

The first public debate in the history of Hungarian philosophy? Ioannes Pannonius' letter to Marsilio Ficino on divine providence

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ABSTRACT

The present paper has in its focus a letter written in Buda in the mid-1480s by a mysterious Hungarian author, Ioannes Pannonius, whose figure is shrouded in obscurity. After a brief overview of the letter, the paper summarises the misconceptions and uncertainties surrounding the identity of the mysterious author and then attempts to outline his biography on the basis of fragmentary information. Contrary to the Anglo-Saxon scholarly literature, it argues that the Hungarian author is neither a fiction nor an intellectual “avatar” of Ficino, whom he could challenge in the public ring of contemporary intellectual space in order to defend his own Platonic theory. And if he is not a fictional author, the significance of the short letter is not only that the head of the Florentine Platonic school, Marsilio Ficino, anticipating the later theological debates around Platonism in the 16th century, replies to the letter, but also that it is perhaps the first known, highly publicised debate in the history of Hungarian philosophy.

KEYWORDS

Neoplatonism, nature, providence, correspondence, astrology

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Marsilio Ficino published two letters in the selected collection of his correspondence in 1495: one of them was an offensive letter written in Buda around 1485 by a certain Ioannes Pannonius who criticized Ficino's theory (or misunderstood words?) about divine providence and the nature of fate. Ficino and one of the main figures among contemporary intellectuals in Europe, did not just respond to the intellectual echo of the "Transalpine barbarian" land, but a few years later published their discussion as well. Who can this mysterious friend be in Buda who was involved in what was perhaps the first public philosophical-theological debate in Hungarian intellectual history? Or maybe he was just a fictitious, created persona against whom Ficino wanted to defend himself and his philosophy publicly? Although the identity of Ioannes Pannonius has been shrouded in mystery for centuries, this paper – despite the dearth of available information – argues that the unknown correspondent was a real person and not a work of fiction of the Florentine Platonist, and tries to outline his very fragmentary biography.

THE LETTER

Let's see Ioannes Pannonius' letter entitled 'A doubt as to whether philosophic works are governed by fate or by providence'¹:

I have read at Buda in your letter to Bandini, and also in your preface to Plato and in the preface to your Theology, how much you attribute to providence. Another might suppose this to be the work of fate. Firstly, I do not myself see how the revival of the ancient authors is subject to providence. Secondly, the theology of the ancients is not Christian. Besides, some time ago, when I had gone to Italy and was being taught Latin and Greek in Florence, I remember hearing from two of your astrologers that you were going to revive the ancient philosophical teaching in accordance with a particular configuration of the heavens. Now although I was told of this configuration of the heavens, I do not recall it clearly, but I believe that you remember it; indeed, that you discovered it by yourself. In support of their view those astrologers also declared that at the appointed time you had restored to light the ancient sound of the lyre, as well as the ancient style of singing and the Orphic hymns which had previously been consigned to oblivion. Soon afterwards you translated Hermes Trismegistus, who lived in very ancient times, as well as many works of the Pythagoreans. You also expounded the Hymns of Zoroaster, and before I returned here from Florence you had set about translating Plato under what was, I am sure, the same astronomical authority. However, the proof that you are doing these things through fate rather than through providence is that prior to all these activities and while you were still a youth, you had no anxiety about publishing some philosopher, or poet, of antiquity; but later, trusting to better judgement, you suppressed him and, so I hear, did your best to expunge him. That was not the gift of divine providence, because it was you yourself, grown wiser with age, who rightly judged that he should be condemned. Indeed, I advise you, my friend, to take care

¹Ficino (2003), 20–21.



that your revival of the ancient authors does not perhaps prove to be mere curiosity rather than religion.²

József Huszti and Paul Oskar Kristeller believe the date of the writing of the letter to have been at the end of 1484, or rather in the beginning of 1485.³ According to the text, Ioannes read one of Ficino's letters to Francesco Bandini, and the introduction of Ficino's translation of Plato, as well as the prologue to *Theologia platonica* somewhere in Buda.⁴ Ioannes was disturbed by two things most of all: the first that – at least according to Ioannes – Ficino had confused divine providence with fate.⁵ One can either go along or go off the life path which is determined by fate. Ioannes thinks that Ficino resurrected the ancient authors by his free will, and thus he erred from the predetermined way. In his response,⁶ Ficino argued that Ioannes was wrong, because he had been moving along the predetermined way by his free will and with the help of God when he brought back the ancient authors from oblivion. Ioannes also alludes to another thing: Ficino clings with a near-religious devotion to these authors, which is – even if he did not use that word – a form of idolatry.

The title of Ioannes Pannonius' letter is a bit different in the "G1" codex of Wolfenbüttel⁷ than in the editions (Fig. 1). This is not a copying error: *Dubitatio utrum opera philosophica regantur fato an natura*. That is: "A doubt as to whether philosophic works are governed by fate or by nature". (Another hand drew attention to the word by underlining it and emended it to the word above: *Providentia*.)

²I publish the original Latin text from Ficino's 1495 edition, because he proofread the whole book (Ficino, 1495, 145^v; see also: Ficino, 1576, 871): „Dubitatio utrum opera philosophica regantur fato an providentia. Ioannes Pannonius Marsilio Ficino Platonico. S[alutem]. P[lurimam]. D[icit]. // Legi Budae in epistola ad Bandinum, item in prooemio tuo super Platonem et in prooemio Theologiae tuae quantum astruas providentiae. Quod aliquis esse fati suspicabitur, primo non video equidem ad quid serviat providentiae renovatio antiquorum. Deinde non est Christiana illa antiquorum Theologia, praeterea memini cum olim in Italiam profectus Latinis litteris et Graecis erudirer Florentiae me a duobus vestrum astrologis audivisse te ex quadam syderum positione antiquas renovaturum philosophorum sententias. Quam quidem positionem syderum etsi audiverim non satis recolo, sed te arbitror meminisse immo et per te invenisse. Adduxerunt item illi astrologi ad suum iudicium confirmandum quod fatali quodam tempore antiquum cytharae sonum et cantum et carmina Orphica oblivioni prius tradita luci restituis. Mox et Mercurium Trismegistum antiquissimum traduxisti et Pythagorica multa. Item carmina Zoroastris explanavisti et antequam Florentia huc redirem transferendo Platoni manum iniiceras, iisdem (ut equidem suspicor) astronomicis auspiciis. Quod autem haec non tam providentia quam fato quodam fiant abs te illud etiam argumento est quod ante haec omnia antiquum quenda philosophum sive poetam, utpote adhuc adolescens leviter propagasti. Quem deinde meliori fretus consilio suppraexisti, et (ut audio) pro viribus extraxisti, neque fuerat illud divinae providentiae munus quod ipse aetate prudentior factus merito iudicasti dammandum. Equidem te amice moneo caveas ne forte curiositas quaedam sit isthaec renovatio antiquorum potius quam religio.”

³Huszti (1925), 64; Kristeller (1973), I, CLVII–CLVIII. Although there is not any concrete biographical date in Ficino's answer, its reference to his Plotinus commentary suggests a later – even one of several years – date for both letters. More precisely: after January 17, 1486. Kristeller (1973), I, CXXVI–CXXVIII., or even Kószegehy (2011, 171).

⁴Perhaps at Bandini's house who was a kind of Ficino's "Platonist ambassador" in Hungary, and had an influential – or rather a central – position in the court of King Matthias. He was on friendly terms with such powerful and educated Hungarian statesmen as Miklós Báthory, the bishop of Vác, Péter Váradi, the archbishop of Kalocsa or Péter Garázda.

⁵Bullard (1990).

⁶Because the length of Ficino's answer, I can not cite it, but see: Ficino (2003), 21–24.

⁷The "G1" is Kristeller's abbreviation: *Epistolarum ad amicos libri VIII.* (Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf. 73. Aug. 2°).



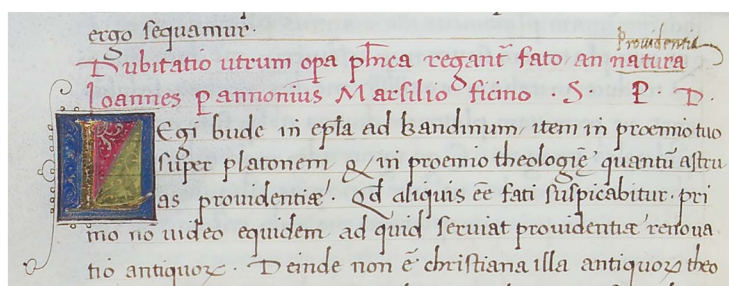


Fig. 1. *Providentia or natura?* (in G1, 276^v)

It is not the emendation that is interesting, but the original word *natura*. If it was written by Ioannes, Ficino might have been right and the Hungarian correspondent read Plotinus or at least the beginning of the book, more specifically the *Enneades* 1.1-3 which deals with fate and providence and often mentions their relations with nature, too. Generally, *natura* cannot be identified with *providentia* neither based on Plotinus, nor on Ficino. Providence is some mightier power which acts as sentinel over nature, as well. Nevertheless, its relation to free will is important here. Man is born with a nature (abilities, faculties and desires) determined by fate which is reflected in the position of the stars. However, this nature can allure not just good, but bad, too. Using our free will we can either subject ourselves to the commandments of our nature, or we can refuse to obey them. We can find our own way with the help of divine providence, and we can choose between accepting or refusing the callings of our innate nature. Therefore it is strange that according to the title of the letter, Ioannes would have doubted that the writing of the philosophic works were led by fate or nature. These two concepts, even if they are not synonyms, oppose divine providence rather than each other. However, it might fit better to Ioannes' reconstructed thought, who – in this way – excludes divine providence from the philosophical works of Ficino.

This cannot be a copying error, but must a philosophical one instead. The title should refer to whether somebody is predetermined by fate, from the moment of his birth, to write a particular philosophic work or – while he is still guided by God – he can choose (because he can even refuse) on whether or not he writes a particular work of philosophy. Therefore if we see the title in the G1 codex, the *dubitatio* of the correspondent seems to be more subtle. According to this, the question is, whether that particular person is determined by fate to write that particular work of philosophy or by his innate nature. However, if he allows himself to be tempted by his nature to write a work, this could be the wrong path, because human nature tempts us to do good or bad at the same time. In this case, our choices made through our free will have no guarantee of being correct. Finally, we cannot decide whether the writing of a particular work of philosophy can be considered to have been the right or the wrong choice.

If Ioannes originally used the word *natura* in the letter, it does not make any sense for Ficino to defend himself by referring to *fatum*, because he can only argue against Ioannes' charges with the concept of *providentia*. According to Ioannes, Ficino's works could have been inspired by *fatum* or *natura*, either way it would not be certain that God would like them. But if Ficino had chosen the way of the providence by his free will – even opposed to Ficino's fate or nature – the written works would be dear to God.

If the letter addressed to Bandini in the beginning of the *De vita Platonis* is read in this manner, the aforementioned horoscope (Fig. 2) and the sentence attributed to Firmicus Maternus beside the image will refer to divine providence (*coelesti ingenio*): the heavens themselves had determined Plato's way, along which he was able to unravel the divine secrets.

Ioannes Pannonius might also have read about "Platonic religion" and divine providence in the prologue of *Platonic theology*, which was addressed to Lorenzo de' Medici.⁸ However Ficino defines the ancient philosophy as an instrument which can direct the more rational people towards the religiousness (Christianity is not mentioned).

Ioannes was really annoyed by the prologue of *Opera Platonis*.⁹ He might have alluded to this in his letter, because Ficino writes about Plato with an almost religious enthusiasm with statements bordering on blasphemy. In one of these he states that God draws people's souls to Himself through the divine inspiration of Plato's texts. Another image goes even farther when Ficino states that Plato was sent to earth by the Almighty to spread the true religion there, and so Ficino must have made the translations with the help of God.

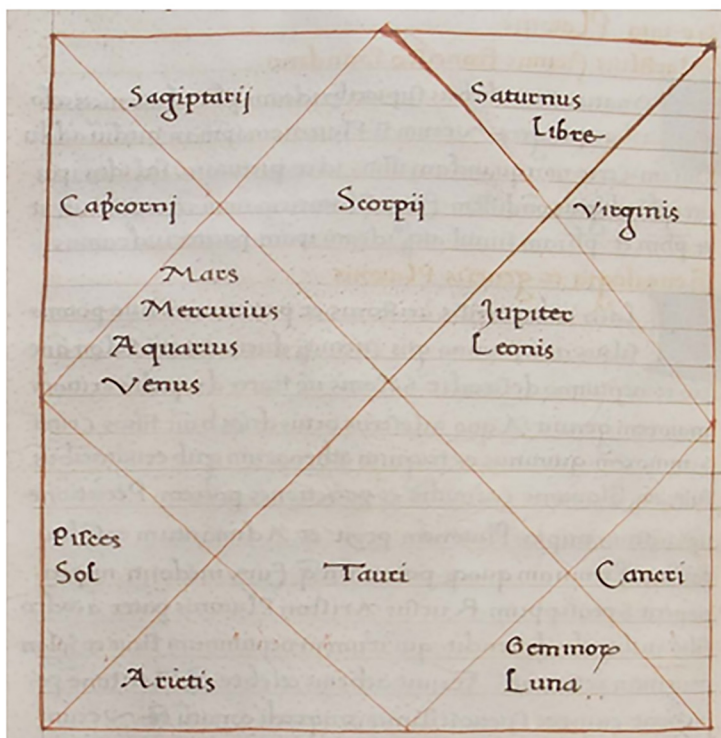


Fig. 2. Plato's horoscope (G1, 151^v)

⁸Ficino (2001), 8–13.

⁹Plato (1546), 1128–1130.



According to his allegory of Platonic philosophy, it was Plato who really “won” the hand of Philosophia and adorned her with presents as the lover does his loved one. Philosophy became religion and poetry together under the hand of Plato. He created an attractive and admirable goddess with noble clothes and fragrant perfume from a once characterless lady. After all, who can resist Philosophia? But it seems that this lady – just as in a tale – could not confine herself to the area of the Academy and she might also have been lecherous. In any case, she – as opposed to her mother – was not pure. Outside the confining walls of the Academy she fell into the hands of every kind of mob who tore off her dress, violated and sullied her.

She lost her dignity, even her fine fragrance. The attribute *prophana* applied to Philosophia does not only refer to the loss of sacredness, but it also degrades the goddess to a commonly used “object”. The “lost honour” of Philosophia comes from a relevant, if strange, story which is told by Plotinus. This story is about the soul, rather than about Philosophia. The soul turns away from God as Philosophia also turned away from Him when she walked out of the groves of the Academy. “The soul in its nature loves God and longs to be at one with Him in the noble love of a daughter for a noble father; but coming to human birth and lured by the courtships of this sphere, she takes up with another love, a mortal, leaves her father and falls. But one day coming to hate her shame, she puts away the evil of earth, once more seeks the father, and finds her peace.” (Plotinus, *Enneades*: 6.9.9, tr. by T. S. Mackenna and B. S. Page.)

THE AUTHOR

Two letters connected to Ioannes have survived in Ficino’s book of letters. These letters were first published by József Koller in 1796 as part of the poet Janus Pannonius’ correspondence.¹⁰ In 1859, even Galeotti deemed the bishop of Pécs to be behind the name of Ioannes Pannonius. At the beginning of the 20th century, Della Torre – similarly to Giuseppe Saitta two decades later – did not deal with the person of Ioannes, because they probably believed him to be identical with Janus Pannonius, the bishop of Pécs.¹¹ Generally the sparse literature until that time had rather been concerned with the chronology of Ficino’s works listed in the letter than with the identity of the addressee. Finally in 1923, József Huszti pointed out the obvious problem that the bishop of Pécs had been dead for more than a decade by 1485 when the unknown Ioannes sent his letter to Ficino. Huszti could not successfully identify him: “Despite all of my efforts through my research, I cannot determine his age, his position, his family etc. in an acceptable way.”¹² Since then, three hypotheses have been born which have tried to identify the unknown Hungarian disputer.¹³

The first is Florio Bánfi’s paper from 1968, which identified Ficino’s correspondent with an Augustinian monk, a certain Joannes Varadiensis (John of Várád) who lived in Buda.¹⁴ Building on a few fragmentary pieces of data and Ficino’s translation of *Corpus Hermeticum* in 1463, Bánfi created an amazingly detailed and romantically readable biography according to which Ioannes Pannonius befriended Ficino at the school desk. This is a nice story, but there is

¹⁰Koller (1796), 219–223.

¹¹Galeotti (1859), 44; Della Torre (1902), 544; Saitta (1923), 8.

¹²Huszti (1925), 64–65.

¹³Kőszeghy (2011), 168–173.

¹⁴Bánfi (1968), 193–200.



absolutely no evidence for it. However, Endre Veress, Sándor Tonk and Sebastiano Gentile all accepted Bánfi's entirely unfounded hypothesis. Michael J. B. Allen did not take a position on this question and despite his argument based on an Augustinian analysis of Pannonius' letter, he did not identify the author with the Augustinian Joannes Varadiensis. Nevertheless Valery Rees – referencing Allen only – thinks that this identification is the most acceptable of all.¹⁵ However, it is not at all inconceivable that if he was a clergyman, he would be a Dominican who studied in Florence.

In her study in 1999, Klára Pajorin drew attention to the unfounded points in Bánfi's text (and the untenability of the entire hypothesis), arguing instead that Ioannes Pannonius was in fact Johannes Vitéz Jr.¹⁶ Pajorin's argument is much more convincing than Bánfi's because it is based on firmer biographical information. But according to Péter Kőszeghy, the known biographical data about Vitéz Jr. do not coincide with the date April 1485 in their exchange of letters,¹⁷ because while Ioannes clearly wrote that he had read Ficino's works in Buda, Vitéz Jr. had been staying as an envoy in Rome for years by this time.

It is worth considering two questions which arise regarding the person of Vitéz Jr. The first relates to his studies in Florence, which – contrary to his studies in Bologna and Padua – is not referred to in any document.¹⁸ According to Pajorin, based on Galeotto Marzio's statement that Vitéz Jr. was his disciple, and a biographical datum which shows that Galeotto was not staying in Italy between 1461 and 1463, Vitéz Jr. could have studied in Florence at this time. Moreover, this information fits perfectly with the date of the translation of Hermes Trismegistus mentioned in the letter. But why would the wealthy Vitéz Jr. have studied in the relatively unremarkable Studio Fiorentino?

It is true that some prominent teachers – such as Cristoforo Landino or John Argyropoulos – taught at Studio Fiorentino during these years, but the standard of elementary education in Latin, indeed of the education in general, was low, and the teachers were not particularly distinguished. Of course, in spite of all of this, Vitéz Jr. could have studied in Florence, but his Florentine studies should be treated with suspicion until some corroborating document – or at least some faint reference of it – is found.

The other possible problem with the person of Vitéz Jr. is the form of his address in the letter. In all of the 12 volumes of his *Book of Letters*, Ficino always refers to the office of his addressee (e. g. "Marsilius Ficinus Florentinus Ioanni Pannonio episcopo Quinqueecclesiensi") but in this case, he merely writes „Marsilius Ficinus Ioanni Pannonio”. The following table lists all the high-ranking clergymen to whom Ficino wrote a letter and who appeared in his book of letters. He indicates the ecclesiastical rank of his twenty-one correspondents for each of the sixty letters:

¹⁵Veress (1941), 322–323; Tonk (1979), 259, no. 1028; Gentile (1994), 109; Rees (1999), 73. Lásd még: Kőszeghy (2011), 168–170; Allen (1998).

¹⁶Pajorin (1999), 60–62. Lásd még: Kőszeghy (2011), 168–170.

¹⁷The date of April, 1485: Kristeller (1973), I, CLVII–CLVIII.

¹⁸His studies in Bologna can be deduced only based on Galeotto Marzio's two words, according to which Vitéz Jr. was his former disciple and housemate (*fuert olim Galeotti discipulus et contubernalis*). Martius Narniensis (1934), 26 (cap. 27). If this is true – Fraknói and Veress think so – then his studies could have been before the conspiracy against King Matthias, some time between 1463 and 1465, when Galeotto was the rhetoric teacher at the University of Bologna. Fraknói (1899), 291. Veress (1941), 46. However his name appeared in the matriculation registers of Padua between January 14, 1467 and May 23, 1468 where he obtained a master's degree in canon law. Veress (1915), 13–14.



Ecclesiastical addressees of Ficino's letters	Pages (Ficino, 1576)
Bessarion, Cardinal of Sabina	616
[Giovanni Antonio] Campano, Bishop of [Crotone]	640
Mariano [Salvini], Bishop of Cortona	643
Francesco Salviati, Archbishop of Pisa	649, 743, 800
Antonio degli Agli, Bishop of Volterra	660, 729
Giovanni Nicolino, Archbishop of Amalfi	668, 804, 811, 815, 816, 855
Francesco [Todeschini Piccolomini], Cardinal of Siena	670, 791, 792
Miklós, Bishop of Vác Báthori Miklós, Bishop of Vác	688, 782, 884
Francesco Soderini, Bishop of Volterra	830, 833, 910, 914, 930, 931, 954, 956
Pietro Placentino, apostolic commissioner	726
Rinaldo [Orsini], Archbishop of Florence	726
Giacomo [Ammannati Piccolomini], Cardinal of Pavia	745, 746
Raffaele Riario, Cardinal of San Giorgio [in Velabro in Rome] Raffaele Riario, Cardinal Riario, Cardinal Raffaele Riario, Cardinal of San Giorgio	795, 795, 798, 802, 811, 829, 925, 926
Giovanni d' Aragona, Cardinal	812, 816
Gentile [de' Becchi], Bishop of Arezzo	833, 915
Matteo Forlivenso, pontifical commissioner	861
Marco [Barbo] di Venezia, Cardinal of San Marco	874, 875, 883, 892, 911
Giovanni de' Medici, Cardinal of [Santa Maria di Domnica]	897, 898, 930
Rinaldo Orsini, Archbishop of Florence	911
Ermolao Barbaro, Patriarch of Aquileia	920
Giacopo Rondono, Bishop of Rimini	956

In the table above it is important to point out Ermolao Barbaro's letter dated March 12, 1492.¹⁹ Ermolao received this dignity in March of 1491, therefore Ficino had not called him "patriarch" in the seven letters addressed to him earlier.

¹⁹Ficino (1576), 920.



However, in the table below, there are two addressees who had not yet won their ecclesiastical rank at the time of the writing of the letters and, naturally, Ficino did not refer to this:²⁰

Addressees of the letter	Pages (Ficino, 1576)	Date of the writing of the letter	Ecclesiastical rank
Bernardo Dovizi [da Bibbiena]	912 913	1490 Oct 25, 1490	Cardinal, Santa Maria in Portico: Sept 23, 1513
Baccio Ugolino	951	June 15, 1493	Bishop, Gaeta: Aug 24, 1494

After these points, the question is why Ficino did not refer to Vitéz Jr.’s high ecclesiastical office rank, the bishopric of Szerém, which was a title he had already taken up in 1481. It can be reasonably presumed that Ficino would have noted this. Consequently, we must find somebody who held a low ecclesiastical rank, or who was not a clergyman at all (e. g. an officer in the Royal Chancellery). Based on the text of the letter, modern scholars generally suspect a clergyman behind the name. Perhaps Ficino did not consider it important to indicate the lower ecclesiastical ranks in his correspondences, but he was consistent in this, too. This is shown in the following table (“Y” marks cases where he referred to the office; “N” marks cases where he did not refer to it):²¹

²⁰Regarding this, it is also worth mentioning those four letters where ecclesiastical rank can not be found. One of these is the letter: *Marsilius Ficinus Francisco Salviato* (Ficino, 1576, 667). In the second letter Ficino did not refer to Soderini’s Bishopric dignity but in the third letter, he indicated Soderini’s law degree: *Francisco Sodorino Iuriscivilis peritissimo* (Ficino, 1576, 672, 798). And finally the fourth letter was also addressed to Raffaele Riario without any rank (Ficino, 1576, 800). Among these, the two letters to Soderini are also the evidence that Ficino was not only aware of the Church appointments of his correspondents but he also referenced them in his letters. Soderini was appointed the bishop of Volterra only on March 11 of 1478. The letter (Ficino, 1576, 672) was dated before 1476, while the letter (Ficino, 1576, 798) was written just before his appointment, because Ficino’s fifth book of letters (which includes this too) consists of his letters between Sept. of 1477 and Apr. of 1478. As it can be seen in the table above, Ficino always mentions Soderini’s episcopal rank in the other eight letters. Francesco Salviati’s letter has no date (Ficino, 1576, 667). Ficino’s first book of letters includes the letters between 1457 and 1476, but he rearranged them. For this reason, it is not certain that the date of the writing of the letters can be determined based on the present place of the letters in the book. A good example of this is Salviati’s letter shown in the table above, where he was already called “archbishop of Pisa” (Ficino, 1576, 649). Salviati received this ecclesiastical rank on Oct. 14 of 1474, thus the (Ficino, 1576, 649) could be written only after this date. Three letters before (Ficino, 1576, 648), is dated Oct. 10, 1474. So this fits with the letter (Ficino, 1576, 649) dated Oct. 14, which was written after Salviati’s Archiepiscopal appointment. Furthermore, although the letter (Ficino, 1576, 660) dated Apr. 28 of 1474 was written around five months earlier than the letter (Ficino, 1576, 648), this is placed in a later page of Ficino’s book of letters. It is therefore conceivable that the letter (Ficino, 1576, 667) without the Archiepiscopal address was written sometime before his appointment. The letter (Ficino, 1576, 800) was addressed “Raphaeli Riario & Francisco Salviato Archiepiscopo Pisano” by Ficino. This can be found in the fifth book of letters. Since this book includes the letters dated from Sept. of 1477, it is imaginable that Ficino wrote this before the Cardinal appointment of Riario on Dec. 12, 1477 (at that time the other addressee, Salviati, had long been the archbishop of Pisa).

²¹I could not track down when Francesco Marescalco and Roberto Salviati did exactly obtain their church offices. The only individual who was certainly a canon at the time of the letter’s writing was Domenico Galletti. However, Galletti was Ficino’s friend from his youth and perhaps Ficino did not consider it necessary to indicate his canonical dignity.



Addressees of the letter	Pages (Ficino, 1576)	Ecclesiastical status	
Michele Mercati	609	monk	Y
Gregorio Epiphanio	616	priest	Y
Ricciardo Angiolieri	643	priest	Y
Francesco Marescalco	644, 738, 776	canon	N
Paolo Orlandini (Florentino)	737	priest	Y
Domenico Galletti	751, 828	canon	N
Roberto Salviati	902	priest	N
Georgius Herivart	924	monk	Y

According to the third hypothesis, Ioannes Pannonius was Ficino’s fictional alter ego which he had fabricated in order to defend himself and his philosophy in Florence – a place increasingly coming under the influence of Savonarola. Valery Rees first suggested the possibility that Ficino in his book of letters played with the alter-ego of the former bishop of Pécs or another fictitious persona, against whose letter he could defend himself publicly. The editors of the English translation of the letters also accepted this hypothesis and most recently Péter Kőszeghy lent it considerable supported it finishing his paper with the words, “such an illustrious personage, even if he had never existed, deserved to have been forged”.²²

Nevertheless it is more probable that Ioannes was a real person. The first argument against Ficino’s exploitation of Janus Pannonius’ fame is the fact that he called the bishop of Pécs “Janus” but his correspondent “Ioannes”. As an aside to how pivotal the study of Greek and Latin can be in our identification of Ioannes Pannonius, the same sounds strange in a letter to a fictitious person. In cases of forgery, it is most practical to give the least amount of specific information through which the fiction can be tracked down. However the Greek and Latin courses over years of study may disclose too much falsifiable detail and, furthermore, Buda did not seem to be a distant, exotic town from Florence in the 15th century. Therefore it would have been obvious to the contemporaries that it was a work of fiction. The argument whereby nobody has ever seen the autograph letter by Ioannes Pannonius is not conclusive,²³ either, because there have been hardly any surviving original letters which were addressed to Ficino. (For example, there is no trace of the letter in which Báthori and Bandini asked him to go to Buda.) In any case, it is worth noting that – besides the case of Ioannes Pannonius – none of the nine individuals to whom letters are attributed in the twelve volumes of Ficino’s *Book of letters* (see the table below) are fictitious. This raises the question why Ioannes alone would be fictitious?

²²Rees (1999), 73 (n.15); Ficino (2003), 200–201. See also: Kőszeghy (2011), 172–173.

²³Kőszeghy (2011), 172.



Addressees of the letters	Pages (Ficino, 1576)
Ioannes Pannonius	871
Cosimo de' Medici	608
Cardinal Bessarion	616
Lorenzo de' Medici	620, 621, 622, s647
Carlo Marsuppini	638
Francesco Todeschini Piccolomini (III. Pius)	670
Giovanni Cavalcanti	732
Pico della Mirandola	889
Ermolao Barbaro	912
Georgius Herivart	924

After these arguments, it seems more probable that the mysterious Ioannes is not a work of fiction, but a real person. His letter to Ficino may help to fill out Ioannes Pannonius' "biography" with some possible information. Huszti and Kristeller's hypothesis on the date of the writing of the letter fits perfectly with the *Theologia platonica* and the 1484 edition of Plato's *Opera omnia* mentioned in the letter.

The two most important starting points for a possible "biography" are the dates of the works listed in the letter and the reference to the two astrologers. First we shall examine the latter. In general, modern scholars suspect Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli (1397–1482) and Mengo Bianchelli da Faenza (kb. 1440–1520?) to be behind the reference to the astrologers.²⁴ Ficino was good friends with them and he also referred to them in *Disputatio contra iudicium astrologorum*,²⁵ Furthermore, Paolo dal Pozzo also appears in his commentary of Plotinus and Mengo Bianchelli in *De vita* (III.18). The mathematician and cosmographer Paolo dal Pozzo is the best known among them. He was a central figure of the cultural life of 15th-century Florence and was a friend – among others – of Alberti, Brunelleschi, Cusanus, Pletho and Pope Nicholas V. There is less information about Mengo Bianchelli, but it is certain that he lived in Florence in the first half of the 1460s, before he became a professor in Pisa and Ferrara. His fame was based mainly on his status as a physician. Perhaps traces of Ioannes may be found in the sources referring to Paolo dal Pozzo, because it seems that the unknown Hungarian correspondent had contact with the latter at the time in question. If we can believe him, it was from them that Ioannes first heard about the astrological calculations based on which Ficino wanted to resurrect ancient philosophies.

In this respect, the text of the letter hides important chronological details. The astrologers tried to prove the truth of their statements through an enumeration of all the ancient works which were translated by Ficino based on the appropriate positions of the stars. The letter

²⁴Ficino (2003), 111 (n.5).

²⁵Ficino (1576), 781.



includes these translated works in chronological order: songs for ancient *cythara*,²⁶ Orphic hymns, the translation of Hermes Trismegistus, some Pythagorean works and finally the hymns of Zoroaster. Although according to the letter it seems that Ioannes knew these works only from hearsay, their dates – if he recalled them correctly after twenty years – can reveal something about his stay in Florence. The first clue is the mention of the Orphic hymns as a kind of *terminus post quem* because this translation can be relatively well dated. According to Ioannes' words, he arrived after this translation was finished, that is after Sept 4, 1462 (or at least it was after this date that he could speak with the astrologers).²⁷ Whilst merely a presumption, if it is true, it would be logical for him to have stayed in Florence from the October of 1462 onwards, because the autumn semesters there lasted from October until July. The other possibility is that Ioannes arrived after the translation of all the aforementioned works was complete, because the astrologers revealed Ficino's attraction to the constellations of the stars with these translations. In this case, Ioannes might have arrived after the April of 1463, the date of Ficino's translation of Hermes Trismegistus.

But how long did he stay in the city? Ioannes writes that before he returned from Florence (*et antequam Florentia huc redirem*), Ficino had begun his translation of Plato.²⁸ All we know about this is that Ficino started work on this text after his translation of Hermes Trismegistus (finished in April of 1463)²⁹ and that he read a portion of the text to Cosimo, who died on August 1, 1464. This date is of key importance regarding the time of Ioannes' return to Hungary, but the above mentioned translation of Pythagorean works and the Oxford codex, referred to by Kristeller as O2, are also important.³⁰ The following Pythagorean works may be considered, having been completed before the translation of Plato: *Aurea verba*, *Symbola*, Iamblichus' work about the Pythagoreans (*Iamblichi de secta Pythagorica libri IV*) and a Pythagorean mathematical treatise by Theon of Smyrna (*Theonis Smyrnaei de locis mathematicis*). Although Della Torre obviously saw these as the Pythagorean works which Ficino refers to,³¹ according to Kristeller all we can safely declare is that these works were finished before 1474.³² However, in the aforementioned Oxford codex two works, *Aurea verba* and *Symbola*, appear together with the translation of the ten Platonic dialogues which Ficino dedicated to Cosimo. The latter – and this is almost certain – must have been still alive at the time of the writing of this codex because there are no signs of or references to his death in the manuscript.³³ This implies that at least these two translations must have been finished before August 1464 (but after April 1463). Therefore Ioannes' stay in Florence is most likely to have taken place between October of 1462, or April of 1463 (or the latest starting month of the autumn semester: October of 1463) and July of 1464.

²⁶The writer of the letter might be referring to the hymns of Proclus. See Kristeller (1973), I, CXLV, no. XXXIII.

²⁷See Kristeller (1973), I, CXLIV–CXLV, no. XXXII; II, 87–88.

²⁸Ficino (1495): „Mox et Mercurium Trismegistum antiquissimum traduxisti et Pythagorica multa. Item carmina Zoroastris explanavisti et antequam Florentia huc redirem transferendo Platoni manum iniiceras, iisdem (ut equidem suspicor) astronomicis auspiciis.”

²⁹Ficino (1576), 1836. See also: Kristeller (1973), I, XV, no. L 31.

³⁰Bodleian Library, Canonicianus latinus 163. Kristeller (1973), I, XXXVII.

³¹Della Torre (1902), 544.

³²Kristeller (1973), I, CXLV–CXLVI, CXLVI–CXLVII.

³³Kristeller (1973), I, CXXXVIII–CXXXIX, XXXVII.



To sum up, although Ioannes Pannonius's identity has still not been successfully established, the following things are known about him: based on the date of his Florentine studies, he might have been born around 1440. His identification as János Váradi is false, and although Pajorin's hypothesis of János Vitéz Jr. is much more plausible, there are at least as many arguments against this assumption as there are for it. Nevertheless, what is least likely is that he was an invention of Ficino's. The most probable scenario is that behind the name hides a lower-ranking clergyman or even a poem-loving, literate chancery official. His identification as an Augustinian monk is not convincing, because due to his Florentine studies he could just as easily have been a Dominican. His dwelling in Florence had to be between October of 1462 at the earliest and July of 1464. His Platonic readings can be deduced from the two letters. Based on the date of the letters, the earliest possible time of his death can be determined. If the date proposed by Huszti and Kristeller is accepted, he died some time after late 1484. However, questions surrounding this date can shift the earliest time of his death to after January of 1486, or – according to Kőszeghy's arguments – even up to 1487–1488. Finally, we may also conclude that their correspondence may indeed be the first known public philosophical debate in Hungarian intellectual history.

NOTE

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