

A Present-day Overview of Research at a 90-year-old University Institute

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Received: March 24, 2025 • Accepted: April 4, 2025

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ABSTRACT

The introduction to the present issue offers an overview of the list of professors and academics at the Ethnography Institute of the University of Budapest (the predecessor of the present Eötvös Loránd University), founded in 1934. The integration of teaching and research is fundamental to the concept of the university. Following a review of some of the most historically significant academic trends and endeavors, the author outlines the thematic diversity of the essays contained in this volume. At the same time, evidence of interconnection and mutual reflection can be discerned among the divergent present-day academic interests.

KEYWORDS

Eötvös Loránd University, Institute of Ethnography and Folklore, academics, research

The present issue contains studies by staff of the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore of Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), partly representing the main personal research interests of members of the institute and partly reflecting the current research profile of the institute as a whole.

The fact that ELTE's Institute of Ethnography celebrated its 90th anniversary in 2024 provides an excellent opportunity for such an overview. The University of Budapest appointed István Györffy as professor of ethnography in 1934 (PAPP 1985). This does not of course mean that ethnography-related subjects had not previously been part of humanities teaching at the university; they had simply been associated with other departments and disciplines (e.g., literature, history, German studies, etc.) (VOIGT 1995). Starting with István Györffy, teaching specifically for students of ethnography has been offered continuously over nine decades at the country's biggest university thanks to the work of nine professors (István Györffy, Károly

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Viski, Gyula Ortutay, István Tálasi, Tekla Dömötör, Vilmos Voigt, Attila Paládi-Kovács, Kincse Verebélyi, and Tamás Mohay) and dozens of lecturers (including, in addition to the professors in the Department of Material Ethnography, Tamás Hoffmann, Jenő Barabás, Tibor Bodrogi, Lajos Boglár, László K. Kovács, József Papp, Eszter Kisbán, Gyula Kocsis, Miklós Szilágyi, József Hála, János Bali, Zita Deáky, Ágnes Eitler, and Gabriella Vámos; as well as Imre Katona, Linda Dégh, Márton Istvánovits, Imola Küllös, Mihály Sárkány, Dániel Bárh, Kata Zsófia Vincze, Bernadett Smid, and Emese Ilyefalvi, long-term staff of the Department of Folklore).

As in any other university institute, the primary task of the Institute of Ethnography in Budapest is to provide teaching in this field of study, which, in turn, is inseparably and integrally linked to the academic research activities of its lecturers. A university institute without academic research would be meaningless. When it comes to the relationship between academic activity and teaching, a certain ambivalence emerges: while the interests of the academic community would best be served by profiling, specialization, and a project-based, collective approach, from the students' perspective the ideal would be diversity and the representation of different methodologies and academic viewpoints. The Budapest institute provides examples of both approaches. While there are convergent interests that can be organized into projects, the academics working here primarily pursue their own scholarly interests and individual research pathways.

A historical analysis of the institute and its two present-day departments makes this characteristic even more evident. Over the past hundred years or so, there have been many periods during which the work carried out in the institute has played a leading role in Hungarian ethnography as a whole. The most notable of these is the period after World War II, when the two most eminent professors of the 1950s and 1960s, Gyula Ortutay and István Tálasi, were not only influential, authoritative figures and the founders of schools but also held leading positions in the discipline. Under Ortutay's leadership, research focused primarily on text folkloristics, while under Tálasi, the focus shifted to historical ethnography. As was typical of the period, in order to eliminate professional "blind spots," professors more or less imposed subjects on their students, a practice that subsequently gave rise to substantial monographs and influential handbooks. From the 1970s, under the leadership of Tekla Dömötör and Vilmos Voigt, the Department of Folklore synthesized into a university textbook the specialist knowledge that formed the background to the curriculum (cf. VOIGT ed. 1998). In the 1980s, the Department of Material Ethnography, under the direction of Jenő Barabás and Attila Paládi-Kovács, endeavored to promote, among other things, the methodology of ethnographic mapping and historical ethnography. In recent decades — in keeping with the original concept of *universitas* — besides knowledge dissemination, many of the university teaching staff have simultaneously undertaken the most diverse creative academic activities, although a detailed presentation of these is beyond the scope of this brief introduction.

The essays in the current issue present the staff, the composition, and the research directions of the faculty as of 2024. (One of the full-time lecturers at the Department of Folklore is on long-term leave, thus neither their essay, nor their deputy's essay, have been included in the selection.) We are particularly delighted that Professor Emeritus Attila Paládi-Kovács has provided an informative overview of the history of the teaching of ethnography in Hungary before 1960, contextualizing the antecedents and the circumstances surrounding the founding of the department in Budapest. A fitting counterpart to his essay, and well worth reading, is the

comprehensive historical overview written by our other professor emeritus, Vilmos Voigt, published in an earlier issue of this journal (VOIGT 2004).

Now retired, having worked full-time at the institute for over a decade, Zita Deáky reviews the manifestations of child labor within and outside the family in a historical context in relation to the decades around the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. As a distinguished scholar of the social and cultural history of birth and childhood, she synthesizes her extensive source research with great assurance and sensitivity. Professor Tamás Mohay, who played a decisive role in the history of the institute during his decades as head of department and his twelve years as director, offers an insight into his field of research over several decades in his study on the Csíksomlyó (Șumuleu Ciuc) pilgrimage, which he recently summarized in a Hungarian-language monograph. The ethno-religious approach adopted in his analysis offers a valuable detour towards the concepts of “site of remembrance” and “national shrine.” An almost automatic thematic link emerges between this study and the essay by the current head of the Department of Material Ethnography, János Bali. The author, who recently published a book on national anthropology, explores the symbolic representational role of shepherd traditions in the constructed system of Hungarian national culture. Two young members of the department have contributed to the diversity of the volume by reflecting on their recently defended doctoral dissertations, which are currently being prepared for publication. In her theoretical-reflexive study, Ágnes Eitler interprets her ethnographic research experiences in the localities where she conducted her doctoral research on the phenomena of staged folk culture. Her essay also seeks possible answers to the collaborative potential between the “internal” intentions discernible in the field and the researcher’s “external” intentions. Gabriella Vámos, whose field of study is the social and cultural history of twentieth-century industrial labor, focuses in her essay on power-driven “cultured” forms of entertainment in the 1950s, primarily through an analysis of normative aspirations. For the latter, the critical analysis of the propaganda press is presented as a primary option.

Historical folkloristics is one of the Department of Folklore’s principal research profiles (cf. BARTH 2017). Bernadett Smid, who teaches Hispanics and folkloristics in the department, has been researching the historical sources and archival documents of early modern Iberian folk religion for many years. In her essay, she analyzes and contextualizes the treasure-hunting practices of a seventeenth-century hermit in Castile, providing a good example of church and secular manifestations of the magic of individual prosperity and the amalgamation of divination techniques. Dániel Báth is also devoted to historical folkloristics and historical anthropology and has carried out decades of archival research and analysis in an effort to integrate the questions raised by historical scholarship and ethnography/folkloristics. His essay in the present volume explores opinions related to religious amulets in the early nineteenth century by highlighting the different attitudes of parish priests in Bácska region. The text also reflects on a research project implemented in the department between 2018 and 2023, focusing on the intermediary role in culture and everyday life of priests in local communities in the 18th to 20th centuries. The essay by digital folklorist Emese Ilyefalvi combines the interest in magic of historical folkloristics with the latest research possibilities offered by the digital humanities, presenting opportunities for extended reading in relation to the Hungarian corpus of incantations.

Connections can nevertheless be discerned between these apparently disparate research directions, which are, of course, connected by a shared alma mater, the institute’s aspirations, and the researcher’s need to identify a methodological path. The last of these connections is valid for

specialists of both historical and contemporary subjects. In addition to essays, the book review section also contains evaluations of publications — mainly written by our alumni — that are connected to the institute and its academic staff. While our overview may not be complete, I am delighted to commend this issue, and the informative insight it offers, to anyone keen to learn about the current research directions, academic situation, and aspirations of a university institute of ethnography that has been operating continuously for nine decades.

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