



CEU Doctoral School of History
Late Antique, Medieval and Renaissance Studies Program

The Public Defense of the Doctoral Dissertation

of

Áron Orbán

on

**Born for Phoebus. Solar-astral Symbolism and Poetical Self-representation
in Conrad Celtis and his Humanist Circles.**

will be held on

Tuesday, 14 February 2017, 15:30

in the

Senate Room – Monument Building

Central European University (CEU)

Nádor u. 9, Budapest

Examination Committee

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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Fifteenth-sixteenth-century Germany – and Renaissance Europe in general – witnessed a growing interest in natural philosophy (including occult disciplines), the laws of nature, and the correspondences between micro- and macrocosm. Astrology grew especially popular in Germany by On the other hand, the enhanced self-consciousness or even pride of the Renaissance author compared to that of the earlier medieval one is a long established commonplace; indeed, humanist poets were inclined, in varying degrees, to self-fashioning, self-mythologizing. My interdisciplinary study focuses on the junction of these two basic habits of mind of German humanists around 1500. I reveal solar and astral (mainly astrological) symbolism in Neo-Latin poetical works and visual artworks of this period, and investigate how this cosmic symbolism was used for self-representative purposes. Among the German humanists I focus on Conrad Celtis (1459-1508), the “arch-humanist” of Germany, the first poet laureate of his nation, the “bringer of the muses” to the German land. Celtis's personality, poetic talent, ambition, scientific-philosophical interests, his assumed role – all this resulted in various interesting ways of "cosmic" self-representation; I argue that this is a core area of his whole poetical oeuvre. In the investigated period of German humanism (c. 1485-1510), some other poets who were friends of Celtis also employed astronomical, astrological, cosmological imagery in the construction of their (or the group's) humanist identities, in various ways, to various extent: Jakob Locher, Laurentius Corvinus (Rabe), Johannes Tolhopf, Augustinus Moravus; I involve in my research representative works of these authors, too.

The first chapter reviews the *poetological background* of the enhanced *vates*-ideology of the German humanists: the humanist revaluation of poetry in the Renaissance and the “defense of poetry” tradition. German poets and poetical theorists profited much from Florentine Platonism, which stressed the divine nature and cosmic context of poetry more than any other poetological tradition before.

The second chapter highlights *Celtis's interest in nature and cosmos* – *particularly astronomy-astrology* – from various perspectives: the models provided by the Pythagorean-Platonic cosmological tradition, Celtis's emphasis on micro-macrocosmical relations in general, and the historical-biographical context of these interests. The strong connections between the heavenly and sublunar spheres, macro- and microcosm was one of Celtis's basic habits of mind, perhaps more than in any other German humanist. In general, there was a strong interrelation between

astronomy-astrology and humanist literary activity in late fifteenth-century Central Europe, including Cracow, Nuremberg, Ingolstadt and Vienna, which were the main stages of Celtis's life.

Chapters 3-6 explore Celtis's and his friends' strategies of "cosmic" self-representation through analyses of specific works. Chapter 3 demonstrates that *natal astrology* was an essential means of character-building in Celtis's poetry (and in some of Tolhopf's works, too). Celtis went into horoscopic details to an extent that was unprecedented in Neo-Latin poetry. The "support" of the stars, the heavens could be rendered palpable through horoscopes: individual astrology came in handy for Celtis and Tolhopf to emphasize the elect status of the German vates.

Celtis supported his vates-role by means of his *horoscope of laureation*, too (ch. 4), which he published at the end of his panegyric *Proseuticum*. This horoscope, too, displayed exceptionally favorable planetary positions. Interestingly, the planetary positions were highly favorable at the day of laureation of several other humanists after Celtis, too; it remains an issue of future research whether horoscopes of laureations were made in these cases, too.

Solar symbolism – the subject of chapter 5 – is less clear-cut in Celtis than astrological symbolism: it is part of a *complex Phoebean symbolism* where the poet used all the traditional functions of Phoebus Apollo – Sun-god, god of poetry (also as an origin of *furor poeticus*), symbol of the ruler, to a lesser extent god of divination or medicine. The poets' support by Apollo is a basic humanist topos, but the complex Phoebean symbolism in Celtis and some other humanists (Jakob Locher, Laurentius Corvinus) definitely surpasses the level of commonplaces: elaborate epiphanic scenes are staged, or events happening at a date or time determined by the Sun's position. The operation of the cosmos and the Sun's central role in it; the Sun as indicator of specific anniversaries; the poet's divine support; the humanist *vates* who spreads the light of wisdom; the sunrise of a new Latin poetry; the symbiosis of poet and ruler – in all these Celtis was interested, and he could express all these with solar, Phoebean motifs that permeate his whole oeuvre.

Following classical tradition, Apollo was often paired with Bacchus, who similarly supported poets through *furor poeticus*. Chapter 6 highlights *humanist works about Phoebean-Bacchic feasts*, works that are based on real feasts of the sodalities but are stylized as rituals of an elite humanist circle. The role of the paganizing (but not anti-Christian) symbolism as a group-identity building factor comes to the foreground in

these works. The inscriptions on Augustinus Moravus's golden bowl, Celtis's birthday poems, and Celtis's odes about feasts at astronomically important dates show a similar tendency to construct an elite identity through cosmological-mythological symbolism.

After all these investigations, the enhanced use of solar-astral symbolism in poetical self-representation emerges as a specific trait of German humanism in Celtis's time, not recognized as such in previous scholarship. In Celtis's case, this symbolism is an organizing factor of his whole poetry, and the interpretation of many of his key works do require the understanding of this complex network of cosmological-mythological-poetological ideas. Furthermore, it is not only the scholars of specific German humanists who may be interested in the results of my study. The analyzed works mirror general basic characteristics of the intellectual life of the age: self-assertive individualism, an optimistic belief in cultural renewal, an enhanced interest in the secrets of nature, a predilection for mystique, allegories and micro-macrocosmical correspondences; in my view, the works investigated in this study provide a quite representative cross-section of Renaissance culture in general.

CURRICULUM VITAE

PUBLICATIONS

“Astrology at the Court of Matthias Corvinus.” *Terminus* 17 (2015), 113-146.

“Az individuális asztrológia mint a karakterformálás eszköze Konrad Celtis költészetében” [Individual astrology as a means of character-building in the poetry of Conrad Celtis], in *Ingenia Hungarica I. Tanulmányok az I. Kárpát-medencei Szakkollégiumi Konferencia előadásaiból* [Ingenia Hungarica I. Studies from the presentations held at the I. Conference of Colleges of the Pannonian Basin]. Ed. Bálint Ternovác. Budapest, ELTE Eötvös József Collegium, 2015. 271-323.

“The Nature of Astrology in Janus Pannonius’ Works Composed in Hungary.” *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 54 (2014), 215–234.

“Individual Astrology as a Means of Character-building in the Poetry of Conrad Celtis,” in: *Investigatio fontium. Griechische und lateinische Quellen mit Erläuterungen*. Ed. László Horváth. Budapest: Eötvös-József-Collegium, 2014.

“Astrology in Janus Pannonius’s Poems of Praise,” in *Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU* 19 (2013), 112-128.

“Judiciális asztrológia Mátyás király udvarában” [Judicial Astrology at the Court of Matthias Corvinus], in *Mikro&Makro – Fiatal kutatók konferenciája 4.* [Micro&Macro – Conference of Young Scholars 4]. Budapest, 2013.

- *Translation from Latin to Hungarian:*

Dubois, George. “A Szentföld visszahódítása” (The Reconquest of the Holy Land). *Plurimus Unum*. Ed. Rita Jánosi, András István Türke. Budapest: Europa Varietas Institute, 2009.

CONFERENCE TALKS, PUBLIC LECTURES

“Szakrális conviviumok Celtis költészetében és Augustinus Moravus pateráján” [Sacral convivium in the poetry of Celtis and on the pater of Augustinus Moravus]. *The fifth lecture of the “Mercuriales” lecture series, ELTE-BTK, Budapest, November 2016.*

“Phoebian symbolism and poetical self-representation in the work of Conrad Celtis.” *Public lecture in the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Neo-Latin Studies, Innsbruck, August 2016.*

“Mitológia, költészetelmélet és asztrológia összefüggései Johannes Tolhopf (kb. 1450 – 1503) műveiben” [Mythology, poetology and astrology in the works of Johannes Tolhopf (c. 1450 – 1503). *II. Neo-Latin Conference in Hungary, Szeged, November 2015.*

“Beiträge zu Vadians astronomisch-astrologischen Interessen in Wien.” “*Vadian und die Wiener Universität.*” *Conference in Vienna, Austria, November 2014.*

“A vates, az istenek és a csillagok. A költő-szerep mitizálása Konrad Celtis műveiben” [The *vates*, the gods and the stars. The mythologizing of the poet's role in the works of Conrad Celtis]. *Public lecture at MTA-ITI (Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Literary Studies), Budapest, Hungary, June 2014.*

"Asztrológia Janus Pannonius magyarországi költeményeiben" [Astrology in Janus Pannonius' works composed in Hungary]. "*Fikció és rejtett értelem a régi magyar irodalomban*" [*Fiction and Hidden Meaning in Old Hungarian Literature*]. *Conference in Szekszárd, Hungary, May 2014.*

“Witchcraft in the *Amores* of Conrad Celtis.” *The Fourth International ESSWE Conference, Gothenburg, Sweden, June 2013.*

„Judiciális asztrológia Mátyás király udvarában” [Judicial Astrology at the Court of Matthias Corvinus]. *Mikro&Makro – Fiatal kutatók konferenciája 4.* [Micro&Macro – Conference of Young Scholars 4], Pécs, Hungary, April 2012.

GRANTS, FELLOWSHIPS

- CEU write-up grant (2016)
- Fellowship of the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Neo-Latin Studies, Innsbruck (2016)
- CEU DRSG (University of Vienna; 2015)
- The Henrik Birnbaum Memorial Scholarship Fund (2015)
- Fellowship of the Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel (2014, 2016)
- ERASMUS scholarship (University of Göttingen, 2014)
- CEU short research and travel grants (2012, 2014, 2015)

WORK EXPERIENCE

- Participation in research program: writing entries in a Lexicon with the working title "Companion to Humanism in East Central Europe, vol. 1. Hungarian Humanism."
- Teaching Assistance at the Medieval Studies Department of Central European University, Budapest (2013)
- Teaching history in Babits Mihály Secondary School, Budapest (2008-2011)
- Teaching history and literature in Németh László Secondary School, Budapest (2006-2007)

EDUCATION

Central European University, Medieval Studies, 1-year-MA and PhD program
(2011-17)

ELTE-BTK (Budapest), History (1998-2005; MA Diploma)

ELTE-BTK, Hungarian Language and Literature (2002-2007, MA Diploma)