

Reformation in Hungary: research problems and methodology

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Invention, Transfer, and Reception: the Making of the European Reformation(s)

A Methodological Survey of Reformation Historiography (workshop)

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1 The Battle of Mohács (1526): the watershed

The first conclusion drawn from the data of the early Reformation is related to ethnicity: the first reformers were native Germans or German speakers, or if this cannot exactly be determined about everyone, the people in question all lived and operated in a German-speaking environment. All sources originate in a German-speaking environment (mostly towns with a German population, or among German-speaking miners, and royal courts, which were multilingual due to dynastic connections), and the majority of these linguistic utterances have been preserved in German (and to a lesser extent in Latin). Although the language of the administration of the state and church was Latin, and the Humanist letters also preferred the classical language, administration in towns and private letters were in the native language of the local majority population.

According to the sources, the Reformation had a significant effect in the German-speaking environment of Hungary in the period before the battle of Mohács, but data shows that at this time the movement had not yet crossed the German-Hungarian language border within the country. Thus, it can be stated that until 1526 the teaching of the Reformation was restricted to an urban, German-speaking environment. According to the works of the Hungarian speaking reformer Matthias Dévai¹, the Hungarian ethnic group was clearly only receptive to the theological interpretation of the 1526 defeat at Mohács, namely the critique of the veneration of saints. However, I will briefly introduce the ideological and identity crisis following Mohács in connection with another figure, Georg Stoltz².

In the autumn of 1526, János Gosztonyi (†1527), bishop of Transylvania ordered a heretic investigation against Georg Stoltz, castellan of Hunedoara³. Stoltz was an Upper Silesian nobleman, member of George Margrave of Brandenburg's court in Jägerndorf⁴, who assumed the position of castellan of Hunedoara in the spring of 1526.

On 24 September 1526, the bishop of Alba Iulia ordered three parish priests in his diocese to start an investigation about the "Lutheran" aberration of the newly arrived castellan of Hunedoara.⁵ On 13 October the three priests gave their detailed report to the bishop about the lifestyle, morals and views of the heretic Stoltz.⁶ The clerics who knew the castellan well, heard Stoltz call the pope Antichrist, he denied that priests were capable of turning the Eucharist into the body of Christ, and propagated the marriage of priests. Moreover, he broke the fast both in words and deeds, he ate meat together with Orthodox Romanians, he questioned the biblical basis for the practice of confession, he claimed that everyone was a priest, therefore he could also baptise, and he considered the institution of the church as well as the church made by hand unnecessary.

¹ Mátyás Dévai (Bíró) (†1545): BBKL 1, 1276–1277; MBW 11, 345; RGG⁴ 2, 773.

² Georg Stoltz († Hunedoara, 1530): Csepregi: *A reformáció nyelve*, 113–6.

³ ETE 1, 283–8 (Nr. 276–7); Keul: *Early Modern Religious Communities*, 53.

⁴ Csepregi: 'Notbischof'.

⁵ ETE 1, 283–4 (Nr. 276).

⁶ ETE 1, 285–8 (Nr. 277).

During the feast of John the Baptist, he pushed away the cross that was extended to him, and laughed when others kissed it. He claimed that saints were humans and villains and that their relics were just junk. He destroyed the picture of Pope Saint Gregory the Great with an axe while he was drunk. He similarly reviled the feasts of the Virgin Mary. He ridiculed indulgences, excommunication, the holy water, the morning and evening Ave Maria, he denied the Purgatory, and claimed that nobody but the Son of God may enter into Heaven.

Seemingly authentic testimonies give an account of the coherent behaviour of a professed heretic, who was openly critical towards the church. The scandalous words and protesting deeds of Stoltz can indeed be placed in the framework of the Lutheran teachings.⁷

The above testimony of the priests was confirmed by the fellow castellans of Stoltz and the other officers of the castle. They even heard Stoltz blame Saint John of Capistrano (1386-1456) and the Hungarian saints, as well as the Holy Blood of Bába (a shrine to which miracles are attributed in Hungary), that they let Buda and the country be taken over by the Turks. However, this statement obviously already reflects on the lost battle of Mohács and the detailed reports about the death of King Louis II⁸, as well as the political and military situation and spiritual crisis of the country. Patron saints, relics, holy kings, and even Mary the *Patrona Hungariae* all failed and proved unworthy of the trust placed in them, thus the state ideology and symbolic representation based on them wavered:

“Where are these villains: Saint Johns of Alexandria and of Capistrano and the other Hungarian saints? If they are saints, why do they not protect Buda and the country from the Turks? And where is the Holy Blood of Bába? How can this kabbalah blood [*Kabala Werh*] scorch and destroy its own shrine and Hungary, if it is holy?”⁹

It was based on the same logic that one generation later, in 1543 the defenders of Székesfehérvár held it against the failed saints that there was no help:

“The villain citizens, who blasphemed the saints of God took Peter and Paul out of the church who had been carved out of wood and lined with gold for remembrance, and the people tied a rope around their necks, took them to the city walls, hung them on a hook outside the wall, and told the statues: Now help us, villains, and we will believe you.”¹⁰

Questioning the veneration of saints gives a theological answer to the political, military situation and identity crisis of the country. From this ground Dévai arrives at the denial of Hell and of Purgatory, a new image of Mary and a new way of creating solidarity with the saints. In a broad framework of the history of ideas, the innovative thoughts of Dévai can be interpreted in the context of the thousand year-old Christian tradition of “Soul-sleeping”.¹¹ The social impact of Dévai’s famous theory of “the sleeping of saints” at the time of crisis following Mohács cannot be emphasised enough. Since Dévai explicitly states the political consequences of his religious arguments:

“Clerics preach in a stentorian voice that Stephen, the first king of Hungarians offered the country to the Virgin Mary. Hence, even the embossing of the coins

⁷ Cf. similar charges in the 1524 heretic investigation in Sopron. ETE 1, 159-71 (Nr. 163); Csepregi: ‘The evolution’, 9-10.

⁸ Louis II. King of Hungary and Bohemia (Buda, 1506 – Mohács, 1526): NDB 15, 381-2.

⁹ ETE 1, 287 (Nr. 277). King Louis II. went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Blood in Bába before the battle, at the end of August 1526, and the Turks robbed the Abbey of Bába a few days after the battle. MHH.S 1, 118.

¹⁰ MHH.S 1, 393.

¹¹ Ács, ‘The Theory of Soul-sleeping’.

present her as the Patron of the country. However, if this is true, I tell you that the king had no idea about the nature of the faith, i.e. that it turns only to God and fixes its gaze only on Christ, ignoring the saints and the Holy Virgin.”¹²

2 The reactions of the followers of the old faith

In order to present if not an extensive selection but at least a representative sample of the language of the followers of the old faith¹³, I have thematically categorised the data of seven, relatively large (both in terms of teaching and in terms of time and place) heretic investigations or reports.¹⁴ The recording of data purposefully shows great variations: it covers all the historical regions of the country and spans the first two decades of the Reformation in Hungary. While among the authors of the texts there are not only clerics serving in various functions with different educational backgrounds, but also a lay citizen; among the heresies presented are teachings accusable of Anabaptism, Spiritualism, and other radical schools.

It is necessary to evaluate the informants of the old faith: the charge book put in front of Dévai, which was compiled by Johannes Fabri¹⁵ bishop of Vienna and his colleagues is by far the most precisely formulated text, which avoids stereotypes and concentrates on the theses *actually* propagated by Dévai, therefore it is truly professional work.¹⁶ Regarding the other texts, however, it is hard to decide whether the heresies described in them resemble previous interrogations of witnesses more or the actual situation examined. Therefore, solely based on the records of the followers of the old faith the dilemma of the real and literary analogy would be unsolvable, i.e. whether the heretics interrogated followed each other's false doctrines or the interrogators copied each other's files.

The records typically consider heresies as a denial of a traditional doctrine, and rarely try to positively elaborate on the heretical doctrines. The interrogated heretic “despises” or “disparages” this or that doctrine, according to the interrogators showing off their rich vocabulary in the field. On the other hand, it is a characteristic of the opinions of the interrogated subjects that the motivation for the denial or rejection of traditional doctrines can be threefold: it is not commanded in the Gospel, it is not necessary or useful for salvation, or that it is simply invalid. Using a later terminology, it can be said that the teachers of false doctrine under investigation classify several aspects of the traditional church doctrine or religiosity as *adiaphora*, the category of in-between things, i.e. among those norms of behaviour, which otherwise have an important role in everyday life or an important social function, however, they are neither commanded nor forbidden in the Scripture. They might be useful for the community, however, neither adhering to them nor ignoring them influences eternal salvation.¹⁷

The thematic categorisation of charges enables the identification of the intersections of heretic investigations and hence also those of the heretical doctrines. The two most important topics were clearly the veneration of saints occurring in all the records, and the fast, which appeared in six of the texts. There is increasing evidence that since the ideological crisis after Mohács partially explains the success of the Reformation in Hungary, the question of the cult of saints

¹² Dévai: *Disputatio*, fol. b4r.

¹³ Csepregi: ‘The evolution’, 26-8.

¹⁴ Sources: Csepregi: *A reformáció nyelve*, 451-4.

¹⁵ Johannes Fabri (Leutkirch/Allgäu, 1478 – Baden/Vienna, 1541): BBKL 1, 1588-9; MBW 12, 37-8; NDB 4, 728-9; RGG⁴ 3,3-4; TRE 10, 784-8.

¹⁶ ETE 2, 264-7 (Nr. 233-4).

¹⁷ Szegedi Edit, ‘Was bedeutet Adiaphoron / Adiaphora?’

should be regarded as the central issue involved. What role, however did the question of fasting – the most fiercely debated topic in Zurich – play in our context?

The problem should again be examined from the point of view of the followers of the old faith. The reason for these topics to gain such importance is the scandals relating to them: Georg Stoltz smashing Pope Saint Gregory the Great's picture with an axe when he was drunk, and the citizens of Székesfehérvár hanging statues of Peter and Paul outside the city walls with ropes around their necks. Similarly, the testimonies recorded also provide extensive details on who, in what company and in which period of fast consumed butter, eggs or roast meat. On the other hand, the denial of Purgatory, for example, or the question of the absolution of deadly sins do not relate to such spectacular elements or to causing scandals demonstrated as prophetic deeds.

The deeper reason, however, for the emphatic treatment of these two main topics is that they were closely connected to the profane rituals of everyday, social life. The questioning of the veneration of saints undermined, on the one hand, the order of time provided by the calendar, and the spatial relations in connection with holy places, churches, altars, shrines, on the other. The rejection of the fast also intervened with the cyclical division of the week and of the year. Whoever abused the saints, did not only attack an article of faith or simply the state ideology, but as a public enemy threatened the everyday life and the order of the closer community.

This explanation is supported by the fact that the two issues mentioned are preceded by the following: regular confession (occurs five times); rites, such as bell ringing, morning and evening prayer, feasts (four times); churches, altars, pictures (also four times) – that is, issues which were related to orientation regarding time and space. Although regarding a different dimension, communal life was also structured by church authority (occurs five times) and the clergy (also five times). The spectacular and scandalous rejection of the latter was monks quitting their orders and the marriage of priests. Therefore, it was justified that the followers of the old faith considered the teachings of the Reformation a frontal attack on their familiar world and the destruction of the system of social relations.

Only one popular topic is missing from this framework of interpretation: the Eucharist, also occurring five times, which brings the harshest words to the lips of its critics: trick of the Devil; idol. The preachers of the Reformation were unable to just label this question as “not necessary” or “not commanded”. According to them, this is no longer an *adiaphoron*, but the key question of true worship deriving from the pure teaching, hence in the interrogation of Dévai in Vienna, four points deal with the problem of the mass. Whereas the rest of the above mentioned topics reflect the values and points of view of the followers of the old faith, with regards to this question the reformers' opinions come into light, as well as their linguistic power.

It has become something of a cliché in the scholarship on the German and Hungarian Reformation that the ideas of the Reformers exerted a fundamental influence on society in part because they were expressed in the mother tongues of the congregations and in part because of the medium of printing. Neither of these two factors was entirely new at the time, but together they released energies that until then had not been seen. We can assess the dimensions of the linguistic event by examining bibliographies of the re-printings of individual texts, but the question remains as to whether or not contemporaries were themselves aware of these processes.¹⁸ One of the most prominent representatives of the

¹⁸ At the same time, in an open debate Pál Ács quite rightly warned of the danger of over-interpretation and misreading in linguistic analyses. As we well know, even the most thorough philological erudition and linguistic-historical methodology cannot serve as a substitute for the sensitivities to connotation and implication that the

Reformation in Hungary, Gáspár Heltai (ca. 1510-1574), definitely was, for in his work entitled “Háló” (or “Net”), when writing on the 1538 religious debate of Segesvár (Schäßburg in German, today Sighișoara in Romania), he used a metaphor that is poetic but also captures the storminess of the new uses of language: “And at the time here and there the word of the Lord began to flash like lightening, both in Hungary and in Transylvania.”¹⁹

3 Theology and Language Use

It is a characteristic of language use in 16th-century Hungary that on the one hand, the written and oral languages often differed, and translation from one language to the other was not such a natural and wide-spread practice as in later centuries. In parallel multilingualism every language has their own well-defined place, function, and they are not freely interchangeable.²⁰ Therefore, a separate set of concepts and formulae were created for idioms used in parallel with each other in the period of the Reformation also, which affected each other only to a small extent. Latin served as the lingua franca, and people living in the same country seldom learnt each other's mother tongue (apart from those aristocratic and intellectual families, which due to their family relations were already multilingual). In larger towns and cities both Latin and German clerks worked, who answered incoming letters according to the language they were written in, however, they only translated from one language to the other in exceptional cases.

Our 16th-century reformers had a restricted knowledge of modern languages (but at least they had excellent Latin skills). The originally bilingual reformers are an exception, such as Gáspár Heltai, who was a Transylvanian Saxon.²¹ The others even after spending many years in Germany did not learn German very well, Dévai even admits this. This characterises the students even more so, who after half a year or one year returned from the universities. Although it was equally easy to get by with Latin everywhere, everyone preferred an environment similar to their mother tongue. The custom for parents to send a student somewhere “for the sake of the language” is a later development, and it is even later that there is a demand among the middle class to know “the languages of the country”.

Among the processes discussed here it is necessary to touch upon the role of Latin. In Reformation research it is currently an authoritative approach that theological debates leading to denominational differentiation can be explained partially by language differences: between Scholastic Latin and Humanistic Latin, Upper German and Low German dialects, and the richness of Latin terminology in contrast with the lacking terminology of vernaculars. A certain part of this linguistic approach is also well-known in Hungary, namely that Hungarian students who were good at Latin but did not speak German preferred Melancthon's lectures and Latin sermons to Luther's mixed-language exegeses and German sermons. The problem however is even greater. Theological terminology already existed in Latin, however, at the time it did not exist in vernaculars. I am not only referring to such small languages as Hungarian here, since the theological differences between the Latin and German versions of the Augsburg Confession are also partially a result of this. Theological debates, competing and contrasting arguments could not be conveyed in vernaculars or only with significant

people at the time had, sensitivities that today cannot be reconjured or reconstructed, the historical and communal context, the unrepeatable meaning “here and now.”

¹⁹ *Háló: válogatás Heltai Gáspár műveiből* [Net: Selected writings of Gáspár Heltai], edited by Péter Kőszeghy (Budapest: Magvető, 1979), 130.

²⁰ Kubinyi, ‘Ethnische Minderheiten’; Bak, ‘Linguistic Pluralism’; Szende, ‘Integration through Language’.

²¹ Caspar Heltai (Helth) (Cisnădie, 1515? – Cluj, 1574): NDB 8, 508; RGG⁴ 3, 1622.

distortions. Whereas Dévai's teachings are clearly formulated in his *Disputatio*²² written in Latin, for example, in his Hungarian language catechism they are vague and unclear. Hence it is not the theological debates themselves and the contrasting views of the Reformation which are formulated in vernaculars, but rather just the waves stirred up by the debate.

Probably it is the observation of these details – language skills, translation culture, lack of theological terminology, mother tongue based and region-based interconfessional organisations – which leads to answering the most important and to this day basically unsolved question of the history of the Reformation in Hungary: Why did the vast majority of the ethnically Hungarian population in the 16th century become followers of the Helvetic Confessions, unlike other ethnic groups in Hungary? For now, my attempted answer is this: Hungarians, in their relative linguistic isolation went their own way. They were, of course, influenced by the Swiss and Southern German examples, and the medieval and humanistic heritage is also demonstrable to some extent.²³ The route of the triumphal procession of the Helvetic theology (from the occupied territories to the Transibiscan region, then from there to Transylvania, and finally to Western Transdanubia and Upper Hungary) makes it obvious that the Turkish invasion and the border castle battles also had a role in this story,²⁴ maybe even the increase in the economic significance of market towns, since Bernd Moeller also demonstrated similar parallelisms between the processes in social history and in the history of ideas during the German Reformation.²⁵ Additionally, the independent development, original theological thinking in the Hungarian-language Reformation, and unique materials in the texts of Calvinist creeds in Hungary are evident.²⁶

The leaven of this theological fermentation was – as it has for long been known to historical research – the Hungarian student association of Wittenberg. Taking a close look at the list of members of the Hungarian student bursa of Wittenberg, it is apparent that unlike the university nations, it was not organised on a regional basis, but based on mother tongue: there are very few non-Hungarian surnames among them, and these come from regions with a linguistically heterogeneous population.²⁷ Although the Hungarian *bursa* kept its records in Latin, its members generally interacted with each other in Hungarian, thus excluding their compatriots with differing mother tongues.

This language-based, at first theological, later denominational differentiation led to obvious ethnic mistrust and conflict by the end of the 16th century. Research shows that in these theological debates ethnic prejudices also played an important role accelerating the process of confessionalisation along the borders between different mother tongues. It is known that denominational identity was not created by creeds, but theologically indifferent elements, such as the mother tongue (*adiaphora*).²⁸ This made it possible to refer to the religion “of Cluj” (Calvinist) and that “of Sibiu” (Lutheran) in 16th-century Transylvania, and this is how the “Hungarian religion” of the Calvinists and the “German and Slovakian religion” of the Lutherans came into long-term existence in the whole country.

²² Dévai: *Disputatio*.

²³ Bernhard: *Konsolidierung*.

²⁴ Szakály, 'Türkenherrschaft'; Öze: *Reformation und Grenzgebiete*; Spannenberger, 'Konfessionsbildung'.

²⁵ Moeller: *Reichsstadt und Reformation*.

²⁶ E.g. BSRefK 2/2, 1-165 (Nr. 58).

²⁷ Szabó Géza: *Geschichte des ungarischen Coetus*.

²⁸ Szegedi, 'Was bedeutet Adiaphoron / Adiaphora?'