

HUNGARY AND THE ORIENT*

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It was a number of months ago that I received with pleasure the request to give a presentation at the opening of this conference. I agreed to the request with great satisfaction since it provides me with an opportunity to greet the participants of this scholarly conference, the aims and subjects of which are so dear to me. My own field of expertise, Turkology, and, within it, Ottoman Studies, has many points of contact with the disciplines covered by this conference. Nevertheless, I feel that I am perhaps better serving the cause of mutual understanding among Orientalist endeavours, if I choose a topic from another area.

The participants have an excellent grasp of not only the present state of their discipline, but also of its past. They are aware of the European history of Oriental, and within it, of Islamic Studies, of these disciplines' historical and cultural aspects and of the ways in which information concerning them has been disseminated. They are also familiar with the institutions of these disciplines which have evolved over the centuries, undergoing many reforms, sometimes falling victim to modern bureaucracy. Here I am referring to those scientific workshops where generations of scholars have followed one another, each enriching Oriental Studies in unique ways.

It is well known that the scientific understanding of the Orient and the birth of the scientific disciplines are linked by many common, universal characteristics. At the same time, there are at least as many features particular to individual disciplines involved in this development. We note the duality between features common to all disciplines and

* The opening lecture of the Congress, delivered by the President of the Csoma de Kőrös Society.

those specific to given disciplines, in studying each area either in its space or time relationship.

I hasten to assure my esteemed audience that I do not wish to pursue this analysis since its details are well known to everyone present. There is a whole series of studies outlining and analyzing these relationships. It is precisely the research of recent years, and the debates they have given rise to, which have shown us clearly and unequivocally the lessons of previous work, and its impact on the present and the place it has in the new intellectual context. I do not wish to merely hint at things here; I have in mind the exchange of views that has taken place concerning the works of E. Said and B. Lewis, more precisely, the authors' concepts of the history of science.

Again I do not intend to dwell on this topic, which to this day can lead to impassioned debates. Allow me to merely state that for us Hungarian Orientalists, given that we were not and are not in the mainstream, this debate provided a powerful impetus. The questions were interesting, indeed, provocative for us too. We had to account to ourselves too concerning the evolution of our intellectual, scientific contact with the Orient, and what we have in common with the rest of Europe and what are the differences.

This brings me to what I wish to discuss. I am aware that I have said nothing new so far, but perhaps by addressing the topic of the history of Hungarian Oriental Studies and what has made its development unique, I can provide my esteemed audience with some new information.

Allow me to begin with our title: Hungary and the Orient, Hungarian ties with the Orient. Let us see what lies behind this relationship. Depth and dimension in ancient and modern history, essentially speaking to the present age. A series of contacts, events, ad hoc meetings and co-existence. A vast and unpredictable mass of influences and reciprocity. Everything that happened in the course of the centuries and what today are historical facts, the impact of which we carry within ourselves unconsciously. When did the scientific discovery of all this begin and where does it lead, along what paths? When did the first endeavours

begin which we may view as the first manifestation of a scientific approach?

I think that an objective critique of the history of science will support the notion that we designate the Ottoman centuries of Hungarian history as the origins of information-gathering on a scientific level. Let us keep in mind that we are referring to the 16th century. We are past the Renaissance, when the intellectual rebirth and self-knowledge of Man triumphed. This was the age of the Reformation, which took giant strides toward freeing human consciousness from artificial restrictions. This was the age when greater demands were placed on knowledge, when the interrelationships became important and when emphasis was placed on everyday practice. Everything pointed toward the need for more profound understanding, the systematization of knowledge, that is, toward scholarship and science.

In the Ottoman period of Hungarian history, in the 16th-17th centuries, we note such endeavours and the creation of works which bear the stamp of this scientific approach.

When the first Hungarian poet, Bálint Balassa, who fought the Turks with sword in hand and died in battle, wrote down lines of Turkish poetry that he heard from Turkish prisoners of war, it was only a case of interest shown by a literary person. The content and melody of the Turkish poems caught his attention as he felt some sort of kinship with them. However, when about eighty years later, the erudite Jakab Nagy de Harsány, who had spent seven years as ambassador of Transylvania and Brandenburg to the Porte, wrote down his linguistic and historical observations and his everyday experiences and analyzed the political issues of the period in a bulky volume, he had bequeathed us a source work of major value. With this work we feel that we are in the presence of scholarship.

The influences of the Ottoman period of Hungarian history and the Hungarian-Ottoman ties that followed in its wake continued in the course of later centuries. We could continue listing the works born during those times. But the real beginnings of the birth of scientific Oriental Studies in Hungary is not to be sought here.

The real locus is in the 19th century, during the period of rebirth, the formation of nationhood, the incipient self-awareness and renewal.

Let us turn our attention to a few historical facts.

The year 1526 marks the date of the Battle of Mohács which was a major milestone in Hungarian history. It marks the end of the Hungarian Kingdom which had been such a force in Eastern Europe for four centuries. This country was rent into three parts within a few decades. One part was under Turkish rule, another under the Habsburgs, while only Transylvania remained independent as a Hungarian political entity. At the end of the 17th century, the country became free of Ottoman rule, but continued to be under Habsburg domination. The war of liberation of the early 18th century failed and a century and a half had to pass before another attempt was made to attain national independence.

The 18th century and the first half of the 19th was spent gathering strength and the increasing articulation of national endeavours. It is impossible here to outline even this lengthy, multi-dimensional and complex process. We must be satisfied with concentrating on one aspect which is closest to us, namely, the endeavour to attain a national identity and to clarify our place in the world.

Among Hungarians living under foreign domination, surrounded by peoples speaking different languages, the question was naturally raised as to what is our place in this world, given that everyone has linguistic and cultural roots. If there are no linguistic and cultural ties that link the people to the present – that is to say, the present of the 19th century – perhaps we ought to search for our roots in the East, in Asia.

This was the spark that kindled fires in the minds of scholars. The idea had only to find individuals who would take it upon themselves to turn the idea into scholarly fact.

From the point of view of science and scholarship, truth becomes bifurcated at this point. Some scholars followed the branch of Finno-Ugrian, while others the Turkic languages as they began the journey East. In both cases the motives were identical. And let us add that both proved correct and both enriched Hungarian and international scholarship.

However, we Orientalists, and especially in the context of the present, are mainly interested in the latter line of investigation. Allow me to concentrate on this aspect.

A young Székler-Hungarian scholar from Transylvania was stirred to action by these ideas in the first decades of the 19th century. His name was Alexander Csoma de Kőrös. It was in the College of Nagye-nyed in Transylvania that he had first heard of the Asiatic origins of the Hungarians. Later, when he was studying in Göttingen, he learned of the Eastern historical sources, which he had hoped would yield data about the Hungarians too. A remark by one of his professors concerning possible links between Hungarians and the Uigurs of Inner Asia led him to decide to attempt to discover traces of this, to engage himself in Oriental studies.

After returning to Transylvania, Csoma again set out from Nagye-nyed in 1818, to seek the ancestors of the Hungarians in the East. He reached Northern India via Beirut, Teheran, Buchara and Kabul. His plans took an unexpected detour at this point. Recognizing the service it would provide to knowledge of Inner Asia, Csoma decided to immerse himself in the study of Tibetan language and culture.

He became involved heart and soul in the project. The many hardships and tribulations notwithstanding, he compiled the first dictionary of the Tibetan language and wrote many articles on Tibetan linguistics and culture.

To Csoma this was but an episode in his life. The desire to find the ancient homeland of the Hungarians continued to be his major concern. At the age of 58 he set out on the journey into Inner Asia with unflagging enthusiasm, certain that he would succeed. He still had visions of the ancient homeland while racked by the fever that eventually killed him in the Himalayas.

We know, of course, that Csoma was mistaken regarding his destination. Yet his commitment to the great cause of scholarship led him to the peaks of achievement. His attainments remain works of inestimable value.

We can sum up his achievement by simply stating that he founded a new discipline of Oriental studies.

Barely a few decades later, another youthful researcher set out for the East in search of Hungarian-Turkic links and to thereby contribute to our knowledge of the Hungarian past. His career is a text-book example of a scholar attaining the peaks of scholarship. His childhood is a sad tale of orphanhood, physical disability, poverty and ostracism. Nevertheless, his energy, ambition and will led him to triumph.

It is no exaggeration to claim that Ármin Vámbéry's career is almost without equal in international Oriental Studies. His fame made him well known throughout Europe as an intrepid traveller, outstanding scholar and an expert on Eastern politics, who was also a political insider, to use a modern expression.

His commitment to scholarship, more exactly to Oriental Studies, began early in his life. In the course of his initial stay in Turkey, which lasted four years, it became clear to him once and for all that he wanted to devote himself to a study of the Turkic peoples and languages and the Asiatic past of the Hungarians and their links to the Turkic peoples. Given this interest he naturally sought to familiarize himself with Central Asia. The khanates of that region tried to preserve their rule by hermetically sealing off their domain from the outside world. Intruders, especially Europeans, who were suspected of spying for the Russians or the British, could expect short shrift. They were tortured and killed. However, his trips which were so fraught with danger, were successful and brought him fame.

Vámbéry's subsequent work eventually grew to embrace practically every field of Turkic Studies. He was rightly recognized as the polymath of the discipline. He did pioneering work in a number of areas. His publications of linguistic records and texts were major achievements in his day, which opened new paths for subsequent generations of Turkologists. Vámbéry's work provided the basis for the better explication of linguistic records and for the better understanding of the facts of Turkish linguistic history. And it is undeniably one of his foremost merits that he turned the attention of European Turkology, which was

engaged in Ottoman Studies, towards the Eastern branch of Turkic peoples and their cultures.

His work brought many results and was a great influence on the study of Hungarian-Turkish linguistic-historical relationships, and, in fact, it marked the birth of Hungarian Turkology.

To summarise, in the course of the 19th century, the endeavour to discover the Eastern roots of the Hungarians' origins, as part of the need to seek out our national identity, is embodied in the work of Alexander Csoma de Kőrös and Ármin Vámbéry. Both men left behind works of enduring value, recognized by international scholarship.

It is one of the paradoxes of life how scholarly thought and result are divided in the two oeuvres. Csoma de Kőrös was never to succeed in discovering the Eastern roots of the Hungarians. He left behind unique and lasting works in another field. Nevertheless, he was the forerunner of whom everyone travelling this path was aware. And among his followers it was Vámbéry, his first heir in this regard, who managed to realize Csoma's goal. It was one of his great merits to have shown the relationship in a number of concrete respects, especially in terms of the Hungarian-Turkish contacts, that indeed the past of the Hungarians does lead East. Let us remark here that his work is not free of contradictions, for which he was duly criticized by his own contemporaries.

Such was the background to Hungarian Oriental Studies, reaching back to the 19th century. Today, we consider it only natural that these scholarly streams soon widened into broad rivers.

As a result of continuous research, ever new facts came to light and increasing numbers of areas became linked to the ongoing work.

In addition to the ancient history of the Hungarians, the centuries spent wandering in the steppe and its Eastern contacts, studies began to focus on such links during the Middle Ages and more recent times. Allow me to merely outline these research domains. For example, we have the problem of the Pechenegs and Kumans who were of Turkic origins and who invaded Hungary and settled here. Then we have the centuries of conflict with the Ottoman Empire from the end of the 14th to the mid-18th century, which includes the 150 years when a part of

Hungary was under Ottoman rule. Then there are the contacts of the 19th and 20th centuries among which I would mention the Turkish period of the Kossuth emigration. The list of contacts is long. All of them were accompanied by innumerable linguistic and cultural influences as a result of which we find in the Hungarian language many loan-words of Turkish origins and Hungarian culture shows a number of Turkish influences. There are a great number of Eastern, primarily Turkish, historical sources concerning this, which only an Orientalist can properly evaluate for the researchers of the Hungarian past.

The recognition that the research of many aspects of Hungary's past is impossible without Oriental Studies is the merit of the 19th-century scholars. It was as a result of their work and endeavours that Oriental Studies became an organic part of Hungarian national scholarship.

In the 20th century, Hungarian researchers of our links to the East could work on the basis of solid foundations. Allow me to mention only the most outstanding personalities here, who are no longer with us, but whose work continues to be a major influence. In the various branches of Turkology there were Gyula Németh and Lajos Fekete, and concerning Inner Asia Lajos Ligeti wrote works of major importance and founded a scientific school. The establishment of most institutions at Hungarian universities and at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, with the exception of the Chair of Turkology, which looks back upon a nearly 120-year history, are all linked to these men of science. The same thing can be said concerning the well-known publications, *Acta Orientalia Hung.*, the *Bibliotheca Orientalis Hungarica*, and so on.

All of us working today in Hungary in Oriental Studies are either directly or indirectly their pupils. We are very conscious of this intellectual heritage, which motivates and obliges us to continue researching the ancient links of the Hungarians with the East. It is also a part of their intellectual bequest which always emphasized the need to place this national obligation within the context of international scholarship. We had often heard them tell us and the norms they had set also point in this direction that in our everyday work we must apply the methodological guideline according to which a particularly Hungarian program makes

sense only when the method meets international standards and expectations, if the results attained also enrich international scholarship. This means that the study of this area merely for its own sake would be provincialism and this is why we need to constantly strive to keep pace with international developments in the field.

Let us hope that we have done right by this intellectual heritage. It is, of course, not up to us Hungarian Orientalists only to pass judgement.

You have no doubt noticed, my esteemed colleagues, you who are internationally recognized experts in Arabic and Islamic Studies, that although I am already discussing the present, I have yet to mention Ignác Goldziher, although he is rightly considered a giant, whose work continues to be a major influence to this day. This was not an oversight on my part, but quite intentional. Let me explain.

You would be quite justified to view it as inexcusable incompetence if I were to attempt at this forum to outline Goldziher's extraordinary qualities as a human being and as a scholar and to try to provide even just a glimpse of the highlights of his work and its significance for Oriental Studies. My task can only be to address myself to the ties between Goldziher, his heritage and Hungarian scholarship.

Goldziher himself makes it redundant to list here the milestones of his career given that his diary provides a clear picture of the twists and turns in his life, which we can only acknowledge in stunned silence. The explanation is to be sought in the social circumstances of his time, which, however, does not alter our unequivocal judgment.

At this time I wish to mention just one aspect taken from the history of science. All that I have said in the foregoing on the origins of Hungarian Oriental Studies and their organic relationship to national disciplines, and which I had justly termed positive in the development of scholarship, were in this case, in that of Goldziher, undeniably negative factors. This concerns that unfortunate situation whereby intellectual life could only accept what it had in some way regarded as being of a national character. Whatever was beyond or outside of this was met with total incomprehension.

We cannot alter the facts. Nevertheless, it must be stated, even though it may seem ahistorical, that Hungarian Oriental Studies would have been even richer, would have developed into an even more organic whole, had the young Goldziher been able to found a school in his own country. The fact that this was not to be created a major vacuum and was a serious setback in Hungarian Oriental Studies.

Hungarian Turkological research has won broad recognition. Nevertheless, we are amply aware that it is precisely in the area of Islamic Studies that we have certain weaknesses, one of the reasons for which is that in the second half of the 19th century this field of scholarship was deprived of the most eminent scholar doing research in this area.

However, let us not just speak of the past and of its wrongs. Hungarian Islamic Studies is a most active branch of scholarship today under the leadership of Professor Károly Czeglédy. Let it be added that a positive role was played here by the good relationship Hungary enjoys with the Arab countries, with which we have fruitful cultural and scientific contacts. This allows Hungarian Arabists excellent opportunities for research and study. I believe that the fact that this conference is being held in Budapest is itself a sign of interest and recognition on the part of international scholarship.

It is a tremendous pleasure for us that the congress accepted the invitation of Hungarian Arabists and Islamic Studies scholars. This international conference will most certainly have a major impact on Hungarian research. For us it means a greater awareness of our debts, the meeting of which is the task of the present and future generations of scholars.