

The Making of a Prince Fashioning the Image of Gábor Bethlen

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*“Magnus Alexander,
Pompeius, Carolus, Ottho,
Magnus & est Bethlen,
nobilitatis apex.”*

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GÁBOR (GABRIEL) Bethlen was elevated prince of Transylvania five centuries ago, in 1613. At present, he figures in much of the local historiography as a local hero, with his reign represented as a golden age of Transylvania. At the same time, his image in Western historiography has been that of a semi-savage, faithless and lawless man.¹ The conflicting image of the prince originates in the troubled times of the Protestant Reformation and the Thirty Years' War. Prince Bethlen intervened in the war leading three military campaigns in Upper Hungary, and was elected king of Hungary in 1620, a title he renounced the following year. At the same time, he was a vassal prince to the Ottoman Porte, which made him a dubious ally of the various anti-Habsburg coalitions. Public opinion as far as England was puzzled by his figure, the anti- or anti-Habsburg propaganda wove various myths around him.

This paper argues that the heroic myth of the prince originates in 17th century written sources, many of them

drawn up with propagandistic aims, directly inspired and commissioned by the prince himself. Therefore the paper will analyze sources dealing with and contemporary to the prince and his rule, focusing on the way his image was constructed in these texts. We shall proceed by first analyzing his own interpretation of his role in his public statements and letters, and then turn to the propagandistic literature that sprang up around him.

The fact that Gábor Bethlen made use of political propaganda is not surprising at the time of the Thirty Years' War, this age seeing the apogee of Baroque pamphlet literature, widely used in Europe for justifying warfare.² But Bethlen needed propaganda for more than just gaining support for his foreign policy. He also needed it for the justification of his rule. He became prince with the support—even military—of the Ottomans, and after the murder of the former ruler, a murder he could easily be associated with. Consequently he even gained for himself the nickname of “Mohammedan Gábor.” Apart from needing to prove that he was a rightful ruler, possessing all the traditional attributes regarded as essential for *the* prince, he also needed to assert himself as a great ruler because of his aspirations, made possible in the context of the Thirty Years' War. Aspiring to play a major role in European politics he also needed to construct his image as an equal of the great European monarchs. In his memoirs, one of his courtiers, Don Diego de Estrada, called him several times the most powerful ruler in Europe,³ and it would seem legitimate to suppose that he was not simply expressing his private opinion—which would of course also increase his own status, as servant to such a great ruler—, but repeated a phrase common at the court of the prince. Examples of expressions or anecdotal episodes showing Gábor Bethlen's behavior and wit that amount to the same point will be quoted later in the paper.

The prince's own understanding of his role was transmitted to us, as well as to his contemporaries, through his letters and his will. Bethlen's letters have a predominantly political and diplomatic character. Very few that he wrote (or have been preserved) would address private issues. For example, the ones written to his brother, governor of Transylvania during his foreign campaigns, only deal with issues of governance and administration.⁴ Comments referring to his person and principles, his life, actions and role in the events reflect the image he was trying to project with well-defined political aims, the goals as well as the details changing according to the target audience. These letters were tools in his hand and were part of a wider propaganda campaign meant to refute or at least counterbalance that of his opponents. A more important function of his letters (and his image as represented in them) was the winning over of the leaders of the aristocracy, holding the economic, military, and also the political power in Hungary at the time, without whom a military campaign was hardly possible in the country. The support of some of them could mean the support (and re-

sources) of several counties.⁵ In his attempts to gain support from the Hungarian aristocracy as well as from the Porte, and later from the confederate powers of the Thirty Years' War, but also in his attempt to create an anti-Ottoman coalition with the Habsburgs, he made use of the strategy of writing detailed interpretations of his actions and even included small autobiographies in his letters. This is what makes it impossible to interpret these narratives as manifestations of subjectivity and draw definite conclusions on his self-perception.

We can however analyze his letters and his will with the aim of identifying the image(s) he was trying to project of himself, the recurrent elements, arguments and topoi present in his self-representations, elements the meaning and function of which may change with the context and the intended audience. Their recurrence, however, will provide us with some of the characteristics of the discourse about Bethlen, and thus with the features that shaped the construction of his public image.

His letters had a public character. Some of them, addressed to the Estates with a mobilizing intent, were printed. Others were copied, and numerous abstracts, copies, as well as comments made to them have been preserved.⁶ The public nature of his letters was not only related to their function of shaping the perception of his contemporaries, or that of communicating the princely will and thus shaping the course of events. Printing the compromising letters of the enemy was a common practice at the time, and one of the best means for the Habsburgs to raise anti-Bethlen feelings. A means they frequently employed was printing his intercepted letters to the Porte. Writers of letters were of course aware of the possibility of their letters being intercepted, and took this possibility into consideration when formulating their letters.

The issue of his relationship with the Ottomans, and the proper policy to be followed as concerns their role, was one of the main issues Bethlen recurrently discusses in his letters explaining the reasons and aims of his campaigns. The first of these he starts by appealing to the traditional pose of the defender of faith and liberty. In letters addressed to three prominent aristocrats⁷ he appeals to their love of God and country in general terms, and does not refer to any specific injuries of the Protestants or of Hungary (this will be done by the Calvinist preacher Alvinczi in his pamphlet entitled *Querela Hungariae*).⁸ But he does refer to offences to his personal dignity by the representatives of Emperor Ferdinand II, to whom he had offered his loyalty, but who, he claims, had refused it with harsh words. The language of offences on his dignity would be later given even more emphasis, especially during his 1623 intervention, when he could not count on much support from the Hungarian Estates.

One of the main obstacles in making alliances, both with the Hungarian Estates and with Western princes, was his being a vassal to the Ottomans. Al-

though Christian unity was long gone, and efforts to justify an alliance with the Ottomans had been made even by Friedrich of Pfalz's court priest, Scultetus,⁹ the anti-Ottoman rhetoric and feelings were still strong. After all, the whole sixteenth century rhetoric of virtues, sacrifice, defense of freedom and patriotism in general was shaped by and during the Ottoman wars.¹⁰

One way of minimizing the impact of his Ottoman links was to deny it by stressing his independence from the Porte. Szaniszló Thurzó's diary on the 1623 peace treaties between Ferdinand II and Bethlen records that on several occasions the prince asked for an extension of deadlines because he had the *moral obligation* of reporting on the results and the situation of the treaties, not because of his dependence on the Ottomans, his representatives claimed, but out of *gratitude*.¹¹

However, the presence of Ottoman troops with him, as well as the printing of some of his letters to the Porte,¹² did not make such rhetoric very credible. Recourse to the traditional topic of interpreting the role of the Ottomans in history was consequently given much more emphasis. In this discourse, the main rhetoric to be counterbalanced was the one representing the Ottomans as the punishment of God on Christianity. For Bethlen, the topos remained useful, but its content and the value-judgments implied changed radically. Thus, the alliance with the Ottomans becomes the guarantee of freedom from oppression and freedom for Christianity, the latter meaning here the Protestant religion, seeking freedom from "Popish" authority. This shift in the role ascribed to the Ottomans is achieved by arguing that they prevented the Catholics from destroying Protestants. At the same time, the argument goes, an Ottoman alliance could also prevent war, and thus the destruction of the "true religion." Thus the "pagan" becomes the guarantor of Christianity. They are still messengers of the divine will, but in this case not of God's punishment, but of His providence. In his will, Bethlen even uses the metaphor of *propugnaculum Christianitatis*, previously referring to shielding Christianity from the Ottoman threat, to the opposite effect: with him, it is the Ottomans who are the shield protecting true faith and the country against "foreigners."¹³

This total reversal of the poles of the pagans vs. Christians dichotomy is formulated in the will of the prince, a text addressed to the Transylvanian Estates, and even in this case he felt the need to explain the use of the topos by referring to necessity. In letters addressed to the Hungarian aristocracy, necessity is given much greater emphasis. As an answer to the force of necessity, moreover, Bethlen not always suggests that one has to take sides between the two "evils." Some of the central components of his self-representation are peace and balance, his role being to achieve them. This central topic of Christian stoicism appears in his will also with reference to the private virtues demanded of a prince, the

achievement of the *via media*, in this case that between avarice and prodigality.¹⁴ But balance and peace are primarily present in his writing as political aims and virtues.

In regard to the Ottomans he stresses his role of mediator and the importance of his person as the guarantor of peace between them, the countries under his rule, and the Habsburgs. The two main occasions when these arguments are made are two requests of the Ottomans to hand over two fortresses, both made soon after he was elected prince of Transylvania and then king of Hungary. In both cases he argues that by surrendering the fortresses he would lose the trust and sympathy of the country, which he must have in order to prevent them from turning to the Habsburgs.¹⁵ When legitimizing his role before his Hungarian opponents, he also interprets his role as protector against harm, in this case from the Ottomans, whom only he can prevent from plundering the country: before his campaigns they had done that, but never as his allies. This argument is made in a letter to Cardinal Pázmány, who accused him of causing the death of 200,000 people.¹⁶ In another letter, this time to a supporter, he claims that the reason why he had accepted the unfavorable conditions of the last peace was that he had seen the strength of the Ottomans (who were in his camp), and wanted to prevent them from continuing the fight and defeating the Christians.¹⁷

The rhetoric of heroic patriotism and of the defense of the faith also included the topic of self-sacrifice, and Bethlen made wide use of it. One of the arguments in the already mentioned mobilizing letters written to Thurzó, Széchi and Rákóczi at the beginning of the 1619 campaign is that he had risked his life and country for the defense of freedom and faith, and he would often return to this topic. In an open letter written to the Hungarian Estates in 1623, he asks for their support by referring to his previous sacrifices for their cause.¹⁸ The sacrifice includes money and effort, but most importantly his dignity, which he sacrificed for the sake of peace, when renouncing the Hungarian crown in the peace of Nikolsburg.

The topic of the hurt dignity becomes central during his 1623–24 campaign, becoming the most important argument in its legitimization, strengthened by the topos of the *patria ingrata*.¹⁹ When reproaching the Hungarian Estates that they do not support him as he would have liked them to, he makes use of the phraseology of vices that lead to war and foreign threat (either Ottoman or Habsburg): treason,²⁰ corruption of ancient virtues²¹ discord, envy and inconstancy,²² to which he opposes his own constancy in his faith and love of his country. The argument that all misfortunes are brought about by collective vices, widespread in both Catholic and Protestant camps,²³ is mentioned more generally in the prince's will, but again in support of the argument that the Ottomans are not the enemy: "We know that from the beginning noth-

ing has done more damage to our beloved country . . . than the devilish envy, deadly hatred, terrible discords, discontents with princes, which all resulted in great treason and the demise of big families, the country approaching its final destruction. . . . God's free mercy has protected the borderlands of our country in changing times from the evil intents of foreign princes, and has commanded the Turkish nation as its shield . . ."²⁴

The will of the prince is in itself a public performance, in the sense that it is par excellence a performative speech act, having legal and even sacral authority.²⁵ This was especially so in Transylvania, where the will of former Prince Bocskai established a tradition of princely wills functioning as mirrors for future princes and as interpretations of the people's destiny. This tradition was followed by Bethlen, with many similarities between the two as concerns the virtues required of a prince and the policies to be followed towards the Ottoman Empire. The will formulating the policies to be followed for achieving these aims thus becomes a political act, a manifesto of principles and policies. The essence of the will also seems to have been known to the contemporaries. The future Prince János Kemény, for example, listed in his memoirs the donations made by the prince in his will. We know that Kemény, serving at Bethlen's court as a child (he was twelve at the prince's death), wrote his memoirs almost thirty years later, while imprisoned by Tartars in Crimea, without his papers at hand.²⁶ A letter from 1630 of a Pauline monk describing his funeral also mentions that, before dying, the prince announced his will to his court, asking them to give the principality over to the Turks.²⁷ The monk is obviously repeating one of the basic charges formulated against Bethlen, but he is also describing what the local Catholic nobility knew (and/or gossiped) about the prince's death, and the will seems to have been one of the topics of discussion.²⁸ Some chroniclers from smaller towns, like Georg Krauss of Sighișoara, also knew about the will. The latter was also familiar with its political aspects, namely that the principality must remain faithful to the Ottomans since the Western Christian help is too far, and by the time it would get there the Ottomans would plunder the country.²⁹

The public that had access to the scribal letters and to the will of the prince, and for whom these transmitted an image shaped according to both their expectations and the needs of the prince himself, consisted of a limited number of persons. An exception, of course, were the letters intercepted and printed by his opponents as part of their counter-propaganda, and the few open letters to the Estates that the prince himself had printed. The image of the prince with the general public, and the interpretation the latter gave to the events, were shaped by pamphlets and propagandistic works published by both sides, and by dedications to books. Bethlen directly inspired some of this literature. For example, his court historian, Gáspár Bojti Veres, mentions him as his main source of infor-

mation, and the dedications of various scholarly works addressed to him clearly reflect his expectations and needs.

THE PROPAGANDISTIC literature supporting the prince was mainly written by a well-defined group of Protestant (Calvinist and Lutheran) preachers and court literati, even if we find among them people like Hápportoni, who had studied in a Jesuit school.³⁰ Some of these, like Alvinczi, also participated in the legitimization of Bocskai's campaigns. In what follows, we will analyze their works as parts of a single discourse, taking as a starting point Melotai's preface to his *Speculum Trinitatis*, an anti-Unitarian pamphlet.

The dedication of Melotai's work argues that Bethlen's rule conforms to the divine law and will. His office as well as his person were ordered by divine providence to defend true religion and the liberty of the country. Melotai addresses Gábor Bethlen as a defender of the church and a promoter of religion.³¹ He starts by defining the virtues that lead people to perform their basic duties towards God and the polity, then proves that Bethlen possesses all these virtues, and concludes that he was chosen by God to defend His case and deliver his punishment on His enemies.

The two virtues that urge men to honor God are piety and love. Those possessing them, when seeing the worship of God and the country endangered, are willing to sacrifice their life for them, knowing that the freedom of worship and the peace of the country attract all heavenly blessings. The duties owed to God and the country are indivisible. Piety is defined as love of God, and both God and the country are to be loved as parents. The image connecting the two is the parental one, though not necessarily paternal: "The country, like a god and a first, great parent, is father and mother, and one loves the country just like one affectionately and greatly loves his father and mother."³² This theory clearly shows the influence of Calvinist covenant-theories: the ruler is bound by the double duty he owes to God and the commonwealth.³³ The relationship between the two is one of analogy, not of derivation, and is formulated not in terms of the origins of power or commonwealth, but in terms of duties. He who performs these possesses all the blessings of God. Bethlen excels in this and shines among his people like the sun among the stars. The image is a recurrent one in all the literature of the time. Melotai proves this in respect of both virtues, piety, i.e. love of God, and love of country.

His love of God is proven by the fact that all he has done since he became prince and was elected king was meant to serve the worship of God. He supports the ecclesiastical Estate and supplements their numbers, decreased by the cruelty of the "western red dragon drunk with Christian blood,"³⁴ by sending students to Christian (i.e. Protestant) universities. But his greatest pious act was

sacrificing his peace, leaving his principedom and accepting all the inconveniences and dangers of a war for the cause of God and Church. The prince is pious, however, in another sense of the word, diligently reading the Bible, attending sermons and disputations, and declaring general penitence when two comets appeared on the sky, foretelling the coming bloodshed. The comets are mentioned in many private diaries as well as in propagandistic works; other authors interpret them as signs foretelling the coming of Bethlen, the new king sent by God.³⁵ The interpretation of natural phenomena as omens was of course an everyday phenomenon, but their significance was increased by the apocalyptic literature of the time, based on some Biblical loci as well as on the predictions of Paracelsus and Tycho Brache, the latter giving the date of 1632 for the coming of the savior.³⁶

There is a work in the propagandistic literature supporting Bethlen that interprets all Bethlen's actions as serving and promoting the true religion and defending the church, published in the same year: Redmeczi's *On the Five Benefactions of His Majesty Gábor Bethlen with God's Church*.³⁷ The benefactions are broadly the same as in Melotai: supplying congregations with preachers, sending alumni to peregrinations, disputations against sectarians, but first of all his military campaigns in Hungary. The work lists the complaints of Protestants, whose grievances amount to those of the people of Israel in Babylon. This parallel with the fate of Israel was a common topos, part of the more general rhetoric of interpreting the Ottoman conquests as the punishment of God on the people for their sins. The idea became a prominent element of Protestant thought under Luther's influence, but it had a long tradition. But here there is no emphasis on the sins (except for those of the Catholics, of course), only on the dreadful present situation. The grievous state of the people and the country had not been brought about by the Ottomans but by Catholics, from whom Bethlen, sent by God and foretold by a comet, redeems the people. That he is the chosen one is also proven by his pious behavior: he always seeks peace and exhibits signs of religious piety, travelling surrounded by priests and having the word of God preached constantly in his camps.

In Melotai's description, Bethlen's actions are guided not only by godly reasons of piety, but also by his love of country, a reason no less godly, the two being intrinsically connected. He has served his country, the argument goes, since early childhood. Melotai states this in general terms but does not dwell on it, except for mentioning Bethlen's constructions, seen as the reconstruction of a destroyed country. He rather sends the reader to two other works, Háportoni's preface to his translation of Quintus Curtius' work on Alexander the Great, and to Bocatius, recently appointed court historian, whom he knew to be working on a history of the life of the prince.

Háportoni's preface to Curtius³⁸ integrates the description of Bethlen's origins and deeds into a theoretical framework, similarly to Melotai's. In line with Protestant thought, he explains that society was ordered by God, approaching society in terms of the relationships between superiors and subjects.³⁹ Authority thus derives from God, but men in their fallen nature tend to honor high born magistrates more. Bethlen therefore should be honored by virtue of his office as well as by virtue of his origins, his ancestors having gained their name and fame due to their military virtues. Bethlen followed his ancestors, and rose to higher and higher offices and finally to principedom, due to his honorable deeds and to divine providence. Háportoni thus shifts from the providential nature of power to that of the person of the ruler. Bethlen also acted as a promoter of peace in foreign affairs, gaining the recognition of the Poles by interposing himself between them and the Ottomans, and appeasing them both. Háportoni then repeats the familiar arguments on the desperate state of the country brought about by the sins of the people, stating that Bethlen, guided by his love of country, set out to restore its former greatness. He also promoted the spread of sciences by establishing a library, following the example of King Matthias Corvinus and having the current work on Alexander the Great translated, whose fame would also bring him fame. Alexander the Great was one of Bethlen's favorite characters, the contemporaries noting that the most beautiful ornaments in his palaces were the three sets of carpets representing the life of Alexander.⁴⁰ Pataki's mirror of princes also magnifies Bethlen with reference to Alexander:

"Magnus Alexander, Pompeius, Carolus, Ottho,
Magnus & est BETHLEN, nobilitatis apex."⁴¹

The other author to whom Melotai refers the reader on Bethlen's life, Bocatius, did not live to write the history of the prince. After his death in 1621, the prince appointed Háportoni as his court historian, but the latter also died soon after. They were followed by Gáspár Bojti Veres, who wrote a history of the prince that goes on until 1614.⁴²

This work also has an apologetic character, with the acknowledged intention of refuting the claims of Bethlen's opponents. The genealogy is focused on the military virtues of the ancestors, and so is the account of Bethlen's life before becoming prince. He participated in all wars waged for the liberty and rights of the country or against foreign domination, sacrificing much of his inheritance in these wars. The occasions when he escaped death almost by miracle prove that divine providence had a higher purpose for him. After a war lost to the Habsburgs, he took refuge in the Ottoman Empire. The notion of taking refuge with the Ottomans was in itself novel.⁴³ In his letters, Bethlen explained it by claiming that he preferred to leave behind all his domains rather than live under foreign oppression; Bojti also includes in the motivation the virtue of con-

stancy, of his refusal to give up his anti-Habsburg convictions. He also proved his moderation by twice refusing the principedom offered to him, creating instead two other princes. The second time he was offered the title, Prince Báthori had already become a tyrant. When the Saxons also turned to the Porte to complain against Báthori, he accepted the title, and did his best to restrain the Ottoman troops that were sent with him to Transylvania— rather unsuccessfully, as Bojti acknowledges. He then established peace and concord among his subjects whom he had just liberated from tyranny.

The main virtues of the prince in this tale are bravery, constancy and measured behavior (though his twice refusing the title also has the more direct implication of refuting the claims that his military actions were guided by an unconstrained want of power and fame, and integrates well into Bojti's mysticism of numbers).⁴⁴ He is the promoter of concord among his people, of peace between the country and the two empires, as well as between the two emperors themselves. He risked his life and several times sacrificed his wealth for the country and his principles, first among which is the freedom of the country, which he freed from tyranny. His rule therefore is legitimate and just, and first of all ordained by God.

Bojti also endows Bethlen with a commission from God, but not like the previous authors. He makes fewer references to the defense of religion and presents Bethlen as serving the common good, for which tyranny can be endured, but for which it can also be resisted.⁴⁵ He introduces Machiavellian terms like necessity and fortune, as well as fate, but preserves the unity of policy and morals by equating these terms with predestination, opportunity and obedience (in taking the opportunity given by God and considering it the sign of a commission): "Fate offers fortune, which is the opportunity given to the courageous, and it is necessary to take the possibility arising from the opportunity; that is, God gives the possibility of promotion to whomever he wishes, and the opportunity must obediently be taken."⁴⁶

The works discussed thus far were intended for the home audience in Transylvania and Hungary. The following two were written for the Western one. A former Heidelberg student, János Keserűi Dajka, wrote a letter to David Pareus in 1618.⁴⁷ This letter reiterates some of the already familiar *topoi* like the military virtues of the prince, but puts more emphasis on the anti-Ottoman battles he participated in. It describes the election of the prince as an expression of God's will, who directed the votes towards him, the Estates voting freely. It describes peacemaking as his prime virtue, Bethlen getting involved in the discussions on the Porte over dethroning Báthori only in order to make peace between the two, and made it his prime concern to restore peace and concord in the country after becoming prince, through clemency, justice and wisdom. Proving that Bethlen

possesses the virtues of a Christian prince is here not primarily meant to prove that he was chosen, but to counterbalance his Ottoman links brought up against him by the counter-propaganda, which in pursuit of its aims largely overstated his influence on the Porte.⁴⁸

Another description of Bethlen was written in 1629 and published in 1630 in the English edition of Botero's *Relazioni Universali*.⁴⁹ The Transylvanian author, who was probably on a diplomatic mission in England⁵⁰ after Bethlen was accepted in the Hague League by the Westminster Treaty, calls his work an apology and formulates the charges he will refute:

*And now that this prince hath so arrested the incroching greatnesse of the Emperour Ferdinand in those parts, that he may well be called, The scourge of the house of Austria: he is therefore most mortally hated by all the Papists of Christendome, who are sottishly addicted unto that Family. Hence those feornes and slanders of him, that he was basely borne, that he was a Turke in Religion, yca Circumcised, and an hundred other Jesuiticall knaveris. And for that hee hath not still beene ready to doe as we would have him in England, since the infortunate warres of Bohemia, even we good protestants have thought that hee hath hitherto done nothing. To rehearse therefore what hee is, and how his time and Armes have beene imployed, may against these calumnies serve for a reall Apologie.*⁵¹

The author, Péter Maksai also feels it necessary to explain the country's relationships with the Ottomans, alluding to its past of successful anti-Ottoman wars, the force of necessity and the politics of playing off one enemy against the other:

*The neighbours unto Transylvania bee the Moldavians and Wallachians, all three confederates: who in a leaguer war have not only resisted the Turks, but freed their countries of them; the Turke at this day being glad of a small Tribute for an acknowledgement from them; knowing, that if he should oppresse them, the Emperour would be glad to take them into his protection. . . . But the two neighbours most to be accounted for, are the Turke and the Emperour; able friends, but too mighty enemies for the Transylvanian: But this helpe he hath against them both; that if one proves his enemie, hee puts himselfe under the protection of the other.*⁵²

As for the prince, he descends from the oldest inhabitants of the land. As a young man he proved his military virtues that soon brought him high positions at the courts of several princes; his Ottoman exile was due to the practices of Bethlen's evil advisors as well as to the fact that the Saxons had chosen him to mediate a peace between them and the prince, who therefore turned against him. Thus, Bethlen became prince at the request of the Saxons to the Porte, "to

redresse the wrongs offered by a hated Prince, and to relieve the miseries of his own country.⁵³ But he became prince by free election, versus Báthori, “a Prince neither lawfully elected, nor lawfully governing.”⁵⁴ His first actions as prince were to rebuild the country and restore “justice and civility.”⁵⁵ He always acted as a mediator of peace, between Poland and the Ottomans, then between Bohemia and the Habsburgs. His intervention in the Bohemian war was both meant to relieve them and restore the peace. In this campaign he was elected king of Hungary, but did not crown himself out of prudence, “besides the treachery of his own Popish subjects.”⁵⁶ His further virtues are the promotion of learning through the establishment of schools and libraries, the advance of religion by peaceful means, never by the sword, and achieving a state of abundance and plenty in the country, defending it “from the power of the Ottoman, the ambition of the House of Austria, the might of the Pole, and the barbarous inroads of the Russes and Tartarians.”⁵⁷

The details of Bethlen’s lives thus present him as a good Christian to a foreign audience, seeking to refute the claims of his being “a Turke in religion.” For this audience it is also necessary to explain his relationship with the Ottomans, which is done in terms of necessity deriving from the sin of discord. Bethlen, by contrast, is a restorer of peace and concord, counterbalancing the collective sin of discord that had brought on the punishment of God. This rhetoric of princely representation invests Bethlen with the attributes of a Biblical redeemer figure, underpinned by parallels with savior and lawgiver-figures like David and Moses. The prince as a young man is endowed with virtues like love of peace and constancy that foreshadow a pious ruler, both in the Calvinist sense of rightfulness and dutifulness, and in the sense of individual devotion. His love of country, the second of the two virtues required by Melotai of the ideal prince, is proven by moral virtues that make him a sacerdotal figure.

It is a recurrent feature of these works to place the present events in an eschatological framework, starting from the parallelism between the fate of Israel and that of the country, centered on the ideas of collective sins attracting the punishment of God, as well as the recurrent appearance of savior-figures. A most direct formulation of this line of thought is Albert Szenczi Molnár’s dedication to his translation of Calvin’s *Institutes*.⁵⁸ Szenczi interprets the biblical history of Israel as God’s recurrent salvation of His people in the proper and predestined time; He did the same when bringing people to the true faith after being corrupted by “the popish,” and when answering the prayers of the people and sending them Gábor Bethlen. This interpretation of his figure underlies the frequent parallels between Bethlen and biblical savior and lawgiver figures, the most prominent of which being David.

Bethlen's rule coincides with the increase in the number of treatises on courtly life or mirrors of princes written in or translated into Hungarian in the early seventeenth century. The relationship between these texts and Bethlen's person is more than coincidental. Bethlen's propagandists were prominent leaders of the Hungarian Reformation, while Cardinal Pázmány, one of his main opponents, was the leader of the Counter-Reformation. Debates between Bethlen's propagandists and his opponents thus took place in the wider context of religious disputes—which obviously had a political aspect as well. The arguments used in support of Bethlen were defined by this context, and his intervention in Hungary was said to have been done in the name of religion. His need to legitimize his rule and actions triggered further such discussions, in which the specific complaints and motifs of each side were often secondary.

A mirror of princes written by János Pataki Füsüs in 1622 and published in 1629 with Bethlen's support was dedicated to the prince.⁵⁹ Pataki begins his dedication to Bethlen by explaining why piety is the first duty of rulers. Their office derives its authority from God, who elevates people to the position they are in, but it is their duty to preserve their God-given status. With Pataki, one of the basic virtues necessary for governing is prudence, to which he gives a neostoic interpretation that clearly illustrates the interconnectedness between Bethlen's needs and the theoretical work of Pataki.⁶⁰ Prudentia is defined as the capacity of adapting to the requirements of the times without compromising one's constancy. The proper exercise of such prudence is exemplified by the campaigns of Bethlen, celebrated by Pataki for making the Habsburg forces withdraw without engaging into open battles and thus without bloodshed. With his campaigns, Bethlen performed the providential function of preserving his people from the machinations of the enemy (the preventive character of the war is repeatedly mentioned in Bethlen's own letters and in other propagandistic texts as well). He also acted, Pataki claims, as an arrow in the hand of God which anticipates Christ's second coming and will finally ruin "the popish."

Pataki's work brings together the most important *topoi* concerning Bethlen's role and figure in a theoretical frame that is supported by his example, but which also legitimates his rule. Prominent features of this frame are its theocratic elements, the inseparability of politics and morals, the importance of prudence and constancy, the requirement of adapting one's actions to the present times without diverging from constancy, the right to resist an ungodly ruler but the necessity to submit to a godly and rightful one. In this context, Bethlen appears as holding a commission from God both by virtue of his office, which is in direct relationship with God, and also by virtue of his actions, which make his rule legitimate, because conforming to the law of God.

WE HAVE overviewed the central topics of the image Bethlen propagated of himself in his letters and his will, and have seen that he made use of a language that integrated elements of the international rhetoric of the religious wars, with princes posing as defenders of religion and liberty. The main challenge the prince faced on the symbolic level in making himself accepted and supported was interpreting his Ottoman relationship in a way that could be accepted by the imaginary of a Hungary and Europe strongly affected by the anti-Ottoman wars of the previous century. In doing so he made use of arguments already present since the time of Bocskai, but that had to be emphatically restated. The Ottomans are given a function predestined by God, the function of guaranteeing but not threatening the freedom of the country and religion. However, such arguments do not make up a coherent system of thought in which the traditional opposition of Christianity vs. “pagans” would simply be replaced by that of a divided Christianity, with the Ottomans guaranteeing the balance of the two. Necessity, and the topos of rope-dancing between the “two evils” are also referred to, just like that of the moral vices of the people that need to be fought against first and foremost. The emphasis given to these different topics change with the context and intended audience, but they are still the main characteristics of the prince’s image.

Arguments supporting Bethlen were drawn from and shaped by a wider context of religious and political disputes. His supporters placed his rule in an eschatological framework, centered around biblical parallelisms between the fate of Israel and that of the country. Thus, Bethlen was given a place among the savior and lawgiver figures of sacred as well as profane history. Alexander the Great and Matthias Corvinus are the two main figures to which Bethlen was frequently compared, a resemblance which Bethlen consciously emphasized, arranging for his funeral to imitate that of Matthias.⁶¹

The recurrent topoi in describing him were drawn from Protestant and traditional humanist thought, as well as from the apocalyptic tradition. Savior of the country by re-establishing concord (concord being the guarantee of the polity’s prosperity since Antiquity) and redeeming the community from the cardinal sin of discord, Bethlen was represented as the promoter of peace and balance both internally and externally. Holding a commission from God to do so, as well as to deliver His punishment on His enemies, and thus uphold His law, he was also described as fulfilling the requirements of the ideal ruler. Bethlen’s supporters personalized the power deriving from God in Calvinist thought, endowing him with the virtues of piety, clemency, prudence, self-sacrifice, constancy and piety, the latter both in the sense of rightfulness and dutifulness and that of individual devotion.

The rhetoric of Bethlen's representation changed the meaning of some well-established topoi such as *flagellum Dei* or *propugnaculum Christianitatis*. Assigning to the Catholic Habsburgs the role traditionally played by the Ottomans, as well as the set of collective sins that bring about God's punishment, was of course a common feature of Protestant thought. The context of the early seventeenth century, with Ferdinand II developing the ideology of *pietas Austriaca* and identifying the House of Austria with Catholicism, as well as the alleged crisis of the Protestant doctrine seeing the Ottomans as God's punishment that will cease as soon as the internal sins are overcome,⁶² combined with the apocalyptic tradition identifying the Ottomans and then the Pope with the Antichrist and the beasts of Daniel and the Revelations, gave force to the argument making Bethlen the defender of the true cause against the House of Austria—even with the help of the Ottomans. These arguments and topoi of course do not make a coherent system of thought. The meaning of the topoi changes with each author and intended audience. They are nevertheless distinctive elements of the official discourse around Bethlen. With the increasing distance in space and time between the authors of these texts and the actual events, the topoi were filled with narrative content from anecdotes, and thus legend formation started around the prince.



Notes

1. R. J. Evans, *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy 1550–1700* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 268–269.
2. Cf. Henry Kamen, “The Statesman,” in *Baroque Personae*, ed. Rosario Villari (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 26.
3. “Don Diego de Estrada visszaemlékezései Bethlen Gábor udvarára,” in *Bethlen Gábor emlékezete*, ed. Makkai László (Budapest: Európa, 1980), 500–540.
4. Cf. Mihály Sebestyén, “A levelíró fejedelem,” in *Bethlen Gábor: Levelek*, ed. Mihály Sebestyén (Bucharest: Kriterion, 1980), 10.
5. Cf. László Nagy, *Bethlen Gábor a független Magyarországért* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1969), 143–147. This was not the case in Transylvania, where the prince was the biggest landowner (in Bethlen's case, maybe not right at the beginning of his rule; nevertheless he soon managed to get hold of a large part of the domains of the former prince and had some donations of princely lands reviewed, regaining thus many additional domains, coming to hold more land than the Estates). Cf. Gyula Szekfű, *Bethlen Gábor* (Budapest: Helikon, 1983); the point is also made by the latest authoritative Hungarian history of Transylvania, Kőpeczi Béla, ed., *Erdély története*, vol. 2 (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1986), 637–687.
6. Cf. Sebestyén, 6–7.

7. To György Széchi, 2 September 1619, to György Rákóczi, 5 September 1619, Imre Thurzó, 12 September 1619. In Sándor Szilágyi, ed., *Bethlen Gábor fejedelem kiadatlan politikai levelei* (Budapest: MTA, 1887).
8. Alvinczi Péter, *Querela Hungariae* (Kassa, 1619), reprinted in *Magyar gondolkodók 17. század*, ed. Tarnóc Márton (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1979), 165–185.
9. Szekfű, 100.
10. Cf. Balázs Trencsényi and Márton Zászkaliczky, eds., *Whose Love of Which Country? Composite States, National Histories and Patriotic Discourses in Early Modern East Central Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).
11. In Makkai László, ed., *Bethlen Gábor krónikásai* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1980), 254, 256.
12. A letter he sent to the Tartars asking for intervention and support became a widely debated issue in the European public printed press; Szekfű, 201.
13. Bethlen's will in *Bethlen Gábor emlékezete*, 421–422.
14. Bethlen's will in *ibid.*, 423.
15. Letter to Grand Vizier Hassan, 12 June 1616 (*ibid.*, 157); letter to his ambassadors to the Porte, 18 September 1620 (*ibid.*, 262).
16. Letter to Péter Pázmány, 30 November 1626, in *ibid.*, 373–374.
17. Letter to Gáspár Illésházy, 27 April 1627, in *ibid.*, 377.
18. Letter to the Estates, 21 September 1623, in *ibid.*, 353–354.
19. Letter to Mihály Károlyi, 29 July 1623, where he renders his reproaches with the classical maxim “*ingrata patria ne ossa quidem habeas; nihil enim etiam terra ingrato homine gravius alit et portat*” (*ibid.*, 350).
20. Letter to Imre Thurzó, 7 June 1621, in *ibid.*, 315.
21. *Ibid.*, 332.
22. Letter to Imre Thurzó, 4 February 1621, in *ibid.*, 291.
23. Since the Ottomans are the punishment of God on Christianity, fighting against them must start by fighting against our own sins, argued Luther. But Cardinal Pázmány's *athleta Christi*, the model of the soldier who can successfully fight the Ottoman threat, was also the man who could defeat his own weaknesses. Cf. István Bitskey, *Virtus és religio* (Miskolc: Felsőmagyarország Kiadó, 1994), 129.
24. Bethlen's will in *Bethlen Gábor emlékezete*, 420.
25. The fact that issues concerning the execution or validity of wills were dealt with by ecclesiastical courts underlines this latter aspect of wills, a point made by Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York–Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).
26. Cf. *Kemény János és Bethlen Miklós Művei*, ed. V. Windisch Éva (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1980), 11, 95–96.
27. Cf. István György Tóth, “Bethlen Gábor mókás temetési menete,” *Történelmi Szemle* 39, 1 (1997): 119–130.
28. *Ibid.*, 125.
29. Cf. Georg Krauss, “Erdélyi Krónika,” in *Bethlen Gábor krónikásai*, 194.
30. Makkai in *Bethlen Gábor emlékezete*, 543.
31. Published in Debrecen, 1622; reprinted in *Bethlen Gábor emlékezete*, 593–618.

32. Ibid., 594.
33. With Márton Szepesi Csombor, both the ruler and the people have to uphold the law of God; as for the relationship between the two, the ruler attracts the blessings of God unto the people by his godliness, and the people constantly pray to God for the ruler. This argument is also made in reference to Bethlen Gábor. Szepesi Csombor Márton, “Udvari schola,” in *Összes Művei* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1968), 330–331.
34. Melotai, 597.
35. János Pataki Füsüs, *Királyoknak tüköre* (Bártfa: Klösz Jakab Jr., 1626).
36. János Heltai, *Alvinczi Péter és a heidelbergi peregrinusok* (Budapest: Balassi, 1994).
37. *Az felséges Bethlen Gábornak ötrendbéli Isten anyaszentegyházával cselekedett jótéteményéről* (Kassa, 1622), reprinted in *Bethlen Gábor emlékezete*, 458–579.
38. Háportoni Forró Pál, “Quintus Curtiusnak az Nagy Sándornak, macedónok királyának viselt dolgairól iratott históriája” (Debrecen, 1619); preface reprinted in *Bethlen Gábor emlékezete*, 580–592.
39. God “ordered and situated most well and properly all parts of the worldly polity, providing order and hierarchy among its members” (“Ezen nagy világi alkotmánynak minden részeit felette jól és illendőképpen rendelvén és helyheztetvén, az benne való tagok és állatok kozzá bizonyos rendtartásokat és főseget adott legyen,” *ibid.*, 580). For Luther and Calvin both conceiving of society in terms of relationships between superiors and subjects see Harro Höpfl, ed. and transl., *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 14, 43.
40. Cf. *Bethlen Gábor emlékezete*, 446.
41. Pataki Füsüs, 110–111.
42. Bojti Veres Gáspár, *De rebus gestis magni Gabrielis Bethlen libri tres* (1624), in *Bethlen Gábor emlékezete*, 36–133, Hungarian translation by József Novák.
43. Szekfű, 39.
44. Bojti’s mysticism of numbers was alluded to by Bartoniek Emma, *Fejezetek a XVI–XVII. századi magyarországi történetírás történetéből* (Budapest: MTA, 1975), 332. The Báthori family dies out after five centuries, and each seventh or eighth year brings about calamities (*ibid.*, 337).
45. This is how Bojti explains why Bethlen faithfully served the former Prince Báthori, presented by him as an ungodly tyrant, and then turned against him using Ottoman support (*ibid.*, 329).
46. Makkai Laszló, “Bethlen Gábor és az európai művelődés,” *Századok* 4 (1981): 673–697.
47. Hungarian translation by József Novák, in Makkai, *Bethlen Gábor krónikásai*, 13–18.
48. Cf. Nagy Laszló, *Botránykövek régi históriáinkban* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1981), 264. As a matter of fact so did Bethlen, as Nagy showed, when in need of assuring his supporters that the Porte would help him if necessary.
49. Maksai Péter, “The State of Bethlen Gábor in Transilvania; The Estate of Gabriel Bethlen or Bethlen Gábor in Hungaria: which came to him either by Election, or by conquest achieved from the Emperour: With a briefe Relation or Chronicle of his Birth and fortunes,” published by Gál István in “Maksai Péter angol nyelvű Bethlen Gábor életrajza 1629–ből,” *Irodalomtörténeti közlemények* 80, 2 (1976): 223–237.

50. Cf. Gál, 233.
51. Ibid., 227–228.
52. Ibid., 225.
53. Ibid., 228.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid., 229.
57. Ibid.
58. Hanau, 1624; reprinted in *Bethlen Gábor emlékezete*, 612–618.
59. Pataki Füsüs.
60. For a more detailed discussion of Pataki's political thought see Hanna Orsolya Vincze: *The Politics of Translation and Transmission: Basilikon Doron in Hungarian Political Thought* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 131–188.
61. Tóth, 127.
62. As Evans put it, “the tide of history ran for Protestantism during the sixteenth century and against it thereafter. Protestants had explained one crisis, after 1500, as the death throes of a corrupted church; yet now another crisis, no less severe, was brewing without any full resolution of the first. If Ottoman advance had betokened Divine wrath in the 1520's, why could progressive elimination of the old observances not assuage it?” (Evans, 114).

Abstract

The Making of a Prince: Fashioning the Image of Gábor Bethlen

Gábor Bethlen was elevated prince of Transylvania five centuries ago, in 1613. At present, he figures in much of the local historiography as a local hero, with his reign represented as a golden age of Transylvania. At the same time, his image in Western historiography has been summarized as that of a semi-savage, faithless and lawless man. The conflicting image of the prince originates in the troubled times of the Protestant Reformation and the Thirty Years' War. This paper argues that the heroic myth of the prince originates in 17th century written sources, many of them drawn up with propagandistic aims, directly inspired and commissioned by the prince himself. It analyzes sources dealing with and contemporary to the prince and his rule, focusing on the way his image was constructed in these texts. The paper shows that the elements of princely representation originate in the discursive traditions that his literati inherited, but also that the literature around the prince changed the meaning and use of several established topoi, such as *flagellum Dei* or *propugnaculum Christianitatis*.

Keywords

princes of Transylvania, Thirty Years' War, princely propaganda, princely representation, patriotism, duties of princes