

Modelling Christianisation: A Geospatial Analysis of the Archaeological Data on the Rural Church Network of Hungary in the 11th–12th Centuries. By Mária Vargha.

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Bernát Rác 

Department of Medieval Studies, Central European University; Quellenstraße 51, 1100 Vienna, Austria; raczbernat@gmail.com

This geospatial-archaeological work is a major contribution to different fields. It greatly enhances our understanding of the process of Christianisation in East Central Europe. It is a groundbreaking work because it examines a crucial development that had only been looked at through historical sources before, which, of course, in this context, are very limited and can often be misleading. There are, of course, sources about East Central Europe in the tenth and eleventh, and way more in the twelfth century, but these have become extensively used even if they reflect only part of the reality and are often centred on particular layers of society which represented only a small part of the population. Mária Vargha has used the burial sites, churches, monasteries, and secular centres, their context, and interrelation to trace the Christianisation process. The data retrieved from hundreds of sites and thousands of burials proved to be a very valuable source for the analysis of the Christianisation of the Kingdom of Hungary. Many volumes have dealt with this topic, but often, these were very archaeological texts limited to a certain site, comparison of sites, or maybe a smaller region, and only in rare cases did such investigations go beyond limited areas, for obvious reasons: the quantity of the data. So far, there has been a lack of critical discussion of the archaeological records, and no one has provided a deeper understanding of the transition that happened between the tenth and the twelfth centuries. A major issue has been the lack of methodology, the ability and need to deal with big data, and the separation of archaeology and history. Vargha has used the relatively raw information from these works, mainly archaeological information from unpublished excavations or data from field-walking, and created a broader picture that transmits important information not only to archaeologists but to anyone wanting to know about the Christianisation of a new East

Central European state and the peculiarities of the Kingdom of Hungary. Separately, such sites do not offer much to archaeologists, and thus, their study often does not go beyond an excavation report. However, when examined together, their comparative geospatial analysis with known centres and the landscape offers much more than that—they provide an excellent source base to investigate Christianisation and state-formation processes. The results of the analysis of these sites are compared to the theories of the historical reconstruction of the same developments. Vargha also notes that there is a great dividing line in the scholarship whereby some people deal only with Conquest-period pagan tombs, and others research only Christian cemeteries (p. 19). Many of the sites are mixed, which creates problems in understanding them. Fortunately, Vargha's approach avoids the many pitfalls of such projects by putting aside individual conversions and looking at institutionalisation. This way, she has been able to contextualise these and the different types of burials and their relationship to different types of power centres. The book has several intriguing maps, which reflect the spatial network analysed in the text.

Regarding these maps, it must be mentioned that there is a lack of data from some places and an abundance of data when one or several archaeologists dealt with certain areas for years and created a solid chronology. The lack or abundance of data are handled very well because, in many cases, the author explains why something is likely and why something is not using other comparisons and historical data. It should also be emphasised that these maps are approximate and thus not definitive.

The book is also an English-language handbook for minor topics connected to the main line of investigation. It explores and summarises topics such as the very interesting question of the baptism of the population in Hungary in the eleventh century (pp. 12–5). It provides an impressive and well-written historiographic overview of different issues connected to burials and the many difficulties and often problematic terminology that have accompanied the scholarship on the topic of cemeteries in this transitional age (esp. pp. 12–9, 23).

The extensive historiographical section is followed by a part that deals with innovative methods that have not really been used in the field or topic, as is made evident from the historiographic section. In the very detailed methodological section, Vargha provides an intriguing discussion on archaeologists and big data research and addresses the problems and the benefits of such research, which, as she writes, is, or was, not often favoured by archaeologists. Her discussion and introduction on geospatial big data are also worth consideration not only by archaeologists but also by historians and even art historians. Vargha's work is the first to be dedicated to big data in a medieval East Central European context.

The main analytical section (the fourth chapter) is a very compact commentary on the maps, which delivers the evidence, analyses it, and presents concise and thoughtful

interpretations. These are texts that help to understand what stands behind the maps. Finally, towards the end, before the general conclusion, there is a section that compares the historical theories and her material. Among the important results and reinterpretation based on her analysis, I will mention a few here: there is a famous law from King Stephen that ordered the building of a church for every ten villages; this became a *topos*. From Vargha's analysis, it seems that even in the eleventh century, there was a very serious church-building campaign that we know of only partially, but clearly, this was a widescale process that can be observed all over the inhabited territories of the state. This was quite a stable network, even if it was looser than the twelfth-century one. In sources, the pagan revolts seem much more important, but in reality, there is not much indication of these, especially when eleventh- and twelfth-century church networks are compared, and so far, no attempt has demonstrated the visibility of these in the archaeological sources (p. 67). The author makes several important observations about the relation of castles, monasteries, and churches that contribute greatly to our understanding of state formation and Christianisation from multiple perspectives (see the relevant sections for each century and a summary: pp. 101–4). In conclusion, the main points about the relations between sites such as field cemeteries and churches or the location of monasteries and remarks made earlier are restated in a clear and succinct manner. Finally, the conclusion ends with thoughtful observations on the nature of institutionalised Christianity (pp. 103–4).

Overall, the book is easily readable and enjoyable, with a very good narrative flow, even for non-specialist medievalists. In some cases, unexpected but fascinating discussions are presented about research methodology, for example, in the case of contemporary ideologically motivated research and the issues with the dominance of the Conquest Period and the damage caused by its research to the remains of later periods (p. 18). What could be identified as a shortcoming of the book is that the maps often portray extensively only the territories of modern-day Hungary and that often, even then, the results are approximate, gathered from the available data, often from reports. The lack is not attributable to the author but rather to the problems of scholarship and methodology, for example, the lack of the recognition of eleventh-, twelfth-, and thirteenth-century ceramics (p. 54). I think it is also important to emphasise that, in the future, greater regional and interregional collaboration is needed for the creation of such works since, in many cases, the flow of information is very much limited by linguistic borders, as can be seen in some of the maps where even inside the former Kingdom of Hungary geographical limitations had to be defined because of the lack of the proficient analysis of such sites.

