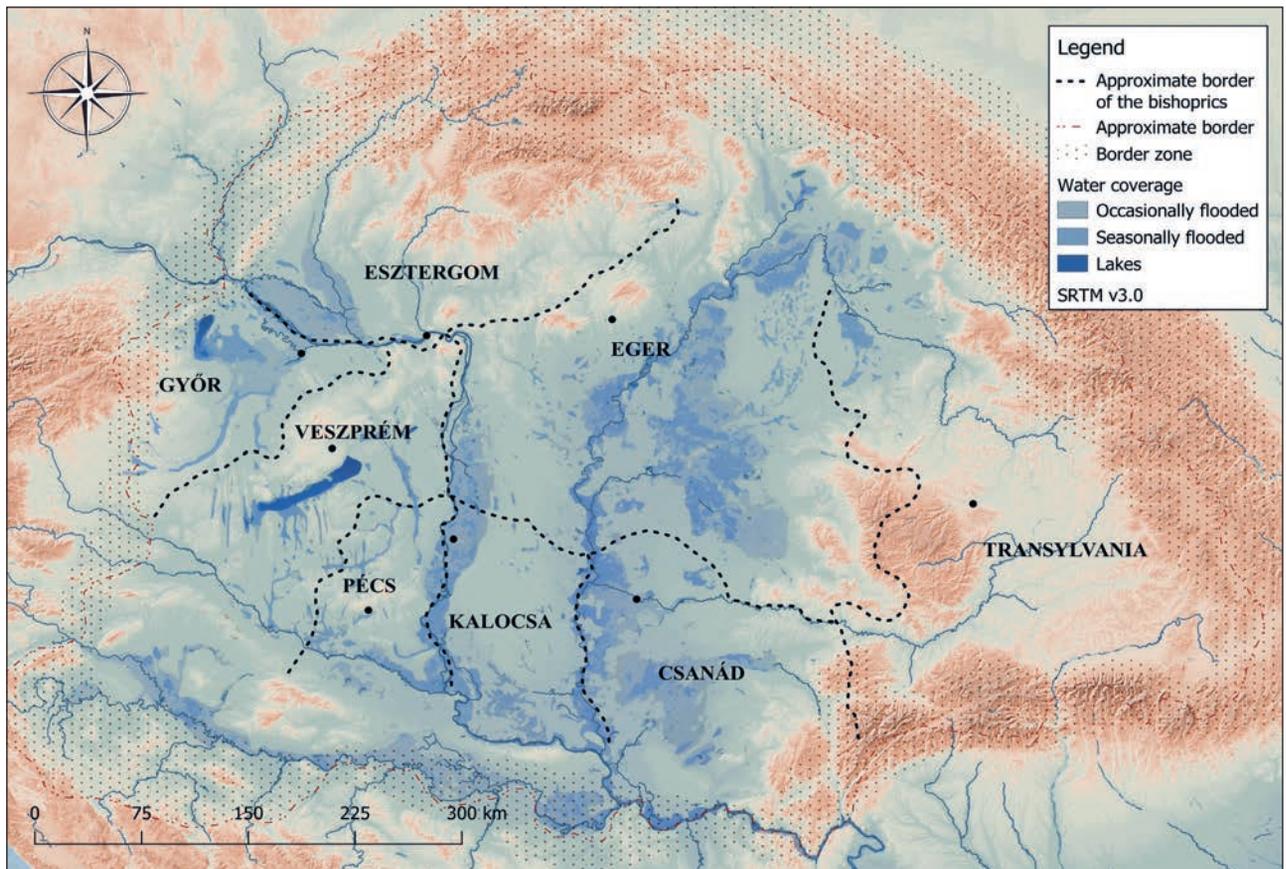


Fig. 1. Approximate extent of the bishoprics in 1038, after Koszta 2012. The borders of the bishoprics are somewhat indefinite; their arrangement in the border zones is unknown.

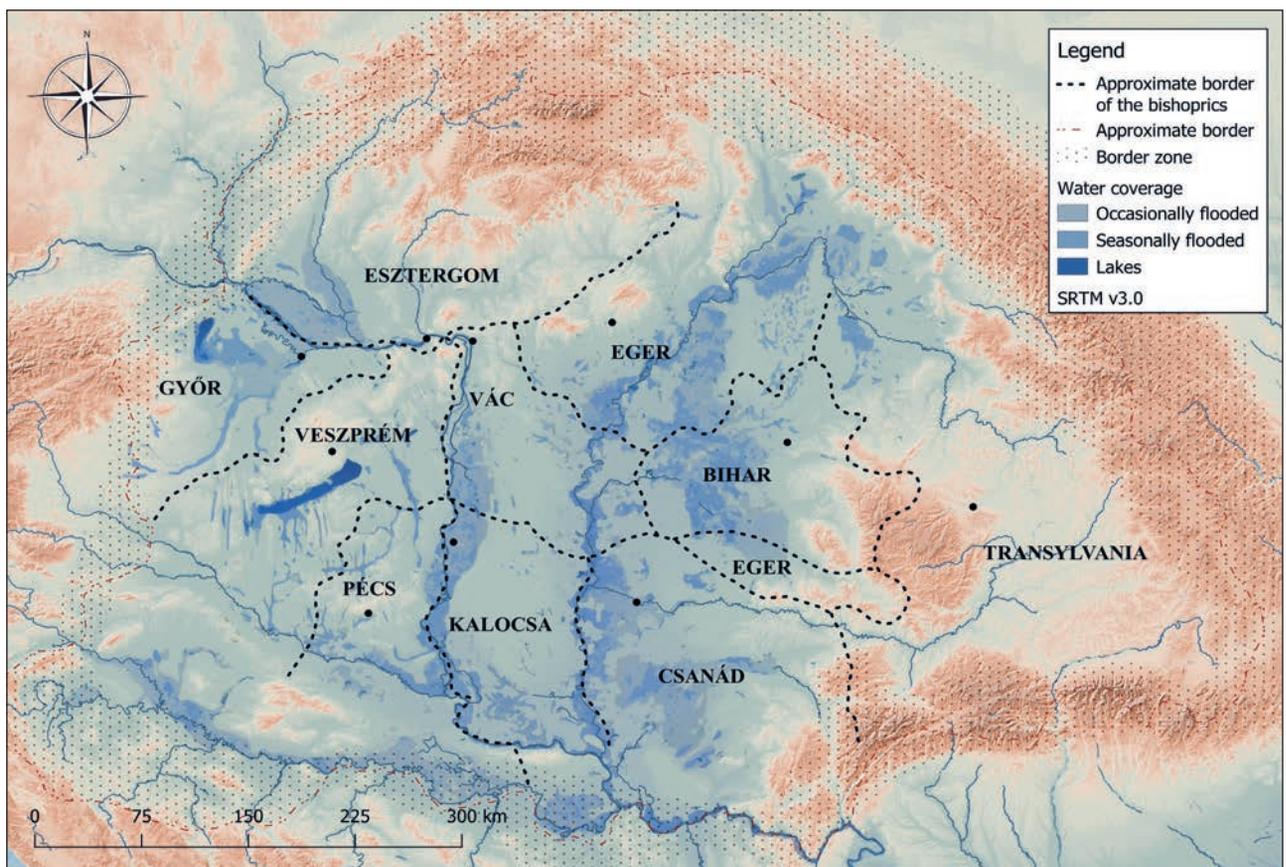


Fig. 2. Approximate extent of the bishoprics in 1050, after Koszta 2012. The borders of the bishoprics are somewhat indefinite; their arrangement in the border zones is unknown.

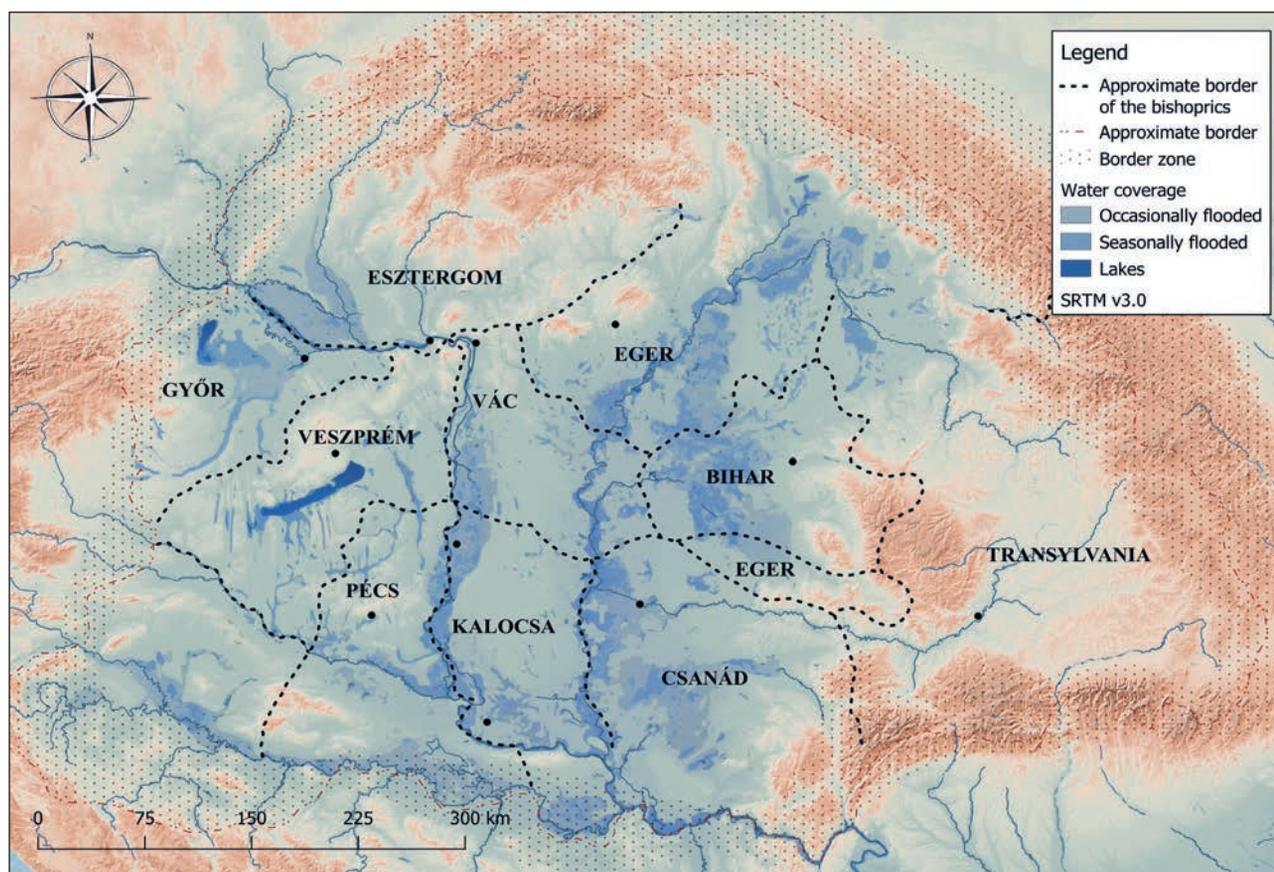


Fig. 3. Approximate extent of the bishoprics in 1038, after Koszta 2012. The borders of the bishoprics are somewhat indefinite; their arrangement in the border zones is unknown.

local churches of villages, would also not appear before the end of the eleventh century. However, that would also mean that the Church (and the ruler) lacked control over the eastern part of the country and would suggest a different development of the rural church network, none of which seems apparent.

Contextualisation of the Notion of Christianisation, and Issues with Baptism

Before discussing the process of Christianisation, it is essential that the meaning of this process be clarified. It is rather hard to answer the question of what Christianisation is precisely. In its concise definition, it means the conversion of individuals or groups of people, sometimes even entire states, to Christianity. However, the way that research - and different disciplines within it - have approached this question is rather varied, which raises several problems.

The issue to start with again is that Christianisation is a process with which its interpretation is primarily dominated by historical narratives.¹² That already implies a social division - it is hardly described from the ordinary people's point of view. Secondly, something which is probably even more significant is the one-sided story in these narratives; while pagan cultures were mostly illiterate and their interpretations of events existed through an oral tradition,

the history of Christianisation is known from the already Christian sources. Thus, the narratives are coloured by the inevitable and complete victory of Christianity; it has been argued that the example of Paul's conversion was projected onto medieval converting societies. To overcome these issues, two crucial perspectives have been raised.¹³ Firstly, Peter Brown's approach to the 'representation' of the religious history of the Roman world's Christianisation. According to Brown, this concept, the narrative of complete victory of Christianisation starting with the crucifixion of Christ, originates from the fifth century but still impacts the present-day historical narratives and research of Christianisation.¹⁴ Brown's theory places the importance of the individual events within the context of the larger supernatural history of salvation itself, and Christ's coming to this world allowed for putting aside the problematic details that accompanied the Christianisation process. Besides, he also highlighted the importance of the impact of this on everyday life and Christianisation - resulting in the incorporation of pagan traditions into the church practices of the newly converted.¹⁵

Furthermore, individual and collective conversion and the notions of conversion and Christianisation have also been discussed by researchers. The term 'conversion' greatly

¹² Schülke, 'On Christianization and Grave-Finds', 78.

¹³ Koziak, 'Conversio gentum', 84-88.

¹⁴ Brown, *Authority and the Sacred*, 3-8.

¹⁵ Brown, 15-18. See also Koziak, 'Conversio gentum', 86.

oversimplifies the notion of Christianisation and should not be used as a synonym for it. As it appears in Early Medieval sources, conversion and converts appear in every case, regardless of the nature (voluntary or involuntary) and the participants in the conversion. All of this also suggests that the ideal, internal conversion was less important than the visible, outward act of baptism. This can be further supported by the well-known phenomenon of the baptism of kings or local sovereigns and their immediate elite being understood as the actual Christianisation of their entire realm. Regarding the act of the church, the Early Medieval missionary work's focus of attention was on the acceptance of baptism rather than a thorough explanation of the Christian faith before performing the sacrament.¹⁶ All the same, baptism was a critical act for both investigating the process of institutionalised Christianisation and individual conversion. Unfortunately, historical and archaeological evidence on both the act and the space it occurred, especially before the emergence of the concept of purgatory in the twelfth century, is scarce and controversial.

Interestingly, despite the many regulations dealing with the everyday life of churches (such as how to behave during the mass, see SI/XIX),¹⁷ no regulation can be found regarding baptism in the law books of St. Stephen. The earliest regulation appears in the first synod of Esztergom (c. 1100), where it states that no one should ask money for baptism and funerals (XLII. Nullus de baptismo vel sepultura pretium exigat.).¹⁸ A little more information can be retrieved from narrative sources, but not without source criticism, of course. In the *Legenda Maior* of St. Gerhard, the king called the saint back from his hermitage, asking him to become a bishop. The king stated that he would receive the tithe, his only duty being to 'practise his avocation in the service of Christ, preaching, baptism, and conversion of pagans.' According to the legend, he was transferred to become the bishop of Cenad where ten monks joined him from around the country. The source claims that all day long, they were baptising the masses of all social classes in the churchyard at the gate of their monastery, Marosvár, with the help of seven of the aforementioned monks who worked as interpreters and preached along with Gerhard. The legend also mentions the first prebends of the monastery. It recounts the establishment of a school where the first students were trained and educated to be priests, and once they were ordained, Gerhard made them the priests of his parishes. It is also mentioned that when he was visiting the communities in his diocese in order to consecrate the graveyards of those who wanted to build a church, his fellow monks were always preceding his visits, preaching and administering baptism.¹⁹

Although the *Legenda Maior* in its present form was compiled after 1381, its source was a twelfth-century

antecedent which used records originating from the eleventh century, and its sections regarding the conversion process are considered as valuable sources on the issue.²⁰

It has to be noted that even in contemporary church law, the process of baptism was not yet clearly formed; though the formula did not change, its further development can only be dated from the twelfth century onward. In the *Decretum*, Ivo of Chartres (d. 1115) established baptism as one of the seven sacraments which, as such, should be administered by a priest. An exception to that would be an emergency baptism, where the presence of a priest or church was not needed, but only the correct formula and water, similarly to the rite of marriage.²¹

As for archaeological sources, the only group of objects doubtlessly connected to baptism are baptismal fonts. Regarding the Carpathian Basin, Edit Tari collected and analysed the stone fonts in detail.²² Attempts at their dating are rather complicated and their appearance before the twelfth century is sporadic and debated; therefore, they do not offer evidence on the early history of baptism.²³

Accepting the account of the mentioned legend seems plausible, and as such, mass baptisms in the conversion process should be imagined. However, as stated, this was not restricted to the centres of the bishoprics – transitional cemeteries of the period strengthen the sources' validity concerning the consecration of graveyards. As mentioned in connection to this, the monks travelled within the bishopric, administering mass baptism to the people on-site. Interestingly, the prohibition of preaching outside the churches, with an exception granted for travelling churchmen, appears only in the first lawbook (I/29)²⁴ of Ladislaus I, and was affirmed again by Coloman (I/68).²⁵ Supposedly, such mass baptisms had ceased to occur by that time which was most probably the point at which the church had enough priests to man the local churches. That should not have taken much longer than the initial establishment of the churches. Therefore, regarding the state of the art of contemporary church law, it is not surprising that the act was not meticulously regulated. Furthermore, in the short term, the state was not interested in the actual conversion – that is why the ways and means of baptism were also irrelevant. Judging by the lawbooks of the period, the most important issue was the attendance of church services; they include a detailed regulation on the expected behaviours and the actual pastoral care of the church.²⁶ Once established, these churches most probably took over the administration of baptisms as well.

¹⁶ Koziak, 'Conversio gentum', 88-89.

¹⁷ Bak, *Online Decreta Regni Mediaevalis Hungariae. The Laws of the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary*, 24.

¹⁸ Bak, 139.

¹⁹ SRH II. *Legenda S. Gerhardi Episcopi* 480-506

²⁰ Kuznetsova, 'Signs of Conversion in Vitae Sanctorum', 126.

²¹ Rölker, *Canon Law and the Letters of Ivo of Chartres*, 183-184.

²² Tari, *Kőbe faragott liturgia*.

²³ Tari, 'Középkori kő keresztelőmedencék kutatása', 362.

²⁴ Bak, *Online Decreta Regni Mediaevalis Hungariae. The Laws of the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary*, 66.

²⁵ Bak, 113.

²⁶ Bak, 'Signs of Conversion in Central European Laws', 117-120.

Although this book's period of interest is the High Middle Ages, the issues raised above on Early Medieval baptism, conversion, and Christianisation are still valid. However, the research approaches are somewhat different since the circumstances of Christianity around the turn of the first millennium had changed compared to Early Medieval times. Instead of the general acceptance and development of the Christian church, the focus shifted to the relationship of centre and periphery, the emergence of the new Christian states and their relation to the Christian West.²⁷ Gábor Klaniczay has proposed that the invention of Central Europe and the formation of the Scandinavian periphery 'allowed the extension of Europa Occidens toward the East and the constitution of the Holy Roman Empire as the centre of Christianitas'.²⁸ According to him, similarities can be observed regarding the processes of the conversion to Christianity, the extension of ecclesiastical structures and religious orders, the formation of dynastic cults, and the evolution of social categories in the High Middle Ages.²⁹ On these topics, sources speak most often about the development of ecclesiastical institutions and monastic foundations in charters and law books, while the dynastic cults are detailed in chronicles and hagiographic texts. Since the institutions were more directly connected to the process of Christianisation, the focus of historical research was primarily set on the development of the ecclesiastical institutions and connected secular law. Besides, as Klaniczay has pointed out, the formation of dynastic and royal saints further supported the relationship of the emerging church and the rulers of the new Christian kingdom.³⁰ Without questioning the importance of these sources, it has to be reiterated that, as a consequence of the nature of historical sources of the period, their subject represents mainly the topmost echelon of both secular society and the church, namely the conversion of rulers and nobility, the establishment of the highest level of ecclesiastical institutions, and monastic foundations by the king or perhaps the high nobility. However, written evidence on the conversion process of the rural population and the development of the local church system is rather scarce, directing the focus of historical research away from these topics.

Besides historical, philosophical and theological approaches, archaeology has also been dealing with the phenomenon of Christianisation, introducing more approaches to the research of the topic from Late Antiquity to the High Middle Ages. Continuing with the topics first raised not surprisingly by historians, archaeology focused on specific areas, objects, or phenomena connected to the process of Christianisation. These studies focused on material culture, burial customs, and archaeological evidence of Christianisation and the religious identity of individuals or groups of individuals – often resulting in controversial conclusions. Consequently, research

of this field is largely segregated as much in time as in space. The need for a more unified approach towards a broader understanding of religious transformations and religious identity has emerged in archaeology. Besides a re-evaluation of funerary evidence and the correlation of material and religious expression, new directions were set toward a more comprehensive approach by stepping out of the traditional targets of investigation for religious transformations and contextualising the material in broader processes of political, social, and economic change.³¹

This book aims to integrate the latter comprehensive approach to the investigation of Christianisation. However, it is vital to underline that Christianisation as a change of belief, and so conversion in the spiritual sense, is hard to sense through archaeological methods. Accordingly, the present work does not seek to trace individual conversion and Christianisation in the spiritual sense. Instead, by remaining aware of the political agenda behind the process, this work focuses on *institutionalised Christianisation*. Unlike the faith of individuals, the shift in the change of practices, the changing landscape, and the development of new structures can be traced by archaeological means. Large-scale data and a comprehensive approach, including the relation of the changing religious and secular landscape, can offer a new interpretation of Christianisation as a religious and social transformation. Furthermore, the present work aspires to achieve this by focusing on the largest segment of the society in terms of numbers; the commoners in the rural landscape. Written sources generally remained silent about, and therefore focusing on them offers a different source basis and another perspective to investigate religious and social transformation processes. As such, Christianisation in the present work is understood as the top-down implementation of the institutionalised Christianity (among the rural population). It is also important to underline that this process was important not only in the grand scheme of things – joining the country to the Christian West – but also by making a rightful ruler of *all* of the kingdom's people, including rural society. Therefore, it should be treated as being as much a political as religious act, at least initially, and something that played out mainly as a mass event. Yet, it is vital to note that eventually this process also required an individual, spiritual conversion to maintain the system's stability.

Having now concisely contextualized the notion of Christianisation and briefly discussed the most important historical events in the process, the book's first chapter provides a problem-oriented historiography wrapped around the sources and methods used in this monograph. Christianisation was highly in the focus of the researchers of multiple disciplines, and so its results are somewhat scattered and often controversial. Therefore, it is essential to discuss the disputes in the light of the methodology and

²⁷ See for example Berend, *Christianization and the Rise of the Christian Monarchy*.

²⁸ Klaniczay, 'The Birth of a New Europe about 1000 CE', 107.

²⁹ Klaniczay, 99.

³⁰ Klaniczay, 121.

³¹ Thomas et al., 'Religious Transformations in the Middle Ages', 328-329. See also Hadley, 'The Garden Gives Up Its Secrets'; Hoggett, 'Charting Conversion'.

interdisciplinary approach of the present work, something which can be found in Chapter II. The next chapter conducts a GIS-based analysis on the archaeological material, dividing it about equally into the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Finally, the results of the analysis are contextualised in the historical investigations on the development and origin of royal churches, and the influence of foreign ecclesiastical systems on the development of the local church network, in order to propose a narrative on the development of the local church network that argues against some traditional theories.

Unfortunately, a regional comparison exceeds the present work's limits, but it is vital for future perspectives. As the Christianisation of the rural countryside was a crucial element in the emergence of Christian monarchies, the comparison of similarities and differences in this context can be discussed and causes can be sought – that is, a study of Hungary in comparison with the state of the art of the existing scholarship from neighbouring areas, such as in the Czech, Moravian, and Southern Polish lands where this process took place, more or less, at the same time. That topic, however, will be explored in the framework of the next project.³²

³² PRIMUS/21/HUM/019, Empowering the Voiceless. The Role of the Rural Population in State Building and Christianisation in East-Central Europe implemented at the Faculty of Arts, Department of Archaeology at Charles University Prague. See also: <https://sacriecce.ff.cuni.cz/> (accessed 08.12.2021)