
The monograph by Sándor Lázs is the continuation of and a significant supplement to one of his earlier works (“Nyulak szigeti domonkos apácák olvasmányainak korszerűsége,” in “Látjátok feleim”: Magyar nyelvemlékek a kezdetektől a 16. század elejéig, ed. by Edit Madas [2009]). The aim of the book is to explore the effects of the monastic reform on the convents of the Dominicans, Poor Clares, and Premonstratensians at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries through a comprehensive examination of the existing vernacular codices. However, while introducing the codices, Lázs also touches on the roles of the monks, who wrote the codices, in shaping and establishing the education of the nuns. An important strength of the book is that it situates its topic in an international context by continuously pointing out well-elaborated parallels with monastic reforms in the monasteries in southern Germany and their effects.

In addition to the short preface and the conclusion, there are six chapters in the monograph. The first five can be regarded as an introduction, i.e. a sort of short but detailed guide which helps the reader better understand the topic. The architectural surroundings of the nuns (pp.15–31) and the monks (pp.33–57), who were at the head of the monastic reforms and provided pastoral care for the convents, are briefly described. The Latin and vernacular literature in the German convents is discussed in a separate chapter, and through this analogy, Lázs introduces the situation in Hungary, which is less known in secondary literature the sources (pp.59–83). The relationship between the monastic reform and literature is elucidated in a separate chapter (pp.85–103); the scriptorium, which created the codices in the early vernacular (already Hungarian) literature, is also introduced, as is the library which housed the volumes of the monastery and the two stages (public and private) for the use of the codices (pp.105–38).

The most important chapter in the book is the sixth (pp.139–389), which analyses the 44 examined codices (not all of which were used by nuns) in detail according to different genres. In his analysis of certain genres (catechismal texts, legal texts, liturgical texts, Bible translations, periscopes, sequences, hymns,
cantios, examples, legends, preaches, treatises, passions, and private prayers), Lázs often quotes certain codices, and this enables his reader immediately to check his argumentation and his characterization of the codices. It would have been preferable to have provided short summaries at the end of the subchapters clarifying the content.

Certain codex-extracts are analyzed on the basis of the circumstances in which they were used, such as in a community of nuns or during a private devotion of certain nuns. Where the place of use of certain codices could be determined, Lázs separately examines the source-collection practices of the various monastic orders, and he offers a comparison. He thus is able to draw further conclusions about the veneration of saints among various orders and the private prayer practice of certain nuns.

In the conclusion (pp.391–403), Lázs summarizes the subchapters, and he then explains the necessity of his genre-based analysis. In his assessment, a proper comparison of the Hungarian and southern German monastic codex-literature can only be done on the basis of such an analysis. In the second half of this final chapter, Lázs challenges two concepts (“church society” and “monastic culture”) that are familiar to medievalists. His aim is to call attention to the fact that neither “church society” nor “monastic culture” can be regarded as discrete units: they were in constant interaction with the secular world and its culture.

Finally, Lázs draws an important conclusion concerning the education of the nuns living in convents in the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern period. He contends that the sources suggest that in the convents of the Poor Clares in Pozsony (Bratislava) and Nagyszombat (Trnava) an independent vernacular literature did not develop at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, because in the seventeenth century the nuns did not use their own vernacular books: they read the codices that had been brought by the nuns of Margaret Island, Óbuda, and Somlóvásárhely, who were fleeing the advancing Ottoman forces. In his view, there were two reasons for this: first, the daughters of the citizens of Upper Hungary lived in these convents, and they laid no claim to codices in Hungarian since their mother tongue was German; second, the monastic reform was not implemented in these institutions. In these convents, the abovementioned situation changed only at the beginning of the seventeenth century, when the Hungarian nuns who had fled the Ottomans took their books and the monastic reform finally took hold.

The conclusion is followed by a list of sources, consulted literature (pp.405–37), and a detailed index (pp.447–59), which will make the use of the bulky
volume easier for researchers and for anyone interested in the topic. The charter in the appendix (pp.439–45) further adds to the value of the monograph; it contains the pericope signs of the Codex of Munich, which may have served as a model for the Hungarian periscopes, and the sketches and reconstruction plans (related to the topic of the first chapter) of an ideal monastery building and the Convent of the Blessed Virgin of Margaret Island.

In conclusion, the volume meets high scholarly standards and will be useful to historians and literary historians interested in this topic. The abundant footnotes testify to a comprehensive knowledge of the Hungarian and international secondary literature. The topic of the monograph is important, and it raises questions for further research, so it may well motivate other scholars to reflect on its findings, undertake further research, and launch fruitful debates on the topic.

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