

BABEŞ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF LETTERS
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF HUNGAROLOGY STUDIES

**Writings from/about Tamás Borsos: Literary and Anthropological
Analyses of an Early Modern *Oeuvre***

ABSTRACT

SCIENTIFIC COORDINATOR:

prof. dr. Gábor Csilla

PHD-STUDENT:

Molnár (Domokos) Zsófia

CLUJ-NAPOCA

2025

Keywords: Tamás Borsos, early modern literature, documents by ambassadors, historical anthropology, anthropology of writing, philological analysis, history of the editions, *ars apodemica*, *speculum regium* (mirrors for princes), *speculum legatorum* (mirrors for ambassadors)

My doctoral thesis focuses on the *oeuvre* of Tamás Borsos, a 16th–17th-century Transylvanian magistrate and more princes' ambassador at different Ottoman courts, mainly the Sublime Porte in Constantinople. As an author, he left behind many works related to his diplomatic career: letters, memoirs, travelogues and a testament. Up to the present day, these have been mainly looked upon as historical sources bearing witness of the early modern era. In my paper I aim to change this conviction and practice and analyse the texts as literary works of art. Being aware of the (temporal) distance that divides the horizon of the writing from that of the interpretation, near the tools of literary investigation I make use of those elaborated by anthropology, in order to gain as elaborate and faithful lectures as possible.

Chapters 1 and *2* of the dissertation contain therefore an overview of the author's and his lifework's position in the preceding scientific research, respectively clarify in detail my research methods and the structure of the paper. Each of the following *Chapters 3–7* discuss then a topic relevant to the creation of the memorialist.

Borsos' activity as a writer cannot be separated from his studies. Hence *Chapter 3* opens the body of the thesis by summing up the few already known facts about his formation. As I fit the name of Máté Toroczkai, a Transylvanian radical nonadorantist thinker, in the list of Borsos' probable spiritual masters, I follow a double goal; firstly, I draw the attention upon a verisimilar source of the memorialist's antitrinitarian commitment, and secondly, I stress the importance of tangential cultural influences in the maturation of his authorship instead of over-emphasizing the role of renown *auctores*, i.e. authorities.

In *Chapter 4* I review all of Tamás Borsos' works and their main editions so as to gain an image as full as possible of the length and contents of his *oeuvre*. This task is indispensable, not only because almost a century has passed since the last nigh complete edition of his creation (*Vásárhelytől a Fényes Portáig*, ed. László Kocziány, Bucharest: Kriterion, 1968/1972²), and thus this volume includes many out-of-date instances (e.g. regarding the storage place of the

manuscripts), but also because this version could only appear containing expurgated text versions, due to the socialist era's dogmatic cultural policy. Here I call the attention upon an unknown fact; namely that not a single, but two early modern copies of Borsos' testament are preserved. In the closing of this chapter I discuss his letters, arguing in favour of the inclusion of the shorter texts of this genre into the complete *oeuvre*, near the longer and better-known works. Only this way may the author's attitude towards writing and his habits as a penman be revealed thoroughly.

The next *Chapter 5* is dedicated to philology; it concentrates on the manuscripts and formulates new results based on hand writing. In this section I make first of all clear the number and identity of the persons who put down the texts, demonstrating that the author himself wrote down the vast majority of the material, but applying two different scripts. The discussion of the occasions for writing leads me to conclude that pragmatics, i.e. the availability of the courier mail or the state of the roads defines notably not only the length or the contents, but also the genre of the writings. Prince Gábor Bethlen's decision regarding the archiving of diplomatic documents, another pregnant pragmatic factor, at this point allows me to stress an almost hidden fact about Tamás Borsos' miscellany, namely that in the course of the 17th century this was being stored for a while in the secret archives in Fejérvár (today Alba Iulia). Taken all this together I draw the conclusion that in the specific context it is more preferential to consider the occasions for writing rather than the genres of the texts, these latter being abstract, anachronistic and hypothetic constructions in the conjunction in question.

One of the main occasions for writing for Borsos represents travelling. In his travelogues' analysis, the topic of *Chapter 6*, I outline the different types of voyaging (concrete vs. abstract, topical) and the various attitudes of a viator (positive vs. negative, enforced, that of an exile) elaborated in his texts. While interpreting the lines recording his travels and his description of Egypt, I demonstrate that the norms he applies and the rules of the so-called *ars apodemica*, i.e. travel advice literature, a popular genre throughout early modern Europe, overlap in many instances. Giving a brief description of an apademic text, the work of David Frölich, a scholar from the Hungarian Kingdom, gives me the chance to touch upon common points between *prudentia peregrinandi* and the instructions given to ambassadors. The hypothesis that I set forth here, namely that Tamás Borsos was acquainted with János Rimay, a well-known mannerist poet, is founded on a number of quotes, and represents more than a curious fact of literary history; it may

well be a verisimilar assumption regarding the source of Borsos' knowledge about the topic of travel.

Chapter 7, the last part of the doctoral thesis, points at those features of the texts belonging to the *oeuvre* which allow us to refer them into two genres of didactic political writing, that is mirrors for princes (*specula principum*), respectively mirrors for ambassadors (*specula legatorum*). While the first genre was popular in the world literature, counting several famous examples, the much rarer latter needs introduction in the context of early Hungarian literature. The paper hence treats five West-European representatives of the genre, this instance being followed by the discussion of a text by Borsos' diplomat-successor, Dávid Rozsnyay, so as to give prominence to some Transylvanian specificities. The review of several recent theories of renaissance self-fashioning sets up for the close reading of Borsos' lines. This main objective of the final chapter is met by lexical, stylistic and rhetoric analysis. The interpretation leads firstly to the conclusion that the ambassador's self-portrait and his portrayal of the ideal ruler, his principal, bear resemblance in quite a few traits.

Secondly, it demonstrates the foremost target of the whole dissertation, i.e. to prove that Tamás Borsos, early modern Transylvanian ambassador and memorialist, left behind a written heritage worthwhile to be regarded and analysed not only as historical documents but rather as literary works of art.