



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Review of Kálnoky, N. (2020) The Szekler Nation and Medieval Hungary: Politics, Law and Identity on the Frontier

Rosu, F.

Citation

Rosu, F. (2021). Review of Kálnoky, N. (2020) The Szekler Nation and Medieval Hungary: Politics, Law and Identity on the Frontier. *Central European History*, 54(3), 530-531. doi:10.1017/S0008938921001175

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law \(Amendment Taverne\)](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3249820>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

The Szekler Nation and Medieval Hungary: Politics, Law and Identity on the Frontier. By Nathalie Kálnoky. Translated from the French by Farkas Kálnoky. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. Pp. 264. Cloth £85.00. ISBN 978-1788314824.

In the scholarship currently available in English on Transylvanian history, the medieval period is almost absent, while detailed research on the groups that made up Transylvania's diverse population and were part of its decision-making bodies, such as the Saxons and the Szeklers, is lacking entirely. The recent translation into English of Nathalie Kálnoky's 2004 dissertation on the legal structures of the Szekler community in medieval Hungary is therefore a sorely needed addition to the existing literature; it also fills a gap in the more specialized world of Hungarian-language scholarship, as the last publication on medieval Szekler law dates from 1942 and is more narrowly focused on aspects of private law. Kálnoky's work brings to light the politics, institutions, laws, and juridical practices of Szekler society between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, while also offering a much-needed overview of medieval Hungarian history and detailed discussions of scholarly debates on the early history of Transylvania—the Hungarian province where the Szeklers settled in the thirteenth century.

The book is divided into two parts: part I contains two chapters, while part II contains three. Chapter 1 discusses various theories on the origins and settlement of the Szeklers in Transylvania, and it offers a convincing refutation of the idea that the Szeklers were an ethnically defined group. Instead, Kálnoky argues that the community was probably multiethnic and that Szekler status was rather a “form of citizenship” (19). According to Kálnoky, the long-term survival of the Szeklers' peculiar legal system—despite their linguistic and religious integration into the surrounding Hungarian population—was due to the community's remote location on the southeastern border of the kingdom as well as the presence nearby of one other such peculiar group with a separate juridical, fiscal, and political identity, namely the Transylvanian Saxons (25). Chapter 2 gives an overview of the particular characteristics of the Szekler community, including its relationship with the Hungarian crown and the Transylvanian provincial authorities, its military obligations—on which its fiscal and juridical privileges were based—its relationship with the Church and royal free towns, and its internal organization on the basis of tribes and clans. Arguably, the most interesting aspect of Szekler privileges was the prohibition of royal donations and confiscations from Szekler land—including in cases of high treason, when the property of rebels would revert to their heirs or the Szekler community as a whole, instead of the crown. This remarkable privilege of the Szeklers was taken away in 1562, when a royal decree explicitly mentioned the possibility of royal confiscations in cases of treason—a threat that would promptly be put into practice in the years that followed.

Part II is the core of the book, and it is based on the author's original research on Szekler medieval customary law and its practical application. It consists of three chapters on codified law, juridical practices, and land ownership, the latter subject being intricate enough to merit a separate chapter. All three chapters are valuable inasmuch as they reveal captivating facets of this often-misunderstood group in Transylvania's history. Chapter 4, on juridical practices, is particularly enjoyable as it brings to life colorful details from trials and how sentences were carried out, which convey a sense of the day-to-day experiences of the members of this community. The distribution of juridical and military offices within the community as well as the

rules of land ownership, which combined individual and communal rights, were bewilderingly complex, and Kálnoky does a great job sifting through this fascinating material. The book ends with the royal decree of 1562, while the conclusion—written in the form of an epilogue—offers a few remarks on the gradual curtailment of the juridical and fiscal privileges of the Szeklers thereafter. The book's main argument is reiterated a few times across the chapters and is probably best expressed in the conclusion: "The more the juridical customs of the Szeklers came under pressure . . . the more the community was intent to protect them by consignment to writing . . . [which] served to accentuate the community's consciousness of its particularism." (171)

The book includes a number of useful annexes: a glossary, two translated resolutions from 1505 and 1506, a chronology, and a complete list of Szekler villages with their Hungarian, German, and Romanian names. The index includes personal and place names as well as topics, and the bibliography has a supplement directed at readers of English and French. The book also includes numerous tables and diagrams, which are particularly helpful as they illustrate the more complex themes discussed in the book, such as inheritance rules.

Like all works of high complexity, this book contains a few points that could have been stronger. The English translation from the original French is generally of high quality, although the occasional unclear sentence and French spelling of proper nouns can still be found in the text. A few isolated typos in the years of some voivodes' reigns (for instance István Báthory, 1571–1575) may create some confusion, and a few lyrical remarks about the character and fate of the Szeklers perhaps could have been avoided. In the introduction, the reader would have benefited from a clearer discussion of the state and fate of the original archival material on which this work is based, and a few of the digressions into historiographical debates are occasionally muddled by unnecessary details. More importantly, the book could have benefited from being placed in a wider European context, which would have made its relevance easier to grasp for readers who are not particularly familiar with Transylvania. The Szeklers were not the only community in medieval and early modern Europe to maintain a separate legal system within a larger political unit, and occasional references to other such groups (for instance the Jewish community in Poland-Lithuania) would have given more depth to the work. However, these weaker points do not subtract from the value of Kálnoky's book, which will likely remain the reference work on medieval Szekler law for some time to come.

FELICIA ROȘU

LEIDEN UNIVERSITY

doi:10.1017/S0008938921001175

Associative Political Culture in the Holy Roman Empire: Upper Germany, 1346–1521. By Duncan Hardy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xvii + 302. Cloth £79.00. ISBN 978-0198827252.

In this engaging, perceptive, and at times iconoclastic study, Duncan Hardy takes a fresh look at the Holy Roman Empire at the close of the Middle Ages. Rather than the consolidation of territories, embarkment on a *Sonderweg*, or an entrenched dualism between king and the emerging German nation, he perceives interconnected components operating in accordance