

Migration and Elites

The Formation of Elites in the Principality of Transylvania*

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Abstract. This study examines the role and impact of migration on the formation and composition of the elite in the newly established Principality of Transylvania between 1556 and 1586, utilizing a prosopographical database compiled through extensive archival research. The new state was open to nobles fleeing the Ottoman conquest, as well as to those dissatisfied with Habsburg policies, offering peace, political prospects, and opportunities for career advancement in both government and military roles. Consequently, nearly 60 percent of the elite were newcomers, two-thirds of whom were migrant nobles, while one-third rose through social mobility. Characterized by smaller wealth, limited networks, and a tendency toward greater agility and risk-taking, the new elite were highly vulnerable. Their integration was hindered by the old elite's reluctance to form dynastic ties. Only about 30 percent of the new families that entered the elite managed to maintain their positions long-term, across multiple generations, while a strikingly high number experienced only one or two generations of elite status. The analysis underscores the precarious nature of elite integration in early modern Transylvania and the complex dynamics of social mobility within a newly established state.

Keywords: migration of elites, Principality of Transylvania, refugee, integration, social mobility, prosopographical analysis

International background of research on noble migration

The recent upsurge in migration research has led to a renewed interest in new approaches to historical migrations. Previously, experts in the field had focused on migration as a historical and social phenomenon, concentrating mainly on the demonstration and analysis of migratory movements caused by unbearable situations, such as wars, religious persecution, and poverty. Consequently, research primarily centred on the mass migration of disadvantaged, mostly poorer groups, and

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its complex causes and multiple effects. However, the migration of elites has not escaped the attention of researchers, and by the early 2000s, two main areas of focus had emerged regarding their mobilization. One significant area of study was forced migration in their case as well. The changes in French politics between 1789 and 1815, the national movements of 1848, and the events of the 1860s led to the mass emigration of elites, including deposed rulers and their supporters, patriots, and liberal thinkers.¹ The forced mobilization of elites was such a dominant phenomenon in the nineteenth century that this period is also known as the Century of Exiles.²

Another area where the migration of elites was studied was temporary intellectual mobility. The traditions of *peregrinatio academica* and the grand tours by young nobles of the elite go back to the Late Middle Ages, when they served as a means for young aristocrats to travel for a limited time and gain experience before embarking on their socially determined duties. It is only recently that this type of mobility has begun to be defined and methodologically analysed as a migration process.³ Since the mid-2010s, the migration of early modern elites has been a particularly topical issue in international historical research. Naturally, in the case of the elites as well, the most researched area has been forced emigration due to religious conflicts. Additionally, the voluntary migrations of elites have garnered more attention, with analyses focusing on the attraction and pull of noble courts, state administrations, and the military, as well as on the previously mentioned noble migrations. Alongside social-historical approaches, its significance within the history of ideas has come into focus, and historical identity studies have also started to explore the subject.

Several European history workshops have set goals to either research elites in specific regions or examine a particular detail. The most ambitious project is linked to French historians: in 2018, Laurent Bourquin, Olivier Chaline, Michel Figeac, and Martin Wrede organized the conference *Noblesses en exil: Les migrations nobiliaires entre la France, l'Empire et l'Europe centrale* in Le Mans. This event was specifically conceived as a first step towards large-scale migration research.⁴ Long-term research focusing on the nobility of Central and Eastern Europe was organized around four main themes: 1) the geographical or social and political routes of exile, 2) the cross-roads where refugees came into contact with each other and had the opportunity to form their own networks, 3) the processes of integration, and 4) the impact of exile on the cultural and religious identity of refugees.⁵

1 Freitag, ed., *Exiles from European Revolutions*.

2 Aprile and Diaz, eds, *Banished: Traveling the Roads of Exile*, 6.

3 Asche, "Peregrinatio academica in Europa."

4 The conference papers have been published: Bourquin et al., eds, *Noblesses en exil*.

5 The objectives are outlined in the conference programme: <https://noblessesenexil.sciencesconf.org/> (accessed: 15 July 2024).

Another exciting new direction of research was opened up by Elisabeth Gruber and Josef Löffler's project in Salzburg (2016–2018) on Material Objects of Noble Memory in Times of Religiosity and Migration 1500–1800. This project examined the religious-political dimensions of the Austrian nobility's emigration from the perspective of material culture. According to their research, objects, as mediums of memory and means of social identity, played a major role in stabilizing self-understanding, thus influencing the success or failure of integration.⁶ Another Austrian project, Ideas of Migration, Migration as an Artefact of Scholarly Thought, led by Walter Pohl, examined how thinkers, philosophers, writers, and politicians of the time, from classical antiquity to 1800, viewed migration. The research covered classical geographical migration, temporary mobility, and semi-permanent mobility. One sub-theme of the project, Elite Mobility: Grand Tour and Peregrinatio Academica, examined this temporary migration and analysed the 'ars apodemica' it gave rise to.⁷

Inspired by this research, our research group, HUN-REN-ELTE Noble Emigration and Memory (1541–1756) – Source Research and Critical Editing was founded in 2022. Our goal is to contribute to the issues listed with a complex mapping of the early modern Hungarian and Transylvanian elite's migration. Our first monographs on the subject have recently been published.⁸

The Principality of Transylvania as a destination for migration

The Principality of Transylvania represents an optimal field of study for analysing Hungarian migration, given that, despite its relatively short existence of a century and a half, this period encompasses numerous examples of voluntary and forced noble mobility, offering a rich array of case studies for investigation. It is particularly noteworthy that the country became a primary destination for migration, although its first three decades were shrouded in uncertainty: during this period, it lacked a name, international recognition, fixed borders, and a clearly defined form of government, as it was a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire. To gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, it is essential to provide a concise overview of the events that transpired.

6 Löffler, "Materielle Kultur." On the role of the transfer of things and services for social ties in exile. The example of the Austrian exile is Esther von Starhemberg in the seventeenth century, in: Löffler, "Zur Rolle des Transfers."

7 <https://www.oeaw.ac.at/en/imafo/research/historical-identity-research/projects/ideas-of-migration>, and <https://www.oeaw.ac.at/imafo/forschung/historische-identitaetsforschung/projekte/ideas-of-migration/elite-mobility-grand-tour-and-peregrinatio-academica/> (accessed: 15 July 2024).

8 Tóth, *Huszárok, határok, családok*; Virovecz, *Híres-hírhedt Balassa Menyhárt*.

In the late fifteenth century, the Habsburgs and Jagiellons competed for dominance in Central Europe, with Hungary—a middle power that included Bohemia and Croatia—being a key battleground. Their ambitions were thwarted by the rise of the Ottoman Empire, which aimed to use Hungary as a base for further expansion into Europe. In the Battle of Mohács in 1526, King Louis II and many of the Hungarian elite were killed by Sultan Suleiman's forces. Despite their victory, Suleiman did not occupy the country but looted it and left garrisons in southern forts. In the power vacuum after Mohács, two kings were elected: Szapolyai, supported by the National Party, and Ferdinand I, brother of Emperor Charles V, whose position was further strengthened by his election as king of Bohemia. Both focused more on defeating each other than addressing the Ottoman threat. By 1527, Ferdinand had pushed Szapolyai out of Hungary, leading Szapolyai to seek alliances with France and the Ottoman Empire, ultimately becoming a vassal of the latter. In 1529, Sultan Suleiman launched a campaign to restore Szapolyai's power, returning to him control over much of Hungary, including Buda. However, Suleiman failed to capture Vienna, allowing Ferdinand to retain control over Western Hungary and Croatia.⁹

From the mid-1530s, John Szapolyai sought reconciliation with the Habsburgs. This led to the Treaty of Várad in 1538, which recognized both rulers as kings of Hungary and stipulated that, after his death, Szapolyai's lands would pass to Ferdinand, even if Szapolyai had a son. The treaty also had an anti-Ottoman tone, being tied to the Holy League, an international alliance formed in early 1538. However, after Charles V's naval defeat and the collapse of the Holy League, the treaty became less viable, as both sides used it mainly to gain time and build strength. Szapolyai married Isabella of Jagiellon and had a son, John Sigismund, in 1540. Shortly after his son's birth, Szapolyai died, instructing in his will that the treaty should be disregarded, and his infant son should be crowned king of Hungary with Ottoman approval. Ferdinand I prepared to enforce the treaty by military means.¹⁰

In 1541, while focused on the Ottoman-Safavid War, Sultan Suleiman moved to annex all of Szapolyai's territories but ultimately retained only Buda and its surroundings. He ceded the eastern territories to John Sigismund, whom he adopted as his son. However, John Sigismund, along with his mother and guardians, was required to relocate to Transylvania. By 1544, Ottoman-controlled territories had expanded, dividing Hungary into three parts: the Ottomans held the central region, the eastern part became the Principality of Transylvania under Ottoman influence, and the west and north were absorbed by the Habsburg Monarchy. Under the Treaty of Várad, Ferdinand I sought to gain control of John Sigismund's lands as well. He attempted this through two secret treaties in 1541 and 1549, and later, between

9 Pálffy and Evans, *Hungary between Two Empires*, 15–61.

10 Máté, "A Literary Image of Renaissance Queenship," 43–59.

1551 and 1556, briefly reannexed Transylvania and the eastern counties. However, it became clear that this strategy was unsustainable due to Ferdinand's inability to effectively manage the region from Vienna. In the end, Ferdinand I had to relinquish control of Transylvania to John Sigismund, who returned from exile in Poland and governed the territory until his death in 1571, overcoming numerous external and internal challenges. Upon his return, many pledged their allegiance to him, threatening Ferdinand's control over Northeastern Hungary. As Sultan Selim II remained inactive on the Hungarian front, Ferdinand I, and later Maximilian II, seized the opportunity to wage war against Transylvania. They captured several fortresses and established a strong defensive line along the border.¹¹

The Treaty of Speyer (1570–1571), following the Habsburg–Ottoman Peace Treaty of Adrianople (1568), ended the war and instability in Transylvania. It clarified the borders and the legal status of both the Habsburg monarch and John Sigismund, with the King of Hungary title reserved for Emperor Maximilian II and his successors. In return, the Habsburgs recognized the sovereignty of the eastern territories, now named the Principality of Transylvania, with John Sigismund as its Prince. The treaty aimed to preserve Hungary's unity, stipulating that Transylvania would rejoin the kingdom after John Sigismund's death. However, his successor, Stephen Báthory, ignored this clause. Although Báthory secretly swore allegiance to Maximilian, he ruled independently as a sovereign prince. Báthory quickly consolidated his power in Transylvania and, in 1576, owing to his astute policies and a fortunate turn of events, was crowned king of Poland–Lithuania. His decade-long reign naturally improved the status and future prospects of the Principality of Transylvania.¹²

It is therefore evident that this region was a politically tumultuous and unstable area, characterized by Ottoman vassalage and persistent Habsburg attempts at occupation. The former Voivodeship of Transylvania, which was the core of the newly formed state, had previously served as a territory protecting Hungary's eastern borders. Consequently, little effort had been made to develop it, rendering it the poorest, most socially and culturally backward part of the country. Having to defend it against essentially nomadic warfare-style attacks, the region did not even have a modern military, always relying on cheap and easy military solutions. The fact that this underdeveloped area developed into a frequent destination for migration can be attributed to two fundamental reasons.

One key reason for migration to Transylvania was the fulfilment of mutual needs. The Ottoman conquests between 1521 and 1566 forced the population of the southern and central regions of the Kingdom of Hungary to flee in large waves,

11 Oborni, "Le Royaume des Szapolyai."

12 Barta, "The First Period of the Principality of Transylvania."

abandoning their estates and homes. While Christian-controlled areas absorbed large numbers of refugees, noble families found few opportunities to maintain their status. In Habsburg territories, their options were limited to government offices and border fortresses, which eventually became scarce. Transylvania, however, offered them more prospects, as its growing political and military infrastructure needed outside support. It not only absorbed refugees but attracted those seeking better opportunities. While the first wave consisted mainly of those displaced by the Ottomans, later arrivals were clearly driven by the pursuit of better career opportunities.¹³

The second factor contributing to Transylvania's appeal was, paradoxically, the very disadvantages discussed earlier. Although the country was a vassal of the Sultan, the great enemy of Christendom, which might have been a deterrent, this status also ensured peace. While dependence on the Ottoman Empire defined the nation's limits, it did not greatly affect the daily lives of its people. For many who had lost everything in the wars or grown weary of endless conflict, the prospect of peace in Transylvania was highly attractive. This peace extended to religious matters as well. The Catholic Church had no political power, and its structure disintegrated after 1551. The bishopric of Alba Iulia was taken over by the royal court in 1542, while the bishopric of Várad dissolved after the death of György Fráter, who had served as governor and bishop. As a result, the doctrines of the Reformation spread freely throughout the region.¹⁴

In theory, the social backwardness of the Transylvanian region might be viewed negatively. However, the settlers found an advantage in the fact that a politically and economically powerful elite was impossible to form in the former Voivodeship of Transylvania due to its role in border defence. The population consisted of various ethnic and social elements and was divided into three large units, the so-called 'nations.' In this context, however, 'nation' was not an ethnic but a legal concept. The political system was also based on the three-estate model, but unlike other parts of the kingdom, the three estates were not the clergy, the nobility, and the bourgeoisie, but rather the three nations: two distinct groups of Hungarians with different legal statuses—the Hungarian nobility and the Székelys—and the German-speaking Saxons. These three nations had united in 1437 to effectively defend themselves against a peasant uprising, and from then on, local affairs were discussed in their joint assemblies. Beyond this, there was neither significant weight nor a strong tradition of them working together politically.¹⁵

Members of the Hungarian nation in Transylvania held the same legal rights

13 Horn, "Together or Separately."

14 Barta, "The First Period of the Principality of Transylvania," 626–28.

15 Szász, "The Three Feudal »Nations« and the Ottoman Threat."

as the nobility in the Kingdom of Hungary, but their estates were smaller, and they had less power to assert their interests. The Székelys, who were responsible for defending the borders, enjoyed a broad range of privileges and immunities, allowing them to preserve for a long time the structure of their nation, rooted in blood ties. By the mid-sixteenth century, this archaic social order had begun to break down, but the emerging Székely elite was not yet significant enough to play a substantial role in the country's political leadership. The Saxons were the bourgeoisie of Transylvania; thus, it was not an attractive target for noble immigrants. In any case, the Saxons effectively barred entry, closing the gates of their cities even to native Transylvanians. Although the three nations were considered equal under the law, the Hungarian nation formed the region's political elite. Thus, a nobleman who relocated to Transylvania and received a government or military position from the ruler did not have to contend with a powerful local elite, making entry into the upper echelons of society incomparably easier than in the Kingdom of Hungary.¹⁶

The situation was different in the other part of the country, outside Transylvania, in the region known as Partium.¹⁷ In the Transtisza counties, which had been separated from the Kingdom of Hungary, the dominant power was held by a few wealthy aristocratic families. Their significance is evident from the fact that several Transylvanian princes originated from the aristocracy of the Partium. Their financial strength and political influence far exceeded that of even the most successful noble immigrants. Understandably, this region did not attract the most ambitious or affluent newcomers, but rather nobles of lesser social prestige and wealth. These individuals sought to build new lives by serving the aristocrats of the Partium. Despite the challenges, their prospects for rising to power were not entirely bleak, as the small and somewhat fragmented Transylvanian elite was quite open not only to outsiders but also to people of lower social standing.

Patterns of migration to Transylvania

Migration to Transylvania was continuous, though not uniform. When examining the pace of migration over time, distinct peaks and larger waves of movement are apparent. Following each Ottoman campaign that resulted in territorial losses—such

16 Barta, "The First Period of the Principality of Transylvania," 708–15.

17 The name Partium (from the Latin *parts*) originates from the term *dominus partium regni Hungariae*, meaning 'Lord of the Parts of Hungary,' a title bestowed upon John Sigismund in the Treaty of Speyer. This term referred to the Transtisza counties that were part of the Principality of Transylvania during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: Máramaros, Bihar, Zaránd, Közép-Szolnok, Kraszna Counties, and the province of Kővár. However, the boundaries of the Partium shifted several times, depending on the prevailing balance of power.

as those in the mid-1540s and the campaigns of 1552, 1556, and 1566—there was a significant increase in the number of noble refugees arriving in Transylvania. In 1568–1569, aristocrats dissatisfied with Habsburg policies toward Hungary arrived in stages. The early years of Stephen Báthory's reign as Prince of Transylvania also saw a notable surge in migration. Beyond the chronological perspective, it is intriguing to explore the patterns and trends that emerge when analysing both refugees and voluntary settlers, thereby shedding light on the broader dynamics of migration.¹⁸

One of the trends of migration was inspired by familial ties. An early example was the wave of Croatian migration prompted by György Fráter between 1541 and 1551. As one of the guardians of John Sigismund, Fráter seized political control of the new state and sought to establish absolute power. Faced with strong opposition, including from the widowed Queen Isabella Jagiellon herself, it was crucial for him to build a circle of loyal and trusted confidants. As was customary at the time, the foundation of this circle was his own familial network. Fráter came from a Croatian noble family that had lost its estates; his father and several brothers had perished in battles against the Ottomans, and he had been preparing for a military career before joining the clergy. As governor of Transylvania, he gathered his remaining relatives and their kin, placing them in key military, administrative, and economic positions.

This period saw the arrival of the majority of Croats who would take root in the principality, such as Gáspár Perusith, György Fráter's brother-in-law, and members of the Petrichecich, Cserepovics, Ukitevics, and Bartakovics families. Another example was a young Croatian relative raised by Fráter himself, who in Transylvania was no longer known by his original family name but as Pál Fráter de Ipp. His case illustrates that many Croats lost their original surnames, which were difficult to pronounce in Transylvania, and became known by the name 'Horváth,' indicating their origin. To distinguish between the many Horváth families, they attached a noble prefix referencing either their old or new estates. Within two or three generations, they lost their Croatian identity, although the first wave of arrivals had consciously sought to maintain ties with relatives and acquaintances left behind in Croatia, as well as those in the Kingdom of Hungary and Transylvania.¹⁹

The death of György Fráter shook the Croats' positions; some left Transylvania, but the majority continued their careers there. They or their descendants appeared among courtiers, castle captains, and military officers fighting in Livonia under Stephen Báthory. In the long term, however, only the Petrichecich Horváth family managed to integrate into the elite. The foundations for this rise were laid by Kozma Petrichecich Horváth, who began his career alongside György Fráter and eventually

18 Horn, *A hatalom pillérei*, 321–69.

19 Petrichevich-Horváth, *A Petrichevich-család általános története*, 321–29.

held several important military and economic positions before becoming a member of the twelve-member princely council, the highest governing body. Among his successors, János Petrichecich Horváth stood out, serving as head chamberlain to Prince Gabriel Bethlen, while his sister Klára was a lady-in-waiting to the wife of Prince George I Rákóczi. By the second half of the seventeenth century, the family had fallen from the ranks of the narrow elite, but they remained significant at the second tier and local levels.²⁰

Although the Croats differed from the ethnic groups of Transylvania and may have faced language barriers, they were regarded as full compatriots due to the Hungarian-Croatian personal union. Alongside them, however, the princely court of Transylvania also attracted numerous foreigners. These individuals trickled in sporadically from the Holy Roman Empire and various states of Italy. Most of them did not flee to Transylvania out of necessity but were drawn by the country's precious metal mines and the high court positions offered to them. Accordingly, they did not stay for long, viewing the opportunities in Transylvania as a stepping stone.

A prime example of career-driven migration is the figure of Giovanandrea Gromo, who served as captain of the guard for John Sigismund and arrived with a 300-strong Italian mercenary force he had recruited. During his career in Alba Iulia from 1564 to 1567, he sent reports on the political situation in Transylvania to Pope Pius V; Piero Loredan, Doge of Venice; and Cosimo I de' Medici, Duke of Florence. Partly serving John Sigismund's interests, these reports were primarily aimed at advancing Gromo's own career.²¹

The most famous Italian who fled to Transylvania out of necessity was Giorgio Biandrata. Due to his antitrinitarian views, he clashed with John Calvin, who pursued him across much of Europe. A nobleman from Saluzzo with a medical degree, Biandrata initially found refuge in Kraków, serving as the gynaecologist to Queen Bona Sforza of Poland and her daughter, Isabella Jagiellon. He later settled in Alba Iulia, where he lived for twenty-five years until his death.²²

The largest group of foreign migrants consisted of Polish nobles, who held significant power in the court of John Sigismund. The young ruler himself was maternally descended from the Jagiellonian dynasty; Sigismund I of Poland was his grandfather, and Sigismund Augustus his uncle. Since the latter had no legitimate heir, by the late 1560s, European political speculations considered John Sigismund the strongest contender for the Polish throne.

20 MNL OL Zichy Family Archives, Missiles, 3412 fasc. XXXII. 81 NB nr. 2034–2115; Directia Judeteana Cluj a Arhivelor Nationale, Archives of the Branyiczkaí Jósika Family, Fasc. 1582.

21 Gromo, "Compendium di tutto il regno posseduto," 34–75.

22 Mihály, "Giorgio Biandrata."

The Polish nobles arriving in Transylvania were also driven by the hope that they could gain an insurmountable advantage over their peers remaining in Poland by securing positions in the court of the next Polish king. The size of the Polish group in Transylvania fluctuated significantly, ranging between approximately 500 and 2,000 individuals. These Poles represented a diverse range of backgrounds in both their origin and education. The most prominent among them came from so-called senatorial families, such as Stanisław Kamieniecki and Mikołaj Zborowski. Among those arriving, there were also a large number of aspiring minor nobles and landless noble soldiers.²³ Some had completed their studies at Italian universities and began their political careers in Transylvania, while others were barely literate.

Some of the Poles had long-term plans and made a deliberate effort to integrate. They learned Hungarian and spoke it fluently, adopting the appearance and customs aligned with Transylvanian norms. The Poles who had achieved prominent positions in John Sigismund's court sought to further strengthen their status by marrying into the Transylvanian nobility. Many of the Poles stayed in Transylvania even after John Sigismund's death; however, when Stephen Báthory was elected king of Poland, they returned with him and were influential political supporters at the Kraków court. One of the most notable examples was Mikołaj Małachowski, who rose to the prestigious position of castellan of Kraków.²⁴

One of the key groups of Hungarian noble migrants consisted of military officers who arrived between 1566 and 1569 from the border fortresses of the Kingdom of Hungary. Spared from Ottoman attacks, Transylvania had not developed a battle-hardened military class, the absence of which was most apparent during the northeastern fortress wars against the Habsburgs. John Sigismund welcomed experienced military officers and actively encouraged their arrival by offering them important posts and significantly better career prospects than they had previously enjoyed. For this group, migration also meant a change in social status, enabling them or their children to enter the political elite.

Two key centres provided Transylvania with several distinguished soldiers: Gyula and the fortress of Eger, which gained fame across Europe in 1552 for successfully resisting an Ottoman siege. In the case of Gyula, seeking refuge in Transylvania was a natural course of action due to the geographical proximity and existing connections. When the fortress fell, it was clear that some of the defenders who fled would seek asylum and new opportunities within John Sigismund's territories. Among the former officers of Gyula, János Ghiczy and Tamás Thornyi achieved the most notable careers. Ghiczy served as the governor of Transylvania between 1583

23 The Polish nobles of the Transylvanian court are presented in a poetic work: Gruszczyński, *Powinności dobrego towarzystwa*, sygn. 839. mf. 481.

24 Letters written in Hungarian: MNL OL R 319, Fasc. 26, Gyeróffy Family Archive, Mf. 47518 d.

and 1588, while Thornyi became the leader of the Banate of Lugos and Karánsebes.²⁵

In 1568–1569, a group from Eger arrived in Transylvania, having voluntarily left their posts for political reasons. They formed the military wing of a noble faction opposed to the Habsburgs' Hungarian policies. Two outstanding figures in this group were Ferenc Káthay and Balázs Kamuthy. By 1569, Káthay was already one of the leaders of John Sigismund's court cavalry, and his sons also enjoyed successful careers. Mihály Káthay, one of his sons, rose to be chancellor under Stephen Bocskai. However, in the long term, the family was unable to maintain its position in the Transylvanian elite. In contrast, Balázs Kamuthy integrated so successfully that, through his sons, his family became one of Transylvania's leading families from the early seventeenth century onward.²⁶

The officers from Eger were also connected to the next wave of migrants: the aristocrats who fled from the northern and eastern parts of the Kingdom of Hungary after 1568. These aristocrats had already been working to establish connections in Transylvania from the mid-1560s. The territorial losses of 1566, the subsequent Treaty of Adrianople, and the changes in Hungarian policy under Emperor Maximilian II upon his accession led to growing dissatisfaction. This discontent was further exacerbated when Maximilian did not return the territories reclaimed from John Sigismund to their original owners, instead declaring them treasury assets. Moreover, the political and military leadership of the northeastern region was taken out of the hands of Hungarian aristocrats. Adding to their frustration, the prohibition on wine exports to Poland caused significant financial losses, as much of their income originated from such exports.

The Viennese court closely monitored the growing rapprochement between Hungary and Transylvania and ultimately deemed it treasonous. In the autumn of 1569, Emperor Maximilian II arrested two of the region's most prominent nobles: János Balassa and István Dobó, the latter being considered a national icon after his successful defence of Eger in 1552. They were accused of plotting to overthrow the emperor's rule in Hungary with Ottoman support and intending to crown John Sigismund as king of both Hungary and Transylvania. This situation prompted several politicians and high-ranking frontier officers to seek refuge in John Sigismund's realm. About a dozen prominent nobles, who had held important military and administrative positions in Hungary, emigrated to Transylvania. It was during this period that figures such as György Bocskai, the brother-in-law of Dobó and Balassa, appeared in Transylvanian political life, along with his sons, one of whom, Stephen Bocskai, would become Prince of Transylvania between 1604 and 1606.

25 MNL OL Erdélyi országos kormányhatósági levéltárak, Gyulafehérvári Káptalan Országos Levéltára, F 1 Libri Regii I. ff. 102, 105; 3. ff. 114–16; 6. ff. 231–32.

26 Horn, *Hit és hatalom*, 197–206, 214–18, 225–32.

Also noteworthy were four members of the Forgách family and László Gyulaffy, the former captain-general of Veszprém, who arrived with his entire family. The loss of these politicians was a significant blow to the Hungarian elite and had an immediate impact on the balance of power within the Transylvanian elite. John Sigismund appointed György Bocskai, Ferenc Forgách, and László Gyulaffy as councillors, while the others also received leading government and military positions. Moreover, as their Hungarian estates were confiscated by Emperor Maximilian, they received generous compensation as well.²⁷

The final wave of migration occurred after Stephen Báthory had ascended the throne. The prince sought to bring highly educated officials, who had studied in Padua and Wittenberg, into the country's governance. However, such individuals were in short supply. Only Ferenc Forgách, who had relocated in 1569, and Sándor Kendy, who had previously fallen out of the Transylvanian elite, met these high standards. Báthory appointed Forgách as his chancellor, while Kendy, through the rehabilitation of his family, was brought into the princely council. The others, carefully selected by Báthory, were invited to the country from the Kingdom of Hungary, and despite their lower social status, many were immediately placed in high governmental positions typically reserved for the elite. In this group, Márton Berzeviczy and Farkas Kovacsóczy achieved the greatest success, securing positions as councillors and chancellors. They faithfully served Báthory both in Transylvania and later in Poland.²⁸

Elites in the Principality of Transylvania (1556–1586)

The patterns of migration show that, aside from aristocratic refugees, those with the best chances of rapid integration and even joining the Transylvanian elite were individuals possessing specialized qualifications or exceptional expertise in a particular field. The knowledge capital they brought with them had its own hierarchy, offering varying advantages depending on its origin and quality. At the top were university graduates: the most prestigious were from Padua, followed by Wittenberg, and then other institutions. There was a significant shortage of highly educated humanist intellectuals relative to the demand. Their education was hindered not only by the time and cost involved but also by the lack of universities in the Hungarian and Transylvanian regions. It is not surprising, therefore, that humanists arriving in Transylvania were immediately appointed to powerful administrative positions,

27 Horn, *A hatalom pillérei*, 136–50.

28 ÖStA HHStA Ungarische Akten, Allgemeine Akten, Fasc. 82, fols. 1–4, 12–15, 18–24, 33–38, 157–164; Fasc. 83, fols. 1–4, 42–82, 39–40, 54–55, 104–105, 143–146, 168–176; Almási, *The Uses of Humanism*, 99–111.

with the most capable quickly rising to the ranks of the elite. Similarly, settlers with military experience could expect rapid advancement, continuing their careers in the court guard or as commanders of Transylvanian castles or military districts. At the lower end of the hierarchy were legal and economic professionals. Their specialized skills were sufficient to place them just below the elite. Moving up from this level was entirely dependent on the individual's additional abilities, networks, and a good measure of luck.²⁹

Noble migrants were thus able to establish themselves as politicians, diplomats, soldiers, and high-ranking officials in roles that required specialized qualifications. However, certain fields remained inaccessible to them, with some positions reserved exclusively for local aristocrats. For instance, offices associated with the imperial court, particularly the position of chief chamberlain, were restricted to members of established aristocratic families, such as the Báthorys, Apafis, Bánffys, and Csákys. Similarly, the old elite maintained its dominance over key local positions of power. Newcomers to the Transylvanian elite could not easily obtain titles such as count or Szekler chieftains, or they would receive them only after a lengthy career in Transylvania or after fully integrating into the local nobility.

The arrival of migrant nobles had a rapid and significant impact on the composition and quality of the Transylvanian elite. Between 1556 and 1586, a core group of elites emerged that continued to play a decisive role in shaping the political, economic, and cultural life of Transylvania well into the early twentieth century. While the elite did not remain entirely unchanged over the centuries, there were no substantial shifts in its composition. Instead, power dynamics shifted within the existing elite, leading to the rise or temporary marginalization of certain families. Although the elite expanded slightly, new members were no longer noble migrants from outside; rather, they were either related to the reigning ruler or ascended through internal social mobility. A prime example of this internal mobility is the rise of the Székely aristocracy. Though they could have been considered part of the elite from the outset, it was only in the latter half of the seventeenth century, after the gradual decline of their archaic social structure, that they gained the political and economic influence necessary to be fully recognized as part of the elite.

The three decades between 1556 and 1586 are therefore crucial, warranting an in-depth examination of the components and characteristics of the elite during this period. For this analysis, I use a prosopographical database that I have compiled based on about fifteen years of archival research. It contains data on more than 200 individuals.³⁰ In addition to family and career information, the database

29 Horn, "Changing Attitudes towards Study Tours."

30 The following analyses are based on this digital database. A simplified printed extract can be found in, Horn, *The Pillars of Power*, 323–71.

includes data on migration, education, wealth, culture, and patronage. The results of my research indicate that the elite of this period consisted of ninety-eight individuals, divided into two fundamentally different groups: the old aristocracy and the newly emerging elite. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between these groups: forty-one individuals were local aristocrats, while fifty-seven were newcomers to the Transylvanian elite (Figure 1).

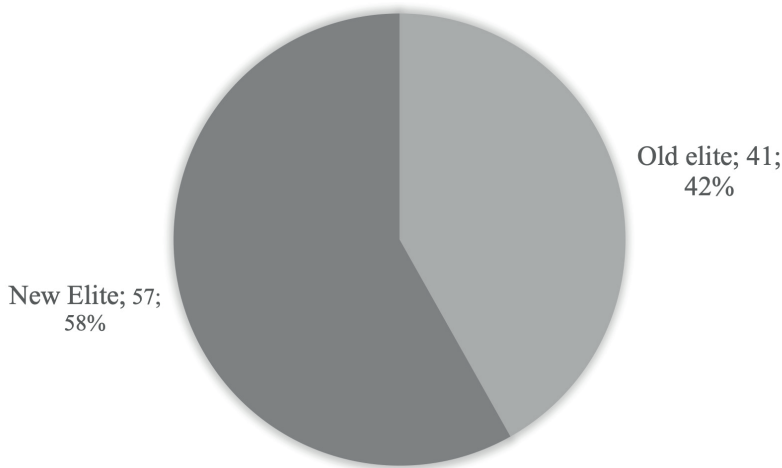


Figure 1 Composition of the Elite in Transylvania (98 people)

However, if we further categorize the newcomers to the elite, we see a more nuanced picture of social mobility. Of the fifty-seven newcomers, thirty-two were noble migrants, seven of whom were second generation, meaning that while their settled parents had not yet ascended into the elite, they enabled their children to do so. The remaining twenty-five individuals can be divided into several groups: 16 were Transylvanian nobles, and two came from bourgeois families, mostly through official or military careers. Four of them, the ‘new starters,’ were in a unique situation because their family, or they themselves, had previously belonged to the elite but had, for various reasons, fallen out. However, they managed to regain their elite status. The three foreigners who settled permanently came from Italy, the Holy Roman Empire, and Poland (Figure 2).

The dual structure of the Transylvanian elite fundamentally shaped the political landscape. The old aristocracy possessed large estates and extensive network connections, which ensured their long-term stability and relative independence from royal favour. Their loyalty, of course, could not be questioned. However, the death of a prominent family member or a temporary political conflict did not threaten the aristocratic families’ place within the elite, as their social position was organized primarily around the family’s collective strategies and resources, rather than individual

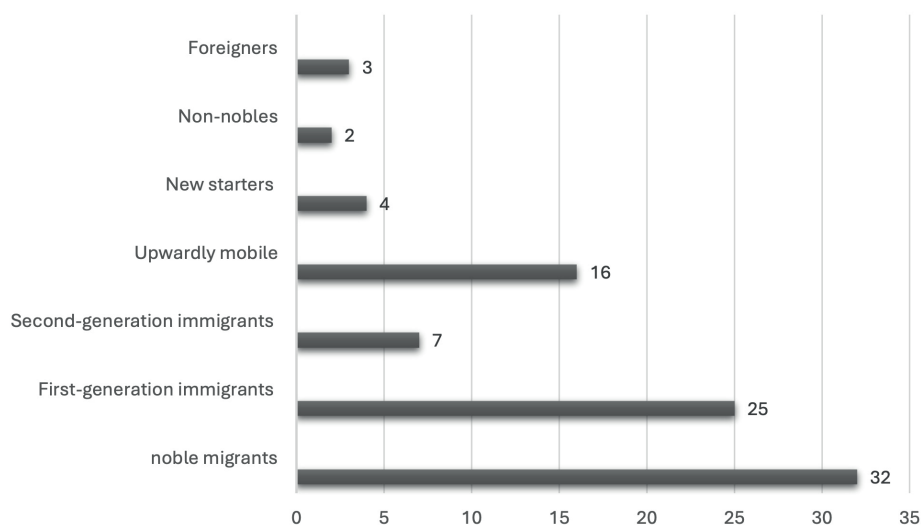


Figure 2 Composition of the new elite in Transylvania (57 people)

achievements. In contrast to the old local aristocracy, members of the new elite faced almost insurmountable disadvantages in terms of wealth and social capital, which they could only gradually overcome, over decades, through the land acquisition efforts of multiple generations. Their social advancement relied almost entirely on the favour of the ruler, who secured their political and economic rise through land grants and official appointments. This dependence deeply influenced their political behaviour: not only was absolute loyalty expected of the new elite, but it was essential for their survival, often manifesting as uncritical compliance with the ruler's will.

While members of the old aristocracy approached the ruler's decisions with more caution and prudence, the new elite's unconditional adaptability could distort the political decision-making process. For example, during the reign of John Sigismund, antitrinitarian religious ideas spread with the active collaboration of the new elite, even when the broader social and political opinion in the country resisted this radical branch of the Reformation. Similarly, in 1593–1594, at the beginning of the Long Turkish War, with the new elite's support, Sigismund Báthory was able to abruptly lead Transylvania into an alliance with Christian forces against the Ottomans, which ultimately led to severe long-term consequences for the principality. The unwavering support provided by the new elite thus strengthened the ruler's power in the short term but often undermined the country's interests in the long term, as critical reflection on political decisions was lacking.

The strategies of the new elite were primarily driven by the desire to consolidate their material positions. However, this goal did not stem from greed, or a sense of inferiority compared to the old elite. Rather, the reason lay in the fact that the

high-ranking positions held by members of the new elite came with the expectation of appropriate social representation and prestige. These objectives required the acquisition of economic resources, as only through material means could they provide the trained and sufficiently large staff needed for the role, maintain a lifestyle fitting to the position, and meet the standards set by the elite. The new elite was therefore compelled to align itself with the expectations established by the old aristocracy in every area in order to preserve its social and political influence.

The pressure to catch up had two significant consequences. First, members of the new elite were more likely to resort to corrupt practices. This was particularly evident during the reign of Stephen Báthory in Poland, especially between 1582 and 1585, when a triumvirate governed, consisting of three members of the new elite: one a migrant, one who advanced through social mobility, and one who had restarted his political career. Their rapid downfall was largely due to excessive corruption, which caused significant harm not only to the ruler but also to the country, as evidenced by the abuses involving mine leasing contracts. The second consequence was the new elite's strong propensity for risk-taking. In addition to the previously mentioned military alliance, members of the new elite were more prone to getting involved in conflicts, initiating lawsuits with uncertain outcomes, or engaging in commercial and financial ventures that often led to risky investments and loan agreements.

This inclination toward risk-taking was particularly evident among noble migrants, who were more likely to make radical decisions and drastic changes. It seems that having once made a decisive choice—albeit sometimes out of necessity—to leave their homeland, they freed themselves from certain internal restraints. This mentality was visible in Stephen Báthory's Polish court, where the young nobles of the new elite were strongly represented. It is noteworthy that it was not only loyalty to the ruler that played a role here—since it was crucial for any young noble to establish a close relationship with the prince—but also the fact that members of the new elite were generally less attached to Transylvania than the old aristocracy. While the latter tried to return to their homeland as quickly as possible, members of the new elite stayed longer at the Polish court and actively participated in the Livonian Wars against Moscow (1579–1582). For noble migrants, temporary 'country-switching' was less of a problem, and they easily adapted to new circumstances.

The new elite also showed greater flexibility in religious matters. While the old aristocracy tended to avoid religious extremism, members of the new elite were more likely to accept the teachings of antitrinitarianism. However, when the Catholicization process began under the Báthorys, it was also members of the new elite or their children that were more inclined to change their religion. Thus, the new elite followed religious changes more quickly and easily, further aligning themselves with the ruler's political direction.

This difference in mentality also manifested during times of political conflict. When facing defeat, members of the new elite usually opted for escape and temporary exile, unlike representatives of the old elite, who preferred to face imprisonment, trusting that their family members that remained uninvolved in the conflict would secure a pardon for them from the ruler. Both strategies could be successful, but these differences clearly reflected the behavioural distinctions between the new and old elite, as well as the new elite's tendency for risk-taking and adaptability.

Pathways to integration

Tracing the fate of new members of the elite, it can be confidently stated that the key to successful integration lay in the network of contacts newcomers were able to establish and how long this took them. Simple alliances of interest were swiftly formed between members of the old and new elites, but they were just as quickly dissolved. Lasting relationships, on the other hand, could only be secured through marriage. This, however, was not easy, as the old elite did not consider the newcomers suitable partners. They almost exclusively married within their own circle, and if that was not possible, they preferred members of noble families of lesser wealth and political influence, but with a long-standing tradition in Transylvania.

Figure 3 illustrates the marriage preferences of the local elite. In total, the forty-one aristocrats who dominated this period married sixty-three times. In forty-three of these marriages, they chose partners from their own caste, while in thirteen cases, they selected spouses from old but less prestigious local aristocratic families. Only on seven occasions did they deviate from this pattern: three wives came from abroad, and in two cases first-generation and, in another two cases, second-generation female members of the newly settled aristocratic families were selected (Figure 3).

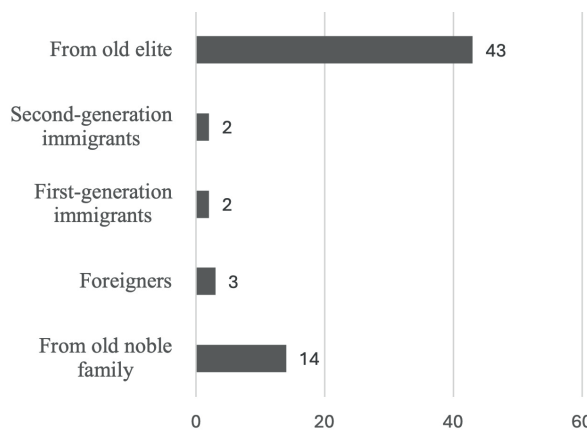


Figure 3 Marriage Preferences of the Old Elite (63 marriages)

First-generation aristocratic migrants only had a good chance of marrying into local aristocratic families if they had already lived in Transylvania for a significant period as members of the elite and were not just preparing to enter their first marriage. Even in such cases, their options were limited to aristocratic widows. The second generation of settlers, however, enjoyed much better prospects of choosing a spouse from the old elite, particularly if they were born or at least socialized in the region, and if their parents' success had already established the necessary foundations.

The reluctance of the old elite resulted in some newcomers seeking partners for themselves or their extended families among the second or third tier of the local nobility. This strategy allowed them to enter the network of the old elite's family and social circle. However, the relational capital gained from such an arrangement often meant sacrificing the financial advantages of marriage—also an important asset for an outsider—which could only be pursued by those who had already secured a stable financial foundation. Another approach for the newcomers was to arrange marriages within one another, which proved advantageous in significantly strengthening their positions of power. The downside, however, was that such marriages led to a division between old and new factions, creating cliques that greatly diminished the chances of successful integration (Figure 4).

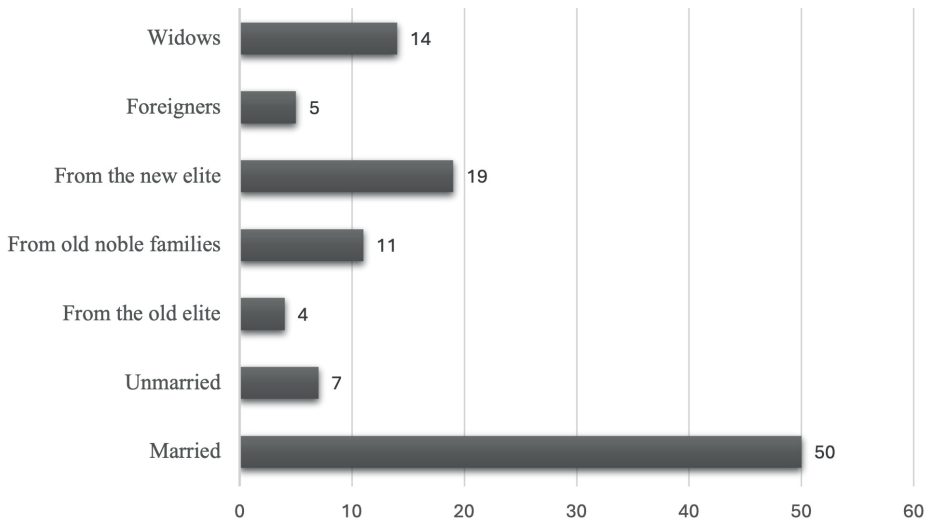


Figure 4 Marriage Preferences of the New Elite (57/65 marriages)
(Widows are highlighted separately from the other categories)

Figure 4 illustrating the marriage prospects of the new elite shows that seven out of the fifty-seven members of this group remained unmarried. Among the remaining fifty, there were sixty-five marriages. Fourteen individuals were already married when they settled in Transylvania, and in the case of twelve of the wives,

only their names and existence are known. Of the thirty-nine marriages that took place after settling in Transylvania as members of the elite, fourteen were to widows. In only four instances did they succeed in marrying into families of the old elite. Eleven wives came from less prestigious local families with reputable names. The picture is further complicated by the fact that seven of these husbands did not come to the elite from outside but from below, rising from the lower ranks. In these cases, the men who ascended to the elite chose wives from their original social class. On nineteen occasions, members of the new elite married among themselves, and five times they took foreign wives.

In addition to the old elite's practice of closed marriages, another factor made the situation difficult for newcomers. This was a peculiarity of the royal court: except for a few brief periods, there was virtually no female presence at the court before 1625, when Gabriel Bethlen entered into his second marriage, either because the prince was unwed or widowed, or because he had kept his wife far away from court. After the three-year reign of John Szapolyai's widow, Isabella Jagiellon. (1556–1559), her son, John Sigismund, remained unmarried and maintained a court composed mainly of soldiers. His successor, Stephen Báthory, was also unmarried and only wed in 1576, as his election to the Polish throne was contingent upon his marriage to Anne Jagiellon. During Stephen's absence, his brother, Kristóf Báthory, governed, and it was Kristóf's wife, ElErzsébet Bocskai, who finally established a female court. However, this court lasted only five years, and to make matters worse, the princess was often ill during this period. Between the spring of 1581 and the summer of 1595—during the childhood and youth of Sigismund Báthory—there was once again no princess at court around whom the female members of the Transylvanian elite could gather.

Thus, in the three decades covered by my research, only in the 1556–1559 and 1578–1581 periods was there a women's court in Alba Iulia, serving as a model and school for the female elite. Therefore, the most important venue for meetings and marriage arrangements was lost. The consequences of this forced situation affected not only women, but also newcomers to the elite, who were seeking prestigious partners for themselves or their children but lacked the necessary social connections. It is possible that the absence of women at the royal court also contributed to the fact that many newcomers remained unmarried or married later in life.

New members of the elite received help from an unexpected source. In 1575, Gáspár Bekes openly rebelled against Stephen Báthory and suffered a crushing defeat at the Battle of Kerelőszentpál. Many of his followers were imprisoned or forced into exile. By the late 1570s, they were gradually pardoned. Although the amnesty did not restore their confiscated properties—most of which had already been given away—it did give them the legal means to recover their ancestral estates through settlements or litigation. These stigmatized and impoverished nobles, hailing from

long-established families, soon realized the potential support they could find in the new elite. They sought to forge familial ties and marriages with its members, hoping that these alliances would help them regain positions of power and governance and recover their estates, or at least parts of them. For the new generation of politicians, these former Bekes party members also presented a valuable opportunity—not only due to the extensive local family networks that could be created through marriage, but also because of the potential recovery of confiscated property. Given their positions of power, these new elites could afford to associate with the rebellious lords without fearing suspicion from the Báthory family. This created the curious situation where Stephen Báthory's most trusted insiders and former enemies became related and found themselves on the same side.

The best example of this phenomenon is the case of Miklós Farkas Harinai. The younger son of a former councillor, Harinai re-entered the political elite through precisely these kinds of strategic marriages. First, he secured his own marriage by wedding a woman called Krisztina, the daughter of János Sigér, one of Kristóf Báthory's most trusted men. Then, probably through his father-in-law's influence, he arranged for one of his sisters, Katalin, to marry Chancellor Farkas Kovacsóczy. This latter marriage ended in divorce, as Katalin was allegedly involved in an affair with Boldizsár Báthory of Somlyó. However, this scandal did not damage Harinai's relationship with the Kovacsóczy family. In their wills, both Farkas and his brother János named Harinai as the guardian of the Kovacsóczy children.

The vast majority of new politicians entering the elite were able to retain the positions they gained, making their integration personally successful. However, only a multi-generational study can truly confirm the long-term success of integration. Figure 5 offers a broader perspective, revealing a harsh reality: only one-third of the new families that entered the elite managed to maintain their status over multiple generations. A strikingly high proportion of these families only enjoyed a single-generation presence within the elite. This was partly due to the fact noted previously that many did not marry or married too late, resulting in no surviving male heirs. Additionally, brief tenures among the elite were more common among those who rose from lower social ranks or had lesser social prestige. In several cases, a talented individual made an exceptional career, but for the rest of the family it proved impossible to replicate due to a lack of talent, poor decisions, changing circumstances, or heightened competition.

A significant number of families ended their elite status with the second generation, accounting for approximately 20 percent of cases. This phenomenon can be attributed to several factors. Once again, the marriage prospects of the new elite played a role: late marriages often left children orphaned and without proper guardianship, who either died young or fell into poverty. Another major factor was the long war

against the Ottomans (1593–1606) and the ensuing civil war in Transylvania. The second generation of the newly settled nobility came of age during this tumultuous period and participated in the conflict at a much higher rate than their peers from the old nobility. Many perished, especially in the battles of 1600–1603. In six cases, a family's trajectory in Transylvania was interrupted because either the settler or their descendants left the country. Those who emigrated can be considered successful, as returning to the Kingdom of Hungary or joining the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth under Stephen Báthory often led to more illustrious careers (Figure 5).

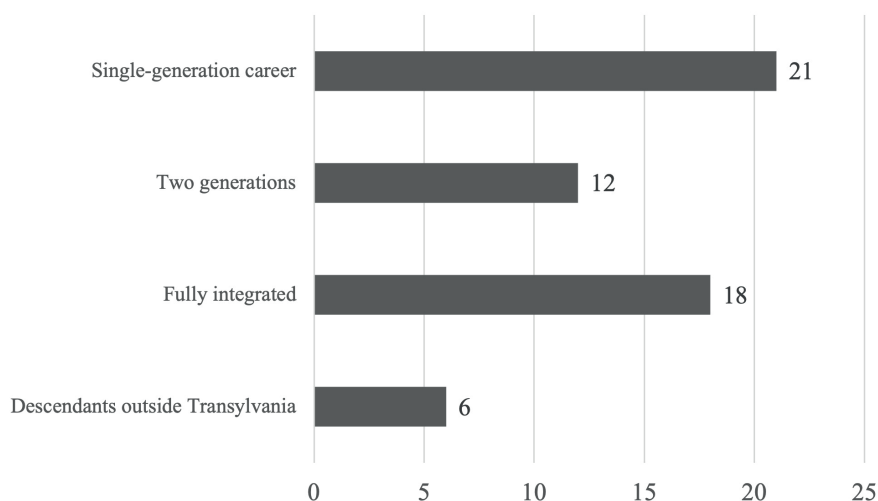


Figure 5 Opportunities for Integration (57 people)

The reasons for the high drop-out rate are evident. As mentioned before, members of the new elite were significantly more vulnerable than long-established local aristocrats. This difference becomes obvious when we compare, with the help of Figures 6 and 7, the atrocities suffered by members of the old and new elites who survived crisis situations. Among the forty-one members of the old elite, the majority, thirty-two individuals, were not subjected to any form of harm or atrocity. This indicates that the old elite was largely insulated from external threats. However, the remaining nine members experienced seventeen different forms of atrocities. These included violent deaths for five individuals, imprisonment and confiscation of property for five individuals, and emigration for four individuals, with two of them eventually returning. Only one member chose to relocate abroad. This relatively low level of exposure to harm reflects the security the old elite enjoyed due to their larger estates, stronger familial networks, and deeper political roots. Their political manoeuvring was more cautious and calculated, minimizing their risk of falling victim to political or social upheavals (Figure 6).

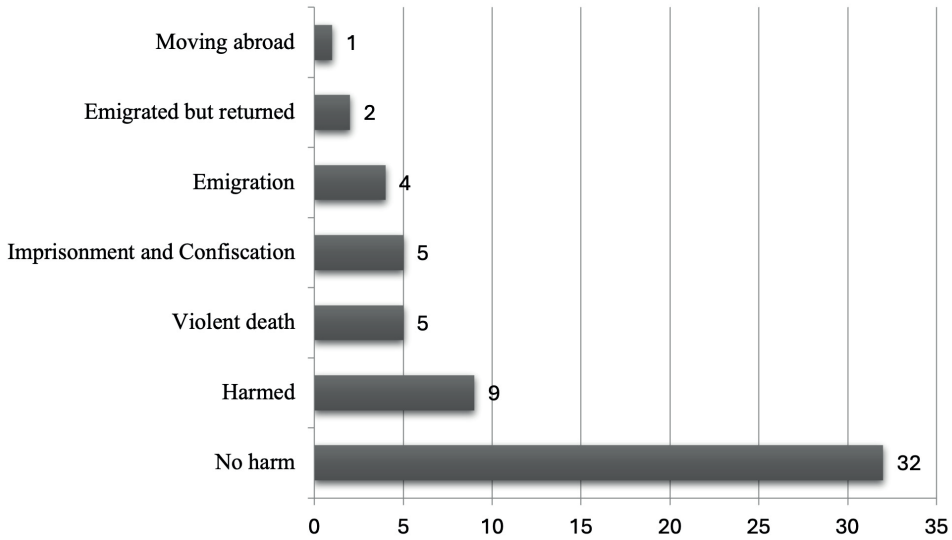


Figure 6 Atrocities Faced by Members of the Old Elite (41 people)

In stark contrast, the new elite suffered much higher rates of harm. Out of the fifty-seven members, only twenty-five were unharmed, while thirty-two faced some form of atrocity. This group experienced a significantly higher rate of violent deaths, with fourteen individuals killed. Additionally, five individuals were imprisoned, three had their property confiscated, and five were forced into emigration. Furthermore, three members chose to move abroad, and one person emigrated but returned later. This high rate of atrocities among the new elite can be attributed to their more precarious position. The newcomers, often with fewer resources and weaker networks, were more vulnerable. They were also more likely to take risks, be agile in their decisions, and become involved in dangerous political situations, which made them more susceptible to harm (Figure 7).

Conclusion

The study has examined how migration played a pivotal role in the formation and composition of the elite in the Principality of Transylvania between 1556 and 1586. At this time, nearly 60 percent of the newly established elite consisted of newcomers, with their two-thirds being migrants, while one-third locals who had risen through social mobility. The migration patterns observed, particularly among Hungarian, Croatian, and Polish nobles, illustrate both the push factors from Ottoman invasions and discontent with Habsburg policies, as well as the pull factors of Transylvania’s political and military opportunities. Immigrants were most successful if they

possessed special skills, such as significant military experience, humanistic education from universities, or financial, legal, or economic expertise. For such individuals, migration often led to long-term social advancement. It also transpires that most non-Hungarian and non-Croatian immigrants viewed their stay as temporary career migration rather than permanent settlement.

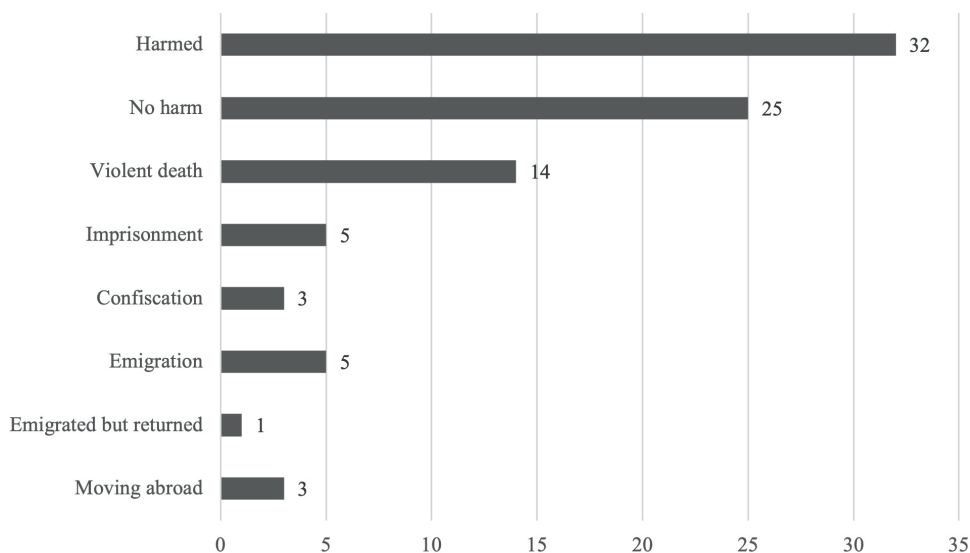


Figure 7 Atrocities Faced by Members of the New Elite (57 people)

The prosopographical analysis has shown how the new elite, composed largely of migrant nobles, faced significant vulnerabilities due to their smaller wealth, weaker networks, and greater inclination toward risk-taking. Their vulnerability is further evidenced by how poorly they fared during political and military conflicts: while only approximately 20 percent of the old elite were affected by conflicts, nearly 60 percent of the new elite suffered various atrocities, ranging from assassination to land confiscation and forced emigration. Their integration was challenged by the old elite's reluctance to form dynastic ties, which ultimately limited long-term stability for many new families. Despite the various challenges, some 30 percent of the new elite managed to successfully integrate and establish long-term positions, maintaining their influence across multiple generations and shaping Transylvania's political landscape.

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