

Social Network and Resources of the Observant Franciscans in Hungary at the End of the Middle Ages

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The Observant branch of the Franciscan Order appeared in south-eastern Europe as early as the first half of the fourteenth century, and the friars soon arrived in Hungary, as well. However, one has to emphasise that these early communities were not the same as the Observant movement initiated by Saint Bernardino of Siena and promoted in East Central Europe by the preachers Saint James of the Marches and Saint John of Capistrano. The early Observance entered Hungary around 1350 from Bosnia, and the Bosnian friars working in the Balkan mission lived in twelve friaries within the borders of the Hungarian Kingdom. The “infiltration” of Bernardino’s followers began in 1415, not independently of the Council of Constance, since almost all of the early Hungarian supporters of this new Franciscan movement were in Constance for a shorter or longer period.¹ For a little more than thirty years, the new Observant friaries also belonged to the Bosnian vicariate, but in 1448 the Hungarian vicariate was formed out of most of the houses existing within the borders of the Kingdom.² A further seventy years passed before the province was founded in 1517, of course in connection with the general development of the Franciscan Order. Around this time the Hungarian

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- 1 B. F. Romhányi, „A konstanzi zsinat és a ferences obszervancia megjelenése Magyarországon” [The Council of Constance and the Appearance of Franciscan Observance in Hungary], in *„Causa unionis, causa fidei, causa reformationis in capite et membris”: Tanulmányok a konstanzi zsinat 600. évfordulója alkalmából* [Studies in honour of the 600th anniversary of the Council of Constance]. Ed. by A. Bárány and L. Pósan, Debrecen 2014, 210–218. B. F. Romhányi: „Das Konstanzer Konzil und die Ankunft der Franziskanerobservanz im mittelalterlichen Ungarn”, in *Das Konzil von Konstanz und Ungarn*. Ed. A. Bárány, Debrecen, 2016, 237–250.
- 2 A few friaries remained under the jurisdiction of the Bosnian vicariate, e.g. that of Diakóvár (Điakovo, Croatia). J. Karácsonyi, *Szent Ferencz rendjének története Magyarországon 1711-ig* [A History of the Order of St. Francis in Hungary up to 1711]. I–II. Budapest, 1923–1924, here: vol. II, 36.

community of the Observant Franciscan friars was by far the largest north of the Alps, with 72 friaries and around 1700 friars. Despite the effects of plague and the peasant war of 1514, there were still more members around 1520 than 1400.³

However, one has to mention some spectacular changes that happened between the beginning and the end of the fifteenth century. Many of the earliest fourteenth-century foundations disappeared till the end of the fifteenth century in the region between the Maros, Tisza and Danube Rivers. Out of these early friaries, only Karánsebes (Caransebeș, Romania) and Diakóvár (Đakovo, Croatia) survived till the end of the Middle Ages. In contrast the new foundations – especially from the mid-fifteenth century – concentrated in the territory of Transdanubia and Slavonia, even if some friaries emerged in the northern part of the country, too. (Map 1) In the background we can detect the support of the aristocracy and the lesser nobility, their “alliance” with the friars in order to defend the Kingdom against the Ottoman expansion.⁴ Looking at the site selection, it is worth mentioning that the overwhelming majority of the new Observant friaries were in smaller market towns, or even in villages, in the neighbourhood of the noble residences. This feature is quite common from the earliest arrival of the followers of Saint Bernardino. Let us



Map 1: Observant friaries around 1500

- 3 Cf. J. Szűcs, „A ferences obszervancia és az 1514. évi parasztháború. Egy kódex tanúsága” [The Franciscan Observance and the Peasant Revolt of 1514. Evidence Provided by a Codex], *Levéltári Közlemények* 43 (1972), 213–261, particularly: 220.
- 4 B. F. Romhányi, „Az obszerváns ferencesek és a Délvidék védelme” [Observant Franciscans and the Defense of Southern Hungary], in *Európa védelmében: Kapisztrán Szent János és a nándorfehérvári diadal emlékezete* [Defending Europe: Saint John of Capistran and the remembrance of the victory of Belgrade]. Ed. P. Kálmán and L. Veszprémy, Budapest 2013, 15–23.

just refer to the foundation of Filippo Scolari (in Hungary known as Pipo of Ozora) near his new castle in Ozora; to the friary founded by Nicolaus of Újlak at his new residence in Palota;⁵ or even to the Visegrád friary founded by King Sigismund of Luxembourg in Visegrád, where the connection between the royal palace and the friary is maybe the most spectacular, as they were direct neighbours.⁶ As a result the Observant Franciscan network was not so strongly linked to the urban centres, which were less in number in medieval Hungary than in Western or Southern Europe anyhow. Several of their most important urban friaries – in Buda, Pest and Esztergom – were taken over from the Conventual branch.

After this short overview of the formation of the late medieval Observant network, let us examine the social and political environment of the order, this time leaving the economic aspects out of account. Our focus will be a topographical one, i.e. we shall concentrate on the sites of the provincial chapters and on the places of origin of the friars; thus, I will not analyse the last wills, the *pro anima* donations, or the confraternity charters in this context.

The sites chosen for the assemblies of the vicariate (called province from 1517) of the Observants reflect three different patterns corresponding to three periods. In the first period, between 1444 and 1471, we have data on seven assemblies, and there is no regularity either in the intervals or in the sites. (Table 1) Each of these events was held in different towns: Jenő (Ineu, Romania), Gyula, Palota (Várpalota), Ozora, Újlak (Ilok, Croatia), Szalárd (Sălard, Romania) and Sárospatak. The last four assemblies were held more regularly, every third year. Although we do not have direct evidence for the financial support of the assemblies, the patrons of the listed friaries were doubtlessly the major sponsors. The Losonci (Jenő), Maróti (Gyula), Újlaki (Palota and Újlak), Hédervári (Ozora), Csáki (Szalárd) and Pálóci families (Sárospatak) all belonged to the highest nobility of the Kingdom. However, despite the fact that in this very period several Conventual friaries were given to the Observants due to the initiatives of John Hunyadi, his personal favour does not appear in the selection of the sites. We would also search in vain

Table 1: Sites of the assemblies of the Observant vicariate between 1444 and 1471

Year	Site	Year	Site
1444	Jenő	1465	Újlak
1452	Gyula	1468	Szalárd
1456	Palota	1471	Sárospatak
1462	Ozora		

5 B. F. Romhányi, *Kolduló barátok, gazdálkodó szerzetesek. Koldulórendi gazdálkodás a középkori Magyarországon* [Mendicant friars, managing monks. Economy of the mendicant orders in medieval Hungary]. Dissertation presented at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2015, 55–56.

6 J. Laszlovszky, „Crown, Gown and Town: Zones of Royal, Ecclesiastical and Civic Interaction in Medieval Buda and Visegrád”, in *Segregation – Integration – Assimilation. Religious and Ethnic Groups in the Medieval Towns of Central and Eastern Europe*. Ed. by D. Keene, B. Nagy and K. Szende, Farnham 2009, 179–203, here: 185.

for evidence of the King as direct supporter in this period. There is nothing surprising in this for the time between 1444 and 1458, the so-called interregnum, but lack of royal intervention is more surprising in the first decade of King Mathias' reign, especially if we consider the good relation between the Order and the King's family. The change in the King's policy becomes even more evident if we consider that between 1473 and 1489 four of the nine assemblies were held in Buda, and a fifth one was also sponsored by King Matthias (see further below).

The situation changed considerably in the second period, between 1473 and 1517. (Table 2) In these 45 years 24 assemblies took place with a regular alternation. Twenty-three ordinary and one extraordinary (Pest, 1504) chapters were held, of which some were supported by the King (twelve),⁷ the Újlaki (three), the Szapolyai (two) and the Geréb of Vingárt families (two). There were only four assemblies financed by other "sponsors" (Palatine Michael Ország of Gut, the former master of the treasury Ladislaus of Paks, Cardinal Archbishop Thomas Bakócz of Esztergom, the Ban of Belgrade Emeric Török of Enying⁸). The chosen sites reflect a similar regularity: Buda hosted the event eight times, Újlak and Atya (Ilok and Šarengrad,

Table 2: Sites of the assemblies of the Observant vicariate between 1473 and 1517 (the sites belonging to the *Medium Regni* appear with bold, those in the southern region appear underlined)

Year	Site	Year	Site
1473	Buda	1497	Pest
1475	<u>Újlak</u>	1499	<u>Atya</u>
1477	Szécsény	1501	Buda
1479	Esztergom	1503	Buda
1481	Szántó	1504	Pest
1483	Buda	1505	Buda
1485	Szántó	1507	Esztergom
1487	Buda	1509	<u>Újlak</u>
1489	Buda	1511	<u>Atya</u>
1491	<i>Paks*</i>	1513	Visegrád
1493	<u>Újlak</u>	1515	Buda
1495	<u>Atya</u>	1517	<u>Futak</u>

*Paks fits into the basic system, being halfway between the south and Buda.

7 The assembly of 1479 in Esztergom was actually sponsored by the King, since the seat was *de facto* vacant because of the fleeing of Archbishop Johann Beckensloer in 1476.

8 As one of the supporters of the illegitimate son of King Matthias John Corvinus Emeric Török received a number of estates from the huge Hunyadi domains (mainly in hypothec), among them the castle of Futak, to which he could stick even after John Corvinus's death. After becoming the warden of Belgrade in 1507 he was one of the mightiest lords of the Kingdom. Cf. *Enyingi Török Bálint okmánytára*. Ed. J. Bessenyei. Budapest 1994, <http://mek.oszk.hu/02200/02211/html/torokb1.htm#c3> (08.06.2015).

The third period begins after 1517, the formal foundation of the Hungarian province of the Observant Franciscans. However, the first evidence of a provincial chapter dates only from 1525. (Table 3) Data for six chapters in the next fourteen years survived, but one has to admit that there are serious lacunas in the source material. Nonetheless, a clear change can be observed: the sites shifted to the north, and some places appear which were never mentioned in this context earlier (Gyöngyös, Jászberény, Nagyszőlős [Vovkove, Ukraine], Nagyvárad [Oradea, Romania]). Of course we find some old ones, as well (Gyula, Buda). Unlike the period before 1517, Buda, the capital of the medieval Hungarian Kingdom, was chosen just once, in 1539, when the city was in the hands of King John Szapolyai. It seems to be clear that the constant Ottoman incursions and the civil war hindered the maintenance of the previous system, on the one hand, and the emergence and stabilisation of a new one, on the other. The main aim of the Order was apparently to be as far from the turbulent regions as possible.¹¹

Table 3: Sites of the assemblies of the Observant vicariate between 1525 and 1539

Year	Site	Year	Site
1525	Nagyszőlős	1535	Gyöngyös
1531	Nagyvárad	1537	Jászberény
1533	Gyula	1539	Buda

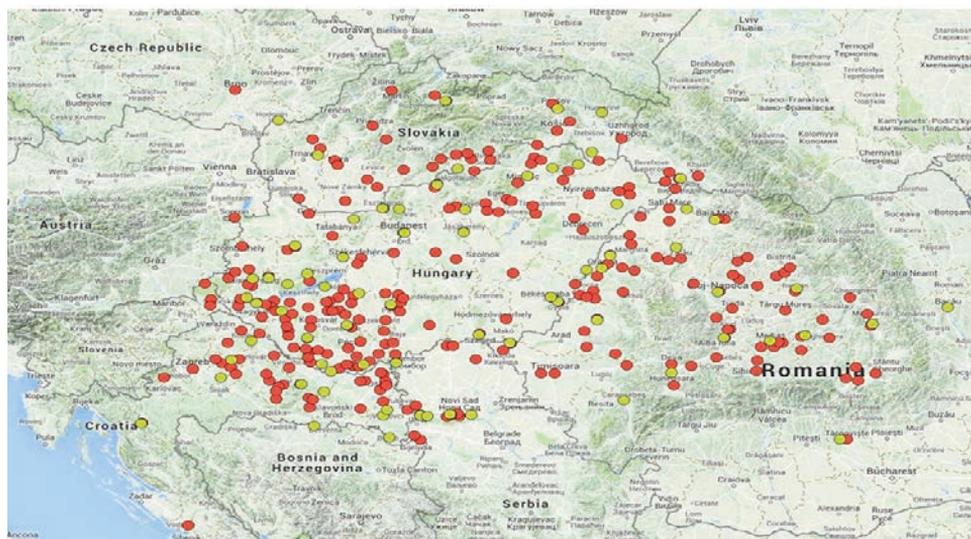
In comparison, let us have a look at the sites of the Conventual assemblies between 1450 and 1540. For this period data on 34 assemblies survived. Most of them (7) were held in Székesfehérvár, but Eger and Óbuda were often chosen (5), as well. Segesd and Szeged hosted the gathering of the Conventuals four times each. Besides these only Pécs, Szemenye and – at the end of the period, in the 1530s – Nagyvárad (Oradea, Romania) were chosen more than once. Not only is the geographic pattern different – this is at least partly the consequence of the different networks – but the circle of supporters seems to be different, too. On the one hand, half of the assemblies were held in important ecclesiastic centres: the Collegiate Chapter of Székesfehérvár, the bishops of Eger, Pécs and Nagyvárad, and once even the archbishop of Kalocsa took over the finances. On the other hand, the highest nobility is very poorly represented, if at all. For instance, the patron of the Szemenye friary, the Bánfi family, played an eminent role in the Angevin era, but they were not important political actors in the fifteenth century. Actually, it is only the King himself who appears as mighty sponsor, besides the Church of course.

To detect the social resources of the Observant movement, we have to refer to the names of the friars. Obviously, there are quite a number of difficulties in using these data: not all the friars are mentioned with their place of origin, in certain cases it is hard to define whether the given surname is the place of birth or the place of entering the Order, or there are even place names that are hardly

¹¹ For the data on the chapters see the history of the friaries in Karácsonyi II, *passim*, as well as M.-M. de Cevins, *Les Franciscains observants hongrois de l'expansion à la débâcle (vers 1450 – vers 1540)*. Roma 2008. 622–623.

identifiable (e.g. Szentmárton, Keszi). But – due to the surviving list of members from 1535 – we have a statistically evaluable set of data at least for the early sixteenth century which we can complete with some other names known from different sources. Out of more than 500 names collected, around 310 places of origin were identifiable. Since most of the places were not sites of Franciscan friaries (sixty names, i.e. ~20 per cent refer to settlements where Franciscans were present, both Observant and Conventual),¹² they can certainly be regarded as places of origin. Of course, in the case of the settlements with a Franciscan friary, we can assume that some local people entered the order, but we also have to account for the possibility that these names refer to the place where the given person took his vows. Nonetheless, it is probable that the persons lived in the very region.

When analysing the data, two features appear at a first glance: the geographical distribution is quite uneven and the number of villages is rather high. As regards the first phenomenon, the concentration of places of origin coincides with that of the Observant friaries in the second half of the fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries (Map 3). One could argue that the recruitment of the Order was easier where they were present with their convents, too. This is certainly true; however, another formulation seems to be more adequate: both the denser network of friaries and the larger number of friars originating from this specific region reflect the higher population density of southern Transdanubia and Slavonia, i.e. the



Map 3: The convents (green) and the places of origin (red) of the Observant Franciscans

¹² Although the former Conventual branch of the Franciscan Order accepted the regular observance in 1517, they formed in Hungary two separate provinces. The former Conventuals became the *Provincia Mariana*, while the Observant vicariate became the *Provincia Salvatoriana* (the names were given in 1523 at the General Chapter of the Order). Cf. Karácsonyi I, 84–87.

southern part of ancient Pannonia. The spectacular presence of the Observant Franciscans was also connected to the constant struggles against the Ottomans, who pressured the southern border region of the Hungarian Kingdom from the early fifteenth century on. In numbers: around 33 per cent of the known members originated from these territories, and we also have to take into account the Croatian and Dalmatian friars (~2 %). A similar percentage of the friars originating from the Great Plain came from the most southern part of that region. Even speaking more generally, we can assert that the majority of the friars came from the southern regions and from Transylvania (Table 4). For instance, when looking at the places from where at least three members entered the Order, we can see that only 33 out of 139 such persons came from towns north of the Kolozsvár (Cluj)-Paks line and 36 persons originated from Slavonian towns alone.¹³

Table 4: The places of origin of the friars (1450-1540)*

Region	Nr of persons	%	Nr of settlements	%
„Pannonia”	167	33.13	116	33.34
- Transdanubia	93	18.45	73	20.98
- Slavonia and Sirmium	74	14.68	43	12.36
Great Plain	111	22.02	72	20.69
- Bács, Bodrog, Csongrád	24	4.76	7	2.01
- Csanád, Temes	16	3.17	7	2.01
Transsylvania	97	19.25	58	16.67
Upper Hungary	61	12.10	47	13.51
Croatia and Dalmatia	10	1.98	9	2.59
From abroad	6	1.19	6	1.72
Medium Regni	5	0.99	3	0.86
Unidentified	47	9.33	37	10.63
	504		348	

* The numbers are mainly based on the list of 1535.

It was supposed earlier as well that the social basis of the recruitment of the friars was the inhabitants of the market towns.¹⁴ The spatial distribution of the places of

13 The social composition, as well as the spatial distribution of those who were admitted to the confraternity of the Observants is quite different from that of the friars. Cf.: M. M. de Cevins, *Koldulórendi konfraternitások a középkori Magyarországon (1270 k. – 1530 k.)* [Mendicant confraternities in medieval Hungary (c.1270 – c.1530)]. Pécs 2015, 229–252.

14 J. Szűcs, „Ferences ellenzéki áramlat az 1514-es parasztháború és reformáció hátterében” [Franciscan opposition movement in the background of the 1514 Peasants’ Revolt and that of the Reformation], *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 78 (1974), 409–435; furthermore <http://archivum.ferencesek.hu/index.php?modul=dokumentumok&ut=/I.%20Enchiridion//01%20Magyar%20rendtörténet&behiv=02%20Magyar%20ferences%20középkor.htm>

origin tells us more about this social environment. While the number of friars with burgher background is effectively high, another social layer is also represented: many of the Order's members came from families living in villages (e.g. Bodmér, Horhi, Potoly, Tagyon, Terebezd in Transdanubia, Alfalu, Csombord or Csíkma-daras in Transylvania).

However, despite the obvious popularity of the Observant movement, there are some missing social layers and regions. The central region, the so-called *Medium Regni*, is hardly represented in places of origin: out of the known 500 names, only five persons can be connected to this part of the country. This is even more striking since the centre of the vicariate was in Buda; the Esztergom friary housed the most important school of the Franciscans till the 1520s, where the famous preacher Pelbárt Temesvári also taught; and the Pest convent was also quite influential: in 1526, for instance, the relics of Saint Gerhard – rescued from Csanád because of the Ottoman wars – were preserved in its church. Another region that we look for on the map in vain is the so-called Temesköz, in the inter-fluves of the Maros, Tisza and Danube Rivers. In this area we are certainly misled by the fact that the surviving list of friars was compiled in 1535. By this time the ethnic and religious composition of this region had undergone a basic change compared to its demographic layout a hundred years before. The constant Ottoman incursions and the uninterrupted immigration of refugees transformed the landscape radically: in this part of the Kingdom, the majority of the population was Serbian or Wallachian orthodox from the late fifteenth century on. As a consequence of this transformation, we see the dissolution of the mendicant network between the 1430s and 1470s.¹⁵ In contrast to this feature, new, orthodox monasteries emerged here from the 1470s on.¹⁶ Therefore it is hardly surprising if there were but a few members of the Order originating from this region, and even they came either from Temesvár itself – the major local centre – or from the territory's north-western corner, around the bishop's seat Csanád. It is maybe less surprising, but still it has to be noted that the north-western part of the Kingdom was rather poorly represented among the members of the Order.

As far as the missing social layers are concerned, one may primarily think of the nobility. Despite the obvious support received by the Order from the lesser

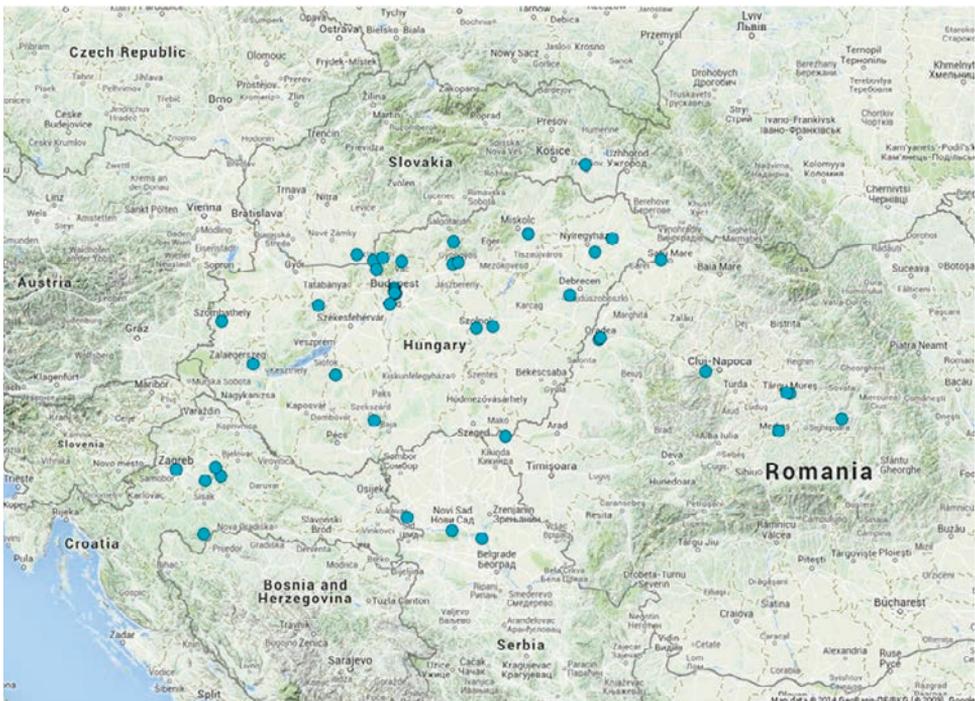
15 B. F. Romhányi, „Kolostorhálózat – településhálózat – népesség. A középkori Magyar Királyság demográfiai helyzetének változásaihoz” [Network of monasteries – network of settlements – population. On the demographic changes of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary], *Történelmi Szemle* 57 (2015), 1–50, here: 26. For the changing role of Temesvár see I. Petrovics, “The Bishopric of Csanád/Cenad and the Ecclesiastical Institutions of Medieval Temesvár/Timișoara”, *Transylvanian Review* 22 (2013), 242–252, here: 248. Due to the role played by Temesvár in the running of the southern border defence, the town lost its urban character to some extent (the Franciscan friars left, the two hospitals were unified), in order to become a fortification, being the military centre of the Hungarian defence system against the Ottoman expansion.

16 The first two documented Orthodox monasteries in the region are Vojlovica (1470s) and Bodrogu Vechi (1480s). B. F. Romhányi: *Kolostorok és társaskáptalanok a középkori Magyarországon* [Monasteries and Collegiate Chapter Houses in medieval Hungary]. Budapest 2000, 31, 73.

and higher nobility, we hardly find any friar of noble origin among the Order's members. In the list of 1535 Friar Petrus Bika of Teremhegy was indicated as noble, and this fact alone shows that it was something to be mentioned. Another known member of noble origin was Paul of Tomor, the later archbishop of Kalocsa and the captain of the Hungarian army at Mohács in 1526. Before entering the Order he had a long career in the service of different lords as a notary and soldier.

The Observant Franciscans and the Pauline Hermits are often paralleled – with good reason. However, there is a small but important difference between them in their recruitment. Namely, the Paulines seem to have been attractive for the clergy, too: in the second half of the fifteenth and the first half of the sixteenth century, there is evidence for several Paulines who entered the Order after an ecclesiastic career. The most illustrious of them was John of Szakoly, the former bishop of Csanád.¹⁷ However, nothing similar can be seen among the Observants.

As a comparison let us also refer to the map on the places of origin of the Pauline hermits. (Map 4) Of course, our data set is much smaller and much more incidental: the basis is not a coherent list of members, giving a snapshot in a precise moment, but a series of data gained from different charters and other documents in the period between the mid-fifteenth and the mid-sixteenth centuries. However, the result can be compared to the previous map, and the differences are rather clear.



Map 4: The places of origin of the Pauline hermits (1450–1550)

17 G. Gyöngyösi, *Vitae fratrum eremitarum*. Budapest 1988, 173.

Maybe two aspects can be underlined here: the missing concentration in south-west Hungary, and – in a clear difference – the dense group in the *Medium Regni*, roughly between Buda and Esztergom. On the one hand, the two maps complete each other; on the other, they also reveal the differences of the social backgrounds of the two orders.

To sum up, more than 40 per cent of the Observant friars in medieval Hungary came from the southern and south-western regions of the Kingdom, even if almost all the other regions also were represented. This latter statement means that Saxons of Transylvania also entered the Order, despite the fact that there were no Observant convents in those territories. Compared to other orders peasants were overrepresented in the community. However, there are some missing territories: the Hungarian Plane, the Banat of Temes (Timiș, Romania) and the westernmost border region around Pozsony (Bratislava, Slovakia). The reasons are different. The Hungarian Plane was a loosely settled area with a nucleated settlement system. The majority of the population in the Banat was orthodox by the end of the Middle Ages; the transformation of the ethnic and religious circumstances in this region began around the 1420s and ended in the last decades of the fifteenth century. The third region was not very densely populated, either, but what is more important it was influenced by the neighbouring Austrian territories where the Observant movement could not take roots.

When analysing the lists of convent members, it can be seen that mobility within the country was significant, but there were very few friars coming from abroad. This is understandable since the Hungarian province of the Order was by far the largest not only in East Central Europe but even in the whole of Europe north of the Alps – certainly there was no need for supply from outside the province.

When we look at the spatial relations between the friaries and the places of origin, we can assert that most of the friaries pulled the new members from a smaller or larger circle around them. However, there are some exceptions. We cannot find such circuit around Bacău and Târgoviște outside the Carpathian Mountains, and it is similarly failing at the friaries of Karánsebes (Caransebeș, Romania) and Szakolca (Skalice, Slovakia). These convents can be identified as missionary centres. Three of them were oriented to the orthodox population, while the fourth (Szakolca) was an outpost towards Hussite Bohemia.

It also has to be underlined that there is no relation between the spatial distribution of the network of friaries and the places of the provincial assemblies. For instance, there was no chapter held in the most densely settled south-western region, while there were many of them in the *Medium Regni*. The reason for the differences is obviously the different social backgrounds: although not exclusively, the network of the friaries was much more influenced by the social contacts and the interests of the recruitment, while the sites of the assemblies were chosen according to political considerations.

