

## The Image of the Turks in Hungarian Renaissance Literature

### I.

If a nation is compelled to live together with another, or more strictly speaking is forced under the rule of a different people, they both form a strong image of each other. During the one hundred fifty years of Turkish occupation in Hungary and the concurrent limited autonomy of Transylvania, the Hungarians developed a distinctive view of the Turks. Grounded in ideological, religious, social, political and military considerations, this image had its constant as well as changing features.

I would like here to take the opportunity to summarize the ideological components of the Hungarians' image of the Turks and the literary realization of these views. The latter is of course to a certain degree a consequence of the former.

First, we need to examine the determinant ideological background that shaped the Hungarian view of the Turks during the Renaissance, or roughly from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries in Hungary.<sup>1</sup> In a recently published paper Pál Fodor outlined the most significant features of this image. At the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the Hungarians had not yet realized the true anti-Christian nature of the Turkish expansion. They thought of the Turks primarily as schismatics and considered themselves as a shield and a fortress wall (*scutum atque murus*) for Christianity. This role was still emphasized by the leading humanist authors around the middle of the fifteenth century, and Hungary's military actions were more and more often meant to serve as a bulwark for the whole Christian community (*Propugnaculum et antemurale Christianitatis*).

At about the same time a new motif made its appearance. The costly defeats and losses cannot be attributed to the great number and strength of the enemy. They are the blows of divine judgment, which God is inflicting on the Hungarians for their sins. The Turks are an apocalyptic people, sent to punish the Hungarians. According to Fodor, »they placed the [...] Ottomans in eschatological dimensions, considering them as the apocalyptic people of the Last Day: the embodiment of the Antichrist.« (Fodor, 49) In this God

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<sup>1</sup> Pál Fodor: Az apokaliptikus hagyomány és az »aranyalma« legendája. [The Apocalyptic Tradition and the Legend of the »Golden Apple.«] In: Történelmi Szemle 39 (1997), p. 21–49.

wanted to improve the Hungarians, not to destroy them. Therefore, it was useless to resist God's will. The only thing for the Christians to do was to arm with enduring hope against the Muslim forces, to trust in God only and not just in their military weapons. This concept derived from Joachim of Fiore and was later taken up by Luther. Nevertheless the Hungarians at the middle of the fifteenth century never thought of giving up the idea of defending their country and faith by arms.

Moreover a new feature stressing the significance of the Hungarians became a part of the argumentation. The Hungarians were to be understood as God's chosen people, as similar to the ancient Jews, who will have a similar fate because of their sinfulness. But if the Hungarians grasp and accept God's didactic purposes, improve and reform themselves, they can fulfill their task and defend Christianity. Thus, they will be restored to God's grace and delivered from persecution.

During the second half of the fifteenth century, while Matthias Corvin successfully ruled Hungary, an alternative view of the Turks was developed. The topos of the kingdom as a bulwark against the Ottoman enemy remained, but Matthias did not stress the religious or ideological differences with the Turks. Instead, he revived and emphasized an older idea of a »Hun-Hungarian« kinship. Consequently Matthias relied on a tradition that reevaluated the relationship to paganism, and his pragmatism in handling the Turkish problem served his aim of building up an empire in Central Europe.

During the decisive years of the Turkish conquest and occupation, which began with the disastrous defeat at Mohács in 1526, accelerated with the fall of Buda in 1541, and led to the chaos of the Fifteen Years' War the end of the sixteenth century, the medieval Hungarian kingdom dissolved into three parts. Under these pressures the image of the Turks was again reconstructed. The new view was built from the fragments of the old but transformed into something quite different. This difference emerged from the Reformation. Based on the apocalyptic determinism emanating from Wittenberg through the writings of Luther, Melanchthon and Carion, the Lutheran and Calvinist clergy in Hungary shared a common view of the Turks. The Hungarian Protestant preachers and theologians reached back to the old tradition of emphasizing sins and the country as a bulwark and revitalized these ideas by apocalyptic eschatological determinism. The former components governing the image of the Turk were reassembled into a new configuration. The Turks were God's punishment for sins such as idolatry, fornication, robbery, drunkenness, envy, pride, cruelty and avarice. But God, as he had once done with the Jews, had now selected the Hungarians as his chosen people. All the tribulations are for the sake of this nation and for the improvement of the Hungarian people. The Turkish reign has to be endured as a divine punishment for the entire nation and the common people have to accept and

obey the rule of the Turks. The leading Protestant clergy, including István Szegedi Kis, Péter Melius, István Beythe, Péter Bornemisza and Gáspár Károlyi, propagated this doctrine. Only the soldiers defending the borders had the right to fight against the invaders, but not on behalf of God and not as crusaders. They had the right of resistance based on a danger to the church and their faith. Some Protestant clergy even suggested to their flock that they should prefer the martyrdom of the Maccabees to resistance.<sup>2</sup> This seems to indicate that these Protestant clergy thought of the Turks much as they thought of Antiochus Epiphanes, a view with its own chiliastic expectations.

The radical change in this understanding of the Turks only appeared at the end of the sixteenth century. At about the beginning of the Fifteen Years' War many Protestant clergy abandoned their Wittenberg inspired concepts. Calling for radical action, they ceased insisting on chiliastic ideas and talking about reconciliation to fate. These clergy suggested that the Turk was not an apocalyptic empire but an earthly power, which could be beaten and expelled by either the united strength of the Christians or a well-organized Hungarian society and army. Such views underpinned the movement led by István Bocskay, the Prince of Transylvania, who was portrayed as a delegate of God.

Among the Protestant groups only the Unitarians did not follow this trend. According to the Unitarians the Turks only wanted a degree of loyalty and the payment of taxes. The Ottoman rule did not interfere with spiritual life or religious consciousness. Therefore, the Unitarians preferred the domination of the Turks to that of the Habsburgs. Nevertheless, according to some witnesses such as Pál Thuri Farkas, who had studied at Wittenberg and later moved on to Calvinism, the Turks during the sixteenth century had engaged in violent efforts to proselytize among the inhabitants of southern Hungary.

## II.

When a country is subjected to the authority of another people, its literature and arts will inevitably deal with the relationship and coexistence between the two nations. This was the case in Hungarian literature during the Renaissance era.

One might think that the problem of this coexistence with the enemy of their bodies and souls, the natural enemy as the Turks were considered, the aggressor, the cruel oppressor of the Hungarians, the pagan and barbarian opponent of Christianity would be the most fundamental target and frequent topic of Hungarian literature during the Renaissance period. This was my

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<sup>2</sup> Pál Ács: A szent Makkabeusok nevei. [The Names of the Holy Maccabees.] Ms.

expectation as well, but my findings did not entirely support this preconception. In searching through a wide array of non-fictional writings, which include all the major genres of the literature of the period, including sermons, prayers, congregational chants, jeremiads, disputes, letters, orations, verse chronicles, historical records, diaries, and the accounts of envoys and travellers, as well as the writings of prisoners such as Georgius de Hungaria, Benedek Kuripesics, Hans Dernschwam and Dávid Ungnád, to discover the previously mentioned image of the Turks, I have found no more than stereotypes, or *topoi*, and almost nothing individual either in discourse or characterization.

Written mainly in the form of *heroides*, the Latin poetry of the humanists represents the ideas of *querela Hungariae*, *luctus Hungariae*, *ruina Hungariae*. These cries for international help and unity, which were addressed mainly to *Germania*, reiterate Hungary's role as the shield and bulwark of Christendom.<sup>3</sup> The basic theme resonated throughout the Hungarian poetry of the age. Bálint Balassi, the most important Renaissance poet in Hungary, employed it as well. Balassi as a soldier often came into contact with the Turks and his poetry was influenced not only by contemporary Hungarian views of them but also by *asik* poetry, some of which he translated into Hungarian.<sup>4</sup> Under Protestant dominance the vernacular poetry echoed and repeated the clerical interpretations and viewpoints. Overwhelmed with sin and weakness, Hungary suffers from the just punishment of the Turks, who are the scourge of God for this ocean of wickedness.<sup>5</sup> This concept of deserved punishment for iniquity proved to be so enduring and influential that Ferenc Kölcsey incorporated the idea into a nineteenth-century hymn, which later became the Hungarian national anthem.<sup>6</sup>

But our sins Your wrath provoked  
as our deeds You pondered,  
flashes through the Heavens burst  
as in rage You thundered.  
Soon the Mongols' arrows rained  
down upon your people,  
then the Turkish yoke was set  
on every house and steeple.

Often from wild Turkish lips  
chants of joy were shouted,

<sup>3</sup> Mihály Imre: Magyarország panasza. [The ›Querela Hungariae‹.] Debrecen 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Bálint Balassi: Versei. [Collected Poems.] Ed. by Péter Köszeghy and Géza Szentmártoni Szabó. Budapest 1993, p. 141–143.

<sup>5</sup> Sándor Óze: »Büneiért bünteti Isten a magyar népet«. [»God is punishing the Hungarian people for their sins«.] Budapest 1991.

<sup>6</sup> In Quest of the Miracle Stag: The Poetry of Hungary. An Anthology of Hungarian Poetry from the Thirteenth Century to the Present in English Translation. Ed. by Adam Makkai. Chicago / Budapest 1996, p. 195.

raised in triumph as they saw  
all our armies routed!

Sebestyén Tinódi, the most productive cultivator of the wanderer verses that chronicled the events of the sixteenth century, in telling, singing and reciting the many stories of battles, duels, and fights in the wars and struggles between the Hungarians and the Turks also incorporated the prevailing Hungarian view into his songs. In his *Call to Lieutenants* Tinódi mentioned the chiliastic prophesies that likened the Hungarians to the ancient Hebrews.<sup>7</sup>

Listen to me now, all of you listen!  
You kinsmen of mine in God, hear my word!  
Put your trust in God alone, brave soldiers,  
and he will be your buckler and your sword.

Confess to God - all make your confessions! -  
say you repent, that you will sin no more.  
Forgive your enemies, and encourage  
your comrades to fight bravely in the war.

Therefore, O God, remove us from your anger!  
Pity us, and make our arms grow strong!  
Let the pagan warriors fall before us,  
Destroy them, destroy their wicked throng!

Our limbs are free and unfettered.  
You have listened, Lord to our prayer!  
Now you are with us, our lances are uplifted,  
cry, »With Jesus leading us we dare!«

Despite Tinódi's aim to inform his audience as a reporter on the events, heroes, and their heroic deeds in the on-going struggle, he spoke, as all other Hungarian poets of the day, only in general terms about the Turks. They were a cruel, dishonest, treacherous, deceitful, and perfidious people. The only remedy against such an enemy was to trust in Christ and to fight for the true faith. Other authors writing about the Turks also omitted individual characterizations of them and employed the same list of general Turkish sins. They referred to the Muslims as »dogs without faith,« who cheated and enslaved you. Occasionally the Hungarian writers recognized some positive qualities among the Turks. They esteemed the Turks' martial abilities of courage, subordination, orderliness, discipline, and above all temperance. For the Turks drinking wine was strictly forbidden by their faith; and this abstinence contrasted sharply with the usual drunkenness of the Hungarian soldiers. In only a few exceptions were the individual qualities, such as wisdom, strength, sobriety and bravery, of a pasha or a begh mentioned. We can probably best ascribe this conspicuous absence of indi-

<sup>7</sup> Makkai, cf. note 6, p. 63-64.

vidual qualities in the depiction of the Turks to the fact that although the Hungarians and the Turks lived in the same place, they usually did not intermingle. Their contacts were not intimate and familiar, but based on a ruler-servant relationship and dominated by fear and distrust on both sides. They lived side by side but remained enemies and their relations were hindered by the barriers of different customs, languages and faiths. All of the Hungarian proverbs that originated during this era reflected this contradictory situation; and the sayings emphasize the negative features of the intruder in general terms.

A further evolution in which we can detect fundamental changes in the Hungarians' view of the Turks appeared around the middle of the seventeenth century in the epic poem *Obsidio Szigethiana* by Miklós Zrínyi.<sup>8</sup> A successful military commander who had fought against the Turks, Zrínyi reflected the Baroque concept, style, literary constructions and *Weltanschauung* of his day. As a poet Zrínyi was also much indebted to Virgil and Tasso. He chose for his subject the siege and fall of Sziget, an important fortress in southern Hungary, to the Turks in 1566. The epic poem details in precisely 1,566 stanzas the heroic deeds of his great-grandfather, the commander of Sziget castle, and a small band of soldiers in their efforts to defend the fortress against the Turks.

Zrínyi, who was highly regarded by his contemporaries as a strategist and repeatedly led successful expeditions against the Turks, desired not only to raise a literary monument for the memory of his ancestor but also to find an answer to the Turkish problem of his own day. He desired to encourage and comfort his own generation by the example of those who had preceded it. Although his great-grandfather had fallen, he could still serve as an exemplar for the whole Christian world and his own desperate nation. The defenders of Sziget had died, but through their Christian martyrdom they had won a moral victory over the numerically superior pagan enemy.<sup>9</sup>

Although a Catholic, Zrínyi also drew inspiration from the explanations of the sixteenth-century Protestant clergy. According to Zrínyi, God had decided to punish the Hungarians for their sins in order to lead them back to the straight and narrow path. By employing a Protestant language and a Catholic literary machinery, Zrínyi drew attention to the need for unity.

In order to make his account more credible and magnify the significance of what had happened, he needed simultaneously to portray the Turks as both a huge threatening army and as individuals. In order to make the moral victory of the Hungarians more convincing and worthy, Zrínyi over-exaggerated the virtues of the Turkish characters. Demirhám was so strong that

<sup>8</sup> Miklós Zrínyi: *Obsidio Szigethiana*. In: *Adriai tengernek Syrenaia*. Bécs 1651. Facsimile Edition: Budapest 1980; with an afterword by Sándor Iván Kovács. – A short piece of English translation by Adam Makkai, cf. note 6, p. 89–91.

<sup>9</sup> Tibor Klaniczay: *Zrínyi Miklós*. Budapest 1964.

he could uproot an oak tree and kill an elephant with the blows of his fists. Delimán, the other Turkish hero, knew no fear, even when he was up to his knees in Christian blood; and as the »Turkish Mars,« he is even more handsome than Mars himself.

By extolling the greatness of the Turks and the leadership of Suleiman Zrínyi magnifies the heroism of his great-grandfather, who in the poem killed the sultan. Although Suleiman was an enemy, Zrínyi presented him as the wisest and most gallant Turkish ruler and commander. If there had been no signs of cruelty in his heart, Suleiman would have been one of the greatest men even among Christians. Coming from a Christian, that is indeed a great honor for a pagan. Posterity, however, knows well that Zrínyi's image of the Turks, which contrasted not only with his everyday but with the realistic as well as schematic view of the sixteenth century, belongs in the realm of a newly born Hungarian literary fiction.