

Some Aspects of Descriptions of the Turks in 16th Century Hungary — Rubigallus and Dernschwam —

SUZUKI Hirokazu¹

1. Humanism, Protestantism, Turcica

In the 16th century many authors published works describing the Ottoman Turks, following the precedents set in the 15th century. In this paper we refer to two authors who visited the Ottoman Empire: Paulus Rubigallus and Hans Dernschwam. Each of them traveled as a member of the Hungarian delegation to the Porte — Rubigallus as an official member and Dernschwam in an unofficial capacity. After returning home, they wrote of their experiences on these diplomatic trips. In those days, the Ottoman Empire and the Turks were usually considered to be barbaric heathens and the eternal enemies of Christianity.

We can divide the descriptions of the Turks found in 16th century Christendom into several groups. The first of these groups includes the Humanists, who wrote using rhetoric and described the Turks by imitating the famous literature of antiquity. The Humanists often described the Turks as “Geta” people.

The second group consists of Lutheran literatures. Before the Ottoman troops besieged Vienna in 1529 Luther had stated that Christians should not fight against the Turks because the Turks had been sent to Europe as the scourge of God to punish sinful Christians. Therefore, resisting the Turkish advance meant opposing God’s will. Catholic authors also thought that the Christians (or Germans) were sinful and had provoked God’s wrath, and believed that the Turks had been sent as the scourge of God. In Hungary, such a theological interpretation had already been expressed in the 15th century, before the Reformation. Of course the Hungarians thought it was the Hungarians themselves that were being punished for being sinful.

After the Ottoman siege of Vienna, Luther changed his interpretation of the Turks. According to Luther, the Turks were now the people of the apocalypse, the devil incarnate, and both the Pope and the Turks were Antichrists. Therefore, the followers of Luther developed a theological and eschatological view of the Turks. They emphasized that repentance and praying for God’s mercy and forgiveness were crucial. If God’s wrath could be mollified, God would protect the Christians and the Turks would lose their invincibility, allowing the Christians to defeat them in battle. Such a theological and eschatological interpretation of the Turks was also widely accepted and expressed in many works published by Hungarian writers.

¹ Associate Professor at the Graduate School of Human Sciences, Osaka University. A Japán-Magyar Balkán Kutatócsoport tagja.

In addition to the two groups mentioned above, we also know of other works which were derived from actual contacts with the Turks. They showed a more or less realistic view of the Turks, and we can use the narratives provided by captives such as Georgius de Hungaria (Magyarországi György or Captivus Septencastrensis) and Bartholomaeus Georgievits (Georgievics Bertalan) as examples. They returned to Christian lands from the Ottoman Empire where they had suffered terribly as slaves. Their works were published many times, not only in Latin but also in various other languages.

Most of the literary works concerning the Turks in the 16th century belong to the category of Turcica or Türkenbüchlein. A large number of pamphlets, booklets and literary compositions etc. were published, not only in Germany but throughout Western Christendom. They were often appeals for help in the struggle against the Turks and described the Turkish menace. The sultan or the Turkish soldiers were often depicted by woodcuts.

In Hungary, the Turks were described in more or less the same way as in the other countries of Western Christendom. The Holy Roman Empire and Hungary each exerted a degree of influence on the other. In particular, the Hungarian Protestant authors who studied in Wittenberg were affected by the Lutheran scholars and teachers they encountered there. However, there also seem to have been some particularly Hungarian aspects present.

The battle of Mohács (1526) and the Ottoman siege of Vienna, especially, suddenly strengthened the sense of fear, anxiety and crisis among the people of Germany, and Luther himself was also influenced by these events, as noted above. But such sentiment was much stronger in Hungary because of the direct contact and ongoing combat with the Turks and the disintegration of the Hungarian Kingdom. Before the battle of Mohács, Hungarians had struggled against the Ottomans for more than 150 years, more or less successfully. But as the Turks became more and more powerful it became increasingly difficult for Hungary to hold back the Turkish advance. The Hungarians asked Latin Christendom, especially the Holy Roman Empire, for help but they failed to receive effective reinforcements or aid in spite of the fact that they had defended Christendom against the Turks (as “Porpugnaculum Christianitatis”) for more than 150 years. Thus, over the course of time, the feeling spread among Hungarians that they were isolated in front of a terrible foe. This self-view gave rise to particular aspects of 16th century Hungarian Turcica literature. Lutheran explanations concerning the expansion of the Ottoman Empire were accepted more widely among the Hungarians than other Christian peoples². Examples of this were the writings of Johannes Sylvester (Sylvester János) and Gáspár Károly³. In this discussion, however, we take a closer look at two other authors, namely Paulus Rubigallus and Hans Dernschwam.

² In Hungary, the Reformists (Calvinists) also accepted the Lutheran view of Turks.

³ See, for example; Károly Gáspár (1984): A gönci prédikátor. Budapest, pp. 101-103.

2. Rubigallus

The verses of Paulus Rubigallus (Rubigally Pál c.1510-1576) belong to both the first group of Humanist works and also to Turcica literature. Rubigallus studied in Wittenberg from 1536 to 1540. He wrote the verse titled “Querela Pannoniae ad Germaniam”, which was published in Wittenberg in 1537. In this composition, he stated that Germania should help and protect Hungaria against the infidel Turks. He described the Turks as so ruthless, for instance, that they skewered Christian children or killed unborn babies still in the uterus, along with their mothers⁴. Presumably it was not important for the author to check whether these descriptions were true or not. While the explicit aim of this verse was to exhort the Germans to fight against the Ottoman Empire and save Hungary, Rubigallus had another important objective in mind. He wished to counter the views of the Austrian author Cuspinianus, who blamed the Hungarians that they had lost their earlier virtues and strength and suffered a decisive defeat at Mohács at the hands of the infidel Turks, failing to carry out their role as the defender of Christianity.

In 1540, Rubigallus travelled for several months as a member of the delegation which was sent from the Transylvanian Court to the sultan’s Porte. Rubigallus wrote a verse in rhyme about his diplomatic travels and this was published in 1544 as “Hodoeporicon itineris Constantinopolitani”. In this work he demanded that the Emperor Charles V defeat the infidel Turks⁵, just as he had appealed to the Germans to rescue Hungaria at the point of the sword from the ruthless Turks in the “Querela”. In 1545 he published another verse, “Epistola Pannoniae ad Germanum recens scripta.” It could be said that both these pieces, dating from the 1540s, were variations of the “Querela” published in 1537, although in “Epistola” he sternly blamed the Germans because they had still not helped Hungary yet. Here, I would like to draw attention to the fact that the author’s perception of the Turks had not changed much, despite seeing them with his own eyes in Constantinople in 1540.

Rubigallus studied in Wittenberg from 1537 to 1540 and was acquainted with Luther, Melancton and other famous Lutheran teachers and scholars. Melancton was so kind to Rubigallus that he even wrote the preface to one of his compositions. From the middle of the 16th century onwards, the Hungarian Protestants who studied in Wittenberg and were influenced by Melancton’s historical philosophy published literary works that expressed the Lutheran image of the Turks, and stressed the importance of repentance and prayer in order to obtain God’s forgiveness of the Hungarians’ sin. However, in Rubigallus’ works we can see not the Lutheran eschatological account of the Turks, but some features of Humanism.

⁴ See, for example; Okál, Miloslaus ed.(1980): Pauli Rubigalli Pannonii Carmina. Leipzig, p. 4.

⁵ Tardy Lajos (1977): Rabok, követek, kalmárok az oszmán birodalomról. Budapest, p. 202.

3. Dernschwam

Hans Dernschwam (1494-1568) was born in Brüx (now known as Most, in the Czech Republic) and studied in Vienna, Prague, Leipzig and Rome. He arrived in Hungary in 1514 and from 1517 onwards he worked for the Fugger family as a businessman. He was also an expert on mining.

He participated in the delegation dispatched to the Ottoman Empire and traveled there from June 1553 to August 1555. This delegation was sent by King Ferdinand and led by Antonius Verantius (Verancsis Antal) and Francis Zay (Zay Ferenc). Dernschwam, however, was not an official member of the delegation and, according to his writings, he traveled there at his own expense. It is not clear what the purpose of his travel was. During his journey he kept a diary, which is now famous for its description of the Roman inscription, “Ancyranum monumentum.” On the other hand, we also find detailed descriptions of the everyday life of the Turks, and other peoples living in the Ottoman Empire, in his diary. This diary was not published in his lifetime, so it did not have a significant influence on his contemporaries. Though it seems that he kept the diary only for his own interest, it is not impossible that he had a special reason to keep such a diary for somebody else (e.g., his client).

He certainly was not a Catholic, because he criticized the Pope, the Catholic priests and the religious orders very severely, particularly the Franciscans⁶. He was probably a Protestant, but we do not know whether he was Lutheran or not. Some scholars have suggested that he was Hussite, or Calixtine. Either way, he did not show any particular sympathy towards the Lutherans and it seems that he was not a deeply devout person, as his view of the Turks was not theologically based. It should be noted, however, that he was not free from the prejudice that the Christians usually held towards Muslims, as he compares them to animals such as swine, donkeys or geese, and likens the prayers in their mosques to the mooing of oxen or the oinking of swine etc.⁷

4. Concluding Remarks

While it seems certain that Rubigallus' view of the Turks was substantially the same, both before and after his visit to Constantinople, we do not know whether Dernschwam's views had changed or not as a result of his experiences in the Ottoman Empire.

We can say that neither Rubigallus nor Dernschwam expressed the Lutheran eschatological view of the Turks, but the way in which they each depicted the Turks differed significantly. There are various possible reasons for this, but I would like to highlight two points in particular.

⁶ See, for example, Dernschwam, Hans (1984): *Erdély, Besztercebánya, törökországi útinapló*. Budapest, pp. 233-234.

⁷ See, for example, Dernschwam, Hans (1984): *Erdély, Besztercebánya, törökországi útinapló*. Budapest, p. 181, 203, 216. and *passim*.

The first concerns the differing aims of their respective writings. Rubigallus published his verses as a public appeal to Western Christianity, particularly the Germans, to struggle against the Turks. Dernschwam, however, was writing privately, either for himself or for someone else. Actually Dernschwam's diary was not even published in his lifetime, and nor does it describe the Turks as excessively cruel and inhuman.

The second point I would like to make is linked with the first. Rhetoric was necessary for Rubigallus in order to express his appeal, and he used the humanistic method of expression (—rather than Lutheran historical philosophy—). Though Dernschwam was also well-acquainted with Humanism, he had no need to rely on rhetoric when writing his own personal diary. His descriptions were vivid, particularly when he focused on the life of people living in Constantinople or Ottoman society in general, which consisted not only of Turks but also Greeks, Jews and other peoples including many Christians. It is possible that these descriptions were derived from his own accurate observations, as a talented businessman.

Finally, although we do not know the details on which Dernschwam's worldview was based, it should perhaps be noted that, in his diary, he also compared the Turks to the "Gypsies", expressing the view that both peoples had similarities, and that both of them were idle⁸. It therefore seems reasonable to suggest that he may have based his views of "the Turks, others outside Christendom", on the biased image of "the Gypsies, others within".

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⁸ Dernschwam, Hans (1984): *Erdély, Besztercebánya, törökországi útinapló*, Budapest. p. 182, 224.