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Maria Parani and Michalis Olympios (Co-Editors)

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GERHARD JARITZ

Central European University

Postmortem Proxy Pilgrimages from Central Europe in the Late Middle Ages:

The Examples of Vienna and Pressburg (Bratislava)

Abstract

The surviving Viennese town-books of around 1400 contain more than 2,000 entries that are last wills, which often mention the bequest of postmortem proxy pilgrimages to be undertaken for the deceased. This article analyzes postmortem Viennese proxy pilgrimages in a quantitative and qualitative way, considering chronological, financial, and gendered aspects and patterns. It also compares these pilgrimages with those from another, neighbouring city, Pressburg (today Bratislava) which took place from the 1420s onwards. As is shown, the rich collections of last wills from Pressburg exhibit both similarities with and differences from the Viennese proxy pilgrimages.

Keywords

proxy pilgrimage; postmortem; Vienna; Pressburg; late Middle Ages

In Western and Central Europe, “by the fifteenth century, the idea that a person could take a pilgrimage on another’s behalf had become perfectly normal” (Craig 222; see also Labande). Sending a proxy on a pilgrimage to support the salvation of the deceased’s soul had also developed into a fairly common item in last wills (Schmugge 275–76; Webb 133–47). A certain sum of money was made available for vicarious pilgrims, who were supposed to be relatives, heirs of the testator, other persons named in the last will, or people appointed by the parties responsible for carrying out the terms of the will. The destinations could be local or regional shrines, or even important distant places of pilgrimage.



The study by Leigh Ann Craig on women as pilgrims in the late Middle Ages, working mainly with English, French, and Italian material, showed that “rare, but not entirely absent, among the profusion of charitable bequests in later medieval wills were donations intended to fund a proxy pilgrimage” (Craig 226). However, she found a larger number of these bequests in German-speaking areas, where surviving urban town-books or records of testaments contain both substantial numbers of last wills and numerous donations towards pilgrimages for the salvation of the testator’s soul.

This study concentrates on such donations in the sources from two neighbouring Central European cities about fifty kilometres from each other: the town-books of Vienna (Brauneder and Jaritz; Brauneder, Jaritz, and Neschwara; Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 3; Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 4; Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 5; Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 6; Wien, Stadt- und Landesarchiv, ms. 3.4.A.285) and the *Protocollum testamentorum* from Pressburg, today Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia (Majorossy and Szende). In the fifteenth century, Vienna, with about 20,000 inhabitants, was closely connected to Pressburg, part of the kingdom of Hungary, which had around 5,000 inhabitants, many of German descent (Opll). The contents of the last wills of these closely connected German-speaking populations can be analyzed and compared to discover the concerns of people contemplating their (eventual) deaths.

Viennese town-books, sometimes also called testament-books, survive from the years 1395 to 1430 and contain more than 4,500 entries that concentrate particularly on inheritance issues, mainly last wills, proofs of blood relationship, and inheritance disputes. They also contain craft regulations and lists of members of the town council. Approximately 3,000 last wills of men and women of different social statuses, mainly but not all inhabitants of Vienna, became one case for this study. The Pressburg *Protocollum testamentorum* consists of 844 last wills from 1410 to 1529. They have already been studied to some extent as regards pilgrimages (Majorossy, “Gender” 6; Csukovits; Csukovits and Majorossy; Majorossy, *Piety*). For this analysis, the 586 last wills up to the year 1500 were consulted. Despite the differing numbers and varying dates of origin, a comparative approach to the evidence on

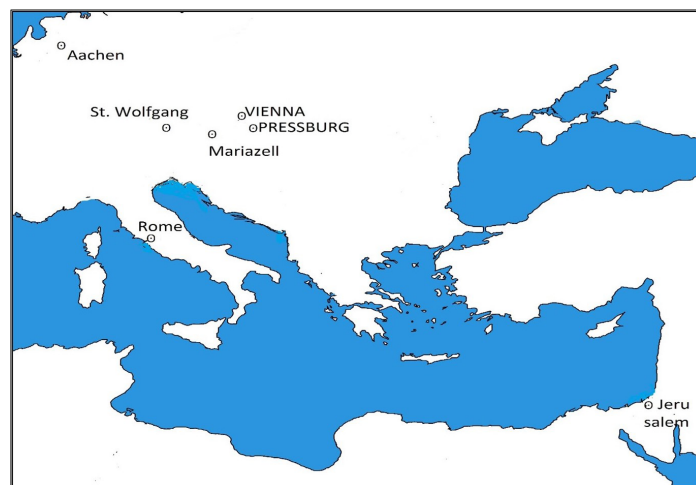
pilgrimage in the last wills of both cities is certainly worthwhile, because they show similar patterns.

Pilgrimage bequests do not occur regularly, but they were not rare, either. Around ten per cent of the surviving last wills from Vienna (332) mention funding proxy pilgrimages, a sufficient number for combining quantitative and qualitative analysis. Ninety of the 586 Pressburg last wills up until 1500 mention pilgrimages. These are good source corpora to show the recognizable patterns and specific rituals in the common occurrence of proxy pilgrimages in the last wills of people in urban space.

The number of proxy pilgrimages requested by testators differed from one last will to another. In Vienna, many testators donated more than one pilgrimage, either to the same or to different places. While 332 testators bequeathed pilgrimages, they donated 793 individual pilgrimages, meaning that many of their last wills sponsored two or more pilgrimages. In Pressburg, the situation is similar, but not as pronounced: 90 testators bequeathed 142 individual proxy pilgrimages. In both cities, more men than women donated pilgrimages. In Vienna, men bequeathed 481 individual pilgrimages and women 312; in Pressburg, men funded 99 individual pilgrimages and women 43.

Comparing the destinations of donated pilgrimages, Vienna and Pressburg show similar patterns, but a clearly different order. In both cities, the same two regional pilgrimage sites and two distant ones played particularly significant roles (Fig. 1), together with a considerable variety of other less important regional and local places.

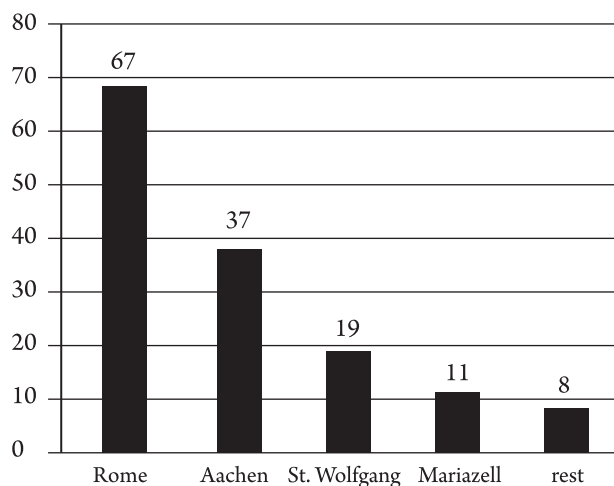
Fig. 1: The most important places of pilgrimage from Vienna and Pressburg



Rome and Aachen were the two most relevant distant places of funded pilgrimage in both the Vienna and Pressburg last wills, and also in other Central European towns. Aachen had four important textile relics: St Mary's cloak, Christ's loincloth from the Crucifixion, Christ's swaddling clothes, and St John the Baptist's beheading cloth (Wynands). Now and then, the sponsorship of a pilgrimage to Rome was connected to sponsoring another one to Aachen.

Rome was by far the most frequent pilgrimage bequeathed in the Pressburg last wills (Fig. 2), with nearly half of all donations, followed by Aachen. The well-known nearer pilgrimage sites of Mariazell in Styria (Born) and Sankt Wolfgang in Upper Austria (Zinnhobler) attracted fewer pilgrimages. The rest were mainly local and regional pilgrimages in smaller numbers, and are not included in this study.

Fig. 2: Numbers of the most frequently funded pilgrimages from Pressburg



The Viennese last wills show the same four most frequently funded pilgrimage sites, but in a different order (Fig. 3). There, the most relevant place of funded pilgrimage became a regional one, Mariazell. As early as the late Middle Ages and under Habsburg influence, a late Romanesque miraculous statue of the Virgin Mary and Child, the Mother of Mercy of Mariazell, had developed from a rather local object of veneration into the most important one for the Austrian lands. Under Habsburg influence it also became relevant for the Catholic world of Hungary (Brunner; Pickl) and the Slavs, which can also be seen to some extent in the Pressburg wills, supported by miraculous legends about the Virgin of Mariazell

healing a Moravian margrave and his wife or helping King Louis I of Hungary win against the Turks. This became more pronounced later, in the Baroque period, with more Habsburg support, and even until to this day, as seen in a cloak used for the Romanesque miraculous statue of the Virgin Mary (Fig. 4). The coats of arms of Slovakia, Slovenia, Poland, Austria (in the middle), Hungary, Croatia, Czechia, and Bosnia on the cloak show the Virgin as *Magna Mater Austriae*, *Magna Domina Hungarorum*, and *Alma Mater gentium Slavorum*.

Fig. 3: Numbers of the most important funded pilgrimages from Vienna

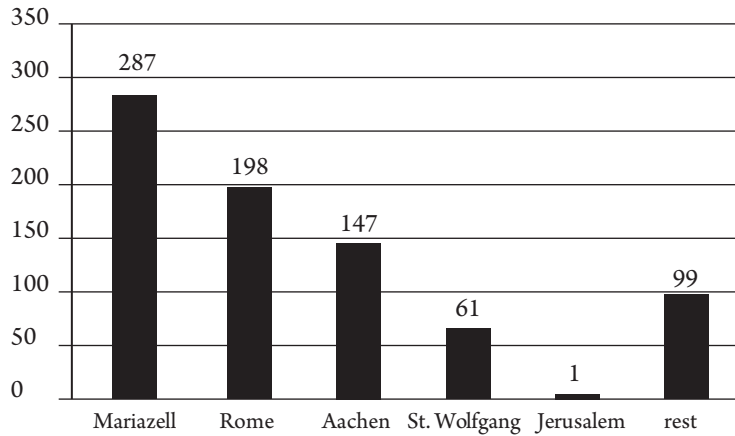


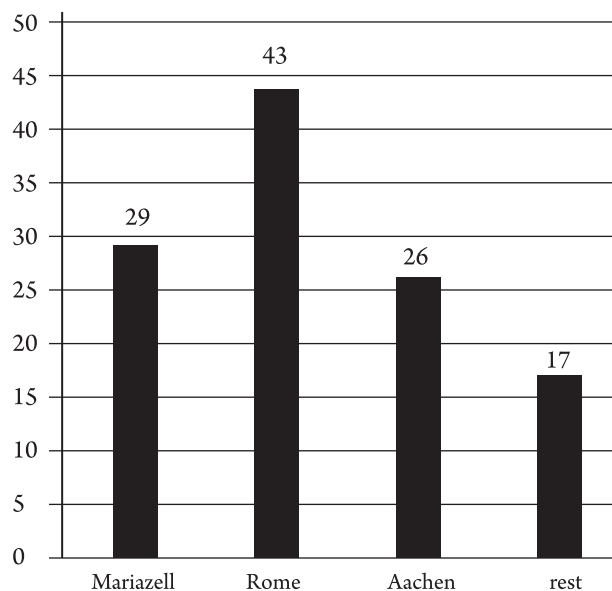
Fig. 4: One of the present-day cloaks of the Mariazell Virgin, showing her as *Magna Mater Austriae*, *Magna Domina Hungarorum*, and *Alma Mater gentium Slavorum*



Comparing the number of proxy pilgrimages bequeathed in the Viennese last wills with those from Pressburg shows that the pilgrimage to Mariazell also had some importance for Pressburg in Hungary, although Rome and Aachen held the dominant positions there. The Viennese last wills show Rome and Aachen as the second most frequent pilgrimage sites after Mariazell, followed by Sankt Wolfgang in Upper Austria. In Vienna, other places of pilgrimage to which donations were bequeathed played less important roles and will not be considered here. The Holy Blood pilgrimage to Pulkau in Lower Austria (Merback, *passim*) and the pilgrimage to Sankt Erhard (in either Regensburg or Styria) occur the most often. And there is one, just one, pilgrimage to Jerusalem, a sea trip (*meruart*), to the grave of Christ (*zu dem Heiligen Grab*) in 1411 (Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 3, 362 n. 1761).

The question arises whether these similar patterns in pilgrimage donations can also be seen to follow the same trend over the whole period under examination. The year 1400 and those leading up to it were an exception among the Viennese cases. Although Pope Boniface IX (Esch) had not officially declared 1400 a jubilee year, so many people came to Rome that he granted an indulgence for the visit. This also led to an increase in donated postmortem proxy pilgrimages to Rome among the Viennese last wills (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5: Donated pilgrimages from Vienna, 1397–1400



Examining the wills from 1397 to 1400, it becomes clear that in these years the pilgrimages to Rome were more important than the regional ones to Mariazell. The testators hoped that going to Rome in this year would increase their chances for salvation of the soul. The Holy Year of 1500 did not have such an effect on the last wills of Pressburg, probably because Rome already played the most important role in the pilgrimage donations there.

Although most of the relevant wills sponsored one or two pilgrimages, sometimes three, some testators bequeathed exceptional numbers. In 1411, a Viennese cleric donated fifteen proxy pilgrimages to Mariazell in his last will (Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 3, 357 n. 1749), always to be on a feast day of the Virgin. The most extraordinary donation was made in 1410, when a woman donated one pilgrimage to Rome, one to Aachen, five to Mariazell, five to each of four local sites, and ten to another local pilgrimage site, that is, 37 proxy pilgrimages altogether (Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 3, 320 n. 1672).

Many of the last wills offer rather general information, just naming the place of the pilgrimages' destination and the sum to be spent for the vicarious pilgrim. Some, however, offer more details. This supplies answers to one of the most important questions: who were these vicarious pilgrims? Many of the last wills do not mention any specific person who was supposed to go on a donated pilgrimage. In the case of Vienna, a few of them name close relatives, that is, the deceased's husband (e.g., Brauner and Jaritz 193 n. 297: 1398; Brauner, Jaritz, and Neschwara 211 n. 943: 1404; *ibid.* 244 n. 994: 1404; *ibid.* 278 n. 1055: 1404; Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 4, 84–85 n. 1985: 1413; etc.), a brother (e.g., Brauner and Jaritz 320 n. 515: 1400; Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 5 n. 2598: 1418; etc.), a son (Brauner, Jaritz, and Neschwara 367 n. 1214: 1405; Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 4, 38 n. 1901: 1412), a brother-in-law (Brauner and Jaritz 206 n. 322: 1398), a cousin (Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 4, 290 n. 2325: 1416; Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 5, 373 n. 3022: 1420), or a son-in-law (Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 3, 152 n. 1405: 1407). Some mention proxy pilgrims by name (Brauner and Jaritz 327 n. 527: 1400; Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 5, 403 n. 2510: 1417; Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 6 n. 4001: 1427), or just as a pious man (Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 5, 190 n. 2759) or a poor man

(Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 6 n. 3306: 1423). Women are rarely mentioned: as the deceased's wife (Brauneder and Jaritz 267 n. 429: 1399; Brauneder, Jaritz, and Neschwara 223 n. 955: 1404), or as the wife together with a son (Brauneder, Jaritz, and Neschwara 367 n. 1214: 1405; Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 4, 38 n. 1901: 1412). Twice, a female servant is mentioned (Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 5, 418 n. 3113: 1421; Wien, Stadt- und Landesarchiv, ms. 3.4.A.285, f. 301r: 1428). In one case, six unnamed women are to make the pilgrimage to Mariazell (Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 3, 44 n. 1282: 1406). For most of the pilgrimages that do not mention a specific person it seems probable that they were to be carried out by professional hired pilgrims. The Pressburg wills follow the same pattern (Csukovits and Majorossy; Majorossy, "Gender"), mainly listing relatives. In one case, it is specified that a learned man should be the pilgrim (Majorossy and Szende 1, 432 n. 357: 1478), another time a poor woman (Majorossy and Szende 1, 370 n. 295: 1471).

Other details sometimes refer to the appropriate time or period when the pilgrimage should be undertaken: within one year (e.g., Brauneder, Jaritz, and Neschwara 328 n. 1150: 1405; *ibid.* 376 n. 1231: 1405; Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 3, 394 n. 1813: 1411; Majorossy and Szende 1, 324 n. 249: 1467; *ibid.* 385 n. 307: 1472/73), two years (Brauneder and Jaritz 375 n. 613: 1391), three or four years (Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 4, 220, n. 2203: 1415; Majorossy and Szende 1, 349 n. 268: 1467), in one case, within the next ten years after the testator's death (Majorossy and Szende 1, 321 n. 245: 1462–67), or – referring to a pilgrimage to Rome – in the year of mercy (*in dem genadenreichen jar*), that is, 1400 (Brauneder and Jaritz 331 n. 534: 1400). Some Pressburg last wills state "soonest" or "as soon as possible" (Majorossy and Szende 2, 88 n. 512: 1494; *ibid.* 149 n. 553: 1497), "next Christmas" (Majorossy and Szende 1, 119 n. 79: 1441), or "next Pentecost" (*ibid.*). A few more leave instructions that the pilgrimage should be made yearly (Brauneder, Jaritz, and Neschwara 275 n. 1049: 1404), or, for Mariazell, as already mentioned, on feast days of the Virgin (Brauneder, Jaritz, and Neschwara 66 n. 870: 1403; Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 3, 357 n. 1749).

Still other detailed instructions refer to a certain requirement for the pilgrimage; one going to Aachen, for instance, should be made

on foot (*ain Achfart zu fuessen*; Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 5, 374 n. 3022: 1422), and two others require that the pilgrimages sponsored in the last will should be done in sequence, one following the other (*zwo vert zu Unser Frawn gen Zell, ain vart gen Sand Erhart und gen Sand Wolfgang miteinander ze gen*; Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 4, 69 n. 1962: 1413; *ain vart gen Zell und gen Sand Wolfgang miteinander*; Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 6, n. 4031: 1427). Also, a few last wills connect a sponsored pilgrimage with a material donation to the site of pilgrimage, such as a glass window or a monstrance to Sankt Wolfgang (Brauneder and Jaritz 320 n. 515: 1400; Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 3, 298 n. 1642: 1410) or a silk veil to Mariazell (Jaritz and Neschwara, *Stadtbücher* 3, 268 n. 1583: 1409).

A number of sponsorships deal with the sums to be spent for undertaking the postmortem pilgrimages. This does not occur regularly, but the amounts of money mentioned show certain patterns. The most expensive of these travels was, besides the only pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the one to Rome, for which approximately eight pounds were allotted in Vienna and ten guilders in Pressburg, that is, about the price of a carriage horse. This is followed by the one to Aachen, with five to six pounds; the one to Sankt Wolfgang, with two pounds; and the one to Mariazell, with less than one pound, often just sixty pfennigs, which was equivalent to the amount spent for ten donated Masses in the last wills from Vienna. Thus, the most popular funded pilgrimage from Vienna was at the same time the cheapest.

Such detailed instructions referring to sponsored postmortem pilgrimages in the last wills of Vienna and Pressburg are rather rare and to be seen as exceptions. Many of the last wills containing the donation of pilgrimages just offer information about the destination(s), meaning that sponsoring a pilgrimage often seems to have been something common and clearly settled, not necessarily to be explained and defined in more detail. Everything else that appears in the more in-depth cases seems to have been an exception. Often the last wills did not concentrate on circumstantial descriptions of the patterns and rituals of the pilgrimages' transaction and performance, which were already clear for most of the testators as well as the proxy pilgrims.

Nevertheless, this material from the fifteenth-century last wills of two Central European cities offers some general results concerning the collective and individual structures of late medieval proxy pilgrimages. Comparing the practices described for Vienna and Pressburg with those in other European urban communities shows a number of clear differences. While “pèlerinages vicaires” for the salvation of the soul were not nearly as common in other parts of Europe, particularly in French communities (Schmugge 275), about ten per cent of the analyzed last wills from Vienna and nearly twenty per cent of those from Pressburg mention pilgrimages. This corresponds to Craig’s investigation comparing English, French, and Italian source material with that from German-speaking areas.

About three quarters of the Pressburg pilgrimages were to go to distant sanctuaries, that is, Rome and Aachen, and about one quarter to nearer ones, meaning Mariazell and Sankt Wolfgang. The Viennese material, however, refers to the distant places of Rome and Aachen in 44 per cent of the cases, and in up to 56 per cent to regional and local sites. The reason for this difference may be the strong Habsburg support for Mariazell, which alone attracted 36 per cent of all the funded pilgrimages in the Viennese last wills. The role that Mariazell and Sankt Wolfgang also played for Hungary can be explained with miracles of the Virgin of Mariazell and the missionary function of St Wolfgang in Hungary and as the educator of Gisela, daughter of a Bavarian duke and later wife of the Hungarian King Stephen (Meller 304–05). The other *peregrinationes maiores* of Jerusalem and Santiago de Compostela, with one and no mentions, respectively, do not play any role in the Central European urban last wills analyzed here.

Differences in the numbers of funded pilgrimages can be recognized for the Holy Year of 1400 and its indulgences in particular. The donations of pilgrimages to Rome in the Viennese last will material increased as the year 1400 approached, and became more important than those to Mariazell, which was otherwise dominant.

While one may assume that a large number of vicarious pilgrims who are not mentioned by name or status in the last wills were professionals, pilgrims for hire, sometimes noted as pious or poor people, one can also recognize that relatives or other close acquaintances played a special role. Men as proxy pilgrims are

clearly more important than women; in a similar but much more pronounced way, males are more frequent testators of pilgrimages than females.

Also of interest is that specific dates by which the pilgrimage should take place are mentioned in a number of donations of proxy pilgrimages. They could be connected to the anniversary of the death of the testator, to the place of pilgrimage and feast days of its saints (like the Virgin or St Wolfgang), or to other specific days of the church year, like Easter, Pentecost, or Christmas. Altogether, it has to be emphasized once again that the donation of proxy pilgrimages in the last wills of Central European urban space followed a number of well-known practices that did not need detailed explanations. When some wills nonetheless offer more elaborate instructions and descriptions, they provide more information about one of the most interesting performances and rituals of late medieval religious life.

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