

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

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**Beyond politics and literature...  
The Ráday family's history of ownership and  
agriculture from the beginning to the first half of the  
19th Century**

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## **1. The goal of this research and its questions:**

In my research, I have uncovered the history of a prominent gentry family of the 18th and 19th centuries, which held significance in cultural, political, and religious aspects. The focus has been primarily on aspects related to ownership and economic history, utilizing primary sources that were previously underutilized and primarily preserved within the family archives. Existing studies and works related to the family have primarily concentrated on the lives and contributions of the two most well-known members of the Ráday family, I. Pál and I. Gedeon. The history of the estates that formed the family's wealth foundation had been relatively neglected in research until now.

Examining the history of the Ráday family solely based on the existing literature would yield a one-sided perspective. The research has mainly delved into the lives and work of the family's two most significant figures, Pál I. Ráday and his son I. Gedeon. The historic awareness regarding the Ráday name usually associates it with Pécel in Pest County, while the family's far more ancient estate, the manor and lands of Alsóludány in Nógrád County, has been largely forgotten by historical memory.

Existing scholarly literature presents Pál I. Ráday (1677-1733) as a prominent participant in the Rákóczi War of Independence, who joined Ferenc II. Rákóczi in late October 1703 and soon became one of his primary supporters. He is known for his involvement in publicist activities during the war, as well as editing and writing for the first Hungarian-language newspaper, the *Mercurius Hungaricus*. After the war, he engaged in public activities for the Protestant Church in the country's assemblies and

authored the prayer and hymn book "Lelki hódolás" starting from the turn of the century, which stands out among the pious collections of the time.

Gedeon I. Ráday (1713-1792) emerges as a notable figure in 18th-century literature due to his patronage, which motivated all contemporary literary initiatives. The love for and collection of books were attributed to father and son, creating a library comprising around 15,000 volumes, encompassing the scientific foundations of the era, classical works, contemporary and Hungarian-language literature.

All these aspects are well-documented regarding these two prominent (and rightfully deemed most significant) family members. However, very few words have been said in scholarly literature about the formation of the estate portfolio that laid the foundation for family wealth and its management, the economic possibilities of these estates, how the Ráday estates evolved, the preceding connections that enriched their ancestral lands, the development of estate management systems, the available lands for agriculture, the nature and quality of farming and animal husbandry on these estates, whether the agricultural or leased estate portfolio was decisive, the influence of national events on the family estates' evolution and management, and whether the achievements of the "new agriculture" in the examined period impacted the family's farming practices.

The research's objective is not limited to a narrow economic history investigation but, expanded, it aims to discuss the ownership and family history aspects of specific periods (before I. András, I. András, II. Gáspár, I. Pál, I. Gedeon, II. Gedeon, III. Pál). This research sets out

to commence with the family's well-documented history dating back to the 13th century, which, so far, has only been summarily described in the existing literature.

The research period concludes with the death of III. Pál (1827). It ends partly because the family's financial foundation dramatically narrowed following this period, which resulted in a significant decline in the family's economic strength. Also, likely associated with this, there was a drastic reduction in the preserved archival materials related to the estates of the subsequent period.

## **2. Sources and Methods of Research:**

The family archive that has survived in the Ráday Archive of the Danubian Reformed Church District represents unique value not only for the family's history but also in terms of national events (e.g., Rákóczi's War of Independence), Protestant religious history, and Hungarian culture (literature, theater history). The Ráday family's archive comprises a total of 25 linear meters of documents, which can be considered an outstanding quantity compared to the often meager half or one linear meter of surviving records for commoner families, although incomparable to the sometimes several hundred linear meters of records preserved for noble families. After gaining elevated status, the family members made efforts to organize estate administration more accurately, which resulted in the preservation of various financial accounts and reports from the first half of the 19th century. However, due to the fragmentation of estates, there was not enough time to fully develop and improve the system.

Primary sources for the research are the economic records preserved in the C/64-2.b. and C/64-2.c. series, which contain economic notes starting from András I. Ráday in the mid-17th century. Urbariums were mostly prepared in relation to the division of family estates, providing evidence for mapping the economic opportunities of the family's estates. The characteristics of the wells in the archive provide abundant information for researchers to explore various segments of the family's life. However, continuous, consecutive account books and crop statements, which could allow for a systematic analysis of economic changes, are entirely missing in economic terms. Instead, for the 18th century, the primary sources are mainly linear documents and entries in calendars found in the Ráday Library that inform about crop results, as well as revenues and expenses. Collecting and processing these required meticulous work.

The fully preserved estate divisions provide a clear picture of the development of family estates. In many cases, they contain indispensable information found in the abundance of correspondence written by estate officials and the officials themselves, whose pages preserve an interesting impression for contemporary individuals.

By examining the more than five hundred mortgage, lease, exchange, and sales contracts, we can shed light on the Ráday family's land strategy – this includes understanding how much the landlord aimed (if at all) to concentrate their properties. It helps determine whether there was any attempt at centralization during the acquisition of their estates. While the Ráday family archive was an inexhaustible source for my research, the investigation of economic, family, and property history necessitated the

inclusion of other sources. From an economic history perspective, particularly notable are the nationwide surveys from the 18th century (1715, 1720, 1728), as well as the data from Maria Theresa's urbarium reform. In terms of family and property history, the county assembly and court records are of significance.

A comprehensive list of the sources used in my research and those that could not be incorporated due to space constraints can be provided.<sup>1</sup> These sources can contribute additional insights to understanding the family's life, the driving forces behind it, and processing them is a task for the future.

Organizing the dissertation thematically and chronologically, I divided it into seven major chapters. After the introductory section, the second chapter delves into the Ráday family's background, examining the motivations (e.g., marriage strategy, holding office) behind the family's relocation from Pest County to Nógrád in the late 16th century. Then, concerning the family's property history, I trace the acquisitions from András I. Ráday, beginning in the mid-17th century, and the expansion of the property portfolio, examining how the Rádays increased their holdings through various related families. Using the well-preserved data, the family's growth and the height of the property portfolio's expansion by the mid-18th century are thoroughly explored, followed by the decline and fragmentation of the estate in the early 19th century. It is fortunate that the family's estate division

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<sup>1</sup> Mentioning only the most important ones: the processing of various litigation records, manorial protocols, but this can also include the analysis of data extracted from thousands of preserved letters.

records have been fully preserved, which provide detailed data on the family's property history. This data has been recorded in tables, and the property structure of different periods has been depicted on maps. The fourth chapter follows the development of estate management, tracking the evolution of the Ráday estate management system from direct lordship to the highest level of estate hierarchy. The chapter on landlord agriculture discusses crop cultivation and animal husbandry and addresses the viticulture of the estates, revenue, and expenditure, as well as the characteristic serf services. The property transactions, mortgage, lease, exchanges and sales chapter uses data from hundreds of contracts to reveal how more and more properties were taken out of the family's management and how the family became irreversibly indebted by the late 1820s.

While the Ráday family's archive can be considered significant in the context of commoner families, in terms of economic history, it is fragmentary for periods preceding the late 18th century. Because no comprehensive exploration of the family archive had been conducted earlier, I endeavored to uncover the basic economic sources (surveys, crop tables, urbariums, etc.) and make them publicly available. Nevertheless, the fragmentary nature of the data, often consisting of just a single year's economic information, often hindered making broad conclusions. Thus, it is essential to emphasize that this dissertation represents a foundational study in which thousands of documents, including tiny informational fragments found in notes, were used to provide a comprehensive picture of the Ráday family's life and economy.

### **3. New Scientific Findings**

The history of the Ráday family has followed a trajectory reminiscent of classic family sagas throughout the ages. In the first half of its history, a gradual ascent is evident. The family initially rose from serfdom to become small landowners, then traversed the social hierarchy, accumulating estates and inheritances, eventually joining the ranks of the landed gentry in the latter half of the 18th century. By the end of the 18th century, they had reached the pinnacle of the social hierarchy, having acquired baronial and later, comital titles, entering the ranks of the Hungarian aristocracy. However, this elevation in status also sealed the family's fate. The noble title led to financial decline, compounded by the fragmentation of their estates and the loss of estate centers in the late 19th century, culminating in the extinction of the male line in the early 20th century.

In the second and third chapters of the dissertation, I have explored the evolution of the family's property holdings from the 14th century to the early 19th century. From the 14th century onwards, there is a consistent increase in the number of properties owned, reflecting the family's journey. The dissertation elaborates on how the family transitioned from serfdom in a single village in the 14th century to the small landowning gentry and expanded their holdings in Pest County through strategic marriages, which they temporarily lost due to the Ottoman conquest. To address this loss and the threat of war, Gáspár I. Ráday relocated the family's seat first to Heves and later to Nógrád County in the mid-16th century, strategically acquiring assets, primarily in Nógrád, over the centuries.



The architect of the family's wealth foundation is considered to be Gáspár I. Ráday's son, I. András, who meticulously built up the property portfolio that determined the family's existence during the tumultuous early 17th century. Through his merits and acquisitions through pledges, he established a property structure that, by the mid-17th century, included 36 estates, mainly in Pest and Nógrád counties. After the expulsion of the Ottomans and the acceptance of the Rákóczi Rebellion and amnesty, Pál I. Ráday could embark on consolidating the family's holdings. Through his wife, Klára Kajali, the family acquired significant properties in Pest (e.g., Pécel), Hont, and Nógrád counties, which reached a total of 75 by the mid-18th century, marking the zenith of their property holdings.

From this point on, a gradual decline is observed. In 1742, the family lost a third of their estates when Eszter Ráday, through her marriage to László Teleki, took control of them. II. Pál and his brother, Gedeon I. Ráday, attempted to create an interconnected block of estates, but this effort was short-lived due to the early death of II. Pál. This unfortunate turn of events was also pivotal in I. Gedeon's life, as he then came into possession of the Pécel manor, which was originally inherited by his brother, and began its expansion and transformation into the family's central hub. The Ráday family's focus subsequently shifted from Nógrád to the heart of the country. By the mid-18th century, Ráday I, followed by II. Gedeon and III. Pál, could still maintain control as the sole proprietors of the diminished estate. However, after III. Pál's passing in 1827, the estate fragmented into four parts, with half of it

completely leaving the control of the male line due to the two female heirs.

The family archives provided an opportunity to uncover the evolution of estate management and its various stages, which I discussed in the fourth chapter of the dissertation. Based on the sources, it is evident how the system, still under direct feudal lordship in the 17th century, developed as the estate holdings grew. By the early 18th century, following Pál Kajali's model, Pál I. Ráday established the "ispánság" offices, and after his death, "tisztartóság" offices were formed to manage the expanded estate holdings. This system necessitated the creation of additional employee positions, including "kulcsár" and "kasznár", and significantly increased the number of economic laborers. At the end of the 18th century, the acquisition of baronial and comital titles created a need to conform to the lifestyle of aristocratic families in terms of appearances. This led to the establishment of the "inspektor" and "prefektus" offices. The fact that these positions were established primarily for the sake of appearances is indicated by the absence of land grants with these promotions. Consequently, these positions were created to manage a gradually diminishing estate inventory, starting from the mid-18th century.

By the early 19th century, the number of economic employees had multiplied several times over, along with the wages and in-kind payments they received. This placed a significant burden on the family's finances, making long-term sustainability unfeasible.

In the fifth and most extensive chapter, I uncovered the management of the Ráday estates based on the available

account books, crop and livestock reports, and other economic sources. In the 17th century, the family's properties could be categorized into two groups. Firstly, there were the estates managed directly by the lord himself, where he conducted estate or manorial farming or received various dues from serfs. Secondly, there were properties located in distant areas, particularly in territories under Ottoman rule, from which indirect income was generated through leasing. This dual approach persisted throughout the second half of the 17th century.

During the time of Pál I. Ráday in the early 18th century, with the end of the Turkish threat, the development of estate management began. At this time, manorial farming was primarily carried out at the "ispánság" centers. The ratio of manorial farming to serf farming was one-third to two-thirds at this time.

By the mid-18th century, the ratio of manorial and leasehold arable land could be defined, favoring the leasehold lands one-quarter to three-quarters. However, this ratio suggests the presence of significant manorial farming on the Ráday estates.

Towards the end of the 18th century, an increase in the annual grain yield and the share of "dézsmá" (a type of tax) revenue (constituting one-fourth of the total income) became noticeable. Throughout the 18th century, the dominant crops grown, both on manorial and leasehold lands, were wheat, rye, barley, and oats.

In the early 19th century, a significant expansion of manorial land occurred, but a third of all manorial land and nearly half of the arable land was leased or mortgaged, providing only indirect benefit to the lord. This period also saw an increase in the number of leased lands, but the

decline in the average size of peasant holdings indicates land fragmentation and the decline of the peasantry into landless status.

By this time, the ratio of all manorial and leased arable land was 58% to 42%. However, when accounting for land not directly managed (leased or mortgaged), this ratio becomes 37% to 63%. This means that by the early 19th century, the family representatives were relying less on manorial production as a source of income. Instead, income came from "dézsmá" collected from serfs and the money or goods received from leased or mortgaged properties at regular intervals.

Up to the period discussed in the dissertation, the Ráday family relied on traditional, open-field cultivation with sharecropping. Although the use of manure for soil improvement began to spread in the early 19th century, it was not sufficient to fully embrace the "new agriculture" elements.

In the last chapter of the doctoral work, by analyzing the data from hundreds of surviving lease, rental, exchange, and inheritance contracts, I revealed the family's property and lease transactions. Through the remaining debt statements from the early 19th century, I was able to document the stages of the Ráday family's indebtedness.

During the first half of the 18th century, the focus of property acquisition was primarily on the northern areas, towards Pest-Solt-Pilis County. However, by the second half of the 18th century, this ambition became more directionless. By the early 19th century, the number of mortgages diminished considerably, while lease transactions nearly doubled. Part of the reason for this shift can be attributed to the lifestyle associated with the noble

titles acquired by II. Gedeon and the accompanying expenses. Leasing the estates not only provided an annual fixed income but also allowed them to fulfill the obligations associated with holding an office, leaving them with less time for direct estate management.

To counterbalance the increased expenses, borrowing became inevitable, with family members beginning to take loans starting from the mid-18th century, and this significantly increased by the end of the 18th century. Revenues from individual estate leases and serf dues could not offset the growing expenses.

By the early 19th century, the rising debts and their interest payments had irreversibly burdened the family's finances. The capital acquired through borrowing was not invested in the development of the estate; as a result, even by the time of III. Pál, the family's economy was unable to break free from traditional farming methods. While elements of the "new agriculture" began to emerge, the lack of capital and the use of the majority of estate land by non-family members thwarted any kind of modernization.

In summary, the key to the Ráday family's rise lay in their successful marriage strategy. However, the continuous decline observed from the late 18th century to the early 19th century, marked by a significant portion of the estate not being managed directly, resulting in an inability to develop the economy and modernize, as well as in the attainment of noble titles, indebtedness, and the proliferation of heirs, was due to land fragmentation. The family's revenues consisted of four units: leasing of estates, manorial farming, "dézsma" receipts, and income from leases. Throughout, the family adhered to traditional

farming methods with their inherent limitations. While segments of the "new agriculture" appeared in the early 19th century, they were not fully realized by the end of the period discussed in the dissertation (1827). After that, the fragmentation of the estates left no chance for economic development.

#### **4. The author's publications related to the topic.**

1. "Most Ludány veve által bennünket...": A Ráday család alsó ludányi históriája. In: NEOGRAD 36 Salgótarján, 2013. 121-139.
2. A helységek közti kereskedelem és a gazdasági munkák nehézségei a 18. században - Egy középnemesi család gazdasági levelezése alapján. In: Magyar Gazdaságtörténeti Évkönyv 2016: Válság – Kereskedelem. Szerk.: Kövér György, Pogány Ágnes, Weisz Boglárka, Demeter Gábor, Draskóczy István, Gaucsík István, Simon Zsolt, Somorjai Szabolcs, Szántay Antal, Tózsá-Rigó Attila. Budapest, 2016. 371-378.
3. Elmúlhatatlan szükségünktől kényszerítettén...” 17–19. századi Nógrád vármegyei zálog és haszonbérszerződések a Rádayak levelestárából. In: Magyar Gazdaságtörténeti Évkönyv 2017-2018: Hitel - Bank – Piac. Szerk.: Kövér György, Pogány Ágnes, Weisz Boglárka; Demeter Gábor, Draskóczy István, Gaucsík István, Simon Zsolt,

Somorjai Szabolcs, Szántay Antal, Tózsá-Rigó Attila. Budapest, 2018. 113-133.

4. A politikán és az irodalmon túl: A Ráday-család birtokigazgatása I. Pál és I. Gedeon idején. In: Lator, László Iván (szerk.): Sorsok és missziók a politikai változások tükrében. Budapest, 2018. 9-30.
5. Majorsági gazdálkodás a 19. század elején a Rádayak „ludányi nyílhoz” tartozó birtokain. In: Magyar Gazdaságtörténeti Évkönyv 2019: Uradalom – Vállalat. Szerk.: Kövér György, Pogány Ágnes, Weisz Boglárka, Simon Zsolt, Somorjai Szabolcs, Szántay, Antal. Budapest, 2019. 155-174.
6. Nógrád vármegye elveszett köznemesi famíliái - A Libercsey de Kislibercse család genealógiája. In: NEOGRAD 2020 A Dornyay Béla Múzeum Évkönyve 43. Salgótarján, 2020. 45-64.
7. „Még áll a ház, s régi alakjában áll...” A Ráday család alsóludányi kastélya. "Madaradnak fogadj engem...": Tanulmányok Lengyel Ágnes tiszteletére. Balassagyarmat, 2021. 355-370.
8. Ráday Pál és a „somoskői jóság”. NEOGRAD 2021 A Dornyay Béla Múzeum Évkönyve 44. Salgótarján, 2021. 25-44.

9. „Bizonyos és eltávozhatatlan szükségéinktől viseltetvén” 17–19. századi zálogszerződések a Rádayak levelestárából. Történelmi Szemle 64. Budapest, 2022. 673-687.
10. Nógrád vármegye elveszett köznemesi famíliái – A Kajali de Kajal család. NEOGRAD 2022 A Dornyay Béla Múzeum Évkönyve 45. Salgótarján, 2022. 9-28.