

THE SEVEN SAGES AS READING FOR EDIFICATION: MEDIEVAL NARRATIVES OF *THE SEVEN SAGES OF ROME*

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Abstract The paper deals with the medieval textual variants of the frame story of *The Seven Sages of Rome*, known and canonised as a masterpiece of Renaissance secular entertaining prose, with special emphasis on the details of textual tradition and the types of the versions. It presents two codices that contain the text: one from Alba Iulia, the other from Budapest. The paper analyses the allegorical interpretations (geistliche Auslegungen) of the work, which are found only in manuscript versions, and which present this secular frame story and the inserted stories in a spiritual and devotional dimension, due to which these were used as exempla in sermons during the Middle Ages.

Keywords frame story, interpretation of exempla, sensus litteralis, sensus allegoricus, sensus anagogicus, *The Seven Sages of Rome*, medieval textual tradition, exegesis, hermeneutics

Something about the preliminaries

The work mentioned in the title is known to international research as *Historia septem sapientum*, but Hungarian literary history refers to it as the History of Emperor Pontianus, connecting it first to a translation by Gáspár Heltai¹ published several times at the turn of the 16th-17th century, and second to a Viennese edition from 1573, by an unknown translator.²

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¹ I used the copy of the Teleki Library of Târgu Mureş [Marosvásárhely]: *Pontianvs csaszar historiaia. Mikeppen az ő fiának Diocleianusnak hét bölcs és tudos mestereket fogada, kik azt tanyítának az hét és nemes tudományokra*, Lőcse [Levoča], 1653 (RMNY 2472). Henceforth: *Heltai-Pontianvs*.

² *Pontianvs historiaia: az az Het Bölch Mestereknek, mondasit chiwda szep hasonlatossaoual foglaluan, mimodon, az Chazar Fiat Diocletianust hetzer halaltul meg mentettet legien*, Bécs [Vienna], 1573 (RMNY 322).

I became interested in this history a long time ago, as a young academic: Heltai's translation is accessible in several modern editions, and as a masterpiece of Renaissance secular entertaining prose,³ it seemed to be an efficient "bait" for first year students, who were, as a rule, reluctant to read old texts. However, during seminar discussions guided by often targeted questions, they usually listed their discoveries in amazement on the twists and turns of the story, the perfect structure, the colourfulness of terms and the outspokenness characteristic of the translator, the relation of men and women, and many more. The greatest praise coming from the students was to call the work modern. The reason this story was attractive to them was that, unlike the majority of Hungarian medieval and Renaissance texts, it could be approached only with the help of methods of text analysis, without a great deal of contextual knowledge. The Renaissance Year and the conference organised on that occasion in Cluj-Napoca in 2008 finally offered the opportunity to finalise this long-standing project, summarizing the observations and analyses. My study then comprised primarily the context of the history of ideas and rhetoric of the Reformation and the Renaissance.⁴

However, the true origins of the text – apart from the compulsory, yet brief references to its Oriental and medieval (even ancient) beginnings – have escaped the attention. Literary historical research, as well as the seminar analyses have all evaluated it as a typical Renaissance work. The fact that medieval versions could offer approaches utterly different than the Renaissance versions, has also escaped the attention of researchers. The Viennese Pontianus, which is much closer to the medieval versions, and therefore this version too would deserve more attention, has also been completely neglected. (Moreover, an analysis which also encompasses the cultural context would perhaps reveal that it is not worthless even as translation and linguistic accomplishment).

This study, in completion, rather than criticism, of the accepted knowledge in the subject, wants to take a step back in time: it will deal with the medieval versions of the Seven Sages. The choice of subject was inspired and motivated by two medieval, Latin versions I found in Hungarian territory, relatively unknown so

³ See the classic study of István Nemeskürty, *Heltai Ponciánusa és a magyar reneszánsz szórakoztató próza* (Heltai's Poncianus and Hungarian Renaissance popular prose) in Idem, *Olvasók és olvasmányok: Tanulmányok a régi magyar irodalomról* (Readers and readings: Studies in Old Hungarian Literature) (Budapest: Magvető, 1984), 118–119, which also summarizes the previous research on the work.

⁴ Gábor Csilla, *A történet kerete, a keret története: változatok Ponciánusra* (The Frame of the story, story of the frame: variations on Poncianus) in *Erdélyi reneszánsz: A 2008. október 8–11. között tartott konferencia előadásai* (The Renaissance in Transylvania vol. I. Proceedings of the conference on 8–11 October 2008), ed. Gábor Csilla, Luffy Katalin, Sipos Gábor (Cluj-Napoca: Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, 2009), I. 147–160. English version: Csilla Gábor, "The Frame of the Story, the Story of the Frame", *Philobiblon* 15 (2010): 176–193.

far. Despite reports on these codices at the turn of the 19th-20th century, the medieval existence or popularity of the history of the seven sages has never been given any real insight in previous research. Nevertheless, the subject has been made much more accessible by Detlef Roth's impressive critical edition. Roth recorded and described (and also used in the edition of the text) eighty-three predominantly late medieval versions – seventy-two manuscripts and eleven printed sources between 1473 and 1526 –, copies from academic libraries all over Europe.⁵ The declared purpose of his work is to stimulate further research based on his philological clarifications.⁶ Indeed, as I browsed through the work and the previous research on it, I found that, despite the enormous amount of international literature, the investigations that comprise the specifically medieval features and take into account the full text (with the additions that are not included into the Hungarian text) are rare and superficial.

Versions and usage possibilities

In parallel with the investigation of the medieval interpretations and usage of the story, one should also look at the textual transmission and the types of the versions. The comparison of the manuscripts revealed four basic types based on criteria of language, style, content and text form, and the contaminations between the versions are relatively rare.⁷ It should be noted that the numbering does not necessarily imply a hierarchy: the recorded differences are related to various ways of usage, and the variants can be acknowledged as equivalent.⁸

Manuscripts of the first group contain the most complete text, and most of them also add moral interpretations⁹ called *Reductiones* or *Moralisationes* both to

⁵ Detlef Roth, ed., *'Historia septem sapientum'. Überlieferung und textgeschichtliche Edition*, I–II (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2004).

⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁸ This is not the place for a comprehensive theoretical treatment of medieval manuscript culture, but I agree with Stephen G. Nichols's statement, based on previous research results, illustrating that there is no need of hierarchy among the variants. He speaks about adaptation and *translatio*, "the continual rewriting of past works in a variety of versions, a practice which made even the copying of medieval works an adventure in supplementation rather than faithful imitation." Stephen G. Nichols, "Introduction: Philology in a Manuscript Culture. Thoughts on the Discipline", *Speculum* 65 (1990): 3.

⁹ A consistent use of terminology faces a series of semantic difficulties. The German literature uses the term "geistliche Auslegung" (which literally means spiritual interpretation), in Latin it is "per spirituale intellectum", also spiritual interpretation. Accordingly, we could simply use the term of *spiritual meaning*, but, as we shall see, the texts imply something more extensive than that. In addition to the unquestionable spiritual or intellectual aspect, there are also strong references to devotional or, to some extent, even Gnostic elements. Therefore in this paper I will alternately use the terms spiritual and/or intellectual and/or moral.

the frame story and the intercalated tales. I shall come back to these later, now let me just say that at first sight they seem to be allegorical explanations embedded in the text (this means, from a structural point of view, that the interpretation of the frame story is placed before the first insert, and the interpretation of the inserts is placed before the continuation of the story). A tale and the frame instance continuously follow each other, and compared to these, the spiritual interpretations of the new paragraph seem like additions, and even allow for a reading when these interpretations are left out altogether. Most codices which contain the *Historia*, also contain the *Gesta Romanorum*, and often also devotional treatises and sermons, indicating that these texts are used foremost for edificatory purposes.

The texts of the second group are close to the first, the only difference is that only around a third of the manuscripts (9 of the 26 inventoried to date) contain spiritual explanations, and these are always placed at the end of the story as a separate unit and are always fragmentary, do not contain moralizations on the whole story. However, there are two manuscripts, traced back to a common source (one in the library of Würzburg, and the other in Bamberg), which claim that these appendices can be used in sermons with this subtitle: *Incipit Moralitas Cuiuslibet hystorie in Speciali et sunt omnes predicabiles et proprijssime ad mores hominum trahende*. This implies that these stories can also be used as exempla in sermons, and all of them are extremely appropriate to improve one's morals. The moral use is thus still very clear, precisely due to these edificatory parts.

The third group contains a significantly shortened text that can be traced back to the second, which adds new explanations both to the frame story and to the inserted stories. These are then embedded again in the story similarly to the first group. Detlef Roth concludes, based on the briefness of the stories, that these versions were primarily used for preaching.

Finally, the fourth group differs significantly from the previous three in composition, it contains a much shorter text than the first or second group, sometimes omitting certain episodes. The division of the text basically follows that of the first group, but the spiritual interpretations are secondary, and in some cases they are left out altogether from the manuscript. The context of the texts in these manuscripts is a moralised *Gesta Romanorum*, as a further indication of their usage as preaching or devotional material.¹⁰

Something about the codices in Alba Iulia and Budapest

Two manuscript versions of the history of the seven sages, slightly different both in their text and in their textual tradition are in the possession of the Batthyaneum Library in Alba Iulia (Gyulafehérvár),¹¹ Romania and the University Library in

¹⁰ Details on the four versions: Roth, ed., *Historia*, 177–182.

¹¹ Call number: R II. 75.

Budapest, Hungary.¹² Not much is known about the 15th-century paper codex of the Batthyaneum, except for what the codex itself (as an object and as a text) tells us. Since it contains no possessor notes, its provenance is also a matter of uncertainty. What we know about it was written down by Elemér Varjú at the end of the 19th century with reference to the manuscripts and incunabula preserved in the Library. He claims that it cannot be verified but there is evidence that the material had arrived to the Batthyaneum as part of the Migazzi collection.¹³ The codex displays a bastarda type writing¹⁴ favoured in the late Middle Ages mainly by the scribal industry. According to Lajos Katona and Elemér Varjú, it was written in the mid-15th century by a scribe who was probably a German native,¹⁵ and it is a typical example of what we usually call a codex with mixed content. The first part contains the Psalms commentaries attributed to a 14th-century mathematician, astronomer and theologian, Heinrich Heinbuche von Langenstein, and to Saint Bernard of Clairvaux with the title *Expositio psalmorum* (2ra–182rb),¹⁶ followed after a blank half page by the *Historia septem sapientum moralizata* (183ra–212rb), then the *Gesta Romanorum* also *moralizata* (212rb–293ra), and finally a pseudo-Bernardian *sermo* “de assumption Beatae Virginis” (293va–295ra). The codex is in quite a bad state, the inner-bottom part of the leaves are torn, therefore the centre of the pages is often missing, and the rest is also often stained, as if having been wet. (Katona also reported on the damaged state of the codex, but he also said that “*today* almost the whole text can be read *still*, except perhaps one or two lines”.¹⁷ By now quite a few lost lines or half-lines exist *already*.)

Some external observations should also be made on the division of the Seven Sages-story within the codex: the individual units – frame story, inserted stories and the moralisations at the end of every unit – are divided by not very ornate initials, visibly serving transparency rather than decoration. The title of the Empress’s tale and the Masters’ tale only appears once on the margin, almost incidentally (*arbor*, 185va). Later on this mark is abandoned, the units are signalled by larger letter size and numbering (*Prima narracio imperatricis*, 185va; *Prima narracio primi magistri*, 186va and so on). A fortunate turn in the story for the Emperor’s son is also marked by larger letter size, in a title-like manner: *filius ductus*

¹² Call number: Cod. Lat. 25.

¹³ Elemér Varjú, “A gyulafehérvári Batthyány-könyvtár” (The Batthyány Library of Alba Iulia), *Magyar Könyvszemle* (1899): 209–243.

¹⁴ On the type of writing see Zsigmond Jakó, Radu Manolescu, *A latin írás története* (History of the Latin script) (Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 1987), 162.

¹⁵ Cf. Katona Lajos, “A Gesta Romanorum gyulafehérvári kézírata” (The Alba Iulia manuscript of the Gesta Romanorum), *Egyetemes Philologiai Közöny* (1900): 369–370.

¹⁶ Robertus Szentiványi, *Catalogus concinnus librorum manuscriptorum Bibliothecae Batthyánianae* (Szeged, 1958), 118.

¹⁷ Katona, “A Gesta Romanorum gyulafehérvári...”, 369.

fuert ad imperatorem (205rb), then a rubrum marks the end of a story: *Explicit Historia VII sapientum cum moralizacionibus* (212rb). The concluding sentence of the following text, the *Gesta Romanorum*: “Expliciunt Gesta romanorum imperatorum moralizata a quodam fratre minorum et cetera” (293ra) betrays the Franciscan origin of the codex.

Compared to the Alba Iulia codex, the one in Budapest¹⁸ is better known. It was called Sztárai codex by Lajos Katona, who reported about it in 1898,¹⁹ and Gusztáv Heinrich as well in the same year.²⁰ The codex contains signs that hint to its production in Hungary, which makes it even more valuable for a philologist searching for the medieval traces of the history of the seven sages on Hungarian territory. The note in red²¹ of the thirsty scribe (*hogh yhathnam*) is a refreshing Hungarian presence in the Latin text, but the reference to Várad and the date 1474 on leaf 47ra (1474 *varadini*) is more than that, a useful argument for the early diffusion of the *Historia* on the Hungarian territory. Another “mark” is the name of the Hungarian scribe, Máté Sztárai, who made the copy on the commission of the Episcopal governor of Várad, László Egervári, and whose identity could be established by Katona²² with the help of the signature of codex 71 of the University Library. This report has then found its place in Hungarian historiography; Klára Csapodiné Gárdonyi wrote, for example, after repeating the findings of János Csontos and Lajos Katona, that the codex contained “a fairly good text variant of the *Gesta Romanorum* and a short summary of the *History of Pontianus*”.²³

Katona was concerned in the first place by the *Gesta Romanorum* in case of both codices, but my interest in this finely executed paper codex written in neat bastarda script and preserved in good condition was the *Historia septem sapientum*. The scribe’s choice not to collect texts of various topics but include only two texts

¹⁸ Online access: <http://images.konyvtar.elte.hu/ECodLat25/>. Accessed on 28 November 2016.

¹⁹ Katona Lajos, “A Gesta Romanorum Sztárai-codexe”, *Egyetemes Philologiai Közlöny* (1898): 400–411. It should be mentioned that this codex returned to Hungary, into the possession of the University Library of Budapest in 1877 with other *Corvinae*, as a gift from Sultan Abdul Hamid II. However, Lajos Katona (referring to János Csontos) claims that it is one of those codices “of which we can only secondarily suppose that were preyed by the Turks from King Matthias’s library or the old Hungarian royal library.” (Ibid., 402.)

²⁰ Heinrich Gusztáv, “Bevezetés”, *Pontianus története Bécs 1573*, ed. Heinrich Gusztáv (Budapest, 1898), 35.

²¹ Mentioned by Heinrich, “Bevezetés”, 35., and also Katona “Gesta Romanorum Sztárai”, 404.

²² Katona, “Gesta Romanorum Sztárai...”, 403.

²³ Csapodiné Gárdonyi Klára, “A budapesti Egyetemi Könyvtár korvinái” (Corvinas of the University Library of Budapest), *Magyar Könyvszemle* 3 (1981): 224. In the light of the philological analysis of the codex, the term “short summary” needs some clarifications, to which I shall return later on. Also: Bibor Máté János, “A kézirat és a nyomtatott könyv” (Manuscript and printed books), *Az Egyetemi Könyvtár Évkönyvei*, Budapest (2007): 233.

can be regarded as conventional in that age, given the large number of such combinations.

The new stories both in the *Gesta* and the *Historia* are signalled by a discrete initial in red. The decoration is moderate, once again its primary function is division rather than ornament. The *applicatio* is marked on the margins, in red or black, or sometimes with a pointing finger. In some places there are also keywords or insertions on the margins. The story of the seven sages begins at the bottom of leaf 83vb with only the incipit: “Hic incipitur historia vij sapientum magistrorum et philosophorum bene moralisata de quodam filio regis ffamosissimi et boni”. The story proper starts on the next leaf (84ra), with a large, fairly decorative initial. The first 1–9 lines of the story are written in larger, gradually decreasing letter size.

It is also important to note that, in addition to the initials, the inserted stories and their application are also marked in the text with subtitles which guide the interpretation, e.g. 85va: *Prima narracio Imperatricis contra filium regis qui ex casu debebat loqui*, followed by the application: *Applicacio prime narrationis Imperatricis prout contra filium regis cogitavit* (85vb). Then: *Narracio primi magistri de filio regis* (86ra), the application of the master’s story is not marked, nor is the target of the story (who or what it is written against). Then: *Secunda narracio Imperatricis* (86va), followed by: *Applicatio narrationis Imperatricis* (86vb), and so on, till the end of the history. The applications in case of the masters’ stories are not separated from the text, only in case of the Empress’ stories. I shall return to the possible reasons for this, now in anticipation let me only say that it is connected to the difference in the opponents’ way of argumentation: the masters’ exempla are very short and they imply the possibility of application, while the applicability of the Empress’ stories against the Emperor’s son and the masters needs detailed explanation, to say the least. Also, it draws the reader’s attention to the two distinct methods of application.

Next to the story of the Emperor’s son, the scribe also marks the application: *Narracio ffilij Imperatoris contra Imperatricem et eius austuciam que valde dolose egit* (97vb), and: *Reduccio narrationis filij Imperatoris contra cauillationes et mendacia Imperatricis et sic finem non habuit bonum* (102ra).

While in the Alba Iulia version the moral and spiritual interpretations were inserted between the stories, in this one these make up a separate unit after the epic part, and the scribe marks the end of the story and the beginning of the interpretation: *Explicit historia septem sapientum quantum ad textum. Et incipiuntur narrationem morales predictae quantum ad prolatum et sic est finis* (102rb). The story itself is complete, but the explanations stop with the interpretation of the fourth master’s story: the text promises the *Reduccio narrationis 4ti magistri* (104va), but the interpretation is missing. The spiritual interpretation of the frame story is also missing from this codex.

Summing up the findings, it is clear: the Alba Iulia manuscript belongs to the first group, the Budapest manuscript to the second, and both were undoubtedly meant for devotional purposes.

***Per spiritualem intellectum*: the attached interpretations. On the frame story and its attachments**

Being aware of the medieval ways of writing and reading and the use of texts, it does not strike one as a surprise that this work, functioning also as a collection of exempla, has its allegorical interpretations which convey its spiritual meaning.²⁴ Consequently, these interpretations should not be regarded as inorganic additions, although this is what happened both in Hungarian and other literatures. When Georg Buchner edited the work in 1889 based on the earliest known manuscript from Innsbruck from 1342, he mentioned that every story of the *Historia* has a *reductio*, but he did not include these into the printed edition as he considered them unnecessary additions.²⁵ Brigitte Weiske treated at some length the previously ignored spiritual interpretations of the *Gesta Romanorum*, a frequent codex neighbour of the *Historia* (indeed, her interest is an exception).²⁶ Ralf-Henning Steinmetz²⁷ and Detlef Roth²⁸ both claimed that it would be important to treat this aspect of the works as well, but no thorough analysis has been performed so far.

The versions are accompanied by two kinds of spiritual interpretations to the frame story: one is part of the first and second versions (henceforth: **A**), the other is part of the third (henceforth: **B**). The fourth version only explains the inserted stories (marked with **C**).

According to explanation **A**, the Emperor should be understood as every person whose only son is their soul; they entrust it to the seven sages, that is, the

²⁴ The allegorical interpretation of works of the most varied genres, subjects or provenance was a tradition in the Middle Ages: Homer, Vergil, the Roman de la Rose, or the Poetic Edda were all endowed with allegorical meanings, and although medieval theologians liked to emphasize the essential difference between rhetorical and exegetical allegoresis, the actual interactions between them cannot be overlooked. (Cf. Hartmut Freytag, *Die Theorie der allegorischen Schriftdeutung und die Allegorie in deutschen Texten besonders des 11. und 12. Jahrhunderts* [Bern, Munich: Francke, 1982], 15.) Dante himself in *Epistola XIII* also differentiates between the literal and allegorical or moral or anagogical interpretation of the *Divine Comedy* (Dante to Cangrande, 7).

<https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/cangrande.english.html>. Accessed on 28 November 2016

²⁵ Georg Buchner, *Die Historia septem sapientum nach der Innsbrucher Handschrift v. J. 1342*. (Erlangen, Leipzig, 1889), 6.

²⁶ Brigitte Weiske, *Gesta Romanorum. Bd. I.: Untersuchungen zu Konzeption und Überlieferung* (Tübingen: May Niemeyer, 1992), 25–29.

²⁷ Ralf-Henning Steinmetz, *Exempel und Auslegung: Studien zu den »Sieben weisen Meistern«* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 2000), 48.

²⁸ Roth, ed., *Historia*, 2.

seven acts of mercy, who will feed and teach them (*ad nutriendum, doctrinandum tradere*²⁹), and lead them to eternal salvation. The sages build him a house outside Rome and fill it with the seven noble arts: this is how man must grow in everything which is not the vanity of the world, he must accept in his heart the seven virtues so that all his desire may be his growth in a life of God's love. In the story the stepmother calls the son home: similarly, the body asks for bodily pleasures. The Emperor (that is, man) loves his wife (that is, the body) so much that he fulfils all her/its desires. The messenger who takes the letter is the evil thought, the letter is the consent to the evil thought.³⁰

The narrative line of correspondences is replaced by an adhortative passage, when the sages observe the stars: "Fac ergo tu, homo, sicut illi fecerunt."³¹ That is, you should do the same, man, if you have evil thoughts, talk about it in confession and look at it in the light of the Holy Scriptures: there you will clearly recognise in the stars, that is, in divine justice, that if you give yourself over to bodily action, you will pay for the very first of such actions with death, eternal death.³² The parallel narration goes on: if they do not obey, the sages will lose their head; that is, if you do not suffer temptation this way, you will lose your crown as if it were your head. It is desirable therefore that the son understands from the little star, the divine mercy, that if he binds himself to seven days of silence, that is, he stays free from sin all his life, he will be saved, although he will face many troubles.

The stepmother wants to seduce the son, but he resists: this is how the wretched body drives the soul to sin. But – the explanation exhorts again – if you stand strongly against sin, you will please God.

The stepmother accuses the son who is taken to the scaffold every day, but the sages save him each time: the man striving for sanctity is often judged by the evil world, but his virtues always save him from mortal sin. The son eventually speaks on the eighth day, and saves himself as well as the masters, while the empress is burnt: the chosen man is glorified in eternal life, and his body, that is, his bodily desires which had previously held him captive, are eliminated by penitence. "Et sic poterit sine fine regnare."³³

²⁹ Ibid., 249.

³⁰ Ibid., 249–250. (Since there are no significant differences, only stylistically relevant word order changes between this critical edition and the manuscript texts, I refer to the critical edition throughout the text).

³¹ Ibid., 250.

³² Ibid., 250, "Si cogitatio ad cor tuum veniat cum consensu, aperias consensum per confessionem et respice in firmamento, id est in sacra scriptura, in qua plane inuenies in vna stella, id est per diuinam iusticiam, quod, si vadas ad opera carnalia, in primo verbo, id est in primo opere, morte morieris, morte eterna."

³³ Ibid., 251.

For the sake of comparison, here is the summary of the shorter **B** version. In this, the emperor is the Heavenly Father, and his son is the man whom he entrusts with the seven masters, meaning the five senses and reason and intellect (*rationi et intellectui*). These build a home for the man in a garden, ornated with the seven noble arts: they present man with eternity. The emperor marries: his wife signifies judgment; she wants to see the man, that is, to judge his life. The legation of the seven masters (the senses, reason and intellect) should be such that they would make the man be seen. The sages know from the stars, namely, from the writings and teachings, that if a man says one single word the first day, he will die a death (*morte morieris*), i. e., if God judged everyman right away, he would be lost. So one should act like the emperor's son: be silent, be humble in front of God, and take the seven masters to hold on for him for seven days: for thus he uses all his strength to do good through seven-fold penitence. This way he will escape the judgment of the Father and the curse of the mother – i. e., judgment – and will be are saved together with his senses, his reason and his intellect.³⁴

The spiritual correspondences with the elements of the narration are visible and traceable in the case of both explanations, just like the parallelisms of the interpretations: Diocletian's individual story becomes a general example of human fate from the creation through committing sins, the troubles of earthly life, the dangers of damnation to the possible perspective of salvation. The procedure respects every criterion of allegorical thinking, the exegetic and rhetorical roots of allegory are readily visible: while it does not suspend, nor dismisses in the background the importance of the primary narrative as the literal sense (*sensus litteralis*) or the dynamic of the plot, it adds to each of its elements a secondary meaning by the recognizing or creating analogies. This way a coherent "other world" is created, a *diversiloquium*, or – regarding the thematic and conceptual difference between the literal and allegorical meanings – even an *alieniloquium*.³⁵ This procedure matches perfectly to that endlessly repeated exegetical tradition inherited from the Church Fathers to the Middle Ages that the recording of the mere facts, the surface must be followed by a deeper sense, a mystery, which is revealed by the allegorical interpretation. This context also reveals another allegory: it connects the historical meaning with reading, and the allegorical meaning with understanding.³⁶ And – perhaps unnecessary to mention – this exegetical procedure can be extended to other text types as well. As evidence for this stands precisely the reflexivity of the text of the seven sages: finishing the first part of the frame story,

³⁴ Ibid., 487–488.

³⁵ Gerhard Kurz refers to the definition on allegory of Johann Gerhard Vossius, cf. Gerhard Kurz, *Metapher, Allegorie, Symbol* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 34.

³⁶ See the analysis of Henri de Lubac on allegorical exegesis, with many examples: *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, vol. 2, (Grand Rapids–Edinburgh: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. – T & T Clark Ltd, 2000), 83–89.

before moving on to the first interpretation, the narrator “speaks out” from the text, announcing the added *moralitas*, while also referring to the importance of the mystical meaning.³⁷

The exegetical method also stretches the basic rhetorical meaning of the allegory as *a chain of metaphors*.³⁸ For, at a closer look, in addition to static correspondences – namely, that each character of the narration has a corresponding character in the allegory – processes, events, actions are also brought into play: the soul is *fed* and *instructed*, the body *asks for* pleasure, the soul *reaches* understanding through divine mercy, and so on. It is also interesting that the interpretations in version **B**, maybe due to their shortness, make better use of this dynamic possibility when focussing more on processes than in version **A**. This is expressed linguistically in a direct and consistent way: addressing the readers/listeners personally in second person singular, and identifying them with the subject of the narration and the allegory. This way it makes them involved in what happens in the world and context of the narration. This linguistic formula implies: the story is about you. I see this version, compared to the distant, simply informational character of version **A** (which is only rarely interrupted by the personal addressing of the reader), as a message more spiritual, more devotional and meditative.³⁹

There is another feature of version **B** that must be mentioned: the dissonance between some of the characters of the primary story and their allegorical “copy”. This is the case of the empress, whose well-known traits, in addition to her evilness, are lust and greed, and a stubborn unscrupulousness in her repeated attempts for seven days to kill the prince. One mustn’t wonder therefore if she is used in the spiritual interpretation as a metaphor for the guilty desires of the body, and her actions in the story are likened to the wily manoeuvres of tempting for sin (this is the case in version **A**.) In **B** however, she is identified with human judgment, considered valuable, as a gift. The fact that she called home the prince is nothing more than the judgment awaiting every human being, therefore in a moral perspective it counts positively, or at least neutrally. This interpretation can of course be in harmony with the internal logic of the *reductio*, the intention to emphasise the human freedom (and responsibility and sinfulness), but no matter how we look at it, it does not match the passionate fluctuations of the primary story. What is more, it definitely counters the tradition that sees the story of the seven

³⁷ Roth, ed., *Historia*, 487: “Nota, quod reduccio iam inponitur, sed postcedens ratio concordat cum predicta ratione, nisi semper moralitas interponitur propter mysticum sensum etc.”

³⁸ Cf. Quintilianus, *Institutio oratoria*, IX.2.46: “allegoriam facit continua metaphora”.

³⁹ Just a short example from interpretation **B** of the frame story: “Tunc imperator accipit vxorem, id est iudicalem potestatem, que cupit te videre, id est iudicare vitam tuam. Et sic fiet legacio septem magistris, (...) vt te presentent.” (Roth, ed., *Historia*, 488.)

sages as a parable of misogyny and the justification of its ideology.⁴⁰ However, this perspective in the present article is merely an interesting addition.

The allegorical interpretations, at a closer look, focus on, and draw attention to, the moral evaluation of human life and actions, staying within the dimension of temporality, but their horizon is an *anagoge* understood as a development of eternal life, or the allegorical meaning.⁴¹

We cannot analyse all the moralisations one by one, but it is worth nevertheless to make some summarizing observations on these.

Synthetically on *reductio*

If we read through the inserted stories without the applications and spiritual interpretations, we can find edifying stories on many versions of the opposition of good and evil. The narratives are shaped usually by the conflict of appearance and reality (*Arbor*, *Canis*, partly *Puteus* and *Avis*, *Sapientes*, *Virgilius*, *Inclusa*), complications around a love triangle (*Puteus*, *Avis*, partly *Tentamina*, *Inclusa*, *Vidua*), actions inspired by greed and envy (*Gaza*, *Amantes*, *Medicus*) or a combination of these. The structure of the stories is often similar, and so are the protagonists. A typical, recurring character is the emperor or king, the knight or the townsman, and of course all of them are blessed or cursed with a deceptive wife. It is also not indifferent that the husbands are mostly old and jealous, while the wives are attractive and young (although the interpretations usually fail to mention any of this). With such an onset, the story cannot really continue in any other way than the young wife deceiving her old and sullen husband with the help of a young lover. Then there are animals, objects and plants which behave like humans (they are good or evil), making adequate terrains for allegories. Their judgment in the story depends of course on the interest of the narrator: it is not accidental that the characters usually call *exemplum* what the narrator's title refers to as *narracio*.

What are the correspondences that can be made between these characters and stories by the *moralisatio*? The emperor for instance can be identified with the Christian man, with the heavenly Father (in addition to the frame story, also in *Aper*, *Amatores*, *Vaticinium/Amici*); Christ (*Gaza*, *Amatores*), the man in the world, the powerful men of the world (*Sapientes*), or the man purified in baptism (*Virgilius*). The emperor's/king's wife *can be* (*potest dici*, as it is often read in the explanations) the church or the good conscience (*Sapientes*), or even man's soul on the likeness of God, or man's pure soul whom he loves very much (movingly this latter precisely in the *Inclusa*). And even more, the beautiful woman that the hideous, swollen-bodied

⁴⁰ The problematics of misogyny is repeatedly treated from different angles in Bea Lundt's monography: *Weiser und Weib. Weisheit und Geschlecht am Beispiel der Erzähltradition von den »Sieben Weisen Meistern« (12. bis 15. Jahrhundert)* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2002).

⁴¹ On the Patristic and early medieval approaches to the anagogical interpretation, containing also instances of devotional history, see: Freytag, *Die Theorie...*, 35–36.

king wants in the *Senescalus* is also an allegory of the soul purified by baptism. The woman, here, is therefore the embodiment of all kinds of divine values: their beauty is a theological category, a sign and a consequence of man's likeness to God.

Other gentlemen of the stories are objects of similar identifications: the townsman can be any man, emperor, prelate (*Arbor*), Christian, or a man trained in divine teaching (*Avis*); the knight can also be identified with the man in the world, the Christian (*Canis*, *Vidua*), and also Christ (*Vidua*), the true Christian, the man immersed in the world (*Puteus*), Adam, our father (*Gaza*, *Vaticinium/Amici*), and the credulous man (*Tentamina*); or going deep enough, the devil itself (*Amatores*, *Inclusa*), and even the world – the case of the knight dreaming about the captive queen from afar (*Inclusa*).

The seven sages who appear in only two of the stories (*Senescalus*, *Vaticinium/Amici*) are identified with everything that can be connected to the number seven in theology: the seven deadly sins, the seven acts of mercy, the seven sacraments, the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Wives of less aristocratic characters or other women sometimes also appear as seducers, but this role is not exclusive: the adulterous wife in *Avis* represents the pleasures of the body; it is true however, that in a different interpretation it signifies the Christians entrusted to the prelate. In yet other interpretation it is the body (*Canis*, *Puteus*, *Vidua*), but also the soul whom Christ took as his bride (*Puteus*, *Tentamina*, *Vidua*), vanity of vanities (*Puteus*), the world (*Amatores*). The two daughters of the knight of *Gaza*: the soul and free will; in other places the two essences: the spiritual and the physical, namely the love of God and of man; or, in a different understanding, pleasure and delight. The emperor's daughter married to the shepherd boy in *Aper* is the mercy and the human soul; the mother of the deceptive wife in *Tentamina* is identified with the world and the church.

Finally, there are some considerations to be made about the allegory of natural beings (ignoring specific objects like the tower identified as a broken heart in *Tentamina*). Ravens because of their black colour exemplify the vanity of life, the desire of eyes and the body, and the sinful man (*Vaticinium/Amici*), the other bird, the truthful magpie stands for conscience, the preacher, and even Christ (*Avis*). The dog naturally means reason, good will, good conscience, just like the falcon (*Canis*), while the snake and the wild boar are the representations of Satan (*Canis*, *Aper*). The forest stands for the well known world, while the shepherd – no wonder – is the preacher himself (*Aper*).

Let me stop here: it is clear that some of the correspondences have long been fixed and are widely known, others are results of occasional identifications with a momentary use (although it is also possible that we, degenerate new-medieval postmoderns, fail to recognise them). It is also clear that the correspondences may place the characters on completely opposite poles (nothing is impossible for an allegoriser), or that they may at times be optional (not to say arbitrary), but they still

offer a context – or we should say, a bit frivolously, a hermeneutical situation – for these stories. Furthermore, they have a common feature: the connection between the literal (within the story) and the allegorical meaning guides the attention from the heavenly to the earthly, from the visible to the invisible, from the known to the unknown.

But how do the mere stories relate to the situation in which they are told, what is the strategy of argumentation they become part of? How does the interpretive situation of the frame story treat the exemplum-stories becoming arguments in the moralizations?

The interpretations of the empress and the masters

The circumstances of telling the first inserted story are memorable: the empress wants to warn Pontianus about the dangers awaiting him by the story of *Arbor*, and to make it more emphatic, she also explains it, although the emperor does not seem to need it.⁴² At the end of the story the empress asks her husband if he understood what he had heard, to which the emperor answers: “Peroptime”. The empress continues still: “Now I will explain what I have said.”⁴³ And the explanation goes: “The noble tree is you, through whom the ill, the poor and others find help.”⁴⁴ The small pine tree under the tree is your cursed son, who started to grow through knowledge. He now strives to cut the branches of your power, to get air, that is, fame and praise. After that he will ruin you so that he can rule after your death. So what if this happens? The ill and the poor will curse those who could have killed your son but didn’t. So I advise you that while you are in the prime of your power and health, kill him, lest the curse of the poor reach you.”⁴⁵ Before making any remarks, let’s see the application of the first master, Bancillus, to his own story. After telling

⁴² The medieval text and the Viennese edition are more sophisticated in suggesting the importance of the explanation than Heltai’s text. While the two former texts include a dialogue between the empress and the emperor after the story to check the understanding, in the latter version the empress’ application continues right after the story (see e.g. *Bécsi Poncianus* 85; *Heltai-Poncianus* C2 r–v.)

⁴³ Roth, ed., *Historia*, 253: „Hiis dictis ait imperatrix: »Domine, intellexisti, que dixi?« At ille: »Peroptime.« Que ait: »Iam exponam, que dixi.«”

⁴⁴ There is nothing unusual about this approach, the pine tree was the sign of power in the Middle Ages.

⁴⁵ Roth, ed., *Historia*, 253–254: “Arbor ista tam nobilis est persona tua, per quam infirmi, pauperes et ceteri alii auxilium inueniunt. Pinella sub arbore est filius tuus maledictus, qui iam incipit per doctrinam suam crescere. Ille vero studet, in quantum potest, ramos potencie tue euellere, ut aerem, id est famam ac laudem humanam, habebat. Deinde personam tuam propriam destruet, ut post decessum tuum regnet. Sed si fiet sic, quid eueniet? Certe pauperes ac debiles dabunt maledicciones omnibus illis, qui potuerunt filium tuum destruere et non fecerunt. Consulo ergo, dum es in tua potestate ac sanitate, ut eum destruas, ut malediccionem pauperum non incurras.”

the story, *Canis*, he also asks the emperor if he heard the story well, and the answer is again “Peroptime”. The master only adds: if the emperor kills his son as advised by the empress, he would do worse than the knight of the exemplum with his dog.⁴⁶

The empress’ explanation applies all elements of her story to the emperor and his son, and structurally it is exactly the same as the spiritual interpretations discussed above: in that parallel world, everything corresponds to something else. The only (yet essential) difference from the spiritual interpretations is that, while in the empress’ narration the individual story is connected to an individual explanation, the *reductiones* are generalised.

However, the master chooses a different solution: he only warns the emperor of the analogical situation without any kind of allegory, and the way he achieves it is to disprove the empress’ attitude and implicitly her story. He adds no further details to the argumentative force of his story.⁴⁷

There is no significant difference in the methods of argumentation also in what follows, the empress explains her stories element by element, while the masters always use short applications. The function of this is revealed if we corroborate them with other stories and their explanations. In the stories above the power- and value-relations between the characters were clear, and the stories, at least at a first glance, explained themselves. (There is, of course, some devious tendentiousness in how the empress identified the son with the little pine tree, which she presented as active, contrary to its role in the plot, while it would have been very much at hand to identify it with the empress; however, in that case her own exemplum would have spoken against the narrator and her intentions. Or it would have been possible to highlight the role of the fictional emperor in destroying the old tree, but then the empress should have also had to formulate a different message.)

However, the empress’ second story, *Aper*, told on the second day, does indeed need the special interpretation of its narrator, for it could not serve her interests otherwise. The shepherd in the story acts as a rescuer in the given situation, and although he cunningly kills the wild boar who threatens the people, he earns the emperor’s daughter and (as inheritance, after the emperor’s death) his country based on the emperor’s promise. The story is therefore about the struggle between good and evil, the message is unequivocal, and any average listener could easily establish the good and evil sides. Nevertheless, the empress offers a completely opposite interpretation: the wild boar is the positive character representing Pontianus’s power and strength, while the shepherd and his staff represent Diocletian and his knowledge, and the scratching of the boar to sleep

⁴⁶ Ibid., 264: “Amen dico vobis, si uos filium vestrum propter verbum vxoris vestre occiditis, peius vobis eueniet quam illi de leporario suo.”

⁴⁷ Cf. Steinmetz, *Exempel...*, 133.

means the deceitful stories of the masters. Here the shepherd turns thus into a negative figure who, if not stopped, wants to drive his master out of his country. The empress' interpretation fails to take into account two important circumstances appearing in the similarities: one is that the beast does endanger the safety of the forest and terrorises the people living there, and the other is that the marriage of the emperor's daughter would also solve the problem of the inheritance of the throne, and does not mean to seize the emperor's power. At the same time, the interpretation also questions the value of wisdom, as it is presented to be an illusion.⁴⁸ The inherent message of the story and the empress' explanation are thus utterly contradictory, which makes the reader suspicious also about the rest: is it correct to take her interpretation for granted?⁴⁹

The empress and the sages are not only opposed in their intention to make the emperor take or preserve the life of Diocletian, but also in their methods. It has already been said that the empress explains her stories exactly on their reverse; one manifestation of this is allegory. In contrast, the masters' unequivocal stories simply make references to important aspects of the frame story: the dangers of a hasty judgment (*Canis, Avis*), the fact that the voice of a slanderous wife can turn things upside down (*Puteus*) and so on. Speaking about the two kinds of use of exempla, Steinmetz draws attention to the fact that the interpretations of the masters refer the future possibilities: if you killed the boy, you would end up like...⁵⁰ This part of the difference I do not consider to be that clear, for instance precisely in the case of *Arbor*, which the empress explains from the point of view of the future consequences of Diocletian's staying alive. For, after identifying the larger tree with the emperor and the smaller one with the emperor's son, and explained the story as an allegory of Diocletian's ambitions, she continues: "and if this is so, the poor will curse you",⁵¹ using *futurum imperfectum* in the Latin text: "Sed si fiet sic, quid eueniet? Certe pauperes ac debiles *dabunt* [italics mine] maledicciones omnibus illis, qui potuerunt filium tuum destruere et non fecerunt."⁵²

⁴⁸ Roth, ed., *Historia*, 271: "Aper iste tam fortis personam tuam designat, cui nullus potest resistere fortis nec sapiens. pastor iste cum baculo pastorali personam filii tui maledicti designat, qui cum baculo scientie sue incipiet te deludere in tantum, quod, sicut pastor aprum scalpebat et fecit eum dormire et postea occidit, eodem modo magistri filii tui maledicti tantum per falsas narrationes te scalpebunt, quod filius tuus te occidet, ut regnare possit."

⁴⁹ In general about this problem, cf. Steinmetz, *Exempel...*; the case of *Aper*: 91–96.

⁵⁰ Steinmetz, *Exempel...*, 74.

⁵¹ *Heltai-Poncianus*, C2v.

⁵² Roth, ed., *Historia*, 254, see translation above.

Again on allegory

It has been discussed above that the empress' explanations of her stories and the moralisations are structurally parallel to each other, but the same thing can only be said with caution about the masters' stories. The parallelism also appears in the fact that both cases contain unexpected turns: we find interpretations in some cases which an average person would hardly think of. However, the allegorical explanations do have some consistency in both cases: the empress wants to have the prince killed through these, and the *reductiones* always speak about the fundamental theses of moral theology and the perspectives and dangers of the road to salvation. Due to the narrative character of the story of Pontianus (and almost to the same degree of the inserted stories), the allegory or allegories based on them are also narrative in character, containing, of course, occasional descriptive elements.⁵³ Examples could also be found in the inserted stories, but I will refer now to some instances of *Canis* which were left out of Heltai's text: the three nannies hired by the knight (or the nobleman at Heltai), besides taking care of the child in any way, as we read at Heltai, had special tasks in the medieval versions: one has to feed him, one has to keep him clean, and one has to watch over his sleep. The medieval texts also relate that – what a miracle – the cradle has four legs.⁵⁴

These instances have no further relevant function in the story itself, but the spiritual interpretations render them suitable for further explanations: in this sense, the three nannies are contrition, confession, satisfaction (variants **A**, **C**), or senses, mind and reason (variant **B**). Contrition leads the soul to virtue, feeds it with virtues, confession washes away the sins, and satisfaction ensures the calmness of good deeds (that is, calm sleep).⁵⁵ The legs of the cradle, "Amen dico vobis", as it is often said in the text for the sake of emphasis, are nothing else than the four cardinal virtues which offer shelter to the child (or the human soul in the allegorical correspondence) in case of danger.⁵⁶ So, what we see here is the description of the landscape, the space, an object as it acquires an explanatory function.⁵⁷

Beyond their use in sermons or as devotional material, what is the reason for the medieval popularity of this creative method? The examples show that the semantic ambiguity of the allegorical structure is also connected to some sort of hermeneutical situation (there is no work of art without interpretation and reflection

⁵³ Willi Erzgräber, "Zum Allegorie-Problem," *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 8 (1978): 105–121.

⁵⁴ Roth, ed., *Historia*, 259–261; 660.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 267; and 493.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 265; 660.

⁵⁷ Cf. Kurz, *Metapher*, 43; 53–54.

thereof...), and this duality with multiple meanings is a requirement⁵⁸ which makes the reception process truly dynamic. The work can be entertaining and instructive at the same time, and neither the author nor the reader must feel remorse because of the former function.

It is a recurrent statement in the literature that the allegory has a certain role of memory support in western culture: it is extremely suitable for preserving values.⁵⁹ In a Christian sense, it is the manifestation of the sense of the faith: it repeats and represents the message of salvation history in the form of stories we would not even suspect. This happens in following the example of Christ who preached using exempla and comparisons, knowing that simple people remember these concrete stories more easily. At the same time, the literature also warns about the allegorical meaning that this is a collective name of the hidden meaning of texts, which can be very useful in preaching and private meditation within the hermeneutic hierarchy of the levels of exegesis (precisely with regard to the potential reader), but is much less functional in speculative theology, where the close commentary and the Aristotelian logic go hand in hand.⁶⁰

If we leave aside the spiritual interpretations, Diocletian's story can also be read as a story of formation and initiation from early childhood to adulthood (or becoming a good ruler), with all its troubles, dangers and pitfalls. The author is also aware of this possibility, as shown by the ritual moments of the narration. The allegorical interpretations (for we should not fully disregard them) ultimately also enhance this process of formation and initiation by guiding the secondary narration based on the moral and sometimes even dogmatic details of salvation.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 35: "Wenn wir einen Text auf eine Allegorie hin verstehen, dann imaginieren wir Situationen, in denen z. B. wie hier Schlüsselemente des Textes einmal die und dann noch auch eine andere Bedeutung haben."

⁵⁹ Cf. Ibid., 45, with further readings.

⁶⁰ Cf. A. J. Minnis, *Quadruplex sensus, multiplex modus: Scriptural Sense and Mode in Medieval Scholastic Exegesis*, in Jon Whitman ed., *Interpretation and Allegory. Antiquity to the Modern Period* (Boston, Leyden: Brill, 2003), 231.

APPENDIX

The intercalated stories

No.	The narrator	Title/type
1.	Empress / 1.	Arbor – <i>The tree</i>
2.	Bancillas / 1.	Canis – <i>The dog</i>
3.	Empress / 2.	Aper – <i>The wild boar</i>
4.	Lentulus / 2.	Puteus – <i>The well</i>
5.	Empress / 3.	Gaza – <i>The treasure</i>
6.	Katho / 3.	Avis – <i>The bird</i>
7.	Empress / 4.	Sapientes – <i>The sages</i>
8.	Malquidrac / 4.	Tentamina – <i>The test</i>
9.	Empress / 5.	Virgilius – <i>Virgilius</i>
10.	Josephus / 5.	Medicus – <i>The doctor</i>
11.	Empress / 6.	Senescalus; Roma – <i>The seneschal</i>
12.	Cleophas / 6.	Amatores – <i>The lovers</i>
13.	Empress / 7.	Inclusa – <i>The imprisoned queen</i>
14.	Joachim / 7.	Vidua – <i>The widows</i>
15.	Emperor's son (Prince) / 8.	Vaticinium; Amici – <i>The friends</i>

Translated from the Hungarian by Emese Czintos