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EDUCATION, ART, AND POLITICS: THE ALTAR OF SAINT STEPHEN AT THE PIARIST GYMNASIUM CHAPEL IN NAGYBECSKEREK*

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Abstract

This paper will use the altarpiece of St. Stephen of Hungary as a case study to analyse the social and cultural circumstances on the southern outskirts of the Kingdom of Hungary and their consequences on the Torontál County school and church administration. The portrayal of the Hungarian Holy King in the Piarist Gymnasium Chapel in Nagybecskerek (Zrenjanin) is a testimony to the continuance of the narrative about the Christian past of the Hungarian people and the need to keep emphasising it in multi-ethnic regions during the Hungarian Revolution and the Serb Uprising of 1848–1849. Having reconsidered the mutual relationship between revolutionary events, education reforms, and assimilation tendencies, the paper sheds light on the dynamic political situation at the time when the Gymnasium Chapel altarpiece of St. Stephen of Hungary was made.

291

INTRODUCTION

The Piarist Gymnasium Chapel was established in 1846 as part of the city gymnasium compound in (Veliki) Becskerek (Nagybecskerek, present-day Zrenjanin), the capital of Torontál County. Torontál County (Latin: Comitatus Torontaliensis; Hungarian: Torontál vármegye; German: Torontaler Comitat) was a political and administrative area of the former Kingdom of Hungary, which was part of the western Banat from the Middle Ages until the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918.¹ Significant political, administrative and demographic changes that took place on the territory of Torontál County influenced everyday life of the Banat region, becoming an essential part of its cultural and historical heritage.²

In these historical circumstances, an initiative was launched to establish a gymnasium in Becskerek.³ The construction of the Becskerek Gymnasium was a long and arduous process that was financially supported not just by the local self-government but also by church institutions, citizens, and guilds of bootmakers, tanners, masons, tailors, and bakers. The interest in fundraising

* Translated by Tijana Borić, PhD.

1 For more on this topic, see Filip Krčmar, “Torontalska županija 1860–1918” [Torontál County 1860–1918], (PhD diss., University of Novi Sad, 2016), 2–7.

2 Ibid., 17.

3 Saveta Stojanović, *Monografija Zrenjaninske gimnazije* [Monograph of Zrenjanin Gymnasium], book no. 2 (Zrenjanin: Narodni muzej Zrenjanin, 1997), 11.

on the part of the Beckserek community members reveals the importance of establishing a sixth-grade educational institution in this part of Banat and the awareness of its citizens about the role of the educational system in the state corps of southern Hungary. The Gymnasium Compound was built and artistically designed mainly owing to the initiative of wealthy citizens and craft guilds. Shortly after the Gymnasium Compound was completed, an altarpiece representing the Holy King Stephen was placed in the Gymnasium Chapel. The artist József Wippler (1793–1867) created the image of the patron saint of the Gymnasium.⁴ The fact that the altar painting was a gift from the Beckserek Guild of Bootmakers emphasised the local community's devotion to the cult figure. Master guilds competed in donations to stress their social position and become established local community members.

Despite the successful fundraising for the construction of the Gymnasium Compound, the issue of the educational goal of schooling remained open. The Serbian population of Beckserek demanded a non-confessional city school to avoid the Catholicization of Orthodox students and those of other confessions. Despite this initiative for non-confessional education, the Csanád Bishop József Lonovics found the Piarist Catholic Religious Order to be the best option for the *milieu* of Torontál County.⁵ Assigning the administration to the Piarists was a compromise solution that was supposed to satisfy the needs of all the residents of Beckserek. The Piarist Gymnasium administration provided education to Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and Jewish students. As a monastic order focused on educating the lowest social stratum, the Piarists ran an extensive school network in the territories belonging to the Kingdom of Hungary.⁶ Children of different religious groups, nationalities and economic statuses attended the Piarist schools, and the Piarist type of education was very suitable for the diverse demographics of the Habsburg Empire.⁷ The Chapel of St. Stephen of Hungary was the first institution under the administration of the Piarists in the Banat part of Torontál County.⁸

The Order of the Piarists (*Ordo scholarum piarum*) was founded in 1621 by the priest Joseph Calasanz, and was the first Catholic religious order primarily dedicated to children's education.⁹ This model of religious education proved to

4 Goran Malić, "Delovanje jevrejskih fotografa u srpskoj kulturi u XIX i XX veku" [Activities of Jewish Photographers in Serbian Culture in the 19th and 20th Centuries], *Godišnjak grada Beograda*, no. 53 (2006): 54–56.

5 Stojanović, *Monografija Zrenjaninske gimnazije*, 12–13.

6 Antonio Lezáun, *The History of the Order of the Pious Schools* (Madrid: Instituto Calasanz de Ciencias de la Educación, 2011), 112.

7 Montserrat Guibernau, "Anthony D. Smith on Nations and National Identity: A Critical Assessment," in *History and National Destiny: Ethnosymbolism and its Critics*, eds. Montserrat Guibernau and John Hutchinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2004), 139–140; Lezáun, *The History of the Order of the Pious Schools*, 2011, 77–78.

8 Dubravka Đukanović, *Arhitektura rimokatoličkih crkava Vojvodine od 1699. do 1939. godine* [Architecture of Roman Catholic Churches in Vojvodina from 1699 to 1939] (Novi Sad: Pokrajinski zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture, 2015), 166.

9 Mileva Šijaković, "Velikobečkerečki slikar Jozef Goigner" [Nagybecskerek painter Josef Goigner], *Ulaznica: časopis za kulturu, umetnost i društvena pitanja*, no. 110, December 1987, 106–115.

be very successful, and in the middle of the 19th century, it became the dominant educational system in Central Europe, mainly in Hungarian lands with centres in Budapest, Kecskemét, Szeged, Nagykanizsa and Timișoara.¹⁰ Education played a significant role throughout the Kingdom of Hungary, especially in the middle of the 19th century when the Piarist Gymnasium in Bečskerek was opened. The curriculum reflected the current national and cultural aspirations. Therefore, in order to understand the historical circumstances in Torontál County in the late 1840s, it is necessary to examine the educational reforms as well.

Major school reforms in Hungary began as early as the second half of the 18th century, modelled on the Austrian educational system, i.e., the regulation (*Ratio Educationis*, 1777) passed during the reign of Empress Maria Theresa (1717–1780).¹¹ This regulation marked the initial phase of education reform cloaked by the ideology of assimilation espoused by the Hungarian authorities, which would reach its final form with the adoption of the Law on Nationalities (1868. évi XXXVIII törvénycikk a népiskolai közoktatás tárgyában). Its provisions were the cornerstone of the further assimilation process of Hungarianization, which would be developed until the disintegration of Austria-Hungary.¹²

The schooling community of Torontál County suffered pressure from the Viennese court and the Catholic Church throughout the 18th century. Then, at the beginning of the 19th century, it was exposed to the pressure of the Hungarianization process.¹³ The new school reforms also affected the Piarists' curriculum, which promoted Hungarian culture and language, encouraged by the local government.¹⁴ The government elevated education the best means of integrating the Hungarian people as the state firmly controlled this field, making organisational changes and reforms in the school system's curriculum from the lowest to the highest level.¹⁵ The goal of these reforms was the nonviolent, soft assimilation of non-Hungarian peoples through the Hungarianization of intellectuals in literature, science, and education.¹⁶

The construction of a chapel within the Gymnasium Compound dedicated to the Holy Hungarian King points to the complex set of national and religious circumstances in Torontál County in the middle of the 19th century. Political, administrative, and demographic changes affected Torontál County, which led to the establishment of this crucial educational institution on the southern

10 Đukanović, *Arhitektura rimokatoličkih crkava Vojvodine*, 142.

11 Krčmar, "Torontalska županija 1860–1918", 378; Petar Rokai, Zoltan Đere et al., *Istorija Mađara* [History of Hungarians] (Beograd: Clio, 2002), 235; Stojanović, *Monografija Zrenjaninske gimnazije*, 10.

12 Anthony D. Smith, "The Crisis of Dual Legitimation," in: *Nationalism*, eds. Smith and Hutchinson, 113–121.

13 Alfred Cobban, "The Rise of the Nation-State System," in: *Nationalism*, eds. Anthony D. Smith and John Hutchinson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 249–250.

14 Lezáun, *The History of the Order of the Pious Schools*, 109.

15 Rokai, Đere et al., *Istorija Mađara*, 234..

16 *Ibid.*, 226–227.

outskirts of the Kingdom of Hungary. The fundraising activities of citizens, church administration, and local authorities additionally confirmed the importance of establishing the Gymnasium Compound for the multi-ethnic community of Becskerek.

The choice of the Piarists for the management of the Becskerek Gymnasium satisfied the multi-confessional criteria of the region. At the same time, the Chapel's dedication to the Holy King Stephen emphasised the dominant position of Hungarians in Torontál County. The period at which the Gymnasium was founded (i.e., during which the central altar painting was created) was an era of national tensions and the beginning of the assimilation process on the border territories of Hungary. In such circumstances, the portrayal of St. Stephen of Hungary in the Gymnasium Chapel was much more than just an altarpiece. It was a testimony to the Hungarian pretensions in the pre-revolutionary period, i.e., the instrumentalization of the sacred object for the sake of national objectives.

THE REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD

294 The period preceding the 1848 Revolution (the Reform Period, Hungarian: *reform kór*, 1825–1848) was a time of the growing Romanticism and national revival in the Kingdom of Hungary.¹⁷ The rise of the ideology of nationalism among the Hungarian people was reflected in culture, and the Reform Period caused the development of various cultural centres across the southern territories of the Kingdom of Hungary. The flourishing of cultural life in Becskerek corroborates this fact. Becskerek was at the time a county seat, so in 1839 the city theatre was built, along with the first city reading room. A bookstore opened in 1843, and the first printing house owned by the Regensburg bookstore vendor Franz Paul Pleitz was opened in 1847.¹⁸ The Piarist Gymnasium was built in 1846 under this wave of construction, establishing Becskerek as an important educational and cultural centre in the southern part of the Kingdom of Hungary.

Apart from the decade-long cultural revival, the revolutionary events in 1848–1849 affected the further progress of Becskerek because Torontál County was pivotal in the civil war between Hungarians and Serbs. The Hungarian Revolution of 1848, which started as a peaceful protest of liberal politicians in Buda and Pest, emerged from the longstanding conflict between the Hungarians and the Viennese court, which sought to govern the Austrian Empire centrally.¹⁹ The conflict with the Serbs arose later, when the newly formed independent Hungarian government refused to fulfil the national demands of the non-Hungarian nationalities.²⁰

17 Krčmar, "Torontalska županija 1860–1918," 144; Alfred Cobban, "The Rise of the Nation-State System," 249–250.

18 Ibid., 145.

19 Ibid., 146.

20 Feliks Mileker, *Istorija varoši Veliki Bečkerek 1333–1918* [History of the Town of Nagybecskerek] (Zrenjanin–Beograd: Istorijski arhiv–IP Beograd, 2011), 315; Rokai, Đere et al., *Istorija Mađara*,

At the 1848 County Assembly, a letter from the governor's office was read, proclaiming the freedom of the press and the establishment of the Hungarian People's Army. That proclamation triggered a reaction by Serbian citizens, who set the Hungarian language registry books on fire and attempted to remove the Hungarian tricolour flag from the Beckserek town hall.²¹ After the May Assembly and the constitution of the Serbian Vojvodina (which included the Torontál County) on May 13, 1848 in Sremski Karlovci, the Hungarian-Serbian conflict worsened. The National Guard designated Beckserek and Vršac as key strongholds.²²

Due to the war atmosphere, the Vienna administration abolished schools on 10 June 1848. Hence, the Piarist school was turned into a military hospital.²³ After the Serbs conquered Veliki Beckserek on January 12, 1849, the Serbian People's Committee of Veliki Beckserek took over the city government. It started forming new authorities, electing Patriarch Josif Rajačić (1785–1861) as acting governor of the Serbian Vojvodina.²⁴ From January 23 to April 3, Patriarch Rajačić led an active process of establishing the authority of the Serbian People's Movement in Torontál County. Residing in the Piarist Gymnasium, he served liturgy in the Gymnasium Chapel of St. Stephen of Hungary.²⁵

During the Revolutionary Period, the Piarist Gymnasium, i.e., the Piarist Chapel, served various purposes – as an ammunition depot, a military hospital, and a temporary seat of the Serbian Orthodox leader. While the exterior was considerably damaged, the Chapel's interior remained intact. Consequently, the altar and the image of St. Stephen of Hungary were preserved, and represent one of the few known sacral artworks of József Wippler. The preserved altarpiece of St. Stephen was the starting point for the art programme of the Gymnasium Chapel, which would only be fully completed thirty years later.²⁶

This turbulent revolutionary environment marked the first decade of the Beckserek Gymnasium, paving the ground for the further development of the educational and social system of Torontál County. The Gymnasium was reopened in the school year 1849/1850 with a significantly changed curriculum: the schooling length was reduced to four years, while German language became the medium of instruction. Even Hungarian history courses were taught in German, which confirmed the post-revolutionary national tension, whereas

248; Peter Sugar, "Nationalism in Eastern Europe," in *Nationalism*, eds. Smith and Hutchinson, 171–176, 174–175.

21 Krčmar, "Torontalska županija 1860–1918," 147.

22 Dejan Mikavica, Nenad Lemajić et al., *Srbi u Habsburškoj monarhiji 1526–1918* [Serbs in the Habsburg Monarchy 1526–1918] (Novi Sad: Prometej, no. 1, 2016), 417–474; Krčmar, "Torontalska županija 1860–1918," 148; Rokai, Đere et al., *Istorija Madara*, 245–248.

23 Krčmar, "Torontalska županija 1860–1918," 148; Stojanović, *Monografija Zrenjaninske gimnazije*, 15.

24 Krčmar, "Torontalska županija 1860–1918," 151.

25 Miloš Popović, "U Velikom Bečkereku, 10. februara" [10th of February in the Nagybeckserek], *Srbske novine*, February 15, 1849, 2.

26 Vanja Stojković, "Pijaristička kapela Svetog Stefana u Zrenjaninu: Istorija i slikarstvo" [The Piarist Chapel of Saint Stephen in Zrenjanin: History and Art], in *Zbornik Matice srpske za likovne umetnosti*, no. 49 (2021): 143–160.

Serbian history was left entirely out of the curriculum. The new educational policy, with its tendency toward Germanization, lasted until 1860, when the Hungarian language was gradually reintroduced into the curriculum.²⁷

The national revolution of 1848, lasting from March to September, significantly influenced the further development of culture and education in Becskerek. The revolutionary events of 1848 abruptly interrupted the flourishing of the cultural life in the city, and the change of the Gymnasium Compound's function mirrored the outcomes of the Serbian-Hungarian conflict in Becskerek.²⁸ Despite the revolutionary events and dynamic changes in the Chapel's function, the altarpiece of St. Stephen was not damaged. Thus, the altarpiece has a historical memorial aspect apart from its sacral and national character. The altarpiece symbolises hardships during the revolutionary conflicts and struggles to preserve the Hungarian national idea in challenging times.

THE CULT OF SAINT STEPHEN: ORIGIN AND RECEPTION IN THE 19TH CENTURY

296 The dedication of the Gymnasium Chapel to St. Stephen (Szent István király, 995–1038), the first Christian Hungarian ruler, points to the widespread cult of this mythical person, crucial for the development of national consciousness on the part of the Hungarian people.²⁹ According to the prevailing cultural and political currents of the 19th century, European nations used visual representations as a mechanism for promoting their longevity.³⁰ Following the example of other European countries, the Kingdom of Hungary also initiated the development of historiography at the beginning of the 19th century. Historiographical works dealt with the origins of the Hungarian people, emphasising its longevity rooted in the pagan and/or Christian past. Despite their scientific pretensions, such historiographical works were mostly romantic; applying the ideals of the Modern Age to the fictional Middle Ages, contemporary historiographers presented the Kingdom of Hungary as a single state, although it has been established that the concept of Hungarian statehood developed gradually.³¹ Referring to the ancient and medieval past, embodied in the figure of the epic forefather King Stephen and the narrative of ethnogenesis, the Hungarian nation invented its tradition³² to confirm national identity.³³

27 Lezáun, *The History of the Order of the Pious Schools*, 100.

28 Rokai, Dere et al., *Istorija Madara*, 239–249.

29 Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 163–164.

30 Erzsébet Király, Júlia Papp, *A magyar művészet a 19. században (Képzőművészet)* [Hungarian Art in the 19th Century (Fine Arts)] (Budapest: Mta Btk–Osiris, 2018), 97.

31 Rokai, Dere et al., *Istorija Madara*, 15.

32 Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 3–10, 263–288; Eric Kaufmann and Oliver Zimmer “Dominant ethnicity and the ethnic-civic dichotomy in the work of Anthony D. Smith” in *History And National Destiny*, eds. Guibernau and Hutchinson, 63–65., Anthony D. Smith “History and national destiny: responses and clarifications” in *History And National Destiny*, eds. Guibernau and Hutchinson, 196–199.

33 Nenad Makuljević, *Umetnost i nacionalna ideja u XIX veku sistem evropske i srpske vizuelne kulture u službi nacije* [Introduction to the National Idea of the 19th Century European System of European and Visual Culture] (Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike, 2006), 255–318.

Hungarians first embraced Christianity during the reign of King Árpád (845–907). However, mass baptisms and the ecclesiastical territorial organisation only took place upon Vajk's ascension to power in 995 (Vajk was the pagan name of the Holy King Stephen/István). The first Christian ruler of Hungary, King Stephen I, continued his predecessor Árpád's activities and started systematically baptising the Hungarian people, opening many monasteries, and establishing dioceses.³⁴ The Christianization of the Hungarians was quite advanced by the year 1000, and, according to tradition, King Stephen petitioned the Holy See to officially crown him for his successes in the field of church organisation. According to legend, an angel addressed to Pope Sylvester II (Silvestro II/Gerberto di Aurillac, 940/50–1003) in a dream, telling him to hand over the crown to the envoys of the ruler of the “unknown people” instead of to the Prince of Poland (Mieszko I, 935–992), for whom it was initially meant. With that crown, the first Archbishop of Esztergom Astrik crowned King Stephen, making him the official Christian ruler in 1001, the year that also marks the beginning of Hungarian statehood.³⁵ The reign of St. Stephen was a turning point in the history of the Hungarian Crown, and succeeding rulers mostly looked up to St. Stephen when it came to church organisation and fair-minded government under the auspices of Christian values.³⁶

Commissioned at the time of the building construction in 1846, the central altarpiece dedicated to St. Stephen of Hungary is the earliest surviving painted artwork of the Piarist Gymnasium Chapel (**fig. 1**). In the altarpiece, the Polish-Jewish artist József Wippler³⁷ portrayed the first Hungarian Christian monarch St. Stephen dressed in royal attire, presenting the royal regalia to the Virgin Mary, the patroness of the Hungarian lands.³⁸ Apart from the most important regalia – the Holy Crown (*Szent Korona*) – the image also shows the sceptre, the orb, and the mantle, which together constitute the Hungarian coronation insignia and symbolise the power and continuity of the Hungarian nation.³⁹ The narrative is associated with the legend of the Holy King Stephen, who raised the Holy Crown before his death (1038), handing it over to the Virgin Mary to seal a Divine contract between the patroness and the most important

34 Rokai, Đere et al., *Istorija Mađara*, 13–19.

35 Zoltan J. Kosztołnyik, *Five Eleventh Century Hungarian Kings: Their Policies and Their Relations with Rome* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 52–66.

36 Király, Papp, *A magyar művészet a 19. században (Képzőművészet)*, 231–232; Rokai and Đere, *Istorija Mađara*, 16–19.

37 Malić, “Delovanje jevrejskih fotografa,” 52.

38 Olivera Milanović-Jović, “Iz slikarstva i primenjene umetnosti u Banatu” [From Painting and Applied Art in Banat], *Grada za proučavanje spomenika kulture Vojvodine*, no. 6–7 (1976): 173–176; Németh Ferenc, “A Nagybecskereki Piarista Gimnázium Története 1846–1920” [History of the Piarist High School in Nagybecskerek 1846–1920], 18; accessed November 27, 2021, <https://mtt.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/Nemeth-Ferenc-Piaristak-2015.pdf>; David H. Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 487.

39 On the Crown of Saint Stephen I, see Zoltan Györe, “Ideologija mađarske Svete Krune” [The Ideology of the Hungarian Holy Crown], in *Vojvodanski prostor u kontekstu evropske istorije 1*, ed. Vladan Gavrilović (Novi Sad: Univerzitet u Novom Sadu–Filozofski fakultet, 2012), 137–159, 158.



Fig. 1. Jozsef Vipppler, *Saint Stephen and the Madonna*, 1846, oil on canvas, Piarist Gymnasium Chapel, Nagybecskerek. Photograph by Vanja Stojković.

symbol of the Kingdom of Hungary.⁴⁰ That moment marked the beginning of the historical process by which the royal regalia became the official symbols of Hungarian statehood and the Virgin Mary became the holy protectress and Queen of the Hungarian territories.

There were many reasons for offering the Hungarian territories to the Virgin Mary, both religious and diplomatic, as the cult of the Mother of God was partly connected with essential elements of Hungarian pagan beliefs, and was therefore supposed to facilitate the acceptance of Christianity.⁴¹ Among numerous theories, the theses of ethnologists Mihály Hoppál and József V. Molnár stand out as the best-accepted interpretations of the pre-Christian past of Hungarian tribes. These theorists emphasise the presence of the archetypes of the Virgin Mary and Christ (*Boldogasszony*, *Fény Jézus*) in the pantheon of pagan Hungarians, thus considering the acceptance of Christian doctrine as a logical continuation of already known sacral narratives. Furthermore, *táltos* shamans played an essential role in the life of pre-Christian communities as spiritual leaders and mediators between the sensual and the otherworldly,

whose role was taken over by rulers in the Middle Ages starting with the Holy King Stephen I.⁴²

According to historian Gyula Szekfű, two religious events constitute the nucleus of Hungarian statehood: the Divine intervention involving angels when Pope Sylvester II decided to send the Crown to Stephen I and the act of offering the Holy Crown of Hungary to the Virgin Mary.⁴³ Therefore, St. Stephen's address to the Mother of God has its roots in ancient customs of *táltos* addressing a pagan deity, and represents a moment of unification of the old pagan and the new Christian understandings of Hungarian spirituality and the birth of the statehood under the auspices of the holiness.

At that time, the Doctrine of the Holy Crown (*Szentkorona-tan*) was constituted as a system of ideas composed of legal, religious, and ethical

40 Rokai, Đere et al., *Istorija Mađara*, 13–14, 17–20.

41 Györe, "Ideologija mađarske Svete Krune," 138–143.

42 More on the pagan tradition of the Hungarian tribes is available in Adam Kolozsi, *Social construction of the native faith: mytho-historical narratives and identity-discourse in Hungarian Neo-Paganism* (Budapest: Central European University Nationalism Studies Program, 2012), 39–41, 80–83.

43 Bálint Hóman, Gyula Szekfű, *Magyar történet I–IV* [Hungarian History I – IV] (Budapest: Király Magyar egyetemi nyomda, 1936) IV, 376; Péter László, "The Holy Crown of Hungary, Visible and Invisible," *The Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. 81, no. 3 (2003): 464, 511.

elements related to the Crown of St. Stephen. The ideology of the Holy Crown is a complex concept that refers primarily to the subject itself, the crown of Stephen I, including myths and legends related to the royal regalia. It also includes a belief in the tradition of Hungary being the state of the Virgin Mary and the role that the Holy Crown has had in the development of Hungarian public law.⁴⁴ The Doctrine emphasises the complex attitude about the regalia of the Kingdom of Hungary. The Holy Crown has not been understood as a sublime symbol of royal authority but as a symbol of the Hungarian people's acceptance of Christianity, given that King Stephen I received it via Divine intervention.⁴⁵ The sacred aspect of the Crown is also reflected in the legend of Holy King Stephen, who offered his territories to the Virgin Mary after he discovered that he was left without a male heir. Later, during the reign of Saint Ladislaus, the Kingdom of Hungary also received the Catholic name of *Regnum Marianum* (Kingdom of Mary). The Holy Crown represents the mystical body (*Corpus Mysticum*), and thus the king is not the highest authority, but the Crown itself.⁴⁶

Over the centuries and under the new political circumstances, the concept of the Holy Crown has been modified and interpreted in various ways in favour of the governing state systems.⁴⁷ 19th-century liberals also used the Doctrine of the Holy Crown, making it the backbone of their political *credo*, calling for respect for traditional constitutionality and the existing legal system to form the civil idea of the Hungarian political nation.⁴⁸ The identity of the Hungarian nation, based on the legends of the mythical founder Árpád and the Christian ruler István, was often emphasised throughout the 19th century in multi-ethnic environments such as Torontál County. Such a premium on the longevity and orthodoxy of the ethnic group (embodied in the narratives of epic kings) was in keeping with the mechanism of national identity formation of young European nations in general.⁴⁹

299

THE ALTARPIECE

The momentum of the Hungarian national awakening from the early 19th century reached the climax in the revolutions of 1848–1849 and echoed in both artworks and historiographical works.⁵⁰ The most influential movement, Romanticism, coupled with contemporary national aspirations, gave birth to 19th-century history painting in Hungary. Large paintings that depicted

44 Györe, "Ideologija mađarske Svete Krune," 138–143.

45 László, "The Holy Crown of Hungary, Visible and Invisible," 464.

46 Hóman, Szekfű, *Magyar történet I–IV*, IV, 153–4.

47 László, "The Holy Crown of Hungary, Visible and Invisible," 464–465.

48 Szekfű Hóman, *Magyar történet I–IV*, I, 160; László, "The Holy Crown of Hungary, Visible and Invisible," 503–506.

49 Bálint Varga, *The Monumental Nation, Magyar Nationalism and Symbolic Politics in Fin-de-siècle Hungary*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), 177–178; Smith, "The Crisis of Dual Legitimation," 171.

50 *Ibid.*, 232–239, 295.

Hungarian historical events had the effect of maintaining patriotic enthusiasm during the revolution. The altarpiece of Holy King Stephen I in the Piarist Chapel in Beeskerek also fits into the broader national and romantic corpus of Hungarian art. It illustrates the famous epic narrative about the progenitor of the Hungarian Christian state.

The altarpiece of Holy King Stephen in the Beeskerek Gymnasium incorporates sacral, national, and memorial elements. As an altarpiece, it is primarily a ceremonial object which functions within the chapel's space, within which it is placed at a crucial and spiritually uppermost spot. As the focal point of every sacral building, the altarpiece has the task of bringing a beholder into a state of mind suitable for prayer. Thus, it served as a mnemonic device for contemplation while, at the same time, encouraging personal piety and collective communion with the Divine.⁵¹ The portrayal of the Holy Hungarian King was an essential part of the religious ritual, which took place in the Gymnasium Chapel and was shaped by the national aspect due to historical circumstances. The image of the chapel's patron saint on the central altarpiece of the Piarist Chapel provides evidence of the developed cult of the Hungarian Holy King. It goes beyond the original historical and mythological framework to become a stronghold for the young Hungarian nation in its further national aspirations throughout the 19th century. The cult of medieval rulers bears witness to the use of myth for the sake of affirming the national *credo*.

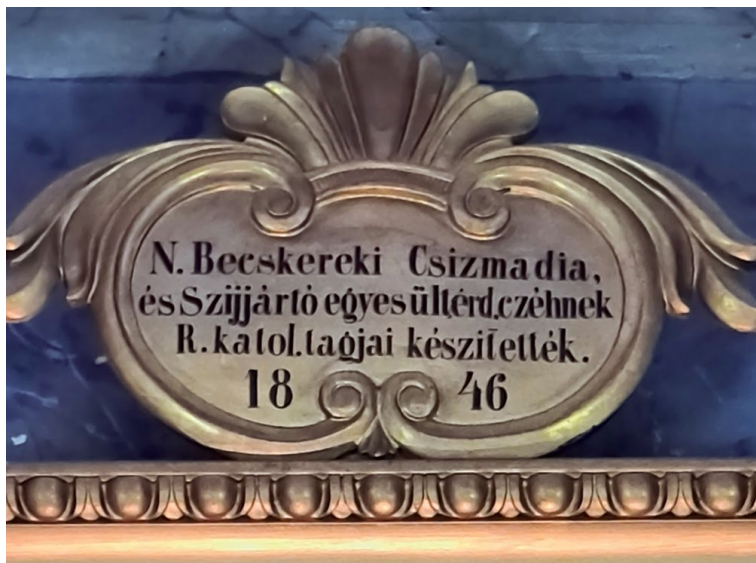
300

The narrative of a medieval pagan ruler who gained legitimacy by being crowned with a Christian regalia was a helpful tool in confirming the orthodoxy and longevity of a nation. For that reason, the myth of St. Stephen belongs equally to the sacral and the national tradition of the Hungarian people. The chapel's dedication and the portrayal of the mythical ruler in the main altarpiece reveal the political and cultural climate in Beeskerek in the middle of the 19th century. The cartouche (**fig. 2**) with an inscription above the altar highlights the importance of the cult of St. Stephen for the local community: "N. Beeskereki Csizmadia, és Szijjártò egyesültérd. czéhnek R. katol. tagjai készítették. 1846" (Commissioned by the Nagy Beeskerek Guild of Bootmakers for the Roman Catholic chapel, 1846).

The archival materials point to the donation of the Beeskerek Guild of Bootmakers that commissioned an altar painting depicting the patron saint, Saint Stephen I, in the year of the chapel's construction. Apart from the inscription of the cartouche, the brightly coloured boot of the Holy King Stephen, shown while praying, also points to the guild's role. It is known that many local guilds helped the construction of the Gymnasium Compound. The Beeskerek Guild of Bootmakers stood out in terms of the number of donations. In a sacral context, donations imply special treatment to the benefactor. The

51 Hans Belting, *Slika i kult istorija slike do epohe umetnosti* [Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art] (Novi Sad: Akademska knjiga, 2014), 519.

Fig. 2. Jozsef Vippler, Cartouche detail on the altar of Saint Stephen, 1846, Piarist Gymnasium Chapel, Nagybecskerek. Photograph by Vanja Stojković.



donation commemorated an individual, a community, or, in this case, a craft guild and included a will or specific request to have masses offered on behalf of the benefactor. Engaging in charity and donations was doubly-motivated, and was a method for some guilds or individuals to highlight their position and reputation in the community. Commitment to the cult of the mythical Hungarian ruler expressed through the local guild's donations reveals the importance of emphasising national identity as a key aspect of the foundation of the Piarist Gymnasium as a vital educational institution for the community of Torontál County.

The altar in the Piarist Chapel of St. Stephen is evidence of the search for the national identity in the multi-ethnic environment of Torontál County. It indicates the presence of the Hungarian national cult of the mythical ruler within the local community of Beeskerek. The image of the Chapel's patron, the Hungarian King Saint Stephen, was made right after the construction of the building and before the beginning of the revolution. It represents the ideological foundations of the local community of Beeskerek. The first Christian ruler, St. Stephen, is a nucleus of Hungarian statehood. Thus, the locus of his image within the holiest space of the chapel discloses the unbreakable bond between the state and the church on which the duality of Hungarian national identity was based. The local guild's donation of the altarpiece to the Piarist Chapel also confirms a commitment to the cult of St. Stephen and a need to stress the Hungarian national credo in Beeskerek.

The depiction of St. Stephen on the main altarpiece illustrates the most important moment in Hungarian Christian history: the union of the Hungarian nation with the Virgin Mary. Having offered the royal regalia of the Kingdom of Hungary, including the cult object *Szent Korona*, to the Holy Protectress Virgin Mary, an indissoluble religious and political basis for Hungarian statehood was formed. Furthermore, the dedication of the Gymnasium Chapel to the mythical founder of Christian Hungary reflected the contemporary nationalist

aspirations of Hungary that considered the border area of Torontál County a relevant territory.

CONCLUSION

The building constructed in honour of the Holy Hungarian King illustrates the complex mechanism of forming national identity and a sense of belonging for the Hungarian people in the southern territories of the Kingdom of Hungary in the 19th century. The dedication of the Gymnasium Chapel to St. Stephen, the first Hungarian Christian ruler, testifies to the widespread cult of the mythical person, a vital link in the formation of national consciousness of the young Hungarian nation in the 19th century. The Hungarian national impulse was the backbone of important events in southern Hungary's political and cultural life, and establishing the Becskerek Gymnasium Compound under the jurisdiction of the Piarists was one aspect of the Hungarian integration and assimilation of the non-Hungarian population.

Having emphasised their longevity based on Christian values, the Hungarians established primacy over the territory of Torontál County, which revealed the tense relationship between different ethnic groups, which would later grow into an open conflict immediately after the founding of the Gymnasium. The Hungarian Civic Revolution of 1848 shaped the further development of Becskerek's cultural and educational life in great measure.

³⁰² The unstable political situation is best illustrated by the dynamic change in functions of the Gymnasium building – in the revolutionary years, it served as a military hospital, an ammunition depot, and the temporary seat of Patriarch Rajačić.

The Gymnasium Chapel of St. Stephen was constructed during the Serbian-Hungarian conflict and artistically designed under the contemporary ideological aspirations in Torontál County. The symbolic value of the altarpiece in the Gymnasium Chapel is also reflected in its historical and memorial characteristics. The altarpiece made in the years before the revolution remained undamaged during the Hungarian-Serbian conflicts despite the dynamic changes in the chapel's function. Accordingly, the painting represents a memorial *topos*, a testimony to the Revolutionary Period, which inevitably changed the further course of events in Torontál County.