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Transmitting National Myths: Early Printed Books on Hungarian History and Their Reception

The aim of my inquiry is to investigate the ways in which early printed illustrated books on the history of St. Stephen's Kingdom, published between 1488 and 1700, sustained memory of the foundational myths of the Hungarian nation. The examination focuses on the main subjects of the books, the interplay between the books and the users as well as on the different habits of using, disseminating and transforming their content. By analyzing two levels of the books' impact – 1) direct responses to the texts and images along with traces of reading recorded on the pages of the books; 2) the reception of the books in Hungarian literary and visual culture – I demonstrate that the illustrations contributed to the long-lasting impact that such stories as the Hunnish-Scythian myth of origin, Christianization of St. Stephen's kingdom, reigns of the holy kings and struggles with non-Christian enemies had on many generations of book users.

A standardized visual-cum-verbal message, circulating among different groups of readers throughout the centuries, sustained and normalized the collective memory about the Hungarian past. Moreover, the shifts in the books' visual and literary content, which could be traced on the basis of their editions, translations and adaptations, allow to determine the long-term changes and the established core of the historical imagery. They also show that the reception of texts and images followed dissimilar trajectories in different time periods. Whereas images were often repeated in the early modern media – portrait galleries, devotional images or picture album - it was the texts that proved more influential in nineteenth-century Hungarian culture. Invariably, however, the texts and illustrations accompanying them have served as a repertoire of motifs concerning Hungarian mythology, the pantheon of saints and monarchs. This imagery was successfully impressed in the memory of subsequent users and *mutatis mutandis* resonates up to the present day.

The main questions to be researched are: In what ways did illustrated books on history contribute to the emergence of the imagery of Hungarian mythology and its transmission? What were the prevailing modalities and phases of their perception and reception? Did visual and literary contents of the books play similar roles in sustaining the memory of the foundational myths, and if not, what was the trajectory of reception of text and images?

The study brings together approaches used in art history, book studies, sociology of texts and reception studies. Illustrated books on history are examined as material and three-dimensional items that transmitted a visual-cum-verbal message about the Hungarian past. They are also viewed as a space within which people who participated in the process of their production and consumption left traces of their attitude toward their shared historical mythology and its main actors.