



The Public Defence
of the Doctoral Thesis in Medieval Studies

by
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on

RELIGIOUS REPRESENTATIONS ON STOVE TILES
FROM THE MEDIEVAL KINGDOM OF HUNGARY

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Nádor Street 9, Budapest

Examination Committee

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Abstract

This dissertation, focusing on fourteenth- to sixteenth-century stove tiles with religious representations from medieval Hungary, aims at discovering the inner mechanisms of tile production, use, and reception. It uses a two-fold approach. Both the transmission of motifs on tiles and the possible functions of such representations in their contexts of use constitute the red threads of research. Despite the fact that medieval stove tiles have been discovered in large numbers in Hungary, there is still no general perspective on how these items were produced, copied, and displayed; what made people prefer tiles decorated with certain motifs and what the functions of these images were is unknown. Attempting to formulate the answers to such questions, I employ a specific interdisciplinary methodology dictated by the nature of the source material.

This is the first time that a catalogue recording tiles from the entire medieval Kingdom of Hungary has been compiled and analyzed. The research is also new in its focus on the religious tiles from the region and in the visual and cultural approach. It contributes to the English terminology of the topic, since most research on stove tiles has been done in German or in the numerous national languages in the regions with medieval stove tile use.

According to the present state of the discovery and publication of stove tiles, the catalogue comprises 389 entries of tiles with religious representations from fourteenth to sixteenth century Hungary. Considering also the available data on the actual number of tiles that can be reconstructed on the base of discovered fragments, I discuss here a group of over 650 individual items. Most are entire tiles or tile fragments, but the group also includes eight molds, seven made of clay and one, exceptionally, made of stone.

The material analyzed reveals the great variety of religious representations on stove tiles in Hungary. There are over 100 different iconographic scenes depicted on these items, and even more numerous identifiable holy characters from the Old and the New Testament or taken from the legends of the saints, besides religious symbols (the Agnus Dei, the Pelican in her Piety) and signs (crosses). Some of the motifs were popular enough to be copied and re-copied. I have identified over 40 groups of directly related tiles from small areas or across provinces, and sometimes with analogies outside the borders of the kingdom. As for the sites containing tiles with religious representations, almost 160 contexts of discovery are discussed, ranging from royal palaces, castles owned by magnates, fortifications, cities and towns, village houses, workshops, and religious contexts. The most numerous are the castles, fortifications, and manor houses (representing 40%), then the urban contexts (20%), and villages (3%). 12% of the find sites are religious, monasteries and churches, and they are analyzed separately because they are more valuable for the interpreting possible functions of images on tiles. Unfortunately, there is a significant proportion of unknown places of discovery, in the case of stray finds or tiles from museum collection which do not benefit from any data on their places of discovery (22%).

Very few tile-producing workshops have been excavated in Hungary, and in most cases their existence and location is indicated by the distribution of tiles with similar characteristics in certain areas, by the discovery of molds, and by large numbers of tiles discovered on single sites. Some of the religious tiles in this group were probably produced by royal workshops in Buda, unattested by documents or by archaeological research, but

probably located somewhere in the capital of the kingdom and working mostly for the needs of the royal palace. The largest medieval tile-production center is located in Northern Hungary, in Banská Bystrica. Two workshops have been archaeologically excavated in this prosperous mining town, and the existence of a third is suggested by other numerous tiles with similar technical and stylistic characteristics. One knows that even in this case some tiles were copied from originals in Buda, proof of connections between tile-producing loci in the kingdom. Another workshop benefiting from archaeological evidence and producing religious tiles besides tiles with other representations and pottery is located in Transylvania, in Feldioara. It seems that its products did not enjoy great popularity, since most of them are unique and were only discovered on this site. Other religious tiles discussed here were created by urban or popular workshops, like those probably located in Cristuru Secuiesc (in the Szekler region of Transylvania), those from Nova Ves (in Slavonia, excavated archaeologically), the workshop in Cluj (Transylvania, also excavated) or those active in Transdanubia (around Lake Balaton). Sometimes the discovery of molds indicates the existence of workshops, as in Varaždin. Tiles imprinted with molds there have been discovered in near-by Ružica and the distant capital, Buda, indicating that motifs circulated (also) through the transmission of molds between workshops. Molds discovered in monasteries indicate that temporary workshops might have existed for the completion of certain commissions, such as the building of tile stoves in monastic complexes (see for example the mold found in the ruins of the Franciscan cloister in Slovenská Ľupča). It is certain that many more workshops functioned in medieval Hungary, considering the great number of tile discoveries. More than 30 sites with pottery workshops and kilns have been excavated, but there is little information on how many of them also produced stove tiles.

One of the aims of this research is to identify the ways in which tile motifs were copied and transmitted. Analyzed here mostly from an iconographic perspective, the numerous cases when similar motifs have been found on tiles in different locations only indicate groups of directly related tiles and the distances between their places of discovery. There are 41 groups of directly related tiles among those included in the present analysis, each containing between 2 and 6 tiles with similar or even identical representations. The minimum distance that motifs traveled is of a few kilometers, while the maximum reached 650 km. Considering the maximum distance in the case of directly related groups composed of more than 2 tiles, the motifs circulated on average 200 km. Most of the time, such groups were located in the same province (25). Sometimes identical tiles, or molds and tiles created from them, were found in different locations inside the same settlements, such as in Cluj, Cristuru Secuiesc, Banská Bystrica, and Varaždin. Other times the same motifs were found in very restricted areas, such as St. George produced by Transdanubian workshops, found in locations around Lake Balaton no further than 35 or 50 km apart and villages from southeastern Transylvania, from the Szekler area, probably produced in the workshops in Cristuru Secuiesc. Most sites are found in the same area, at distances between 100 and 300 km. But there are also 16 cases when directly related tiles were found in different regions of medieval Hungary. Tiles from Buda were copied and used in Transylvania, Northern Hungary, and Slavonia. Other tiles were used in distant and very different contexts, such as a representation of St. George found both in Mihăileni (Transylvania) and Kľaštorskó (Northern Hungary), 640 km. away. The representation of Ladislav on horseback was found in Transylvania and Central Hungary on

several sites, the maximum distance between them being of 300 km. Jephthah is also a popular motif, being found in Central and Northern Hungary, on sites at most 248 km away. Other tiles with religious representations from Hungary have analogies outside the borders of the kingdom, in the Swiss area, Bohemia, Carinthia, and Austria.

The richest site, from the point of view of motif transmission, is the castle of Ružica, in Slavonia. 7 of the religious motifs decorating the interiors refurnished with heating stoves in the second half of the fifteenth century by Nicholas of Ilok, one of the most important magnates of Hungary. Representations of the Pelican in her Piety, St. George, and an unidentified holy bishop have analogies in Buda, situated at a distance of ca. 650 km. A fragment decorated with the image of Archangel Michael has an analogy in the royal castle of Viségrad (345 km away). Two other tiles found in the castle, depicting Adam and Eve by the Tree of Knowledge and their Banishment from Eden, have good analogies among the tiles produced for St. Stephen's cathedral in Vienna (ca. 450 km away). A crown tile decorated with the image of St. George on foot slaying the dragon has several analogies in Slavonia and in neighboring Carinthia, part of Austria at the time. The furthest site of discovery of such an analogy is in Celje, 650 km away. Considering the variety of motifs copied and the long distances from where they were brought, Nicholas of Ilok seems to have made the most effort to embellish his stove tiles. He could almost be considered a collector of tiles.

The exact means of transmission of motifs on tiles remains unknown. The identification of indirectly-related tiles suggests that motifs or elements were copied from representations on other artistic supports, such as reliefs, manuscript illumination, and especially prints. Tiles discovered in the workshop of Feldioara contain details clearly inspired by the reliefs and corbel from the local church. A tile from St. Peter suburb of the city of Cluj, also in Transylvania, has analogies in manuscript illuminations and clay reliefs in Western Europe. Tiles dated to the time of the Reformation in particular have been inspired by prints, such as those depicting the 12 heroes of the Old Testament (among which the image of Jephthah seems to have been the most popular on stove tiles in Hungary). The analyzed tiles also indicate the use of separate molds in the creation of tiles, combining figures in various manners. Such is the case of saintly figures used in the decoration of niche tiles from Buda (afterwards copied elsewhere in the kingdom), the tiles from the castle of Făgăraș where identical figures were used in the scene of Jesus and the Samaritan woman and in a heraldic composition as supporters. Similar conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of some tiles from the castle in Diósgőr, where individual molds representing human faces are used in different combinations on crown tiles, besides imprints from what might have been metal badges.

In general, the transmission of these motifs took place among contexts of equal rank (rural around Lake Balaton, castles and fortifications in general, and monasteries). The most peculiar stylistic transmission is the one from the manor house of Racoș to the near-by castle in Făgăraș. The latter is the only case not matching the top-down or equal-level distribution of St. George motifs. When motifs circulate from upper-social contexts to lower ones, from castles to cities, for example, their quality also decreases, details are lost, open-work elements are flattened on panel tiles, and glaze can be omitted. These changes are most visible in the research of tiles decorated with the knight in tournament, but also some of the religious representations, such as St. George. An

open-work semi-cylindrical tile depicting the knightly saint was found in the ruins of the Carthusian monastery in Kľaštorskó in Northern Hungary and a related panel tile in the village of Mihăileni, in Transylvania, 640 kilometers away. I have also noticed, as a general trend, that the majority of related tiles are dated to the end of the fifteenth century and the first part of the sixteen century, indicating an increased circulation of tiles, tile molds, drawings, or pottery masters by that time.

Stove tiles initially spread in Europe along the waves of German colonization and on the commercial routes from German areas to Central and Eastern Europe. In Hungary, besides royal and noble palaces and fortifications, the sites richest in stove tiles were the German settlements of Northern Hungary and Transylvania. But the use and production of tile stoves spread among all ethnic groups, just as it did for example in neighboring Moldavia (much less exposed to German colonization in the Middle Ages). Vernacular inscriptions on religious tiles, in Slovak, German, and Romanian, clearly indicate that tiles were produced/used in interiors used by all social and ethnic groups. One can therefore point both to an ethnic transmission of technology and motifs, and a top-down social transmission, from royal centers to those owned by magnates, the higher and lesser nobles, in cities and towns, and also in rural areas.

It becomes apparent that the distribution of tiles depended on various factors, mostly regulated by the balance between offer and demand. Numerous tiles have been used in the areas around the large production centers, their activity answering a need but also creating and supporting tile stove use. Restricted availability of such items determined in some cases the use of low-quality tiles even in castles. Popular variants of St. George slaying the dragon appeared on tiles used in the region of Lake Balaton in several village houses and also a fortification, a castle, and a Benedictine monastery. The nobles wanted the best, the most fashionable and most knightly depictions of in their interiors but sometimes had to use what was available on the local market.

By comparing the distribution of knight-in-tournament tiles and religious tiles as a group, I have concluded that besides technical considerations, the images decorating tiles also contributed to their distribution. The fact that image mattered is confirmed by the changes in tile iconography triggered in the sixteenth century by the Reformation. In 1553 and 1551 (or 1571) tiles inspired by Reformation prints were already in use in the kingdom. Several characteristics of the tiles in this period indicate the receptivity of tile iconography to Protestant ideas and fashion: fewer religious representations in general, an increased proportion of Old Testament scenes and scenes from the life of Christ, more numerous inscriptions added on tiles (including some in vernacular languages), and prints more often used as models. The only longer texts come from the end of the period analyzed, in the second half of the sixteenth century. The lettering changes from Gothic minuscule to classical, antique capitals. Inscribed years became more frequent, inscriptions appeared in vernaculars (German in Latin letters and Romanian in Cyrillic), and the first initials of potters were added to tiles. The taste for Antiquity extends to the way writing is included in the image. In one case the inscription appears in a Roman *tabula ansata*. They are good illustrations of the changes introduced by the Reformation in the field of decorative arts.

The above mentioned trends in tile iconography confirm that, at least to some degree, image did matter. Some motifs and holy characters were more popular than others on tiles, and this cannot be reduced to a matter

of “fashion”. Images that are fashionable become so because they fulfill certain functions. The possible reception and function of representations on stove tiles is an intricate topic because it does not benefit from direct, written sources, but has to be inferred from indirect information such as context, depiction on neighboring tiles in the composition of stoves, symbolism, etc. What is certain is that such images were liable to various interpretations, depending on their viewers and their context of use. The tiles also fulfilled more functions at the same time, that of heating the interior spaces, decorating interiors, and transmitting certain information on the owners.

Besides the embedded functional and decorative functions, representations on tiles could have indicated the personal or collective devotion of the owners, they could have indicated their loyalties or allegiance, or their identity (especially in the case of heraldic representations, but also through the choice of certain saints, certain inscriptions, or scenes reflecting certain beliefs). The tiles were also objects of prestige, showing the social status of the owners. In the case of tiles copied from upper social contexts, or good-quality tiles, with tracery and polychrome glazing, or of fashionable tiles recently entering fashion, the stoves could have constituted items of prestige and display. These images, especially the narrative ones, were probably used as means of visual literacy and as aids to memory. The Reformation tiles were probably also used for religious propaganda. A less discussed function of representations on stove tiles is that of offering supernatural protection. All religious images were believed to have an apotropaic function, and in some cases they were used together tiles bearing magic symbols and representations. The few reconstructed stove ensembles reveal the fact that religious representations were used besides lay, heraldic, and even magical symbols.

Comparing the occurrence of saints on tiles and their attested cults from other types of sources in Hungary, I have pointed to both similarities and differences. Some saints are almost as popular on tiles and as church patronia, such as St. George, the Virgin, or St. Peter. But on the level of the entire medieval Hungary, some holy persons were much more popular on stove tiles: St. Ladislav, St. Catherine, and St. Barbara. The comparison must be detailed, taking into consideration both the nature of stove tiles as functional and decorative objects and the popular manifestations of such cults and their presence in various forms of popular culture and mentality. Future studies have to accomplish the task on a case-to-case basis, comparing the distribution of tiles with certain saints and the spread of their cult on smaller areas, such as medieval counties, in order to show to which degree religious tiles reflect popular cults.

Future research will be much eased by the creation of an online database of tiles in which all interested (archaeologists, art historians, historians, and others) will be able to find, add, and edit the entries and post links to their studies on the topic. This tool is essential since, as shown in this dissertation, tiles are published in numerous languages. Its role is even more important since tiles receive increasing attention and continue to be discovered during archaeological research; museographers would also be able to continue processing the items kept in museum collections across Central and Eastern Europe. A tile database is only the first step in the valorization of this exceptional source material for the European Late Middle Ages, which can be used to increase knowledge on various aspects of daily life and religiosity, as tentatively indicated here.

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