

Digital Data and Prosopography: Preliminary Results of the DaT18 Database

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Abstract:

In terms of the naked figures, the public rise of the Greek Orthodox Church in mid-eighteenth-century Transylvania happened at an impressive pace. Between Empress Maria Theresa's decree on toleration (1759) and the subsequent appointment of Dionisije Novaković to head the newly recognized religious body (1761), more than half a million people openly identified themselves as Greek Orthodox in nearly 1,000 parishes. While convincing explanations have already been given for why this religious choice had proved so successful, the questions connected to the creation of the rural clerical elite in only a matter of years still ask for answers.

Reconstructing the collective biography of this social group was the main objective of a research project titled 'Dissent and toleration in Habsburg Transylvania: A socio-political history of the Orthodox protests (1740s-1760s)'. The records created by the Habsburg state and those internal to the Transylvanian diocese provide historians with just enough elements to use prosopography as an investigative tool for better describing the Orthodox rural elites. A relational database available online since early 2020 on the project's website (<https://www.dat18.ro/en/database>) allows the piecing together of the scattered information concerning clerical careers, thus escaping the gaps in knowledge that have until now plagued our understanding.

This data sample is to be interrogated in order to answer two main questions: (i) to what extent was the rise of the Orthodox clergy the result of religious conflict? and (ii) how did this new elite make the transition from the age of contention to the free exercise of religious belief, given the institutional changes of the early 1760s? The DaT18 database enables complex analyses on close to 1,700 individuals identified after record linkage, which contribute to a deeper understanding about the time and place of their ordination, the consecrating bishop, labour migration and the clergy turnover rates during the 1760s, in turn raising new research questions.

Keywords: clergy database, digital prosopography, statistical analysis, Greek Orthodox Church, Transylvania