

# BENEDEK ILLYÉS, THE GRAFFITI VANDAL WHO DAMAGED A HISTORIC MONUMENT (15<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY?)

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**ABSTRACT:** A significant portion of the Szekler runiform church inscriptions must be classified as *hic fuit* inscriptions, that is, graffiti by visitors. Such an example is the inscription on the lower edge of the outer wall fresco of the Unitarian church of Sepsikilyén, which was inscribed among several Latin *hic fuit* graffiti. This inscription can be divided into a Latin part in fraktur letters and a Hungarian part in runiform script: *Scribsit (!) BNDK<sup>2</sup> I[[L]]`Ly`ES*. The Latin word and the orthographic emendation show that the author, named *Benedek Illyés*, was a man of higher education than the average: a fact which is also justified in several other inscriptions. This graffito probably erased the signo of the painters, but nevertheless belongs to a layer older than the later graffiti in capital letters and must therefore date to the 2<sup>nd</sup> part of the 15<sup>th</sup> century or to the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

**KEYWORDS:** Sepsikilyén, *hic fuit*, graffito, runiform script

Late medieval church inscriptions in runiform script in the Szeklerland usually have a simple text. Most of them fall into one of two categories: inscriptions relating to construction (such as “made by X.Y.”),<sup>1</sup> and the so-called *hic fuit* inscriptions (commonly occurring in Latin and in Latin-script Hungarian in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries: *hic fuit N.N.*, i.e. “N.N. was here”).<sup>2</sup> Of course, there are a few exceptions: the first is the set of long inscriptions of the church in Székelydálya, which have not been fully deciphered yet, but they certainly do not fall into either of these two categories.

These are mostly very brief inscriptions that leave one very important question unanswered: who made them, what else can we learn about the author besides his name? In the case of construction-related inscriptions, we obviously know the profession: a painter, a stone-cutter, etc. But in the case of *hic fuit* inscriptions, this too is unclear; we can only guess, or be grateful for cases such as in Gelence, where the engraver added his profession: *Pál the priest*.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, it is somewhat common knowledge (but never proven) that the Szekler runiform script is the ancient popular script of the Hungarian nation, or at least of the Szeklers, which predates our Latin script; accordingly, writing it is a form of the people’s literacy not taught in schools and not related to the usual

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- 1 The inscriptions in Bágy, Csíkszentmihály/Csíkszentmiklós, Énlaka are clearly in this category. Many interpreters believe the Bögöz inscription to be such (Szigethy 1930; Németh 1934, n. 8; as an alternative explanation, based on Szigethy, also Forrai 1985, pp. 158–159), but a different interpretation is possible as well, and the author identification proposed by Szigethy is certainly erroneous, for reasons of chronology (Benkő 1994, pp. 164–165, however, he believes the inscription is roughly a hundred years younger than the fresco, and therefore implicitly a *hic fuit* inscription).
  - 2 Two inscriptions in Berekeresztúr are obviously such (in the window recess of the 1st-floor tower: Ráduly 1992); moreover, these were inserted among roughly 30 *hic fuit* inscriptions in Latin, partially dated to the 16th or 17th century; so is one in Rugonfalva (Benkő 1991, p. 20); and a surviving inscription in Gelence (see next note). I found a *hic fuit* inscription in runiform script, not yet disclosed, on a supporting pillar in Székelydálya, which is significantly younger than the large wall inscriptions.
  - 3 Kónya 1994; Ferenczi 1997, p. 20; Erdélyi & Ráduly 2010, p. 86; Sándor 2014, pp. 187–188, etc. The Gelence inscription is dated to 1497, which means it certainly has nothing to do with when the fresco was made (first half of the 14th century); chronologically, it falls in the middle of the Latin *hic fuit* inscriptions found in its proximity. Thus, it is very likely that it was written by one of the visitors, who was not related to the church in any way as a priest – not to mention that barely half a metre farther, Latin *hic fuit* inscriptions are lined up.

literate class. However, lately this assumption has been challenged with good reason based on the inscriptions known. It is mostly certain that starting from the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century a sort of a fashion for the script emerged among the literate, up to the royal court<sup>4</sup> (the Nikolsburg alphabet is acceptable evidence of this). We cannot claim that this fashion was related directly to the inscriptions of (often remote) churches in the Szeklerland, but we can indeed claim that the role of the church is obvious in many runiform inscriptions (especially in the case of the most famous and longest specimen, the Marsigli runiform rod), and it seems the Catholic church preferred this script to some extent in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century. On the one hand, it is of course unlikely that a church construction inscription could have been made without the priest's consent, as in Bány, the SE wall in Berekeresztúr,<sup>5</sup> Csíkmadaras (although we cannot read it, it is on the headsill of the front door), Csíkszentmihály or Csíkszentmiklós, Dálnok, and especially one of the oldest ones, in Vargyas, which is almost certainly on an object with a ritualistic function (baptismal basin or plinth?).<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, a priest is explicitly indicated in Székelyderzs and Gelence, and we now know the same was the case in Énlaka as well: György Dakó or Darkó of Musna was the priest of Homoródalmás.<sup>7</sup> I will not explore the issue of the Székelydályá inscriptions, but we can be sure the series of inscriptions covering roughly 9 m could not have been put on the front wall without the Church's consent.

This raises the possibility that the runiform writers of the period were typically from the more educated strata, rather than from the uneducated classes.<sup>8</sup>

4 Róna-Tas 1985/86; Sándor 2017.

5 Erdélyi & Ráduly 2010, p. 75. Neither they, nor others could provide an interpretation, but the surviving first letters seem to be part of the word CsEŃALL^TA.

6 The function of the object and interpretation of the inscription both stirred heated debate with no reassuring agreement; to cite a few of the more characteristic views: Ráduly 1995, p. 10, pp. 79–95 (essentially the same as: Erdélyi & Ráduly 2010, p. 64); Ferenczi 1997, pp. 18–19; Vékony 2004, 18–24; Szász 2007 (these two do not consider this to be an inscription relating to the construction, and offer a completely different interpretation than the others); Benkő 2014, pp. 317–318; Sándor 2014, pp. 180–182.

7 The most recent and most accurate summary is provided by: Fehér, J. 2017.

8 Sándor 2014a, pp. 329, 337.

I will now analyse an inscription which could only be covered partially by analyses so far because its meaning was completely uncertain (see Photo 1). The runiform inscription on the outer wall of the Unitarian church in Sepsikilyén has been known (perhaps) since 1978; the letters were revealed after the destruction from the earthquake in 1977 and were discovered by Ádám Kónya.<sup>9</sup> They remained undisclosed for a long time and to this day have not been properly published.<sup>10</sup> There is one researcher who made an attempt at an individual interpretation, János Ráduly; after him, his interpretation has essentially been reiterated. According to this, the inscription is a name: *B<sup>e</sup>n<sup>^</sup>diko* or *B<sup>a</sup>n<sup>^</sup>diko*.<sup>11</sup> If he is right, the text is regrettably unsuitable for further analysis: a name alone, especially a nickname (or a last name derived from a nickname, but in this case, with no first name), indicates nothing of the social origin, and it is possible that this small-type script on the edge of the fresco on the outer wall was added illegally, just like the Dracula statue on the Vajdahunyad fort wall in Budapest.<sup>12</sup> This interpretation, however, does not stand up to scrutiny.

On the southern outer wall of the nave, there is a series of late medieval frescos (presently restored). Later frescoes can be dated perhaps to the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup> The frescos are surrounded by a dark red, plain painted strip frame; in the lower frame and underneath (even in the picture area) there are numerous scratches and inscriptions that cross each other. Quite a few of these are clearly *hic fuit* inscriptions in Latin, both in fraktur and capital letters. None is dated to a specific year; a dating can be attempted based on script style. The runiform inscription (*a*) falls in the category of the following inscriptions (Photo 2):

9 The frescos were first uncovered by J. Huszka in 1887; they were whitewashed again, and came to light once more in the earthquake in 1977; but Kónya (1982) does not mention the runiform script yet.

10 First disclosure: Ráduly 1993; Ráduly 1994. The following subsequent disclosures were made since then: Ráduly 1995, pp. 10, 34–49. (drawing, photo); Erdélyi & Ráduly 2010, p. 87 (upside down drawing!); Mandics 2010, III pp. 72–73; Fehér 2019, pp. 121–122. Mention in: Ferenczi 1997, p. 22 (photo 15); Benkő 2014, p. 322; Sándor 2014, p. 207; Tubay 2015, p. 156.

11 Ráduly all op. cit.

12 [https://www.kozterkep.hu/1500/lugosi\\_bela\\_mellszobor\\_budapest\\_2003.html](https://www.kozterkep.hu/1500/lugosi_bela_mellszobor_budapest_2003.html), [https://index.hu/urbanista/2016/06/29/megoldodott\\_a\\_varosligeti\\_drakula\\_rejtely](https://index.hu/urbanista/2016/06/29/megoldodott_a_varosligeti_drakula_rejtely)

13 Kónya 1978.

There are fragments of illegible fraktur script on the left edge of the frame (**b**: *B[-]+un[- - -]* 15<sup>th</sup> century?), underneath there are capital letters (**c**: *+++ hic fuiť Micha[el - - -]* 16<sup>th</sup> century, 2<sup>nd</sup> half?), in the middle, on several illegible Gothic types a cross sign and capital letters were added later (**d**: *[- - -] hic [- - -]*, **e**: *Micha[el - - -]*, 15<sup>th</sup> century/early 16<sup>th</sup> century?, **f**: *[- - -]sumus[- - -]* 16<sup>th</sup> century, 2<sup>nd</sup> half?), and above the runiform inscription, fragments of illegible fraktur letters in the picture area (**g**).<sup>14</sup>

As I do not believe that the author changed his dialect while writing, my explanation for the correction is this: the phoneme-grapheme correspondences for the letters L/Ly had probably gradually grown distinct in Szekler script,<sup>15</sup> and our author was likely uncertain of the correct spelling. This does indicate he had some standards. But we learn more of his cultural expectations from the word to the left, which is indeed hard to read, but perhaps the picture shows that it is a Latin expression: ° *X/crib/it (!)* ° Not quite academic Latin, of course, because he meant: *Scriptit B. I.*, written by B. I., but this does prove the author was educated. It is not unlikely at all that he too was one of our runiform script writers who were in the orders.

The cross-shaped stroke at the left margin of the inscription (it is a matter of taste whether we take it to be the beginning or the end) remains unexplained. It could stand for two things: a sign to draw attention, or a repetition of the name's initial letter (perhaps he could not make up his mind about which side of the Latin text he should continue the words with different writing directions).

14 We must mention that there are capital-letter engravings on the doorjamb of the church that were added later, certainly after the wall strokes (17<sup>th</sup> century?): **h** Iohann[- - -], **i** [- - -]N MA[- - -]ni X638, **j** hic fuiť PAIL, **k** h^(ic) fu(it) B ° TI.

15 Inscription 2 from Csíkszentmiklós/mihály contains the same name Eljás probably with the letters L + J, written etymologically, with Ly in the Marsigli calendar (675,1,4.); the inscriptions from Székelydálya (a teaser of my deciphering to be published soon) contain the word hely with an Ly on the inscriptions A and B, and with L on the inscription C; in the Vargyas inscription, the Ly combination denotes the phoneme ly – the latter is the first-ever certified occurrence of the character Ly, while the use of the L can be traced back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Alsóbű: FOLK, see Fehér 2019a). Based on Vargyas and Alsóbű, it seems both signs initially stood for L, but palatalisation had certainly occurred by the Székelydálya period, that is, the early 15<sup>th</sup> century (there and thereafter, Ly has never stood for L anywhere).

Thus, the correct epigraphic transcript of the inscription is (Photo 4):

→ ° X Scribsit (!)° ← BNDK<sup>2</sup> I[[L]]`Ly`ES

Written by: *B<sup>e</sup>n<sup>e</sup>d<sup>e</sup>k Ily<sup>y</sup>és.*

Albeit with some degree of inaccuracy, the age of the inscription can be determined based on its connection to the other inscriptions. It is obviously part of the earlier group, as it begins with a word in fraktur script, but even more so because it is overlapped by later strokes. However, it cannot date from the time when the fresco was made, although the old-style script could point to it being a made-by inscription, not a *hic fuit*. If we look at the signs very carefully though (they are letters 2.7–2.1 cm tall), we can see that they were written over some very tiny older fraktur-type marks (see Photo 5). Four of the letters with a general height of 0.45 cm can be deciphered: INXX. If we look for a meaningful text behind this, the word is probably: [*P*]inxx(erunt) [- - - et - - -], ‘Painted by ... and ...’, which indeed was actually a made-by inscription by the fresco painters. We must probably date these to the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century; of course, it was rather unwise of the painters themselves, as mediievally modest as they were, to write their names half a centimetre tall, really asking for their destruction. A bit later, the visitor Benedek Illyés, shamelessly (or ignorantly, because he might not have noticed the tiny inscription) destroyed the signature on the artwork by adding his graffiti, probably in the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, or perhaps in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, but in any case earlier than the capitalised graffiti nearby.

Of course, the “more educated” class that wrote the inscriptions must be criticised for scrawling over the frescoes without hesitation (in Gelence, priest Pál scribbled right in the elbow of the Holy Mother of God!),<sup>16</sup> but we have long known about this trend. There is a silver lining: this is how most of our runiform scripts were preserved, and they are much rarer than late-medieval frescoes, so their survival is even more important for us. This is what makes the Sepsikilyén inscription so significant for us: it is among the few inscriptions

16 Some say this is so unlikely that it even makes the authenticity of the inscription doubtful (Horváth et al. 2011, p. 77).

where the runiform script stands right next to the Latin text (in fact, there is another one in the Berekeresztúr tower, and the humanist-educated István Szamosközy and the scrivener of Marsigli B wrote a few Latin words using runiform script<sup>17</sup>), confirming the Latin-style and church-style literacy of the typical authors of runiform script.

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17 Cf. Fehér 2019.

## PHOTOS



Photo 1: Sepsikilyén, Unitarian church, fresco with inscription (photo by author)



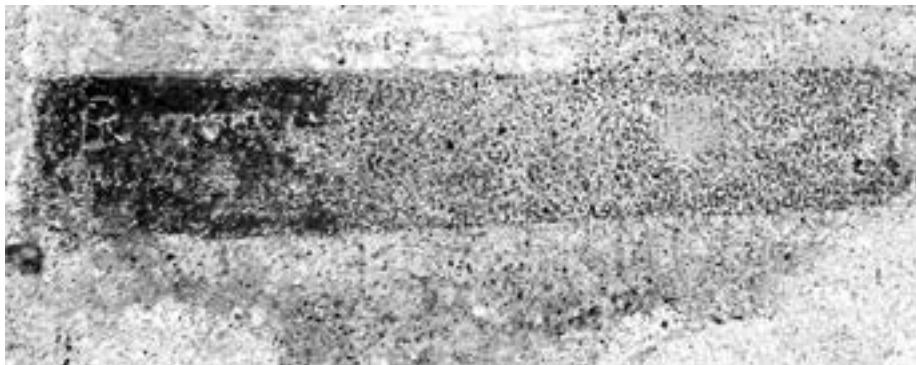


Photo 2: *Hic fuit* inscriptions at the bottom of the fresco (photo by author)



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... HIC FUIT MISH

Photo 3: *Hic fuit* inscriptions at the bottom of the fresco (photo by author)

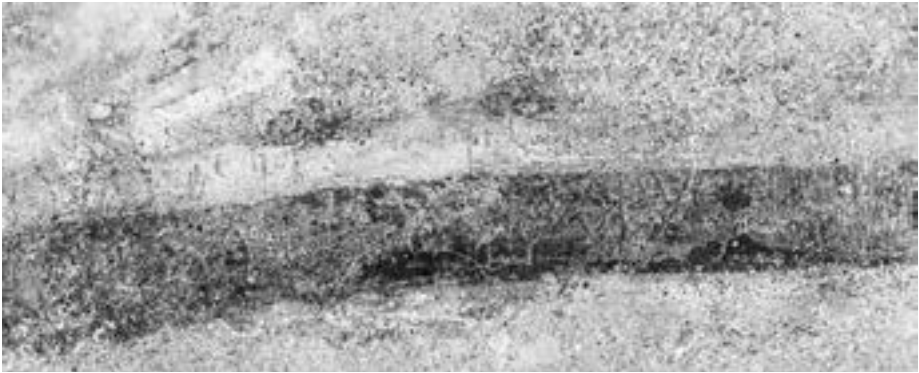


Photo 4: Inscription with runiform script (photo by author)

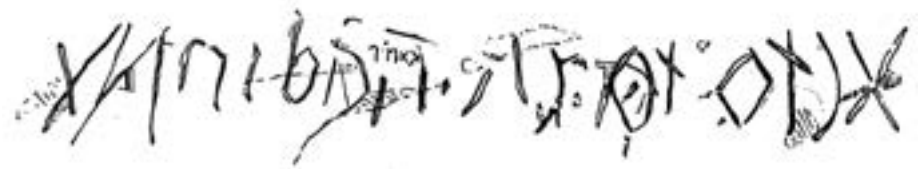


Photo 5: Inscription with runiform script (drawn by author)



Photo 6: Inscription with runiform script (photo by author)

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