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The Theme of Youth and Court Life in Historical Literature Regarding Gábor Bethlen and Zsigmond Báthory

This study explores the causes of the sharp disparity that emerged in assessments of two rulers of the early modern Transylvanian state, Zsigmond Báthory and Gábor Bethlen, in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Hungarian historiography. The author compares two aspects of the images of the princes—their childhood and youth and their courts. Bethlen, born in 1580, grew up in Báthory's princely court and stood in his service between the years 1593 and 1602. The life paths of the princes of Transylvania were thus interconnected, though biographical constructions originating over subsequent generations symbolically separated them. These constructions highlighted the malleable character and weakness of the disdained Báthory in connection with his youth and court. The fiction-laced development history of the venerated Bethlen, contrarily, depicts the antecedents of exemplary rule, while illustrations of his princely court also serve to emphasize the prince's virtues. The examined contrasts in the established images of Báthory and Bethlen are a product of a polarizing approach to history by which the tarnishing of Báthory has enhanced the brilliance of Bethlen.

Keywords: princely image, courtly culture, biographical construction, national historiography

There hardly exist two rulers whose appraisal in the historical memory of the early modern Transylvanian state contrast to the same degree as those of Princes of Transylvania Gábor Bethlen (1580–1629) and Zsigmond Báthory (1572–1613)—the former widely considered to be the greatest ruler of the semi-independent principality, while the latter is known primarily for his failures.¹ The personalities of these princes can be seen and judged with particular clarity when compared to one another. Such comparison of the contrasting personal attributes of Gábor Bethlen and Zsigmond Báthory likewise presents the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the logic underpinning historical memory and historiography regarding the two Princes of Transylvania.

1 Zsigmond Báthory, the nephew of Prince of Transylvania and King of Poland István Báthory, served as the Prince of Transylvania on four separate occasions between 1588 and 1602.

This essay will not present a detailed account of the long process involved in the formation of the images of princes Zsigmond Báthory and Gábor Bethlen from the time of their rule to modern academic historiography.² Instead, it will emphasize some of the main thematic elements lying at the foundation of comparisons between the two princes of Transylvania. This essay will examine two clearly definable themes within this complex issue: childhood and youth; and depictions of the princely court of Transylvania beginning with Bethlen's first appearance at the court in 1593 and ending with Báthory's abdication and emigration in 1602.

Opposing Images: Báthory and Bethlen

The attempt to compare Gábor Bethlen with Zsigmond Báthory may at first appear to be a peculiar undertaking, since comparisons between Bethlen and his immediate predecessor, Gábor Báthory, are both more obvious and customary. The struggle between Gábor Bethlen and Gábor Báthory (Prince of Transylvania 1608–1613) and the formation on the part of the former and his followers of the latter assassinated prince's image³ offer a clear explanation for the broad disparities existing between representations of the victorious Bethlen and the defeated Báthory.⁴ Interpretations of the conflict between them become richer in the broader context of representations of the two historical personalities, Zsigmond Báthory and István Bocskai (Prince of Transylvania 1605–1606). Narratives of their lives and rule submit themselves to contrast- and analogy-based patterns. On the negative pole stand the two Báthorys, while Bocskai and Bethlen stand at the positive pole. Bethlen is depicted as Bocskai's successor, the heir to his objectives, and as such having turned against Gábor Báthory, just as

2 Though it is important to highlight the qualitative difference in myth-laden early modern historical narrative and critical, scientific historiography beginning in the nineteenth century, rigorous separation of the two might serve to obscure the fact that the results of modern academic research on Báthory and Bethlen are not exempt from the influence of the myth contained in the early image formation of the princes.

3 The Transylvanian Diet elected the Ottoman-supported Gábor Bethlen to serve as Prince of Transylvania in place of Gábor Báthory on October 23, 1613. Hajduks assassinated Báthory four days later.

4 For information regarding the trials involving Gábor Báthory's female relatives see: László Nagy, "*Sok dolgot próbála Bethlen Gábor. . .*" *Erdélyi boszorkányperek* (Budapest: Magvető, 1981). For information regarding Bethlen's inquiry into the failed 1610 assassination attempt against Gábor Báthory and attempts to tarnish the latter's reputation through exposing his amorous affairs see: Ildikó Horn, "Őnagysága merénylői (Gondolatok egy politikai összeesküvésről)," in idem, *Tündérország útvesztői. Tanulmányok Erdély történelméhez* (Budapest: ELTE BTK, 2005), 171, 178–79.

István Bocskai drew away from Zsigmond Báthory. These narratives inform the reader of the reasons for which the paths of the initially allied historical actors deviate: the successes gained following their divergence become more spectacular and convincing if the narrator disparages the unsuccessful predecessor or opponent. This essay attempts to portray the most important themes that impel the dynamic illustrating Zsigmond Báthory and Gábor Bethlen within the context of the paradigm described above. Its analysis and conclusions are thus based on conjecture and opinion regarding the princes just as much as they are on document-supported fact.

Aside from the success with which they performed the functions of Prince of Transylvania, the fact that posterity has remembered Zsigmond Báthory with disdain and Gábor Bethlen with admiration is due undoubtedly to the success with which they were able to establish cogent and convincing images of themselves and whether long-lasting negative opinions were formed about them. Among the historiographers active during the life of Zsigmond Báthory, the harshly critical narratives of István Szamosközy (1570–1612) and Ambrus Somogyi (1564–1637) foreshadow the generally negative appraisal of the prince formed in the course of history. These historiographers cited circumstances surrounding Báthory's birth, childhood and youth, his upbringing and the courtly environment to support their portrayals of his unsteady character and capriciousness. The positive assessment of Báthory contained in the works of János Baranyai Decsi and Giorgio Tomasi's apologia *La Battorea* published in 1609 did not exercise a major impact on the historical image of the prince.⁵

Szamosközy's contention that the volatile political career of Zsigmond Báthory could be explained by his impulsive lack of consistency remained influential into the nineteenth century, when critical scholarship began to examine his rule for the first time. The image formed of Gábor Bethlen during

5 See the following influential works regarding Zsigmond Báthory's character and court: Sándor Szilágyi, ed., *Szamosközy István történeti maradványai (1566–1603)*, Monumenta Hungariae Historica, Scriptorum 28 (Budapest: MTA, 1876), 10–16; István Szamosközy, *Erdély története (1598–1599, 1603)*, trans. István Borzsák (Budapest: Magyar Helikon, 1977), 56–62, and Sándor Szilágyi, ed., *Szamosközy István történeti maradványai (1566–1603)*, Monumenta Hungariae Historica, Scriptorum 30 (Budapest: MTA, 1880), passim. The following works played a significant role in the reassessment of Zsigmond Báthory: Tibor Klaniczay, "Udvar és társadalom szembenállása Közép-Európában (Az erdélyi udvar a XVI. század végén)," in idem, *Pallas magyar invadéjai* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1985), 104–23; László Nagy, *A orosz hírvé Bábthoryak* (Budapest: Kossuth, 1984), 77–148. Over recent years, the historical conception of Zsigmond Báthory has been formed in the works of Ildikó Horn, Tamás Kruppa, Gábor Várkonyi and the author of this essay, among others.

and immediately after his life also endured until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but contrary to the negative opinion that took root with regard to Báthory, was almost universally positive. Bethlen himself contributed to the foundation of this favorable image, establishing a group of reverent followers, including János Keserői Dajka, Pál Háportoni Forró, Gáspár Bojthi Veres and János Kemény among others, who wrote historical works, letters and memoirs praising the ruler. These laudatory voices overwhelmed expressions of criticism toward Gábor Bethlen, such as those of Cardinal Péter Pázmány, and served as the foundation of scientific research regarding Bethlen beginning in the nineteenth century.⁶

The extremes contained in the ex post facto assessments of Zsigmond Báthory and Gábor Bethlen and the genuine differences and interconnections in their lives warrant comparison of youth and the court—two aspects of biography and political environment. While Zsigmond Báthory was raised to be prince as a member of Transylvania's ruling family, Gábor Bethlen emerged from a much more modest background and the possibility of his becoming prince was not even considered for many years. The religious affiliation of the historians writing about the Catholic Báthory and the Protestant Bethlen obviously influenced their narrations of the princes, just as it did their view of relations between the House of Habsburg and Transylvania. The period in which the lives of Zsigmond Báthory and Gábor Bethlen intersected also serves to justify comparison of the two Princes of Transylvania: the nine-year interval between 1593 and 1602 during which Bethlen was part of Prince Báthory's court. Gábor Bethlen became Prince of Transylvania in 1613, the year that Zsigmond Báthory, just eight years his senior, died in Prague just six months following the assassination of his nephew, Gábor Báthory. Gábor Bethlen's rule as prince of

6 See the following work for the accusation repeated in pamphlets at the time regarding Bethlen's "secret Turkishness" and duplicity: Sándor Szilágyi, ed., *Bethlen Gábor fejedelem kiadatlan politikai levelei* (Budapest: MTA Történelmi Bizottsága, 1879), 1; and Dávid Angyal, "Adalékok Bethlen Gábor történetéhez. Harmadik közlemény," *Századok* 64, no. 4–6 (1929–1930), 585–91. Endre Veress notes that "three members of the court wrote about his household during his life, of which two embellished and distorted with regard to the Bethlens, particularly about Gábor Bethlen's youthful deeds. And this continues to persevere in our literature to the present day." Endre Veress, "Bethlen Gábor fejedelem ifjúsága," *Erdélyi Múzeum* 9, no. 6 (1914): 287. The noted interwar Hungarian historian Gyula Szekfű examined the literature idealizing Bethlen as well as the dissenting opinions in the following work: *Bethlen Gábor* (Budapest: Magyar Szemle Társaság, 1929), 281–82; also see: László Nagy, "Bethlen Gábor a magyar történelemben," in *Bethlen Gábor állama és kora*, ed. Kálmán Kovács (Budapest: ELTE, 1980), 3–18; and Mihály László Hernádi, "Bethlen Gábor bibliográfiája 1613–1980," in *ibid.*, 73–164.

Transylvania thus began the same year that both Zsigmond Báthory and Gábor Báthory died.⁷

Assessment of the Youthful Bethlen

Along with the large number of academic sources published in the final third of the nineteenth century with regard to Bethlen's reign, the desire arose among historians to understand where this Prince of Transylvania had come from and what factors had exercised an influence on him during his youth. Endre Veress supplemented the existing fragmentary knowledge, some of which was of dubious accuracy,⁸ surrounding Bethlen's youth in an independent study published on this topic in the Kolozsvár-based periodical *Erdélyi Múzeum* in 1914. In this study, Veress published the letters Bethlen had written in the period between his rise to the princely court in 1593 and his accession to the position of Prince of Transylvania in 1613.⁹ Veress, who as a specialist on the entire Báthory era also plays a key role among historians dealing with Bethlen's youth, summarized the results of academic research on this topic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

Historical research over the past decades has uncovered details regarding his reign with singular success and has collected hundreds of letters regarding his life. However, just a few of these letters originate from the period of his youth and thus the few occasions on which data emerged from the time before Bethlen rose to the throne counted as true events.¹⁰

Veress's statement on the lack of information regarding this period of Bethlen's youth between 1593 and 1602 remains valid one-hundred years later. We know from a letter written from Gyulafehérvár (Alba Iulia, Romania) in 1593 that Zsigmond Báthory more than one year previously had "at the word of many coaxing people" seized property and "upon the exertion of a few primary kinsmen" offered restitution or other lands in return. The letter

7 For information regarding the final years and political plans of the abdicated prince see: Ildikó Horn, "Báthory Zsigmond prágai fogsága (1610–1611)," in idem, *Tündérország útvesztője*, 145–65.

8 Dávid Angyal: "Hibás adatok Bethlen Gábor ifjúságáról," *Századok* 33, no. 6, (1899): 547–51.

9 Only the 1593 letter cited above documents Bethlen's life during the reign of Zsigmond Báthory. The next letter was written in 1603, one year after Zsigmond's final abdication as Prince of Transylvania.

10 Veress, "Bethlen Gábor fejedelem ifjúsága," 21.

reveals that the orphaned thirteen-year-old Bethlen traveled to the princely court in Gyulafehérvár to acquire such recompense and that he was confident in the success of this endeavor and counted on the intervention of influential people. The letter states that Bethlen had been occupied with studies until that year and was seeking to engage his services with a lord, perhaps even Prince Báthory himself.¹¹ This was followed by almost a decade of silence during which Bethlen's relations with Prince Zsigmond Báthory are shrouded in almost total obscurity. The Jesuits who wrote regular, well-informed reports on the affairs of the court do not mention Bethlen. Known charters from the period do not yield sufficient information regarding the youthful future prince to provide contemporary historians with a detailed description of his life path from 1592 to 1602. Not even the presumed support of his influential relatives, notably Bocskai, manifested itself in the form of any duty, function or office that merited citation in charters or private letters originating from this period. Historical literature does not indicate whether Gábor Bethlen was continually in the service of Prince Zsigmond Báthory during these nine years or whether he even lived in Gyulafehérvár during this entire interval. One cannot thus make positive assertions on either account.

In 1600 Gábor Bethlen concluded an agreement with his brother István regarding the division of their lands. The agreement shows that Gábor received the family estates in Marosillye and also reveals the uncertainty of the times, referring to the gloomy possibility of “either pagan or some godless prince or the governor of the country” seizing these lands from him. Following Giorgio Basta's occupation of Gyulafehérvár, Mózes Székely's invasion,¹² the defeat of Michael the Brave at Miriszló (Mirăslău in Romania) and, particularly, the banishment of Bocskai and the confiscation of his territories at the Transylvanian

11 The letter written in 1593, though originally misdated 1596, is contained in the following works: Miklós Kubinyi, Jr., “Bethlen Gábor levele Justh Andrásához,” *Századok* 23, no. 3 (1889): 239–40; Angyal, “Hibás adatok Bethlen Gábor ifjúságáról,” 547–48; Endre Veress, “Bethlen ifjúkori levelei,” *Erdélyi Múzeum*, New series, 9, no. 6 (1914): 313; Gábor Bethlen: *Levelek*, ed. Mihály Sebestyén (Bukarest: Kriterion, 1980), 27–28. The land and property in question (“our main property,” castle and 400 houses with serfs) is associated with Bethlen's home village of Marosillye in academic literature, which places 1599 as the year of its reacquisition. See Elek Csetri, *Bethlen Gábor életútja* (Bukarest: Kriterion, 1992), 22.

12 Giorgio Basta (1550–1607) commanded the armies of the Holy Roman Empire during the reign of Rudolf II. The general of Albanian origin served as the military governor of Transylvania beginning in 1598, occupying the principality at the head of his armies following Báthory's final abdication in 1602. During his two-year rule over Transylvania, General Basta suspended the principality's constitution, ruled via decree and imposed heavy taxes, while his soldiers plundered the land. Basta led the military coalition that defeated the Ottoman-supported forces of Mózes Székely in 1603.

Diet held in that year provided the brothers with ample cause to attend to the fate of their family estates.¹³ Zsigmond Báthory's June 1602 deed of gift, which describes Bethlen as *generosus*, though it does not reveal his position or office, indicates only that the prince had rewarded his service during the final stages of the struggle for power in Transylvania with an endowment of land.¹⁴ Bethlen demonstrably remained loyal to Báthory as he struggled with Ottoman support to retain control over Transylvania even after István Bocskai had taken exile in Prague. Thus the deed's customary expression mentioning the intercession of councilors in its justification for the gift of land could not have pertained to Bocskai, but rather to those who continued to support Báthory.¹⁵ Twelve days following the publication of the deed Bethlen participated on Báthory's side in the engagement against General Basta and his forces at the Battle of Tövis, just as he presumably did in the course of the prince's previous campaigns, seeking refuge following the defeat in the Ottoman-controlled city of Temesvár and offering his support to Mózes Székely. We encounter Bethlen again in the pages of Szamosközy's history, which portrays him as one of the leaders of Mózes Székely's forces during the 1603 siege of Gyulafehérvár. Bethlen himself later read and annotated this work.¹⁶

13 Barabás Samu, ed., "Bethlen Gábor és István osztozása," *Történelmi Társ* 13, no. 3 (1890): 560–62.

14 Zsigmond Báthory donated princely lands in Arad County to Gábor and István Bethlen while in Déva on June 20, 1602. See: Tamás Fejér, Etelka Rácz, and Anikó Szász, eds., *Az erdélyi fejedelmek Királyi Könyvei. I 1569–1602. Báthory Zsigmond Királyi Könyvei (1582–1602)*, vols. 1–3 of *Erdélyi Történelmi Adatok*, 7 vols. (Kolozsvár: Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, 2005), 517 (no. 2,022). For a digital copy of the document see: Éva Gyulai, ed., *Az erdélyi fejedelmek oklevelei (1560–1689) Erdélyi Királyi Könyvek*. DVD-ROM (Miskolc–Budapest: Miskolci Egyetem BTK–Arcanum Adatbázis Kft., 2005).

15 For information regarding Bocskai's exile in Prague see: Nóra G. Etényi, Ildikó Horn, and Péter Szabó, *Koronás fejedelem. Bocskai István és kora* (Budapest: General Press, 2006), 149, 155–57.

16 Szamosközy, *Erdély története*, 467, note no. 233. For a summary of the military events that took place in Gyulafehérvár in 1603 see: András Kovács, "Bevezetés," in *Gyulafehérvár város jegyzőkönyvei*, ed. idem (Kolozsvár: Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, 1998), 5–6. I know of no other work that so thoroughly recounts the history of the two sieges, including Bethlen's participation in the first siege. Biographies of Bethlen do not generally explore the connection between the burning of Gyulafehérvár and Bethlen's leading role in the siege. This connection is indeed indirect—imperial defenders in fact caused the fire—and does not warrant avoiding the theme. László Kőváry openly examined this matter in the 1860s on the basis of information from Farkas Bethlen based on that originating from Szamosközy: László Kőváry, *Erdély történelme*, vol. 4 (Pest: Ráth Mór, 1863), 139–40. Historians never did attempt to conceal the fact that Bethlen took part in the siege—his participation could be regarded as a glorious anti-German act—though they refrained from linking the future prince to the fire that swept through the city of Gyulafehérvár. (Elek Csetri's description in an account of the reconstruction of the Gyulafehérvár palace of "a building destroyed in the age of Basta before the eyes of Bethlen" represents a cautious, though still relatively direct statement in comparison to other works touching upon the siege of the city. Csetri, *Bethlen Gábor*

That described above is essentially all the credible information that is known about Gábor Bethlen from the period of his life between the ages of thirteen and twenty-one years old. Those historians who wanted to say more about Bethlen's youth—his reflections, his development, his investigations—relied on data contained in later memoirs, accounts and other sources that can scarcely reveal more about the intentions underlying the formation of the future prince's past than the aforementioned sources, though may appear to be valuable because they originate from "Bethlen himself" or people who knew him directly.

The source attributes described above naturally present historians with a dilemma. The quality and conclusions of their narratives regarding Bethlen's youth vary depending on the degree, if any, to which they accept sources belonging to the latter category. The decision of historians on this account determines the feasibility of writing a history of Bethlen's life between 1593 and 1602 that can be of fundamental importance to any analysis of his personal development. Those who reject sources that do not stand up to the test of historical criticism can hardly conclude that there is sufficient credible information available to write a coherent history of Bethlen's youth.

Numerous historians have nonetheless taken the pains to piece together these *ex post facto* sources in order to compile a narrative of Bethlen's youthful development while he was a member of Zsigmond Báthory's court, some of them drawing heavily upon their imaginations in order to compensate for inadequate information. These historians describe Bethlen in the role of a court page, though they can only make assumptions with regard to his actual duties due to the lack of sources. They typically depict Bethlen lounging about in the court's antechamber, serving as court messenger and caring for the prince's hunting dogs in addition to his more significant and valorous participation in military campaigns. These historians tend to associate Bethlen with his "relative" and "supporter", the distinguished military leader Bocskai, in order to strengthen the historical analogy between the two. The concept of Báthory's court as the site where the future prince formed his political and diplomatic consciousness,

életútja, 142.) The burning of Gyulafehérvár during the siege was not the only catastrophe to weigh upon the material culture of the city during the Long War, although it indisputably contributed greatly to the destruction of such culture stemming from the Báthory era. Though who would have dared suggest that Bethlen rebuilt that which he had indirectly helped to destroy? The hero cannot at once be both destroyer and builder.

a process that culminated in his participation in a diplomatic mission to Prague, is indeed an enticing one.¹⁷

17 Sándor Szilágyi, *Bethlen Gábor életrajza* (Pozsony–Budapest: Stampfel, 1885), 4–6; Dávid Angyal, *Bethlen Gábor életrajza* (Budapest: Lampel, n.d. [1899]), 5–6; Antal Gindely and Ignác Acsády, *Bethlen Gábor és udvara*, Magyar történeti életrajzok (Budapest: Magyar Történelmi Társulat, 1890), 7; Veress, “Bethlen Gábor fejedelem ifjúsága,” 291–92; István Rugonfalvi Kiss, *Iktári Bethlen Gábor erdélyi fejedelem* (Budapest: Bethlen Gábor Irodalmi és Nyomdai Rt., 1923), 9–12; Szekfű, *Bethlen Gábor*, 28–29; Dávid Angyal, “Adalékok Bethlen Gábor történetéhez. Második közlemény,” *Századok* 64, no. 1–3 (1929–1930): 473–74; Tibor Wittman, *Bethlen Gábor* (n.p. [Budapest]: Művelt Nép, 1952), 8–10; László Nagy, *Bethlen Gábor a független Magyarországgért* (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1969), 13–14; Nagy, “*Sok dolgot próbála Bethlen Gábor. . .*,” 46–48; Lajos Demény, *Bethlen Gábor és kora* (Bucharest: Politikai Könyvkiadó, 1982), 10–16; József Barcza, *Bethlen Gábor, a református fejedelem* (Budapest: Magyarországi Református Egyház, 1980), 17–18; Csetri, *Bethlen Gábor életútja*, 19–23. For assertions regarding Bethlen’s “high-ranking positions for his age and situation” see: László Makkai, “Bevezetés,” in *A fejedelem*, Erdély öröksége, vol. 4, ed. László Cs. Szabó and László Makkai (Budapest: Franklin-Társulat, n.d. [1941]), vi. Makkai’s source for these claims is almost certainly Pál Háportoni Forró, who stated that Bethlen was able to hold his own with “great and honorable offices as well as council dignities, court captain-general’s and general’s services and all of this in performing the greatly laborious duties of emissary to both of the emperors.” See “Háportoni Forró Pál ajánlólevele Quintus Curtius fordításához,” in *Bethlen Gábor emlékezete*, ed. László Makkai (n.p. [Budapest]: Magyar Helikon, 1980), 280–81. For Háportoni’s assertions see Veress, “Bethlen Gábor fejedelem ifjúsága,” 292 (note 24). Veress accepts these claims and states that they can be supplemented by diplomat Paul Strassburg’s account of his meeting with Bethlen. These descriptions of the offices that Bethlen performed in the court of Prince Zsigmond Báthory are obviously exaggerated inferences derived from the subsequent progression of his career. For a description based on reliable sources of the offices that Bethlen filled during this period see Zsolt Trócsányi, *Erdély központi kormányzata 1540–1690* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1980), 25, 102 (note 111), 339, 353 (note 372). In addition to Háportoni Forró, Strassburg alleges in the account of his meeting with Bethlen cited above that the future prince stated with regard to his stay in Prague “*adolescensium cum Sigismundo Bathoreo in Rudolphi caesaris aliorumque principum aulis, juventutem ac virile robur armis exercuit.*” See Sándor Szilágyi, “Oklevelek Bethlen Gábor és Gusztáv Adolf összeköttetéseinek történetéhez,” *Történelmi Tár* 5, no. 2 (1882): 277. The figures of Zsigmond Báthory and Bocskai were subsequently switched in certain narratives. Veress, “Bethlen Gábor fejedelem ifjúsága,” 291 and notes 22–23. Bethlen himself laid the foundation for the frequent conception of István Bocskai as his relative and supporter in the noted statements he made in an 1628 letter to the chief Ottoman *kaymakam* (lieutenant-governor) highlighting the success of his services to the Sublime Porte in support of Bocskai’s principality in an effort to defend himself. In this letter, Bethlen wrote that Bocskai “was our kin, it was he who raised us and placed great credence in us.” It was in Bethlen’s interest at this time to emphasize his connection to Bocskai. See Szilágyi, Áron and Sándor Szilágyi, eds., *Török–magyarkori állam-okmánytár*. (Pest: Eggenberger, 1868.), vol. 2, 31. The reference to the familial relationship between Bethlen and Bocskai subsequently gained importance as a result of their cooperation in the year 1604 and the analogy made between their historical roles. (Even the skeptical Szekfű accepted the connection between Bethlen and Bocskai as a fact. See Szekfű, *Bethlen Gábor*, 28–29.) The figure of Zsigmond Báthory occupies an ambivalent role within the life story of Gábor Bethlen, portrayed as both the appropriator of the orphaned Bethlen’s family estates in the village of Marosillye and as the commander of anti-Ottoman campaigns that provided Bethlen with the opportunity to gain the military experience necessary for his development as a leader. According to the narratives, Bethlen profited from the diplomatic and other lessons he gained from his involvement in the everyday life and dangerous intrigues within Báthory’s court.

The dispute that arose between Gyula Szekfű and István Rugonfalvi Kiss surrounding the 300th anniversary of Gábor Bethlen's death in 1629 illustrates the dilemma concerning historical representation as outlined above. In his 1929 biographical synthesis, Szekfű contents himself with Veress's collection and processing of data regarding Bethlen's youthful years as a part of Báthory's court and does not impart any additional information. Szekfű states in the work that the letters published in Veress's book provide a satisfactory depiction of the "external image" of Bethlen's early political development, though furnish "precious little" data concerning his "internal development." The pages of Szekfű's work dealing with Bethlen's early years are interesting due to the aforementioned attitude of skepticism, particularly from a methodological standpoint, which the author suggest is the result of the factors that limit the scope of knowledge surrounding figures from the early modern history of Hungary. Szekfű's observations are not limited to Bethlen, but apply to Hungarian historical personalities from the period in general, suggesting that images of their lives and actions are based almost exclusively on external perceptions, while personal (that is, not public) images are rare and those that exist are conventional and stereotypical.¹⁸ Might the reservations that Szekfű maintained toward the romanticized historical images have impelled this practitioner of *Geistesgeschichte* to reject the notion of certainty surrounding the formation of historical knowledge? Or was he, who otherwise so enthusiastically discussed issues related to the soul or spiritual constitution, simply avoiding the prospect of doing research that would have entailed the exposure of the hidden aspects of the personality and their behavioral manifestations?

Szekfű's version of Bethlen's youth is correspondingly short and reserved. In his response, István Rugonfalvi Kiss attributed Szekfű's methodological scruples to negative bias toward Bethlen. Rugonfalvi Kiss states in his response, which is imbued with boundless respect for Bethlen, that the main mission of historians is to explore the inner world of the historical heroes under consideration—the key to which is an examination of childhood and youth. Rugonfalvi Kiss charges that Szekfű's theses regarding Bethlen amount to sacrilege, castigating his peer's decision to, as Veress, reject the historical credibility of information regarding the future prince's youthful merits and deeds contained in the works of laudatory court literati such as Gáspár Bojthi Veres and János Keserűi Dajka

18 Szekfű, *Bethlen Gábor*, 27–28, 285 (note no. 12).

or the accounts of Bethlen himself.¹⁹ Disparities in the various narratives of Bethlen's youth indeed stem from the authors' decision regarding the validity of the image of the future prince formed by Bethlen and his propagandists. Szekfű long remained among the minority of historians who rejected the historical objectivity of this image. Szekfű's reservations, that is, his defensive and unaccepting attitude, did not prevent his peers from writing true developmental histories of Bethlen's early years.

Sources dealing with the childhood and youth of Zsigmond Báthory, who was raised to be prince, were much richer than those dealing with this period in the life of Gábor Bethlen, though the majority of these sources appeared only in the first half of the twentieth century and for a long time did not correct the image based on information contained in the works of Szamosközy and other contemporary historiographers. Sources collected and published by Endre Veress served as the foundation for knowledge regarding the childhood and youth of Báthory in the first half of the twentieth century, providing historians with much more information than those dealing with the same period in Bethlen's life. However historians did not make significant use of Veress's documentation and subsequent sources on the same theme appearing in Jesuit publications edited by László Lukács as the basis for works examining the childhood and youth of Zsigmond Báthory until the 1980s.²⁰

Thus whereas the processes of uncovering and utilizing historical sources regarding Bethlen took place in direct correlation to one another, there was a conspicuous interval between the two in the case of Zsigmond Báthory. For a long period of time, it was not possible to find out any more information regarding Báthory's childhood and youth or subsequent reign than that contained

19 István Rugonfalvi Kiss, *Az átértékelt Bethlen Gábor. Válaszul Szekfű Gyulának* (Debrecen: the author's edition, 1929), 13–18. Sándor Makkai's work dealing with Bethlen's "inner face" examines the theme of youthful development to a much greater degree than other biographies of the Prince of Transylvania. Makkai's interpretation of Bethlen's youthful character and development can be summarized in the following quotes from the aforementioned work: "Three concomitants arise with Gábor when he appears on the historical scene with his first letter written at the age of thirteen: *orphanhood, ignorance, insignificance*" (italics in original); and "His amazing vitality emerged in the midst of the childhood impediments of orphanhood, ignorance and insignificance, impediments that became existence-determining factors for him and dictated the course of his adult and princely life." Makkai thus suggests that surmounted difficulties form the character of the man, manifesting themselves in the strength needed to rise to the top. *Egyedül. Bethlen Gábor lelki arca* (Kolozsvár: Erdélyi Szépművés Céh, 1929), 9–34, esp. 15, 19.

20 Ladislaus Lukács S.I., ed., *Monumenta Antiquae Hungariae*, vols. 2–4 (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 1976–1987); István Bartók, "A gyulafehérvári fejedelmi udvar és az ifjú Báthory Zsigmond," in *Magyar reneszánsz udvari kultúra*, ed. Ágnes R. Várkonyi (Budapest: Gondolat, 1987), 148–54.

in the negative assessment of him that had imbued the collective historical consciousness. At the same time, researchers devoted attention to the childhood and youth of Bethlen, but it resulted in a rather meager body of historically reliable sources regarding this early period of his life that biographies attempted to enhance through repetition of inadequately supported stories portraying the future prince of Transylvania in a positive light. The contours tracing Bethlen's early years were formed in accordance to the general knowledge surrounding Zsigmond Báthory's rule and inferences projecting the known characteristics of the adult Bethlen onto his youthful self. Scientific, though not always critical, historiography did not depart from the dominant opinions formed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries regarding either Báthory or Bethlen. This essay will depict over the subsequent pages concrete examples portraying the themes and interpretations of historical works regarding the youthful and courtly lives of the two princes of Transylvania.

Possibilities for Comparison

There exists the inherent possibility to make comparisons with regard to such themes as the formability of character, upbringing, education and the use thereof in the course of ruling. Accounts of the lives of Bethlen and Báthory are inclined to seek the origin of both the positive and negative characteristics of the adult princes in their early years and to identify traits in the princes that are either receptive or resistant to the harmful influence of the court environment—in Báthory's case primarily the Jesuits and the Italian courtiers. Historiographers expressed a significant degree of the customary Bible-based skepticism toward child rulers and impetuous youth with regard to Zsigmond Báthory, doubt from which Bethlen was exempt since he became Prince of Transylvania well after the age of 30. Many historiographers indeed highlight the great breadth of experience that Bethlen had accumulated by the time he became ruler.²¹

With regard to the differences in the early lives of Báthory and Bethlen, historiographers criticize the former for squandering his talents, while they extol

21 Makkai states that Bethlen's "entire being showed more" than his true age: László Makkai, "A magyar Machiavelli," in *Magyarország története 1526–1686*, ed. Ágnes R. Várkonyi (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1987), 802. Szekfű asserts that "it was likely the bitter experiences acquired in his youth" and his personal flexibility that served to moderate in Bethlen the formation of characteristics typical of the temperament of the Hungarian high nobility—lack of restraint, emotional "outbursts" and "the consideration of facts from the perspective of enthusiasm." Gyula Szekfű, *A tizenhetedik század*, vol. 5 of *Magyar Történet* (Budapest: Egyetemi Nyomda, n.d. [1929]), 282–83.

the latter as a man who rose to power through his own resolve and strength of character. They portray Báthory as restless and erratic, while Bethlen was calm and reliable, his pleasures and diversions a function of his “noble passions.”²² The occasionally exaggerated emphasis placed on Báthory’s “Renaissance” education serve to temper the portrayed malleability of his character, though the lesson to be drawn from this emphasis is clear: education is found wanting on the balance of power. The internal division of the character can be highlighted through references to education in terms of the contrast of a high degree of culture with minimal political aptitude. Biographical narratives regarding Bethlen generally suggest that the wisdom he gained from his life experiences, his even temper and sound judgment, his military prowess and his support for culture and intellectual life—a factor connected to the theme of his court building—counterbalanced the prince’s lack of formal education.

Divergent directions opened with regard to the themes of political simulation and foreign political orientation as well. The deceptions of Zsigmond Báthory aimed at misleading both foreigners and his own subjects are considered reprehensible, while in Gábor Bethlen’s case such duplicity is portrayed as legitimate response to the same in others. Báthory’s use of force is usually described as a product of the prince’s arbitrary character, though is occasionally depicted in the context of a certain political-theoretical acumen, namely familiarity with the teachings of Machiavelli. In 1879, Sándor Szilágyi attempted to dispel or mitigate charges among Bethlen’s contemporaries portraying him as a duplicitous despot: “for centuries and decades on end, stories of Bethlen’s deceit were passed on by word of mouth, engraving themselves so deeply in the consciousness of people that the only reason that did not refer to Machiavellianism as ‘Bethlenism’ is that the former word existed before he did.” Szilágyi contended that Bethlen’s detractors were personally biased and excessive in their criticism, portraying changes of allegiance as an established custom when people switched religions and claiming that the Holy Roman Emperor was, himself, simply feigning allegiance with the Turks.²³

22 Szekfű, *Bethlen Gábor*, 173, 205.

23 For the allegedly “Machiavellian” character of Bethlen’s rule see the following works: Nagy, *A orosz bíró Báthoryak*, 105–06; Sándor Szilágyi, ed., *Bethlen Gábor fejedelem kiadatlan politikai levelei* (Budapest: Magyar Tud. Akadémia, 1879), 1–2; in contrast to Szekfű’s interpretation: Bethlen’s “approach and moral principles are very distant from the tenets of Machiavelli.” Rugonfalvi Kiss, *Az átértékelt Bethlen Gábor*, 30; László Nagy depicts Bethlen’s Machiavellianism as a necessary means of acquiring and maintaining his power as Prince of Transylvania: Nagy, *Sok dolgot próbála Bethlen Gábor. . .*, 164–66. Tibor Wittman, by contrast, claims that Szekfű’s portrayal of Bethlen as a “Machiavellian prince” served to “deprive our people of

Zsigmond Báthory's alliance with the Prague court was depicted as disregard for the "Turkish party – peace party" reality, though when he became disillusioned with this coalition and turned to the Porte, this was portrayed as evidence of his indecision. Gábor Bethlen's decision to maintain his alliance with the Turks was, contrarily, deemed to be necessary in order to serve the best interests of the country.²⁴ Historians cited Báthory's policies toward the feudal estates as the product of the dangerous, stifling despotic régime he had created, while they gladly appraised Bethlen's exercise of power in terms of so-called national absolutism.

One must unquestionably separate the young Gábor Bethlen from Zsigmond Báthory's pro-Habsburg policies, which bearing in mind the former's subsequent pro-Turkish orientation is not a difficult task. Bethlen's alleged visit to Prague as a member of Báthory's—or Bocskai's—delegation corresponds to this objective. However, the Imperial Court "failed to dazzle him, because life had provided him with clear insight from a young age. He noticed the shadows lying behind the splendor, the true lack of power behind the displays of power and, most importantly: the squeezing of the interests of Hungary and Transylvania into the background."²⁵ Mention of Bethlen's inadequately documented visit provides the historian with a good opportunity to foreshadow the anti-Habsburgism that constituted the cornerstone of his policies.

It is difficult for those writing developmental histories of Gábor Bethlen to avoid examining the degree to which the experiences of the future prince as part of Zsigmond Báthory's court influenced his character and later policies. The lack of concrete information regarding this issue opens room for conjecture. Historians are inclined to associate the period that the young Bethlen spent in the princely court in Gyulafehérvár with the broadening of his personal horizons, though refrain from identifying him with harmful influences of this environment that would serve to impair their positive assessment of him. Among the arguments serving to distance Gábor Bethlen from Zsigmond Báthory, images founded upon notions of innate character traits and even "healthy instincts" represent

one of its greatest national heroes": "Bethlen Gábor mint hadszervező," *Századok* 85, no. 3–4 (1951): 357. László Makkai approaches this theme from the perspective of cultural history: "The analogy of 'Hungarian Machiavelli' could sooner be applied to him than to Bocskai. . . . He was a conscious Machiavellian, though not in the negative sense used by everybody (and himself) at the time to mean 'unscrupulous,' but from the Renaissance perspective of man and society." Makkai, "A magyar Machiavelli," 802.

24 János Keserői Dajka gives classic expression to this viewpoint in the following work: "Bethlen Gábor nemzetsége, jelleme és tettei," in *Bethlen Gábor krónikásai. Krónikák, emlékiratok, naplók a nagy fejedelemről*, ed. László Makkai (Budapest: Gondolat, 1980), 17.

25 Nagy, *Bethlen Gábor a független Magyarországért*, 13.

a suitable means of defending the former from the “following the dangerous example, the bloodthirsty and wanton tyrant.”²⁶

Narratives on the life of Bethlen portray the environment of the Gyulafehérvár court not only as the site of his childhood and youthful upbringing, but the scene of princely creation and performance, support for the arts and sciences and various forms of political action and conduct and sometimes as the location at which the politically influential relationship between ruler and consort was formed.²⁷

With regard to the characteristics and assessment of court life in Gyulafehérvár, historians conspicuously praise Bethlen for supporting intellectual education and material culture, while at the same time condemn Báthory for encouraging dissolute pleasures. The material culture at the Gyulafehérvár court is more evident in Bethlen’s case as a result of purchase records that have fortunately survived and were published at an early date.²⁸ These records provide much more information than that available from the list of items that Báthory destroyed, at least according to Szamosközy, the inventory of the plundered Gyulafehérvár palace at the calamitous end of the prince’s reign and other bits of sundry data. Narratives regarding Gábor Bethlen based on available documentation pertaining to material culture conclude that court expenditures were warranted under his rule and that he put its financial affairs in order, whereas the situation under Zsigmond Báthory was just the opposite.

26 Csetri, *Bethlen Gábor életútja*, 21. The court of the ruler is a reflection of himself: this is a powerful image, though it does not always guide the pen of historians. In his biography of Gábor Báthory, Sándor Szilágyi recognizes on the one hand the connection of the young prince’s amorous adventures to the court, while on the other hand suggests that he was not solely responsible for these indiscretions and that the court could be characterized primarily as the scene of jovial, temperate merrymaking. Sándor Szilágyi, *Báthory Gábor fejedelem története* (Pest: Ráth Mór, 1867), 45, 64–71.

27 For a depiction of court life in connection to Bethlen see: Kőváry, *Erdély történelme*, vol. 4, 249; Szilágyi, *Bethlen Gábor életrajza*, 5; Dávid Angyal, *Magyarország története II. Mátyástól III. Ferdinánd haláláig*, vol. 5 of *A magyar nemzet története* (Budapest: Athenaeum, 1898), 417–19; Angyal, *Bethlen Gábor életrajza*, 67–73; Gindely and Acsády, *Bethlen Gábor és udvara*, 231–60 (the portion of this book dealing with Gábor Bethlen is the work of Ignác Acsády); Rugonfalvi Kiss, *Iktári Bethlen Gábor erdélyi fejedelem*, 100–1 (“In the keeping of his court he follows Zsigmond Báthory”); Szekfű, *Bethlen Gábor*, 202–6; Rugonfalvi Kiss, *Az átértékelt Bethlen Gábor*, 103; Wittman, *Bethlen Gábor*, 126–37; Márton Tarnóc, *Erdély művelődése Bethlen Gábor és a két Rákóczi György korában* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1978), 13–30; Márton Tarnóc, “Irodalom és művelődés Bethlen Gábor államában,” in *Bethlen Gábor állama és kora*, ed. Kovács, 29–35; Demény, *Bethlen Gábor és kora*, 179–95; Barcza, *Bethlen Gábor, a református fejedelem*, 127–29; and Csetri, *Bethlen Gábor életútja*, 141–55.

28 Béla Radvánszky, ed., *Bethlen Gábor fejedelem udvartartása*, vol. 1 of *Házi történelmünk emlékei*, I. osztály, Udvartartás és számadáskönyvek (Budapest: Athenaeum, 1888).

Authors writing about Báthory highlighted his conflict with the intellectual elite composed of humanists who studied at the University of Padua, though failed to mention his foundation of the Jesuit college in Gyulafehérvár with the aim of transforming Transylvania's capital city into a center of education on the scale of that existing in Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca, Romania).²⁹ Contrary to the university college that Bethlen founded, Báthory's Jesuit college ceased to exist as a result of the war, the caution of the Jesuits and the prince's impending abdication and is thus unmemorable. The achievements that Zsigmond Báthory attained in the field of court culture are either separated from his political deeds or they are portrayed as factors moderating his policies in a forgiving concession of political history to cultural history. Contrarily, there is complete harmony between political policy and court culture in histories of Bethlen.

Szamosközy criticized Báthory's Italian courtiers as useless from the perspective of the common good, a criticism that became deeply entrenched in historical narratives of the prince, while similar disapproval is absent vis-à-vis Bethlen's Spanish dance master, Don Diego de Estrada. The use of King Matthias Corvinus as a model appeared to be an appropriate means of analyzing the rule of the princes and their courts. Szamosközy condemned relations between Zsigmond Báthory and his Italian courtiers as an inversion of the praise that Bonfini expressed for the patronage of Matthias Corvinus.³⁰ Szamosközy portrays Báthory as an anti-Corvinus of sorts, while Bethlen is depicted as the reincarnation of the king, such as can be seen in the memoirs of János Kemény.

Descriptions of the court's moral condition rarely pass up the opportunity to invoke the subject of deviation from sexual norms. In comparison to the amorous failures and adventures of his predecessors—Zsigmond Báthory's inability to consummate his marriage and Gábor Báthory's seduction of even the wives of the lords—Gábor Bethlen's sexuality is either portrayed as conventional or is not highlighted. Narratives regarding Bethlen depict his consort, the German-born Catherine of Brandenburg, within the context of stereotypical intricacies

29 Ladislaus Lukács S.I., ed., *Monumenta Antiquae Hungariae*, vol. 4 (1593–1600) (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 1987), 182–83, 195 and 237–40.

30 Péter Erdősi, "Uralkodók, sajtómesterek és történetírók. Egy Szamosközy-hely előzménye," in *Portré és imázs. Politikai propaganda és reprezentáció a kora újkorban*, ed. Nóra G. Etényi and Ildikó Horn (Budapest: L'Harmattan–Transylvania Emlékeiért Tudományos Egyesület, 2008), 173–85.

of women of the court.³¹ Catherine is thus remembered less favorably than Zsigmond Báthory's consort, Archduchess Maria Christina of Austria, who is regarded primarily as a victim of the latter prince's erratic nature.

The contrasting viewpoints surrounding the personalities of Zsigmond Báthory and Gábor Bethlen tend to dissipate when the princes are examined from a greater perspective in which their individual actions and personal characteristics are interpreted as functions of the process of assimilating European culture in Transylvania and not as mere factors governing their political practices. József Bíró, for example, described Zsigmond Báthory as an outmoded “baroque character” with “his rambling imagination and extravagance” amid the burgeoning Renaissance culture of his age, whereas he depicts Gábor Bethlen as “the greatest Transylvanian patron of Renaissance art” whose “cultural policy, radiant court and entire lifestyle” attempted to “transplant the European spirit in Transylvania.”³²

Gyula Szekfű examines the courts of Báthory and Bethlen from the perspective of Transylvania's distance from Europe, foreignness, national character and the successful adaptation to the western model. Szekfű wrote that “the court of the Prince of Transylvania . . . existed in the distant East, where hardly any foreigners ventured and if they did marveled primarily at the unexpected foreign, Italian elements: musicians, dancers in the court of Zsigmond Báthory.” With regard to Bethlen, Szekfű asserted that “he is the first to keep a truly Hungarian princely court,” which westerners consider to be barbarian from afar, though are convinced of the opposite after first-hand experience shows them its true ambiance of courtesy and culture.³³ István Rugonfalvi Kiss suggests that Gábor Bethlen carried on the courtly precedents of Zsigmond Báthory, writing in connection to the former prince of Transylvania that “This is how he came to know Zsigmond's brilliant court, which he later imitated.” However, Rugonfalvi Kiss was referring only to the culture of the court, supplementing the latter sentence with the following statement regarding Bethlen: “Zsigmond Báthory's volatility soon devastated his peaceful, harmonious development and with it the happiness of Transylvania.”³⁴

31 Ignác Acsády describes the changes that took place within Bethlen's court following the arrival of Catherine as if he were holding before him Bonfini's description of the transformation of the court of King Matthias Corvinus following his marriage to Beatrice of Naples. See Gindely and Acsády, *Bethlen Gábor és udvara*, 240–41.

32 József Bíró, *Erdély művészete* (Budapest: Singer–Wolfner, n.d. [1941]), 112.

33 Szekfű, *Bethlen Gábor*, 171–72.

34 Rugonfalvi Kiss, *Iktári Bethlen Gábor erdélyi fejedelem*, 11.

Thus knowledge surrounding the youth and courts of Zsigmond Báthory and Gábor Bethlen are based on assessments of their personalities, lives and entire character of their rules. Observations or omissions in narratives about the prince demonstrate the sensitivity of the question regarding the reality that the early influences on the idealized Bethlen, his political experiences and the antecedents to the building of his court, could be sought in the person of the scorned Báthory. Reservation and inhibition concerning this issue is, of course, largely related to the labels placed on the two princes, though stems also from the fact that the study of princely courts was long a dependent subcategory of political history. The theme of the court of Transylvania hardly appeared in historiographies and was long connected to an excessive degree on the life histories of the princes and depictions of their political actions and personal characteristics. In this way, evaluations of the princes projected themselves on interpretations of the court.

How might the increasingly independent discipline of court research emerge from this condition? The first task would be to remove the aforementioned labels. Court researchers can break free of the biographical constraints that have circumscribed this discipline without calling the importance of biographical and political-historical correlations into question. However, the most far-reaching necessity would be to analyze the long-term processes extending beyond the rule of individual princes in the same spirit with which Zsolt Trócsányi transcended the boundaries of political-historical periodization in his examination of central government. One of the main questions stemming from the issue currently under consideration is: what was lost from sixteenth-century court life as a result of the Long War and what survived to reemerge in the seventeenth century. Those who sought Transylvanian models for the regeneration of the court in the latter century often found such paradigms primarily in the period of Zsigmond Báthory's rule. At the same time, forcing this image of reproduction would lead toward the opposite extreme in which foreign influences and the role of renewal are neglected and models known to Bethlen and his contemporaries confined to those found in the sixteenth-century Gyulafehérvár court.

Reducing the weight of political-historical narrative and the focus on personal acts and character makes the court appear to be less a creation of individual princes than a collective product of a society or culture to which the ruler makes a personal contribution. This shift in approach can serve to heighten the perception of continuity and discontinuity between the eras of Zsigmond Báthory and Gábor Bethlen. Viewed within the context of the broad

research problem undertaken from the former perspective, the manner in which Gábor Bethlen regarded his personal memories of Zsigmond Báthory's rule in the course of building his own court and the magnitude to which the precedents of the final decades of the sixteenth century served as patterns in this endeavor represents an issue of only modest importance.

With regard to Bethlen's personal experience and memory, the existing knowledge surrounding the early period in the future prince's life can contribute little to the elaboration of the similarities and differences between the two courts until the emergence of new dependable sources. An examination of Bethlen's life before he came to power suggests that the military experiences he gained between 1593 and 1602 were of crucial importance to his later performance as ruler of Transylvania and placed him on a similar military-political course as his frequently cited analogue, Bocskai.³⁵ At a personal level, Bethlen did not represent continuity in terms of central government, diplomacy or court culture, gaining the knowledge and experience required to conduct affairs in these areas only during a later period of his life.

Summary

To summarize, the demonstrably corresponding aspects of the political practices and court culture of Báthory and Bethlen are nevertheless subject to contrasting interpretation within the context of disparate assessments of their life histories. The religious affiliation of those who wrote about Báthory and Bethlen provides one possible reason for the sharp disparity in interpretation surrounding the princes, the former a pro-Habsburg Catholic and the latter an anti-Habsburg Protestant. However the religious bias that so deeply divided nineteenth- and twentieth-century historiography is not enough in itself to explain the entrenchment of radically contrasting evaluations of Báthory and Bethlen. One must also take into account the impact of assessments of the princes based on the degree to which the personal and dynastic interests of the princes coincided with those of the political community. Another factor that contributes to the

35 Bocskai served as chief general [*főgenerális*] of Transylvania and the lord-lieutenant [*főispán*] of Bihar County, while Bethlen served as chief general/chief captain [*főkapitány*] of the princely armies and the chief captain of Csík-Gyergyó-Kászonszék as well as the lord-lieutenant of Hunyad County; both held the position of council lord [*tanácsúr*]. See Trócsányi, 1980, 26, 337 regarding Bocskai, notes 25, 102 (note 111) and 339, 353 (note 372) regarding Bethlen; and Miklós Lázár, "Erdély főispánjai," *Századok* 23, no. 1 (1889): 33.

contrasting appraisals of the princes is the perpetuation of the premodern phenomenon according to which the *court*, the *state* and the *ruler* are regarded as associated and mutually representative entities forming a symbolic unity.

The contrasting images of Gábor Bethlen and Zsigmond Báthory are highlighted prominently in the writing of the history of the Hungarian nation: whereas the former is portrayed as an indispensable, exemplary, continually relevant, power-projecting hero figure, the latter is deemed unsuited to fill this role. It is simply not significant enough—laudatory attention is not directed toward his losing, prodigal-son personality and his court. The cult-building approach to history based on making sharp contrasts rather than nuanced comparisons serves to further strengthen the image of Bethlen's greatness. Such glorification implicitly entails the degrading of others. The historical images of Zsigmond Báthory and Gábor Báthory thus grew increasingly dark as a means of casting an even more brilliant light upon Bocskai and Bethlen.

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