


# Hungarian-Romanian transcultural relations during the Middle Ages and the reformation

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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### ABSTRACT

It was in the Latin-language historical literature of medieval and Renaissance Hungary that the noble ideology was first formulated which has determined the discourse on Hungarian national and literary consciousness up to the present day. These chronicles, however, contain a great deal of information not only about the Hungarians, but also about the peoples who lived alongside them. Thus, Romanians are also important figures in this Latin-language historical literature. In the first part of this study we will discuss the depiction of the Romanians in Anonymus' and Simon Kézai's Chronicles, the Illustrated Chronicle and Antonio Bonfini's monumental work. In the second part of the study I will describe the influence of the Hungarian Reformation literature of the 16th and 17th centuries on Romanian literature. From a Hungarian perspective, the Romanian Reformation is worth studying because it is a clear demonstration of Hungarian "cultural imperialism" in the 16th to 18th centuries, so much so that Hungarian culture has been unable to repeat cultural export on such a scale ever since. This means that between 1540 and 1750 there was no other language into which so many Hungarian-language ecclesiastical works (catechisms, psalms, hymns, postulates, agendas, piety works) were translated as Romanian. In other words, no other culture has been so powerfully influenced by a Hungarian impact as was Romanian culture during these two centuries.

### KEYWORDS

historical literature, Latin language, Romanians, Reformation, translation, transculturality, Renaissance

Historical literature in medieval Hungary was written exclusively in Latin until the mid-16th century. The situation was similar in the two Romanian principalities of Moldavia and

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Wallachia, except that the language of the chronicles in these regions was not Latin but Old Church Slavonic. However, the difference between Hungarian and Romanian literature is significant in that while Romanian literary historians (e.g. Nicolae Manolescu, Ion Negoïtescu) do not mention the Slavonic period of Romanian literature, the historical literature in Latin is an essential chapter in the history of Hungarian literature.

## 1. THE IMAGE OF ROMANIANS IN THE HUNGARIAN CHRONICLE LITERATURE OF THE MIDDLE AGES AND THE RENAISSANCE

Romanians are an important feature in this Latin-language historical literature. They are already mentioned in a chronicle written around 1200 by the anonymous notary (Anonymus, P. dictus magister) of King Béla III (reigned between 1172 and 1196). Hungarian and Romanian historians have long been at odds over the interpretation of the passages concerning these chronicles. The majority of Romanian historians (e.g. Alexandru Madgeru, Ioan-Aurel Pop) believe that everything that Anonymus says about the Hungarian conquest (and especially the conquest of Transylvania by the Hungarians) is authentic. A minority (e.g. Lucian Boia), on the other hand, are more inclined to agree with Hungarian historians who believe that the events narrated by Anonymus reflect the conditions of the writer's own time. For example, he claims that the Hungarians occupied Pannonia along with the Kuns, although in fact the Kuns did not appear in the Carpathian Basin until almost 200 years after the conquest (end of the 9th century). Many important characters in the chronicle are fictional or were not alive at the time of the conquest. Their names were generally based on place names in use around 1200. The reeve of Ung Castle, Laborc, for example, was named after the River Laborc which joins the River Ung and flows into the River Latorca. The names of the three chieftains of Transylvanian and Bihar often referred to in the chronicle are also fictitious personal names formed from place names: *Ménmarót* (*Menumorut*), *Galád* (*Glad* in the Romanian version) and *Gyalu* (*Gelou* in the Romanian version). The name *Ménmarót* is derived from the Moravian folk name ~ *Marót* (the prefix *mén* is of Turkish origin, meaning 'big'), the name *Galád* is derived from the name of the village *Gilád* (*Ghilad* in Romanian) in Temes [today: Timis, Romania] County, while the name *Gyalu* is derived from the name of the town *Gyalu* (*Gilău* in Romanian) in present-day Cluj County. The only relevant information that can be deduced from the text refers to the time of Anonymus, i.e. the second half of the 12th century and the first half of the 13th century. The documentary sources, as well as the data on the history of place names, confirm that the first Romanians did indeed arrive in Transylvania at this time. The chronicle therefore provides authentic data on the conquest of Transylvania by the Romanians and not the Hungarians.

In his chronicle compiled around 1284, Simon Kézai did not write about the Transylvanian conquest at all, but he did mention the Romanians in a prominent place in the history of Hungarian-Szekler history by claiming that the Szeklers did not have an independent alphabet but borrowed the letters of the Romanians instead.<sup>1</sup> Kézai may have obtained information about the Romanians' (Cyrillic) and the Szeklers' (runic) writing from a Cistercian monk at the

<sup>1</sup>Simon KÉZAI: *A magyarok cselekedetei [The Acts of the Hungarians]*, translated by János BOLLÓK, Osiris Kiadó, Budapest, 1999, 102.



monastery at Kerc [today: Cârța, Romania]. Indeed, he may have seen Old Slavonic inscriptions in Cyrillic script in the wooden churches of the Romanians living around Kerc from the early 13th century, as well as runic inscriptions in the Szekler churches of the area. It was not uncommon for an outsider to confuse the two scripts, as some of the Cyrillic letters do indeed bear a resemblance to the Szekler runic characters.

In the history of Hungarian literature, Anonymus is the first not only to talk about the Romanians, but also to create the first negative images of them: “the area [Transylvania] is inhabited by the weakest people of the whole world, the Vlachs and Slavs, for their whole armament consists of bows and arrows. Their lord, Gyalu, is not brave and lacks good warriors to stand up to the reckless Hungarians.”<sup>2</sup> Such negative opinions proliferate throughout the *Illustrated Chronicle*. This richly illustrated tome, dating from around 1358, gives the most damning verdict on the Romanians in the context of the 1330 campaign of Charles Robert (reigned between 1308 and 1342) against voivode Basarab in Wallachia. The author of the chronicle does not keep silent about the fact that the Hungarian king unjustly attacked his vassal, who “always faithfully paid the taxes levied on him to his royal majesty”. Nevertheless, the Transylvanian voivode Thomas persuaded the king to attack Basarab. The campaign ended in a disastrous failure: Basarab’s soldiers massacred the Hungarian army in a narrow strait and Charles Robert himself only managed to escape thanks to his disguise. Nevertheless, the chronicler summed up the events as follows: “Everywhere around the army, Vlach dogs were dropping like flies; they lost the blessing of the last anointing, as they mercilessly slaughtered Christian people and the anointed priests of Christ. The number of Vlachs killed there by the Hungarians was counted only by that most accurate scrivener of hell.”<sup>3</sup> Thus the Romanians were labelled as apostate secessionists, even though in fact they had not provoked the attack in any way, since Basarab had pledged allegiance to his overlord and offered gifts to him at the beginning of the campaign.

The actions of Antonio Bonfini (1427/34-1502) brought about a radical change in the perception of the Romanians. Bonfini was the reader of King Matthias’ (reigned between 1458 and 1490) Italian wife, Queen Beatrix, at the court of Buda from 1486. In 1488, Matthias commissioned him to compile a modern treatment of Hungarian history (*Decades rerum Ungaricarum*), on which Bonfini worked until 1497. According to Bonfini, historical processes follow the natural law of birth – development – fulfilment – decay – death – rebirth. From time to time, the peoples, institutions, cities, and families of antiquity re-emerge from obscurity. Thus, the ancient Romans live on in the Romanians, just as the ancient Roman Corvinus clan was revived in the Hunyadi family. Bonfini rewrites and reinterprets the topos of the medieval Hungarian chronicles concerning the Romanians. On the one hand, he clearly states that ‘the Vlachs were descended from the legions and colonies that Trajan and other Roman emperors had settled in Dacia’.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, while Anonymus scorned the Romanians for being light-armed archers, Bonfini even traces the vernacular name Vlach back to the Greek name

<sup>2</sup>ANONYMUS, *A magyarok cselekedetei [The Acts of the Hungarians]*, translated by VESZPRÉMY László, Osiris Kiadó, Budapest, 1999, 27.

<sup>3</sup>*Képes Krónika [Illustrated Chronicle]*, ed. Gyula KRISTÓ, Európa Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 1986, 264.

<sup>4</sup>ANTONIO BONFINI: *A magyar történelem tizedei [Decades of Hungarian History]*, translated by Péter KULCSÁR, Balassi, Budapest, 1995, 385.



for the arrowhead, precisely because the Romanians were excellent archers. While the Vlachs, according to Anonymus and Kézai, were the servants of Attila the Hun and mingled with the barbarians, the Romanians of Bonfini, after having mingled with the barbarians, did not become corrupted, but preserved the Latin language, treasuring it as much as their lives. He describes the battle of Basarab and Charles Robert almost verbatim from the Illustrated Chronicle but omits the outburst against the Romanians.

Bonfini needed to take this stance because by the 15th century the “Romanian issue” was already in existence at the court of Buda. King Matthias’s opponents had been spreading rumours about the Hunyadi family’s lowly origin and foreign, Romanian character: “He [King Matthias] knew well that his opponents despised his lowly origin; it is widely rumoured that he was born of the Vlach race; some called him a mongrel, born of parents with different names; the lords of Hungary, especially those in the West, said that the Vlach king should not be tolerated”.<sup>5</sup> Bonfini traced the genealogy of Matthias back to the Corvinus family in Rome precisely in order to repel these slanders, vehemently protesting against the tale of the *Raven and the Ring* according to which King John Hunyadi was the love child of King Sigismund Hunyadi (reigned between 1411 and 1437) and a Romanian boyar girl.

Although in his writings Bonfini ennobled the Romanians as Romans, the way in which Hungarian humanists perceived Romanians remained a strange mixture of personal frustration and ethnic prejudice. Thus, for example, Miklós Oláh (1493–1568), who was originally from Wallachia but went on to have a distinguished career in Hungary (rising to become Archbishop of Esztergom) and became a first-rate European humanist, became the subject of a smear campaign on account of his Romanian origin by András Dudith (1533–1589), Ferenc Forgách (1535–1577) and Farkas Kovacsóczy (1540–1594), who were also first-rate humanists and had attended European universities. “It is no wonder that your nature is so harsh and even cruel, since you are a Vlach (Olahus), that is to say, you come from the tribe of the people whom, because of their sturdy forest life, others call the Valach (Valachos), who live in the mountains of Transylvania as far as Wallachia in caves and caverns like savages, spend their days amongst sheep and all types of plague, have no connection with the society of other merchant peoples, and have no firm idea of God”, Forgách wrote about Miklós Oláh.<sup>6</sup>

Based on their anti-Romanian outbursts, Forgách and Kovacsóczy may be considered the prototypes of the ideologically minded modern intellectual. The Romanian ecclesiastical or secular intellectual who wished to enter the circle of Latinist humanists in Hungary and Transylvania could expect double frustration. On the one hand, they were not on an equal footing, not only with their Hungarian counterparts, but even with their other ethnic counterparts (mainly Saxons, Slovaks, or Croats); on the other hand, they constantly had to face the fact that the Romanians, the only heirs to the glorious ancient Latinity in Central and Eastern Europe, were in a more deplorable position than any other nation in terms of Latin literacy. The

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 713.

<sup>6</sup>*Humanista történetírók [Humanist Historians]*, ed. Péter KULCSÁR, Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 1977, 1034.



Romanians' Latin origins and their exclusion from society in the medieval and early modern period were thus a source of confusion for Hungary's humanist elite.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. THE LITERATURE OF THE HUNGARIAN REFORMATION AND THE ROMANIANS

The native language of the first Reformers in Hungary was German, and therefore the Lutheran Church was the first to be established in Hungary. The Saxons of Transylvania adopted Lutheran religious doctrines in 1545. The Calvinist Reformed Church was established in the 1560s. In the Kingdom of Hungary, the Diet of 1608 granted Calvinists freedom of worship. In Transylvania, the Diet of Torda held in 1568 declared that no one could be persecuted for their religious beliefs. It was within this framework that the system of the four established religions (*recepta religio*) was established in Transylvania by the mid-1590s and was enacted into law in 1653. The four established churches/denominations of the principality were Catholic, Evangelical, Calvinist/Reformed and Unitarian.

However, the religion of the Orthodox Romanians, who followed the Greek rite, was not declared accepted but merely tolerated (*tolerata*).<sup>8</sup> The main reason for this was that by the end of the 16th century, only the religions practised by members of the previously privileged religious orders (Hungarians, Szeklers, Saxons) had acquired the status of accepted religions. There is some debate as to why the Romanians could not become a privileged and noble nation (*natio*) in the same way as the other peoples of Transylvania during the Middle Ages. Some argue that it was because the Romanians, a mixed population of Roman settlers and indigenous Dacians, had been continuously present in Transylvania since the time of the Emperor Trajan and had already lived in 'proto-state' structures when the Hungarians arrived, but these structures were destroyed by the new conquerors and the Romanians were reduced to serfdom. Others claim that this was not the case because the Romanians did not arrive in Transylvania in large numbers until later, after the Hungarians, the Saxons and even some Szeklers had settled, at a time when the process of establishing medieval national autonomies had already come to an end. Thus, they were unable to develop into a unified social stratum and were forced to fit into the given framework, i.e. to merge either into the nobility or the serf class. As a result, the Romanian commoners, who initially enjoyed the same freedom as the Szeklers and Saxons, lost their personal liberty and became serfs, at least initially, not to Hungarian landlords, but the Roman *knezes* and *voivodes* who had gained nobility. In order to rise in society, the new noble Romanian *knezes* renounced their orthodox religion, a hindrance in mobility, without hesitation. In many cases, however, they retained their language, so we know of a significant number of Romanian Catholic nobles, especially in southern Transylvania and the Banat. Nevertheless,

<sup>7</sup>Gábor ALMÁSI: *Constructing the Wallach 'other' in the late Renaissance*, in: Balázs, Trencsényi; Márton, Zászkaliczky (eds.) *Whose Love of Which Country: Composite States, National Histories and Patriotic Discourses in Early Modern East Central Europe*, Brill Academic Publishers, Leiden, 2010, 91–130.

<sup>8</sup>Mihály BALÁZS: „A hit ... hallásból lészön”. *Megjegyzések a négy bevett vallás intézményesüléséhez a 16. századi Erdélyben* [“Faith ... is by Hearing”. *Notes on the Institutionalization of the Four Established Religions in 16th Century Transylvania*] in *Tanulmányok Szakály Ferenc emlékére* [Studies in the Memory of Ferenc Szakály], ed. Pál FODOR, Géza PÁLFFY, István György TÓTH, MTA TKI Gazdaság- és Társadalomtörténeti Kutatócsoport, Budapest, 2002, 51–75.



the emergence of the new nation based upon social strata was territorial. Thus, the peoples who became nations were those which, while maintaining their own customs, lived in a unified and coherent territory (Terra Siculorum, Terra Saxonum, Terra Hungarorum). In 13th century documents, Terra Blachorum is still mentioned, but the region did not become a compact area inhabited by Romanians, and so the Romanians did not become *Natio Valachica*. This is mainly because they did not live in a homogeneous area like the Szeklers and Saxons, as they were constantly migrating, due to their pastoral lifestyle.

Despite the fact that Eastern Orthodoxy was not an established religion, it was not persecuted either, as was sometimes the case with the Catholic, Unitarian or Sabbatarian churches. The Romanians' religion and church was never banned in Transylvania, nor were Romanians forced to convert to any other established religion, while the possibility of doing so was not excluded. In fact, from a religious point of view, being tolerated (*tolerata*) outside the structures of the society resulted not only in disadvantages, but also in certain advantages for the Romanians. Like the Ruthenians, Romanian serfs were not obliged to pay tenth to the Catholic Church precisely because of their being schismatic. However, as soon as they became Catholics, they also became obligated to pay tenth.<sup>9</sup> This is probably the simplest explanation for the fact that during the Middle Ages very few Romanian serfs converted to Catholicism.

From the literary point of view, the Hungarian Reformation influenced Romanian literature mainly in the field of catechism literature, Bible translations, and church hymnody. The first Romanian book to be printed entirely in Romanian, and which has survived to the present day, is the *Catechism (Întrebarea creștinească – The Christian Question)* printed by Deacon Coresi in Brassó [today: Braşov, Romania] in 1560. It has not yet been possible to determine the exact source of the publication, but it is certain that the translator had converted a Hungarian text into Romanian. This is evidenced by the Hungarian-style structures of the Romanian text: *halottak feltámadása* = *sculatul morților* (*resurrection of the dead* = 'getting up of the dead'), instead of the Romanian *înviere* (*coming back to life*); *kiadni* = *a da afară* (*publish* = 'give out') instead of *a edita*, *a publica* (*to edit, publish*) etc. The *Cazanie*, also published in 1568 in Coresi's workshop, with the financial support of Miklós Forró Háportoni, a Hungarian nobleman from Fogaras [today: Făgăraş, Romania], is entirely Calvinistic in spirit. From a theological point of view, this is one of the most important publications of the Romanian Reformation. This is confirmed by the mere fact that it contains a literal translation of a sermon by Péter Juhász Melius (1532–1572). Melius had studied at the University of Wittenberg and later became a preacher in Debrecen. In the midst of constant religious disputes, he founded and organised the Reformed diocese of Transtisza, of which he became bishop in 1562. In addition to works of religious disputation, he wrote sermons, translated the New Testament and excerpts from the Old Testament, as well as Calvin's *Catechism* into Hungarian. Not only does the inclusion of Melius's sermon prove that the translator/compiler of *Cazanie* was a Romanian preacher who had certainly converted to the Reformation, but also shows him to have been a strong critic of society and the clergy, typical of the Reformers, who had taken up the fight against the cult of fasting and death, demon worship, quackery and superstition, which were particularly strong in Romanian popular religion.

<sup>9</sup>Géza HEGYI: „*Terrae Christianorum.*” *A keresztény földre telepedett románok dézsmáltatásának kezdetei*, Erdélyi Múzeum [*The Beginnings of Taxing of the Romanian Settlers in Christian Lands*] 79 (2017/1), 61–75.





The second part of the *Cazanie* is a book of rituals entitled *Molitvenic*. The Romanian text is based on the 1559 *Agenda* by Gáspár Heltai (*Agenda, az az szentegyházi cselekedetek – Agenda, or the Acts of the Holy Church*, published in Kolozsvár [today: Cluj Napoca, Romania]). Gáspár Heltai (1510–1574) was a printer, writer and preacher of Saxon origin. Notwithstanding the fact that he had not begun to learn Hungarian until 1536, he became one of the most influential initiators of Hungarian language culture, popular education and literature. In 1543 he enrolled at the University of Wittenberg, where he came into contact with Luther. After his return home, he launched the Reformation in Kolozsvár. He is best known for his printing activities: more than 80 publications are known to have been printed in his workshop, most of them in Hungarian, and addressed to a wide audience. For the sake of the “simple-minded”, he used types and sizes of letters that were easy to read and divided texts into numerous paragraphs. One of the most important publications of 16th century Romanian Reformation, *Palia de la Orăștie* (*The Old Testament of Orăștie*), published in 1582, also has as its source the *Old Testament* as published by Gáspár Heltai in 1551 in Kolozsvár. *Palia* contained the Romanian translations of Genesis and Exodus.

The years 1569–1580 saw the publication of the first Romanian text printed in Latin script with a Hungarian spelling. The surviving fragment of this publication (*Fragmentul Todorescu – The Todorescu Fragment*) contains translations of ten Hungarian Calvinist hymns. The 17th century was the heyday of Calvinist Romanian hymnbooks. Four such collections are known: the work of Sándor Gergely Agyagfalvi (1642), an anonymous collection (around 1660), and the works of János Viski (1697) and István Istvánházi (1703). The hymnbooks were intended for use not by laypeople, but by the preachers who ministered in the church, and they contained the most frequently used texts of the Reformed church services. A total of 102 Hungarian Calvinist hymns were translated into Romanian over the 16th and 17th centuries. The most important source for the translators were the psalter translations in verse published by Albert Molnár Szenci (1574–1634) and the accompanying hymns. Szenci came from a middle-class family in Upper Hungary and studied at the universities of Strasbourg and Heidelberg. He travelled through the main German cultural centres, living in Frankfurt-am-Main, Altdorf, Oppenheim, Heidelberg and Hanau. He kept a diary during his stay abroad. He was friends with the astronomer Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) and that great figure of German Baroque literature, Martin Opitz, who taught briefly at the College of Gyulafehérvár [today: Alba Iulia, Romania] in 1622 and wrote about the Romanians of Transylvania in his poem *Zlatna*. Szenci’s *Psalterium Ungaricum* in verse was published in Herbor in 1607. The publication of the book had a practical purpose: to adapt the psalms to a form that could be sung. The author drew mainly on French models such as Clement Marot (1496–1544), Théodore de Bèze (1519–1605) and German examples such as Ambrosius Lobwasser (1515–1585). He rendered the 150 psalms to 130 melodies, thus becoming the poet who wrote the largest quantity of verse in Old Hungarian literature. The Romanian translations fully respected the rhythm used by Szenci, so that the Romanian psalms can be sung to the melodies used by Szenci.

These hymnbooks were all written in Latin script and used Hungarian spelling. Romanian writing using Latin script and Hungarian spelling, which developed in the Hátszeg-Fogarás region and in the Banat region (around Lugos-Karánsebes [today: Lugoj and Caransebeș, Romania]) was not only a curiosity, but a living tradition that was to survive for 250 years (between about 1570 and 1820). It was used not only by Calvinists but also by Catholic Romanians. Romanian Calvinist texts were of course also written in Cyrillic script in the



17th century. The most important examples are the *New Testament* of Gyulafehérvár [today: Alba Iulia, Romania] (1648) and *Psalter* (1651). The translation was based on a Greek-Latin bilingual edition of the Bible; but the first complete Hungarian translation of the Bible published by Gáspár Károli (1529–1592) in 1590 (*Vizsolyi Biblia* – the Bible of Vizsoly) was also used to check the translation of both works. The translation, begun by Silvestru, the igumen of the monastery of Govora, was finalised by a certain János, dean of Marosillye [today: Ilia, Romania], and György Csulai (d. 1660), Calvinist bishop of Transylvania.

György Csulai, from a Romanian noble family in Hátszeg [today: Hațeg, Romania], studied at the College of Debrecen and later at the universities of Heidelberg and Altdorf. After his return home he first became a pastor at the royal court, and from 1649 onwards went on to act as bishop of Transylvania. Csulai knew some Romanian. He wrote extensive prefaces to some books of the New Testament. The prefaces summarise the most important information about the New Testament book in question: who the author was, when it was written and what its contents were. These lengthy prefaces (55 pages out of 330 pages of printed text) display the most distinct Protestant features.

The Reformation was the first intellectual, theological, and cultural movement originating in Western Europe that made a serious impact on Romanians who followed the Greek rite. The Reformation also saw the first publications in Romanian and the first steps towards the emergence of a clear and accessible literary language, free of complicated Byzantine idioms. It was also thanks to the Reformation that Western European verse forms first appeared in Romanian poetry.

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