

Š T Ú D I E

THE QUESTION OF ORIGIN AND SOCIO-LEGAL STATUS OF “UDVORNICI” IN THE CONTEXT OF SIMONIS DE KÉZA *GESTA HUNGARORUM*¹

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The study focuses on the medieval royal service population known as the *udvornici*, emphasising their early development in the 11th and 12th centuries. Using the only known narrative source that directly refers to this social group, it compares the origins and legal status of *udvornici* with the evidence found in the earliest Hungarian law codes of the period. In addressing the origin of this dependent social group, the study engages with the broader discourse on personal freedom and slavery during the formation of the Kingdom of Hungary. By formulating new research hypotheses, it aligns with current trends in medieval social history and critically revisits the theory of *udvornici* originating from war captives.

Keywords: Árpád dynasty. Simon Kéza. Kingdom of Hungary. Royal servants: *Udvornici*.

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The social structure of the early Hungarian Kingdom has been debated for a long time, since before the 19th century. The often-contradictory theses advanced by individual historians have come under scrutiny over the past 30 years, as new social discourses have emerged. This has been especially true of many smaller groups included in the service organisation of the Kingdom of Hungary during the rule of the Árpád dynasty. Among them, a unified group of servants, listed under the term *udvornici*,² comes forward to challenge the old stereotype of the

1 The study was supported by the International Visegrad Fund (Visegrad Fellowship #62610044).

2 First described in the 18th century by Adam František Kollár, they were servants on the royal

traditional division of society into free and unfree people. Seemingly stuck in the middle, this group of “*Hofdienstleute*”³ testifies to the complexity of what freedom meant in the High Middle Ages. Although they are already mentioned in the oldest set of Hungarian laws, the origin of this group of royal servants remains only hypothetical. However, the question of their emergence and social status was not only addressed by modern medievalists or by scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Simon of Kéza, the author of the late thirteenth-century *Gesta Hungarorum*,⁴ was the first to voice the question of their origin. Furthermore, he wrote that the origin of several groups of people, including *udvornici*, has been the topic of “*some people’s interest*,” by which he likely meant members of the earliest nobility and individuals associated with the royal court.⁵ The whole of Kéza’s text is quite problematic, at times even appearing chaotic; for this very reason, it has been repeatedly criticised by numerous historians. The main reason for this lies in the fact that Simon Kéza’s chronicle has not survived in its original form, but only in 18th-century

dynastic estates. “*Vdvornicis sive servis Regiis*” KOLLARIUS. *Historiae ivrisque pvblici regni Vngariae amoenitates. Volvmen II.* Vindobonae 1783, pp. 30, 116-117. Their name is derived from the Hungarian *udvar* and the Slavic *dvor*, both meaning royal manor/demesne. Presently, the Slovak term “*dvorníci*” or Hungarian “*udvarnokok*” is commonly used when talking about this social class; however, its English equivalent, “*courtiers*”, doesn’t reflect the social standing of this group. Therefore, the original Latinised term *udvornici* will be used in this study. GYÖRFFY. Az Árpád-kori szolgálonépek kérdéséhez. In *Történelmi szemle*, 1972, Vol. 15, no. 3/4, pp. 265-290; KNIEZSA. *A magyar nyelv szláv jövevényszavai. I. kötet I. rész.* Budapest 1955, pp. 540-541.

- 3 German terminology used for labelling people in the service of the court, commonly used to describe *udvornici* since 1832. HORMAYR. *Taschenbuch für die vaterländische Geschichte.* Dritter Jahrgang. München 1832, p. 170.
- 4 The Hungarian chronicler Simon of Kéza was active in the second half of the 13th century, most likely within the milieu of the royal court of Ladislaus IV the Cuman. The precise dating of the composition of his chronicle remains a matter of scholarly debate; nevertheless, its contents are closely connected to the ideology of the Hungarian nobility and the concept of the Hun origin of the Hungarians. From the historiographical perspective, the chronicle combines historical tradition with legendary elements and politically motivated constructions, which necessitates a particularly critical approach to its interpretation. For more information on the chronicler and his work, see: MARCZALI. *A magyar történet külföldi az Árpádok korában.* Budapest 1880, pp. 40-48; SZÜCS. *Theoretical Elements in Master Simon of Kéza’s Gesta Hungarorum (1282–1285 A.D.).* Budapest 1975; MARSINA. Stredoveké uhorské rozprávacie pramene a slovenské dejiny. In *Zborník Slovenského národného múzea. História*, 1984, Vol. 78, no. 24, pp. 167-195; KUZMÍK. *Slovník starovekých a stredovekých autorov, prameňov a knižných skriptorov so slovenskými vzťahmi.* Martin 1983, pp. 304-307.
- 5 DOMANOVSKÝ, ed. *Simonis de Keza Gesta Hungarorum.* In SZENTPÉTERY, ed. *Scriptores rerum Hungaricarum tempore ducum regumque stirpis Arpadianae gesterum. Volumen I.* Budapest 1999, p. 192.

copies produced by Gábor Hevenesi⁶ and György Pray.⁷ Nevertheless, it remains the only narrative source providing information on *udvornici*. Moreover, the appendix analysed below, which addresses servile and semi-free groups in the Kingdom of Hungary, constitutes a unique text even within the broader Central European context, as it specifically examines the origins of several groups of royal servants as a legally dependent stratum originally residing on the dynastic and castle estates of the Árpáds.

When it comes to the two questions at hand—the origin of *udvornici* and their socio-legal status—Master Simon Kéza's chronicle offers information unmatched by the sparse primary sources of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Amongst fewer than thirty surviving charters,⁸ none provides the kind of explanation attempted in this work. Although the chronological jump from the eleventh to the thirteenth century may seem problematic and potentially unreliable, it is necessary to address these unresolved issues and to engage with the hypotheses advanced by historians who have previously examined this subject. However, this is not to suggest that the entire text—or even the appendix featuring passages about *udvornici*—should be regarded as trustworthy. Only through careful examination and comparison with the limited evidence preserved in extant charters can these questions be meaningfully addressed. In addition to analysing the key aspects of freedom and socio-legal status in the appendix to Simon Kéza's work, it is essential to relate this material to the earliest Hungarian law codes of the eleventh century, as well as to relevant linguistic studies, particularly in light of the hypothesis concerning the Slavic origin of the group in question. Analysing charters or law codes independently of the chronicle has not produced sufficiently comprehensive results; therefore, it is necessary to interpret them in conjunction with the chronicle, which may provide context for otherwise fragmentary sources. Moreover, in line with current historiographical approaches, a critical stance toward the source does not in itself justify its dismissal.

6 Budapest, Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem Egyetemi Könyvtár, Hevenesi-Kaprinai-Pray gyűjtemény, Hevenesi-gyűjtemény, 70. kötet, pp. 1-15.

7 Budapest, Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem Egyetemi Könyvtár, Hevenesi-Kaprinai-Pray gyűjtemény, Pray-gyűjtemény, 29. kötet, pp. 1-28.

8 Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára, Diplomatikai Levéltár (further MNL OL DL), sign. 10, 11, 14, 15, 20, 21, 170, 41520, 44118, 40532, 40065; Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára, Diplomatika Fényképgyűjtemény (further MNL OL DF), sign. 208370, 235915, 200611, 206852, 282722, 206830, 286216, 206816, 206817, 200615, 208372, 262045, 201636, 78592; Budapest, Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem Egyetemi Könyvtár, Hevenesi-Kaprinai-Pray gyűjtemény, Kaprinai- gyűjtemény, B sorozat, 37. kötet, pp. 179-181, n. XXXVII.

The Second Appendix or “*De Vdwornicis*”

As mentioned, the contents of *Gesta Hungarorum* are known to us only through their transcriptions and first editions from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The belief in the work’s medieval origin is supported by descriptions of a manuscript including said text. Remarks about it were written down in 1782 by Daniel Cornides, who assessed this manuscript.⁹ Recorded to be from the end of the 13th century, there is no reason not to believe it was this exact manuscript that Gábor Hevenesi used during his transcription of the chronicle in 1701.¹⁰ Since the original work was lost in the course of the nineteenth century, only the earliest transcriptions of this chronicle are available for its study and modern historical interpretation.¹¹ These, however, are generally regarded by historians as reliable reproductions of the original medieval text. The most notable and to this day normative edition was published in 1937 by Sándor Domanovszky.¹²

When discussing the social structure of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary, particular attention must be paid to the “appendix” at the end of the chronicle, which some scholars regard as a distinct type of text in comparison with the *Gesta* themselves.¹³ In contrast to the main body of the *Gesta*, however, this section appears to have been largely neglected in works addressing the subject. It was Sándor Domanovszky himself who bypassed the entire appendix, arguing that the text was too brief to provide meaningful insight into the various social classes and their distinctions.¹⁴ Most editions of the chronicle identify two appendices, the second beginning with the heading “*De Vdwornicis*.”¹⁵

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- 9 HOLLER. Anonymus és a “senonok hegyei” meg az “aliminus népek.” Árpád-kori történeti szövegek fejlődési modelljének első közelítése. In *Magyar Nyelv*, 2009, Vol. 105, no. 4, pp. 431-432.
 - 10 Budapest, Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem Egyetemi Könyvtár, Hevenesi-Kaprinai-Pray gyűjtemény, Hevenesi-gyűjtemény, 70. kötet, pp. 1-15; DOMANOVSKY. *Kézai Simon mester krónikája*. Budapest 1906, pp. 12-14.
 - 11 VESZPRÉMY and SCHAER, eds. *Gesta Hungarorum. The Deeds of Hungarians*. Budapest; New York 1999, pp. XVIII – XIX.
 - 12 DOMANOVSKY, ed. *Simonis de Keza Gesta Hungarorum*, pp. 129-194. The author also previously published a monograph on the same topic, see: DOMANOVSKY, *Kézai Simon mester krónikája*.
 - 13 According to László Veszprémy, the *Gesta Hungarorum* of master Simon of Kéza features the writing principles applied to similar texts across several European regions in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. VESZPRÉMY. *Mítosz és történelem a 13. századi Európában*. In *Századok*, 2000, Vol. 134, no. 1, pp. 245-249.
 - 14 DOMANOVSKY, *Kézai Simon mester krónikája*, p. 143.
 - 15 The name of this social group takes on grammatically different versions; however, almost all editions include the aforementioned heading: In Alexius Horányi “*De Vdwornicis*.” HORÁNYI, ed. *Chronicon Hungaricum*. Budae 1781, p. 141; In Matthias Florianus “*De Vdwornicis*.” FLORIANUS, ed. *Chronica Hungarorum*. Lipsiae 1883, p. 97; In László Veszprémi

However, an examination of the only two surviving handwritten transcriptions—those of Gábor Hevenesi and György Pray—suggests that a formally separate second appendix bearing this title did not exist in the original chronicle. Rather, the text attributed to this “second appendix” was most likely a continuation of the preceding chapter entitled “*De Nobilibus Advenis*.” The first edition to introduce a separate heading within the appendix was that of Josef Podhradczky in 1833; however, even this version included a broader range of social groups, as reflected in the extended title “*Caput Secundum. De Vdvornicis, Castrensibus, Conditionariis, Libertinis et Mancipiis*,”¹⁶ Sixteen years later, Stephan Endlicher published an edition of the chronicle that presented a distinct second appendix under the more limited title “*De Udworknicis*.”¹⁷

Understandably, the addition of a heading does not alter the content or meaning of the text itself; rather, formal modifications of this kind depend on the editor and their editorial approach. However, a comparison between modern editions and their earlier counterparts reveals a marked difference in the extent to which editorial interventions are acknowledged—an issue of particular importance when no original manuscript has been preserved. Editorial changes to a text’s formal structure may prove problematic. Even seemingly minor interventions, such as the addition of a heading, can influence the interpretation of the source material if they are not explicitly noted. In the present case, the designation of an appendix as “About *Udvornici*” in certain editions, as demonstrated above, has contributed to the widespread assumption that the second appendix of the *Gesta Hungarorum* is devoted primarily to *udvornici*, which is not, in fact, the case. Moreover, even the normative modern critical edition of the chronicle, prepared by Sándor Domanovszky,¹⁸ does not remark upon this discrepancy, either in its discussion of the differences among the various editions or in the author’s monograph on the chronicle of Simon of Kéza.¹⁹ Although the appendix begins by referring to *udvornici* and outlining their supposed origin as a servant group,

and Frank Schaer “*De Udworknicis*.” VESZPRÉMY and SCHAER, eds. *Gesta Hungarorum*, p. 176; In Josef Podhradczky “*Caput Secundum. De Vdvornicis, Castrensibus, Conditionariis, Libertinis et Mancipiis*.” PODHRADCZKY, ed. *De originibus et gestis Hungarorum libri II*. Budae 1833, p. 88; In Sándor Domanovszky without a header, text follows the previous chapter “*De Nobilibus Advenis*.” DOMANOVSZKY, ed. *Simonis de Keza Gesta Hungarorum*, p. 192, n. 95; In Stephanus L. Endlicher “*De Udworknicis*.” ENDLICHER, ed. *Rerum Hungaricarum Monumenta Arpadiana*. Sangalli 1849, p.128.

16 PODHRADCZKY, ed., *De originibus*, p. 88.

17 ENDLICHER, ed., *Rerum Hungaricarum*, p. 128.

18 DOMANOVSZKY, ed., *Simonis de Keza Gesta Hungarorum*, pp. 129-194.

19 The author speaks of “the second appendix,” does not lean towards the use of any title for it, but also does not take a stand against it being done by other editors and historians. See: DOMANOVSZKY, *Kézai Simon*, pp. 115-121, 137-143.

it proceeds to address other groups—*iobagiones*, *alii conditionarii*, *captivis*, *uher*—similarly, albeit more briefly. The appendix, therefore, cannot be regarded as a text exclusively concerned with *udvornici*, nor should it be characterised as such. Nevertheless, this interpretation persists in some recent editions and studies, including those specifically focused on *udvornici*.²⁰

A further issue arises from the fact that Simon of Kéza, in the same section of the chronicle, refers not only to *udvornici* but also to other servile and semi-free groups, as well as to slaves. Some scholars have subsequently subsumed these groups under the umbrella term *udvornici*. This subordination was the conclusion that Matúš Kučera presented in some of his works,²¹ despite his reliance on an edition of the *Gesta Hungarorum* that does not introduce a separate heading for the second appendix. The author never explained the basis on which he arrived at this conclusion, nor did he support his claim with any relevant sources. It is therefore possible to conclude that, in this context, this represents a misinterpretation of the medieval social group known as the *udvornici*. A substantial body of charters from the eleventh, twelfth, and even thirteenth centuries supports the contrary view, according to which the *udvornici* constituted a distinct group of court servants. Their members can be identified, among other things, by their self-designation using this term. In certain instances, the designation appears to function almost as a socio-legal status,²² distinguishing *udvornici* from ordinary *servi*.²³ However, no medieval source attests that the *udvornici* were bound by a clearly defined or specialised service obligation, such as those documented for other categories of royal servants (e.g., *aratores*, *piscatores*). Rather, the sources

20 See: STEINHÜBEL. *The Nitrian Principality: The Beginnings of Medieval Slovakia*. Leiden; Boston 2020, p. 277; KUČERA. O otrokoch v Uhorsku v 10. – 13. storočí. In *Historické štúdie*, 1959, Vol. 5, p. 223; KUČERA. *Slovensko po páde Veľkej Moravy*. Bratislava 1974, p. 369; VESZPRÉMY and SCHAER, eds., *Gesta Hungarorum*, p. 176; MACARTNEY. *The Medieval Hungarian Historians. A Critical and Analytical Guide*. Cambridge 1953, pp. 90, 94, 108.

21 KUČERA. O historickom vedomí Slovákov v stredoveku. In *Historický časopis*, 1977, Vol. 25, no. 2, p. 225; KUČERA, *Slovensko po páde Veľkej Moravy*, pp. 324–325.; Studies can also be found in a newer publication of the author's chosen studies, compiled by Martin Homza and published in 2012. KUČERA. *State a články k slovenskému stredoveku*. Bratislava 2012, pp. 29, 106.

22 For example, they were exempt from paying tithes to the church, as witnessed by the charter of Bela IV from 1240: “*cum ad solutionem decimarum nec vduornici nostri aliquatenus compellantur*.” MNL OL DF, sign. 208340; ERDÉLYI, ed. *A Pannonhalmi Szent-Benedek-Rend története: a Magyar kereszténység, királyság és Benczés-Rend fönállásának kilencszázados emlékére. Volume 1*. Budapest 1902, pp. 789–791, no. 189.

23 See: SUTT. *Slavery in Árpád-era Hungary in a Comparative Context*. Leiden; Boston 2015, pp. 52–130.

indicate a range of duties performed throughout the year, varying in scope and intensity among different groups of *udvornici*.²⁴

When analysing a primary source, it is essential to consider the contemporary influences that shaped it at the time of its composition. In the last third of the thirteenth century, Simon of Kéza was confronted with the emergence of a new social stratum, namely the lower nobility, a development that evidently required a response in his work.²⁵ These individuals often occupied a semi-free status and were increasingly elevated to the noble estate by the king or queen in recognition of their military service. This was also the case for *udvornici*, as attested by several thirteenth-century elevation charters. After nearly three centuries of the existence of the Kingdom of Hungary, the traditional medieval principles of hereditary noble origin began to be challenged, and the overall structure of society itself was transforming.²⁶ It is therefore understandable that the chronicler, who was composing his work during this period, sought to address these developments. The introductory sentence of the relevant passage may itself serve as an explanation for the inclusion of a discussion of *udvornici*, *castrenses*, and other groups immediately following a chapter on nobles of foreign origin. The wording, “*Because some people have wondered about udvornici, castrenses, other conditionarii, libertini et mancipia, ... who they are and where they came from,*”²⁷ clearly conveys the author’s motivation for composing this section. Members from all the aforementioned groups experienced increased social mobility during the thirteenth century. Although forms of servitude and slavery persisted, particularly on royal and ecclesiastical estates, they gradually declined across Central Europe, necessitating corresponding changes in the economic system, which could no longer rely predominantly on unpaid labour.²⁸ In addition to aligning with the Christian ideal of a just social order, this transformation enabled the ruler to meet a growing demand for military manpower by

24 László Erdélyi gives an example of duties required from *udvornici* in the service of Pannonhalma Abbey and their complaints against excessive workload. ERDÉLYI. *Egyházi földesúr és szolgálói a középkorban*. Budapest 1907, pp. 27-45.

25 MÁLYUSZ. A magyar köznemesség kialakulása. In *Századok*, 1942, Vol. 76, no. 1-3, pp. 272-285.

26 KRISTÓ. Kézai Simon és a XIII. század végi köznemesei ideológia néhány vonása. In *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények*, 1972, Vol. LXXVI., pp. 19-20.

27 “*Sed quoniam quosdam movet, quid sint udvornici, castrenses, alii conditionarii, libertini et mancipia...et unde esse habeant.*” DOMANOVSKÝ, ed., *Simonis de Keza Gesta Hungarorum*, p. 192.

28 SUTT. “The Empty Land” and the End of Slavery: Social Transformation in Thirteenth-Century Hungary. In KLEINGARTNER et al., eds. *Landscape and Societies in Medieval Europe East of the Elbe*. Toronto 2013, pp. 274-287.

incorporating a broader segment of the population into the royal army. In the case of the *udvornici*, this development primarily concerned individuals engaged in military service, who were increasingly elevated in recognition of their merits—an honour previously reserved largely for the nobility and wealthier strata of society.²⁹

Such developments understandably threatened the position and prestige of the upper social strata, which had long profited from the labour of unfree groups and prided themselves on noble lineage extending back many generations. The need to ground one's origins in ancient and distinguished ancestry emerged during the thirteenth century alongside transformations within the ruling elite.³⁰ It is therefore unsurprising that "*some people*"³¹—that is, unspecified representatives of the established nobility—became unsettled and began to question the identity of those newly attaining freedom and noble status. Moreover, it may be argued that the so-called second appendix, which in fact did not exist as a formally distinct section, represents a natural continuation of the author's original work, aimed at explaining the social structure of the Kingdom of Hungary in the thirteenth century. As such, it may have been appended to the end of the *Gesta Hungarorum* during the final stages of the chronicle's composition.

What the *Gesta* Say About *Udvornici*

Before turning to the contents of the chronicle, it must be noted that the text is, at times, inconsistent and difficult to follow; it should therefore be approached with due caution. One of the principal issues in the passage concerning *udvornici* is its problematic chronology, which will be examined in detail below. Such difficulties have led several scholars, including Gyula Kristó, to argue that the *Gesta Hungarorum* should be regarded more as a work of historical fiction than as a reflection of late thirteenth-century social conditions.³² Furthermore, although the chronicle was composed in the last quarter of the thirteenth century, it describes events separated from its own time by more than two centuries. This temporal gap raises not only questions concerning the work's reliability but also its authorship. The widely accepted view that the *Gesta Hungarorum* was preceded by an earlier, now lost chronicle, identified by László Veszprémy

29 HUDÁČEK and ZUPKA. Medieval Society and Power Elites in East Central Europe. The Case of the Kingdom of Hungary until the End of the 13th Century. In *Historický časopis*, 2025, Vol. 73, no. 3, pp. 443-444.

30 SUTT. Lords, peasants and slaves. In CURTA, ed. *The Routledge Handbook of East Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 500-1300*. London; New York 2022, pp. 265-270.

31 "*quosdam movet...*" DOMANOVSKY, ed., *Simonis de Keza Gesta Hungarorum*, p. 192.

32 KRISTÓ, *Kézai Simon*, p. 22.

as the *first Gesta*,³³ addresses this issue only in part. Several historians consider the works of *Anonymous*³⁴ and Ákos³⁵ to be the foundation upon which Simon of Kéza expanded his own chronicle, producing what is often regarded as the earliest continuous narrative account of the Kingdom of Hungary, tracing its development from the Magyar settlement to the author's own time.³⁶

In the case of the *udvornici* and the appendix, the text exhibits clear signs of continuity with the chronicle as a whole, as noted by János Horváth and Imre Madszar, in repeated introductory formulas and rhythmic structures.³⁷ From a stylistic perspective, it is clearly an addition made by Simon of Kéza. Within it, the author situates the origin of *udvornici* in the period of the Magyar tribes' arrival in Pannonia. According to Simon of Kéza, it is common knowledge that certain captives who possessed no land chose to attach themselves to landed households in exchange for compensation, a decision presented as voluntary. There are plenty of primary sources confirming that Hungarians kept captives and contributed to the slave trade, albeit predominantly before the Kingdom of Hungary was established.³⁸ Accounts such as the *Life of Saint Adalbert and the Chronicle of Thietmar of Merseburg* attest to the existence of slave trading and the taking of captives in the tenth and eleventh centuries.³⁹ According to the most recent research, the Hungarian slave trade, of which a significant part likely originated from military captives, was conducted primarily through Byzantine ports, with some captives also redirected towards slave markets in neighbouring

33 VESZPRÉMY. 'More Paganismo': Reflections on the Pagan and Christian Past in the *Gesta Hungarorum* of the Hungarian Anonymous Notary. In GARIPZANOV, ed. *Historical Narratives and Christian Identity on a European Periphery. Early History Writing in Northern, East-Central, and Eastern Europe (c. 1070–1200)*. Turnhout 2011, pp. 183–187.

34 VESZPRÉMY. *Történetírás és történetírók az Árpád-kori Magyarországon (XI–XIII. század közepe)*. Budapest 2019, p. 19.

35 Ákos is thought to have written his work around 15 years prior to Simon of Kéza; the chronicle has not survived as a standalone work. MÁLYUSZ. *A Thuróczy-krónika és forrásai*. Budapest 1967, pp. 50–53.

36 MARSINA, *Středověké uhorské rozprávací pramene*, pp. 175–180.

37 HORVÁTH. *Árpád-kori latinnyelvű irodalmunk stílusproblémái*. Budapest 1954, pp. 385–391; MADSZAR. *A hún krónika szerzője*. In *Történeti szemle*, 1922, Vol. 11, no. 1.–4, pp. 75–103.

38 See: BÉKEFI, *A rabszolgaság Magyarországon*, pp. 3–6; SUTT, *Slavery in Árpád-era Hungary*, pp. 8–34; SOLYMOSI. Liberty and Servitude in the Age of Saint Stephen. In ZSOLDOS, ed. *Saint Stephen and his Country. A Newborn Kingdom in Central Europe: Hungary*. Budapest 2001, pp. 69–79.

39 See: TŘEŠTÍK. "Veliké město Slovanů jménem Praha." *Státy a otroci ve střední Evropě v 10. století*. In POLANSKÝ; SLÁMA and TŘEŠTÍK, eds. *Přemyslovský stát kolem roku 1000*. Praha 2000, p. 63; WARNER, ed. *Ottoman Germany. The Chronicle of Thietmar of Merseburg*. Manchester; New York 2001.

Bohemia. This practice gradually declined after the first third of the tenth century.⁴⁰ Simon of Kéza tries to justify this change, claiming that the emerging kingdom's vast territory required a stable labour force for settlement.⁴¹ Another factor underlying this shift was the process of Christianisation, particularly during the rule of Saint Stephen I, who has had a positive image throughout Hungarian historical tradition. The liberation of Christian captives could be interpreted as an expression of royal piety and mercy, in accordance with ecclesiastical expectations, while also serving the practical aim of repopulation.

According to Simon of Kéza, one of three scenarios applied to captives taken during the Magyar's settlement:

*"some of these were put to death when they continued to offer resistance, according to the custom of nations; the more warlike of the remainder they took with them to fight on the battlefield, and gave them a portion of the spoils; others in turn became their property and were kept around their tents to perform various servile duties."*⁴²

According to Péter Molnár, this passage incorporates Roman legal concepts.⁴³ However, it was noted by György Györffy that it may have been strongly inspired by the events surrounding the conversion of the Cumans, particularly in the sections describing the nomadic way of life and animal herding.⁴⁴ It is important to recognise that the text likely underwent adaptation to achieve specific stylistic or thematic goals. As noted above, the most probable motivation for the formation of the entire appendix was the transformation of the social structure of the Kingdom of Hungary, associated with the growing anarchy of the Hungarian nobility, which reached its peak at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁴⁵ While the appendix as a whole could be dismissed as historical fiction, certain passages suggest that Simon of Kéza had access to specific knowledge or earlier sources regarding the conditions of the emerging Kingdom of Hungary, such as the Magyar raids and the taking of captives.

40 FONTAINE. *Slave Trading in the Early Middle Ages*. Manchester 2025, pp. 124-128.

41 *"Quia vero regnum erat amplissimum et gentibus vacuatum, nec etiam communitas tota in hoc Apostolico assensum tribuebat..."* DOMANOVSKÝ, ed., *Simonis de Keza Gesta Hungarorum*, p. 193.

42 *"aliquos ex captivis virtuosos ad praelium deducentes secum, ali quam ipsis portionem de spoliis erogarent, quosdam vero diversis servitiis mancipando in proprietatem circa sua tabernacula solerent conservare."* DOMANOVSKÝ, ed., *Simonis de Keza Gesta Hungarorum*, p. 192.

43 MOLNÁR. A Magyar jobbágyság eredete Kézai Simon szerint: az értelmezés lehetőségei és zsákutcai I. In *Századok*, 2017, Vol. 151, no. 3, pp. 575-560.

44 GYÖRFFY. *István király és műve*. Budapest 1977, p. 431.

45 KRISTÓ, Kézai Simon és a XIII. század, pp. 19-22.

Therefore, the text must be examined carefully and compared with other, more reliable primary sources to distinguish between fictional elaboration, historical tradition, and elements reflecting actual historical context.

Another important detail from the chronicle must be highlighted before examining the supposed origin of the servile group called *udvornici*. According to Simon of Kéza, both Christian and pagan captives were taken by the Magyars.⁴⁶ This distinction is crucial when considering the origins and status of the court servants. The church emerges as a central focus in the *Gesta*, described by Gyula Kristó as the ideological father of freedom, with the king acting as its implementer.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, it cannot be overlooked that the church itself owned slaves. The *Gesta* must be interpreted from the perspective of the thirteenth century, while accounting for the multiple temporal layers the chronicler presents, particularly the periods before and after the Christianization of the Hungarians. Christian captives were supposed to be reinstated into their former liberty, especially since many of them came from noble birth, according to Simon of Kéza.⁴⁸ Though no longer considered noble, they were expected to cultivate the land and sustain themselves “*like other Christians*.”⁴⁹ Since *udvornici* did not own the land they cultivated and were settled in royal villages (or on other royal grounds), they, according to Simon of Kéza, likely did not belong to the second group of captives, who received war spoils and could claim property. Assigning them to the third group raises questions regarding their rights and the legal distinction between them and other *servi* in the eleventh-century Kingdom of Hungary. The answers lie at the end of the entire chronicle, which clarifies that buying out captives and bestowing certain freedoms upon them by the king refers only to the individuals from the Christian populace. It should also be noted that the *udvornici* were not the only social group mentioned in the chronicle’s concluding appendix. It is notable that “*udvornici, castrenses, libertini*” or “*alii conditionales*,” all social groups that can be described as dependent persons in the 13th century, are described as originating from the Christian population.⁵⁰

46 “*Factum est, quod cum Hungari possessa Pannonia Christianos et paganos more gentium quosdam captivos occiderent resistentes.*” Ibidem.

47 KRISTÓ, Kézai Simon, pp. 19-20.

48 “*captivos Christianos deinceps relinquerent pristinae libertati, cum multi nobiles inter captivos habeantur.*” DOMANOVSKÝ, ed., Simonis de Keza Gesta Hungarorum, p. 193.

49 “*quod captivi terras colerent et ex terrae fructibus viverent, prout alii Christiani.*” Ibidem.

50 The text goes on to exclaim upon individual groups, but omits *castrenses* (men of the castles), instead naming *iobagiones castri* (castle warriors), who formed a different social group. Although an apparent error, members of both of these groups, alongside all the other mentioned by text, excluding *mancipia* (slaves), became the frequent subjects of royal elevation at the time Simon of Kéza wrote his chronicle. Out of all the social classes, the most attention is given to information about *udvornici*, though the reason for this decision is unknown.

Their semi-free status (although varying in terms of personal freedom) was not the sole commonality. In comparison to the aforementioned social groups that derived from Christian war captives and were later freed, this does not apply to captives known as *uheg*,⁵¹ who were pagan and, therefore, could be freely owned by Hungarians as their slaves according to Simon of Kéza.⁵² Thus, while studying the appendix on the origin of the *udvornici* is essential, comparison with other social groups is equally necessary, as it addresses the same questions and widens their understanding. The influence of Christianity is particularly evident in the discussion of *udvornici* and the claim of ownership over members of this servile group. The chronicle opens this discussion by criticising Hungarians for becoming too accustomed to a life of comfort with captives; however, only after affirming the passage of time since the Kingdom's establishment and their own conversion to Christianity.

These captives belonged to the same Christian population previously mentioned in the text, who were intended to be freed by order of the Papal See in the first decades following the establishment of the Kingdom of Hungary. The passage explains that, from these captives, a new servant class was created by the magnates of the Kingdom, who continued to treat them as slaves rather than set them free, and referred to them in the vernacular as *udvornici*.⁵³ It is important to note that the chronicle does not use the word “*slave*” when describing the *udvornici*. Nevertheless, as Remig Békefi observed,⁵⁴ primary sources from this period rarely distinguish between “*mancipium*” (slave) and “*servus*” (servant). In the case of the *Gesta Hungarorum*, the term “*captivos*” (captives) is preferred to describe the unfree working servile stratum. In line with the thoughts of László Erdélyi about Christian brotherhood and the treatment of all people as human beings rather than property,⁵⁵ these terminological choices may reflect the author's subtle acknowledgement of efforts toward the abolition of slavery. The chronicle itself highlights the uneven distribution of labour: captives were assigned physically demanding and exhausting tasks without choice,⁵⁶ as a result

51 A term of Slavic origin, describing runaway servants. It was already used in the third set of laws of Saint Ladislaus. KNIEZSA, *A magyar nyelv*, p. 544. For the problem of the exact place of origin, see: KRISTÓ. Űzbég és tolvaj. In *Magyar Nyelv*, 1975, Vol. 71, pp. 62-66.

52 DOMANOVSKY, ed., *Simonis de Keza Gesta Hungarorum*, pp. 192-194.

53 “*Processu autem temporis fide roborata potiores regni vivere volentes otiose habentesque captivos sine numero, non dimiserunt eos abire liberos, ut volebat Apostolicus, sed curiae suae famulantes ordinarunt ex eisdem, quos patrio nomine udvornicos vocaverunt.*” Ibidem, p. 193.

54 BÉKEFI. A rabszolgaság Magyarországon, pp. 5-6.

55 ERDÉLYI. Egyházi földesúr, pp. 3-7.

56 “*graves labores et onera suis captivis imponebant*” DOMANOVSKY, ed., *Simonis de Keza Gesta Hungarorum*, p. 193.

functioning more like slaves than the modern interpretation of servants would suggest.

The chronicle suggests that, despite the efforts of earlier rulers, even during the reign of Coloman the Learned (1096–1116), several Hungarian magnates, whom Simon Kéza refers to as *nobiles regni*, continued to hold *udvornici* as their servants. According to the chronicler, Coloman insisted that only he, as king, and those Hungarian prelates to whom he had previously granted these captives, were entitled to dispose of these persons. The servile class was placed under the authority of the palatine, who was expected to act in the nobles' best interest; however, dissatisfaction among the magnates persisted, and the *udvornici* continued to be used for heavy labour.⁵⁷ Presumably, this misuse prompted intervention by the prelates, who were to raise the issue before the Pope.⁵⁸ At this point, the chronology in Simon of Kéza's account becomes entangled. Although the passage begins with King Coloman, it shifts to an episode in which the Pope allegedly learns of the life of St. Stephen, declares him a true apostle's follower, and instructs him to organise the churches in the kingdom as he sees fit, declaring the king's sole authority over the captives redeemed under his auspices.

Consequently, the text returns to the rule of Coloman, who reportedly redeemed all captives, except those previously gifted by nobles to the churches.⁵⁹ The apparent chronological inconsistencies could be attributed to scribal errors or later misinterpretations of the text. However, *udvornici*, as a distinct class of semi-free persons, are already mentioned in the laws of St. Stephen.⁶⁰ Their particular legal standing is further confirmed in the third book of the laws of St. Ladislaus, whose reign also predates that of Coloman.⁶¹ Additionally, there is but one charter dating to the twelfth century, attesting to the donation of *udvornici* to persons outside the ecclesiastical environment by the king,⁶² who was their inherent owner. This deviation was also contemporarily contested, requiring a confirmation of this donation by Stephen III in 1171.⁶³ Plenty of diplomatic sources suggest sole royal and ecclesiastical possession of *udvornici* since the

57 "Et ne communitas nobilium reprobationem huiusmodi grave ferret, palatino regni, qui pro utilitate nobilium praeficitur, rex suos *udvornicos* uti dedi." Ibidem.

58 "quod displicens praelatis, Apostolico super his sunt locuti." Ibidem.

59 Ibidem.

60 ZÁVODSZKY, ed. *A Szent István, Szent László és Kálmán korabeli törvények és zsinati határozatok forrásai*. Budapest 1904, p. 156.

61 Ibidem, p. 174.

62 The subject of the donation was the village Gerolth (present-day Kroatisch Geresdorf, Austria). MNL OL DL, sign. 15. Transcription, see: FEJÉR, ed., *Codex diplomaticus Hungariae VII/5*, pp. 119–120.

63 MNL OL DL, sign. 21. Transcription, see: FEJÉR, ed., *Codex diplomaticus Hungariae II*, pp. 184–185.

beginning of the 11th century.⁶⁴ Although some of these charters are considered unreliable or even forged, their content remains relevant for the present discussion. These sources challenge the statements of the *Gesta Hungarorum*, as the ownership and freedom status of *udvornici* appear to have been settled during the rule of St. Stephen (1000–1038) and were apparently not contested by the nobility under Coloman. One possible reason for attributing the dispute to a later ruler may have been to preserve the impeccable reputation of King Stephen, sanctified yet before the end of the 11th century,⁶⁵ long before Simon of Kéza wrote his chronicle.

The chronicler appears to have had a precise knowledge of *udvornici* on royal and ecclesiastical estates and their specific standing dating back to the reign of Saint Stephen. It is therefore possible that the servants burdened with heavy labour by the *nobiles regni* were not *udvornici* per se, but rather individual groups of Christian captives, who had not been freed in accordance with the first papal decree. The term *udvornici*, as used in the text, may have served as a loanword employed by Simon of Kéza to suggest a court-based system of the kingdom's magnates, analogous to that of the king. If this interpretation is correct, it would be natural for the prelates to intervene on behalf of these Christian servants, who were treated more like slaves than freemen. The use of the Legend of Saint Stephen supports this thesis, portraying Saint Stephen as the ideal Christian ruler and emphasising his redemption of Christian captives.⁶⁶ This practice is echoed in the reign of Coloman the Learned, who, according to the chronicle, bought out these supposed *udvornici* and assigned some of them lighter duties within his castles. Based on the description of this group of servants, they may be more accurately compared to *conditionarii* rather than *udvornici*, who by this time had already formed a distinct social class with a specific legal status. Simon of Kéza further notes that Coloman divided dependent persons into multiple categories, likely reflecting the professional specialisation of service, including groups such as *tavarnici*, *piscatores*, *aratores*, and others.⁶⁷

64 See: FEJÉR, ed. *Codex diplomaticus Hungariae ecclesiasticus ac civilis. Tomus I.* Budae 1829, pp. 312–314, 428–239, 448–459; FEJÉR, ed. *Codex diplomaticus Hungariae ecclesiasticus ac civilis. Tomus II.* Budae 1829, pp. 94–109, 120–125, 184–185, 219–220, 277–279, 346–348.

65 See: GYÖRFFY, *István király és műve*; ZSOLDOS, ed. *Saint Stephen and His Country. A Newborn Kingdom in Central Europe: Hungary.* Budapest 2001.

66 See: SZENTPÉTERY, ed. *Scriptores rerum Hungaricarum tempore ducum regnumque stirpis Arpadianae gestarum. Volumen II.* Budapestini 1938, pp. 363–440; KARSAI. Szent István király tisztelete. In SERÉDI, ed. *Emlékkönyv Szent István király halálának kilencszázadik évfordulóján.* Budapest 1938, Vol. 3, pp. 155–256; BEREND. *Stephen I, the First Christian King of Hungary. From Medieval Myth to Modern Legend.* Oxford 2024.

67 Gyula Kristó also argues about a separate subtype of settlement naming, according to the spe-

Contemporary Laws and the Social Standing of *Udvornici*

As noted above, laws regarding *udvornici* appear already among the earliest Hungarian legal codes.⁶⁸ Of the twelve surviving manuscripts that include the Laws of St. Stephen,⁶⁹ the twelfth-century *Admont codex*⁷⁰ is the oldest. Its final law, numbered XV, is remarkable for specifying a particular class of persons. Commonly, the laws either talk about “*liberi*” (free people) or “*servi*” (servants, or in this case, unfree people), with the exception of statutes pertaining to ecclesiastical persons. The semi-free status of certain social groups is seldom explicitly addressed in these sources. This law from the second book of laws of Saint Stephen stipulates that *udvornici* are to be judged as freemen in the cases of theft, but their testimony is not accepted among the free.⁷¹ In analysing this provision, it is important to note that the *Admont codex* does not share the same header for this law as its later copies. While it clearly states, “*Let no testimony from a thief be accepted,*”⁷² both the *Thuróczi codex* (fifteenth century) and the *Ilosvay codex* (sixteenth century), among the most reliable manuscripts, label the very “*About theft of udvornici.*”⁷³ Despite variations in the headers, there is no significant difference in the interpretation of the law regarding their legal status. Being regarded as a freeman in eleventh-century Hungarian judicial practice, as recorded in these early law codes, did not preclude the possibility of losing one’s freedom and becoming a serf. This is clearly illustrated in the law “*About*

cialisation of service of the settlement’s populace, ever since the eleventh century. KRISTÓ, *Úzbég és tolvaj*, pp. 62–66.

- 68 The exact date of the first law codes is not known; however, historians believe that the first book of laws was created in the last decade of Stephen’s reign, approximately between 1030 and 1038. BAK; BÓNIS and SWEENEY, eds. *Decreta Regni Mediaevalis Hungariae I. 1000–1301*. Idyllwild 1999, pp. XXXV–LI. The exact date of the codification of the second book of laws is also unknown. Its origins are likewise dated to the last decade of Stephen’s reign. However, Monika Jánosi assumes that the second book may have been created only during the reign of King Andrew I. (1046–1060) and the individual legal articles derived primarily from earlier decrees of Stephen I. BAK; BÓNIS and SWEENEY, eds., *Decreta Regni Mediaevalis Hungariae I.*, pp. 77–78; JÁNOSI. *Törvényalkotás a korai Árpád-korban*. Szeged 1996, pp. 90–95.
- 69 JÁNOSI. A Szent István törvényeit tartalmazó kódexek. In *Magyar Könyvszemle*, 1978, Vol. 94, no. 1–4, pp. 225–230.
- 70 Budapest, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár, sign. Cod. Lat. 433, fol. 119r–126v.
- 71 “*Si quis illorum qui vulgo udvornich vocatur furtum commiserit lege liberorum diiudicetur. Testimonium autem eorum inter liberos non recipiatur.*” Budapest, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár, sign. Cod. Lat. 433, fol. 126v.
- 72 Ibidem.
- 73 Thuróczi codex: “*De furto udornicorum.*” Budapest, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár, sign. Cod. Lat. 407, fol. 85r; Ilosvay codex: “*De furto wdvarnicorum.*” Budapest, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár, sign. Fol. Lat. 4023, fol. 17r.

theft of freemen."⁷⁴ According to Stephen's laws, a thief could redeem himself if caught stealing for the first or second time; if he lacked sufficient financial means, he was to be sold into serfdom. However, if he redeemed himself twice and committed theft a third time, the prescribed penalty was death.⁷⁵

The Laws of St. Ladislaus, although considered much stricter by János Bak,⁷⁶ were built upon the legislative framework established by the laws of St. Stephen. It can therefore be assumed that, in cases of theft, the legal regulations concerning the freemen continued to apply to *udvornici*. Under the second law code of King Stephen I, prior to the enactment of St. Ladislaus's laws, freemen, including *udvornici* per their specific status, were exempt from corporal punishment for theft, in contrast to serfs, who faced mutilation (cutting of the nose or ears) if they could not provide appropriate compensation.⁷⁷ However, this second set of laws altered the adjudication of theft, introducing a system of punishment based on the monetary value of the crime. If a freeman stole goods worth 10 *denarii*, the penalty was death. For lesser amounts, one eye was to be gauged, and the offender was judged according to the second book of the Laws of St. Stephen.⁷⁸ This meant that they were automatically subjected to mutilation and, if unable to redeem themselves, could also be sold into serfdom. In addition to this law, another provision in the same lawbook concerning the *udvornici* partially corroborates the account in the *Gesta Hungarorum* regarding their judicial supervision under the palatine. The third law addresses the use and misuse of the royal seal, which validated judicial and legal documents in the highest form. According to it, the count palatine could wield the seal only during his stay at the royal court. Outside of it, he could use it solely to summon and judge *udvornici* and those who come to him voluntarily.⁷⁹ This paragraph confirms the palatine as an appellate authority for *udvornici*, who could bring their complaints before

74 "De furto liberorum" Országos Széchényi Könyvtár, fol. 126r; ZÁVODSZKY, ed., A Szent István, p. 154, n. VII.

75 Ibidem.

76 ZÁVODSZKY, ed., A Szent István, p. 170, n. XIV.

77 "Si quis servorum semel furtum commiserit, reddat furtum, et componat nasum V iuencis, si potest, sin autem abscidatur. Si absciso naso iterum commiserit furtum, componat aures V iuencis, si potest, sin autem abscindantur. Si idem tertio furtum commiserit, careat vita." Ibidem, p. 154, n. VI.

78 "Si liber, quod decem denarios valeat, furatus fuerit, cum omni substantia sua pereat; si minus, alter oculus eruatur, et secundum sancti Stephani decreta diiudicetur." Ibidem, p. 175, n. VIII.

79 "III. De palatino comite Placuit etiam, ut si aliquando palatinus comes domum ierit, regis et curie sigillum, que in vice eius remanserit, illi dimittat, ut sicut regis una est curia, et ita unum sigillum persistat. Domi vero comes idem quamdiu manserit super neminem sigillum mittat, nisi super eos dumtaxat, qui vocantur udornic et qui spontanea voluntate iverint ad eum, illi ei liceat iudicare." Ibidem, p. 174, n. III.

him. In this context, although Simon of Kéza claims that Coloman entrusted the *udvornici* to the legal protection of the palatine, it is highly likely that this judicial practice already existed earlier, demonstrably under King Ladislaus I. Whether the palatine's authority over *udvornici* originated even earlier, during the reign of King Stephen I in the first third of the eleventh century, remains an open question.

A noteworthy reference appears in the third law code of King Ladislaus, where the second paragraph mentions Judge Sarkas,⁸⁰ who, during the reign of King Andrew, compiled a survey, historians roughly date to c. 1060–1063. This survey likely concerned all royal and castle estates, as well as the servants residing on them. It is possible that Sarkas, acting as *iudex*, was the royal palatine. If so, his judicial authority could already have extended to the *udvornici* in this period, even though the royal decree invoking the survey explicitly applied only to *cives* (castle folk), *ewnek*, *servi* (servants), and *wzbeq* (fugitives).⁸¹ Granted, the earliest surviving charter specifically addressing matters concerning *udvornici* and issued by a palatine dates to 1221, under the chancery of Nicholas Szák.⁸² The thirteenth century provides a more detailed view of the palatine's role, with at least twenty extant charters issued by several palatines in various matters concerning *udvornici*.⁸³ The palatine did not inherently act as the sole judge for this social group but primarily functioned as an appellate authority. For example, one charter from the end of the reign of Béla II recounts that five *udvornici* sought to reclaim twenty-four families of servants who had previously been granted to the monastery of Saint Mauricius by King Ladislaus. Although the palatine Fonsol is listed among several judges appointed by the king for this case, he did render the verdict to the *udvornici*. The charter specifies that, after being found guilty, all five *udvornici* (Luta, Keta, Taluta, Janca, Rodoan) were punished by having their heads shaved, on account of the judgment of comes Sar,

80 ZÁVODSZKY, ed., *A Szent István*, pp. 173–174, n. II.

81 GYÖRFFY, *István király*, p. 246; See also: HUDÁČEK, „Kráľ v sedle“. Arpádovci a Itinerant Kingship (Reisekönigtum). In BYSTRICKÝ and HUDÁČEK, eds. *Gestá, symboly a rituály v stredoveku*. Bratislava 2019, p. 129.

82 MNL OL DF, sign. 237740; FEJÉR, ed. *Codex diplomaticus Hungariae ecclesiasticus ac civilis. Tomus III. Vol. I*. Budae 1829, pp. 346–347; SZÖCS, ed. *Az Árpád-kori nádorok és helyetteseik okleveleinek kritikai jegyzéke*. Budapest 2012, p. 30, n. 11.

83 Nicholas Szák: MNL OL DF, sign. 237740, 206886; Denis son of Apod: MNL OL DL, sign. 91106, MNL OL DF, sign. 226823; Denis Türje: MNL OL DL, sign. 207010; Roland Rátót: MNL OL DL, sign. 37459, 40028, 40031, 226337, MNL OL DF, sign. 227819, 251791; Henry Kőszegi: MNL OL DF, sign. 264932, 261809, 251792; Lawrence son of Kemény: MNL OL DL, sign. 40077; Nicholas Kőszegi: MNL OL DL, sign. 98451; Matthew II. Csák: MNL OL DL, sign. 47739, 40145; MNL OL DF, sign. 204730; FEJÉR, ed. *Codex diplomaticus Hungariae ecclesiasticus ac civilis. Tomus V. Vol. II*. Budae 1829, pp. 447–448.

another member of the judicial panel.⁸⁴ A certain comes udvornicorum named Opus, responsible for encouraging the involvement of the named udvornici, is not mentioned in the section describing the punishment.⁸⁵ It was also not the only time members of this social group were punished by having their heads shaved.

In 1184, the Belgrade Chapter issued a commemorative charter concerning a dispute between the *udvornici* of the Esztergom suburbs and representatives of the Tihany abbey over the claim to ten servants of the church. The palatine was among the appointed judges for the trial, and after the *udvornici* pleaded guilty, their heads were shaved.⁸⁶ Notably, this charter also names two superiors of *udvornici* of Esztergom: “*Seraphim et Pancracius centurio, cum quibusdam sibi subditis udvornicis.*”⁸⁷ This reference provides valuable insight into the group’s internal social structure and indicates differences in social standing among its members. Neither Seraphim nor Pancracius was subjected to head shaving; instead, each received a monetary fine,⁸⁸ demonstrating that some *udvornici* possessed at least limited personal assets. The last twelfth-century charter concerning a legal dispute involving *udvornici* dates to 1192 and regards the property called Fenetü.⁸⁹ Despite the previous sale of this land to *miles religiosus*, named Hohold, who had the charter issued, three of the Zalaegerszeg *udvornici* (Albeus, Salomon, Aegidius) attempted to assert a claim to it. While the dispute over the property had begun prior to their objections, the palatine Mochu participated in the proceedings.⁹⁰ The charter does not record any

84 “*Nomina autem servorum regis, quibus capita tonsa sunt iussu Sar comitis sunt hec: Luta, Keta, Taluta, Janca, Rodoan.*” MNL OL DF, sign. 206830. Transcription, see: ERDÉLYI, ed. *A Pannonhalmi Szent-Benedek-Rend története: a Magyar kereszténység, királyság és Benczés-Rend fönállásának kilenczszázados emlékére. Volume VIII.* Budapest 1903, p. 272, n. 3.

85 “*quidam diabolico instinctu voluerunt predictas familias a servicio supradicte ecclesie subtrahere et in ministerio udvornicorum subuigarem auctore quodam comite udvornicorum, Opus nomine...*” Ibidem.

86 “*praedicti udvornici, maioris condemnationis metuentes incursum, calumpnie reatum viva voce professi, sacra adtingere eos non permiserunt, unde in tonsure capitis udvornicos iam dictos, iudicalis multavit auctoritas...*” MNL OL DF, sign. 208372. Transcription, see: FEJÉR, ed., *Codex diplomaticus Hungariae II*, pp. 219-220.

87 Ibidem.

88 “*qui autem eis praeerant, singulos 50 pensis istis pristina*” Ibidem.

89 Most probably a part of the present-day Lendava, Slovenia, formerly located in the Zala county. The original form of the word is uncertain, as the charter has not been preserved in a medieval transcription but was transcribed by Stephen Kaprinai in the eighteenth century in one of his manuscripts. Budapest, Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem Egyetemi Könyvtár, Hevenesi-Kaprinai-Pray gyűjtemény, Kaprinai- gyűjtemény, B sorozat, 37. Kötet, pp. 179-181.

90 “*Praeterea rursus Albeus, Salomon, Aegidius, Saladienses regis udvornici, praenominatum praedium Fenetü suum esse ius duxerunt. Igitur huius rei controversia protensa est, usque ad praesentiam palatini comitis Mochu: coram cuius praesentia Paris illud vendidisse praedium se Hohold dixit.*” Ibidem, pp. 180-181.

punishment for the three named *udvornici*, who later summoned the *pristaldus* Ioann as a witness to testify on their behalf and to attest to the false claim they had laid.⁹¹ Most importantly, this evidence demonstrates that members of this servile stratum could not only lay claims to property but also appeal before the palatine as their appointed judicial authority. This confirms the broader legal agency and hierarchical structure present within this social class.

Given that this servile class had the right to appeal to a royal deputy and was judged as part of the freemen, it is appropriate to consider their social status higher than that of common servants. This led some researchers, such as Ferenc Noéh, to the conclusion of calling *udvornici* free servants. Although he was not a historian, his article revealed the lack of literature on the social status of *udvornici*, which, in turn, contributed to imprecise conclusions about this servile group.⁹² A twelfth-century charter issued by King Béla III (1148–1196) already addresses the confusion between *udvornici* and freemen. According to this document, only “those who are free and are called *liberi udvornici*” may claim the status of a free person. Despite issuing two charters on the subject,⁹³ the issue persisted, prompting King Béla IV (1206–1270) in 1240 to clarify that several royal *udvornici* had attempted to assert the status of *liberi udvornicorum*. The charter, therefore, instructed that the number of such persons be determined by individual lineages,⁹⁴ while other *udvornici* could claim only the liberties granted by prior decrees. While Simon of Kéza portrays *udvornici* as servants descended from captives taken by Magyars in the tenth century, the earliest Hungarian laws make clear that their standing was not equivalent to that of

91 “*Udvornici tamen exclamaverunt, quod coram Thoma comite litigassent propter praedium illud, et eis iustificatum esset, pristaldumque haberent, nomine Ioann, assertorem veritatis in hac re. Itaque praenotatus Mochu palatinus comes pristaldum iussit ad se adduci. Adductus igitur pristaldus Ioann, coram eodem comite denegavit se esse pristaldum super istud praedium. Unde udvornici praetitulati inventi falsidici, in iudicio damnati sunt, et praedium illud Hohold plenarie iustificatum est...*” Ibidem, pp. 180–181.

92 The publication is a scientific and popular journal; however, it does not feature any notes, only works used by the articles. NOÉH. Birtokok és birtokosok a középkori Magyarországon. In *Geodézia és kartográfia*, 2004, Vol. 56, no. 6, p. 24; More on the question of freedom and other interpretations, see: BOLLA. Das Dienstvolk der königlichen und kirchlichen Güter zur Zeit des frühen Feudalismus. In *Annales Universitatis Scientiarum Budapestensis de Rolando Eötvös nominatae. Sectio historica*, 1976, Vol. 17, pp. 17–36.

93 Both charters are only known to us through their transcriptions and come from the year 1186. MNL OL DL, sign. 41520, 40532.

94 “*Regis aliquam intervenire confusionem quia plerique ex odvorniciis nostris libertatis sibi nomen usurpare consueverant placuit eos, qui liberi sunt in eadem gente ac liberi vduarnicorum vocari consueverunt sub numero designare.*” MNL OL DL, sign. 41520; Transcription, see: NAGY, ed. *Hazai Okmánytár. Codex Diplomaticus Patrius Hungaricus. Tomus VIII*. Budapest 1891, pp. 42–43, n. 29.

common servi. Moreover, describing this group as part of a semi-free social stratum is insufficient to capture their actual status and the freedoms available to them, which must be investigated through individual charters. Unfortunately, the scarcity of legal documents from the eleventh and twelfth centuries limits this analysis to the thirteenth century. Nevertheless, the recurring patterns observed in charters across different periods should not be overlooked. As Ilona Bolla has argued, the court procedures governing *udvornici* in the first half of the thirteenth century could not have functioned so effectively without systematic continuity from earlier periods.⁹⁵

Origin of the Name and the Question of Ethnicity

Research on *udvornici* in the second half of the twentieth century increasingly focused on the nationalistic debate over the term's origin, with two main competing theories promoted primarily by György Györffy and Matúš Kučera. While the first author displayed a tendency toward compromise, suggesting that the name of this servile group might derive from a mixed Hungarian-Slavic origin,⁹⁶ Matúš Kučera firmly argued for a direct derivation from the Slavic word "dvor" (court).⁹⁷ Although the theory of Slavic origin remains largely plausible to this day, a similar line of reasoning could be employed to support the Hungarian thesis. However, the term's form "*udvarnici*" appears more widely only after the first third of the thirteenth century,⁹⁸ preceded by a single instance in a charter from 1199.⁹⁹ This subtle change is notable, as the modern Hungarian word for "court" is *udvar*. From an etymological perspective, a similar methodological

95 BOLLA. *A jogilag egységes jobbágyságról Magyarországon*. Budapest 2005, pp. 43-45.

96 GYÖRFFY. Az Árpád-kori szolgálnépek kérdéséhez. In *Történelmi szemle*, 1972, Vol. 15, no. 3-4, pp. 264-310.

97 KUČERA, *Slovensko po páde Veľkej Moravy*, pp. 368-375.

98 The form featuring "a" became prevalent by fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, even in the case of transcriptions of older materials. The first document from the thirteenth century is the charter from 1234 and the chancery of King Andrew II., which includes both variants of the name. The used words are "*udvornicorum*" and "*udvarnicos*". MNL OL DL, sign. 40010; For transcription see: FEJÉR, ed. *Codex diplomaticus Hungariae ecclesiasticus ac civilis. Tomus III. Vol. 2*. Budae 1829, pp. 408-410.

99 Data according to the author's private database of over 260 written records about *udvornici* from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries. The mentioned charter is the only example of the word used with the letter "a" from eleven charters and one manuscript, dating from the eleventh to the twelfth century. Charters and manuscripts written after the year 1200, featuring transcriptions of earlier materials, were not included, as the accuracy of the text's transcription cannot be guaranteed. It must be mentioned that this charter uses a singular form of the group's name; the word used is "*utvarnicis*," featuring the letter "t" instead of "d", which is unprecedented and might have been a scribal mistake. MNL OL DF, sign. 201636; For transcription see: FEJÉR, ed., *Codex diplomaticus Hungariae II*, pp. 346-348.

problem arises with another previously mentioned servile group, the *uzbegs*. The evolution of languages, often involving loanwords, complicates tracing precise origins. János Melich, applying a phonetic-comparative approach to loanwords, concluded a Czech-Moravian origin of the word *uzbeg*.¹⁰⁰ His methodology was later critiqued and revisited by Gyula Kristó around the turn of the twenty-first century, laying the foundation for new linguistic and onomastic approaches to historical place-name research.¹⁰¹ In the case of *udvornici*, the root of the word appears straightforward, which might encourage premature conclusions. However, no similarly extensive research has been conducted on its linguistic development. Toponymic studies of servile settlements, popularised from the 1960s onward,¹⁰² came closest to expanding the understanding of the term, though their methodologies remain problematic. In 2016, István Hoffmann and Valéria Tóth proposed a new hypothesis, following up on Gyula Kristó's work. These authors first questioned the use of the word *udvornici* and its initial vowel, reflecting on the origin of the letter “u,” which aligns the word with its modern Hungarian form. According to their analysis, there are two possibilities regarding the origin of the word, which they deem inherently Slavic the very same way they see *udvornici* as a social class stemming from Slavic captives: either the term originated as *dvornic*, with the later addition of the vowel u in order to align it with the Hungarian phonological principles, or it was borrowed already with the vowel u incorporated in the word, requiring no modification for Hungarian usage.¹⁰³ This question remains unresolved, as the earliest preserved written record of *udvornici* dates from 1055¹⁰⁴ – at least half a century after the formation of this servile stratum in the Kingdom of Hungary – and no equivalents to this word appear in the Slavic languages.

Returning to the chronicle, Simon of Kéza does not explicitly state the origin of the term *udvornici*. In fact, the precise form of the term he used is uncertain,

100 MELICH. Néhány magyar jogtörténeti kifejezésből. In *Nyelvtudományi Közlemények*, 1913, Vol. XLII, no. 1-2, pp. 244-247; KRISTÓ, Üzbég és tolvaj, pp. 62-66.

101 HOFFMANN and TÓTH. A nyelvi és az etnikai rekonstrukció kérdései a 11. századi Kárát-medencében. In *Századok*, 2016, Vol. 150, no. 2, pp. 257-260.

102 See: KRAJČOVIČ. Z historickéj typológie služobníckych osadných názvov v Podunajsku. In RATKOŠ, ed. *O počiatkoch slovenských dejín*. Bratislava 1965, pp. 205-252; GYÖRFFY. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft der Ungarn um die Jahrtausendwende*. Budapest 1983, pp. 57-66.

103 HOFFMANN and TÓTH, A nyelvi és az etnikai rekonstrukció, pp. 305-306.

104 The charter uses the word “*udvornicis*” and is considered a *falsum*, which does not exclude it for the purposes of the onomastic research. MNL OL DF, sign. 208370. Transcription, see: FEJÉR, ed., *Codex diplomaticus Hungariae VII/5*, pp. 59-62; SZENTPÉTERY, ed. *Az Árpád-házi királyok okleveleinek kritikai jegyzéke. Regesta regum stirpis Arpadianae critici diplomata. I. kötet. 1001–1270*. Budapest 1923, pp. 6-7.

as only later copies of his work have survived. Simon of Kéza refers to this group of servants as “*known in their own language as udvornici*,”¹⁰⁵ which indirectly suggests a non-Hungarian origin, although the captives discussed in the chronicle’s appendix are not identified by language group. According to Péter Molnár, the *Gesta Hungarorum* can be divided into three books: the first two focus on Hun and Hungarian history, while the third addresses *adveni*, or new peoples of different ethnicities.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, he argues that, according to the chronicler, the only way Hungarians could become serfs was by refusing to take up arms during the Magyar settlement in Pannonia, whereas the origin of serfs of other ethnicities is discussed in the appendix.¹⁰⁷ Settlement-wise, the charters from the eleventh and twelfth centuries indicate at least 24 different locations inhabited by *udvornici*, though this likely represents only a fraction of the actual number. The highest concentration of these settlements can be found along the northeast coast of Lake Balaton. Of these, 10 are separate villages or settlements of varying size,¹⁰⁸ with an unspecified number of *udvornici* residing in the suburbs of Veszprém. The very same charter, previously mentioned as the first to feature *udvornici*, also references Lake Balaton for the very first time in 1055.¹⁰⁹

It is a consensus among the researchers that the placename derives from the Slavic term for this area, although Hungarian inhabitants used it at the time of the founding of the Tihany Abbey.¹¹⁰ Considering the Slavic root of the term used for this servile class and the chronicle’s references to captives, it is reasonable to infer that parts of this region were still inhabited by a non-Hungarian, likely Slavic, population. The northern shore of the lake, a medieval floodplain, contained settlements built on elevated areas safe from regular inundation. While this landscape may seem inhospitable to modern observers, Miklós Takács

105 “*quos patrio nomine udvornicos vocaverunt*.” DOMANOVSKÝ, ed., *Simonis de Keza Gesta Hungarorum*, p. 193.

106 MOLNÁR. A Magyar jobbágyság eredete Kézai Simon szerint: az értelmezés lehetőségei és zsákutcai II. In *Századok*, 2017, Vol. 151, no. 4, pp. 725-730.

107 MOLNÁR. L’origine des serfs hongrois selon Simon de Kéza: Une conception inspirée par la littérature épique française ou par le droit romain? In GYÖRKÖS and KISS, eds. “*M’en anei en Ongria*.” *Relations franco-hongroises au Moyen Âge II*. Debrecen 2017, pp. 157-186.

108 Some of the settlements merged or ceased to exist. They are as follows (present-day names): Udvary (Balatonudvari), Fyred (Balatonfüred), Zeleus (Balatonszőlős), Eurmenes (Örvenyes), Mama (Balatonfűzfő), Sondur (Sándor-pusztá, uninhabited land between Balatonfűzfő and Balatonkenese), Kensa (Balatonkenese), Chitun (today part of Balatonakarratya, northwest side towards Balatonkenese), and Zaarberin (today part of Balatonalmádi).

109 MNL OL DF, sign. 208370. Transcription, see: FEJÉR, ed., *Codex diplomaticus Hungariae VII/5*, pp. 59-62; SZENTPÉTERY, ed., *Az Árpád-házi királyok I*, pp. 6-7.

110 HOFFMANN and TÓTH, A nyelvi és az etnikai rekonstrukció, pp. 260-273.

compared the importance of these marshlands to the forested regions of Western Europe.¹¹¹ The role of *udvornici* as a court servile stratum required access to a road network to function in the role of a supplier. As Katalin Szende noted, one such particularly important network extended from Buda (modern Budapest) through Veszprém and along the northern side of Lake Balaton toward Rome.¹¹² Similarly, more settlements of *udvornici* can be found clustered along major road systems in the Kingdom of Hungary; for example, two villages located in present-day Bratislava, Slovakia, named Udvoř and Stara, demonstrate this pattern.¹¹³

A particularly noteworthy example is the charter of Géza I from 1075, which was also later transcribed and confirmed by Stephen II in 1124. Both documents are known presently through a transcription dating to 1217,¹¹⁴ but the references to *udvornici* are sufficiently specific to be considered fairly reliable. The charter employs a unique and otherwise unattested term to describe the location of *udvornici*. In part, this is due to the addition of the letter “h” at the beginning of the word, an anomaly not found in other charters from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, which may be attributed to scribal error. More significantly, however, the text uses the descriptive phrase “*Hudwordiensium Bissenorum*”,¹¹⁵ implying a Pecheneg origin of the population. This represents the only known instance in which a group of *udvornici* is explicitly associated with a particular ethnic origin in charter evidence. Commonly, only the affiliation to the king, church, or county is referred to in connection with this social group. As Zoltán Kordé has argued, the second half of the tenth century provides a plausible timeframe for the settlement of Pechenegs in the Kingdom of Hungary.¹¹⁶ The identification of these *udvornici* as Pechenegs in origin is therefore not implausible and supports the broader hypothesis of a non-Hungarian origin for the members of this servile stratum, though, in this case, not of Slavic descent. The need to distinguish this particular settlement from other villages of *udvornici* suggests a deviation

111 TAKÁCS. The importance of water in the life of the rural settlements of Medieval Hungary. In KLÁPŠTĚ, ed. *Památky archeologické. Supplementum 17. Ruralia V. Water Management in Medieval Rural Economy I*. Praha 2005, pp. 222-232.

112 SZENDE. Towns along the way. Changing patterns of long-distance trade and the urban network of medieval Hungary. In HOUBEN and TOOMASPOEG, eds. *Towns and Communication. Volume 2. Communication between Towns*. Lecce 2011, pp. 161-225.

113 Both are mentioned in the charter from 1138. MNL OL DF, sign. 286216; Transcription, see: MARSINA, *Codex Diplomaticus I*, pp. 75-77, n. 78.

114 MNL OL DF, sign. 235915; Edited, see: FEJÉR, ed., *Codex diplomaticus Hungariae I*, pp. 428-439; MARSINA, ed., *Codex Diplomaticus I*, pp. 53-58, n. 58.

115 Present-day Bešeňov, Slovakia.

116 KORDÉ. A Magyarországi besenyők az Árpád-korban. In MAKK, ed. *Acta Universitatis Szegediensis de Attila József nominatae. Acta Historica. Tomus XC*. Szeged 1990, pp. 3-22.

from the standard organisation of this group. This raises important questions regarding the integration of Pechenegs in the court-specific servant group as well as potential differences between them and other members of the stratum.

Considering the geopolitical conditions of tenth-century Pannonia, the Magyar raids and slave trade conducted prior to their settlement in the region,¹¹⁷ as well as the Slavic root of the term in question and the documented areas of settlement of *udvornici*, it can be argued that the bulk of this social stratum may have been of Slavic origin. The continued use of a loanword rather than a Latin equivalent, even in the late thirteenth century, is not difficult to explain. There appears to have been no suitable Latin term capable of fully capturing the specific position and function of the *udvornici*, as this servile group seems to be specific to the Kingdom of Hungary and its courtly system. By contrast, *dusnici*,¹¹⁸ another group of servants with a distinct name of Slavic origin can be correlated with several Latin terms, as analogous social strata existed across Christian medieval societies in Western and Central Europe.¹¹⁹ This comparison further underscores the distinctive character of the *udvornici* within the Hungarian socio-legal framework.

Conclusion

Analysis of the final paragraphs of *Gesta Hungarorum* by Simon of Kéza confirms that further research into the servile class named *udvornici* is warranted to confront older, and in some cases, outdated narratives. The subjects of freedom, slavery, and social stratification in the Kingdom of Hungary during the rule of the Árpád dynasty are closely reflected in the question of this group's social standing.

Given the limited reliability of the narrative tradition regarding their origin, this study has demonstrated the necessity of confronting such accounts with contemporaneous legal and diplomatic sources. The comparison with early Hungarian law codes and surviving charters suggests that the *udvornici* cannot

117 FONTAINE, *Slave Trading*, pp. 124-128.

118 This exact term is largely known to us from primary sources from the thirteenth century; the word is of distinct Slavic origin. Along with *dusnici*, the Latin terms *exequiales* and *obsequiatores* were used. See: MELICH. Szláv jövevényszavaink. In *Nyelvtudományi Közlemények*, 1904, Vol. XXXIV, no. 2, pp. 204-207; ÁSBÓTH. Szlávság a magyar keresztény terminológiában. In *Nyelvtudományi Közlemények*, 1884, Vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 378-380; In comparison, the term *udvornici* was in use from the eleventh century and without Latin equivalents. Charters preserved in original condition from the eleventh and twelfth centuries: MNL OL DL, sign. 11; MNL OL DF, sign. 201636, 206817, 208372, 248762.

119 See: KUČERA, *State a články*, pp. 182-185; HUDÁČEK. Záušné donácie (pro anima) v Uhorsku v 11. storočí (Úvod do problematiky). In HLAVÁČKOVÁ and LYŠÁ, eds. *Smrt' v stredoveku*. Bratislava 2024, pp. 129-153.

be understood merely as descendants of war captives, as implied by Simon of Kéza, but rather as a distinct and legally defined social stratum whose status had already been shaped by the reign of Saint Stephen and further developed under his successors. Their position within society, while often described as semi-free, reveals a far more complex reality. The *udvornici* were subject to specific legal regulations, could appeal to higher judicial authorities such as the palatine, and, in certain cases, exercised limited property rights. These characteristics distinguish them from both fully unfree *servi* and the free population, placing them within a differentiated framework of dependency tied closely to royal and ecclesiastical administration.

At the same time, the study has shown that the terminology itself, including its likely Slavic linguistic background and its development in written sources, reflects broader processes of cultural and social interaction within the early medieval Kingdom of Hungary. While the precise origin of the term remains unresolved, its consistent use suggests the existence of a social category tailored to the institutional and economic needs of the court-based system. Although previously treated as a marginal or sufficiently explored topic, this study demonstrates the potential to significantly expand the understanding of the social structure of the Kingdom of Hungary through focused research on the *udvornici*. With over two hundred charters issued between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries relating to this group and only a fraction of them systematically analysed, it is evident that the subject has not yet been exhausted. Furthermore, a comparative analysis with similar dependent strata in other Central European kingdoms may provide valuable insight into differing models of social organisation, particularly regarding servile populations and their integration into courtly and administrative systems.

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