Cooperation and Conflict. The relationship between Bishop György Széchényi of Győr and the secular elite (1658–1685)



György Széchényi was born in 1605/06 into a family of non-noble origin, whilst in 1695 he died as the head of the Hungarian episcopate, as Archbishop of Esztergom. Following his studies, during which he was granted a title of nobility by Ferdinand II in 1629, from 1648, as Bishop of Veszprém, firstly he could call himself a 'real' bishop, because only part of the diocese he had been given lay under Ottoman control. After spending nearly ten years in Sümeg, for, as Bishop of Veszprém, he was forced to maintain his residence in Sümeg – which was further from the frontier – due to Veszprém's position as a frontier stronghold, György Széchényi moved his seat to Győr on 25 January 1658, where new challenges awaited him.

Diocese of Győr in the 17th century

In the 16th century, the town of Győr became one of the key strongholds in the defence against the Ottomans; owing to its location, it served as an outpost for Vienna and the provinces of Lower Austria, and was thus considered by contemporaries to be the 'bastion of Western Christianity'. This new role also gave the town a new character: a fortress was built around the settlement, and the inhabitants had to live alongside a permanent imperial army. However, as its military potential grew, so too did its political role; the Bishopric of Győr – and thus the figure of the bishop himself – gained in importance and became a matter of national political significance.

Ecclesiaestical elite

Hungarian estate society in the 17th century from a Catholic perspective can still be divided into three poles: the monarch, the *status saecularis* and the *status ecclesiasticus*. Looking at the position occupied by the Bishopric of Győr in the hierarchy, we can see that while it held a very prominent position for much of the Middle Ages, this was less true of the late Middle Ages. A charter dated 1515 shows that Győr ranked only 10th, without a great deal of prestige. However, all this changed decisively after 1526 as a result of the Turkish conquest by 1607 Győr had jumped up to fifth place – a position that remained largely unchanged until the 1660s – owing largely to its relatively good financial situation and, to a decisive extent, its geographical location (its distance from the Imperial Court).

Secular order of precedence

Most of the lists of dignitaries continued into the early modern period, and by the beginning of the 17th century the following order had become established: 1. Palatine, 2. Chief Justice, 3. Ban of Croatia, 4. Master of the Treasury, 5. Master of the Horse, 6. Master of the Chamber, 7. Master of the Table (Chief Steward), 8. Chief Doorkeeper, 9. Chief Cupbearer, 10. Chief Steward of the Court, 11. Count of Pozsony (Bratislava). The titles were accompanied by legal authority, privileges, prerogatives, recognition and social prestige. Based on this observation, we can understand why György Széchényi, as Bishop of Győr and Archbishop of Kalocsa, established his network of contacts with the following individuals and maintained frequent correspondence.

Pál Esterházy



Pál Esterházy was born in 1635. He was soon faced with great responsibility, he became the head of the family following the deaths of his four brothers in the Battle of Vezekény (Vozokany) in 1652. Throughout the campaigns against the Turks in 1663–64, he stood by Miklós Zrínyi's side, in 1663 Pál Esterházy was elected major-general. In 1681, thanks to his supporters – in which the Viennese nuncio Buonvisi also played an important role – he was elected Palatine in Sopron after a long vacancy.

Kristóf Batthyány



Kristóf Batthyány – Captain-General of Transdanubia, Master of the Cupbearers –was born in 1637. His father, Ádám Batthyány I, secured an agreement from Leopold I in 1655 that, upon his death, the office of Captain-General could be passed on to his son, Kristóf (Transdanubia region was under their control between 1633 and 1703). In 1683, yielding to Ottoman pressure and fearing for their estates and people, they (with his son) defected to the Ottoman side and plundered and ravaged Styria. By September, however, at the request of several noblemen – including György Széchényi and Pál Esterházy – he was granted a grace and by September was already fighting on the monarch's side.

The Turkish challenge of 1682 and 1683

György Széchényi kept a close watch on the autumn movements of the troops from Szombathely, from where he attempted to direct operations in person; we can therefore see that he did not flee, but remained in the border region throughout. He reported to Batthyány on 17 September that he was heading from *Vasvár* towards *Szombathely* with his army; he had travelled for a while with the palatine (Esterházy), who, however, turned his army towards *Óvár*, and it was already apparent that a large military operation was being prepared by the Ottomans. Even at this stage, he asked the captain-general to inform him of his intended course of action, so that they might coordinate the movements of their armies as effectively as possible.

Alongside all this, they began organising the army; and Széchényi drew attention to an interesting difficulty. Although the monarch had spent 50,000 forints on mercenaries, it was almost impossible to find men willing to take up weapons. In addition to his own 200 soldiers, the archbishop mustered 800 cavalry and infantrymen from Győr, as well as troops from Veszprém and Pápa.

After that, correspondence stopped for the rest of the year, and no Ottoman army arrived in the region. The mobilisation, however, could be considered reasonable, the most recent research has examined the correspondence between *Antonio Colletti*, the Polish ambassador in Vienna, and *Carlo Barberini*, the cardinal-protector of the Polish-Lithuanian Union, between 1681 and 1684, which in several instances supplements or even confirms Széchényi's information. The importance of organising the defence of Transdanubia can also be substantiated by Colletti's letters to Cardinal Barberini. On 20 September, he expressed the view that the Court in Vienna was overestimating the strength of the Ottoman army; in his opinion, even if not in terms of numbers, the imperial troops – supplemented by Hungarian forces – held the advantage in terms of combat value. On 12 October, uncertainty still prevailed in Vienna; they were inclined towards a ceasefire, fearing that the Ottoman troops could easily capture Győr and Komárom. In this context, the central leadership's decision to organise the defence of Transdanubia was by no means irrational, and Széchényi was well aware of this.

In 1683, however, not only Transdanubia but the whole country had to face an even greater challenge. In March 1683 *Kara Mustafa* could lead the Ottoman army towards the Kingdom of Hungary and Vienna. On 18 March, the Palatine, Pál Esterházy, issued a proclamation calling for *insurrectio* against the Ottomans. However, news of the Ottomans' arrival was already spreading like wildfire throughout the region; everyone in the surrounding area of Győr was trying to escape, so the archbishop could no longer find enough men for his troops. In accordance with the military plan Kristóf Batthyány, with 6,000 soldiers, is defending the areas beyond the Rába, including Győr and Körmend (here are the troops of the archbishop as well).

On 28 May, he wrote a letter to Kristóf Batthyány's son, Ádám Batthyány (II), suggesting that they set up camp on the meadows near *Mórichida*. Széchényi, however, was watching events unfold with concern; the letters reveal a growing sense of tension and maddening uncertainty. He knew that even the slightest mistake – when facing a Ottoman force of this size – could prove fatal. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that even at this stage he continues to date his letters in Kesző and endeavours to direct events from the 'front line'.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a new side to Archbishop Széchényi's character and personality emerges in these letters, one that had previously been only faintly evident during his time in Veszprém. The prelate demonstrates – and on several occasions even flaunts – his skills as a military commander, frequently advising Kristóf Batthyány, the Captain-General of Transdanubia, on the choice of campsites. Upon hearing news of the Ottoman attack, he did not flee; instead, he commanded his troops from the borderlands from his episcopal residences, constantly monitoring the changing military situation. Confident in his intuition, preparedness and abilities, he was even capable of defying orders from Vienna and making contrary proposals to Batthyány.

Csongor Cziráki
(Vilmos Fraknói Vatican Historical Research Group)