CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE HOMILETICS OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE: MARTYROLOGY AS A (RE)INVENTED TRADITION IN THE PARADIGM OF EARLY MODERN HUNGARIAN PATRIOTISM

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János Komáromi, the most faithful servant of Imre Thököly, in exile with his master first in Constantinople, then in Nicomedia, wrote in 1701 a remarkable entry in his diary. Deeply impressed by the history of the region, he not only remembered the Christian martyrs persecuted and killed there during the rule of Emperor Diocletian, but he found a moving parallel between their own exile and the persecution of the early Christians: “I feel as a release that our martyrdom has been ordained to this place. Blessed be God!”

Although the quotation’s textual context refers to a violent episode of church history, Komáromi’s parallel did not imply a religious experience on his part or any kind of religiously motivated sacrifice. He simply equated their present status, that of political refugees, with the condition of the Christian martyrs. Since no religious or confessional references are implied by the expression of “our martyrdom”, one should accept that Komáromi’s discourse had a secular aspect. Furthermore, the analogy between the supreme sacrifice of the martyrs, that is, their death for the early Christian church, and the refugees’ sufferings for their homeland and ultimately the possibility of their death as a sacrifice, suggests a political interpretation of martyrdom relying on the topos of pro patria mori.

Accordingly, the aim of this article is to explore the political connotations potentially available in the exile account of János Komáromi.

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1 Késmárki Thököly Imre secretariusának Komáromi Jánosnak törökországi diariumja s experientiája [The diary and experience of János Komáromi, the secretary of Imre Thököly of Késmárk, in Turkey] ed. Iván Nagy (Pest: Ráth Mór, 1861), 76.
2 Ernst Kantorowicz, “Pro Patria Mori in Medieval Political Thought,” American Historical Review, 56 (1951): 479–92.
3 Pocock asserted that the study of political thought consists of the exploration of political language: J. G. A. Pocock, Politics, Language and Time: Essays on
For the diary and his other writings conceived and written during his exile (1697–1705) convincingly exhibit a particular discourse promoting a proto-nationalistic view of the concept of patria and of the patriot as martyr. Consequently, I will attempt to decipher the historical, literary and poetical contexts of Komáromi’s discourse in order to reveal those probably (re)invented tradition(s), such as the Protestant and especially Calvinist martyrology, which articulated the textual representation of exile as an extreme experience and attributed political significance to it. Moreover, I will assess the functions and uses of these (re)invented traditions in order to exhibit the homiletics of this political discourse. I will conclude my argument by suggesting that early modern patriotic discourses were strongly connected not only to the medieval heritage of political theology but to the homiletic tradition of the 16th and 17th century as well. Thus the multiplicity of political reality rendered into representations by homiletic practice.

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4 Eric Hobsbawm, Nation and Nationalism since 1780, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 76.

5 According to Quentin Skinner, the primary task of the intellectual historian is to see and think as his ancestors, and my interpretation is committed to this methodology, relying on an exhaustive contextualization which, hopefully, will result in a plausible explanation of this complex historical phenomenon. Quentin Skinner, Visions of Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 51.

6 I rely on the concept proposed by Hobsbawm: “Invented tradition is taken to mean a set of practices normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a virtual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.” Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., The Invention of Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 2.

7 Hungarian historians commonly underestimate the political significance of early modern Hungarian sermon-literature. In spite of the impressive ideological potential and persuasive power of the genre, few historians have attempted to estimate the social and political impact of this homiletic corpus. During the Middle Ages homiletics were continuously engaged in the task of adapting pagan rhetoric and poetic traditions to the use of the Church. The Reformation made a further major contribution to the political uses of homiletic devices. Melanchthon in his rhetoric, Elementorum Rhetorices libri duo, set aside a fourth genus, the genus didascalicon, solely for the homiletic, theological and political function performed by the Reformed sermo. In consequence, starting with the sixteenth century the Reformed sermon, as an oration delivering political messages, had a remarkable influence on the Christian political attitude toward the Ottoman expansion. The main corpus of the so-called literatura antiturcica which proliferated in Germany after the battle of Mohács consists mainly of sermons; these employ an impressive repertoire of homiletic devices in urging the German estates to stop the pagans before it was too late. However, the primary target of those involved in the exploration of political rhetoric has been the analysis