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**THE MYSTERIOUS MYSTERY PLAYS OF CSÍKSOMLYÓ.  
WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE CSÍKSOMLYÓ  
HERITAGE?<sup>1</sup>**

The 18<sup>th</sup> century drama corpus of Csíksomlyó containing of some 80–85 dramas was thought to be lost until the 1980s when they were rediscovered walled in the Franciscan monastery. It turned out that in 1944, the friars fearing of the front line moving in on them decided to hide their most precious treasure, i.e., the incunabula, the old books and the 18<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts. Due to their thoughtfulness, now we may read and publish the manuscripts.

The bulk of the manuscripts survived in three volumes:

*Liber exhibens actiones parascevicas* (48 dramas, 1352 pp);

*Actiones comicae* (7 dramas, 194 pp);

*Actiones tragiccae* (6 dramas, 155 pp).

These 61 dramas have been and will be published in five volumes of the annotated series *Régi Magyar Drámai Emlékek XVIII. század* [Records of Early Hungarian Drama 18<sup>th</sup> century].<sup>2</sup>

In addition, there are cca 25 plays: 5 in Hungarian, 9 in Hungarian-Latin, 11 in Latin and also some fragments.<sup>3</sup> These plays are still kept in boxes packed in 1896 for the millenary exhibition in Budapest and copy books in the monastery and in the Museum of Csíkszereda. Most of these plays are undated and fragmentary.

The dramas we know quite a lot about are those copied in the three volumes.

**The Good Friday tradition – *Liber exhibens actiones parascevicas***

In 1774, Márton Péterffi, the provincial superior ordered the copying of all passion plays performed during the past decades; they were copied mostly by pupils and novices – unfortunately, with a lot of mistakes (sometimes they did not even understand what they were copying).

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<sup>1</sup> Research project supported by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office (NK-FIH) nr. 119865.

<sup>2</sup> *Ferences iskoladrámák. Csíksomlyói passiójátékok 1721–* [Franciscan school dramas. Passion plays from Csíksomlyó 1721–] *I*, 2009, *II-III*, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> See the data in PINTÉR 1993, 114–127.; MUCKENHAUPT 1999. We cannot state the exact numbers until we identify all variants.

The purpose and the content of the volume is explained on p. 2:  
Libellus Scholarum Csik Somlyoviensium, nihilominus Mediam Syntaxeos, ac Grammatices signanter, specialiter concernens et continens Repraesentationem, Enuclationem Mysteriorum Passionis Dominicae, seu Actiones Tragico-Parascevicas, Devoto Populo ad aedificationem quott Annis exhiberi solitas, in usum faciliorem Moderatorum sedulo congestas. Confectus 1774.

Except for one, all 48 plays are written in Hungarian. Some parts of the volume seem to be an odd-one-out like the one Latin drama as we think *Liber exhibens* was supposed to be a volume of vernacular plays. Of the 48 plays, only 45 were performed on Good Friday. The remaining three are quite interesting: for the Latin play, only the year 1732 is provided (p. 904–927), the 1729 play was performed on Passion Sunday (p. 961–1000), and the play performed on Corpus Christi day is undated (p. 715–720). We could not find any Good Friday play from 1729 or 1732 in separate sheets or copy books either; thus we think the copiers of *Liber exhibens* just replaced the missing years with something else; the case of the Corpus Christi play might be similar.

These performances are usually considered as school plays because they were written or compiled by the teachers of the Franciscan school and performed by the pupils. Still, they were not simply – or not at all – school plays as they attracted a wide audience: uneducated and mostly illiterate people from the surrounding villages. We may prove it with both the prologues and the epilogues of the passion plays seriously warning the audience – addressing them as *you* – to avoid a sinful life in order to be saved from the suffering in hell. What is more, they quite often identified the passion story. The everyday sins of the spectators who visited Csíksomlyó for the Good Friday procession to the stations of the Cross (Calvary) led to the crucifixion of Christ. Accordingly, some of the plays were performed station by station during the procession; thus, instead of *scenas*, they were divided into 14 *statio*s typical in the Baroque era. This fact suggests that staging plays was not primarily a pedagogical aim in order to enhance the pupils' knowledge, personality and behaviour; but the purpose of these Csíksomlyó performances was quite close to the late medieval religious/devotional performances. The corpus, though written in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, belongs to the late medieval, mostly Western European, Easter-play tradition; at Easter, Csíksomlyó Franciscans performed eminently on Good Friday.

### Theatre (1)

The drama scripts give evidence that the audience must have been so large that they did not fit in any theatre or roofed hall. We have very little data of the Csíksomlyó theatre. The monastery was not wealthy; therefore they might have performed first

in the dining hall. From 1734, they were performed in the newly built oratory on the groundfloor,<sup>4</sup> later, in the 1740s, in a wooden shed next to the school building.<sup>5</sup> These venues might have been quite small to accommodate the large number of their audience, and the worshippers could not fit either of the theatre halls; thus, the performances must have been held outside, either in the courtyard or on the way to the Cross. On the other hand, they had these venues built; thus, they must have used them on days other than Good Fridays for performances.

With *Liber exhibens*, we see a tradition of performing Good Friday plays in the period between 1721–1774. Though not all passion plays from these 55 years survived, we are sure the school performed on every Good Friday.

The other manuscript volume titled *Actiones tragicæ* contains six plays from the period of 1775–1780, and five of them were performed on Good Friday;<sup>6</sup> thus the *Actiones tragicæ* collection suggests that the Good Friday tradition continued in the 1770s.

Seemingly, we know quite a lot of the Csíksomlyó Easter – Good Friday – tradition as the passion plays have been saved for posterity – still, we have many questions and very few answers.

## Questions

If Good Friday tradition in Csíksomlyó was so strong, where has it gone, and how did it disappear after 1780? What happened before 1721 and after 1780?

Was the Good Friday performance the mainstream tradition as it seems now?

The plays that survived represent the mainstream tradition indeed, though we think the tradition is only a part of the history of Csíksomlyó's devotional and religious school theatre.

## The tradition of Pentecost pilgrimage

The Observant Franciscan monastery of Csíksomlyó has been the most popular destination for modern Pentecost pilgrimage for Roman Catholic Hungarian worshippers for at least a century, that is why anthropologists and historians have focused on it; thus, we know some exact data.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century (1649), Csíksomlyó Franciscans asked for and received the permission to hold a pilgrimage on the second holy day, on Monday, of Pentecost.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> PINTÉR 1993, 45.

<sup>5</sup> PINTÉR 1993, 45.

<sup>6</sup> See the 1775, 1777, 1778, 1779 and, most possibly, the 1780 plays of the volume.

<sup>7</sup> See the letter of the Observant Franciscan friar Ferenc Jegenyei to pope Innocent X, on 26th De-

Between 1690–1780, there was a regular yearly pilgrimage started already on Pentecost Sunday.<sup>8</sup> During this period, theatre performances were permitted on Saturday. From 1781, more and more pilgrims visited and began to take part in a procession on Pentecost Saturday and Sunday. This continued into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after 1920, modern pilgrimage meant taking a political stand for ethnic Hungarians within the Romanian state and after 1945, demonstrating support for the Catholic religion. Today, Pentecost Saturday and Sunday are celebrated as a special occasion, a pilgrimage with ethnic Hungarian worshippers from several countries and regions; they usually arrive on Saturday afternoon, take part in a vigil during the night, and at early dawn, they march in a procession to the top of the hill (of Kis-Somlyó, to Salvator / Saviour's Chapel) in order to greet sunrise.

As we see, the tradition of the pilgrimage has changed: a growing crowd gradually began to participate on all days of Pentecost, from Saturday to Monday. In the earliest years of the tradition, i.e. in the 17<sup>th</sup> and the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, pilgrimage was held only on Pentecost Monday, later, till 1781, the pilgrimage took place on Pentecost (Whit) Sunday: this was the time when theatre performances could be held on Saturday. No drama script survived after 1781, and most probably, the plays ended in or after 1780.

Among the possible causes might be the growing crowd taking part in the performances (either on Good Friday, or on Pentecost Saturday/Sunday). There is a natural upper bound of the number of the audience – no devotional, religious play can be shown to a large crowd. On the other hand, the theatre of the leading Catholic schools (Piarists also taking over most of the Jesuit colleges) got quite far from religious performances finally giving way to popular professional theatre.

### Pentecost performances

Among the separate manuscripts not included in any volume (25 dramas: 5 Hungarian, mostly fragments; 9 Latin-Hungarian; 11 Latin plays), only three are dated: all three are in mixed, Latin–Hungarian, language and, surprisingly, all three were performed on Pentecost Saturday. For Pentecost, the teachers could choose from a rich variety of themes as we can see already from the titles:

POTYÓ Bonaventura: *Mundus redargutus et ex parte consolatus*, 1742, 12 May (Hungarian–Latin; about the last Judgement)

CSATÓ Gábor: *Elatus animus dire afflictus atque ex gratia astripotentis iteratus restitutus seu Superbiae correctio in regis Micislai exilio...*, 1747, 20 May (Hungarian–Latin)

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cember, 1649: MOHAY 2006, 138.

<sup>8</sup> Idem., 139–140.

DOMOKOS Kázmér: *Actio tragica de historia Eulogii*, 1764, 9 June (Hungarian–Latin)

The manuscript volume titled *Actiones comicae* contains 7 dramas between 1773–1780 and five of them were performed on Pentecost Saturday thus with the three dated dramas survived (1742, 1747, 1764) we have altogether 8 Pentecost Saturday plays. In *Actiones comicae* the two earlier ones (1774, 1775) are in mixed language (Hungarian–Latin), the later plays (1776, 1777, 1780) are completely in Hungarian:

FERENTZI József Vitus: *Tragico-comoedia de sancto Vito martyre*, 21 May, 1774 (Hungarian–Latin)

FERENTZI József Vitus: *Divitiae pauperrimae*, 3 June, 1775 (Hungarian–Latin; morality play about three brothers and their father's legacy)

FERENTZI József Vitus: *Exaltatio Sanctae Crucis*, 25 May 1776 (Hungarian; Byzantine emperor Heraclius defeats the Persian Khosrow, Heraclius carries the Cross on Calvary Hill)

KÉZDI István Gracián: *Actio Pentecostalis, qua Regis Juda Joachim in Captivitatem Babilonicam ducti atque post 36 Annos Liberati vicissitudo, et simul Mundi astutia...*, 18 May, 1777 (Hungarian; Joakim, king of Judah; 2King 25; Jeremiah 52)

SZENTES Antal Regináld: *Zápolya János and Bebek Imre*, 13 May, 1780 (Hungarian; 14–15<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian history)

As we see, the topics had a rich variety. The manuscripts are carefully copied, the plays are neatly elaborated, the playwrights emphasized their moral teaching also in the Latin *Thema* preceding the text proper (most often they used some Biblical quotation).

Though there were performances on Pentecost Saturday, we do not know if they were accidental, random, or regular. The three random plays survived (1742, 1747, 1764) would suggest a random occasion of theatre. On the other hand, the manuscript collection of the 1770s suggest a regular yearly performance. We do not know why they did not compile a Pentecost collection – or, may be they did but, it did not survive.

### Other occasions for performances

Leaving behind the Good Friday and Pentecost Saturday performances, only a few dated plays survived. One of the best plays is dated in 1729 and the occasion of Passion Sunday in its title (two weeks before Easter, 3 April 1729).<sup>9</sup> This is the only dated performance on Sunday when the schools usually did not present plays,

<sup>9</sup> „Triumphus Filij David Jesu A Nazareth de Goliatho infernali reportatus per David Patrem suum praefiguratut populo Dominicae Passioni devoto”: *Ferences iskoladrámák I*, nr 7. The possible author is VERES György Lajos.

and the exceptional day would suggest a VIP guest, though the manuscript does not mention to it. This performance was held for a selected, educated audience, possibly in the dining hall (at the time). Our guess is supported by the high quality of the play. It is a fine, elaborate play, and it guides the spectator through David's story as prefigures in order to show the Passion of Jesus. Every even scene shows the passion story starting with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, while the odd scenes follow David's story. The prologue gives a detailed interpretation of the complicated structure and the epilogue explains the main tasks of the Observant Franciscan order, thus these parts differ from the warnings given to the spectators of the Good Friday plays.

The other dated plays are in the two *Actiones* volumes: the dramas from 1773, 1778 in *Actiones comicae* and from 1776 in *Actiones tragicae*.

FERENTZI József VITUS: *Superbia dejecta humilitas exaltata sive tragico – comedia de Sennacherubo superbo et Ezechia humili*, 4 May, 1773 (Latin; *Actiones comicae*)

SZENTES Antal Regináld: *Rusticus imperans*, 13 June, 1780 (Hungarian; *Actiones comicae*)

KÉZDI István Gracián: *Incipit Actio Tragica pro Anno 1776. in qua Regis Imperatorisque Achab et ejus uxoris Jezabel ob peccatum interitus, et Nabot seu Christi Domini Innocentia fuit adumbrata a Juventute Csik Somlyoviensi populo die Sancti Adalberti exhibita*, 23 April, 1776 (Hungarian; *Actiones tragicae*)

All three performances were held on Tuesday. Tuesday was a special day, first of all that of Virgin Mary's as her mother St Ann was the lady of Tuesday;<sup>10</sup> in the Baroque age, Tuesday was also the day (13<sup>th</sup> of June) of St Anthony of Padua (who had an important role in Franciscan piety), and the nine Tuesdays novena to St Anthony.<sup>11</sup>

The 23<sup>rd</sup> of April was St Adalbert's day.<sup>12</sup> For long, St Adalbert's worship was overshadowed by St George's Day (24 April) which was extremely popular.<sup>13</sup> St Adalbert's revival in Hungary started in the Baroque period, he was the patron saint of the pupils of the Franciscan schools in Csíksomlyó and also in Szabadka,<sup>14</sup> so his worship was quite alive in Csíksomlyó.

<sup>10</sup> BÁLINT 1998, II: 458; *Magyar Katolikus Lexikon* VI: 425.

<sup>11</sup> *Magyar Katolikus Lexikon* VII: 590.

<sup>12</sup> St Adalbert of Prague (Svatý Vojtěch; Voitecus) was a Benedictian monk (cca 956–997), a Bohemian missionary, he baptized prince Géza and king Stephan in the 10<sup>th</sup> century and he was chosen the patron saint of the Archdiocese of Esztergom.

<sup>13</sup> BÁLINT 1998, II: 305–307.

<sup>14</sup> PINTÉR 1993, 43.

## Theatre (2)

It is possible that the earlier Good Friday passion plays were held in the dining hall, i.e. in a closed space, but later, the school must have been forced to play outdoors because of the large number of spectators. Supposing that the Good Friday performances were outdoor devotional productions and often processions for a large crowd of worshippers, we must ask what the purpose of the theatre hall or shed was. With finding the plays dated for Pentecost Saturday and for Tuesday, we might answer the question: these performances were held in the theatre or in the shed. The mixed language of the plays suggests that they were prepared for a different, small and elite audience, i.e. for the teachers, pupils, and some learned guests, for example, high priests who could follow the Latin or mixed language productions and also understood the carefully elaborate plays; for them, the vernacular was not so important (as opposed to the uneducated spectators of the Good Friday passion plays).

This assumption would outline two different theatre strategies: one aimed at the evangelization, the strengthening of the Catholicism of the Csík region with the Good Friday performances for the uneducated and low-class audience involved in singing the popular songs, before or during the procession to the Cross. These strongly impressive drama scripts were full of explanations forming an effective moral in the prologues and epilogues. The other type was quite different; it gave a more sophisticated, eloquent performance for a smaller, higher-class audience in one of the theatre halls. Thus we disagree with the frequent claim about the naivety of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Franciscan monks: they fulfilled their duty by accommodating the cultural level of their audience.