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What Makes a Library in Hungary or Transylvania Modern in the Early Modern Age? Some Aspects of Assessment

There are enough sources made available by the research done on the history of libraries as well as on the history of reading and using books to be able to confront the statements formerly made by our literature describing the nature of these books. We can be even bolder and can justifiably contribute to several issues of the history of reception of European intellectual movements.¹ When describing books, a collector, a reader or a community it is unavoidable to use qualifiers even if it is not always important to qualify each and every phenomenon. One of the qualifiers which often occurs in literature is modern. Adjectives of similar meaning which can mean modern in the context of the present study are the following: progressive, up-to-date, open, as well as secular and secularizing. Secularization was interpreted by many as a trend toward modernity in the forty years following World War II. If we add to this thought the fact that due to the low figure of books and the great number of individuals with modest means, the role played by institutional collections is greater than in contemporary Western Europe and as the educational and cultural institutional system was characteristically clerical here then there is not much else to add on modernity.

In theory, the characteristics of publishing in Hungary and Transylvania might have had an influence on the composition of our libraries, but due to the modest output of book printing this influence was minor. One of the statistical results of the above-mentioned basic research points out that since there were more than 50000 titles in the libraries of the Carpathian Basin in the sixteenth century the nearly 1000 publications could by no means have a great influence on the composition of the libraries. In the following century the proportions stayed the same even if the figures are higher. Nevertheless, one must pay attention to the analysis of Hungarian publications² since they describe tendencies which characterize as a whole the entire body of books (Hungarian publications and imported books together).

Three aspects need to be considered here from the point of view of our present study: (1) books which are non-theological and non-ecclesiastic predominated, (2) contemporary books were imported into the Carpathian Basin, i.e. the proportion of old books diminished, (3) beside Latin, books in German, sometimes in Italian and sporadically in French, Czech or Polish appeared.

The often cited and often disputed thesis put forward by Katalin Péter³ on the secularization of publications in the last third of the sixteenth century and on the

change of its linguistic composition (a change towards vernacularism and the primary position of Hungarian) proves to be correct when taking a look at the composition of contemporary imported books. The Hungarian language, of course, played no part in this latter group. What is significant is the high proportion of Latin non-ecclesiastical books even in the libraries of the population whose mother tongue is German. János Heltai wrote⁴ about this tendency and about the publications of the second third of the seventeenth century where Latin and re-theologization became predominant. Of course, this picture where the entire collection of books whether they are the products of Hungarian printing or are imported is rather schematic since one must make a distinction between the different areas (Western part of Hungary, Eastern Hungary, Partium Regni Hungariae or Transylvania) where the religious faith of the population of each area is, by all means, a very important factor. In the same way belonging to a stratum of society also has special characteristics. If the secularized themes of books read is considered modern then the collections of aristocrats, especially in Western Hungary, were modern. German, Italian and sometimes French books also appeared in these collections even at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The non-Latin books on political theory, philosophy of history, moral philosophy or military science were up-to-date because these books were not published in Latin but were written in French, Italian or German and were translated from one language into the other (from Italian into French or vice versa, etc.) without being translated into Latin. Indeed, the young aristocrat contemporaries of Péter Pázmány (Miklós Zrínyi, Ádám Batthyányi, Ferenc Nádasdy, or the nephew Miklós Pázmány) possessed modern collections of books.⁵ It was also characteristic of the same group that they emphasized the *civilized* nature of the royal court besides its being *cultured* although this tendency would reach its peak only by the eighteenth century.⁶

In the Transylvanian Principality the policy of encouraging literature and science in the Hungarian language started belatedly at the beginning of the seventeenth century with a modern programme and lasted for a short time only, so considering their contents just a few of these books can be considered modern. The project of translating ancient authors into Hungarian was a noble and important enterprise but Hungarian readers read these books not as entertainment but as moral teachings or as a scientific book. The translation of books written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the trend of Neo-Stoical moral theological thinking and their ancient and sixteenth century sources was done for a definite moral educational purpose, which was at the time up-to-date. Considering the fact that the same intellectual trend was still actively influencing political ethics two centuries later, as well as the birth of our national anthem (thus it has an impact on us even today), it is therefore hard to use the word *modern* for readings of this kind even if they are close to our heart.⁷

The means to obtain books or to be more precise the time between the publication

of a book and its arrival in Hungary is a major factor to take into account when one assesses how modern and up-to-date readings in Hungary and Transylvania were in a given time. In spite of the fact that an organized book trade did not exist,⁸ due to *peregrinatio academica*⁹ until the beginning of the seventeenth century books were up-to-date when arriving in Hungary. This statement, however, is true only for a few who received their books in a timely fashion; therefore the existence of that book can be registered retrospectively in the 21st century. On the other hand, the reading public in Hungary and Transylvania was very small. A few courts of aristocrats showed an outstanding and positive example in this regard such as the Batthyány court in Némethújvár.¹⁰ One should also mention the library of György Thurzó in Biccse where the inventory made in 1611 shows that half of the books were definitely published between 1600 and the time of the inventory. This modernity is hard to apprehend with regard to a politically oriented aristocrat like Thurzó since these books were mainly from the contemporary Lutheran polemic debates. The Lutheran ministers who served on Thurzó's lands could access modern literature and Thurzó himself who was interested in issues concerning church organization was also up-to-date in these matters.¹¹

When studying the libraries of the second half of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries it is striking that a larger and larger proportion of the books were old publications. This belatedness cannot be exclusively explained by the fact that the non-existent institutions of book trade could not maintain an up-to-date offer on modern books. The Hungarian travelers visiting Europe also bought old books more and more often presumably because they were cheaper¹² and there are examples where monks returning to Hungary after the Muslim Turks were expelled from the country brought back from their mother monasteries or monastic centres the older books which were no longer needed there.¹³ It also occurred that the publishers sold off the books (cheaper maybe) which they had in stock in a large number to those returning home. This did not have a modernizing impact on the Hungarian libraries and the knowledge of those using these books.¹⁴

In the Hungarian history of ideas the transformation of the institutional system occurred several times and is well known. This transformation, besides unfortunately resulting in physical destruction (caused by Muslim raids after the battle of Mohács, the destructions of the Fifteen-Year War, the Tartar and the Muslim Invasions of Transylvania as well as the military campaigns against the Turks) involved the transformation of the contents of the libraries as well. In the sixteenth century with the spread of the Reformation a new institutional system emerged with churches, schools and printing houses, etc. and strengthened by the seventeenth century. Then the waves of the Counter-Reformation transformed these especially in the 'mournful decade' of the seventeenth century. In the territories under Muslim rule churches and schools replaced the destroyed Catholic Church institutions in either a Protestant spirit (creating mainly Calvinist or Unitarian churches and schools) or

operating as Catholic thanks to the Franciscan, Jesuit or the Pauline missions. Reconstruction after the Muslims' defeat was mainly Catholic except the institutions founded by the Lutheran Slovaks settling in more Southern areas.

Due to the destruction and the absence of funds the remaining books were overvalued and used disregarding their confessional nature or modernity. When taking into account the sources from the minutes taken by *canonica visitatio* which described the books of the parish and vicarages or those of the village schools¹⁵ then it is clear that from the beginning of the sixteenth century we can hardly speak of modernization¹⁶ despite the periodic book purchases or the improving quantitative and qualitative figures of Hungarian publishing. This does not mean that a priest trained in Italy or Vienna did not occasionally show up in the villages of Hungary or Transylvania with his books but the overview justified the analysis made by Ádám Dankanits regarding Transylvania who spoke of *the decline of the traditional world* after the first third of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ Going through the sources describing the erudition of the school masters in Bereg edited by Róbert Oláh one does not find the Calvinist parishes of the Trans-Tisza region any more modern.¹⁸

Our view of how modern a person's readings or thinking are can be influenced by the proportion of this person's secular and ecclesiastic jobs. A landlord was in charge of the population living on his lands from a legal point of view as well. To this sense of responsibility came a sense of moral duty to a greater extent than the approach used later in history, especially during Socialist times, would suggest. The aristocracy acted in a responsible manner when they had to take a stand on religious matters and played an active role in maintaining church institutions (they maintained the buildings and provided human resources; that is they employed a school teacher, a priest, or a minister).¹⁹ Beyond this they allowed the people around them to use their libraries and when making purchases they considered these people's needs.²⁰ They participated in religious polemics and in church organization and they acquired the knowledge to do these. The aristocrats of Western Hungary and those of Transylvania discharged these jobs in a different way, some of them, of course being compelled to do them. Undoubtedly, when viewed from the perspective of Western Europe it may look anachronistic to what extent the Hungarian aristocracy of Transylvania in the eighteenth century was involved in the main consistorial of the Calvinist Church,²¹ as were the theological studies of Pál Teleki.²²

This sense of obligation to play the above-mentioned role is closely connected to belonging to an ethnic minority or feeling vulnerable. A minority community or one threatened in its religious beliefs often becomes orthodox. It does not allow innovation because it might bring disputes which in turn may allow the threatening authorities to intervene. We can see this phenomenon in the history of the reception of intellectual ideas. This kind of thinking largely influenced the way the Saxon Lutheran Church of Transylvania considered Philippism and Pietism which are considered modern even by the church historians of today. The same attitude can

be witnessed in the books read by the leading intelligentsia of towns and the burghers.²³ The same thoughts motivated the teachers compiling book lists for purchase in Calvinist boarding schools²⁴ up to a point when they made the distinction between books available for students and the ones accessed by teachers.²⁵

The relationship of literature in Latin or in the vernacular and science is closely related to the question of modernity in Europe, too. For the generation at the beginning of the sixteenth century Latin was undoubtedly the language of science and scholarly papers were almost exclusively written in this language. On the other hand, the sixteenth century was also the period of the establishment of the modern state.

The sixteenth century was, however, the period when modern states were formed and during which special cultural and political policies were developed such as those of Henry VIII or Francis I. An important element of these policies was to create the tools for science and literature in the vernacular language (dictionaries of a certain language) and to support this kind of work. Spanish owes much to strict censorship since the control of the contents of a text was accompanied by a linguistic check as well which had a positive impact on linguistic unification. The vernacular programme of the Reformation brought with it similar results in the entire German speaking world. In contrast, the official language in Hungary remained Latin, partially in order to oppose Germanisation after the Osman Turks were driven out of the country. This resulted in the fact that the Hungarian creative intelligentsia encountered only old-fashioned European science if they did not learn a modern language. Learning a modern language was not unheard of but definitely was not the norm. Writing and reading in Latin made knowledge more conservative as well as the collections of libraries.²⁶

When studying modernity and being up-to-date one must consider the distorting effects of literature, i.e. one should analyze the viewpoints of the scholar too: what can be researched, what is interesting and what is not. As was referred to in the introductory paragraph of the present study, the presence of progressive or non-conformist books in philosophy, theology or the history of ideas has always been judged more interesting, almost sensational. This is true even if the study of non-conformist intellectual trends is undertaken with a wider array of tools or institutionally than the ones which characterize a period. Therefore, the presence of a book with an *interesting* topic and its owner as well appear as up-to-date while a library containing many *boring* books with modern knowledge as old-fashioned. One must therefore be very careful with interpretations which are usually the result of a preconception or simply the direction of the research. For those who study the history of philosophy the presence of books by outstanding authors is interesting (a good example of this is the study on Descartes²⁷ since this phenomenon falls in the mainstream of philosophical thinking trends). Compared to the mainstream, the representatives of Catholic or any of the Protestant theological schools of thought are only the *little*

brook, the *tributary*. Reality, however, is the opposite: the mainstream was the latter one and the presence of thinkers today considered great was atypical. Studies focusing on Radical Reformation which was strong in Hungary emphasized this fact many times forgetting the fact that their heroes represent just as small a *brook* in the history of reception in Hungary as the great thinkers of the history of philosophy, compared to *regular* Protestant theological works or to an even higher degree, to the great number of books on Catholic theology or religion. Another phenomenon, the one which follows international *fashion* trends can be detected when one takes stock of the popularity of studies done on special cases as opposed to general tendencies. An example for this is the over-emphasis of occult sciences in the readings of people in Hungary. It is indeed very interesting whether we can document the existence of such readings in the Carpathian Basin before the battle of Mohács or in the beginning of the seventeenth century but when one evaluates the importance of these books one must counterbalance it with the great amount of other books read. A natural intellectual interest for the occult sciences does not necessarily mean the reception of a rare book or its interpretation as an intellectual trend.²⁸

In summary I would like to return to the starting point of my train of thoughts: one must avoid the trap of being anachronistic also when one examines how modern or outdated the libraries and the readings of the Early Modern Age were. Every element of public collections in particular church history has to be considered when answering this question. Church history must be taken into account primarily because almost all educational or cultural institutions were run by the church. One must be empathetic when evaluating a person or an institution in our history just as we tend to regard contemporary or recent activities of a person or a group with understanding and empathy. One does not have to relieve of all responsibility those who did nothing to counter the current but one should assess the force of the current they were impacted with. When literary historians charge one or the other churches with transmitting outdated knowledge because it fits their train of thought one does not have to accept this as true. Analysing the sources of reading history encourages us to think about whether a statement like this is true or not. In the reception of intellectual trends in the Early Modern Age, however, there is a proven ever-growing belatedness from the end of the sixteenth century. When taking stock of the causes of this belatedness in a given point in time our analysis may result in showing us an act of good will, modern from their point of view which may have aimed at preserving the community, yet being retrograde from our perspective. There is also the question to what extent the belated reception of intellectual trends strengthened or weakened the preservation of Hungarian traditions. If we consider the fact that Paul Lendvai²⁹ who was educated in Hungary but later immigrated to Austria, and the British Bryan Cartledge³⁰ both call Hungarians *survivors*, then the nuancing of the negative picture suggested by the belated readings does seem justified.

Anmerkungen

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 - 12 This can be seen and is well documented in the sources on heritages of burgers in Beszterce: Monok, István/Ötvös, Péter/Verók, Attila (Eds.): Erdélyi könyvesházak IV/1. – Bibliotheken in Siebenbürgen IV/1. Lesestoffe der siebenbürgen Sachsen, 1575-1750. Budapest: OSZK 2004, S. 3-155 (= Adattár XVI-XVIII. századi szellemi mozgalmaink történetéhez 16/4/1.); Monok, István: „Beszterce és Sopron. Egy erdélyi és egy nyugat-magyarországi város olvasmányai a XVI-XVII. században” (Beszterce and Sopron. Reading Materials in a Transylvanian Community and in a Town in Western Hungary), in: De la umanism - la luminism. Sub redactia Ion Chiorean. Târgu Mureş: Academia Romaniei 1994, S. 29-42.
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Monok István

Néhány szempont a kora újkori Magyar Királyság és Erdély könyvtárai modernségének megítéléséhez


A kora újkori könyvtárak illetve olvasmányok modernsége vagy elavultsága tekintetében is figyelni kell arra, hogy ne legyünk anakronisztikusak. A korszak könyvvel kapcsolatos intézményrendszerének ismerete alapul szolgálhat a kérdésre adandó válasz szempontjaihoz, de emellett nagy hangsúllyal kell figyelembe venni a köz-történet minden elemét, de különösen az egyházak történetét. Ez utóbbit azért, mert csaknem minden művelődési, oktatási intézmény közvetlen egyházi kezelésben működött. Ahogy egyes személyek, csoportok napjaink vagy közelmúltbeli viselkedését – joggal, vagy ok nélkül – hajlamosak vagyunk nagy megértéssel, empátiával kezelni, úgy történetileg is tudnunk kell empatikusan viselkedni történelmünk ismert alakjai, vagy bármely intézményének megítélése kapcsán. Az események sodrása ellen semmit sem tevéket nem kell persze mindig felmenteni, de a sodrás erejének megítélésére is kell tudni energiát fordítani. Amikor egyes egyházakat korszerűtlen ismeretek áthagyományozásával vádol a szakirodalom, mert egy gondolat belső logikájába ez illik bele, azt nem kell feltétlen igaznak elfogadni. Az olvasmány-történeti források elemzése legalábbis arra int, hogy legalább a fenti szempontok szerint végig kell gondolnunk egy ilyen állítás helyességét. Valóban úgy látjuk, hogy a kora újkori szellemi áramlatok befogadásában Magyarországon a XVI. század végétől kezdve folyamatosan növekvő mértékű készség bizonyítható. A késés okainak elemzése azonban egy-egy történelmi pillanatban indokolható szándékú, ma retrográd, akkor akár a közösség megmentését eredményező cselekvést mutat. Vagyis az adott korból nézve éppen az a cselekvés volt modern. Kérdés persze az, hogy ez a folyamat – a megkésett recepció – mennyiben erősítette vagy gyengítette a magyar hagyományok megőrzésének a lehetőségét. Ha tekintetbe vesszük azt, hogy a magyarországi iskolázottságú nyugaton élő szakírók, és a teljesen idegenek egyaránt „túlélőknek” nevezik a magyarokat, akkor a korszerűtlen olvasmányok sugallta negatív kép árnyalása mindenképp indokolt volt.


Márta Csire · Erika Erlinghagen · Zsuzsa Gáti ·
Brigitta Pesti · Wolfgang Müller-Funk (Hg.)


Ein Land mit Eigenschaften:
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in Ungarn in transnationalen
Kontexten

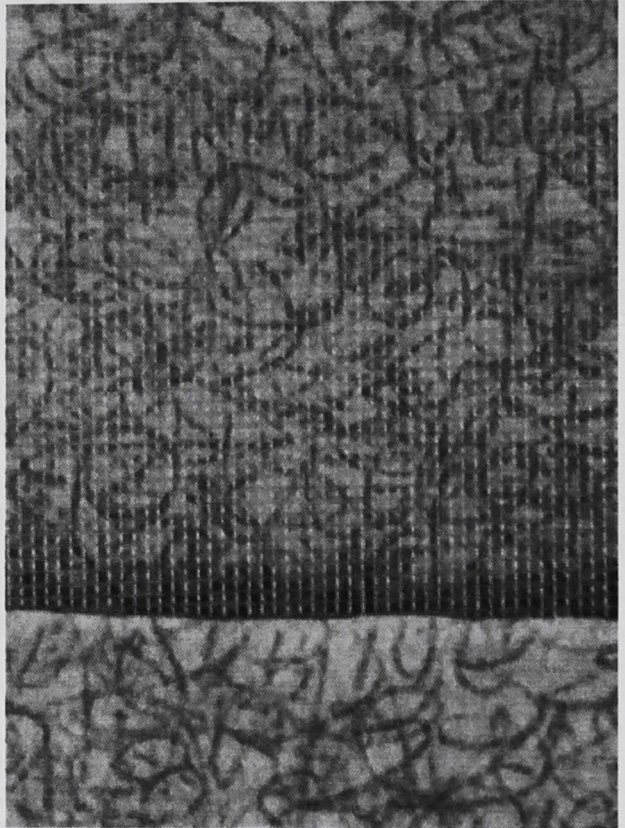
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