

The novelty of Sámuel Domby's medical dissertation

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

Sámuel Domby of Gálfalva (1729–1807) defended his doctoral dissertation *De vino Tokaiensi* at the University of Utrecht in 1758, and it was published in the same year. Domby was not the first medical student to write about the curative effects of the Tokaj-Hegyalja wines, but his book is really considered unique because he summarised and in many ways also exceeded the knowledge of earlier authors on the subject. He not only communicated what was known about the wines of Tokaj-Hegyalja, but also demonstrated through a series of medical, meteorological observations and chemical experiments why these wines were so excellent, what effects they had on a healthy human body and what ailments could be effectively treated by drinking them. In many respects, his work has stood the test of time: for instance his observations on the importance of terroir and the protection of origin are still worth considering today.

KEYWORDS

Sámuel Domby, Tokaj, wine, Early Modern medicine, iatrochemistry, iatromechanics

Sámuel Domby of Gálfalva (1729–1807) defended his doctoral thesis at the University of Utrecht in 1758 and the dissertation *De vino Tokaiensi* was published in the same year.¹ This volume is an important contemporary historical document as it shows in a very clear way how philosophical and scientific knowledge changed from the second half of the 17th century to the middle of

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¹Domby (1758). This study is based on my earlier, more detailed essay which was published in 2022. See N. Kis (2022).

the 18th century, and how the type of medicine that serves as the basis of today's research was developed.

For centuries, thinking, and thus university studies were determined by the scholastic tradition, the revision of which was given a definite direction by the work of René Descartes (1596–1650). His rationalist philosophy was of exceptional importance for *medicina* to become a truly independent discipline, independent of theology. Following Descartes, the *ratio et experimentia* emphasized in Dombó's preface became a basic requirement. Scientific results now had to be verifiable by empirical observations and experiments; it became acceptable, even expected, to be in disputation with previous authors and findings. They were fond of breaking down observed phenomena and problems into sub-elements in order to draw scientifically sound, rational, complex conclusions by recognising the various regularities. This is also the guiding thread of Dombó's dissertation, in which the first three chapters (geographical, meteorological, botanical and chemical knowledge) essentially serve to prove the findings of the last two (the effects of Tokay wines on healthy and sick bodies). In medicine, interdisciplinarity had become particularly accepted; Dombó is also a good example of this, as he discussed the reasons for the beneficial health effects of Tokay wine using results from a number of disciplines.

The 17th century has an extremely rich heritage of scientific discoveries, and was also the age of the emergence of vital research instruments such as the microscope.² Armed with such an intellectual arsenal, the medical scholars of the 18th century carried out their research on the functioning of the human body, on ways to maintain its health and on curing diseases by applying these results and thinking further.³ Theoretical medicine was accompanied by clinical medicine, of which Hermann Boerhaave (1668–1738), cited by Dombó, was one of the earliest exponents; the diagnosis of diseases was increasingly based on anamnesis and symptomatology, with the aim of achieving precision.

Cross-border, science-based surveillance of certain epidemics, such as the plague, dysentery or typhoid fever, which was also affecting our country, had become increasingly urgent. All the more so because wars and droughts had already decimated the population, but it was the only way to hope to control the pandemics that followed.⁴ At the forefront of the publication of these observations were the scientific journals, initially foreign, which were also read by Hungarian scholars, and which excelled in publishing various natural scientific results, knowledge and even statistical publications.⁵ Since these types of studies and smaller announcements were also sent for publication from the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary, domestic events (be they meteorological or infectious) could also become part of the scientific community's thinking; and the factual material of such announcements was also incorporated by Dombó in his dissertation.

As regards Samuel Dombó's higher education, there is very little information available. Contemporary biographers such as Elek Horányi (1736–1809) or István Weszprémi (1723–1799) did not discuss this topic.^{6,7} Ágnes Gyárfás only mentioned that she spent her

²Birtalan (2014), 25.

³Kapronczay (2007), 15.

⁴Like the one in 1718 reported by Raymann, cited by Dombó. See. Raymann (1720).

⁵Daniel Fischer designed a similar one in our country, see. Tarnai (1956). Schultheisz (2006), 227–231.

⁶Horányi (1775), 526.

⁷Weszprémi (1778).



university years in Utrecht, where he had also obtained her doctorate.⁸ In her study of the chief physicians of Borsod County, Éva Gyulai dealt with his practice and the volumes published under his name, but not with Dombó's academic studies.⁹

The enrolment registry of the Calvinist College of Sárospatak does not include his name, but a catalogue of the college in the Manuscript Archives reveals that Dombó was in fact a student at Sárospatak: after finishing his secondary school studies he enrolled in the academic section of the college on 22 March 1746.¹⁰ This manuscript enrolment registry contains the names of students in higher education at Patak, referred to as "tógátus" based on their clothing, covering the years from 1700 to 1831, but this section of the volume is certainly a copy of an earlier manuscript, since it also indicates Dombó's occupation as chief physician (*Physicae Com. Borsod.*), which he held between 1761 and 1779.¹¹

Following his studies at Patak, Dombó embarked on a peregrination that lasted several years. He alluded to this in the preface to his dissertation when he noted that he had lived among Germans and Bavarians before completing his university studies. According to the surviving university registers, he was officially enrolled in two foreign universities: he was admitted to Frankfurt an der Oder on 13 May 1754 and to Utrecht on 10 April 1756, where he defended his doctoral thesis exactly two years after his enrolment, on 10 April 1758.^{12,13}

Frankfurt University represented the Lutheran branch of the Reformation and was a popular institution among Hungarian students, especially those from Upper Hungary and Transylvania. According to his civil status record, Dombó studied theology and medicine here.¹⁴ The University of Utrecht was extremely popular with medical students; according to the entry on the institution's register, Dombó only studied medicine there.¹⁵

In his thesis Dombó also referred to a stay in Bavaria. There were four universities in the area at the time, but three of them (Würzburg, Bamberg and Ingolstadt) were under Catholic authority; the only university in Bavaria where he could continue his higher education was the Protestant university of Erlangen. Hungarian students began to visit here in greater numbers after 1756 when the Seven Years' War made the North German territories no longer safe for them.¹⁶ Armed with such an intellectual arsenal, the medical scientists of the 18th century carried out their research on the functioning of the human body, on ways to maintaining its health and curing diseases by applying these results and thinking further.

He also gave the reason for his leave from Frankfurt in his dissertation: although he had already completed a medical dissertation on a similar topic (*dissertatio circularis*) in preparation for his university dissertation (*dissertatio inauguralis*), the "fierce battle of Mars", by which he

⁸Gyárfás (1983), 80.

⁹Gyulai (2017).

¹⁰*Catalogus Studiosorum - Series Togatorum A. 1700-1831*, 21. See. Manuscript Collection of the Reformed College of Sárospatak, Kt.3224. See. TAR (2004), 96.

¹¹Gyulai (2017), 103.

¹²Tar (2004), 96.

¹³Bozzay and Ladányi (2007), 155.

¹⁴Tar (2004), 96.

¹⁵Bozzay and Ladányi (2007), 121.

¹⁶Tar (2004), 73.



must have meant the armed conflicts of the Seven Years' War in and around Berlin, eventually caused him to leave Frankfurt.

Although there is, again, no record of official enrolment in the registers, Dombó indicated in a letter to Károly Eszterházy, Bishop of Eger, in 1775 that he had also attended lectures at the University of Leiden. In this manuscript Dombó, writing about the excellence of the gold of Körmöcbánya (Kremnica, Sk), noted that "*Muschenbroch, in the famous Physicus Leyda Universitas, tried gold before us, and found it [that from Körmöcbánya] the best, even better than Indian gold.*"¹⁷ Pieter van Musschenbroek (1692–1761) was professor of mathematics and physics at the University of Leiden from 1739, and it is recalled that he attended his lectures. In this respect, Dombó's situation is not unique, as other peregrines have had their presence not officially recorded, but have attended training.¹⁸

To complete their university studies and obtain a degree, the candidate had to take part in a public debate and submit a written dissertation (*dissertatio inauguralis*).¹⁹ Some of these dissertations merely contained the theses handed out on the spot, but most of them – including in Dombó's case – actually contained the dissertation. The structure of the dissertations published in print followed roughly the same layout: the title page included the name of the author, the title of the dissertation, the title of the subject (in this case physico-chemico-medical), the defence, the place and date of the thesis and the data concerning the printing of the volume. This was followed by the recommendations, the preface, the dissertation itself and finally the theses.²⁰ Dombó's treatise differs from this scheme in that it does not include the theses. Instead he inserted a kind of collection of axioms into the volume under the title *Adnexa varia*. This contains twenty-six different findings which are not related to the subject of the dissertation, but reflect the author's modern, critical approach to medicine. The items include botanical and anatomical findings, followed by topics such as practical medicine, fever, epilepsy, pregnancy and childbirth, and finally medicine and the medical mentality in general. The *A. varia* is followed by two farewell poems (*propemptikon*), and finally the *Errata*, which lists printing errors. The *propemptikon* were written by the new doctor's friends Daniel Paksi Szathmári (1769–1818), who was studying at the University of Franeker, and Peter Pétsi, who graduated from Utrecht in the same year.

Compared to the customs of the time, the 49-page dissertation is made up of five chapters, which are divided into a total of 26 subsections. What makes the thesis particularly unique is that Dombó did not choose a convenient and safe theoretical topic, nor was he satisfied with summarizing previous experiments and observations. He proudly undertook the novel choice of topic, as no doctoral dissertation with a monographic focus, exclusively on the medicinal properties of the Tokay, had been written previously. In 1715, János Péter Komáromy (1692–1761) had submitted a doctoral thesis on the medicinal properties of wine from Sopron, with special reference to the characteristics of the Tokay, thus paving the way for foreign experiments on the medicinal use of these wines.²¹ The health benefits of the Tokay, especially since

¹⁷Bakos (1960), 533–534. Cf. Archdiocesan Archives, Eger, Arch.Vet.3269.

¹⁸Bozzay (2009), 183.

¹⁹Bozzay (2009), 182–183.

²⁰Kovács (2019), 68–70.

²¹Komáromy (1715).



Komáromy's dissertation, had attracted the interest of scholars even beyond Hungary's borders. In 1721, Johann Melchior Welsch (1697–1742) of Nördlingen defended his doctoral thesis *De vini Hungarici excellentie natura virtute et usu* under the chairmanship of the famous professor Friderich Hoffmann (1660–1742) of the University of Halle.²² Its text was later published several times in the Hoffmann oeuvre under his authorship:²³ thus it appeared in 1739 in the *Opuscula medica varii argumenti*²⁴ and in 1740 in the fifth volume of the *Opera Omnia* and.²⁵ Dombó used the *O. medica varii argumenti* when writing his dissertation, attributing the text to Hoffmann.

Looking at the author's references, it may be noticed that the findings of Friedrich Hoffmann (actually mostly Welsch) and the chemist-pharmacist Caspar Neumann (1683–1737) served as a kind of guiding thread for the thesis as a whole; but this was not a slavish adoption.²⁶ The first chapter gives an account of the name of the Tokay, the extent of the wine region and its geography, clarifying previous knowledge in several cases, for example, the geographical extent of the wine region. It is also where the author describes the ever graver problem of wine fraud which was having a negative impact on the image of the region. Tokaj-Hegyalja was the first region in the world to become a closed wine region, but even so, there have been various ongoing practices to set higher market prices on wines of poorer vintages both at home and abroad. The author also lists these: in addition to selling wine from other domestic wine regions as Tokay, in case of a worse vintage fraudulent wine-sellers would sell the beverage sweetened with foreign light beer, wine from Lower Hungary or Spanish *aszú*, or the use of sugar and cooking.

The second chapter takes into account the different types of grape and wine, focusing on the natural scientific investigation of the reasons why wines that are grown and produced in this region have such excellent texture, flavor and colour. Hoffmann (i.e. Welsch) emphasized the role of geographical location, rainfall, soil, air and sunlight.²⁷ The basis of this explanation can be traced back to ancient Greek natural philosophy, according to which life is defined on the fundamental level by the four primal substances: earth, air, fire and water; and in the case of plants, this means the foursome of soil, air, sunshine and precipitation.²⁸ Of these, Hoffmann (i.e. Welsch) attributed the particular sweetness of wine primarily to the effect of sunlight, and linked its development to the condition of the free flow of various juices in the vineyard. The involuntary, continuous and free movement of these delicate juices, and thus clearly an understanding based on the so called *jatromechanic* tradition, also formed the essence of Hoffmann's theory. The reason why the Tokay is ultimately so healthy is that it contains pure, subtle, ethereal particles which, when they enter the plant, and pass from there into the wine and

²²Welsch (1721). Born into a family of physicians, he studied at the Universities of Jena and Halle, and in 1734 he became a city doctor in Nördlingen. For his life story, see Beyschlag (1803), 540.

²³Hoffmann (1722); Hoffmann (1736).

²⁴Hoffmann (1739).

²⁵Hoffmann (1740).

²⁶Since *De vini Hungarici* appeared under his name in two different publications in Hoffmann's oeuvre during the life of the professor in Halle, he presumably agreed with its findings.

²⁷Magyar (1996).

²⁸Magyar (1996), 231.



finally into the human digestive system and the blood and lymphatic circulation, ensure free flow, thus supporting the maintenance of health to a particularly powerful degree.

In a state of health, this circulation is undisturbed; while disease is caused by its disturbance (blockage, congestion, damage to these conduits). Domby did not dispute this, either, but he gave a much more complex explanation of the characteristics of the Hegyalja wines than anyone before him. For him, the high quality of the grapes produced in the Hegyalja region is no longer primarily due to sunshine, but to a delicate balance of climate (particularly the influence of sun and rainfall), location (such as the geological composition of the land, topography and altitude) and human factors (the diversity of the vine varieties planted). Essentially the same variables are nowadays referred to as *terroir* – so Domby's approach is also very modern in this respect.

As detailed and accurate as the author's description of the geographical conditions was in relation to the knowledge of the time, he was in equal measure imprecise in his listing of the typical vine varieties of Hegyalja. It is clear from the dissertation that he had accurate memories and observations of the local characteristics of the wine region, harvesting and fermentation (which is to be expected, since his family lived in Erdőbénye), but his inaccuracies about the types of grapes make it almost certain that his immediate environment was not involved in viticulture, as he only named five types of grapes. The grape which is called *augusztá* because of its ripening time is now known as *gohér*.²⁹ The grape known as the *white grape* because of the intense whiteness of its grapes and leaves is known as *albula*.³⁰ According to Domby, the *tumidula*, or *furmint*, contributes the most to the strength of the wine. Finally, among the less noble grapes, Domby mentioned *gemmea* which, because of its juiciness, is used to increase the quantity of must when mixed with other grapes; its Hungarian name was *Gyöngy-Fejér*.³¹

The third chapter of the dissertation is based on various chemical researches, on the basis of which Domby wanted to provide an additional explanation for the specifics of Hegyalja wines. This chapter shows most clearly which school of medicine Domby was committed to, regardless of the fact that he mostly quoted the iatromechanic Hoffmann (actually Welsch). Hoffmann and his circle emphasised the role of the disembodied, subtle *aether*, both in the ripening processes of the vineyards of Hegyalja and in the health benefits of wine. According to Hoffmann, the reason why the Tokaj is so healthy is that it contains a high level of the all-pervasive *aether*. The third chapter reveals that Domby also believed in the existence of some kind of incorporeal, all-pervasive substance that serves as a kind of catalyst for life functions, but he did not consider it to be the aether (he did not mention it, although it was the main point of Hoffmann's argument concerning Hegyalja wines), but emphasized the role of an equally immaterial force, the various *spirits*, among which he included one called *phlogiston*. The latter was a concept brought to life in the work of the main representatives of *chemiatic* medicine, Johann Joachim Becher (1635–1682) and specifically Georg Ernst Stahl (1659–1734).³²

Domby, referring to Neumann, considered that every wine had five components: essential oils (*oleosarum partium essentialium*), various salts (*salinae*), earth (*terra*) and water (*aqua*).

²⁹For its origins see. Balassa (1991), 121–123.

³⁰Jaenichen and Keler (1731), 273. Matolai (1744), 13. For its origins see Balassa (1991), 118–120. This is the *Kövérszőlő* which is being re-cultivated nowadays.

³¹Matolai (1744), 13. *Gemmea* is known as *Pearl grape* or *Pearl white*; it is no longer cultivated in the wine region.

³²Schultheisz (2013).



The last ingredient was a kind of disembodied material, the combustible spiritus or *phlogiston* or, as the author called it, *spirituum inflammabilium seu phlogistarum partium*.³³ These five components are roughly similar in the work of the English chemist Thomas Willis (1621–1675).³⁴ The quality of a wine, i.e. its physical and chemical characteristics, is determined by the quantity and quality of these components in relation to each other, but in the most excellent wines, such as the Hegyalja, *spiritus phlogiston* is found in outstanding quantities, as in *aeter*. The *spiritus* is also present in the whole world, like the *pneuma* of Galen or the *entelecheia* of Aristotle, it is also a kind of immaterial force that organises life; also called *spiritus universalis*, *spiritus mundi* or, in Stahl's terms, *anima*. The *phlogiston* was also a kind of spiritus in the sense of Domby and his contemporaries: a material that supports physiological processes by generating heat (and not by hydraulic phenomena in the Hoffmann sense). This is precisely why the basis for treating diseases is different in iatromechanic and chemiatic medicine: while the former focused on restoring the smooth flow of bodily fluids, the latter concentrated on strengthening the body by strengthening the *spiritus* that permeates each organ.

The more *flogistones* a substance has, the more alive it becomes. Distillation and, in particular, rectification (repeated distillation) were used to extract precisely this spirit from the wine, so that it could be used as a particularly valuable substance, primarily as a medicine, but also to improve wines of poorer vintages. As far as we know today, this is pure alcohol, but scholars of the time thought it was a much more important factor; hence the name *spiritus vini*, referring to its function as a spirit, and the name *aqua ardens*, referring to its combustibility.

In chapter four, Domby turns to a discussion of the effects of Tokay wine on a healthy body. This chapter reflects the influence of a contemporary medical movement, dietetics, which also originated with Hippocrates. Its explicit aim was to maintain health and to strengthen the resistance of the human body.³⁵ It is in this chapter that the transcendence of the Hoffmann approach is most evident. In Domby's dissertation, the concept of the *aether* as a kind of life-organising force involved in the functioning of the human body is no longer to be found. Domby applied his thesis on the differentiation of chemical constituents discussed in the previous chapter to his knowledge of medicine when he studied the health effects of the wines of Hegyalja. On this basis, he established that wines with higher acidity have a greater effect on the body and mind than those with more water; that sweeter wines are inherently better than sour ones; E that wines that have not yet been clarified and are still at the boiling point are unhealthy, and that, finally, and incorporating Hoffmann's principles, the most subtle wines, i.e. those containing the purest and finest ingredients, have the most excellent effects.

The physical benefits of more acidic wines are that they enhance digestion and elimination, increase heart rate and body temperature, strengthen blood vessels and generally strengthen and stimulate the lymphatic system. They also have a beneficial effect on the mind, as the author encouragingly put it, "*refreshing the mind worn out by overnight stay, relieving the troubled, lifting those weakened by sadness, and rendering all the faculties wonderfully vivid*."³⁶

³³Neumann (1735), 400–403.

³⁴Schultheisz (2013), 15–16; Magyar (2015), 13.

³⁵Kapronczay (2007), 17.

³⁶Domby (1758), 35.



In the final chapter of the dissertation, Dombó examined the medicinal properties of Tokay wine regarding various diseases. In the first subchapter, diseases specific to the Kingdom of Hungary (or predominantly present there) were examined; the first of these was *Porcellus Cassoviensis*, a disease with asthmatic symptoms, named after the characteristic swelling of the upper left side of the abdomen and the settlement where it was particularly common. The following names for nausea, *languor Pannonicus* and goitre are names for the same digestive disease. Dombó also included various arthritic diseases and gout. The best known typical domestic disease is Hungarian fever (*morbus Hungaricus*, *morbus Castrensis*, *febris Hungarica*), which was initially observed in camp conditions. Subsequent research revealed that the authors used different names, but mentioned similar symptoms when referring to typhoid fever, a rash that is practically present throughout Europe. In examining the medicinal properties of the Tokay, earlier authors made shorter, more general suggestions for its therapeutic use: it was mainly used as a digestive, a tonic and an anti-pneumonia agent. Komáromy was the first to write about the wider range of uses: he recommended the wines of Sopron and Tokaj against scurvy, stroke, epilepsy, fever, pneumonia and the plague, among other things.³⁷ Dombó summarised the therapeutic potential of these wines in a much more complex way: he described the pathology of the diseases in question, as well as the composition of the medicine and its effects on the human body, in order to ensure its safe use. It can also be observed that, in contrast to the chemiatic treatment of the disease, he used much gentler therapeutic suggestions (drinking the Tokay is still better for the patient than, for example, arsenic). According to Dombó, for many illnesses it is sufficient to consume only the wines of the Hegyalja region for therapeutic purposes or to use them externally, for example in the form of a wine poultice soaked in herbs.

Dombó's dissertation caught the attention of the scientific community. They praised the choice of topic, the excellence of the thesis, its interdisciplinarity; in several cases it was cited by foreign authors.^{38,39} Although Dombó returned home to his native country, he continued to correspond with a number of foreign scholars, which he reported on in later publications.⁴⁰

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³⁷Komáromy (1715), 26–40.

³⁸*Maendelyke...* (1758); *Bibliothèque...* (1759).

³⁹Plenck (1784); Anon. (1786); Rowley (1793); Grossinger (1797).

⁴⁰Gyárfás (1983), 86, 100–101.



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