



BOOK REVIEW

**Wien, Ulrich A., ed. Common Man, Society and Religion in the 16th century/Gemeiner Mann, Gesellschaft und Religion im 16. Jahrhundert: Piety, morality and discipline in the Carpathian Basin/Frömmigkeit, Moral und Sozialdisziplinierung im Karpatenbogen**

**Vienna: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021. Pp. 438.**

Hannah Elmer 

Leibniz University Hannover  
Email: [hannah.m.elmer@gmail.com](mailto:hannah.m.elmer@gmail.com)

This volume of twenty-one essays plus a short introduction is the product of a conference held in June 2017 at the Institute for Humanities of the Romanian Academy (Institutul de Cercetări Socio.Umane Sibiu) in Hermannstadt/Sibiu. The theme of the workshop, “Church and Population in the Transylvanian Village—background and conditions of reception as well as influences from society, ethnicity, church and politics in the century of the Reformation,” is a more accurate description of the volume’s contents than its final title, reflecting both the local focus on Transylvania and the thematic variety of the volume, the contributions of which include literacy, secularization, church administration, and marriage, among others. In contrast to the promise of the book’s title, with the exception of the first essay (Wolgast), there is little explicit discussion of the “common man.” The term more frequently functions as a synonym for “villager” (even encompassing local clergy) than as a key category of early modern social difference.

The volume is organized into four sections. The first covers the “Common man and local priests: behaviour and religious life in Transylvanian villages and beyond” (nine essays); the next addresses “Social, economic and moral life” (eight essays, one of which is placed at the very end, misleadingly grouped with “Arts and Lutheran confession”); the third turns to “An echo of Wittenberg: the example of village pastor Damasus Dür” [sic] (three essays); and the fourth examines “Arts and Lutheran confession” (one essay plus the additional contribution belonging to the second section). Seven contributions are in German with the remaining fourteen in English; each is followed by a summary in the other language.

The implicit focus on Transylvania is promising for scholars of other regions, not least because of the richness of the religious and political diversity of the area in the sixteenth century. Focus on the Reformation, with additional emphasis on the reforming pastor Damasus Dür, may likewise interest scholars of various disciplines. Robert Kolb’s essay makes clear the value of Dür’s writings in understanding how ideas from Wittenberg could spread and be adapted to local contexts. In addition to Kolb’s essay, among the most interesting contributions is that of Eike Wolgast, “Der gemeine Mann zwischen Bauernkrieg 1525 und Religionsfrieden 1555,” which explores the complex intersection of social class, political agency, and Reformation theology, showing how Luther’s critique of ecclesiastical authority was transformed and applied by “the common man” as grounds for political rebellion. Wolgast explains that though the rebellion was violently suppressed and, in many ways, served to reify former social relations, fear of another uprising helped open the door for conflicts between the nobility and subordinates to become “rationalized” and “legalized,” thus altering expectations and interactions among the groups. The contributions by Julia Derzsi and Mária Pakucs-Willcocks also provide insightful perspectives on the possible consequences of confessional upheaval on everyday life, highlighting the changing expression and enforcement of social norms and gender-appropriate

behavior as manifested in marital disputes. Kolb's abovementioned essay and Maria Crăciun's contribution on the communication of Lutheran ideas through the visual programs of pulpits (especially of the seventeenth century) are among the few that productively bring the Transylvanian material into dialogue with that from other regions.

As befitting a conference volume, many contributions are narrow in focus. Unfortunately, because the compilation as a whole covers so much ground, it achieves little coherence as an aggregate, and the introduction, only five and a half pages, including acknowledgments, does not do enough to draw out unifying themes and underscore the stakes of the research. Few of the contributions, especially the shorter ones, venture to make larger arguments that could speak to scholars outside of their immediate disciplines.

The volume should be lauded for its efforts to make Romanian and Hungarian research more accessible to audiences lacking those language competencies. While Eastern and Southeastern European history continues to be marginalized in early modern scholarship, this volume works to make issues and newly available source material, particularly from Transylvania, more visible. As a whole, the volume takes that local history seriously and on its own terms. Unfortunately, because the research in many of the contributions is not explicitly connected to larger historical problems or historiographical debates, the volume risks not being read by scholars working on other regions or neighboring topics.

A more significant weakness of the volume is linguistic. Especially among the English contributions, there is an extreme range in language quality, with only a few attaining the standard expected of the field. Some English contributions are so riddled with errors as to verge on incomprehensible, and only two to three English essays have few to no mistakes. The German contributions are more consistent but make up only a third of the volume. These linguistic obstacles made appreciating the individual arguments and drawing connections among them challenging, diminishing the value of the work. This is a shame because the sources have much to offer.