

University of Szeged, Faculty of Arts

Doctoral School in Literary History

Doctoral Theses

OLD BOOKS, NEW STARS

The Reception of the New Results of Astronomy in
Hungarian Sources of the Early Modern Period and the
Interpretation of the Celestial Phenomena in Old
Hungarian Literature

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Szeged, 2007

I.

Before the seventies of the 16th century there had not been experienced an astronomical event like the 1572 new star which provoked such an immense flow of letters, tracts, poems, engravings and prints in contemporary literature. This phenomenon was problematic in determining its physical position and also in theological sense opposing to the Aristotelian nature philosophy (celestial incorruptibility). That is why the „birth of a new star” gave rise to lots of questions, scientific and theological explanations, speculations and prophecies.

There are still unpublished sources for the new star. A good example for this is the correspondence between the Duke of Württemberg, Louis III (1554–1593) and the Landgrave of Hessen-Kassel, William IV (1532–1592). This correspondence involved not only the two princes but the University professors at Tübingen and William’s court astronomers, too. We also find the Wittenberg professor Kaspar Peucer among the participants, whose activity clearly reflects Philipp

Melanchthon's ideas about Christian astrology: astrology gives a better understanding of God and faith induces one to make more precise observations. The constant warfare against the Turks and Germans in the sixteenth century was not favourable for the sciences or for the survival of either manuscripts or printed sources in Hungary. Therefore it is not surprising that we do not have any contemporary observations of the new star, only entries from diaries and annals, all made in the seventeenth century. A typical example of the latter can be found in the chronicle of Matthias Miles (1639–1686), a citizen of Nagyszeben (Hermannstadt, today Sibiu in Romania). The humanist bishop, Andreas Dudith (1533–1589) whose work about the 1577 comet was well known, also mentioned the new star in some of his letters, although he did not observe the phenomenon in Kraków, where he lived during that time. The new star was described with its astrological significance in the Hungarian translation of the calendar of Wilhelm Misocacus, appearing in 1578 in Kolozsvár (Klausenburg, today Cluj-Napoca in Romania).

II.

A manuscript dealing with the 1572 new star has been found in the sixteenth century collection of the University Library, Budapest. It is the work of a Wittenberg student, possibly of German origin. The text is written on blank sheets attached to the end of a colligate volume, sometime during the last quarter of the 16th century. The owner of the volume was probably Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520–1575), a professor of Hebrew, philologist and theologian of Croatian descent. Three persons are mentioned in the manuscript: Kaspar Peucer, Esrom Rüdinger and Friedrich Widebram. We can assume that the unknown author had been a student of Peucer, and probably had listened to lectures of Rüdinger and sermons of Widebram. Although there is no trace of the Advent sermon of Widebram referred to in the manuscript, he had published earlier a poem about the comet of 1566. The text indicates that it was written after 7 December 1572, as the author mentioned in detail a sermon given on the second Sunday of Advent by Widebram in the castle church of Wittenberg. Since he

talked in present tense about the new star as comparable only to Venus in brightness, we can assume that it was written before 15 December, the third Sunday of Advent, because the new star had gradually lost from its brightness in the middle of December.

The text can be divided into three, though not continuous parts. The first is about astronomy of the new star, presumably a short summary of the lectures of Peucer and Rüdinger, held for their students after the early November-December observations by the enthusiastic but somewhat doubtful Wittenberg professors. It describes the light phenomena connected to the appearance of the new star in detail. This part is probably based on Peucer, since on 7 December 1572 Peucer wrote a letter to Hieronymus Wolf, where he mentioned the new star in similar terms. The student classified the object as a comet, and following the astrological tradition he thought it had been lit by the planet Jupiter. This is a reference to Aristotle's theory of comet generation: "When the matter begins to gather in the lower region independently the comet appears by itself. But when the exhalation is constituted by one of

the fixed stars or the planets, owing to their motion, one of them becomes a comet.” The second part of the text is concerned with astrology. This section might also originate from Peucer, who was one of the developers of the Wittenberg protestant history approach, as it is a listing of political events which were, according to the student’s or Peucer’s belief, were caused by the comet of 1472. The events connected to this comet by the author were the conspiracy of János Vitéz, archbishop of Esztergom against King Matthias of Hungary, the war against the Helvetian Confederates by Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy in 1474, the crusades in 1470 led by Alfonso V, King of Portugal, and quite mistakenly the death of Tamerlane, which has happened, however, in 1405, as the supposed result of the appearance of the comet of 1402. The last third of the text is a part of the sermon given by Widebram at the castle church in Wittenberg, on the Second Sunday of Advent. Here we can see an interest in whether the event is the return of the star of Betlehem, since should it be the case, it might be the sign for the second coming of Christ. Peucer also knew about this possibility. In a letter written by William

IV to Peucer on 14 December 1572, the Landgrave talked about the new star in the above terms, i.e. as a sign heralding the second coming of the Son of God. Protestant preachers saw other possibilities, too, which Widebram or the student missed. The star was linked, together with the comet of 1577, to the birthday of Martin Luther, which itself had a tradition of horoscope falsification.

III.

The connection of the new star and the star of Betlehem is worth a more thorough discussion. During the St. Bartholomew Massacre thousands of Huguenots were killed, a tragic event that had shaken the protestant part of Europe. Given the tradition of celestial events as signs of misery and terror, it was no wonder that the massacre had been linked to the appearance of the new star. One can see it in the annals of Martin Crusius (1526–1607), or in the work of William Camden (1551–1623). Tycho and Camden both mentioned Theodore de Bèze, as the one who made the connection between the massacre and the new star, so now we look at Bèze's

contribution in some detail. Bèze himself described the events in a letter to the German theologian Caspar Olevianus (1536–1587). The source of the tradition, however, is not the letter, but an epigram of Bèze, quoted by Tycho in the *Progymnasmata*. The epigram has a history of textual variations. It seems to have been published first in an anonymously edited booklet appearing in Geneva in 1573, which contained poems to the memory of Gaspar de Coligny (1519–1572), who has been killed during the St. Bartholomew's Night massacre. A different version of the poem appeared a year later, inserted into the book of Tadeáš Hájek on the new star. The epigram appeared in different versions in the different editions of Bèze's poetical works. It is worth noting that the 1598 edition has the epigram with a title giving August 1572 as the first sighting of the new star! This was followed by the version given by Tycho Brahe, which is a variation of the 1576 and 1598 texts. As has been mentioned earlier, there is hardly any record of the new star of 1572 in the extant manuscripts and books in Hungary (by Hungary we mean the medieval Kingdom of Hungary). What has remained is basically diaries and

chronological parts of calendars from the seventeenth century. It is worth, however, to discuss them since they reflect the political or theological manipulations of their times.

The first example is from the sixteenth century though, the *Prognosticon* of Wilhelm Misocacus. He connected the appearance of the 1572 new star to the death of the Polish king, Sigismund II (1520–1572). A part of the seventeenth century calendars only register the fact, that a new star had appeared. For example, the Brassó (Kronstadt, today Braşov in Romania) chronicle mentioned the phenomenon of the new star, David Hermann, citizen of Brassó gave the date of its disappearance, while the Brassó calendar only reports the fact itself. More interesting is the calendar published in Lőcse (Leutschau, today Levoča in Slovakia) in 1671: “1572 coronation of Rudolf II as King of Hungary. Birth of the new star on 25 September.” One can find almost the same note in the diary of Máté Szepesi Laczkó (c. 1570–after 1633): “1572. Rudolf II was crowned King of Hungary. Zsigmond [Sigismund] Báthori was born around this time. New star was seen in 28 7-bris.” These

reports state that the new star had been seen in Hungary in late September, completely at odds with the usually accepted chronology of the event. It is well known that unusual celestial events were linked to notable, usually dire events in both Antiquity and the Christian world. One can mention the case of Julius Caesar, or from the history of Hungary, of János Hunyadi. Decades after the unusual celestial phenomenon, it might easily have blended together with a different historical event. This seems to be the case with the Hungarian calendars, too. The catalyst is the chronology attached to the Carion chronicle, and published by Melanchthon and Peucer. The historical events were far away from each other in time, but the appearance of the new star noted in church history and the coronation ceremony of Rudolf listed among the notable events in Hungarian history were printed next to each other in the table in the book. Such tables in chronologies made the originally independent occurrences to be linked in the eyes of Hungarian calendar makers and diary writers. Or it might have been the same political manipulation as in the case of the epigram of Théodore de Bèze described in the previous section.

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Therefore it is not surprising that we do not have any contemporary observations of the new star, only entries from diaries and annals, all made in the seventeenth century. Hungarian book culture sources suggest the existence of a narrow humanist circle who read basic astronomical works. On the other hand Aristotle represents an inescapable authority in

astronomy and nature philosophy. Most important works of astronomy published in the 16th century get into the possession of Hungarian owners with a quite long delay (several decades or even a century).

V. Publications on the subject of the dissertation

1. *A Polish Humanist Jan Dantyszek's Book.* = Magyar Könyvszemle 111. (1995) 76–87.
2. *An Unknown Manuscript on the Supernova of 1572.* = Magyar Könyvszemle 121. (2005) 435–442. (with J. Barsi)
3. *Hungarian Sources of the New Star of 1572.* In: *Ötvös Péter Festschrift.* Ed. Zs. Font, G. Keserű. Szeged, 2006. 47–57.
4. *The Enigmatic Star of 1595.* = Magyar Könyvszemle 122. (2006) 162–200.
5. *The New Star of 1572 and Hungary.* = Journal for the History of Astronomy 38. (2007) 477–486. (with E. Zsoldos)
6. *Sidus Iulium and Dudith András.* In: Az Egyetemi Könyvtár Évkönyvei XIII. (2007) 141–148.