

The Lapon, the Scythian and the Hungarian, or our (former) selves as ‘others’. Philosophical history in eighteenth-century Hungary

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The only appropriate genre of history is that of Mr Voltaire, which had not existed before him. [...] There is one single object the philosopher must make the target of his historical investigations: the portrayal of manners and morals, because his aim is improvement and enlightenment, which is only to be expected from the better knowledge of the human mind and heart,

wrote the twenty-three year old Count János Fekete in 1764, in his notes to the versified *Lettre à M' de Voltaire* by Lőrinc Orczy, subtitled “The Complaint of a Hungarian” (*Plainte d' un Hongrois*)¹. Orczy is recognized to be the first important representative of a *ständische* Enlightenment and an important apologete of modern ‘luxury’ in Hungary, while Fekete is known as a prominent Voltairian. Both of them clearly recognized the methodologically innovative character of Voltaire’s historiography: its commitment to a history of civilization, rather than a mere narrative of events, and its endeavour to turn an impartial and de-mystified rendering of history to the better understanding of the present. At the same time, both of them harboured a certain resentment towards their French idol, the

1 J. Fekete, L. Orczy, *Lettre à M' de Voltaire ou Plainte d' un Hongrois*, ed. I. Vörös (Fontes Minores ad Historiam Hungariae Spectantes 1) (Budapest, 1987), 20. For details, see O. Penke, *Filozofikus történetek és történetfilozófiák. A francia és a magyar felvilágosodás* [Philosophical histories and philosophies of history. The French and the Hungarian Enlightenment] (Budapest: Balassi, 2000), 172 ff.

reason being his neglect of topics from Hungarian history that could have figured prominently in his presentation of the major themes in the progress of European society: the achievements of the fifteenth-century King Matthias Corvinus in the battlefield as well as his patronage of art and culture, or indeed 'le siècle de Marie Thérèse', marked by the growth of arts and sciences, as well as successful defensive wars. This mixed response, shared by several contemporaries, shows that the merits of a new type of Enlightenment historiography – of which Voltaire was regarded as an important, but not the only representative – were not only recognized in eighteenth-century Hungary, but were also understood as applicable to major themes in national history.

This paper is going to highlight a complex, even somewhat paradoxical development arising from this combination, one that had important consequences for the shaping of various options in identity formation in the period known as the Hungarian national awakening. I shall concentrate on the contested issue of ethnic origins as approached in terms of the discursive patterns of Enlightenment philosophical history and discussed in the vocabulary it offered, by some authors of the 1770s and 1780s, i.e., the very beginning, or indeed the prelude to this period. I hope to show how this innovative language, developed in strict reliance on the achievements of the eighteenth-century sciences of man, when applied to confronting a theory of linguistic kinship and by implication of national origins which was at variance with the inherited 'master narrative' on the subject, became instrumental in reaffirming the traditional view. It did so by underpinning a quasi-racialist 'othering', characteristic of ethno-nationalist discourses of identity arising in the nineteenth century and still preserving their vigour. In all of this, the political climate of the Kingdom of Hungary in the 1770s, and the fact that during this period the relevant trends of Enlightenment were predominately embraced by nobles strongly attached to the ideology of social distinction posited by the above-mentioned 'master narrative', played no small role.

The paradoxical nature of these developments arises from the following considerations. We know about instances, in historical situations not significantly different from that of eighteenth-century Hungary (as an inferior partner within a composite state, with a highly ambivalent constitutional and economic status), in which a new preoccupation with the history and the progress of manners and morals was turned to the criticism of a tradition of martial (vain)glory and sham independence. The oeuvre of William Robertson, historiographer royal for Scotland, is a case in point. Robertson, who in his later works on non-European civilizations displayed considerable expertise in portraying the 'significant others' of contemporary European commercial modernity in vivid anthropological terms, was engaged in a quite different sort of 'othering' in his *History of Scotland* (1759) and in the *View of the Progress of Society from the Fall of the Roman Empire to the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century* (1769) – the Preface to the *History of the Reign of Emperor Charles V*. He pointed

to the distant and ‘foreign’ character of a world inhabited by the ‘former selves’ of refined, commercial and enlightened contemporary Europeans and Scots (at least, Lowlanders), whose manners seemed to distance them radically from their predecessors. Robertson’s combination of narrative with stadial history, in a cosmopolitan (or, comparative) perspective, was imbued with an enlightened version of patriotism in the sense of displaying a strong commitment to the values of refinement, sociability, social solidarity and the rule of law, all of which followed from his criticism of the rudeness of manners associated with feudalism. Ethnic pride and satisfaction in martial valour seemed relatively irrelevant from this perspective².

Even in eighteenth-century Scotland, however, Robertson’s case was a quite distinctive one³, and the Hungarian examples below demonstrate the immense variability of the field of interpretation marked by the notions of ‘manners’ (socially and culturally defined and derived standards or interaction, and a shared moral psychology) on the one hand and ethnicity and language on the other, when it comes to definitions of identity. In what follows I seek to explore some ways in which the intellectual elite of Hungarian society sought to redefine its own identities as well as its patriotic agendas through revising and adjusting kinship narratives inherited from medieval chronicle literature, and construing new ones. While on the one hand these narratives were closely tied to the question of origin, they also had far-reaching consequences to the distribution of social and political authority – in other words, inclusion and exclusion, more generally discourses of ‘otherness’, operated on this level too.

The theory of a prestigious *steppe* kinship of the Hungarians with the mighty Huns, establishing the status claims of an (originally) military aristocracy, was hardly contested ever since its authoritative formulation by Simon Kézai in the thirteenth century. The corporate paradigm, i.e., the idea that the *res publica* was established upon the dualism of the monarch and an autonomous *corpus*

2 Robertson’s achievement is assessed in this sense in a now sizeable literature. See C. Kidd, *Subverting Scotland’s Past. Scottish whig historians and the creation of an Anglo-British identity, 1689-c. 1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); C. Kidd, “The ideological significance of Robertson’s History of Scotland”, in S.J. Brown (ed.), *William Robertson and the Expansion of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 92-121; K. O’Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, especially Vol. II: *Narratives of Civil Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), section iv. I have proposed possibilities of a fruitful comparative perspective on the Scottish Enlightenment and the Hungarian Reform era of the early nineteenth century focusing on Robertson and a prominent Hungarian historian in L. Kontler, “European Historians from the Periphery. William Robertson and Mihály Horváth”, *Hungarian Quarterly*, 45, Spring (2004): 109-126.

3 See D. Allan, *Virtue, Learning, and the Scottish Enlightenment: Ideas of Scholarship in Early Modern History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993); see also D. Allan, “Protestantism, Presbyterianism and national identity in eighteenth-century Scottish history”, in T. Claydon, I. McBride (eds.), *Protestantism and National Identity. Britain and Ireland, c. 1650-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 182-205.

politicum, first obtained some institutional reality in the *generalis congregatio* (or, *parlamentum publicum*) of 1277, and took an epic shape in the *Gesta Hungarorum* of Kézai (ca. 1282/1285). The *Gesta* is a projection of the desirable model of the polity into the distant past, in which kinship and continuity was alleged between the ancient Huns and the Hungarians. It defined membership in the body politic through a theory of inequality, in which the dissolution of the ancient self-governing community and the creation of a boundary between the free and the unfree was explained by reference to the contempt of the latter for the call to arms issued “in the name of God and the people” (ch.7)⁴. The military nobility, in virtue of its eminent role in the series of campaigns ultimately leading to the Hungarian conquest of the Carpathian Basin at the end of the ninth century, was thus identified as the *communitas Hungarorum* (ch.42)⁵, a corporate legal person authorized not only to govern itself but also to be involved in decision-making on behalf of the *populus*. Laws were represented as deriving their binding force from the *assensus* of the *tota communitas* or its *sanior pars*, and a vocabulary of consent and pact was used in explaining the origin of the power of rulers among both the Huns and later the Hungarians (ch.19, ch.46)⁶. Already in regard of ancient times, endowed with prescriptive authority, Kézai referred to “the dominion of the Huns and Attila” (ch.15) in a sort of *politia commixta*⁷.

During the subsequent centuries the theoretical premisses of the corporate paradigm became fully integrated in the political thought and attitudes of the Hungarian elite, and ultimately received reinforcement from legal humanism in the *Tripartitum Opus Juris Consuetudinarii Incltyi Regni Hungariae* of István Werbőczy, a culmination of the centuries-old process of collecting “the customary law of noble Hungary”⁸. Though its enactment was prevented by a party of magnates at the diet of 1514, it was published in Vienna three years later, and became included in the Hungarian *Corpus Juris* in 1628. The most successful Hungarian book of all times went through over fifty editions in three centuries, during which period it was regarded as an authentic source of law

4 Anonymus, *A magyarok cselekedetei* – Kézai Simon, *A magyarok cselekedetei* [The deeds of the Hungarians] (Budapest: Osiris, 1999), 93.

5 *A magyarok cselekedetei*, 107.

6 *A magyarok cselekedetei*, 101, 109.

7 *A magyarok cselekedetei*, 99. For a detailed discussion of Kézai’s theory, see J. Szűcs, “Társadalomelmélet, politikai teória és történetiszemlélet Kézai *Gesta Hungarorum*ában (A nacionalizmus középkori genezisének elméleti alapjai)” [Social theory, political thought and historical approach in Kézai’s *Gesta Hungarorum*], in *Nemzet és történelem* [Nation and History] (Budapest: Gondolat, 1984), 413-556. Abbreviated German version in J. Szűcs, *Nation und Geschichte* (Köln: Böhlau, 1981).

8 For a discussion of the *Tripartitum* in this sense, see G. Hamza, “A *Tripartitum* mint jogforrás” [The *Tripartitum* as a source of law], in *Degré Alajos emlékkönyv* (Budapest: Unio, 1995), 77-85. More recently a comprehensive approach to the *Tripartitum* has been taken in the studies in M. Rady (ed.), *Custom and Law in Central Europe* (Cambridge Centre for European Law, 2003).

– as the only readily available and accessible compilation on the subject, and as a faithful representation of the views of the nobility. Werbőczy confirmed the principle fundamental to the self-understanding of the nobility: that the prelates, barons, magnates and nobles of the Kingdom of Hungary may differ in regard of their dignity and their role in promoting the public good, but they all enjoy *una eademque libertas*, one and the same liberty. While there is a reference to the idea that noble status arises from merit, this is immediately linked with the story of the *lex Scitica*, familiar from Kézai. Conscientiously answering the call to arms issued by the “captains elected by unanimous consent”, some people preserved their freedom while others were relegated in servitude. Also echoing Kézai’s *communitas* theory, in Werbőczy’s account the monarchy arose from the nobility’s voluntary consent to elect a king and transfer to him the power to govern and rule. “There is no prince but elected by the nobility, and there is no nobleman but ennobled by the king”; and the mutual bond expressed in this formula makes all nobles true “members of the Holy Crown”⁹.

This ‘gentry variety’ of the doctrine of the Holy Crown at the same time excluded all others (i.e. those who did not benefit from royal land donation) from privileges, and, by implication, membership in the political body. Chartered towns were more or less regularly invited to send deputies to diets and were occasionally referred to as members of the *regnum*, but Werbőczy clearly distinguished the privileges of burghers from the “golden liberty” of the nobles, the same across the *universitas*, as being merely particular to the localities where they constituted randomly assembled multitudes¹⁰. While most of this has to do with social exclusiveness, rather than the political right of the nobility to be involved in legislation, the thrust of Werbőczy’s argument and the few passages that specifically relate to the structure of the polity support the corporate model. Having repeated that after the power of governance had been transferred to the Holy Crown, kings continued to make law with the consent of the *populus*, he even offers the interesting paradox that whereas normally nobles and non-nobles are both embraced in this category, “for the present purposes we shall disregard non-nobles whom we understand under the name of *plebs*”¹¹. With all of this in mind it is clear that the references in the preface¹² to the ancient martial glory of the Hungarian *natio* served to reassert Kézai’s national paradigm.

Scythianism – which refers to both a theory of national origins and the corporate paradigm of the polity associated with such origins – was a staple of Hungarian

9 I. Werbőczy, *Hármaskönyve* (Budapest, 1897), 55-69. Here and below I refer to this Hungarian edition, but there is a recent English one too, S. Werbőczy, *The Customary Law of the Renowned Kingdom of Hungary: A Work in Three Parts (the Tripartitum)*, ed. and trans. by M. Rady with J. Bak and P. Banyó (Budapest and Idyllwild: CEU Press and Schlacks, 2005).

10 I. Werbőczy, *Hármaskönyve*, 391, 401.

11 I. Werbőczy, *Hármaskönyve*, 229.

12 I. Werbőczy, *Hármaskönyve*, 5-7.

late baroque noble consciousness, and was also underpinned by the traditional classification of the Hungarian language as one of the 'oriental' languages, along with Turkish and Mongolian, (and Hebrew, and Chaldean, and Arabic, and Armenian, and Persian ...). This classification became seriously challenged in a treatise on the kindred nature of the Hungarian and the Lappian language, written by János Sajnovics and recording the findings of a Nordic expedition whose original purpose was astronomic observation. Sajnovics (himself mainly interested in astronomy, not linguistics) set out on the journey in 1768, in the company of Maximilian Hell, Maria Theresa's imperial and royal astronomer in Vienna¹³. Hell was aware of the widespread preoccupation with Nordic cultures in contemporary Europe, and it was probably upon his encouragement that Sajnovics set out on an empirical investigation of the ethnographic features and the language of the natives in the region of their observation site, including the proposed kinship between Hungarian and Lappian.

Sajnovics' *Demonstratio Idioma Hungarorum et Lapponum idem esse* (Tyrnau, 1771) is considered a landmark in Finno-Ugrian historical linguistics whose methodologically innovative features – especially the fact that beyond vocabulary and tone, he put a great emphasis on grammatical comparison in demonstrating linguistic kinship – eclipse such dilettante aspects of the work as the derivation of the Lappians from northern China, and the further speculation on the kinship of Hungarian and Chinese (prompted by Hell and the recognition, in a Chinese vocabulary, that certain Chinese words when read backwards resemble Hungarian ones). It both fitted into the development of eighteenth-century linguistic studies, and gave them further impetus, which was usually recognized by contemporaries in Europe¹⁴. However, the argument presented in it had been 'in the air' for a considerable while. It is no wonder that its contemporary reception was far from being as uniformly hostile as it should have been its due according to the romantic perceptions of much subsequent historiography on the subject. Ever since the Hamburg scholar Martin Fogel (Fogelius), mainly on the basis of shared etymologies, first raised the idea seriously in *De lingua indole Finica Observationes* (1669), the notion of a Finno-Ugrian community of languages and

13 The two scholars were invited to lead an expedition to north of Norway by Christian VII, to carry out observations of the 1769 transit of Venus before the Sun. The purpose was to provide data which, collated with similar data from several dozens of other observation posts widely scattered over the globe, would yield an exact calculation of the distance of the Earth and the Sun. Hell published the pioneering results of their expedition both in *Ephemerides Astronomicae ad Meridianum Vindobonensem*, the journal of the Vienna observatory, and separately as *Observatio transitus Veneris ante discum Solis die 3 junii anno 1769* (Copenhagen, 1770). I discuss both the astronomical and the ethnographic-linguistic aspects of the expedition in L. Kontler, "Distances celestial and terrestrial. Maximilian Hell's Arctic expedition of 1768-1769: contexts and responses", in A. Holenstein, H. Steinke, M. Stuber (eds.), *The Practice of Knowledge and the Figure of the Savant in the 18th Century* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming). See also the literature cited there.

14 For a concise discussion in English, see Z. Vladár, "Sajnovics's *Demonstratio* and Gyarmathi's *Affinitas*: Terminology and methodology", *Acta Linguistica Hungarica*, 55, 1-2 (2008): 145-181.

the special relationship of Finnish, Lappian and Hungarian recurred in the work of scholars from several European countries: Swedes (including Philipp Johann von Strahlenberg, the first to focus on the comparison of the ‘most ancient’ stock of vocabulary: numerals, limbs, simple tools and actions), Germans (such as Leibniz), and Hungarians. Among the latter, the remarkable Lutheran antiquarian scholar Dávid Czvittinger was the first to embrace the Finno-Ugrian theory in his *Specimen Hungariae Litteratae* (1711). There were several others to prepare the ground for Sajnovics, including individuals who did so despite their uneasiness with the theory, such as Mátyás (Matej) Bél, who presumed to identify the remnants of the “Hungarian-Scythian” language in Finnish¹⁵. Most recently, in 1768, Johann Eberhard Fischer, a German scholar at that time attached to the University of Göttingen, but in his earlier career recruited to Russia as the secretary of the second Kamchatka (or “Bering”) expedition between 1733-1743 (himself involved in the fieldwork from 1740), completed and published his two-volume *Sibirische Geschichte von der Entdeckung Sibiriens bis auf die Eroberung dieses Landes durch die Russische Waffen* in Saint Petersburg. In this book he reiterated and further contextualized the claim already made in his *De origine Ungrorum* (1756, published 1770) that the Hungarians are a Finno-Ugrian people, and it soon became a reference work in German academic circles¹⁶. Another, much more famous Göttingen scholar, August Ludwig Schlözer, recognized Sajnovics’ achievement already in 1771, and later encouraged Sámuel Gyarmathi’s work, who pursued Finno-Ugrian research beyond Sajnovics in both methodological and empirical terms¹⁷.

15 In this sketch I am relying on P. Domokos, *Szkitiától Lappóniáig. A nyelvrokonság és az őstörténet kérdéskörének visszhangja* [From Scythia to Lapponia. Echoes on the problem of linguistic kinship and ancient history] (Budapest: Universitas, 1998).

16 Fischer’s role is usually understood as subsidiary to the better known German scholars recruited for the expedition, the naturalist Johann Georg Gmelin and especially the historian Gerhard Friedrich Müller. He is also recognized as having written at the request of August Ludwig Schlözer the *Vocabularium Sibiricum* (1747), deposited in manuscript as a gift in the Historical Institute in Göttingen, to be used extensively by later scholars there. The literature on Fischer is meagre, but see passing references in Vermeulen, “Anthropology in Colonial Contexts”, 22-25; Y. Slezkine, “Naturalists versus nations: 18th-century Russian scholars confront ethnic diversity”, *Representations*, No. 47, Special Issue: *National Cultures before Nationalism* (Summer 1994): 170-195, here 186-187. For the Kamchatka expeditions in the context of eighteenth-century Russian voyages of discovery, see E. Donnert, *Russia in the Age of Enlightenment* (Leipzig: Edition Leipzig, 1986; German original 1983), 95-114.

17 He showed that the similarity of suffixes, rather than words, is the really convincing proof of linguistic kinship, and on this basis demonstrated that the Manshi and the Chanti are the closest relatives of Hungarians, while the common Hungarian-Turkic vocabulary stems from intercourse during the migrations, not from supposed kinship. For Schlözer and his Hungarian connections, see É. H. Balázs, “A Magyar jözefinisták külföldi kapcsolataihoz” (About the international connections of Hungarian Josephinists), *Századok*, 97 (1963): 1187-1203; J. Poór, “August Ludwig Schlözer und seine ungarländischen Korrespondenz” in A. Duțu, E. Hösche und N. Oellers (eds.), *Brief und Briefwechsel in Mittel- und Osteuropa im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert* (Essen: Reimar Hobbing Verlag, 1989); I. Futaky, *Göttinga. A göttingeni Georg-August Egyetem magyarországi és erdélyi kapcsolatai a felvilágosodás idején és a reformkor kezdetén* [Göttingen. The Hungarian and Transylvanian contacts of the Georg-August University during the time of Enlightenment and the Reform Era] (Budapest: ELTE Levéltár, 2007).

In fact, strictly academic circles almost invariably welcomed Sajnovics' theory in Hungary itself too. Even the Jesuit György Pray, the greatest contemporary authority in historical research, felt compelled to modify his earlier views on the subject in his *Dissertationes historico-criticae in annales veteres hunnorum, avarum et hungarorum* (1775) – although by simply claiming a Hun pedigree for Finno-Ugrian peoples as well¹⁸. It must also be added that the only *linguist* to champion the alternative concept in Sajnovics' lifetime, György Kalmár, published his relevant work nearly simultaneously with the *Demonstratio*, so his *Prodrum idiomatis Schytico-Mogorico-Chuno-(seu Hunno-) Avarici, sive apparatus criticus ad linguam Hungaricam* could not have been a response to Sajnovics¹⁹. In other words, the issue here was not (yet) that of an academic debate, the more so as contemporary scholars used the terms “linguistic family” or “linguistic kinship”, if ever, metaphorically at best, and without any clearcut frontlines between, say, the Scytho-Hungarian and the Finno-Ugrian “schools”²⁰. There was, however, one important and influential group on the public intellectual scene, which acutely realized the *political* stakes of the matter, and reacted accordingly: the men of letters of noble origin who dominated that scene before the 1780s and included, besides figures like Orczy and Fekete, Ábrahám Barcsay, whose poetry gave expression to sensibility as well as anti-court political sentiment, and György Bessenyei, the emblematic figure of the Hungarian Enlightenment as a whole. Together they gave voice to the sentiments of a sizeable elite group whose cultural and intellectual horizons, thanks to their education as members of Maria Theresa's famous Hungarian Guards²¹ were broadly European, but whose vision of the future restoration of the erstwhile greatness of the Hungarian nation was predicated on galvanising their own class to a new dynamism through modern

18 D. Kosáry, *Művelődés a XVIII. századi Magyarországon* [A cultural history of Hungary in the eighteenth century] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1980), 575. In the abridged English edition, there are short summaries of eighteenth-century historical and linguistic scholarship, as well as the literary and cultural significance of the noble “bodyguards” (see below): D. Kosáry, *Culture and Society in Eighteenth-Century Hungary* (Budapest: Corvina, 1987), 149-154, 160-162, 195-200.

19 Z. Éder, “Újabb szempontok a *Demonstratio* hazai fogadtatásának kérdéséhez” [New perspectives on the reception of the *Demonstratio*], in Z. Éder, *Túl a Duna-tájon. Fejezetek a magyar művelődéstörténet európai kapcsolatai köréből* (Budapest: Mundus, 1999), 49.

20 B. Hegedűs, “Kalmár György a magyar nyelv származásáról” [György Kalmár on the origin of the Hungarian language], in I. Csörsz Rumen, B. Hegedűs and G. Tüskés (eds.), *Historia litteraria a XVIII. században* (Budapest: Universitas Kiadó, 2006), 300.

21 On the Hungarian Guards, with references to the figures mentioned, see L. Deme, “Maria Theresa's Noble Lifeguards and the Rise of the Hungarian Enlightenment and Nationalism”, in B. Király and W. S. Dillard (eds.), *The East Central European Officer Corps, 1740-1920s: Social Origins, Selection, Education, and Training* (Boulder, CO: Columbia University Press, 1988), 197-212. The Hungarian language literature is respectable. However, historians have hitherto largely yielded the field to literary scholars, whose main preoccupation has been the rise of vernacular literature, and are yet fully to discover the subject and approach it with their own questions. The standard monograph is F. Bíró, *A felvilágosodás korának magyar irodalma* [Hungarian literature in the Age of Enlightenment] (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 1994), esp. 69-92, 161-185.

letters and knowledge practices. This was a vision of improvement which, in their own view, depended on maintaining a discourse of identity built on a prestigious pedigree and social exclusiveness, both under serious attack from the mid-1760s on by the Viennese court and government, towards which their attitudes were therefore highly ambivalent. In this atmosphere, the implications of Finno-Ugricism – understood by them as not only linguistic but also ethnic kinship – seemed to them highly disturbing.

Barcsay's poetry abounds in rebuffs addressed to Sajnovics whose "yoke" was perceived by him a vital threat to ancient liberties, established on the cornerstone of the idea that Hungarians are "the valiant grandsons of Scythians". Similarly, in his "The Errors of Star-Watcher Sajnovits and Hell Being Refuted", Orczy casts doubt on the allegation that the progeny of Alexander the Great's brave opponents should be related to mere Lappians munching on dried fish – but recommends "the astronomer" to return to these "kind relatives" of his: a hint at Sajnovics' Slovak ethnic background. This tacit reference to Slavic mischief as a possible background to Sajnovics' work leads us to the political context. Just a few years earlier, the diet of 1764-1765 ended in bitter estrangement between the Hungarian nobility and the Viennese government. At this assembly the Hungarian estates, jealous of their privileges, but also infuriated by a series of publications apparently commissioned by the government and directly challenging those privileges, refused the ruler's demand for increased war tax, a general overhaul of the entire system of taxation, and military reform at their own expense. These were parts of a comprehensive package of administrative and social transformations which drew inspiration from the work of the newly established chairs of cameralist sciences and natural law at the University of Vienna, hallmarked by the names of Karl Anton von Martini and Joseph von Sonnenfels²². In response to the estates' reluctance, Maria Theresa's government decided to implement its plan of abandoning the dialogue with them, and neglecting the diet in its future pursuit of the much needed reforms²³.

During the debates of the diet and afterwards, court propaganda on behalf of the proposed measures received a boost from a treatise by Adam Franz Kollár, *De originibus et usu perpetuo potestatis legislativae circa sacra apostolicorum regum Hungariae*. Kollár, who was proud of his Slovak commoner origins, called into question many of the political and social privileges of the Hungarian ecclesiastical

22 On these initiatives, see K.-H. Osterloh, *Joseph von Sonnenfels und die österreichische Reformbewegung im Zeitalter des aufgeklärten Absolutismus* (Lübeck-Hamburg: Mathiesen Verlag, 1970); Ernst Wangermann, *The Austrian Achievement 1700-1800* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1973), ch. 4; H. Reinalter (ed.), *Joseph von Sonnenfels* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1988); G. Klingenstein, "Between Mercantilism and Physiocracy. Stages, Modes and Functions of Economic Theory in the Habsburg Monarchy, 1748-1763", in C. Ingrao (ed.), *State and Society in Early Modern Austria* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1994), 181-214.

23 R. J. W. Evans, "Maria Theresa and Hungary", in H. M. Scott (ed.), *Enlightened Absolutism. Reform and Reformers in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 189-207.

and secular elites, criticizing Werbőczy in especially sharp terms, and causing great consternation among the clergy and the nobility. Characteristically, Kollár's anti-feudal polemics was readily associated by this constituency with anti-Hungarian sentiment, identified in his commentary on *Hungaria*, a work by the sixteenth-century humanist Miklós Oláh (Nicolaus Olahus), which Kollár edited and published in 1763²⁴. These comments, which refer to the statistical minority of Hungarians in the Kingdom of Hungary and predict the gradual demise of the language as well as the nation itself, became European currency through being quoted in Schlözer's *Allgemeine nordische Geschichte*, which in turn seems to have inspired Herder's famous 'prophecy' to the same effect. The latter's prediction that the Hungarian nation, amidst the "ocean" of Slavic peoples, will inevitably perish, was underpinned by his theory (available in publication for the first time also in the late 1760s and early 1770s) on the crucial role of language in the formation of human identities. Herder claimed that "all conditions of awareness in [man] are linguistic" – thus, as language acquisition took place in communities, reason and the capacity of thinking, the very distinguishing feature of the human animal, was bound to have as many modes as there were human communities²⁵. Members of the Hungarian intellectual elite had good reasons for being attentive to his views, and also for taking them as an alarm bell. These developments also established Schlözer's notoriety as an 'anti-Hungarian', apparently confirmed by the fact that his social and political views were based on the same foundations as those held by the Viennese reformers – no wonder that the next, 'Josephist', generation of young enlightened Hungarians cultivated his courses at the University of Göttingen²⁶. In any case, by championing the Lappian cause, for an influential segment of the contemporary enlightened political public, Sajnovics and his mentor Hell seemed to be the Jesuit hirelings of a hostile court, employed in a plot which also involved willing collaborators from the camps of old and new national enemies, Germans and Slavs²⁷.

24 Cf. Evans, "Maria Theresa and Hungary", 196 ff.; D. Dümmerth, "Herder jóslata és forrásai" [Herder's prophecy and its sources], *Filológiai Közlöny* (1963); D. Dümmerth, "Kollár Ádám problémája" [The Ádám Kollár problem], *Filológiai Közlöny* (1967).

25 J. G. Herder, *Treatise on the Origin of Language* [1772], in *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. M. N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 131, 150. See also *Fragments on Recent German Literature* [1767-1768], in *Philosophical Writings*, 49.

26 On the central role of the University of Göttingen as a point of orientation and a source of inspiration for the rank-and-file of Hungarian Josephists, see É. H. Balázs, *Berzeviczy Gergely, a reformpolitikus (1763-1795)* [Gergely Berzeviczy, the political reformer] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1967), 86-117. Some of the argument is worked into the same author's *Hungary and the Habsburgs 1765-1800. An Experiment in Enlightened Absolutism* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1997).

27 A Google search on Hell and Sajnovics demonstrates in a few seconds that this representation is still alive and well among a somewhat less enlightened segment of the political public. Late eighteenth-century attitudes to Jesuits, both before and after the dissolution of the order, were diverse. On the one hand, in scholarly circles there was a great deal of mutual respect

In many ways, György Bessenyei (1746-1811) is a category of his own in the history of the Hungarian Enlightenment and national awakening. The scion of a gentry family in eastern Hungary, he was educated as a member of Maria Theresa's above-mentioned Hungarian Guards, and rose to literary fame as a still young man in the 1770s, with a comprehensive programme urging the improvement of public happiness through the cultivation of the arts and sciences, of historical and political knowledge in the vernacular²⁸. His own translations from universal histories by Voltaire and Millot, and global geographies by Malzet and Vaissete, were put in the service of this end: his suggestion that “after all, we had better followed in the footsteps of the greater world” in effect meant that in the study of man and society, the “new learning” predicated on history should be raised on a par with or in place of theology and jurisprudence. With these premisses in mind, Bessenyei wrote several ‘philosophical histories’, whose principles he embraced and set out as follows:

When one reflects on the common rise of a Country, one ought to consider ... whether the great sciences make any progress? Whether the arts and crafts prosper? And whether it has found outlets through which its products and superfluities could be traded to neighbouring Nations, thus augmenting its internal wealth? These comprise the first consideration and knowledge of a Country, wherein the character of the arrangements, negotiations and obligations towards its King in regard of the holding and taxation of property, and the liberty or subjection of persons, must also not be overlooked²⁹.

Accordingly, in his “Hungarian Spectator” (*A magyar néző*, 1778), Bessenyei surveyed the history of the world, from a Hungarian perspective, in a thoroughly Voltairian framework. He proposed to give an account of the successive stages of the “mitigation” of rude manners, resulting from religion and learning, but also claimed that military glory and polite letters, rather than being antagonistic, could mutually supplement one another³⁰. This, of course, nicely dovetailed with his overall conviction that *vera nobilitas* could derive from proficiency in letters

and communication between Jesuits and Protestant scholars, and even personally expressed sympathy by the latter on the occasion of the dissolution. On the other hand, in the public-political domain the old Protestant topoi about the ‘conspiratorial inclination’ of the Jesuits remained common currency.

28 On Bessenyei's project and its different aspects, see F. Bíró, “A szétszórt rendszer (Bessenyei György programjáról)”, in S. Csorba, K. Margócsy (eds.), *A szétszórt rendszer. Tanulmányok Bessenyei György életművéről* [The fragmented system. Studies on the oeuvre of György Bessenyei] (Nyíregyháza: Bessenyei Kiadó, 1998), 25-36. On some aspects of Bessenyei's work in the genre of philosophical history, see Penke, *Filozofikus világtörténetek és történeftilozófiák*, 176-183, 211-218.

29 György Bessenyei, *Összes művei: A Holmi* [Complete works: Paraphernalia], ed. F. Bíró (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1983), 323-325.

30 Bessenyei, *Magyarság. A Magyar Néző* [Hungariandom. The Hungarian Spectator] (Budapest, 1932), 17.

as well as armsbearing, a claim he made to urge a re-evaluation of the social roles of the nobility, which he still regarded as the chief repository of improvement – although it also depended on “emulation between the great and the little”³¹. Then, in “The Customs, Manners, Modes of Government, Laws and Important Deeds of the Hungarian Nation” (*A magyar nemzetnek szokásairul, erköltseirül, uralkodásának modjairul, törvényeirül, és nevezetesb viselt dolgairul, 1778*) he again provided a set of present-oriented historical reflections, rather than a narrative of events, intended as a historical underpinning of his programme. Achievement by the sword and by the pen are represented, in a somewhat laboured fashion, as two equally feasible paths to ennoblement – although Bessenyei held that among certain circumstances, such as in eleventh-century Hungary and Europe as a whole, the one took precedence over the other. His point is, ultimately, the parallel development of society in Hungary and Europe in the past, and the consequent chance to re-establish synchronicity for Hungary with European progress in the present. (It is tempting to recognize here an association with the notion advanced by Montesquieu, with whose works Bessenyei was familiar, that the shared ‘deep structures’ of European societies predestine them to progress towards a similar present and future, in spite of the empirical variations within the overall system of monarchy based on ‘intermediary powers’.) “It seems as if the Hungarian nobility originated fully from warfare. It could not have been otherwise, for in old times it was impossible to rise to nobility by writing and the pen in a nation, which could neither write nor read, but only fought, triumphed, plundered and ruled”. But he goes on immediately to say that “[A]ll nations in the world, which have since developed arts and sciences, began their nobilities in this way [...]”³². An appendix on “The Form of the Whole of Europe in the Eleventh Century” (*Egész Európa’ formája a XI^{di}k Százban* – excerpted from Voltaire’s *Essai sur les moeurs*, ch. 39-46) is intended to demonstrate that in those times Hungarians were not any more barbarous than other European nations. “If you observe only Hungary in the eleventh century, you will find that it dealt improperly with its kings; but was there anything other nations did not commit, although they had been Christians for a long time?”³³. Religious war and forced conversion is also described as the order of the day. The ubiquity of violent passions and ignorance was directly related to the overall rusticity of manners: “The sum of customs and manners was excessive eating and drinking, pillage, recklessness in combat, and cruelty”³⁴.

Thus far this is more or less the standard Enlightenment narrative of the feudal past, with the potential of the assessment of the present in equally standard terms of enlightened patriotism. Bessenyei indeed hinted at the anachronistic

31 Bessenyei, *A Holmi*, 16.

32 Bessenyei, *Összes művei: Társadalombölcseleti írások 1771-1778* [Complete works: Writings on social theory, 1771-1778], ed. P. Kulcsár (Budapest: Argumentum-Akadémiai Kiadó, 1992), 96.

33 Bessenyei, *Társadalombölcseleti írások*, 164.

34 Bessenyei, *Társadalombölcseleti írások*, 163.

distribution of social power and privilege in eighteenth-century Hungary: in the beginning, “the ploughman paid taxes to the bearer of arms in return for his own protection. So, in old times everything was based on services; but since servants became masters without bearing arms, the one part always obeys, and the other always commands. [...] This great nobility was once a standing army; now they lay idle in their homes”³⁵. Bessenyei, however, nowhere arrived at the explicit conclusion that noble privileges, being no longer justified, ought to be eliminated, although – as a commissioner of Hungarian Protestants in Vienna – he was more inclined to a compromise with the policies urged at court in social and national as well as confessional issues than most others. On the contrary: assigning an unassailable social pre-eminence to the nobility on account of its historical roles, what he sought was a new justification for these roles, to be found in superior learning, while he still regarded the gulf that separated the nobility from the peasantry as unbridgeable.

He supported this from Werbőczy in his “Of the Course of the Law” (*A’ törvénynek útja*, 1777). As a matter of fact, as the whole of this treatise addressed the relationship of the nation and the ruler in law making, its topic and argument both closely followed Werbőczy, whose work Bessenyei was obviously thoroughly familiar with. His claim that the people raised “captains” and masters above themselves through the voluntary consent of all, echoes the passages of the *Tripartitum* as well as Kézai’s *Gesta* to the same effect – although without explicit reference to the Huns and the presumed continuity with the Hungarians, in its political terminology recalling the staples of Scythianism³⁶. The same applies to the justification of differences between the ‘people’ and the ‘common folk’: more generally, in terms of voluntary subordination of the cowardly to the brave warriors, and specifically by reference to forfeiture of right as a result of rebellion (almost a word-by-word quotation of Werbőczy’s argument from the consequences of the 1514 peasant war)³⁷.

The ideological stakes of the available discourses of origin were thus formidable, and Bessenyei was no less worried about the consequences of the theory put forward by Sajnovics on the basis of linguistic evidence (especially in combination with those of the Herderian ‘prophecy’). Though his relevant statement – significantly enough, contained in a work entitled “The Legal Status of Hungary” (*Magyarországnak törvényes állása*) – derives from the times of his retirement to his estate, some thirty years after Sajnovics’ treatise burst onto the scene, in it he advanced views most probably first developed and discussed

35 Bessenyei, *Társadalombölcseleti írások*, 153.

36 Bessenyei, *Társadalombölcseleti írások*, 175.

37 Bessenyei, *Társadalombölcseleti írások*, 177. For historical studies in Hungary in the age of Bessenyei, see Kosáry, *Művelődés*, 571-584; for the views of Bessenyei and other contemporary writers on history, Bíró, *A felvilágosodás*, 161-186; and Penke, *Filozófikus világtörténetek és történetfilozófiák*, 161-182.

with other opponents, back in the 1770s. (Even though, it must be added that in *The Customs...* he also claimed it was not his intention to derive the Hungarian nobility from the Scythians, because “the foundations of the laws of our land go back to Saint Stephen”)³⁸. His criticism is expressed in considerable detail. Bessenyei bluntly claimed that “it is impossible to displace something of such a great consequence, on the basis of so little a circumstance [as language], and set it on a different footing”, and suggested that “instead of words, one should consider moral character and manners”. This lens shows the ‘Scythian’ and the ‘Lappon’ to be separated by a yawning gap: in the subsequent representation, the latter becomes the target of consistent ‘othering’ by Bessenyei. In contrast to the people of Attila, marked by “its thirst for triumph, valour and glory, as well as its sagacity required for domination”, the ‘Lappon’ was deformed in his outward appearance as well as his manners: on top of his “ugliness of form, the Lappon is vile and fearful, it is such a subterranean mole of a Nation, which loathes the fight, and never wages war”³⁹.

We are dealing here with an interesting paradox. Bessenyei defended a view of national origins which was scientifically obsolete and was under challenge by one that was sound. The former theory, Scythianism, was deployed by him, in the best traditions of Enlightenment social science, with reference to the category of manners and virtues (or the lack of them), while at the same time in the polemic against ‘Lappianism’ coming dangerously close to being conveyed in racial terms. To be sure, this combination was by no means unusual among eighteenth-century scholars: suffice it to refer to the derogatory observations of Cornelius de Pauw to the natives of North America⁴⁰ or – in an academic environment with which late eighteenth-century Hungarians were intimately familiar – the unflattering classification of the ‘Mongol’ race (supposedly giving rise to the peoples of Eastern Asia, North America and Africa) by the Göttingen historian Christoph Meiners⁴¹. However, language, although obviously an important racial

38 Bessenyei, *Társadalombölcseleti írások*, 96.

39 György Bessenyei, *Összes művei. Prózái munkák, 1802-1804* [Complete works: Prose writings], ed. G. Kókay (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1986), 231-235. The passage is almost a literal translation from the national characters in Dom J. Vaissete’s *Géographie historique, ecclésiastique et civile, ou description des toutes les parties du Globe terrestre* (Paris, 1755).

40 For the classic exploration on de Pauw’s thesis on the inferiority of native Americans and the debate provoked by it, see A. Gerbi, *The Dispute of the New World. The History of a Polemic, 1750-1900* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973), Ch. 3; for developments upon Gerbi’s perspective, J. Cañizares Esguerra, *How to Write the History of the New World: Historiographies, Epistemologies and Identities in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), Ch. 1; S. Sebastiani, *I limiti del progresso. Razza e genere nell’Illuminismo scozzese* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008), esp. Ch. 3-4.

41 F. Lotter, “Christoph Meiners und die Lehre von der unterschiedlichen Wertigkeit der Menschenrassen”, in H. Bockmann, H. Wellenreuther (eds.), *Geschichtswissenschaft in Göttingen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987), 30-75; L. Marino, *Praeceptores Germaniae. Göttingen 1770-1820* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), 110-120.

marker – arguably a more inherent one than manners, acquired through socio-cultural intercourse – did no more seriously enter into their considerations than in those of Bessenyei. This sort of ‘enlightened racism’ was tailor-made to the Hungarian writer’s agenda, a programme of elevating the cultural level of the country, in the conviction that while martial valour is capable of being translated into virtue in letters, dumb and smelly fishermen would never attain to this. Kinship with the latter was therefore repudiated in the most violent terms of othering, together with the phenomenon of language as representing any *analytical* value, albeit – to amplify our paradox – its cultivation, as a *tool* of improvement, was deemed by Bessenyei indispensable for the achievement of his ends. However much he claimed, famously, that “as long as her own language remains uncultivated, no Nation in this World will become learned in foreign tongues”⁴² he retained his scepticism about language as the constitutive element of community. Hungarian enlightened patriots like him continued to insist on the role of ‘virtue’ in cementing the community, only they urged that virtue in arms ought to be replaced by ‘virtue in letters’, i.e., promoting improvement. The scientifically sound Finno-Ugrian theory on the other hand gave a boost to ethno-linguistic definitions of nationhood, which started to emerge in the context of efforts by the same enlighteners who dismissed that theory but still fostered the cultivation of the mother tongue with a view to the requirements of socio-cultural progress. Conversely, Hungarian ethno-nationalism, which received an initial impetus from the discovery of Finno-Ugrian theory in the sense that it placed language in the focus of belonging, has yet continued – to this day – to take immense satisfaction in the Scythian myth.

⁴² Bessenyei, *A Holmi*, 32.

