

***Catalogus Raritatum et Benefactorum,*  
A Representative Manuscript from the Beginnings of the Museum of  
Natural Sciences in Aiud**

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**Abstract**

The Museum of Natural Sciences in Aiud houses one of the oldest museum collections of natural sciences in Romania.

The manuscript written by Ferenc Benkő and László Nagy in 1797, *Catalogus Raritatum et Benefactorum*, owned by the Bethlen Documentary Library in Aiud, is representative for the evolution of the museum in Aiud at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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The Museum of Natural Sciences in Aiud as well as the Bethlen Documentary Library, which belongs to the Transylvanian Calvinist Church District, functions in the building of the Bethlen Gábor College. This college was founded on the initiative of Prince Bethlen who made a proposition to this effect to the Diet gathered in Cluj, which became law in May 1622. When the Gábor Bethlen Academic College was founded and for a long time afterwards, there was no other institution of higher education in Transylvania, taking into consideration that the Jesuit University of Cluj founded by István Báthori in 1581 ceased to function in 1603.

Initially, the College functioned in Alba Iulia, then, due to the different Turk and Tartar invasions, in 1658, it took refuge in Cluj, and in 1622, Prince Mihály Apafi (considered the second founder of the College) moved the institution definitively to the castle situated in the centre of Aiud and gave it the right to govern itself autonomously, without the interference of the city authorities. However, the letters patent issued by the Prince destined this school an institution of higher

education and general interest, to be equal, from an academic point of view, to the academic colleges of Cluj and Alba Iulia.

After other devastations suffered during the invasion of the pro-Habsburg hosts (the so-called Labancs) at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (1704 and 1707), the building of the college required reconstruction made possible only by some pecuniary aid received from abroad (Germany, Holland, Switzerland, and mainly the British Crown which contributed with 11,000 pounds). The new college building was finished in 1885, a date engraved into the main entrance.

The golden age of the College was between 1704 and 1849. The institution had four faculties: Theology, Law, Philosophy, Natural Sciences.

It is a detail generally unknown – paradoxically even by some museologists – that the collection of the Museum of Natural Sciences in Aiud is undoubtedly the oldest of this kind in Romania. Its beginnings were bound to the nucleus of the collection, which contained mainly minerals, fossils and antiquities, mentioned in the manuscript *Catalogus Raritatum et Benefactorum*, document which has been preserved since the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the Bethlen Documentary Library.

The first reference to the collection goes far back in time, to the year 1720, at the beginning only a small circle of privileged persons being allowed to see it. In 1796 the foundation of a museum in Aiud was mentioned. This, according to the times, was conceived as a collection of natural sciences, but also of curiosities, bringing together in a rather heterogeneous manner various samples of fauna, flora, mineralogy, palaeontology, but also different historical relics, quite unequal regarding their value and significance.

During the investigations performed in the documentary collection of the Bethlen Library an extremely interesting manuscript was discovered which offers data regarding the development of the museum in Aiud at the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> century. We refer to a handwritten catalogue begun by Professor Ferenc Benkő and László Nagy [fig. 1] who recorded the new items entering the collection in the interval 1790–1815.

The copy-book has forty-seven pages, of which only twenty-four are filled with different handwritings, sign of the successive additions. The rest of the pages have remained blank waiting for other donations to be recorded.

Only a fragment of the original title page – on which one can recognize the words *Catalogus Raritatum et Benefactorum* with

difficulty – is included in the cardboard cover which binds the leaves of the manuscript [fig. 2]. The cover according to the words of the custodian librarian dates back to the same period.

The first part of the manuscript is a topographical presentation of the collection with reference to its arrangement at that time, while the second part – begun, according to the inscription, on 1 August 1797 – enumerates chronologically the donors of the different exhibits, the last note being inscribed into the catalogue on 8 November 1815 (on page number 42) [fig. 4].

The first page – with Baroque formulation and calligraphy – refers to “The Description of the Museum and of the Rare Objects” deposited in 1796, the location of the museum being specified in the “Small auditorium” under the inscription “*Raritatum et Rerum Naturalium Museum*” [fig. 3].

The museum was founded on: 1. the collections acquired from the Professor of geography, German language and natural history Mihály Galambos (he started his collection in 1778 and continued it until his death in 1790, when the collection was bought by the College for 180 forints), “and which were increased and enriched with small gifts received from other donors”; 2. the rare objects; 3. books of natural history; 4. “Groff Bethleniana Mineralogica Collectia” (donation made by Count Gergely Bethlen and his wife). Four catalogues are specified which contained these collections.

The next page indicates: “At the entrance on one side in grey cabinets there are: stones, rare soils, salts, volcanic rocks, semimetals and metals”. Here the author made the first critical remark showing that “A great deficiency is that they are not labelled and consequently we do not know where they come from, moreover that this collection was enriched with valuable and rare pieces in this year”.

The book collection – not very large at that time –, gathered between 1790 and 1797, originated from donations made by Sámuel Gyarmati (“a herbarium with 34 chosen sea plants”), Károly Ribitzei jr. (Linné’s *Systema Vegetabilium*) and Ferenc Benkő (six volumes of herbaria in folio and eight books among which Benkő’s *Magyar Mineralogia*, Blumenbach’s *Natury*, Gmelin’s *Mineralogia*, Molnár’s *Phytologicon*, Forster’s *Naturaly Historia*).

Some donations were the personal objects of some famous persons of the age. Thus Farkas Kemény donated “a pair of leather slippers which belonged to Countess Katho Bethlen, wife of Prince Apafi”, Anna Gyertyánosi “a pair of very beautiful slippers” and “a

porcelain egg very beautifully worked”, and László Kun “a very beautiful pocket-size sun-dial”.

Others donated the furniture in which to display the exhibits or instruments necessary for the activity of the museum. For example, Professor Ferenc Benkő donated for the mineralogical collection two grey glass-fronted cabinets to which he added four portraits: Valery, Scheutzer, Köleséri and himself, as well as a marble quill and a sander for drying ink. Other objects were bought. It is remarkable how meticulous the inventory is: “There were bought from our own budget: 1 pair of scissors, 1 hammer, pincers, 1 big needle, 1 brush, 2 bottles”.

The most important data, however, refer to the different exhibits donated or bought. From the beginning we can separate the objects belonging to the natural sciences, the antiquities and the different other curiosities.

It is worth mentioning some of the natural sciences exhibits. A first category is that of the geological samples to which belong minerals, gems and fossils. Mineralogy was best represented, thanks first of all to the collection donated by Count Gergely Bethlen and his wife (the first part donated on 24 June 1796: “The beautiful and rich collection contains beautiful and rare pieces from all the five stages of mineralogy”), then due to other donations, such as those made by Professor Sámuel Gyarmati from Zalău, with a collection of “77 pieces of rocks and ores”, by Ferenc Benkő with “30–40 pieces of rocks and ores”, József Solomon with “a very beautiful agate and a graphite ore”, by Count László Kun who gave samples of gold from Roşia Montană or by Sámuel Farkas and Miklós Gaál (crystals of stibnite). Some pieces came through exchanges too. In 1798 it was noted: “Recently I have made an exchange with Count Károly Pálffy and his wife: a Hermes of Siberia, a square iron ore with gold from Siberia, a piece of silver grown naturally from Siberia, a beautiful piece of beryl from Siberia in which there are many crystals and a Crisoprasus of Saxony”.

Fossils are in a smaller number, but nevertheless we must mention a “petrified shark tooth” and especially petrified tree trunks coming from different donations: a piece of trunk petrified, found near the town Turda under a dam (Mihály Pénteki), “a piece of petrified yew, very rare, found at Toplița” (Zsigmond Vajda), “2 pieces of petrified beech wood” from the bed of the Criş river, at Vața (András Barta), to which can be added eventually a “petrified sediment with traces of leaves and herbs found besides the bitter water in Rodna” (Jónás Deák Csiszér).

The different biological preparations from the present day flora and fauna exceeded in number the geological ones. Already in 1797 1600 exhibits of “snails, butterflies, and other insects” had been mentioned. If a series of exhibits were only summarily mentioned (“A white pelican from among those which traversed the country from North to South in 1796 in great number and other birds; A maxillary of a whale; An elephant tooth on a chain; A unicorn horn; A stag horn; An ostrich-egg” etc.) without being specified, unfortunately, either their origin or their donors, others came this time too from donations. Between 1790 and 1797 Gergely Bethlen and his wife donated six scorpions of Mehadia, a sea lizard, and as a valuable exhibit a *babirusa* tusk in a silver frame, to which they added a microscope, a rare instrument at that time. András Szabó on 24 December 1810 donated: a big coconut, the rostrum of a sawfish, a stingray, the big shell of a sea turtle, a domesticated sea turtle, a murex (“sea snail with which velvet is dyed”).

The antiquity collection was similarly rich. Some exhibits had rather didactic value, such as plaster or resin replicas of some bas-reliefs or of some antique elements of lapidarium with scenes out of the Greek or Roman mythologies. Others have come from donations, in most cases the original provenance not being specified: a small Roman copper “Penates” (Deák Sámuel Fazakas, 1790–1797); Roman pavement bricks (József Kovács, the same years); “two Roman copper idols, one is of Jupiter and its hands and feet are broken, the other is of Apollo and is intact” (Mihály Pénteki, 1798); different pieces of Roman lapidarium, among which a lion, probably funerary (Miklós Harkányi, 1798); the arms of Hungary from 1098, of which it is stated that comes from the graveyard in Huedin (István Lenghyel, 1811); “woman head made of clay demonstrating that the Roman women’s costume was similar to that worn by the contemporary Hungarian women” (Susana Gyöngyössi from Turda, 1801); “a clay pot smelling very good, it has probably been used as a censer for aromas” (József Gyöngyössi, 1801); “a strange iron tool, pan-shaped but with four legs from Roşia Montană, which was probably used by Romans or Dacians for horseshoeing” (Ferenc Dézsi, “rector in Abrud”, 1801; “a human face sculpted into marble (...) a perforated brass coin with the following inscription: Sanctus Aolyfius (...) a copper coin” (Lajos Kovásznai, 1801).

A series of precious metals (gold and silver) are only mentioned briefly, being however specified the fact that they are to be found in “the box with the silver”: “An old gold ring in a box for coins; An inkstand (...); A silver seal in the middle of which there is a saint holding in his

hands a basket with flowers with the following old inscription without a date: *Tabes Plebany Dinome*; Two silver spoons with gold insertions, one with the inscription *S.N.B.* and one with *P.T.*; A gilded silver fork with the following inscription: *Rhédei János 1627*; A gilded silver knife sheath with the letters *S.E.1441* which is known to have belonged to Erzsébet Szilágyi” (János Hunyadi’s wife).

A series of objects had a rather ethnographic value, referring either to the agricultural instruments of the age, either to different objects of everyday use. Thus, in the section dedicated to “objects from the countryside”, we find “Old stone axe and picks (...)”; Iron objects used at ploughing in Basta’s age” or “The padlock of Görgény Castle with the inscription: *The Padlock of Görgény Castle 1300*; A beautiful spider web style veil; An iron pen with black point with the following inscription: *SAS MIH: A.D. 1649*” or, finally, “A red silk purse, it is said that it belonged to Thököly”.

Maybe the most piquant part of the manuscript refers to curiosities. It is evident enough that each donor endeavoured to collect any anomalous being and to donate it to the museum. Thus appear monstrous specimens of animals, such as “A lamb with two bodies and a single head, representing the playfulness of nature”, “a lamb with two bodies and a single head” (Baron Ferenc Nálátsi’s donation), “a sheep with two heads and two tails” (József Szabó), “a double piglet given as a present, having two tails, eight legs and one head” (László Láposi, 1803) etc. Others had tried to find pieces less evidently exceptional: “A maize stalk which has seven big beautiful corncobs” (István Baló), “three stalks of barley, one of them double, one has seven heads and the third has nine heads and which have been found near Cristur” (Dénes Gálfi), “a rare plant having the form of a bird, from Hungary, which has grown in Orosháza” (Simon Mihály), “a stick named Aaron’s rod, which in fact is a reed from the Jordan River, if it is true” (*sic!*; Péter Székely, priest), “a sling stone found in Háromszék in 1789” (Count Miklós Hídvégi and his mother, Countess Klára Bethlen), “a hair ball found in the stomach of an ox 1798” (Izsák Barabás), or simply, “Professor Ferenc Benkő’s wife donated a turkey which had been hatched by a chicken at the house of Mr Prenger” (!).

The Aiud museum no longer owns many of the exhibits mentioned in the manuscript. Some have been lost, scattered by the turbulent history of the little Transylvanian town, especially during the Revolution of 1848, but also after those events. On the other hand, after 1815, the collection was enriched by new exhibits, especially biological

and geological ones, tendency which was to continue until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Without any other interpretation, the manuscript first of all demonstrates that at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Aiud was an important centre for Transylvanian science and its fame had reached extremely far. This explains the diversity of the donators – some of them having lived at considerable distance from Aiud (Zalău, Hațeg, the Székely regions) – who were undoubtedly honoured to see their names inscribed into the list of those who contributed to the increase of this museum's collections. As the years passed Aiud was however to lose its privileged position in the world of Transylvanian science, being replaced by some new centres in ascension at that time. At first by Sibiu, where the Society of Sibiu's Physicians and Naturalists founded at the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was to concentrate a great part of Transylvania's creative energy. Then by Cluj, when the university of Cluj was founded in the second half of the same century.

Nowadays, Bethlen College only houses a museum of natural sciences, which practically continues the tradition of the institution recorded in the manuscript. Generated *in principio* by nobles' passion for collections, the museum in Aiud had known a golden age, than gradually fell into an unwished for shadow...

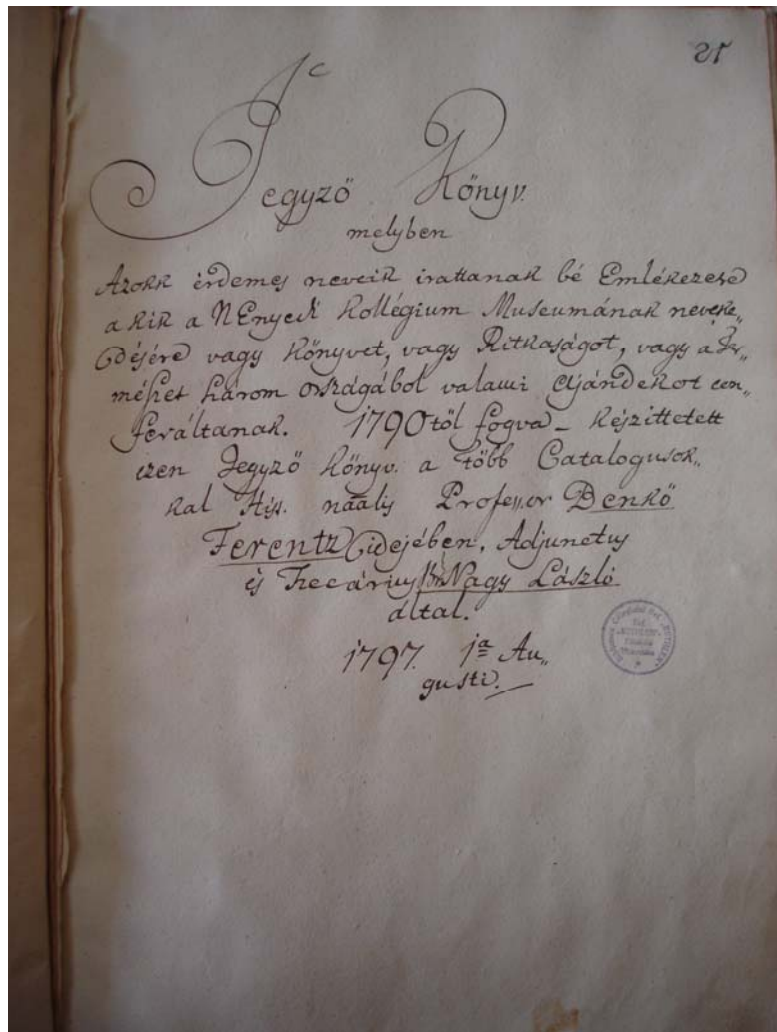


Fig. 1: The note made by the authors of the manuscript *Catalogus Raritatum et Benefactorum*, Ferenc Benkő and László Nagy.





Fig. 2: Fragment of the manuscripts title page, inserted into the cardboard cover

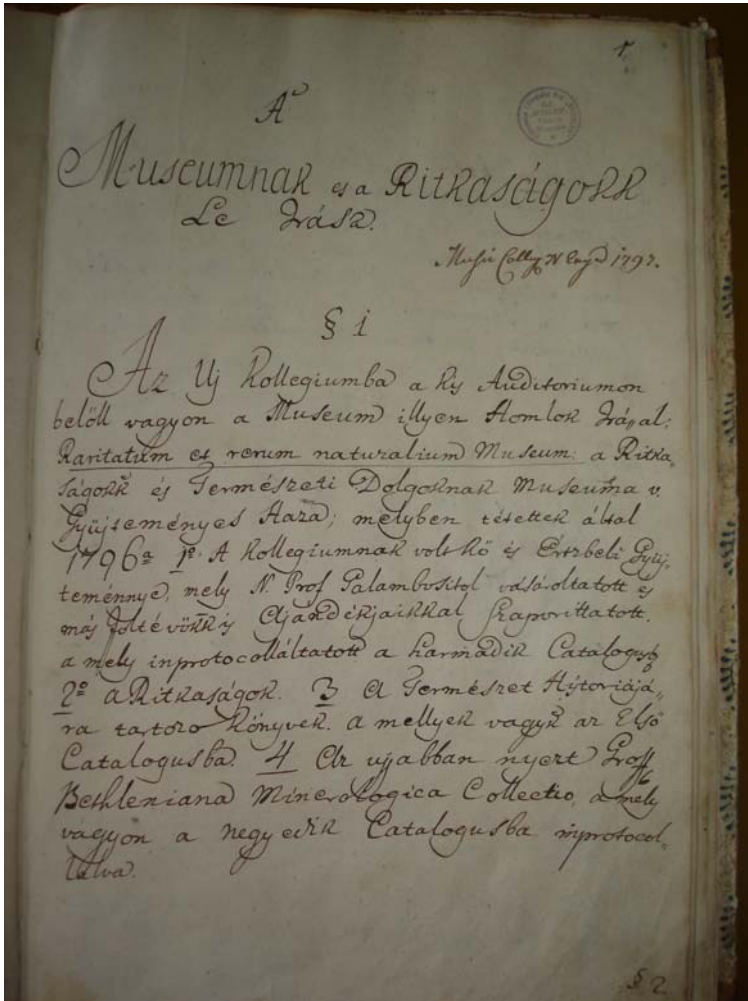


Fig. 3: The first page specifying the location of the museum in the “Little Auditorium”, under the inscription “Raritatum Et Rerum Naturalium Museum”

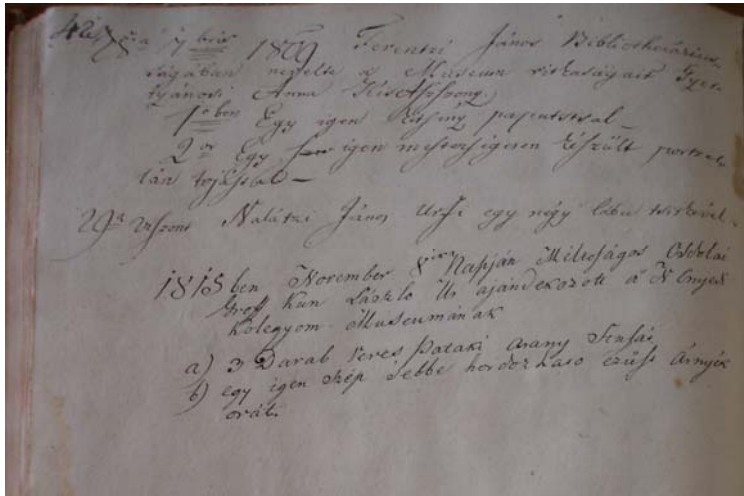


Fig. 4: The last note inscribed into the catalogue on November 8, 1815 (page 42).

Translated by Ágnes Korondi