

# Villányi, Péter (coll., ed.): Galgamácsai népmesék és mondák 1–4. [Folktales and Legends from Galgamácsa 1–4].

Új magyar népköltési gyűjtemény XXVII. Budapest. Akadémiai. 2022. 3495.

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## BOOK REVIEW

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After two decades, a new member has been added to the *Új magyar népköltési gyűjtemény* [New Collection of Hungarian Folklore] series founded by Gyula Ortutay. Péter Villányi published the prose folklore repertoire of a village near Budapest, Galgamácsa, a result of forty years of collecting. The collector-editor published the considerable material in four volumes, taking into account the variant system of each type that is at times fairly rich. The text publication is completed by a comprehensive introductory study, detailed biographies of nearly forty informants and analyses of their repertoire, a meticulous set of notes, as well as name indexes and a dialectal glossary. The four-volume masterpiece is almost three thousand pages long, having been given its final form thanks to the thorough and careful work of series editor Ilona Nagy.

The parameters listed above, however, hardly divulge anything of the significance of the collection and publication, the gravity and magnitude of the work. Perhaps it would be no exaggeration to say that Péter Villányi's work embodied and somewhat exceeded the ideal the founder imagined. As the developer of the performer-centered method, also known as the Budapest school, Gyula Ortutay, who founded the series, intended this forum for the publication of monographs on performer personalities and villages. His goal was to show the performer behind the folklore text, and behind the performer the community in which that person lived and whose tradition nourished his/her work as a folklore performer. Accordingly, starting with the first book, Ortutay's work on Mihály Fedics, a storyteller from the Nyírség, published in

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1940, the volumes of the *Új magyar népköltési gyűjtemény* have been published with an extensive introductory study, from which the reader can learn a lot about both the artist and their environment. The books of Ágnes Kovács and Linda Dégh were also written in this spirit, with ever higher sophistication, considering more and more aspects. At the same time, the series established a methodology for the critical edition of recent folklore works, and has remained its primary forum to this day.

Péter Villányi was born in Budapest to a middle-class family and came into contact with the Hungarian dance house movement as a student. It was within this movement that he met Magdolna Gulyás, a student from Galgamácsa studying in Budapest, whom he later married. Through his wife, he became a member of the village community, still traditional in many respects in the 1970s, which considered the young man who came in as a son-in-law to be one of their own, and involved him in various activities, from pig slaughters to house-building bees. The young man who spent only his weekends in the village was thus able to simultaneously take on the position of an urban intellectual looking in from the outside, and an insider, an observer who knows the community from the inside. As a result of his interest in folk art and his experiences of village life as a city dweller, he started collecting in Galgamácsa, and later in other settlements of the region. Péter Villányi came from outside the discipline of ethnography, but he graduated from the University of Debrecen with a degree in ethnography, trained as a professional ethnographer over the decades, and thanks to his extensive reading, he gained a thorough insight into both the rules and issues of the discipline. This experience was integrated into his collecting practice over the decades and provided him with a solid foundation for the preparation of a significant monograph. In the introductory study, he expresses his opinion on several current scientific problems and takes a firm stand on controversial issues.

The Galgamácsa collection is at once a monograph of a settlement and of personalities, but it significantly transcends genre boundaries in both capacities. The settlement of Galgamácsa is located in Pest County, in the micro-region called *Galga-mente*, on the slopes between the southern reaches of the Cserhát Mountains and the Gödöllő Hills. The region was the northernmost territory of former Ottoman Hungary — due to frequent battles and looting, a significant part of the population fled by the end of the 17th century. After the expulsion of the Turks, the landlords populated the villages of the area with Danube Germans (Swabians) and Slovaks and Hungarians from the northern areas of Nógrád and surrounding counties. The Hungarians who came here spoke the Palóc dialect. Most of the settlements in the region are thus not ethnically Hungarian, and Galgamácsa, too, is surrounded by Slovak and German villages. The village can be considered exceptional, as until recently it was inhabited by a Hungarian-speaking population that survived the Ottoman rule, joined by those coming from the north.

The process of collecting in Galgamácsa spanned four decades, from the late 1970s to the late 2010s, and took place in three significant periods, between 1976 and 1981, 1987–1988, and from 1993 to the end of 2018. In this time, the researcher witnessed the slow, gradual disintegration of the traditional social framework of the village community, the discontinuation of communities and occasions of storytelling, and the settlement's partial incorporation into the Budapest agglomeration. He treated all this not as a disadvantage, but as an asset, which enabled him to keep track of the changes that occurred in the community's narrative tradition, beyond the changing repertoire of the personalities performing tales and legends to the changes in communal occasions.



The researcher tried to observe the folklore of the village during real storytelling occasions, so in the 1970s he participated in plucking bees, corn husking, and other communal activities, where people told stories spontaneously and not for the sake of the microphone. Nonetheless, these were not ideal conditions even for tape recorders that provided relatively good technical conditions, so subsequent transcription was not possible due to the noises and the fragmented voices of the participants. That is why Villányi later collected the stories told during traditional storytelling sessions once again, recording them with a microphone. At the same time, personal participation and involvement in activities helped him form a picture of the actual popularity of individual stories, the performance skills and tools of the storytellers, as well as the reactions of their audience. He does not obscure the fact that his embeddedness in the community and the attitude of his affines towards him and his activities were not always positive, and that acquaintances and prior preconceptions may have been an inhibiting factor for him.

The tale and legend collection and monograph published as the 27th volume of *Új magyar népköltési gyűjtemény* introduces novelties in many respects compared to previous similar endeavors. Its most important innovation lies in the change of the researcher's perspective, which is related to the extended time of collecting, as well as the external and internal perspective of the collector, but at the same time, all this cannot be attributed to the circumstances alone. Rather, it is due to the individual worldview of the author-editor and his own *ars poetica* as a researcher.

One of the most important features of the volumes, even at first glance, is their meticulousness and ambition for being exhaustive. Thanks to this, not only did certain types of legends get published in several versions, as was the usual practice in Hungarian legend collections in the past, but so did tales. It broke with the two-centuries-long practice of the literary aesthetic determination of 19th-century folklore collections. Consequently, there is almost no folklore collection in Hungary that has not undergone some kind of preliminary screening, in which the versions of the published folklore texts considered to be most beautiful, most elaborate, or closest to the ideal type (Normalform) were selected. This approach affected folktale variants in particular, the more rudimentary and more superficial variants of which were mostly passed over. In the case of legends, the editors were not too strict in view of their length, and largely sought to represent the diversity of variants in their volumes. In the collection before us, however, a completely different approach prevailed. Since the aim of the work is to present Galgámácsa's former and recent prose folklore repertoire, as well as its characteristic performance style of tales and legends, the editor was not selective with the texts. Each tale type might be presented in up to five different performances.

The fifteen-page, monograph-like study found in the first volume discusses in detail the geographical features of the settlement, its history, including populations, former property relations, former owners, buildings, and all the circumstances that determine the backdrops, material world, and characters of each folklore narrative. The history of the changes experienced by the village community in the second half of the 20th century, the process of the disintegration of the agrarian society, the commuting of the population from the village to the city, and the effect of all this on the narrative tradition of the locals are accurately detailed in the text. A particularly invaluable chapter of the introductory study is the author's detailed report on the storytelling occasions of the people of Galgámácsa and their gradual changes.

Another special feature is the voluminous chapter that contains the detailed biographies of thirty-five performers of tales and legends, as well as the analyses of their repertoire. Two of



Villányi's key informants in the 1970s were József Pesti (1905–1981) and his wife Borbála Majer (1912–1990). The nearly hundred-page, monograph-like description of Pesti could also be an independent publication — just as the series of tales he tells could fill almost an entire volume. Besides Pesti, the detailed biographies of three dozen other storytellers can be found in the volume, but the number of storytellers featured was much higher.

In his introductory study, the author meticulously presents and analyzes the village's entire repertoire of tales and legends. Even at first glance, it is striking that, compared to many other collections of legends, the chapter on historical legends is relatively short. Most collections of legends presenting recent material, published in Hungarian in recent decades, included considerable historical legend material, published in the chronological order of the real life time of each legendary hero, in accordance with a previously established practice. Few former kings, barons, politicians, and generals feature in the folklore of Galgamácsa. The chapter containing historical legends, which also includes legends about the lives of saints, is very short. It mostly contains stories about King Matthias, a significant part of which is a *truffa* (trifle) of Renaissance origin. These stories have traditionally been identified as historical legends by Hungarian scholarship, but most of them can be classified as tales or anecdotes, a type also known by the ATU catalogue. The other large thematic group of historical legends from Galgamácsa talks about the events of the last two centuries, therefore they are primarily about the Revolution and War of Independence of 1848/49 and its heroes, Lajos Kossuth, the poet Sándor Petőfi, and Franz Joseph of Habsburg, the ruler for nearly seventy years. Significant among the historical legends are the events of the 20th century, World War I, the Trianon Peace Treaty, and the memory of Regent Miklós Horthy. The events and heroes of the early modern period are almost completely absent, which can be explained by the fact that the period in this region was marked by battles with the Turks and was accompanied by significant population movements. At the same time, also by the fact that folk memory is much less captivated by historical facts and chronological time than researchers previously thought. Some of the historical heroes are kept alive through their interesting, witty anecdotes, while others are kept alive through personal or historical experiences passed down within the family. The legend tradition of the events of the distant past, the Middle Ages, and the early modern period was mostly conveyed to rural farmers by primary education and cheap prints. For reasons still unknown, none of them left a significant mark on the consciousness of the inhabitants of the settlement.

The readings intended for the people also did not escape the attention of the editor. A selection of cheap prints found in the settlement is presented in the rich image appendix of the fourth volume. Here, the reader can also find portraits of storytellers, photos of storytelling occasions, and reproductions of old postcards depicting the village.

Of Péter Villányi's virtues as a collector, the researcher's humility must be mentioned first, thanks to which, although aware of the centuries-old practice of folklore collecting and the expectations of the folklore collector, he is able to override these based on his own experiences and ideas. He focuses on the local community's perspectives, thus describing not that which an outside researcher would want to see from the folklore of the village community, but that which the members of the community consider important. He tries to document the state he has come to know, and with the conditions he has experienced. This is especially noticeable in relation to the repertoire of legends and anecdotes. Historical traditions in Galgamácsa are represented not by notables of national fame and significance but rather by distinguished persons who directly influenced the life of the village, above all the earl Antal Grassalkovich, the former owner of the



area, as well as former representatives of the local bourgeoisie and intelligentsia, and certain public, silly, or eccentric figures of the past who stood out in the community due to their personality traits, around whom circles of legends and anecdotes emerged. Some of these stories can be considered local legends or local anecdotes, but the volume's rich variant system also creates an opportunity to show just how thin the line between the individual genres is. Local anecdotes make good use of the opportunity provided by belief legends, and over time historical heroes take on the attributes of figures of belief.

The accurate interpretation of dialectal peculiarities in Péter Villányi's book is a sign of the diligence of the editor and publisher, as well as his unconditional commitment to the topic. We have already mentioned the voluminous and meticulously elaborated dialectal glossary. The other aspect where this attentiveness prevails is the phonetic peculiarities of the dialect. The people of Galgamácsa speak the so-called *Palóc* dialect, which diverges significantly from the Hungarian literary and colloquial language in terms of the use of vowels. Even in terms of critical editions, the book conveys the dialectal peculiarities with unusual accuracy, thanks to which a *Palóc* village storytelling event comes alive for the discerning reader even without actually hearing the speakers.

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