
*Humanista a határon: A készmárki Sebastian Ambrosius története* is the first volume in the new series *Mikrotörténelem* (Microhistory) by the Budapest branch of the French publishing house L’Harmattan. The microhistory series has had two predecessors in Hungary, both with distinct agendas. The first attempt in the late 1980s and early 1990s was administered by the publishing house Magvető, and focused exclusively on scholarship by Hungarian authors with a wide methodological range, such as classic social history with a liberal use of case studies (Bácskai 1989), the history of representation and material culture (Szabó 1989; Endrei 1989), and contributions successfully combining medievalist genealogical research with a social studies approach (Fügedi 1992). The second series was published by Osiris in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and widened its scope to the translation of international literature. Beyond publishing Lajos Für’s *Bercelí zenebona, 1784: Kísérlet a történelmi pillanat megragadására* [The Squabble at Bercel: An Attempt to Grasp a Historical Moment] (2000), a book often referred to as the first Hungarian work in microhistory in its narrower methodological sense, the publications of the Osiris series also included classical works from Natalie Zemon Davis (1999) and Giovanni Levi (2001). The L’Harmattan series has inherited the editors from Osiris and seeks to combine the traditions and objectives of the two previous series. Apart from further translations from the international body of literature, it also aims to publish original Hungarian works written with the methodological tools provided by microhistory—a historiographical tradition increasingly widespread in Hungary.

Marcell Sebők is one of the leading representatives of this trend. After having published a selection of methodological articles and case studies of historical anthropology and microhistory, he proceeded to apply this methodology to his own fieldwork. *Humanista a haráton* is an adaptation of Sebők’s doctoral dissertation, defended in 2001-2002 at ELTE University in Budapest. Thus the story of Sebastian Ambrosius (1554–1600), a Wittenberg student, Philippist theologian, clergyman from the Zips (Szepesség/Spis) region, and a Humanist correspondent of many authorities of his age, has fortunately reached its audience after a long and creative process.

Any biographer struggles with the problem of structure. Although the life of an individual person seems to be a perfect story in itself, having a clearly defined beginning and an unquestionable end, it often proves difficult to delineate what the story is about. While striving to share with the reader the fullest body of information about the protagonist, authors must also take all possible measures to prevent their work from appearing like a collection of unrelated anecdotes. Sebők skillfully structures his material, using a method he calls the “mosaics of biography.” Although he starts somewhat typically with the birth, family and education of Ambrosius, he later abandons the chronological approach and uses a thematic organization instead. In this way, the activities of Ambrosius as Protestant minister and especially as religious polemist become the main focus of his book—which is indeed a legitimate focus for analysis, as religious polemics seems to have been the main concern of Ambrosius, as demonstrated by his own publishing activities, and by those who published works challenging his ideas.

Religious polemics have captured the historiography of the Hungarian Reformation since the nineteenth century. Yet Sebők dedicates only limited space to the traditional questions of this research area, namely the clarification of theological differences between theologians and their adherents. He summarizes the most important differences between orthodox Lutherans

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and followers of the Melanchtonian interpretation of the Bible through the works of Ambrosius—who was himself a Philippist (that is, belonged to the latter group) and was accused several times of Crypto-Calvinism. The author's main focus however lies elsewhere, namely in the strategies and methods of communication and conviction between the two opposing sides.

Sebők analyzes these questions, which have been of central importance for international research on Reformation for the past twenty years, from several distinct perspectives. Reading the numerous treatises published by the Philippists and their opponents in the Zips region between 1587 and 1600, Sebők argues that despite differences in the quality of argumentation, they have much in common: in this later phase of Konfessionsbildung, both sides preferred to reiterate the sophisticated argumentations of their predecessors rather than present new ones. The techniques of argumentation also show a rather unified pattern, even if Ambrosius’ application of these was far superior to that of his opponents in terms of his systematic presentation of both sides of the debate, with a reiteration of their arguments. Also, a comparative analysis of the personal remarks—as an accessory and sometimes substitute for further theological arguments—from both sides produced interesting results, showing the orthodox Lutheran side, represented by Georg Creutzer, Gergely Horváth, Elias Lani and others, as the more aggressive one.

Sebők’s analysis, however, does not end with a clarification of the authors’ textual strategies. It continues with a survey of the methods of organizing debates and building social networks intended to further each side’s arguments. A fascinating discussion on Gergely Horváth, Ambrosius’ main opponent, shows how he was able to use his social status as an important nobleman in the region to strengthen his theological stance, and how this was counter-balanced by the patron of Ambrosius, Sebestyén Thököly. This discussion of clientele systems exemplifies a successful application of current international research.

Finally, one of the five chapters concentrates solely on the question of Ambrosius’ communication strategies in the Respublica litteraria of his age. On the basis of the surviving pieces of his correspondence with contemporary authorities like Theodore de Bèze, Johann Jacob Grynaeus and Hugo Blotius, Sebők explains the problems of Ambrosius’ entry into these circles, his maintenance of contacts, and the support expected (and sometimes received) from these early modern intellectuals. The results—significant for the study of the entire region—show that at the end of the sixteenth century, this Protestant minister from Zips was received on a more or less equal basis by some of Europe’s leading intellectual personalities of the day.

Apart from his multi-perspective analysis of Ambrosius as a religious polemist and theologian, Sebők also addresses other important issues, such as the national/ethnic allegiance of Ambrosius and his everyday life as a minister. These factors complete the biographical mosaic, even if some receive too much space. One such instance is a description of the debate around the introduction of the Gregorian calendar, which is too extensive if one considers the rather meager role Ambrosius played in this issue. Together with an elaborate survey on the role of the calendars in everyday life in early modern Hungary, it seems obvious this chapter was devised as a separate article. Sadly, it detracts from the general structure of the book, although with some additional work, it could have been better integrated into the overall presentation.

Unfortunately, too, even if reshaping his dissertation took many years, the book bears traces of a rushed submission, and would have benefitted from a stricter editor. It would have required some reduction: the descriptions of religious polemics are simply too lengthy, and in several cases, analytical points are reiterated with no reference to earlier discussions. Moreover, there are grammatical errors and cases where the footnotes would likely hinder rather than assist readers planning to locate archival material, especially in the case of the referenced archives in Slovakia.