
In a circular letter written in the spring of 1789, Michael Brukenthal, commissioner of the Fogaras (Făgăraș) district, sought answers to the question of what superstitions and rites existed among the people of the region. Three Saxon Lutheran and three Hungarian Calvinist pastors, one Hungarian Unitarian minister, and one Greek Catholic priest sent their reply to Brukenthal’s request. The book reviewed here has taken on the task of publishing this rather unique source. Although this source material has already known to scientific researchers, it has been only partially published, and thus the source value of this full publication is enormous. Furthermore, the diversity of the respondents already hints at the fact that the source introduces the folk beliefs of multiconfessional and multiethnic Transylvania in the late eighteenth century.

As one can see in the very detailed introductory study of Ambrus Miskolczy (pp.13–130), covering a long list of secondary literature, he situates the source in the relevant academic discourse, and then discusses in detail how the manifestation of folk belief was judged by the masterminds of the Enlightenment and why superstitions were paid remarkable attention. This train of thought is clearly summarized as follows: “superstition played the same role in the Enlightenment’s world of ideas as the evil in religious views that was condemned by the same given ideas. The Enlightenment’s image of superstition – due to its character as a substitute for evil – almost took on a transcendent character; however, it was present everywhere in its true countenance – according to everyone’s own standards” (p.18). Miskolczy mainly relies on the radical thinkers of the French Enlightenment, yet, later on we see that the thinkers of the Enlightenment living in the (Catholic and Protestant) ecclesiastical milieu and having more moderate views condemned with the same vehemence the superstitious behavior occurring among their fellow members of the congregation.

Thereafter, by following the themes present in the source material, the study deals with the concepts relating to witchcraft and vampires. Concerning witches, it states that in the folk belief of the early modern period, the belief in the existence of witches was present irrespective of denomination, although the Catholic and Protestant interpretation of witches differed in many respects.
While the former relied on the famous Malleus Maleficarum, the latter focused mainly on the punishments for wizardry and oracle seeking in the Old Testament. “Witch-hunting is a crisis phenomenon. The community that became unbalanced searched for and found a scapegoat accompanied by an ideology and a proper background. It all happened when it was struck by an epidemic or a weather catastrophe, the concomitant phenomenon of which was the political world’s upheaval,” states Miskolczy, in harmony with the results of the historical and ethnographic research dealing with the belief in witches (p.21).

Following Descartes and Spinoza, the philosophers of the Enlightenment the belief in witches among superstitions against which one had to show determination in the same way as against other harmful beliefs. However, the “disappearance” of the witches was followed by the “occurrence” of the vampires. Although the belief in vampires was rare in the earlier centuries, at the beginning of the eighteenth century it became a mass phenomenon. Miskolczy blames the media for this change, and then on the basis of vivid examples he shows how belief in vampires became an exotic belief coming from the East among the contemporaries. “Our vampires came in useful for the Enlightenment, since they were needed for the cult of light. Light does not exist without darkness; the self-worship of the Western civilization needs the barbaric East” (p.32). The introduction discusses many Hungarian cases in detail and refers to the fact that contemporary administrative leaders considered the belief in vampires to be a danger to national health due to the exhumation of corpses. They mainly wanted to counter it with the help of medicine and to restrain it with measures taken by the authorities. The author touches upon the stance of the Orthodox Church by calling attention to the conduct of Orthodox bishops in the Romanian voivodships, who also intervened in the exhumation of corpses from the second half of the seventeenth century. Besides, in Transylvania, due to the closeness and interdependence between the Orthodox and the Calvinist churches, the heads of the former church were especially encouraged to keep a distance from superstitious customs.

The second large thematic part of the introduction draws conclusions based on the sources. On the one hand, Miskolczy emphasizes Joseph II’s determined actions against superstitions, on the other hand he clearly refutes the idea that the published sources were written by the order of the monarch. He names Michael Brukenthal, commissioner of the Fogaras district, as the initiator of the inquest, and describes him as an official who talks many languages, has links to the Freemasons, and has far-reaching connections.
Following this, and relying on the available information, the reader is introduced to the pastors who answered Brukenthal’s questionnaire. Sámuel Köpeczi Bodos, a Calvinist pastor, is highlighted due to the more detailed information that could be collected about him, mainly owing to his memoirs. It appears that similarly to Brukenthal, Köpeczi was also interested in the question of superstitions, which augmented his most detailed report to the commissioner. The villages where he was a parish priest are regarded as good sources due to their mixed ethnicity and denominational constitution. In his memoir, Köpeczi mentions Joseph II many times, from which it becomes clear that in the early days, much like the majority of Protestant intellectuals, he too belonged among the staunch adherents of the monarch. However, after the radical reforms were initiated, he gradually deserted him. Miskolczy could gather less information about the other respondents; it is known that Ioan Halmaghi, the Greek Catholic episcopal vicar of Fogaras, opposed religious superstitions in his circular letters.

According to Miskolczy, the parish priests who presented these reports can somehow be considered as “anthropologists living in the field” (p.84), since by living among the people, they had firsthand information about the superstitious acts. Nevertheless Protestant and Greek Catholic priests, who generally had a more in-depth theological education, were separated from their congregations to a greater extent than the Orthodox priests, who only occasionally received such education, and thus more greatly resembled their flocks in terms of living standards and beliefs. According to Miskolczy, herein lies the border between the West and East, which explains why many of the superstitious occurrences – listed as a catalogue – were confessed with shame by the pastors, or they did not detail them due to the same feelings of shame.

The introductory study also presents examples of superstitions mentioned in the source. He draws the following conclusion from them: “The details of the superstition inquiry form an overall picture that we have not known so far; besides, the true-life reports bring the surviving reality of the past nearer” (p.95). Indeed, there are magical texts written on a slip of paper, beliefs relating to witches, various alliances made with evil powers, and cases relating to vampires. Finally, the reader can get to know Joseph Karl Eder, a Transylvanian Saxon learned official, with whose assistance Brukenthal’s collection made it to the National Széchényi Library.

The introduction, which constitutes almost half of the volume, is followed by the source material. It starts with Brukenthal’s questionnaire, which was addressed to the pastors in Hungarian as well as in German (pp.131–36).
Then, there are the answers, written either in Hungarian or in German, but with one exception (pp.136–293). Ioan Halmaghi worded his answer in Latin, which is published in its original form, as well as the original translation made by István Fazekas (pp.187–208). Explanatory notes to the sources are provided by Miskolczy and he also compiled notes for the foreign and dialect words and abbreviations occurring in the Hungarian texts (pp.294–97).

In conclusion, it can be stated that Ambrus Miskolczy has excelled at presenting this rich collection of Transylvanian folk beliefs from the eighteenth century. The lengthy introduction, which could stand on its own as an independent monograph, uses the specific topic of the questionnaire only as a starting point: it discusses the question of superstition in the early modern era in a European context by covering English, German, French, and Romanian secondary literature. The analysis of secondary literature is a much-needed addition to the Hungarian historical literature. This publication brings the reader much closer to the folk beliefs of this multiethnic and multiconfessional region.

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