

## “Double enemies” within the Gates

### The Oriental Ismaelite Others, as a Variant of Central European ‘Frontier Orientalism’ in Hungarian Historical Fiction

Márton Pál Iványi 

Doctoral School of Sociology and Communication Science of the Budapest Corvinus University;  
H-1093 Budapest, Közraktár utca 4-C; [martonpivanyi@gmail.com](mailto:martonpivanyi@gmail.com)

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**Abstract.** A relatively unknown facet of Central European Orientalism becomes manifest when encountering the epistemological heritage of the historical experiences of the Ismaelite community in Medieval Hungary. Accordingly, hegemonic themes of Hungarian historic fiction about this Muslim minority range from being speculative/profiterring arms dealers. Such patterns span across the entire trajectory of Hungarian literature. This paper introduces this virtually unknown attitude with the frame of reference based on oeuvres of the Romantic and the Modern periods, with the broader intention to understand the nuances of the Saidian paradigm.

**Keywords:** orientalism, history, Hungary, anthropology, Islam

## Introduction

One of the greatest mysteries of Hungarian historiography has been until this day the Ismaelites (in Hungarian: *izmaeliták*), who gained historical and sociological importance during the Árpád dynasty-era. Despite our limited knowledge, two things seem certain: 1) the Ismaelites were a community of Muslim origin, and 2) they have been cast in a strongly negative light in the intellectual history of Hungary, including both contemporary accounts and Hungarian fiction of much later historical periods.

We read terrible complaints about Ismaelites, of the almost Draconian laws put in force against them, and we are reminded, more broadly, of the enormous resonance of the discourse of ‘Oriental’ and/or Muslim Otherness,<sup>1</sup> and more narrowly, of the Central European (Frontier) Orientalism nexus,<sup>2</sup> which was shaped by the

1 Said, *Orientalism*; Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*; Massad, *Islam in Liberalism*.

2 Cf. Gingrich, “Frontier Myths of Orientalism”; Lemmen, “Noncolonial Orientalism”; Sabatos, *Frontier Orientalism*.

historical-political experience of the expansion of the Ottoman Empire centuries later. Ever since Said's introduction to the critical paradigm of Orientalism, considerable attention has been dedicated to alleged or actual tendencies of exercising a form of ideological power over the cultures and societies of the Orient. Accordingly, they are reduced by "pervasive patterns of representation"<sup>3</sup> as "exotic, degenerate, passive, fanatical, mysterious, civilized, and uncivilized"<sup>4</sup> by "symbols, narratives and repertoires."<sup>5</sup>

Both the validity and the limits of the corresponding poststructuralist critical current have attracted enormous attention ever since. At the same time, unlike the legacy of the Ottoman era, which is shared by the fictional traditions of several nations in Central Europe, a Hungarian specificity is almost completely unknown in these traditions, namely the portrayal of the Ismaelite community. Henceforth, this will be presented in view of two short stories by Mór Jókai in the Romantic Era, and eight modern Hungarian novels: one by Ferenc Herczeg, Géza Gárdonyi, Gyula Krúdy, János Kodolányi, László Passuth and György Karczag each, and two by Sándor Makkai. In addition to fiction, a pertinent inauguration speech of a Hungarian academic, János Karácsonyi, delivered at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, will also be introduced.

## Historical antecedents

The assumption and discussion of the disputed historical origins of the Ismaelites is far beyond the scope of this paper, which will be content with the fact that there are four competing theories all of which assume their Oriental roots, and that their social and military role was of paramount importance in the 12<sup>th</sup> century due to the wars with Byzantium.<sup>6</sup>

It has long been known in historiography that there was a significant Muslim population in the Árpád era in Hungary.<sup>7</sup> Their origins and the chronological orientation of their appearance have divided the intelligentsia and scholars of Hungary for centuries. Nineteenth-century Hungarian Orientalists (i.e., János Jerney, Ármin Vámbéry) linked them to Volga Bulgaria, but over time the main ideas shifted to the Khazar Empire (Gyula Pauler), the Balkans (János Karácsonyi),<sup>8</sup> or to certain

3 Bakic-Hayden and Hayden, "Orientalist Variations."

4 Hodkinson and Walker, *Deploying Orientalism in Culture and History*, 1.

5 Gingrich, "Frontier Myths," 123–24; Sabatos, *Frontier Orientalism*, 164.

6 Mátyás, "Az Árpád-kori magyarországi muszlimok eredete," 315.

7 Szűcs, "Két történelmi példa," 1400.

8 Karácsonyi, "Izmaeliták."

speculations that they may have come from Khwarezm (Károly Czeglédy, Charles D’Eslary) together with the Magyar tribes at the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, during the reign of Prince Taksony (?–970), or even later, in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>9</sup>

Naturally, fiction has been dealing with this community for a few centuries and it has been of interest to non-Hungarian authors as well. An important example of this intersection is Italian prelate Roger of Torre Maggiore’s (1205–1266) account of the Mongol–Tatar Golden Horde’s invasion of the Kingdom of Hungary. Roger writes in Chapter 37 (Capitulum XXXVII) of his *Carmen miserabile super destructione regni Hungariae per Tartaros* that during the siege of a village named Pereg, after all the Hungarian prisoners had been slain, Ismaelites were among those forced to fight on the side of the Tatars (Mongols).<sup>10</sup>

### Romantic associations of paganism, untrustworthiness, treason, and exploitation

Several centuries later, a great deal of attention was drawn to this page of Medieval history with its various subjects by Hungarian authors. In a short story by novelist and dramatist Mór Jókai (1825–1904) entitled “Knight Fulkó, a Tale from the Bad Old Times” (*Fulkó lovag. Rege a régi rossz időkből*), the brave brothers Simon Koppánd and Mihál Koppánd, fleeing the Mongols (in Hungarian original: the Tatár), “arrived at a private farmhouse of an Ismaelite. As a double enemy, for he was a stranger and a pagan, how could he have given good advice to the fugitives?” In addition to their alleged unreliability, Ismaelites also bear the stigma of supporting the Mongol invaders: “Many impious sinners have been slain [...] traitors, apostates, Ismaelites, butchers selling human flesh, raiders, and Saracen spies who have joined the Tatars.”<sup>11</sup>

In another collection of Jókai’s short stories entitled “The History of the Hungarian Nation in Novelistic Sketches”<sup>12</sup> (*A magyar nemzet története regényes rajzokban*), in the piece “The Jerusalem Campaign” (*A jeruzsálemi hadjárat*), after the royal treasurer Dénes had put the treasury offices up for auction, the mines fell into the hands of Jews, Armenians, Ismaelites, and all the methods of minting

9 Berend, *At the Gate of Christendom*, 64–65; Szűcs, “Két történelmi példa”, 11–27; Mátyás, “Az Árpád-kori magyarországi muszlimok eredete,” 316–17.

10 Rogerius, de Apulia, *Carmen miserabile super destructione regni Hungariae per Tartaros*. Bibliotheca Augustana, [https://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/Chronologia/Lspost13/RogieriusApulus/rog\\_ca37.html](https://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/Chronologia/Lspost13/RogieriusApulus/rog_ca37.html). Translation of the Latin original based on Voloshchuk, *Ruthenians (the Rus’)*, 108.

11 Jókai, *Fulkó lovag*.

12 The term “Novelistic sketches” is a literal translation of Jókai’s archaism “regényes rajzok”

money, salt taxes, levies, customs duties, tax payments, and all the ways of scourging the people were sold to them. In the light of later accounts, it appears that these political privileges, as well as the Ismaelites' practices of collecting money, remained extremely unpopular.<sup>13</sup>

### Modern Hungarian fiction: unbiased beginnings?

Playwright and author Ferenc Herczeg's (1863–1954) historical novel "The Pagans" (*Pogányok*), published in 1902 but set in 1046, documents that "Böszörmény" merchants "appeared as vultures following every battle."<sup>14</sup> That the name 'Böszörmény' refers exclusively to the Ismaelites is mere speculation that can only be assumed. Nevertheless, at one point, the author does name the Ismaelites explicitly, in connection with the periodic group baptism fairs in Marosvár (modern Ócsanáád, located in Southwest Romania), where they "offered people knives and fire tools, and women glass beads and silver pins."<sup>15</sup> In view of this *hapax legomenon*, in fact, neither Herczeg nor his characters make any explicit value judgments of members of this community in the book about pagans that depicts the historical fall of the ancient faith and features characters who otherwise repeatedly condemn paganism.

Géza Gárdonyi's 1908 historical novel "The Prisoners of God" (*Isten rabjai*) is set in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, following the Tatar invasion. In the fourth chapter of the book's third part, the Ismaelites are introduced predominantly in a value-neutral way, while the author makes an interesting distinction between them and the Böszörmény people:

"The Hungarian and the Böszörmény swordsmiths, the Styrian spearmen, [...] and the Ismaelite bow and quivers makers were selling their merchandise separately [...] A Jewish merchant with a pointed hat entered [...] and offered [...] wound-healing ointments. Commodities of an Ismaelite stirrup-seller were more popular. He also sold beautiful gold-plated stirrups. »Very cheap! Blease (sic!), very cheap!«"<sup>16</sup>

Gárdonyi, however, discusses not only the "typical" characteristics of this community of as arms dealers, but also tries to identify their origins:

13 <https://www.arcanum.com/hu/online-kiadvanyok/Jokai-jokai-mor-osszes-muvei-1/a-magyar-nemzet-tortenete-regenyes-rajzokban-341BF/a-jeruzsalemi-hadjarat-34504/>

14 Herczeg, *Pogányok*, 159–60.

15 Herczeg, *Pogányok*, 31.

16 Gárdonyi, *Isten rabjai*.

“At that time, there were many Ismaelites and Böszörménys in Hungary. The Ismaelites were Muslims, Bulgarians, or Persians. And the Böszörménys were arms dealers from Bessarabia. They came to us like the Bosniaks do now. They had their belts wrapped around them with daggers. They wore white and yellow turbans, baggy pantaloons and tight dolmans. Their weapons were much in demand.”<sup>17</sup>

### Continuing paths of negative portrayal in Hungarian inter-war fiction

Gyula Krúdy’s 1925 novel “The Templar” (*A templárius*) reveals the Ismaelites’ political ties and secret financial dealings, claiming that their patrons were dubious contemporary figures:

“The papal envoy spoke a lot about the Jews and other (sic!) Ismaelites, who have huge patronage here. Their chief patron is Count Samuel of the Chamber, who has secretly converted to the Jewish religion, and placed state property in the hands of his fellow believers.”<sup>18</sup>

In a similar spirit, protagonist Knight Roger tells the Master of Veszprém that, when needed, their Order protected from injustice not only troubled Jews and Ismaelites, but also the Cuman King.<sup>19</sup> Later, the former Templar Bogumil hermit Pontius, living somewhere in the karst mountains of the Balkan Peninsula, complains to Roger: “The Jews and Ismaelites have patrons even if they have Christian servants and hold Christian children, but we have no patrons, not even in our hermitage.”<sup>20</sup>

The traditions of Ismaelites’ potential willingness to act as money lenders is seen in one of the most important prose works of Hungarian poet Mihály Babits, the family saga entitled “Children of Death” (*Halálfiái*, 1927): the bankrupt antihero Gyula Hintass refers to Ismaelites as a “historical precedent” (i.e., a pretext) when he tries to justify before Nelli his willingness to borrow money: “Jews and Ismaelites! already our old kings turned to them when they were short of money, and we will follow the ancient Hungarian tradition, Nelli!”<sup>21</sup>

In Chapter I of Transylvanian author Sándor Makkai’s (1890–1951) 1934 “Shaman King” (*Táltoskirály*), the depiction of the cruelty of Ismaelites goes beyond what Jókai had presumed. Here, the old Szekler Uncle Áron speculates about the end of the world

17 Gárdonyi, *Isten rabjai*.

18 Krúdy, *A templárius*, 141.

19 Krúdy, *A templárius*, 155.

20 Krúdy, *A templárius*, 226.

21 Babits, *Halálfiái*, 143.

in the wake of actual social events, among which he thinks about the Ismaelites: “and how many poor people have had their wives or unmarried daughters taken away by the Ismaelites [referred to as “szerecsenyek” or Saracens in the text] because they could not pay the Jura Regalia [*regálé*] and the tenth [*decima*]!”<sup>22</sup>

The next narrative section of Chapter 11 of Makkai’s novel also grasps the social rejection of the Ismaelites:

“There were whispers of horrors throughout the land about what was happening on the cunningly hidden mysterious giant estate of the [Ismaelite land-steward Samuel – *Sámuel*]. It was generally known that it was a refuge for the Muslim Ismaelite merchants, tax collectors and scourgers [...] They were supposed to have drained the marshes and furnished the estate, as they were known to be famous arithmeticians and engineers.”<sup>23</sup>

In Chapter 13, Ismaelites appear again as the fine-capitalist usurpers that we encounter in Jókai’s piece. This is clear when, in one scene, the treasurer Dénes tells King Andrew II (1205–1235) that he had “received some gold from Samuel to give a farewell feast for the young lady [Beatrice d’Este, later Queen Consort of Hungary] and her journey.”<sup>24</sup>

It is precisely because of these qualities that the conspiring Palatine Apodfi is working with Jews and Ismaelites, as it emerges a chapter later:

“Who can give advance money? Apodfi asked himself. The answer was very easy: Only those who always come and go, give-everything-for-money, turn-everything-to-money, a rootless sort, who care nothing once they have squeezed the money out of the living flesh. Because they can run away with it and are not bound by heritage or tradition. And such are the Ismaelites and Jews.”<sup>25</sup>

The general antipathy towards the Ismaelites is occasionally mixed with superstitious beliefs, which is attested by ordinary people’s dialogue regarding a servant who holds Samuel’s horse in Chapter 16:

“»Do you see the godless Szerecseny (i.e., Ismaelite)?« This is what one of them murmured to the others. ‘Ever more of these devil-faced executioners are emerging from the depths of hell. This horse must also be a shaman. »It looks at you as if it was a bewitched man«, whispered another, crossing himself.”<sup>26</sup>

22 Makkai, *Táltoskirály*.

23 Makkai, *Táltoskirály*.

24 Makkai, *Táltoskirály*.

25 Makkai, *Táltoskirály*.

26 Makkai, *Táltoskirály*.

In a later scene of the same chapter, the Palatine reproaches Samuel:

“There is some suspicion that you are still an Ismaelite. It is alleged that you have Muslim priests in the Nyír region and follow the Koran. You have allowed your Muslim employees to marry Christian Hungarian women and force them to convert to the Muslim faith. According to witnesses, you and they have several wives and captives of the Turkish faith (sic!). You bought Christian prisoners, on whom you also imposed your superstitions.”

Here we should add that Austrian Andre Gingrich has also underlined the gendered aspect of “frontier” Orientalism, which “functions with the central mythological arrangement of being threatened or besieged on a nearby, contested, and fluctuating border through which an almost equally matched, dangerous, and therefore »evil« Oriental invades and existentially threatens »us« as well as our women.”<sup>27</sup>

Makkai even depicts Ismaelites as the allies of the Mongols as they guide the spies of the latter, as manifested in a dialogue which Samuel has with the Mongol envoys:

“»You will be governor of Hungary, if you keep your word,« replied Mukhuli [Mongol envoy of Batu Khan]; and you will all, if you remain faithful, be confidants of the chiefs and judges of the Great Khan who will be the commanders here. By the command of the Great Khan, I promise. »We have won so great a favour with so little service,« Samuel courteously said. »We will be content with less, my lord. It will be enough for us to admire among ourselves the bright face of the Great Khan, the glorious face of his leaders, and to share in the benefits of a kingdom over which he is worthy to reign. We want only to be servants, only humble and faithful servants. If we may ask one thing, let us hereafter keep our hard-earned possessions.«”<sup>28</sup>

Loyalist Archbishop Róbert formulates the hatred of the Hungarian church leaders in Chapter 19 as follows, emphasizing their paganism as well as their materialism:

“A Christian country, a Christian people is ruled by unbelieving Ismaelites [...] who suck its blood, trample on its back, and dare to desecrate, mock, and diminish its ancient heritage. And what was perhaps once unthinkable, they dare with their unholy hands to trespass on the goods of the Church, to snatch church treasures consecrated for worship for taxes invented by human arbitrariness, to mock and abuse the venerable person of church servants!”<sup>29</sup>

27 Gingrich, “The Nearby Frontier,” 62–63.

28 Makkai, *Táltoskirály*.

29 Makkai, *Táltoskirály*.

Makkai's book does not spare negative epithets to describe the Ismaelites: they are 'godless' (Chapter 16), 'infidel' (Chapter 19), 'stone-hearted' (Chapter 20), 'damned infidel' (Chapter 21), and even 'executioners' (Chapter 23).<sup>30</sup>

Makkai's historic novel the "Yellow Storm" (*Sárga vihar*), also published in 1934, is the sequel to the *Shaman King*. Dealing with "acute" events of the Mongol invasion, it discusses the Ismaelites in much less depth, and we may add, in a much less negative light. Nevertheless, the trope that "the Cumans' (Kun) fairy tale [i.e., the nightmare of the Mongol invasion]" was beneficial for them in terms of threatening the Christians<sup>31</sup> is also represented here, attested by the narration that is meant to reflect the public mood. In the shadow of the imminent war, we also see the Ismaelite arms merchants appearing.<sup>32</sup> Yet, it is not only the opportunism of the arms merchants that unfolds in the "Yellow Storm", but also their secret agreement to drive a wedge between the Hungarians and the Cumans, the potential allies of the Kingdom:

"The Ismaelite merchants, when they saw that the more fantastic the colours they used for painting the picture of the approaching horror, the more credit they find, and having succeeded in appeasing the disbelieving indifference of the people, suddenly they turned the tables on the Cumans."<sup>33</sup>

Samuel reappears as a Mongol spy, at least according to the Mongols,<sup>34</sup> but he is at his most repulsive when he and his "odious" Ismaelites take part, in possession of the royal seal that had been captured by the Mongols as a result of the lost battle of Muhi (1241), in luring back to the fugitives back to their homes and thus aiding the profiteering of the established Mongol rule.<sup>35</sup>

In all three volumes of János Kodolányi's (1899–1969) "Tatar Invasion" (*Tatárjárás*) trilogy, the depiction of the Ismaelites is composed of patterns similar to those discussed above. However, although Ismaelites are not explicitly mentioned in the second and third volumes, as we know that the terms 'szerecseny' and 'szerecsön' used there are their synonyms<sup>36</sup> not only in public knowledge but in the entire corpus dealing with this period, only the first book entitled "Friar Julian" (*Julianus barát* – 1937) will be discussed below.

In Kodolányi's novel, the cruelty of the Ismaelites is depicted numerous times. When Györk [later Julian, protagonist of the novel, a character based on a historical

30 Makkai, *Táltoskirály*.

31 Makkai, *Sárga vihar*, 17.

32 Makkai, *Sárga vihar*, 51.

33 Makkai, *Sárga vihar*, 61-2.

34 Makkai, *Sárga vihar*, 202.

35 Makkai, *Sárga vihar*, 311-3).

36 Karácsonyi, "Izmaeliták"; Mátyás, "Az Árpád-kori magyarországi muszlimok eredete," 318–19.

personality] thought of the heathens wallowing outside the fold (i.e. the Church) in one of the scenes at the the Monastery of Pécsvárad, he “thought of the slaves who had been driven around there earlier, during the spring in long, chained lines like cattle by an Ismaelite merchant and his servants.”<sup>37</sup> In a later episode, Friar Georgius remarks to Friar Otto that the Ismaelites “bear the kingdom of Allah in their heart and are pagans!” The latter monk takes issue with this statement.<sup>38</sup>

Kodolányi’s characters, like those of Makkai and of the later novelist László Passuth, constantly blame the ‘disloyalty’ of the Ismaelites and their supposed foreign orientation:

“[...] the real bloodsuckers are the Ismaelites [...] even here in Fejérvár [capital of historic Hungary] they have proliferated. When Julianus went out into the town, he often saw a Saracen in a richly embroidered silk coat, red boots, and gold earrings strutting in the crowd, openly laying down his prayer mat and turning to the East to prostrate himself to say his prayers. There were some who had been studying in Aleppo, in the madrasa, at the time when the king was at war with paganism, and the whole Christian world was waiting with their breath withheld for the outcome of the war against the Muslims. Such was their impudence.”<sup>39</sup>

The character of the Ismaelite Emerald (Smaragd), the only Ismaelite actively and directly involved in the scenes of the book, who hosts Friar Julian as a long-time guest, remains ambivalent throughout the plot. With the protagonist they indeed learn a lot from each other, and their mutual relationship of sympathy mixed with incomprehension seems to tilt in favour of fellowship. Eventually, however, it turns out that Emerald ‘persists in his abominable faith’ and immoral habits.<sup>40</sup>

## Post-war modernist times

Similar contradictions and tensions are reflected by the fact that in the wake of a treasury crisis, the Master of the Treasury Apodfi, a protégé of King Andrew II, who (the latter) is the protagonist of the historical novel “The Field Cut Seven Times” (*Hétszer vágott mező* – 1970) by the internationally well-known author László Passuth (1900–1979), is made publicly responsible for “a good many of the ruthless money collections carried out by Muslims rather than Christians—Ismaelites—using their cruel, merciless methods.”<sup>41</sup>

37 Kodolányi, *Julianus barát*, 66

38 Kodolányi, *Julianus barát*, 174.

39 Kodolányi, *Julianus barát*, 393.

40 Kodolányi, *Julianus barát*, 457.

41 Passuth, *Hétszer vágott mező*, 446.

Passuth later elaborates on the people's suffering as follows:

“The lawless, especially the peasantry of the villages, were driven into servitude by the hordes of tax collectors, especially the Ismaelites. The cruelty of the treasury's whackers, the heartless way in which they collected their money, the excesses of the Muslims: these were a perennial theme in the country [...] The public revenues: customs duties, taxes, Jura Regalia, and mines, were largely in the hands of the Ismaelites, the merchants, called »szerecseny«, who were forced to tighten the tax purse whenever the royal treasury urged them to make »extraordinary sacrifices«. It was a vicious circle; the people of the country hated the foreign-speaking, dark-skinned masters, and their plundering, vicious goons.”<sup>42</sup>

In Passuth's book, the theme of the Hungarian clergy's hostility to Ismaelites, already known from Makkai, is represented once again:

“[...] in the focus of their [the clergy's] hatred were the generally educated, higher-cultured »Ismaelites« who had come from Aleppo or Jerusalem and fled to the West to escape the crusaders, and who were understandably hated by the Hungarian high priests. »These Muslims«, the Hungarian bishops wrote to Gregory IX, »had been consorting with Christian women, and even damnably marrying them, often by falsely claiming to be Christians, but after the marriage, these women, together with their servants bought with money, were forced to abandon their Christian faith.«”<sup>43</sup>

Overall, Passuth's 1970 depiction of Ismaelites is reminiscent of the earlier works of the inter-war period.

The second chapter of the first part of the 1978 “Roaring Arrows” (*Zúgó nyilak*) by an almost forgotten twentieth century author, György Karczag (1941–1978), gives Ismaelites no more than episodic roles. In this book born in the socialist era, yet not necessarily adopting the ideological tenets of socialist realism, Ismaelites remain uninvolved in major crimes such as tactical dissimulation (cf. Makkai, Passuth, Kodolányi) or conspiring with the Mongols (cf. Makkai). At the same time, they still appear as a relatively dangerous, influential, profit-making, usurious community. This is reflected by the fact that This is reflected by the fact that, when the protagonist, Ákos Ernye, is told by his friend, Miklós Tárnok, of the latter's public activities, Miklós also reveals in a boastful manner that as the “king's inner man” he “watches over the Ismaelites.”<sup>44</sup>

42 Passuth, *Hétszer vágott mező*, 640, 714.

43 Passuth, *Hétszer vágott mező*, 717.

44 Karczag, *Zúgó nyilak*, 20.

When on behalf of King Andrew II, these two characters visit the “Ismaelite chamberlain” Teka to squeeze gold out of him, the area, namely a quarter of the lower town of Esztergom, where Teka resides, is described as a dubious nest of Ismaelites, Jews, witches, and robbers. As a prelude to the money-lending cooperation that was accompanied by mutual threats, portrayed as a cunning tactician, Teka conveys his good wishes to Tárnok as follows: “May Allah watch over your steps, king’s man.” At one point in the interactions, Tárnok’s words of warning to Ákos are revealing: “Draw your sword, and if this pagan tries something cunning, stab him in the back.” Finally, the scene ends with a grotesque wish, while Tárnok sees through the Ismaelite speculation: “May your beard grow long, and may you have a hundred wives!” After this situation burdened by mutual suspicion and the intention to mislead, Ismaelites appear only one more time. As Pope Honorius III disapproves of King Andrew’s “pagan” Ismaelite connections, his envoy reminds the monarch in the same spirit that “an oath to a pagan does not bind a Christian,” encouraging Andrew to drive them away, and immediately “his holiness is filled with tears of joy.”<sup>45</sup>

Episodes in which the Vatican condemns a monarch for assumed cooperation with ‘pagan’ Saracens, is a recurring feature of Hungarian literature.<sup>46</sup>

### Academic representation of the “unreliable” Ismaelites

János Karácsonyi (1858–1929), Hungarian theologian and historian, canon of Nagyvárad (present-day Oradea), begins his excellent historical essay delivered at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences on 5 December 1904, formulating the following very critical opening:

“We are not familiar with the origins and name of this violent people who were gradually taking the upper hand over the Hungarian nation, who siphoned off its wealth and blood.”<sup>47</sup>

Later in his essay, Karácsonyi refers to King (Saint) Ladislas I (Szent László) saying that:

“[...] from such a gracious king we can expect nothing more than that he persuaded the Böszörmény people (i.e., Ismaelites) to be baptized, and afterwards let them live and stay in their property. However, the Ismaelites

45 Karczag, *Zúgó nyilak*, 21–26.

46 For instance, in the historic novel “Édua and Kun László” written by Péter Szentmihályi Szabó, both Pope Honorius IV and Pope Nicholas III threaten Hungarian King Ladislaus IV. See Szentmihályi Szabó, *Édua és Kun László*, 239.

47 Karácsonyi, “Izmaeliták,” 83.

had already learned hypocrisy in the Arab and, even more, in the Greek [Byzantine] Empires. They had to conceal from both the Sunni Arabs and the Christian Greeks that they were Ismaelites. The entire religious sect was partly a secret society, because their ultimate aim, the community of wealth and women, was known only to the insiders of the sect.”<sup>48</sup>

The view of Ismaelites’ tactical dissimulation and mysterious behavior was thus raised to a scientific level in pre-war Austro–Hungary. Karácsonyi continues this line of argument as follows:

“The Ismaelite monasteries that came under Hungarian rule only continued the hypocrisy. They bowed to the word of the persuader, they were baptized, but at home, in secret, they continued their pagan practices. This is why, as early as 1092, the Christian clergy accused Ismaelite merchants of circumcising their children. This is why St. Ladislaus passed a law stipulating that such an Ismaelite bishop should be removed from his old village and placed among Christians, so that he could not keep their customs [...] Ten years later, the complaints were renewed even more strongly against the Ismaelite bishop’s secrecy, his insistence on sorting food and washing. That is why King Kalman made the harsh law to divide all the Bohemian villages in two and force them to keep Christian laws.”<sup>49</sup>

### Ismaelites and Orientalism

Ismaelites’ secrets and otherness, also represented by János Karácsonyi, takes us to the very center of Orientalism. In his magnum opus *Orientalism*, Palestinian-American Edward Said explicitly noted, in the context of French scholars that theirs was an “Orient of memories, suggestive ruins, forgotten secrets, hidden correspondences, and an almost virtuosic style of being, an Orient whose highest literary forms would be found in Nerval and Flaubert.”<sup>50</sup>

Jókai, a Hungarian novelist writing at a time that overlaps with that of the two French authors, already described the Ismaelites as being malicious and untrustworthy, to whom two Hungarian knights cannot and should not turn for assistance. What is more, they are explicitly discussed in one of Jókai’s short stories as “double enemies”, i.e., both pagans and strangers.

At this point, the present paper does not venture to explain the ontology of the questions raised by Jókai and his successors, i.e., whether such an extremely negative

48 Karácsonyi, “Izmaeliták,” 91.

49 Karácsonyi, “Izmaeliták,” 91.

50 Said, *Orientalism*, 170.

attitude had historical precedents or objective references or whether the contemporary pope's alleged disapproval of King Andrew's cooperation with Ismaelites is based on factual considerations.

Rather, it aims to highlight a tendency that was intensified during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, reaching its height in the interwar period and post-war socialist era, when authors, such as Gyula Krúdy, Mihály Babits, Sándor Makkai, János Kodolányi, László Passuth, and György Karczag would regularly stick degrading labels on Ismaelites, describing them, among others, a blood-sucking cruel élite, cunning and calculating merchants, treacherous spies, and unreliable outsiders. Although differences can obviously be identified in authors' attitudes in the modern era, for example, within the same socialist period, the portrayal given by Karczag seems much less extensive than Passuth's, the inter-war output seems to be fairly homogenous in the general trend of condemning the Ismaelites.

In comparison with the works born in the socialist era, fiction in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century seems less biased in its evaluation of the Ismaelites, as indicated by Herczeg and Gárdonyi. Nevertheless, their contemporary theologian, János Karácsonyi explicitly refers to Ismaelites as a hidden sect rousing general suspicion in the public.

Bulgarian–British historian Maria Todorova's assessment,<sup>51</sup> quoted by Charles D. Sabatos concerning the legacy of the Ottomans, that “it was a religiously, socially, institutionally, and even racially alien imposition on autochthonous Christian medieval societies”<sup>52</sup> shows surprising parallels when analysing the portrayal of the Ismaelites in Hungarian fiction.

In order to better understand the Ismaelites and to place them in the broader context of the Hungarian authors' attitude towards the Islamic Other, it is necessary to at least briefly touch upon the literary traditions of the portrayal of the Ottoman occupation.

### **Encounter with other Muslim Others: The Ottomans as the political representatives of Islam**

Undoubtedly, in the shadow of the historical-political reality of the Ottoman expansion over several centuries,<sup>53</sup> the material experience, and correspondingly, the literary overtones that emerge from the dawn of the modern era in the Central European region are fundamentally different from those in the West.

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51 Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 162.

52 Sabatos, *Frontier Orientalism*, xiii.

53 Gingrich, “Frontier Myths,” Sabatos, *Frontier Orientalism*.

In the words of the Slovak–American Charles D. Sabatos, “the expansion of the Ottoman Empire brought the Islamic world into the European consciousness.” He also notes that, as elsewhere on our continent, the prevailing image of the ‘Turk’ is that he is ‘the sworn enemy of Christianity,’ the violent and cruel ‘Antichrist.’<sup>54</sup>

The political threat associated with Islam, the expansion of the “pagan” Turks, is not only a historical experience, but is also extremely well documented in both Hungarian and Central European literature. This paper does not wish to go into the literature on the Ottoman era or the period in any detail. This would require a complete monograph comprising only in the context of Hungarian literature Gáspár Heltai, Miklós Zrínyi, Kelemen Mikes, Miklós Jósika, Zsigmond Kemény, Zsigmond Móricz, László Passuth, Géza Gárdonyi, Ferenc Herczeg, and others, to say nothing of contemporary authors such as Viktor Horváth, Csaba Ujkéry, Mór Bán, letting alone the regional perspective with authors, such as Georgius, Václav Vratislav Mitrovic, Štefan Pilárik, Jonáš Záborský, Henryk Sienkiewicz, or Stefan Zweig.

Of this wealth of material, we will only grasp a few examples, from the early modern times, Romanticism, and modern 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, indicating the nuanced differences of attitudes in Hungarian fiction.

In the second Canto of *The Siege of Sziget*, Zrínyi’s consistent “Christian” / “pagan” dichotomy, while equally attributing to both sides the virtues of courage and heroism, gives the quintessence of the literary projection of the threatening historical situation: “Lord, you see how the heathen Turk / Like a tooth of the infidel dog / How he can harm the Christians / Only their intention is how they can break.”<sup>55</sup>

Zsigmond Kemény’s 1862 historical novel “Harsh Times” (*Zordidő*) is set during the fall of Buda, an episode that marks the beginning of 150 years of Turkish rule. In a scene in the book, nobleman János Podmaniczky addresses Chancellor Werbőczy, confronting Queen Isabella with the Ottoman-Turkish threat, as follows: “at a distance of barely three thousand paces from her, who is praying before the cross, a hundred and fifty thousand heathens are changing the name of Allah with blind zeal. For no doubt, my dear friend, our mighty patron, the glorious Emperor Soliman, for all his great learning and profound insight, is wallowing in the mire of pagan faith with all his people.”<sup>56</sup>

In addition to such tendencies of condemning the Ottomans for jeopardizing the Hungarian nation’s existence and portraying them as pagan invaders, Romanticism, in general, including the oeuvre of the earlier cited Mór Jókai, is characterised by a preference for distant cultures and exoticism, especially the fabulous Orient.

54 Sabatos, *Frontier Orientalism*, xvii.

55 Zrínyi, , *A Szigeti veszedelem*.

56 Kemény, *Zord idő*, 38.

This positive attitude is detectable, among others, in certain parts of some novels dealing with the Turkish world (Turkish World in Hungary, The White Rose, and The End Days of the Janissaries).

Accordingly, Jókai's 1862 novel entitled "The White Rose" (*A fehér rózsza*), despite the dominant depiction of religious and cultural differences, does not deprive the Turkish characters of certain virtues he considers universal.<sup>57</sup>

Géza Gárdonyi's famous novel the "Eclipse of the Crescent Moon" (*Egri csillagok*), published in 1899, revolves around the siege of Eger in 1552. Among numerous indications of hostility towards a mortal enemy, there are a few patterns in it that reflect nuanced international relations, or even a message of potential reconciliation. In Chapter 9 of the second part, entitled "Buda is Gone!" (*Oda Buda!*), protagonist Gergely Bornemissza overhears in his dream a dialogue between two Hungarian noblemen, Bálint Török and Miklós Zrínyi. Zrínyi, the future hero of the Siege of Szigetvár, offers a toast against the Turks, and Török replies that the Austrians are the true enemy:

[Zrínyi]: "A sacred oath, gentlemen, that we'll devote all the thoughts of our life to the resurrection of our country. That we'll not sleep on soft beds as long as the Turk can call a single foot of the soil of Hungary his own!"  
 ... [Török]: "Are twenty-four thousand Hungarians to die again just for the Austrians to lord it over us? Devil take them! A hundred times rather the honest pagan than the deceitful Austrian puffed up with lies!"<sup>58</sup>

In Chapter 22 of the fifth part entitled "Lunar Eclipse" (*Holdfogyatkozás*), we see the following scene, when Éva and the Turkish mother receive their children:

"Both mothers flew to their children with open arms. One cried, »Selim!« The other cried, »My Jancsi!« They knelt before their children, hugging and kissing. As the two women knelt facing each other, they looked up at each other. Each reached out a hand to the other."<sup>59</sup>

In the light of these examples, we might cautiously conclude that as the immediacy of the Turkish geopolitical threat was removed, the representation of Turks gradually gave way to exoticisation and modest initiatives for reconciliation, while an imprint of the existential threat still remains evident and dominant. In contrast, the representation of the Ismaelites tends to be getting worse in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps dropping to its lowest point in the inter-war period.

57 Jókai, *A fehér rózsza*.

58 Gárdonyi, *The Eclipse of the Crescent Moon* 115; Sabatos, *Frontier Orientalism*, 69.

59 Gárdonyi, *Eger Stars*, 431.

The message of limited appeasement concerning the Ottoman heritage has no match in the modern portrayal of the Ismaelites, who generally appear either as value-neutral arms merchants or as suspicious, profiteering parasites, living on the elite, and are virtually never shown in a positive light in modern Hungarian fiction.

With a tendency grasped and discussed in the frame of reference of examples from Hungarian fiction and social sciences, the Ismaelites, who are not mentioned in the Orientalist debate, occupy an interesting position in the “Othering” discourses and constitute a community that distinguishes Hungarian history and epistemology from Western<sup>60</sup> or even its “relative,” Central European Orientalism.<sup>61</sup>

Gingrich’s explanatory model of ‘Frontier Orientalism’ “functions first with the image of a contested, nearby border, and constructs secondly an eternal »we« that is in direct, close confrontation with the »Oriental«.”<sup>62</sup> The corresponding “central mythological arrangement” contains narrative elements “of being threatened or besieged on a nearby, contested, and fluctuating border through which an almost equally matched, dangerous, and therefore »evil« Oriental invades and existentially threatens »us«.”<sup>63</sup>

In our case, the Oriental Ismaelites, in parallel with those of Frontier Orientalism drawn by Gingrich, are agents of historical interactions with the Islamic world “before the beginning of the early modern period.” Hence, the former community can arguably once again provide a “specific regional mythological repository.”<sup>64</sup> Hungarian literature does not, or not necessarily, posit them in line with modern imperialist objectives, thus the Oriental Ismaelites can well be contrasted against classic colonial Orientalism and may well be juxtaposed with current findings of contributions focused on Central European variants.<sup>65</sup>

However, in contrast, with their typical features and predominantly negative qualities, Ismaelites are already “inside the gates” rather than “nearby intruders at »our« border.”<sup>66</sup> This medieval historical example of a posteriori Orientalism, as a Hungarian peculiarity, offers room for interesting comparisons also with the Ottoman legacy.

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60 Said, *Orientalism*; Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*; Massad, *Islam in Liberalism*.

61 Lemmen, “Noncolonial Orientalism”; Sabatos, *Frontier Orientalism*.

62 Gingrich, “The Nearby Frontier”; *Diogenes*, 61.

63 Gingrich, “The Nearby Frontier,” 62–63.

64 Gingrich, “The Nearby Frontier,” 63.

65 Gingrich, “Frontier Myths”; Gingrich, “The Nearby Frontier”; Sabatos, *Frontier Orientalism*.

66 Gingrich, “The Nearby Frontier,” 62.

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