CHAPTER 12

Romans, Romanians and Latin-Speaking Hungarians: The Latin Language in the Hungarian-Romanian Intellectual Discourse of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century

Levente Nagy

At the end of the eighteenth century, the languages spoken by the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Hungary and Transylvania did not always correspond to their culture. Although the Romanians spoke (neo)Latin, they were culturally very distant from the Latin part of Europe. The Hungarians (who are not a Latin people in terms of culture) used Latin as a matter of course in the fields of public administration, education and high culture. Romantic nationalism knit language and culture into an inseparable unity, its fundamental principle being that (national) science and erudition could only be expressed using one’s own language and no other. In the nineteenth century, Romanian intellectuals re-Latinised an essentially non-Latin culture by means of language. Their aspirations briefly coincided with the ideas of the Hungarian middle and low nobility, and of those intellectuals who, deeming Hungarian unsuitable, wished to preserve Latin as the language of public administration. Although the latter were few in number and were not among the most prominent of the Hungarian intellectual elite, they represented an interesting example of Hungarian-Romanian intellectual cooperation, despite the fact that the debate on Roman continuity, especially with the Saxons, had been under way for some time.

Medieval and Early Modern Preliminaries

One of the great paradoxes of Romanian cultural history is the fact that Latin-speaking Romanians could not look back to a Latin Middle Ages. The Byzantine Greek and Old Church Slavonic culture of the Balkan Peninsula had had such a deep influence on Romanian life, that Romanian immigrants to the Kingdom of Hungary (Transylvania in particular, but also Maramureş/Máramaros, the Banat and the Oradea/Várad region) even after the twelfth century remained entirely unaffected by the medieval Latin culture of Hungary. Since Romanians
were excluded entirely from the political life of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary, the church remained their only accessible platform of high culture. The monasteries and wooden churches built by the Romanian kenéz (the municipality leaders who masterminded immigration) featured inscriptions in Old Slavonic rather than Latin. The royal charters elevating kenéz families to the ranks of the nobility featured Slavic annotations written in Cyrillic characters until as late as the fifteenth century.

There are no records available pertaining to the knowledge and usage of Latin among the Romanian kenéz nobility, most of whom blended seamlessly into the Hungarian nobility (the Drágffys, Kendeffys, Hunyadis, etc.), as did those Romanian intellectuals who pursued significant careers, such as Nicolaus Olahus (Miklós Oláh), György Bujtul (Gheorghe Buitul), Gábor Ivul (Gabriel Ivul) and Mihai Halicius. Olah wrote exclusively in Latin, not for a Romanian readership but for the Hungarian and European humanists with whom he exchanged an extensive correspondence in Latin. At the same time, he corresponded with his family and stewards almost exclusively in Hungarian.¹ In the seventeenth century, two Romanian Jesuits from Caransebeș (Karánsebes) pursued notable careers. Having studied in Rome and Vienna, Gheorghe Buitul (1589–1635) was head of the Jesuit mission at Caransebeș from 1625 until his death. He also ran a school in the town. Here, however, the languages of tuition were apparently Hungarian and Romanian, and Latin was only taught as a foreign language, if at all.² Buitul’s only surviving writings in Latin are his letters and the reports that he wrote to the Propaganda Fide (the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith). Gabriel Ivul (1619/1620–1678), also from Caransebeș, studied in Nagyszombat (Trnava) and Vienna and was a student of Buitul. He taught in Trnava before becoming a teacher at the Košice (Kassa) academy. His Latin-language textbook on philosophy, *Philosophia novella*, was published in Košice in 1661. Although these writers were fully aware of the Latin origins of their people and their language, they made no attempt to orientate Romanians towards Western European Latin culture, despite the fact

---

¹ Magyar Országos Levéltár (National Archives of Hungary) P 184. Archives of the ducal branch of the Esterházy family; documents of the Oláh family.