Ph.D. THESIS

Nagyné Hudák Krisztina

Christianity in the Carpathian Basin from 374 to 456 A. D.

Doctoral School on History
Head: Erdődy Gábor, D.Sc., professor
Ph.D. Program on Medieval and Early Modern World History
Program Director: Poór János, D.Sc., professor

Members of the committee:

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                             Vida Tivadar, C.Sc., associate professor

Supervisors: Sághy Marianne, Ph.D., associate professor
                    Tóth Endre, DSc, associate professor

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Topic

This dissertation deals with the religious history of the Carpathian Basin between 374-456 with special emphasis on Pannonia, but including Moesia Secunda, Scythia Minor, Noricum Mediterraneum, Noricum Ripense, Venetia and Histria. It surveys the last century of Christianity in Pannonia, focusing on the Christianisation of German peoples, and on the possible contacts between German and Roman Christians in the provinces.

I applied a multidisciplinary approach to investigate this complex history, combining historical, theological, archaeological and ethnogenetical evidence, theory and methodology. The last monograph on Pannonian Christianity by Dorottya Gáspár (2002) is an archaeological survey, but even this material is not exploited in full as Gáspár excluded archaeological evidence left by German Christians on chronological grounds. This thesis is indebted to the seminal works of Endre Tóth, Tibor Nagy, Edit B. Thomas, András Alföldi, and Jacques Zeiller.

Purpose and Goals

In Endre Tóth’s view, „we are not yet in the position to grasp the full history of the cultural and religious transformation that took place in the last fifty years of the Roman provinces in Transdanubia.” A new synthesis is long overdue on the history of Christianity in the Carpathian Basin, re-evaluating the interpretation of written and material evidence according to new methodologies, completing and challenging earlier research by Tibor Nagy, István Bóna, Dorottya Gáspár, Endre Tóth, Péter Kovács, Olivér Gábor, H.-E. Giesecke, E. A. Thompson, V. Popović, B. Migotti, D. H. Williams, N. McLynn, R. Bratož. My thesis aims to be a modest contribution to this long-awaited synthesis.

My main effort was to include the widest possible circle of various types of evidence into my investigation in a multidisciplinary approach. I used chrononological data provided by archaeology and art history and, based on my earlier work, I proposed new periodizations. Apart from historical and ecclesiastical sources, I relied heavily on archaeological and art historical evidence. The comparative evaluation of historical and archaeological contributions provided new results.

Periodization of Pannonian Church History

(Fourth - Fifth Century)

I propose a new periodization for the field that better applies to church history. The years 406 and 433, the Hunnic conquest of Pannonia, were seen fundamental by earlier research. The Hun period is a turning point in the history of the Carpathian Basin, but this periodization has been disputed since the 1960s. I rejected the periodization deduced from written sources and historical events. The division of the last third/quarter of the fourth century (period Bierbrauer/Tejral D1), and the first half of the 5th century (period Bierbrauer/Tejral D2) is problematic and not useful from the point of view of church history. Instead, I opted for the 420s in Pannonia and in the Carpathian Basin as a dividing line, when the seat of the Huns’ Great King is established in this region. The first distinct period I study is pre-Hunnic (375 – 420s), the next is Hunnic (420s – 456), 374 is the year of the inauguration of Bishop Ambrose of Milan, who played an essential role in the spreading of Christian orthodoxy in this region.

As a result of the process of Germanisation among the
Romanized provincial population along the Danube frontier, the material culture of the Middle-Danube region in the fifth century was characterized as „Eastern Germanic culture complex of the Middle-Danube region” (J. Tejral), or „Eastern German koine” (V. Bierbrauer). The koine has been formed as early as the last third or last quarter of fourth century (Bierbrauer/Tejral period D1), in the region of South-Eastern Slovakia and North-Eastern Hungary, with strong influence of the Tcherniachow culture. After a while, in the first half of the fifth century (Bierbrauer/Tejral period D2) Eastern Germanic koine developed between present day Lower Austria and Romania, substantiated by elite burials. There must have been gentes mentioned in written sources inside the Eastern Germanic koine, but their territories are archaeologically not attestable. Systematic archaeological research did not reveal ethno-specific archaeological material of Skir, Herul, Sueb, Gepid, Ostrogothic tribes inside of the culture complex. Hence, the Christianity of individual gentes in the Carpathian basin cannot be precisely defined in this period. When using incomplete written sources or texts providing no clear evidence, I use the term “Germanic Christianity” in general.

Research Questions

The fourth and fifth centuries are a transition period in the history of Christianity. The multi-threaded history of events deeply effected and fundamentally changed the history of the Christian churches. I sought to answer the following questions:

1. The problem of Christianity in the Pannonian provinces in the last third of fourth – first half of fifth century.
2. The decline of Arianism in Roman Pannonia
3. The rise of Arianism among the Germanic tribes in the Middle Danube Region (parallel with the previous process)
4. Missionary activity of the Church of Rome among barbarians. The question of mission is not sufficiently investigated in late antique church history, therefore I paid special attention to it.
5. The question of the connection between Roman Arianism and Gothic Arianism.

Scholarly Results

The Complex Church Organisation in Pannonia

I argue that a complex church organisation existed in Pannonia by the pre-Hunnic period, even if the network of bishoprics cannot be evidenced after the 420s, because of the confusion due to unceasing barbarian attacks. Some episcopal sees are known from written sources (Sirmium, Mursa, Cibalae, Siscia, Iovia) but possibly another towns (Scarabantia for example) may be considered as bishoprics as well, and perhaps. Aquincum and Carnuntum that were military administrative centers with a large population. I elaborated the hypothesis deriving from the work of Rajko Bratož. Prior to the synod of Chalcedon in 451, no prescription existed about the establishment of episcopal sees in all civitates. In Pannonia, more bishoprics might have existed, not recorded in written sources.

Supreme Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Over Pannonian Provinces Dominated by Rome and Thessaloniki

Ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the Pannonian provinces was held by Rome before the end of fourth century due to the expansion of apostolic authority promoted by the bishop of Rome. At the end of the fourth-beginning of the fifth century, it
was practiced already *de iure*. The influence of bishops Damasus and Siricius of Rome reached Christian centers, such as Milan and Aquileia. Roman authority covered a large territory including Illyricum.

Sirmium, Aquileia and Milan were closely united with Rome between 375 (the death of Emperor Valentinian I) and 399 (the death of Bishop Siricius). The supremacy of Rome was stressed in ecclesiastical affairs, because its *de iure* jurisdiction over Illyricum was practiced *de facto* by Thessaloniki.

**Art and Pro-Nicaean Victory Propaganda**

The Arian church organisation collapsed in the Middle-Danube region after the council of Aquileia of 381. The 382 council of Rome drew a program to give impetus to the veneration of saints. Ambrose of Milan played a decisive role in defeating Arianism in the Pannonian provinces. Ambrose relied on the emperor and the bishop of Rome to defeat the Arian heretics in the Danube area. This might have meant the dispatch of competent theologians to the region.

I interpret the paintings of the SS. Peter and Paul Burial Chamber in Sopianae and the casket mounts from Ságvár with images of apostles as works of an artistic conception radiating pro-Nicaean victory. Pope Damasus mobilized Saint Peter and Paul as patrons of Nicene orthodoxy and as defenders of the Roman Church against Arianism. The veneration of Peter and Paul was propagated by Ambrose in Northern Italy and Illyricum.

**The Synod of Sirmium of 378: Reality or Fiction?**

Until the 1990s, most scholars believed in the existence of a synod in Sirmium in 378 with the participation of Ambrose of Milan and supported by Damasus of Rome and Emperor Gratianus to defeat Arianism and spread orthodoxy in Pannonia. Neil McLynn and D. H. Williams rejected this idea. I corroborate with further arguments that the synod of Sirmium in 378 is a fiction and its documents in the Church History of Theodoretus are later compilations.

**Arian Literary Texts Associated with Pannonia: “Roman Arians?”**

Written sources are silent concerning the Arian communities of Pannonia Secunda after the 380s until the beginning of fifth century. The anti-Nicaean confession *formulae* in the Pannonian version of the *passio quattuor sanctorum coronatorum*, however, may allude to the existence of an unknown Arian community, perhaps from Sirmium. I stress in my thesis that the Arian *q-evangeliary* dated around 400 was not used by Goths, but by Roman provincials who adopted the Arian faith.

**Early Christian Artefacts in Fifth Century Pannonia: A Roman Christian Art**

Christian artefacts found in the Pannonian provinces have no definable Barbarian ethnic connections. The early Christian finds of Valeria and Pannonia Prima provinces from the fifth century – with the only exception known today, the lead plaques of Hács-Béndekpuszta – cannot be connected to any Barbarian tribe, but to a Roman population that still existed in the region.
**Hillforts of Southeastern Noricum and Southwestern Pannonia: not built by Refugees from Valeria**

In spite of the chronological difficulties concerning the late antique hill fortresses in Venetia, Histria, Southeastern Noricum and Southwestern Pannonia, some characteristic features can be observed. Between the first and second construction periods of the forts (second half of fourth-beginning of fifth century and second half of fifth century – sixth century, in some places until the middle of seventh century) there is a chronological gap, even in the Hun period. This chronology prohibits the hypothesis that these fortresses were established by Pannonian refugees coming from Valeria and elsewhere in the 430s.

**The Christian Church of Pannonia Secunda and Sirmium did not Convert Goths**

The thesis investigates the crucial role of Sirmium in the Christianisation of Pannonian provincials and Germanic tribes from the last third of fourth century until the beginning of fifth century. Sirmium was not a Nicene orthodox church for long time. Wisigothic Arians and their priests coming through the Balkans might have found support among the crypto-Arian priests of the city living in legality. Sirmium was thought to be a significant counter weight rivalising with Germanic Arian missions after the election of Bishop Anemius. The city could not play this role, however, because Arian Germans lived separately from Roman communities. We have no evidence about Roman missionary priests speaking Germanic languages.

**Fourth Century Nicaean missions to the Germans dealt mostly with preparing peace treaties**

There were pro-Nicaean (Tomi) and anti-Nicaean (Durostorum) centers of mission along the Danube frontier. Missionary priests (for example Ulfila) were also active. Missions launched by Roman Christians were not motivated by religious piety, but by political reasons. A successful mission along the frontiers of the Empire among strangers settled in Roman area corroborated imperial policy beyond the frontiers and guaranteed peace. A case in point is the story of Fritigil. The mission first of all promotes peace and prepares for a truce and a peace treaty. The Roman Church of the end of fourth century was not a missionary church in the Danubian frontier area. Mission toward Germanic and other barbarians was undertaken to secure peace.

Missionary activity was undertaken only when peace reigned between Romans and barbarians. The missionary headquarters ensured the safety of the priests. In the period that I investigated, we can see very few longer periods of peace, thus the missions were also short-cut and they were not able to make profound change in the belief-system of the barbarians. The pre-Hunnic and Hunnic periods did not favour missionary policy.

**The Role of the „Minor Goths”: The Community of Ulfila Shaping German Arianism**

The Arian ecclesiastical tradition of the Goths is connected with the person of Ulfila in the second half of the fourth century. Ulfila played a dominant role in the process of the conversion of the Goths to Arianism. The conversion to Arianism promoted by Ulfila among the Goths was not superficial. The „Gothi Minores” deployed a missionary
activity even after 15-20 years (i.e. at least one generation). In the fifth century, Arianism is the “ethnic” religion of the Goths.

A fundamental element in the missionary success of Ulfila’s disciples was language: the peoples in the Hunnic Empire spoke mostly Gothic or languages similar to the Gothic. The Gothic language and the Gothic Bible accelerated Christianisation. In my opinion, Gothic missions launched from Nicopolis and Durostorum, managed by Ulfila and his disciples could be continuous after the 376 reception of the Goths in the Roman Empire. Gothic priests deployed missionary activity beyond or near the borders along the long section of the limes between Nicopolis and Sirmium in successive waves probably until 536.

The monks of Ulfila

Fragment No. 55. of Eunapius makes the assumption probable that the monks seen at the crossing through the Danube were not pagan Goths dressed in husk in order to deceive Roman authorities, but Arian Gothic monks.

The Gothic mission in the Carpathian Basin is weakly demonstrated in contemporary sources and archaeological finds

Written sources about the conversion of the Germanic people under Hun influence or in the vicinity of the Huns are lacking in the first half of fifth century. At least a part of recently ordained priests of Ulfila did not remain close to their master, but went on mission in the last third of fourth century until beginning the fifth. They took toward areas inhabited by Germans according to Jordanes. The fragments of lead plaques from a grave of the German cemetery of Hács-Béndekpuszta with prayers from the Holy Scripture translated by Ulfila cannot be dated before the middle of the fifth century. Success of mission depended basically on the political orientation of the community to be converted. The Eastern Germanic elite adopted the etiquette and the garments of the conquering Huns.

No Gothic mission among Vandals in the Upper-Tisza Region

I accept the hypothesis that the Vandals were christianized by the Goths. The Vandal liturgy has Gothic antecedents and the Bible translation of Ulfila has a Vandal branch. I do not share the opinion of Knut Schäferdiek, who posits that the connection between Goths and Vandals was established in the Upper-Tisza Region. In my opinion, close diplomatic and ecclesiastical relations between Goths and Vandals were established only in Hispania. The Upper-Tisza region as missionary area before 402 can be excluded. A record of Orosius does not prove the Gothic mission in the Carpathian basin in the Vandal settlement area. The Vandals kept moving further away from Wisigoths, they had no direct contact until they reached Gaul.

Christianisation expressed a change in Barbarian Elite’s political orientation

“Conversion” does not mean the conversion of an entire population to a new faith. It rather means a change of orientation of the political elite that can consequently promote local missionary activity. Conversion of the common people is a long process that may last for several years. There must have been many Christians among the Wisigoths due to the permanent missionary activity launched by the Gothic communities of Ulfila in Nicopolis and Durostorum. The thesis investigates the question of the extent of individual’s right of decision in dissolving late Iron Age tribal-clan society, who was allowed to make a decision about the conversion to
Christianity?

A „desire for autonomy” can be observed in fourth century North-Balkanic Arianism, but the motivation of German Arianism is different. The choice of religion for individuals was free, but if their decision contradicted the local community, converts were ejected from the community as in the passion of Saint Sabas the Goth in 372. This was true for paganism as well as for Arianism: the community practised the same religion. Individuals and communities had their right to make decisions. Having this right, communities split from other parts of the population wandering far away, especially in the pre-Hunnic period. Where a population had less direct contact with the Empire, or lived further away from its frontiers, the process of the extension of kingdoms took place more slowly. A king coming from a leading family was only a sacral representative of the community as late as in the sixth century. German tribes and clans had own decision-making powers. Missionaries did not have to convert the king, but the tribal-clan leaders at first in order to receive their approval for the mission. This process can be observed in the Middle-Danube region in the case of the Heruls.

The Conversion of the Goths to Arianism was inevitable

The political situation around 375 was an important factor in adopting Arianism by the Goths. Emperor Valens, the diplomatic partner of the Goths, was an Arian. The toleration of Arianism and its support was of primary interest for Gothic tribal leaders. A criterion of their reception into the Empire was to take on the religion of the emperor. A mass conversion of Goths to Arianism took place, but not all of them converted - written sources mention Nicene orthodox Goths in smaller number. The conversion of Goths to Arianism was inevitable for both political, religious and social reasons. The success of Arian mission was due to the „conservativism” among Goths. This conservativism created a particular Germanic early Christian art that used non-Christian symbols to express Christian doctrine. The Gothic Arian church was integrated successfully into the political and social structure of the Empire while it retained Gothic culture - partly in changed, Christianised form - which proved to be important. Christian Germans took over the veneration of saints from the Romans, but they changed their feasts according to their own traditions.

No Connection between Roman Arians and the Nascent Gothic Arian Church

The last Roman Arians are still extant in our sources in the last third of fourth century and in the beginning of the fifth. Their groups cover partly the same area with German Christians, because the Goths of Ulfila were active in the Balkans, and most Roman Arians tended also to move in this area. The years between the battle at Hadrianopolis and the beginning of the Hunnic Empire in the Carpathian Basin were a formative period when the term Arianism began to define exclusively Germans. In this changing process ethnical changes and sequels of the Middle-Danube region and the Balkans were of crucial importance. „Self-Christianisation” expressed a German identity. One of the typical feature of the German missions of the fourth-fifth centuries was self-conversion.

No Connection Between German Arianism and Roman Arianism in the Region

I investigated the roots and formation of German Arianism, i.e. the role of the social and political situation of the Danube area in this formation process. Orthodox Christians and
Arians (both Romans and Germans) lived as strangers next to each other. I concluded that there was no connection between Roman and German Arians. They lived as neighbours confessing a similar faith, but the ethnic differences and cultural gap divided them. Contrary to the opinion of Philipp von Rummel, there were some examples of provincial Arians (Julianus Valens, Auxentius) being in connection with local, nascent German churches in the Middle-Danube region, but these cases were not usual at all.

**Publications**


**Conference Papers:**

June 2002, Kecskemét, Hungarian Patristic Society: A viziögőt szerzetesség problémája a 4. századból. /Megjegyzések Eunapios 55. fragmentumával kapcsolatban/ [The problem of visigothic monasticism [Notes to frg. 55. of Eunapius]]

June 2003, Kecskemét, Hungarian Patristic Society: A pécsi I. (Péter-Pál) sírkamra ikonográfiai programja [Iconographical program of the Saint Peter and Paul Burial Chamber in Pécs]
