

New Volumes on Late Antique and Medieval Latin Literature

Latin irodalom a kora középkorban: 6–8. század. A keresztény Európa születése [Latin Literature in the Early Middle Ages, Sixth–Eighth Centuries: The Birth of Christian Europe]. By Tamás Adamik. Bratislava: Kalligram, 2014. 599 pp.

Latin irodalom a Karoling-korban: 8–9. század. A keresztény Európa megerősödése [Latin Literature in the Carolingian Period, Eight–Ninth Centuries: The Consolidation of Christian Europe]. By Tamás Adamik. Bratislava: Kalligram, 2017. 485 pp.

Latin irodalom az átmeneti korban: 9–11. század: A keresztény Európa kiteljesedése [Latin Literature in the Period of Transition, Ninth–Eleventh Centuries: The Completion of Christian Europe]. By Tamás Adamik. Bratislava: Kalligram, 2020. 464 pp.

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Planned for four volumes, the third volume of Tamás Adamik's much-awaited medieval literary history was published in September 2020. The author, Tamás Adamik, Professor Emeritus of Classical Philology at Eötvös Loránd University, compiled his first works on the history of classical Latin literature during the 1990s as an outcome of his academic activity. In 2009, he published a synthesis of classical Roman literature, summarizing its four great epochs. These are the main antecedents of his works of late antique and medieval literature to be reviewed here and placed into its academic context.¹

1 Adamik, *Római irodalom az archaikus korban*; Adamik, *Római irodalom az aranykorban*; Adamik, *Római irodalom az ezüstkorban*; Adamik, *Római irodalom a késő császárkorban*. Adamik, *Római irodalom a kezdetektől a nyugat-római birodalom bukásáig*.

The three volumes published so far of literary history are similarly the outcome of Professor Adamik's decades-long teaching career and related research. One of the most important themes of his university courses was to introduce his students to the history of medieval Latin literature. Unquestionably, the volumes represent a much-expected enterprise, since most authors that he discusses are little known even to students of history, literature, or classical philology, not to mention other readers with less interest in this cultural field. Thus, his work fills a genuine gap in Hungarian, partly because in several cases, he shares previously untranslated texts, and some which have been hardly available so far. These new books combine the virtues of a classical literary history with those of an anthology. The author emphasizes the important function of understanding the social context in the assessment of the literature of each period. Therefore, he gives an overview of the historical background in each chapter, making the linguistic and cultural context of individual authors and works more comprehensible.

The role of Latin is indisputable in medieval cultural history, as for centuries it was not merely the language of literacy and teaching, but also the language of social contacts in educated and clerical circles. Due to various historical and cultural changes, by the age of Humanism, national literary languages had been born, or at least developing, which not only competed with Latin at the level of everyday use, but also gradually became suitable for literary and philosophical communication, and today still carry elements built from medieval living Latin.

It is therefore undeniable that there is a need for an overview of medieval Latin literature in the languages of university education, including Hungarian. If it might seem paradoxical to review in an English-language journal books written in Hungarian, we should not forget that Adamik was for many decades a professor at the university that issues this journal, whose two main profiles are history and literature. Therefore, it seems highly appropriate to reflect on its pages on a series that touches these two disciplines constantly and in parallel, but at least alternately.

Comprehensive literary histories to which Adamik's volumes are comparable are all monumental undertakings of many decades. Apparently, the author made good use of some items of this set, as for example, in the first four cases of the next examples that do not necessarily show mere structural parallelism. The two-volume Latin literary history by Franz Brunhölzl, chronologically maybe the most recent one, follows a territorial division in its structure, discussing individual authors within this framework. The same method characterizes Adamik's first volume. In the same way as Brunhölzl, Adamik also adds a detailed bibliography to each author.² A major publication from the beginning of the twentieth century

2 Brunhölzl, *Geschichte der lateinischen Literatur*.

is the work by Max Manitius. He follows throughout his three volumes a structural division according to literary genres or disciplines, and a subdivision according to the authors and various works.³ The third example is Robert Curtius's 1948 Latin literary history in German, which was made accessible in an English translation in 1953.⁴ The author extends the limits of the discussion to the age of the Enlightenment and, in his unique thematic division, he attempts to capture the distinctive aspects of European thought evolving through centuries. Also, one of the most famous histories of Latin literature is the work of F.J.E. Raby discussing medieval Latin poetry, where the individual volumes are devoted to ecclesiastical and secular poetry.⁵ Since Raby analyses only poetry, this allows him to offer an almost complete overview of his narrower field.

This reducing pattern has been followed by some editors who invited various specialists to give a synthesis of individual periods. For example, in the case of *Letteratura latina medievale*, edited by Claudio Leonardi in 2002 and published in several editions since, the literary history of individual centuries is written by different authors.⁶ As reflected by the editor's foreword, each chapter, encompasses different methods of cultural, and literary history, and textual analysis. It is clear that multi-author undertakings, even if individual contributions are outstanding, are not comparable to those of single authored works, where the undoubted advantage is in the consistency of the text. The 2014 volume of *Medieval Literature*, edited by Holly A. Crocker and D. Vance Smith, represents new fields of discipline. It goes beyond traditional editing concepts, and as its subtitle indicates, also discusses *Criticism and Debates*.⁷ Here, the thematical approach is dominant, marked by the contributions of experts of each field. In fact, it should be considered more of a volume of collected essays, reflecting recent approaches, like gender, human ecology, identity, and others.

It turns out in this short overview of medieval literary histories that the authors' concepts and approaches may differ significantly; consequently, making a comparison of only two of them is difficult, not to mention the whole spectrum.

Since Adamik also discusses two literary works from medieval Hungary, the *Admonitions* of St Stephen, and the *Deliberatio* of St Gerard, it is justified to look at some comparable publications from East-Central Europe. The authors and their works in this region basically appear in national literary histories. In the eleventh century, Hungary is in a peripheral position from the point of view

3 Manitius, *Geschichte der lateinischen Literatur des Mittelalters. I–III*.

4 Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, English translation, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*.

5 Raby, *A History of Christian-Latin Poetry*; Raby, *A History of Secular Latin Poetry*.

6 Leonardi, *Letteratura latina medievale*.

7 Crocker and Smith, *Medieval Literature*.

of Latin Christianity. It was in this period that the local literatures of the region took their initial steps of which the two Hungarian pieces noted above were the first in their genre. Adamik's decision to integrate these pieces in the overview of the literary history of the period seems to be justified.

Examples from East-Central Europe include Jana Nechutová's synthesis on the Latin literature of medieval Bohemia, and the anthology entitled *Medieval Literature of Poland* edited by Michael J. Mikoś.⁸ Nechutová's book, as its title suggests, also examines Latin literature, but exclusively for Bohemia and in German. In this case, the selection covers the medieval Latin literature of Bohemia in a broad sense of genre and chronology. The second example shares common features with Adamik's works in that it has a longer introductory study, but is basically an anthology, offering its literary examples in English, based partly on Latin, partly on Polish language medieval literature. All these examples draw attention to the importance and, at the same time, the difficulty of selection, and to the fact that even in the case of synthesizing works, a compilation of different aspects may be justified.

Adamik does not attempt to give a complete overview of medieval Latin literature. Nevertheless, his selection criteria are clear. Each volume offers some novelty that makes the reading an enjoyable experience. The first book includes the essential introductory essay, discusses periodization, terminology, and introduces the political context that affected literature. Chronologically, the first volume covers the earliest period; thus, it is the most novel part in its content, namely in the personalities, genres, and last but not least, in the new characteristics of the changing poetry. Its structure follows regional divisions, distinguishing five major territories (Italy, North-Africa, Gaul, Spain, and England together with Ireland), and creates sub-chapters according to authors, discussing their genres and specific works. Each chapter is supplemented by a well-structured bibliography, and the volume also includes a name and subject index.

Each volume follows the same structure, which in the case of the second one about the Carolingian era comprises a chapter on the main characteristics of the period, and fifteen chapters about various authors and literary works. The geographical framework in this volume is the Carolingian Empire itself. The authors of the era were either directly connected to the Court of Charlemagne, or were members of a monastic community, who worked in a wide variety of genres. This period is also called the Carolingian Renaissance, primarily because it brought about spiritual renewal by uniting the Neo-Latin and Germanic peoples into a single Christian community. The works of ancient authors were primarily considered as formal,

8 Nechutová, *Die lateinische Literatur des Mittelalters in Böhmen*; Mikoś, *Medieval Literature of Poland*.

linguistic samples to be filled with Christian content. Basically, they sought to raise the cultural standard, in which Charlemagne's personal support and his cultural program often played a significant role. The concept of the *translation studii* applied in his court also confirmed the high prestige of the rich literature of the period.

In the third volume, Adamik refers to the ninth to the eleventh century as a period of transition between two great epochs, the Carolingian era and the Golden Age of twelfth-century Renaissance. As a consequence of the disintegration of the Carolingian Empire, Latin Christianity was divided into smaller units, which brought along the emergence of "national" literatures and historiographies, in which the literature of the peoples accepting Christianity was also included from the tenth–eleventh centuries onwards.

At the same time, medieval Latin literature remained transnational, as the universal linguistic and cultural unity did not show great differences even in its literary genres. That period also saw the emergence of some new genres, such as the sequence (*sequentia*), the historical epos, the beast epic, or the romance, the latter indicating the spread of literature that meets the needs of the secular world. An important detail of Adamik's work is its presentation of *Roudlieb*, the eleventh century romance of knightly adventures, which has been studied since its discovery in the nineteenth century but is still not widely known. Adamik gives a partial translation of the romance, introduces its research history, and adds an extensive bibliography.

The third volume is especially interesting from the point of view of Hungary and East-Central Europe, since that is the period when the Christian monarchies were established in this region and the first works of Latin literature were born. Adamik understandably focuses on the Latin literature of Hungary. It would have been relevant to provide some contemporary examples of the Latin literature of neighboring countries as a comparison. It is possible that the author may have reserved this additional aspect for the fourth volume of the series.

What are the main strengths of the three-volume work by Tamás Adamik, representing six centuries of Latin literature?

Primarily, it helps clarify some still extant misconceptions about the Middle Ages. In a narrower sense, perhaps the most important of these is the stereotype that medieval authors could not use Latin well enough. Regarding the inevitable transformation of language, Adamik refers to Saint Jerome, who wrote in the third century that "the Latin language itself changes daily from area to area and over time"⁹. Adamik also distinguishes the linguistic state of the individual periods of the Middle Ages and concludes in the third volume that the tenth century represents a decline of the use of Latin, where "grammatical control" is weaker than in both previous

9 "ipsa latinitas et regionibus quotidie mutetur et tempore" Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, 357. col.

and subsequent periods (p. 26). However, he acknowledges that this, in turn, gives a degree of freedom and opportunity for experimentation with the language, that is, for the authors. The work of Tamás Adamik is also important since it helps to eliminate the views that the Middle Ages was a period of general ignorance. On the contrary, the author highlights that most authors were well versed in classical scholarship, and Adamik also points out the wealth of literary themes and genres. A third great novelty of the books presented here is that they draw attention to authors outside the general literary narratives. They are, among many others, the North African Christian authors of Late Antiquity, including Dracontius, Fulgentius, and Luxorius. Adamik does not only outline their oeuvre, but also gives excerpts of their texts in existing translations, or often in his own new interpretation. In the third volume, the author highlights that after the Hungarian state foundation, the transmission and adoption of Latin-language culture, and at the same time the emergence of Latin-language literature, began almost immediately. This way the *Admonitions* of St Stephen is featured in a comparative context. It is an added strength of the undertaking that there is emphasis also on female literature, for example, by presenting the lyrical and dramatic works of Abbess Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim.

Research into medieval Latin literacy has been present in Hungary, touching on a high number of aspects and disciplines, especially since the last third of the twentieth century. It would be difficult to list the related publications in the fields of chronicle research, codicology, hagiography, liturgy, and literature, as they are so numerous. Nevertheless, there has been no similar overview of medieval Latin literature in Hungarian. Therefore, Professor Tamás Adamik's synthesizing literary history and anthology wrapped in cultural history, with a rich and carefully selected bibliography is an excellent handbook for further research: a colorful selection of medieval literature published in an easy to read style.

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