

Past and present for the future in Magyarlóna¹ - a history of a Transylvanian village research

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract

The church of Magyarlóna (Kalotaszeg) has close stylistic connections with one in Szászfenes. Important medieval frescoes have been found on the southern section of the wall of the chancel arch. In the 18th century, the church's interior was entirely transformed to suit the new age and the world of the Reformation. The joiner and painter Lőrinc Umling first worked there in 1750, where he constructed the crown-shaped pulpit canopy. In 1752, the master craftsman created the painted ceiling (one hundred and twenty panels) of the church. In 1768, Umling, together with his sons, painted the church pews. This Transylvanian church and its values are not current in the thoughts of the Hungarian history of art. To appreciate the inner values and consider the painted woodwork as a unique chapter of our architecture, it is necessary to look more deeply into this Hungarian settlement and the origins of the local culture.

Keywords

Magyarlóna · Umling Lőrinc · medieval frescoes · painted woodwork

The inhabitants of the villages in the region of Țara Călatei in Romania are predominantly Hungarian. Although their numbers are declining, there are still single nationality Hungarian villages as well as mixed communities and a few single nationality Romanian villages dotted here and there. This region, known as Kalotaszeg in Hungarian, is important from the aspect of Hungarian ethnography as its people have their own distinctive culture, and with regards to religion, the residents of all but three villages follow the Reformed faith. Today, the Kalotaszeg region refers to the area to the west of Cluj, which is bound by the Vlădeasa Mountains, the eastern Meseș Mountains and the northern Gilău Mountains. It is divided into three clearly defined, independent areas: the higher-lying Felszeg that is enclosed by the Gilău Mountains and the rivers Cris and Călata; the lower-lying Alszeg around the river Almas, and the area flanking the river Nadăș (Nădasmente). Adjoining this fairly enclosed area lying in an east-west direction, there is a thin spur of land with a few villages between Gilău and Iara, which ethnographically also belong to Kalotaszeg.

One of the forty-three villages in Kalotaszeg is Magyarlóna or Lóna for short. The village is situated in a river valley and was regarded as the hub for the rest of Kalotaszeg, for the villages lying to the south and south-east. (Fig. 1.) The name of the village was recorded as Lona in 1332 and 1519, Szász Lona in

¹ The present work is dedicated to the memory of Professor Tamás Guzsik, the former tutor of my scientific researches during my studies, who published several scientific articles on the methodology of medieval church research. At that time, there was a group of students who took part in a special scientific student movement - the "Guzsik followers". The common feature of the group was the shared interest in researching the history of Hungarian architecture through the researching of villages, medieval churches, or cloisters. Currently, there is little attention being paid to the church at Magyarlóna, typically, the focus tends to be on the picturesque, tall-pointed tower roofed churches of Transylvania. However, the uniqueness of this chapter in Hungarian church architecture reflects the values from the time and contains special craftsmanship in the painted wood and carpentry. To understand it better and appreciate the inner value and skills, the history of this Hungarian settlement and the origins of the local culture are worth examining.

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Fig. 1. Magyarlóna the Transylvanian village (Photo by the author)



Fig. 2. The South-East view of the church (Photo by the author)



Fig. 3. The frescoes as the restorer found them under the plaster (Photo by the author)



Fig. 4. The fresco with two unidentifiable figures - bishops or evangelists (Photo by the author)

1652, before becoming Magyarlóna around 1910. In Romanian, it used to be called Lona and then Lona Săsească before acquiring its present name Luna de Sus, meaning the moon above, at the end of the 1920s. Like most villages in Transylvania, it also had a German name, Sächsischlone or Deutschdorf. The

surrounding place names suggest that in the 9th century, at the time the Magyars settled here, there was a sparse Slavic population in this area.

Lóna was first mentioned in a medieval charter in 1298, when its ownership was transferred from Ban Mikud of Nógrád



Fig. 5. The female figure in the top fresco may be the martyr Saint Agatha (Photo by the author)

county to Peter of the Monoszló clan, the Roman Catholic bishop of Transylvania, and it became one of the villages of the emergent episcopal estate of Gilău. After the destruction wrought by the Mongol invasion in 1241–1242, the bishopric undertook the repopulation of the area and settled Saxons in Lona and the neighbouring village of Fenes to replace the Hungarian residents who had perished. The identity of the newcomers was reflected by the addition of the Hungarian word for Saxon to the names of the villages, which became Szászlóna and Szászfenes.

During the Ottoman times in the 16th and 17th centuries, the Gilău estate and its possessions, including Szászlóna, remained for the most part united in the Principality of Transylvania fashioned from the Eastern Kingdom of Hungary. The village was owned by János Giczy, the regent of Transylvania, and then by Bishop Demeter Náprági, during the temporarily restored Catholic bishopric, before returning to temporal hands in 1601. From 1633, it belonged to the Rákóczi family and then to Dénes Bánffy from 1662; it was later inherited by the Esterházy counts. The inhabitants of the village were liberated from serfdom in the 1848 Revolution. All but two of the people in Lóna named in a census dated 1666 from the archives of the Bánffy counts were Hungarians. The other two, Tamás Topánfalvi and

Gergely Topánfalvi, were described as newcomers and were Lóna's first known Romanian residents. Between 1784 and 1787, there were 99 houses, 130 families and 666 residents in the village. According to 2002 figures, 1,104 inhabitants of the village were Calvinist, 132 Baptist, 54 Roman Catholic, 736 Orthodox, 14 Pentecostal and 3 Greek Catholic. Lóna certainly had a church in the 1330s because papal tithes for the year 1332 mention a priest named János as the incumbent [2, p. 120].

The church may have been built at the behest of Bishop András Szécsi, who lived in the first half of the 14th century. The church in Lóna has close stylistic connections with one in Szászfenes. (Fig.2.) The nave of the Gothic church probably had a wooden roof. The Gothic vaulting has not survived in the apse, but its structure can be deduced from the buttresses and the remaining traces of the imposts. Medieval frescoes have been found on the southern section of the wall of the chancel arch. (Fig.3.) The entire height of this wall was painted in three bands, as was the north wall. In the uppermost band to the left of the chancel arch is most probably one of the last scenes of a narrative composition begun on the north wall. The female figure depicted in the top fresco may be the martyr Saint Agatha. Firm evidence of the martyr's identity may only be gained from the other scenes of the legend, which are presumably on the north wall. (Fig.5.) Narrative renditions of legends about saints were an Italian speciality, encouraged by the Franciscans, in Gothic Hungarian painting. Beneath the top section, the Annunciation is portrayed showing the half-exposed, stiff figure of Mary to the right and the Archangel Gabriel to the left with a battlement and a tower in the background.^{2,3}

In the lower fresco on the other side of the arch are two unidentifiable figures. The one on the left is a bishop wearing a mitre and holding a crosier. The right-hand figure holding a book may be an evangelist or apostle. The basic style of the frescoes is highly provincial linear Gothic to which the painter has added numerous elements from the Italo-Byzantine tradition. (Fig.4.) The frescoes were probably painted not long after the church was completed. During the Reformation, the church and the local people were first Lutheran (in 1560), becoming Calvinist in 1564. That the Reformed faith supplanted Evangelicalism as the dominant religion suggests that a great number of Saxons who settled here assimilated with the Hungarianised inhabitants or the remaining Hungarian population after the

2 During the continuing research, it became clear that there were large frescoes present under the visible plaster. With the help of expert restorers, new unknown frescoes have been uncovered. (Researchers: Attila Weis - art historian, Loránd Kis - restorer)

3 Following the restoration works, a decision was raised regarding the editing of a new edition of the 2010 book with the new research results. The second edition contains substantial additions and includes not only new information added by the restorers and researchers, but also a new chapter introducing and presenting the rich traditional costume of the inhabitants of Magyarlóna [8].



Fig. 6. The inner view with the western gallery (Photo by the author)



Fig. 7. The inner view of the church with the frescoes (Photo by the author)

Mongol invasion. In world terms, religious freedom was first proclaimed in Transylvania at the Diet of Torda in 1568; this ordered that no one could be persecuted for their religious views. The sweeping change ushered in an important period in the church's architectural history, and in 1601, the Reformed rectory was built.

In the 18th century, the church's interior was entirely transformed to suit the new age and the world of the Reformation in Kalotaszeg. The old cabinetmakers of the region created a high standard, distinctive decorative style. The joiner and painter Lőrinc Umling first worked in Szászlóna in 1750, when he produced his most significant work, the crown-shaped pulpit canopy [6, p. 66] In 1752, the master craftsman completed one of

his most successful works, the painted ceiling of the Reformed church in Lóna⁴ with one hundred and twenty panels.⁵ The front of the western, men's gallery has nine panels, below them is a horizontal board with an undulating lower edge bearing an inscription. The three central panels are adorned with pink flowers in Italian vases in a Renaissance frame. A delightful detail is the abundant leafage and floral decoration on the stairs of the western gallery. In 1768, Umling together with his sons was employed for another task, painting the pews of the church [5, pp. 81-87]. Unfortunately, little can be seen of this today as the decoration, mainly on the front of the pews, has worn away. The work of the Umling family endows the interior of the church in Magyarlóna with a marvellous unity.⁶ (Fig.6.)(Fig.7.)

⁴ The church is used by the local community. Some structures of the old valuable elements have been seriously damaged, so urgent restoration works are required. This has occurred with the most attractive structure, the painted wooden ceiling. Therefore, on writing a book about the values of Magyarlóna, it was decided to offer the income from the book to begin the restoration of the wooden painted ceiling.

⁵ With the help of the income of the first edition, the restoration works began on the worst section of the old wooden ceiling. It was possible to gather a lot of new information about the techniques and the original colours of the wooden structures. (The restorer was Ferenc Mihály) It is hoped that the income from the second addition will make it possible to continue the restoration works.

⁶ That work was in shelter for ages. The Gothic church of Magyarlóna is one of the most decorative in the Kalotaszeg region. All the furniture has been painted, the colourful view that remains represents an admirable inner view even today.



Fig. 8. Detail of a painted gravestone in the cemetery (Photo by the author)

The bell, which was cast during the reign of King Matthias in 1482, originally hung in a separate bell tower [1, p. 299]. The construction of the tower standing now began in 1799 under the direction of the master builder József Léder, who gained a reputation as one of the most important proponents of neoclassical architecture in Kolozsvár (Cluj). The organ was made in Nagyvárad in 1826. In the same year, a carpenter from Kolozsvár, József Pesthi, constructed the gallery on the eastern side; the organ was situated here until it was moved to its current position in 1896 [7]. The carved wooden gates of the churchyard that can be seen today were inscribed with the year they were made, 1935, when the gates that had stood there since 1848 were replaced.⁷

In keeping with tradition, the people of the village were buried in the churchyard from the Middle Ages onwards. Headstones from the end of the 18th century still stand around

the church, for example, one from 1794 and another from 1798, which is inscribed with a metric poem.

In 1805, burial in the churchyard was prohibited for reasons of hygiene and a cemetery on the outskirts of the village was used from then on. The cemetery, must have existed prior to this date because the earliest headstone still standing today is dated 1803, and there is a record of a 1772 tombstone inscription. Reformed, Baptist and Roma residents buried their dead in separate sections all in the same cemetery. The graves did not have a built edge and their precise places have been obscured by time. The practice of clearly defining graves only developed in the modern era in the 1960s and 1970s, since when the neat rows in the lower sections have reflected the regimented customs of burial.

By the 1700s, gravestones in the form of a slab with a dripstone similar to those in Magyarlóna were widespread in neighbouring villages. Later changes in tombstone fashion followed the belated appearance of middle class taste. Alongside rural craftsmanship, the vocabulary of classical shapes of the trained mason became increasingly common.

Headstones with decorations painted in blue, yellow, green and red bestow aspects of folk art on the cemetery [4]. (Fig. 8.) Motifs similar to those in embroidery, folk costumes and painted furniture that were enjoying their heyday, appeared on the gravestones towards the end of the 19th century, when the “decorative taste”, admired today as folk art, found new strength and blossomed [3, p. 93]. The folk costumes of unrivalled richness that accompanied the people who lived here from birth until death, also recall this world. The villagers are still proud of their costumes today, and women and girls frequently wear traditional festive attire.⁸ The people of Kalotaszeg can recognise which village someone comes from based on their folk costume. As elsewhere in the region, the pearl headdress that is worn by girls from confirmation until marriage is also present in Magyarlóna. The other distinctive feature of the regional costume is the “bagazia”, a finely pleated skirt, which is folded up at the front.

The Magyarlóna church is one of the finest examples of the ecclesiastical architecture of Kalotaszeg. Today, it relates to the visitor its seven to eight hundred years of history and proclaims the prestigious culture of the people who live here. The history of the village, the historical connections, the old stones of the cemetery and the traditional costumes together represents the values that originate from the Hungarian past and the Transylvanian identity.

⁷ In the *Historia Domus* of Magyarlóna, the history of the Calvinist Church can be followed from the 18th c.

⁸ The spirit of the colourfully dressed woman originates from a long past and local habit. This is not only tradition, the use of traditional costumes are alive in their dress even now. This colourful old dress is used in the church on unique holidays.

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