CHAPTER 6

Protestant Reformers: Johannes Honterus, Primus Truber, and Johannes a Lasco

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Introduction

This chapter considers the careers of reformers of the early and middle decades of the 16th century who influenced church life in the territories of modern Romania, Poland, Slovenia, and Croatia. These reformers were inspired by humanism and responded to movements in favour of church reform in Saxony, south German and Swiss towns, and in Geneva. Use of the term Protestant is not intended to imply that these reformers were united in their challenge to the authority of Rome. They were influenced in different ways by Lutheran and Reformed ideas and exhibited differing degrees of confessional ambiguity. Some reformers were able to gain the support of magistrates and to establish churches in line with their ideals for reform. We consider by way of example the career of Johannes Honterus (1498–1549) who played a leading role in promoting reform in the Saxon towns of Transylvania. Other reformers remained loyal to the cause of reform despite the entrenched opposition of Catholic authorities. Our example is Primus Truber (1508–1586) and the circle of Slovene and Croatian reformers who attempted to promote reform from exile in the Empire. Many reformers traveled west for their education or spent time outside the region but were able to return to influence religious life in their homelands. We analyse the career of Johannes a Lasco (Jan Łaski) (1499–1560) and his attempts to set up congregations in the Empire, England, and in Poland. All these case studies reflect on some key themes about the character of Protestant reformers and reform in Central Europe. Reform movements were localized initiatives driven by networks of like-minded clergy. The cause of reform was highly dependent on how effectively these clergy could collaborate with urban magistrates and nobles. The character of reform was also influenced by the contacts established between Central European reformers and leading Western theologians and universities. Only a few Central Europeans, including Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520–1575), were theologians of international significance in their own right. However, reformers from this region were prolific writers, translators, preachers, teachers, letter-writers, and activists. Many exhibited great linguistic and literary creativity and tremendous organizational skills, working effectively with like-minded colleagues, printers, and supporters. The careers of many Protestant reformers
confirm the depth of their commitment to the cause but also a restless energy and tendency towards fractious division, particularly while living in exile.

**Edit Szegedi, *Johannes Honterus and Reform in Transylvania***

Johannes Honterus, a prominent humanist and reformer from the Saxon community of Transylvania, has been the subject of consistent attention within regional histories and also analysis within both Hungarian and Romanian national historiographies. To understand his life and work properly, we must depart from the analysis provided by authors who have attempted to project their standards and attitudes back to the 16th century. Often simplistic assumptions have been made about the connections between the Transylvanian Saxon community and the Lutheran church in Transylvania. Great care is needed in examining the identity of Honterus, his relationship with the Saxon community in Transylvania, the identity of the Saxons, and relations between Transylvania's Saxons and their regional neighbours as well as with other German-speakers.¹

Johannes Honterus lived most of his life within the Saxon community of Transylvania. By way of contrast with many contemporary reformers in Central Europe, Johannes Honterus was not forced into exile for religious reasons. Rather, Honterus was forced to leave Transylvania in the context of the struggle for the throne of Hungary after the Battle of Mohács. Honterus returned to Transylvania after he abandoned his previous support for Ferdinand Habsburg.²

The political loyalties and social identity of the Saxon community in Transylvania should likewise not be thought of as fixed or homogeneous. There were significant changes over time and internal divisions within the German-speaking community that had first settled in towns and villages in southern and central Transylvania during the 12th century. There were ongoing tensions and conflicts between the two main towns of Braşov (Kronstadt) and Sibiu (Hermannstadt) that played a role during the Reformation period and dominated the public life of the Saxon community into the 19th century. It is also important to note that religious reform was not understood by Honterus and others as a matter for the Saxon towns and villages of Transylvania alone. Rather the cause of reform was conceived of as encompassing all the communities of the region and certainly not limited to German-speakers. Saxon

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¹ Theobald Wolf, *Johannes Honterus der Apostel Ungarns* (Kronstadt, 1894), p. 74.