

MEMORIES CARVED IN THE WALL A 16th-Century Type of Funerary Monuments in Transylvania

DÓRA MÉRAI¹

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Graves for the deceased were usually cut into the floor of churches, created in churchyard cemeteries or in the newly established public cemeteries in Transylvania in the sixteenth century. Not all graves were marked with stone funerary monuments. Wooden memorials were presumably widespread, but no contemporary sources inform about these. Grave markers from the cemeteries are simple or coped headstones and coffin-shape stones, preserved for example in Cluj (Kolozsvár) and Târgu Mureş (Marosvásárhely). These gravestones display commemorative inscriptions and simple imagery. A funerary inscription recently discovered in Ocna Mureş (Marosújvár) was carved into an ashlar within the external buttress supporting the choir of the church. This stone bearing an inscription represents a specific type of funerary monument from early modern Transylvania, most examples of which are known from Cluj. The paper presents these stone memorials: who and why chose this form of commemorating the dead.

Keywords: Transylvania, funerary monuments, funerary inscription, church, cemetery, memory, stone carving, Early Modern Period, 16th century

A photograph of an inscription on a stone, taken in Ocna Mureş, Transylvania (present-day Romania), was posted in April 2020 in the Facebook group called Monument Forum (in Hungarian, *Műemlékek Fóruma*). The photo generated a large interest among the members of the forum (*Fig. 1*).² The ashlar served as a coping stone on one of the external buttresses supporting the wall of the choir. The building is a ruin today: it has lost its roof, and pens as well as other outbuildings belonging to the neighbouring houses were attached to the walls both inside and outside.³ The 70 × 40 cm large surface of the stone presented in the photo had been carved flat and it displays the following inscription in Latin: HIC IACET MICHAEL SALI | OBYT A(NNO) D(OMINI) 1586 – “Here lies Michael Sali, he died in the year of the Lord 1586.”



*Fig. 1. Funerary monument of Mihály Sali, Ocna Mureş
(photo: Zsolt Sándor Jakab)*



*Fig. 2. Funerary monument of Jakab Szilágyi, Zimbor
(photo: Dóra Mérai)*

¹ Central European University, Department of Medieval Studies, Cultural Heritage Studies Program. E-mail: MeraiD@ceu.edu

² The photographs taken by Zsolt Sándor Jakab and Sándor Kiss were posted by Zsolt Sándor Jakab. I thank both of them for giving me permission to use their photos.

³ Its present state of conservation is represented by the photos on the website of Diaszpóra Alapítvány (Foundation): <http://www.diaszpóra-alapitvany.ro/fototar/erdelyi-szorvanytelepulesek/feher-megye/felsomarosujvar?fbclid=IwAR3q82wcYVnJF3s3IEiOaPM7MbGAZJD3q1CRCBnFxod1SO5ISscV22zbUfp4> (Accessed: 2 February 2021).

A commemorative inscription was carved in a similar manner on a stone within the south-eastern buttress on the exterior of the church choir in Zimbor (Magyarzsombor, Silaj County), but in Hungarian: IT FEKSIK SZILAGI | IACAB KIT AZ VRIS | TEN CHODALATOS | KEPPEK KIVOT AZ | VILAGBOL | 1585 (“Here lies Jakab Szilágyi who was miraculously taken from this world by the Lord, 1585”, *Fig. 2*). This church is out of use as well, standing abandoned but in a somewhat better state of conservation (ISTVÁNFI 2001, 261). The rough inscription written with irregular letters does not say anything else besides the year when Jakab Szilágyi died and implies that this happened under some unusual circumstances. The surface of the stone displays the sketchily carved outlines of various tools which might possibly refer to the occupation of the deceased: a hammer, a ruler, and perhaps a spade, a chisel, and a shovel. The stone may evoke the figure of Master Jakab, a mason who fell victim to some odd accident, but his name will survive until the walls of the church collapse for good and all, though this picture is only the product of imagination. Centuries-old funerary monuments with their short-spoken inscriptions do not just preserve the memory of the dead but they also inspire new, different images, new memories, as media in the social context of commemoration (ERLL 2011). In this respect, there is no difference between a richly decorated memorial and a rough stone with a simple inscription such as the one in Zimbor.

FUNERARY MONUMENTS CARVED IN WALLS

The practice of choosing a stone in the wall of an already standing, even centuries-old building to carve a commemorative inscription in its surface was not exclusive for the Early Modern Age. Pál Lővei collected several examples from Italy and the German territories dating from the period ranging from the 13th to the 16th century. He identified a 13th-century example from the medieval Kingdom of Hungary too: the funerary inscription of Martinus Lapidica in Kalocsa (today in Hungary; LŐVEI 2009, 193–195, 414–415, figs 726–728). In Jászapáti (Hungary) the carved building stones on the interior side of the wall surrounding the churchyard display similar texts, which testifies that this tradition was still alive in the 18th century (LŐVEI 2009, figs 736–737).

Returning to Transylvania and to the 16th century, the highest number of such commemorative texts carved into the stones of an earlier built structure survived in Cluj. Here, however, it is not the walls of a church but those protecting the town that bear the inscriptions. The graves belonging to these funerary monuments were not established in a churchyard cemetery but in the first public cemetery of the town. The inscriptions were first collected by István Nagyajtai Kovács in the 1840s, encouraged by John Paget, an English physician and traveller (NAGYAJTAI KOVÁCS 1840; NAGYAJTAI KOVÁCS 1843). The plots stretching along the walls were sold out by the end of the 18th century, and, since the wall was an obstacle for the expanding town, they started to demolish it segment by segment. Both the central authorities in Vienna and the local town leadership issued decrees to protect the inscription-bearing stones, but in practice these orders were not really followed (KERNY 2002, 71; MIHÁLY 2013, 19). Nagyajtai Kovács concluded based on his observations that people did not re-use earlier funerary monuments to construct the wall but the building stones of the already standing wall were turned into memorials by carving the commemorative inscriptions into their surface. His hypothesis was confirmed by the large amount of human bone remains he saw to surface during the earthworks related to nearby construction activities. The area between the two ranges of the double town walls indeed served as a cemetery in the Early Modern Period. The first walls were erected in the early 15th century, and they were strengthened with a second range at

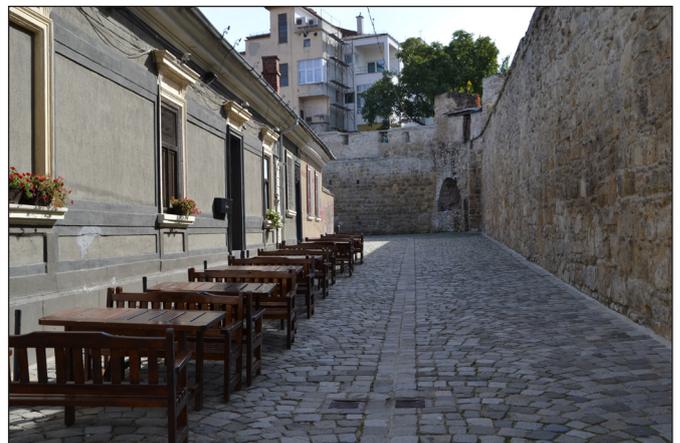


Fig. 3. The town wall of Cluj (photo: Dóra Mériai)

the eastern, southern, and western sides of the town in the 16th and 17th centuries (*Fig. 3*). According to written sources, some segments of the *zwinger*, that is, the area between the two wall ranges, were turned into a cemetery in the 1570s (MIHÁLY 2013, 126).

THE BURIAL SITE

In Cluj, similarly to many towns all over Europe, churches belonging to the parish network, various monastic orders, hospitals and their yards had been used as burial sites since the Middle Ages (HEREPEI 1988, 19, 34; FLÓRA 2014, 289–292; BALOGH 1985, 75, 189; SZABÓ T. 1995, 228). These cemeteries became overcrowded by the mid-16th century; there was no place left for new graves, and the plague that repeatedly hit the town in these decades just added to the problem the town leadership had to face. This was also the period when the Protestant reform reached the town – by the 1540s – and the monastic orders were expelled. The town leadership, trying to solve the cemetery problem, turned to the Prince of Transylvania in 1564 asking for permission to use the garden of the former Franciscan monastery as a public cemetery. This, however, did not provide a long-term solution, so in 1573 they designated the area between the two walls surrounding the town for the purpose of burying the dead. The narrow space did not favour the custom of setting up gravestones on top of the graves, so the commemorative inscriptions were carved into the stones of the wall instead. Since this territory was also filled with graves quite soon, the town council prohibited any further burial here in 1586, and designated a new site as public cemetery outside the city walls, on the southern side of the town. This site was the predecessor of what is called Central or Házsongárd Cemetery today (BALOGH 1985, 196; HEREPEI 1988, 20).

The space of burial was separated from the space and environment of the church in various parts of Europe in this period, abandoning medieval customs in this respect. Cemeteries were gradually moved to the outskirts of the settlements. The phenomenon was partly a consequence of Protestant theology; at the same time, it also contributed to the solidification of the Protestant views and practices regarding the issue. Luther himself argued for this separation: since the prayers of the living have no power to change the fate of those who are dead, it is unnecessary, and even dangerous from the point of view of public healthcare, to bury the dead in the settlement centre, in or right next to the church. More radical Protestant denominations went even further and explicitly prohibited burials connected to churches as a superstitious, Catholic tradition (OEXLE 1983, 70; KOSLOFSKY 2000, 46–77; MÉRAI 2012–2013). It was not just the Protestants who promoted such a change. The Prince of Transylvania transferred the former Franciscan monastery in Cluj to the Jesuit order. The Jesuits too found it problematic to use the cemetery established in the narrow courtyard of the monastery due to considerations related to public healthcare. They prohibited burials in the church interior and exception was granted only in special cases (BALOGH 1985, 117).⁴

Cluj was not the only town in the Transylvanian Principality that designated areas for new public cemeteries outside the city walls. The council of Sibiu took steps in this respect in 1554 referring to the danger for public health arising from the waves of plague and the crowdedness of churchyard cemeteries (ROTH 2006, 71, 88). In Braşov, burials in the cemetery around the main parish church were prohibited in 1788 by a decree of the imperial administration; the new Lutheran cemetery was established near the city gate (GROSS 1925; KÜHLBRANDT 1927). The town council of the Calvinist Târgu Mureş opened a public cemetery in 1616 at the north-eastern border of the settlement, and it was soon taken over by the Church (KELEMEN 1977, 185).

FUNERARY MONUMENTS IN THE CITY WALL OF CLUJ

The establishment of a public cemetery between the two ranges of the city wall resulted in a particularly minimalistic form of funeral monuments. Since there was not enough space to set up gravestones on the top of

⁴ The process of separating of the living and the dead did not end in the 16th century. Several states had regulated the issue by the 1770s–1780s, including the Habsburg Empire where churchyard burials were prohibited by the Catholic emperor in accordance with the principles of enlightened absolutism. Joseph II ordered the closure of all cemeteries within the settlements and the establishment of public cemeteries outside the inhabited area (OEXLE 1983, 72–75).

the graves, the ashlar of the wall were transformed into funerary monuments by carving their surface and adding an inscription. The latter generally indicated no more than the name of the deceased and the year of death. The stones selected for this purpose were located at a height ranging from 60 cm to 2 m, right above or near the grave as suggested by the human skeletal remains found during construction-related earthmoving works (NAGYAJTAI KOVÁCS 1840, 69–71; NAGYAJTAI KOVÁCS 1843; DEÁK 1879, 358). Though in Ocna Mureș and Zimbor there were no excavations near the walls, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the graves were similarly located beneath the inscription-bearing stones.

Nine such memorials are known to have survived in Cluj: three are now stored in the lapidary of the National History Museum of Transylvania, where they were taken after they were removed from those segments of the wall which had to be demolished (Figs 4, 5, 6). Another stone was transferred to the Central (Házsongárd) Cemetery and built into the facade of the crypt established for members of the Bethlen of Iktár family (Fig. 7). Five ashlar turned into funerary monuments are still in their original place, built in the city wall (Figs 8 and 9).⁵ The stones were shaped either by creating a flat, deeper surface for the inscription or by carving back the surface around the inscription plaque. In the latter cases, two schematic “handles” were added to the flat surface in the form of a *tabula ansata* (Figs 4, 5, and 7). The inscriptions were written with Renaissance capital letters, but the epigraphic quality varies depending on the skills of the stone cutter.



Fig. 4. Funerary monument of Erzsébet, wife of János Keretszegi Eötvös, and their five family members. Cluj, National History Museum of Transylvania (photo: Melinda Mihály). Inscription: YT NIVGOZIK EORSEBET | AZZONY KERETZEGY | EOTVES IANOS FELESEGE | HATOD MAGAVAL 1554 (“Here lies Erzsébet, wife of János Keretszegi Eötvös with five others 1554”)

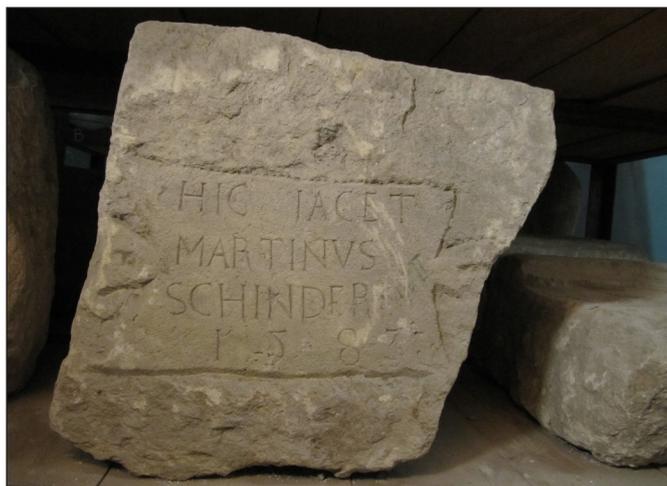


Fig. 5. Funerary monument of Martinus Schinder. Cluj, National History Museum of Transylvania (photo: Melinda Mihály). Inscription: HIC IACET | MARTINVS SCHINDER | 1583 (“Here lies Martinus Schinder 1583”)

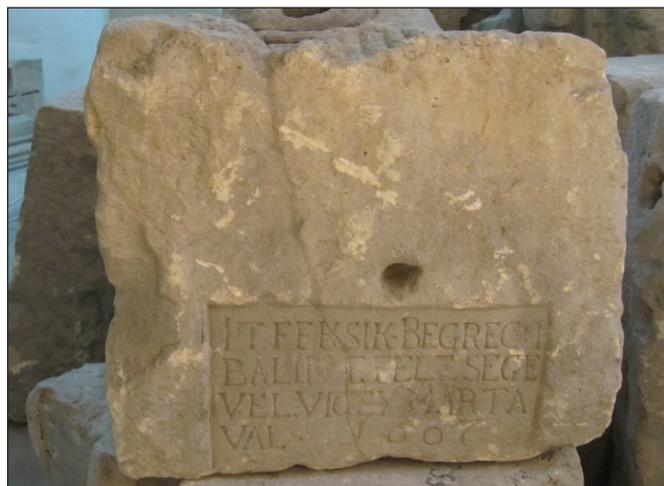


Fig. 6. Funerary monument of Bálint Begreczi and his wife, Márta Viczey. Cluj, National History Museum of Transylvania (photo: Melinda Mihály). Inscription: IT FEKSIK BEGRECZI | BALINT FELESEGE | VEL VICEY MARTA | VAL 1607 (“Here lies Bálint Begreczi with his wife, Márta Viczey 1607”)

⁵ I had no opportunity to survey in person the stones depicted on Fig. 8 in the drawings of Lajos Pákei and the funerary monument of Lukács, son of Lukács Szőlősi Literatus (1574), because these are located in privately owned and closed areas today. Photos of the stones were published by LÖWY et al. (1996, 46–48) and JAKAB (2012, 33–34).

Most of the inscriptions survived from 1574, the year immediately following the establishment of the cemetery in 1573. One monument, however, bears the date of 1554, which means that it would have been made about twenty years before the cemetery was opened (Fig. 4). It makes the dating even more questionable that according to the inscription, the deceased is the widow of the goldsmith János Keretszegi. The goldsmith master was still alive in 1557, so his wife could not have been a widow three years before that (FLÓRA 2014, 379). The Hungarian language of the inscription suggests that it is unlikely to have been made before 1570. The first known grave inscription from Transylvania written in Hungarian originates right from here, the same cemetery between the town walls, and bears the date of 1574.⁶ Neither the shaping of the stone that has the date 1554, nor the epigraphic style of the letters shows any significant difference from the rest of the inscriptions that would suggest a twenty years' gap between their creation. Therefore, the date 1554 was probably a carver's mistake and this memorial was in fact made in 1574.

Since the area between the walls was quickly filled with graves, the town council decided to close the cemetery as soon as in 1586. It appears that after this year, they only exceptionally established new graves here, if at all.⁷ The last dated stone originates from 1607 and can only hypothetically be connected to the site, because it was found in a secondary position (Fig. 6). István Nagyajtai Kovács mentioned some further inscriptions too but he emphasized that he had no chance to verify these pieces of data. However, after him it was taken for granted in the secondary literature that there are 42 inscription-bearing stones known (JAKAB 1988, 224–225; MIHÁLY 2013, 126).

WHOSE MEMORY DO THE STONES OF THE CLUJ CITY WALL PRESERVE?

Lukács Szőlősi Literatus was a nobleman, and based on his middle name, *literatus*, he was a man of letters. An epitaph verse in Latin was carved on an ashlar of the city wall in the memory of his son, also called Lukács.⁸ This inscription is exceptionally elaborate compared to the others, probably due to the education and occupation of the father. The rest of the inscriptions contain no more than a brief “here lies” formula. Another *literatus*, Gergely was also commemorated on a stone of the town wall, but this stone is now lost (NAGYAJTAI KOVÁCS 1840). In addition to the one about Lukács Szőlősi, one more Latin inscription has survived, written about Martinus Schindler. The only information provided about the latter is that he died in 1583 (Fig. 5).

Goldsmithery is the occupation represented in the highest number among those commemorated on the wall. The above-mentioned János Keretszegi, whose widow was buried with five other people (presumably family members) in the grave below the inscription, was a goldsmith master and town *dispensator* (steward; FLÓRA 2014, 379) (Fig. 4). Bálint Begreczi (or Pegreczi) was also a goldsmith master: he was a leading master of the guild in 1600 according to the written



Fig. 7. Funerary monument of Istók, son of János Nyirő (photo: Dóra Mérai). Cluj, Central (Házsongárd) cemetery. Inscription: IT NIVGSIK ISTENBE | NIRW IANNOS FYA | ISTOK HALALA LEOT | PWNKOST HAVANAK | 12 NAPIAN ANNO | 1585 (“Here lies in God the son of János Nyirő, Istók. He died on the twelfth day of Pentecost in the year 1585”)

⁶ The only stone inscription in Hungarian from Transylvania which was created earlier than this one originates from the fortified residence in Dumbrăveni (Ebesfalva, Erzsébetváros) and it was carved on a coat of arms (BALOGH 1985, 245).

⁷ Inscriptions commemorating three nobles executed in Cluj in 1594 and buried in the trenches along the walls were seen by Sándor Bölöni Farkas in the 19th century (KERNY 2002, 71, note 11). According to János Herepei, the town council reopened the cemetery in 1602 (HEREPEI 1988, 24).

⁸ Inscription: HIC TVMVLAT(VS) E(ST) LVCAS FILIVS | NOBILIS [LV]CAE LITERATI ZEOLEOSI | O FI(LI) INGENVE [---]RMI LOQVELA | MEMOR E(ST) LI(N)GVA DVLCIS AMORE TVA | AN(NO) DO(MINI) 1574 3 DIE OCTOBR(IS)

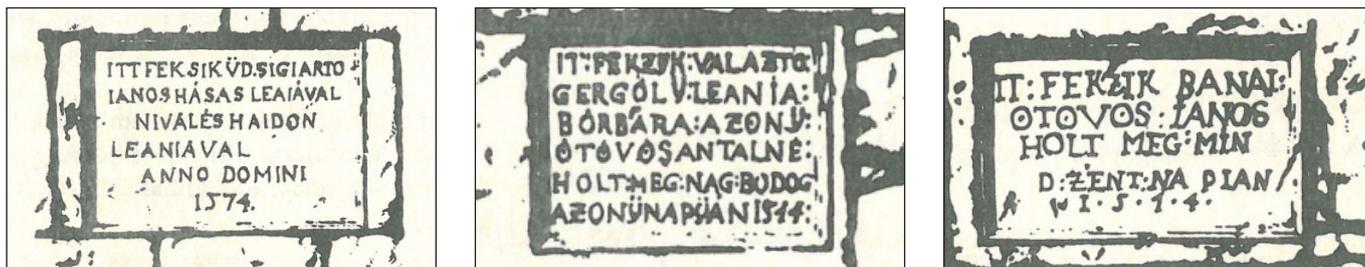


Fig. 8 a-b-c. Funerary monuments from the town wall of Cluj. Source: BALOGH 1944, 186, 5a-b, 6a). a) Funerary monument of János Ijgyártó and his two daughters. Inscription: IT FEKSIK VDS IGIARTO | IANOS HASAS LEANIAVAL | [...]MNIVAL ES HAIADON LEIANIAVAL | ANNO D(OMI)NI 1574 (“Here lies János Ijgyártó senior with his married daughter, [...]mni, and his unmarried daughter. In the year of the Lord 1574”). b) Funerary monument of Barbara, daughter of Gergely Választó, wife of Antal Ötvös. Inscription: IT FEKZYK VALAZTO | GERGOLY LEANIA | BORBARA A'ZONY | OTOVOS ANTALNE | HOLT MEG NAGBODOG | A'ZONY NOPYAN 1574 (“Here lies Borbála, daughter of Gergely Választó, wife of Antal Ötvös. She died on the day of the Assumption of Virgin Mary 1574”). c) Funerary monument of János Bányai Ötvös. Inscription: IT FEKZYK BANAI | OTOVOS IANOS | HOLT MEG MIN | D ZENT NAPIAN | 1574 (“Here lies János Bányai Ötvös. He died on the day of All Saints 1574”)

sources, as well as a member of the town council in 1605 (BALOGH 1985, 195–196). The funerary monument he has with his wife, Márta Vacey, is the most recent among the similar inscriptions on the city wall and bears the date of 1607 (Fig. 6). The Vacey or Wiczey family was also a prominent goldsmith clan that gave several leaders to early modern Cluj. Istók, whose memorial was transferred to the Central (Házsongárd) cemetery, was the son of János Nyíró (Fig. 7). A goldsmith called János Nyíró was a member of the town council in 1621 and 1622, and the inventory of his properties, prepared after his death, has also been preserved (BALOGH 1985, 158; FLÓRA 2014, 412). The name of János Bányai Ötvös (*ötvös* meaning ‘goldsmith’ in Hungarian) suggests that he was also a master of the goldsmiths’ guild, similarly to Gergely Választó, whose daughter, Borbála was commemorated on the city wall (Figs 8a and 8b). The surname of Gergely Választó refers to his profession too, to the process of refining gold. Sources from 1577 mention him among those members of the goldsmiths’ guild in Cluj who represented the interests of the town in a conflict with the corresponding guild in Sibiu. Borbála also married a goldsmith, Antal Ötvös (DEÁK 1886, 3).

Several surnames mentioned in the inscriptions reflect a profession, such as Ötvös, Választó, Íjgyártó (bow maker) or the surname of János Tölcséres (funnel maker) Pécsi. It is uncertain, however, whether these names indicate the actual profession of these persons. Such surnames started to solidify from the last quarter of the 16th century. János Szappanos Ötvös (soap maker, goldsmith), whose funerary monument was set up in 1602 and is known from the Central (Házsongárd) cemetery, was himself a soap maker while Ötvös (goldsmith) was his inherited surname (HEREPEI 1988, 61–63). Documents in the town archives testify that János Nyíró was a goldsmith master and did not deal with shearing baize as suggested by his surname (BALOGH 1985, 188; FLÓRA 2014, 412).

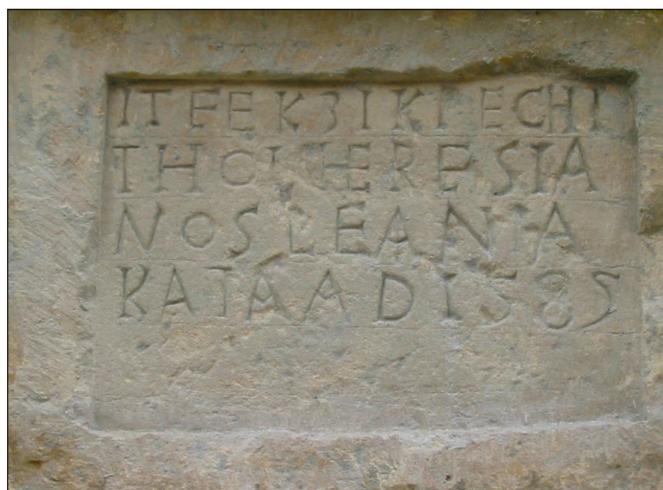


Fig. 9. Funerary monument of Kata, daughter of János Péchi Tölchères (photo: Dóra Mériai). Cluj, town wall. Inscription: IT FEKZYK PECHI | THOLCHERES IA | NOS LEANJA | KATA A(NNO) D(OMINI) 1595 (“Here lies Kata, daughter of János Péchi Tölchères. In the year of the Lord 1595”)

CONCLUSIONS

Those commemorated on the town wall were craftsmen and their family members, and, based on their occupations, they belonged to the town’s elite, a wealthy stratum that played a prominent role in the town’s

administration. The guild of the tailors and that of the goldsmiths were the most powerful in this respect, the latter contributing significantly to the flourishing of the town due to the gold and silver mines around Cluj, and they provided most of the town leaders in various administrative offices (FLÓRA 2009; FLÓRA 2014, 167). These wealthy burghers chose a surprisingly modest form of commemorating their dead. While in the Lutheran town of Sibiu (Nagyszeben), several funerary monuments rich in ornaments and inscriptions attest that the urban elite insisted to their right to use the parish church in the main square as their burial site (see ALBU 2002), it seems that Cluj, dominated by the Antitrinitarian denomination that time, opted for a more radical change. Here, only a few funerary monuments have survived from church interiors and even these are more modest than those in Sibiu. Meanwhile, burials of the elite appeared in the newly established public cemeteries in Cluj as attested by the grave inscriptions. This phenomenon corresponds to what was observed in the Western European Protestant regions, where the Lutheran urban communities were more insistent on their traditions than were groups of more radical Protestant denominations (ZERBE 2007).

Grave markers set up in public cemeteries usually display simpler forms than ledger stones inserted into the pavement in church interiors in the period, which is also due to their location. It was not worth to decorate with elaborate ornaments those stones that were directly exposed to weather in the cemeteries, and the poor quality of the stone materials used for this purpose did not even allow that. The public cemetery established between the two ranges of the town wall in Cluj brought to life a new, specific form of prestige representation: commemorative inscriptions were carved into the wall, an important symbol of the rank and autonomy of towns – that is, they were carved into the “body” of the town itself, and thus effectively communicated the rank and role of those buried there and of their families. In this sense, the funerary monuments created from the ashlar stones within the walls of the churches in Ocna Mureş and Zimbor speak an equally expressive language. Grave markers set up centuries ago in the former cemetery around the church have been lost for a long time now, but the two inscriptions preserve the memory of the deceased as long as the church exists.

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