

1st INTERNATIONAL BALKAN CONGRESS

I. ULUSLARARASI BALKAN KONGRESİ

24th - 26th September 2012 / 24 - 26 Eylül 2012

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Albanian and Turkish heroes in the Hungarian historical songs of the 16th century

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Abstract: The epic song (*históriás ének*) is the most prevalent and representative expression of the Hungarian poetry of the 16th century (rewritings of antique texts, short stories and novels written in verse). The whole corpus of these songs is composed by about 175 texts of different length and metrical structure: (1) *történeti énekek* (songs on historical events) further divided in *tudósító énekek* (songs on contemporary events) and *krónikás énekek* (chronicles), (2) *vallásos históriák* (religious songs, mostly rewritings of Bible stories) and (3) *széphistóriák* (romances). Among the epic songs concerning the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire we can find the history of the Albanian leader George Kastrioti Skanderbeg (in Turkish İskender Bey) by Miklós Bogáti Fazekas (1548–1598?) and the historical songs composed by Sebestyén Tinódi (1495–1556), Ihász Névtelene (Anonymus of Ihász), Névtelen Marosvásárhelyi (Anonymus of Târgu Mureș) and István Szőlősi (?–?) in which the main characters are Turkish heroes.

Keywords: Old Hungarian literature, epic, historical songs, Albanian and Turkish heroes

Miklós Bogáti Fazekas (1548–1598?) was an outstanding Hungarian schoolmaster and poet, who among others (according to the classification of the RPHA¹) wrote seven religious epic songs and seven concerning profane arguments. Among these, three deal with historical events: *Ötödik része Mátyás dolgainak* (1576, The fifth part of the deeds of King Matthias), followed by *Castriot György históriája* (1579, History of George Kastrioti Skanderbeg)² and *Demeter király históriája* (1598, History of King Demetrius).

In 1579 Bogáti stayed in Tötör (now in Romania, in the district of Cluj) as guest of the Unitarian Lord László Szalánczi, a rich landowner in the county of Hunyad. Bogáti completed here his *History of George Kastrioti Skanderbeg* in October as we can deduce it from the closing formula: «I wrote it in the week of Saint Gallo in Tötör / In fifteen hundred seventy nine.» (*Szent Gál hetében íram ezt Tötörben, / Ezeröttszázban és hetvenkilencben*).

¹ *A régi magyar vers számítógépes repertórium (Répertoire de la poésie hongroise ancienne – RPHA)*, edit. Iván HORVÁTH, Gabriella H. HUBERT, collaborators: Zsuzsa FONT, János HERNER, Etelka SZÖNYI, István VADAI, Gépeskönyv, ContentWare Labs, 2000, v. 5.0.5.

² Here I quote from the first edition: *A nagy Szkenderbégnek, kit Castriot György hercegnek hívtak, Epirusnak, Nagy Albániának és Macedóniának Urának csodálatos jeles vitézi dolgairól, két török Császárral, ki Görögország veszte után, csak egyedül állotta meg a törökök ellene Európában, Hunyadi János idejében* [On the marvelous and valorous deeds against two Turkish sultans of the great Skanderbeg, called George Kastrioti, Prince of Epirus, the great Albany and Macedonia, who after the fall of Greece alone in Europe resisted to the Turks at the time of John Hunyadi], Debrecemben Anno. XXXXVII, [recte: 1587]. A second edition appeared in Cluj in 1592.

The figure of Skanderbeg (1405–1468), defender of the Christianity, enjoyed a great popularity in the 15th and 16th centuries and his most important biography written by Marinus Barletius³ (1454–1512) was translated in many languages. Hungarians were very interested in him as under the Ottoman domination [period corresponding roughly to the years when Buda was occupied by the Ottomans (1541–1686)] he represented a good model to enhance the fighting spirit and to bolster the courage of the soldiers. However, above all, Hungarians found many commonalities between János Hunyadi (1387–1456) and Skanderbeg: both of them were great heroes and fearful adversaries of the Ottomans and, as allies, they fought also together:

Two heroes lived then to the best of my knowledge,
Hunyadi and Skanderbeg I read it clearly.⁴

So the primary aim of the song was to provide an important model of a glorious ruler in sharp contrast with the confessional division between Catholics and Protestants and the state of anarchy and discord. Great rulers such as Alexander the Great, János Hunyadi, King Matthias and also Skanderbeg were often evoked in this context. From the age of seven Skanderbeg lived in the court of the Sultan, was grown up in the Mohammedan creed and in Turkish was called “İskender Bey”:

Who has heard of a greater King than Alexander, There is no match to his good fortune, To the warriors he gave a great example, That everybody, who are capable, try to imitate.	Even after, there were great Lords, Who from little became great, Hear the deeds of second Alexander, Who the Turks called Iskender Bey. ⁵
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The Turkish name of George was Iskender Bey,
Which means, just to be clear, Lord Alexander.⁶
(I, 55–56)

As far as the confessional division, Bogáti opted for the figure of Skanderbeg, also because in 1443 he refused to fight against the Christians, escaped to Krujë, abandoned the creed of Islam and became one of the main antagonists of the Ottomans and an important symbol for the defense of the Christianity: in this way his life lent itself very well to argue for

³ Marinus Barletius, *Historia de vita et gestis Scanderbegi Epirotarum principis*, Impressum Romae: per B. V. [Bernardinus de Vitalibus], [ca. 1508].

⁴ Bogáti Fazekas 1592, IV, vv. 7–8: “Két vitéz, élt akkor legjobb azt tudom, / Hunyadi, Szkender Bég nyilván olvasom”. The English translations provided in this paper are by the author.

⁵ Bogáti Fazekas 1592, I, vv. 1–8: “Ki hallott Sándornál hatalmas királyt, / Jó szerencsájének nem tudjuk mását, / A vitéz népek nagy példát, / Minden erre néz már ki bírja magát. // Lőnek azután is nagy fejedelmek, / Kik kicsinyből nagyra emelkedének, / Második Sándornak dolgát értsétek, / Kit törökök hívtak jó Szkenderbégnak”.

⁶ Bogáti Fazekas 1592, I, vv. 55–56: “Györgynek Szkender Bég lőn törökül neve, / Annyi mint Sándor Úr, hogy minden értse”.

the necessity of the conversion (to a variety of Protestantism). The region that represented the expectations, the “new” Epirus, was the Transylvania:

I don't know anything better in past events,
I wrote this to the Hungarian nation as an example,
Epirus would be in Transylvania,
Heart and hands would be necessary in the throat of the Turks.”⁷

Concerning the presence of Turkish heroes in the Hungarian epic songs, above all we need to mention some of the works of Sebastian Tinódi (Tinódi Lantos Sebestyén, 1510–1556). In order, the first song (1546, *Szulimán császárnak Kazul basával való viadaljáról*) in 70 strophes (280 verses) recounts the conflicts between Sultan Suleiman and Shah Tahmasp in the years 1534–1536:

I've paid tribute to many kings and emperors, I've recounted their great battles, But I haven't reflected on the Turkish nation, Hear, what I've heard about it.	I talk about the deeds of Suleiman, Whose empire is in Buda, And he owns a great part of this world, In many country he is the whip of God. ⁸
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At the beginning of the song Tinódi presents the protagonists: Sultan Suleiman, son of Selim I, characterized by the white colour, “Sahit Ahmáz” or “Kazul basa”, son of Ismail (who is Shah Tahmasp I of the Safavid dynasty) distinguished by the red colour and the cause of the conflict, “Jesil basa” depicted in blue. In the first episode the messenger of Tahmasp offers some opium to the Sultan, who wants to punish cruelly the messenger for his daring. But, the pashas advise him not to do so because nobody kills the messengers. Then, at the end of sanguinary battles, the Sultan gains many fortune and also Tahmasp's beautiful wife. He spends with her only one night and then gives the woman to “Kertez szancsák”, one of his sanjak-beys. But, the woman kills his new husband and so she's condemned to death in the waters of the sea. After that, the Sultan forces his favorite, the grand vizier Ibrahim, to combat against Shah Tahmasp. Ibrahim challenges the Shah to a duel, but he refuses to fight against a slave of the Sultan. Later, the Sultan becomes envious of Ibrahim because of his power, but once again, the Sultan follows the advices of another pasha and tactically decides to assassinate Ibrahim only in a later moment. So, the diplomacy and tactical strategy plays an important role in the whole story. At the end of the song the Hungarian poet describes the destruction of Babylon:

⁷ Bogáti Fazekas 1592, VI, vv. 258–261: “Nem tudék jobbat én régi dolgokban, / Magyar nemzetnek íram ezt példában, / Epirus lenne az Erdélyországban, / Szív, kéz, kellene az török torkában”.

⁸ Tinódi 1546, vv. 1–8: “Sok királyról, császárról emlékeztem, / Csoda hadakat róluk beszéltem, / De török nemzetről nem elmélkedtem, / Meghalljátok, mit felőlük értettem. // Én beszélek Szulimán járásában, / Kinek birodalma vagyon Budában, / És nagy része vagyon mindez világban, / Isten ostora ő nagy sok országban”.

The Sultan invaded Babylon,
Shot and destroyed its stonewall,
After a violent combat he conquered the city,
And killed all its inhabitants.⁹

The strength of Sultan Suleiman is compared to the power of Alexander, the sage and so Tinódi wishes for God's help to diminish his power and raise the Christianity.

Tinódi in his *Zsigmond Király és Császárnak Krónikája* (1552, The Chronicle of the King and Emperor Sigismund) mentions a second song (1546–1552, The Chronicle of the Turkish Sultans), but this text unfortunately is lost:

I wrote in detail about the battle,
In the chronicle of the Turkish sultans.¹⁰

The last song of the Hungarian minstrel about the Turkish side, in 116(117) strophes tells about the campaigns of Ali pasha of Buda¹¹ (1554, The History of Ali pasha of Buda) in the Upper regions of Hungary. In a short time Ali pasha, characterized as valorous and sage (*vitész* and *bölcs*), occupies eight castles. However, the most significant part of the song concerns the siege of Drégely defended by György Szondy. The captain, before his death, arranges everything, destroys the goods, kills the horses and sends two of his servants to Ali pasha:

So he implores his Excellency, the pasha,
To teach prowess to his two servants,
And to bury the body of György Szondi,
As here they will see his terrible death.¹²

During the last attack Szondy is shot through the knee, but intrepidly he continues to fight till his death. His body and his head are brought to Ali pasha, who acknowledges Szondy's bravery and ensures him a burial proper to his rank:

The Castle of Drégely is in the hands of the pasha,
And they carry before him the body of Szondi,
He orders to seek his head and join it to the body,
And he makes the valiant hero bury with great honour.¹³

⁹ Tinódi 1546, vv. 261–264: “Szállá meg az császár Babilóniát, / Lötteté, rontatá az ő kőfalát, / Nagy viadallal megvevé városát, / Leváगतá mind az bennevalókat”.

¹⁰ Tinódi 1552, vv. 609–610: “Viadal ott mint lón bőven megírtam, / A török császárok krónikájokban”.

¹¹ Ali Chadim, Ottoman governor of the eyalets of Buda and of Bosnia”.

¹² Tinódi 1554, vv. 81–84: “Ezen igen kéri basát őnagyságát, / Vitézségre tanítsa ő két apródját, / És eltemettesse Szondi Györgynek tagját, / Mert majd itt meglátják az ő szörnyű halálát”.

¹³ Tinódi 1554, vv. 97–100: “Jó Drégelynek vára lón basa kezébe, / Szondinak az testét vivék eleibe, / Fejét keresteté, az testhez viteté, / Mint oly vitéz embert nagy szépen temetteté”.

The overwhelming preponderance of the Turks is evident since the beginning:

Sanjak-beys, voivodes, beys are all together,
And moved off with twelve thousand cannons.¹⁴

In fact, the aspect Tinódi wants to emphasize is the courage, the integrity and tenacity of the defenders. And the example is really efficient, because also the enemy pays homage to Szondy.

From 1597 we have also the *Chronicle of Turkish Sultans* composed by the Anonymus of Târgu Mureş. In fact, we are talking about the fragments of a song in 282 strophes. Its style is not skilled and consistent: the poet catalogs names and facts. Considering that the first 18 strophes are lost, the first sultan we meet is Bayezid I and the last one is Selim II. The most extensive part (22 strophes from 63 to 85) narrates the deeds of Suleiman the Magnificent. Then, it's possible to deduce that the thirteenth emperor is Murad III, but the strophes 91–105 are damaged and the strophes 106–126 are missing. The second part (strophes 127–278) represents an important source material about the Hungarian view of the Ottoman Empire. It contains allusions to Johann Hilten, references to the *Book of Daniel* and recalls the prophecy of the “Red Apple” (*Kizil elma*) that foretells the fall of the Ottomans (cf. letter of Bartholomeo Georgievits, 1545). The strophes 181–182 draws a comparison between Alexander the Great and János Hunyadi: the first defeated the enormous army of the Persian king Darius and the second defeated the Turks at Belgrade (1456). Then, the poet enumerates all the territories belonging to Christianity (America included) to emphasize the great quantity of the Christians as well. At the end of this list, in the strophe 207–208, we find ‘our small country’ (*a mi kis országunkat*), namely the Transylvania. Christians, because of all the sins they’ve committed, are punished by God and the Ottomans represent God’s whip. Then, the poet accuses the nobility for their silence and resorts to the metaphor of the city of Amyclae. Again, he evokes well-known figures who were defeated against their strength (the Midianites, Holofernes, Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus...). The song ends with a series of instructions and desires addressed to all the Kingdoms and to the nobility, to the women and to the heroes, that, if fulfilled, would ensure God’s help.

Against its title, the brief *Historical Song about the Defeat of Sinan pasha* (1595–1635) by István Szőlősi in fact narrates about the deeds of Zsigmond Báthory, Prince of Transylvania (1572–1613) as he, together with István Bocskay (1557–1606) defeated the troops of Sinan pasha in 1595. In fact, the figure of Sinan pasha appears only at the beginning of the second part of the song. As the main characters are the Hungarians, the analysis of this text is not included in this paper.

¹⁴ *Ivi*, vv. 55–56: “Szancsákok, vajdák, békek egyben gyülnének, / Tizenkétezeren álgyúkkal eredének”.

The last song that should be mentioned here is the *Icon vicissitudinis humanae vitae*, a fragmented historical song written by an unknown author (perhaps Kristóf Szattay or György Tardi). The poet recounts the story of his marriage (vv. 1–100) and terrible death (vv. 101–200) in February 1587 of Kalajlikoz Ali pasha (governor of the eyalets of Buda between 1580–1583 and 1586–1587). The poem which, according to the closing formula, is the sixth epic song of the author, is clearly moralizing in tone, a kind of teaching on women. Ali pasha is described as follows:

Ali Pasha was really virtuous,
He had a thick red beard,
He was a good archer and a capable horse rider.
His look was proper to his skills.¹⁵

According to the chronicle, after the death of his husband, the grand vizier, his wife, Ismihan (or Esma Han), sister of Murad III, decided to marry with Ali pasha, who enjoyed a considerable fame. So, Ali pasha is obliged to abandon his children and his previous wife (known by the Hungarians as Zulejka). During the first night the wish of Esma is to reappoint Ali again governor of Buda and obviously the sultan fulfills it. But before the new couple could arrive to Buda, Esma dies without a child. After that the Sultan decides to take all the treasures of his sister:

Ali can't receive them, said the Sultan,
Because he had no child from his sister.¹⁶

So, Razainkadin, the maid of honour (*Haszonkadár*), says to Ali, that if he marries her, she'll steal the crown of Esma. While Ali pasha goes to Buda for the second time, Razainkadin remains in Constantinople with the crown (*στέφανος* = *Isztiphant*, *tads*) waiting for the invitation of Ali pasha. But, the letter never arrives, so at first Razainkadin sends the crown to Buda, and then, furious because Ali pasha doesn't take her with him, she accuses the pasha before the Sultan. The pasha is "getthi" (cf. gitti) and as a consequence he poisons himself.

In the remaining part (vv. 201–250), before the two closing strophes, the poet asserts that women are false and reminds the audience of some well-known examples, such as Xanthippe, Mary, Queen of Hungary (1371 – 17 May 1395), Salome, Jezebel, Dalila, Astarte, etc.

¹⁵ Szattay (1587–1600), vv. 25–28: "Az Ali Pasa igen jámbor vala, / Szép temérdek veres szakállá vala, / Jó nyilas és pályafuttató vala. / Szép játéká hozzá illendő vala".

¹⁶ *Ivi*, vv. 135–136: "Alit nem illetné, Császár azt mondá, / Mert nénjétől magtalanul marada".

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