CHAPTER 8

Enduring the Deluge

Hungarian Jesuit Astronomers from Suppression to Restoration

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The first engagement of Hungarian Jesuits with astronomy occurred in the years following the relief of the siege of Vienna in 1683. This was part of the broader involvement of the Society of Jesus in debates over cosmology that had begun decades earlier with the trial of Galileo and was carried forward by the work of the polymath Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680). Several Baroque-era Jesuits of the Austrian province of the Society (an administrative unit eventually embracing all of Hungary), none of whom had extensive experience as practicing observational scientists, put forth cosmographies drawing upon Tycho Brahe’s model of the solar system. Martinus Szentiványi (1633–1703) presented a model that incorporated modifications to the Brahian model introduced by the Italian Jesuit Giovanni Battista Riccioli (1598–1671). In 1702, Gabriel Szerdahelyi (1660–1726) published a Dissertatio that featured three systems (Ptolemaic, Copernican, and Brahian) and portrayed God as prime mover setting the cosmos in motion by striking it like a tennis ball. Both the Baroque Society’s tendency to anthropomorphize the forces moving the cosmos and the church’s rejection of Copernican cosmology were overriding influences on Hungarian Jesuit astronomy until the last third of the eighteenth century.

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4 However, decades later the Jesuit Paulus Bertalanffy derided Copernicus. Tibor Berend, History Derailed: Central and Eastern Europe in the Long Nineteenth Century (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 32.
The accomplishments of Maximilian Hell (Höll) (1720–1792) were of an entirely different order from those of these Baroque Hungarian Jesuits. One of the most important astronomers ever to work in Hungary, Hell established observatories in Cluj, Transylvania and Trnava (now in Slovakia). His carefully collected data appeared in widely circulated publications. Hell, like many of his Jesuit contemporaries, straddled two worlds. A committed Jesuit, he never openly rejected any of the cosmological positions held to be true by the church.

Hell’s inclusion among the Hungarian Jesuit astronomers of his day is inevitable, but far from straightforward. He lived and worked within the historic lands of the Crown of St. Stephen, although Banská Bystrica, Trnava, and Cluj all lie outside of Hungary today. Many of his most important accomplishments were achieved in the service of the Habsburg dynasty, which was regarded as a foreign oppressor by many Hungarians. While he may have spoken very little Hungarian and had no Hungarian ancestry, Hell trained some of the leading lights of late eighteenth-century Hungarian science and shared his colleagues’ interest in the earliest history of the Magyars.

Like his Bohemian contemporary Joseph Stepling, Hell maintained contacts with the wider world of astronomers who had long since discarded the older theories. Hell disliked Protestant institutions but did not spurn the products of such schools. What might seem to moderns (acclimated to academic freedom) like hypocrisy or at least cowardice was actually in Hell’s case something more complex: the fourth vow of obedience, taken by all pre-suppression Jesuits occupying important academic positions located Jesuits (at least in theory) in a role within a hierarchically organized Society that had been especially well equipped to engage the polemical culture of the late sixteenth century.

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5 Augín Udías Vallina, *Searching the Heavens and the Earth: The History of Jesuit Observatories* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2003), 31. However, Hell later wrote that he had been unable to complete the construction and equipping of the Cluj facility.

6 *Ephemerides astronomicae ad meridianum Vindobonensem anni 1765* (Viennae: Typis et Sumptibus J.T. de Tratten, 1764). Sequels to this volume were produced between 1791 and 1803.


8 Late in the day, Jesuit astronomy had received a boost when the 1759 edition of the *Index Prohibitorum* cancelled the decree against the Copernican hypothesis. Juan Casanovas, “The Teaching of Astronomy in Jesuit Colleges in the 18th Century,” *Padeu* 16, 57 (2006): 57–65; at 62. However, the Ptolemaic model would continue to appear in Jesuit-produced textbooks until shortly before the suppression. E.g., Andreas Jaszlinszky, *Institutiones physicae generalis et particularis* (Tyrnaviae: Typis Academicis Societatis Jesu, 1756), figure 4; Sommervogel 4759. Thanks to Justine Hyland for her assistance in accessing this image.