

# Szamosközy vs. Michael the Brave and the Wrath of Șincai\*

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History should be a science of constructive and objective debate, eventually put to the service of the masses, with the aim of throwing a light on the past and learning from events that have occurred. The famous Latin principle that history should be written “*sine ira et studio*”<sup>1</sup> – without anger and subjectivity, has always been theoretical, as scholars, who are also people, cannot detach themselves emotionally from the events they study. It is neither awkward, nor rare, to find many history books or articles written in the last years that have as sole aim to attack another’s work or even person. From mild language to hysterical gestures, especially at thematic talk-shows on TV, the confrontation rages on. We could think it is a sign of our times, of the globalization of science, rapid circulation of knowledge, and politics with a scientific background.

It is not.

While looking for information on the military life of the Wallachian Voivode Michael the Brave, we have come across a few notes from various historians, regarding the awful epitaph written for the Voivode by a contemporary Transylvanian chronicler of Hungarian origins.

Never published, only mentioned with disgust by Romanian authors – because, indeed, it is foul – the epitaph was rather hard to find, and the translation from Latin is quite interesting<sup>2</sup>. Without the slightest aim to stir any kind of nationalistic controversies, the study would have stopped here, being in the end a simple curious detail of written sources. But, as we shall see in the following pages, the epitaph did not remain unanswered, in the same manner, by none other than the well-known Transylvanian historian of Romanian origins, Gheorghe Șincai<sup>3</sup>. The quarrel of two Transylvanian historians, almost two centuries apart, comes to life here...

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<sup>1</sup> Tacitus, in his introduction to the *Annals*, writes that he will present the facts *sine ira et studio*.

<sup>2</sup> The only Romanian source for the part of the text available in Romanian is the work that was used for this study: Ioachim Crăciun, *Cronicarul Szamosközy și însemnările lui privitoare la români*, Cluj, 1928.

<sup>3</sup> Gheorghe Șincai, 1754-1816, Romanian scholar from Transylvania. He studied in Transylvania, then in Vienna and Rome. His activities included history, philology, poetry, literature. As director of the Greek Catholic schools in Transylvania, he tried to educate the masses and spread the Romanian culture. One of his most important works is *The Chronicle of the Romanians*.

## The Events

In 1599, the army of Michael the Brave entered Transylvania and defeated the army of Cardinal Andrew Bathory, the ruler of the country. Although he tried to pacify the region and reach an agreement with the local nobility and the Austrians at the same time, Michael was soon faced with an uprising and war. There were hard times for Transylvania, as the events shattered its political and social balance, the effects being felt for many years after.

There were also difficult days for a few of the former employees of Cardinal Bathory, who had to take refuge in the Saxon cities, like Hermannstadt/Sibiu, for example. In a German city with no particular love for 'aliens', life must have been hard for Szamosközy and others. The news of the slaughter of Michael was thus felt with great relief and joy, as the chronicler also writes. So happy were they, and so much fear must the Voivode inspire them, that only now did they dare mock him.

## Who was Szamosközy?

Istvan/Stephen Szamosközy was born around the year 1565, probably in the town of Cluj. He lost both his parents at a very early age, but was very lucky to be taken in by the family of Ladislaus Sombory, a Transylvanian nobleman. He was raised here together with Sombory's son, and got the same high education.

He joined the son of his protector to the University of Heidelberg, between 1587 and 1590, and, after 1591, to the University of Padua, until 1594. During this time, he also did research at the Library in Florence, and had a book published. In 1593, his book, *Analecta Lapidum Vetustorum Et Nonnullarum in Dacia Antiquitatum*, 1593 was published in Padua, and was reedited in 1598 in Frankfurt.

After 1594 he returned to Cluj; from 1599 to 1604 – during the Wallachian intervention and the wars that followed –, he had to take refuge in Sibiu, Alba Iulia, and then Cluj again. It was a hard time for the chronicler, who had been used to a life of privileges and must have lived in sheer poverty and misery during these years. This period also influenced him dearly in his writings, especially regarding his feelings about the Wallachian Voivode Michael the Brave, and the Romanians in general.

The newly elected ruler of Transylvania, Stephen Bocskay<sup>4</sup>, appointed him custodian of the Chapter of Alba Iulia, then chief archivist and official chronicler of the Principality. Though his will, Bocskay also left 2,000 gold pieces for the printing of Szamosközy's Chronicle. Sigismund Rakoczi<sup>5</sup>, the new Prince of Transylvania, gave him a house in Alba Iulia in 1608 and an estate at Galda de Sus.

It is believed that Szamosközy died in Alba Iulia, on the 29<sup>th</sup> of March 1612.

## His Works

His first work was the one mentioned above, a book regarding archeological finds of Transylvania, i. e. Roman lapidaria bearing inscriptions. From his other works, only fragments were preserved until today, in both Hungarian and Latin. It is

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Bocskay, 1557-1606, reigned 1605-1606.

<sup>5</sup> Reigned from 1607 to 1608.

believed that he also wrote *De Originibus Hungaricis*, a history of the early history of the Hungarians. Although lost, the work was cited by two other Transylvanian historians, L. Toppeltin<sup>6</sup> and D. Zwittinger<sup>7</sup>. Nothing else is known about this work. Among his other works are a Hungarian-Latin dictionary and political epigrams and verses, many written in a very rough and trivial style.

His sources are very varied – he took his information from other chronicles, documents from public and private archives and libraries, and from eye witnesses – diplomats, authorities, soldiers, etc – of the events he describes. His style and work method is thus a modern one, with almost no link to the old medieval way of writing historical events. Also, the supernatural element is not present in an overwhelming amount, such as the scholars of the Middle Ages used to do. He tried to get correct information, and extract the historical truth from his sources, and thus give an accurate account of events. For this, and also for his preoccupations in various fields of history – archeology, military history – he is regarded as the first modern Hungarian historian.

Unfortunately, no full version of his Chronicle was found, only fragments in Latin and Hungarian. There are three versions in Latin and very many short notes in Hungarian. After his death, his papers were scattered in various public and private libraries, possibly some lost forever.

### The text

The text presents the events in a very objective way. Actually, Szamosközy appears in some of his writings as a supporter of Michael the Brave, as he even calls him “The Romanian Hannibal”. He also mentions that “Voivode Michael did not like the obsequiousness, drunkenness, and the grudge of the Hungarians.” Very useful are also the information he gives about the types of troops in the Wallachian army, and their numbers, as well as tactics employed. The chronicler has a real appetite for presenting battles and executions, as we will further see. He usually only makes limited comments, as in the following text: “Even Sinan-Pasha, when he was running across the bridge and many were crowding around him, fell off the bridge in the swamp, from where the Janissaries took him out. Bad omen also for the next battle of Sinan-Pasha!”

Other bad omens, mentioned by the chronicler in the old tradition of the medieval writings, are those regarding Cardinal Andrew Bathory, as he was going to war against Michael the Brave and the Wallachians: “When the Cardinal came down the stairs of the palace in Fehérvár, to mount his horse, one of his spurs broke. The flag, raised in front of his tent, in the camp, fell down”; at the beginning of the battle of Șelimbăr, which the Cardinal lost to the Wallachians, “the tip of the golden flag of the Cardinal broke by itself, and fell down; bad omen.”

He must have been present at the famous entering of Michael the Brave in Alba Iulia, as he describes the event and the persons with great detail.

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<sup>6</sup> Laurentius Toppeltinus, Transylvanian historian, 1641-1670.

<sup>7</sup> David Zwittinger, Hungarian historian and philologist, 1675-1743.

Also, much information has to be regarded as coming from the inner circle of the most important participants to the events, such as when mentioning that one of the reasons why general Basta and Michael were not getting along was that both “were very ambitious, they hated each other *ad invicem*”.

### The Killing of Michael the Brave

He described the killing of Michael the Brave with as many details as possible, and gave no less than five versions of his execution in the camp of Turda, including the Romanian version! With sheer pleasure, he wrote that on that fateful morning, 300 Walloons headed for the tent of the Voivode. Then...

“One of the captains, by the name of Bori, after entering the tent together with a few others, grabbed Michael saying «You are taken [prisoner]»; Michael said «No», and with this he put his hand on the sword, to take it out. A Walloon aiming with his gun fired it and hit him in his left hand, with which he tried to take out his sword, because Michael the Voivode was left-handed. Another Walloon pierced his chest with the sword, a third Walloon shot him in the back and so, after collapsing, they cut his head with his own sword. [They are looting the tent, and then] ... they dragged his body out of the tent and he lied three days, naked, at the margin of the road. They put the head, together with the beard, on the carcass of a horse, which had died there at the same time, and so the head stood there for a long time. The Germans cut big pieces of skin from the Voivode’s body, flaying his back, ribs, shoulders, and *pro praeclaro scilicet gestae rei monumento* they kept them as keepsakes. Finally, as disgusting as he was, a few Serbs buried him in a small pit, so the dogs wouldn’t eat him.”

### The Epitaph

“And in order to bring him too – us, who were living in misery in Sibiu – a token of our appreciation, we wrote for him this epitaph<sup>8</sup>:

*«Hic iacet ille ferox, latro merus et Nero verus,  
Cacus<sup>9</sup>, atrox Dacus, scelorum lacus, ille Valachus!  
Hac qui transibis, bis terque cacabis et ibis.»*”

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<sup>8</sup> Another example of mock epitaph, written in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, belongs to the Wallachian chronicler and politician Ienăchiță Văcărescu, and is dedicated to Kara Mustafa, the former Ottoman Grand Vizier, the unlucky besieger of Vienna in 1683:

“And it seems to me that this epigram would deserve to be on his grave:  
Black was your name, black was your work,  
Because you have destroyed so many countries, uselessly and for nothing.  
Eratrostrate has taught you how to leave a memory for yourself,  
And you shall have it as great as his, without the immortality.”

(On the side of the document, an explanation regarding Eratrostrate – “The one who destroyed the temple of Diana in Ephesus, one of the seven wonders of the world.”), Ienăchiță Văcărescu, *Istoria otomanicească*, Bucharest, 2001, p. 67.

<sup>9</sup> Cacus, in Latin mythology, was a son of Vulcan, a monster who was spitting fire through his mouth and was eating humans, and who was eventually killed by Hercules on the Aventine.

In his biography of Vasile Lucaciu<sup>10</sup>, Tiron Albani<sup>11</sup> also mentions this epitaph. Allegedly, it was told by Ioan Rațiu in a session of the Parliament in Budapest, probably in 1905 or 1906. Albani gives a slightly different version than the original and that of Șincai, although he must have taken it from the *Chronicle* of Șincai:

*“Hic jacet ille ferus, latro merus et Nero Verus  
Atque Malus Dacus, scelerum lacus, ille Valachus;  
Hic qui transibis, terque cacabis et ibis.”*

He also gives the information – which is a pure invention – that the epitaph was actually written and put on Michael’s grave by the Hungarians. The translation he gives for the epitaph is also purely poetical and barely resembles the original.

The translation of the original epitaph:

*“Here lies that savage, true brigand and real Nero  
Cacus, heinous Dacian, sack of catastrophies, that Wallachian;  
You who are passing by(his grave), defecate two-three times and go.”*

The last version of the killing of the Voivodw, the fifth, is the Romanian version:

As the Walloons came to his tent, “O Michael Voivod came out to greet [the Walloon commander] and, wishing to treat the Walloon captain, invited him to enter the tent himself the first. As the captain categorically refused to enter the tent the first, Michael Voivod went in front. And when he entered the tent, he [the captain] stabbed him from behind with a sharp iron lance, so that the tip of the lance came out through the front by a palm’s distance. Another Walloon shot him at once, and they cut off his head.”

In the Latin material, Michael the Brave is called “O the most foul of the tyrants”, and the Wallachians/Romanians are presented in the most negative and vulgar way possible – they are lazy and dirty; they are thieves and outlaws; even their leaders are not any better: “O the stinking Wallachian emissaries”. His most dear wish is, as expressed in the pages of his work, “O that the entire people of the Wallachians be wiped out completely.”

It is obvious that the chronicler changed his opinions over the duration of time, which is also reflected in the fragments which are available today, and that in the final version of his work, Szamosközy would have opted for the considerations in the Latin material, at least the ones regarding the Romanians.

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<sup>10</sup> Tiron Albani, *Leul dela Șișești*, Oradea, 1936, p. 174.

<sup>11</sup> Tiron Albani (1887-1976) was a journalist at various socialist newspapers. His biographies of Lucaciu, Avram Iancu and others combine fact and fiction.

## The Wrath of Șincai

Almost 200 years after Szamosközy wrote his disgusting epitaph, Gheorghe Șincai found the manuscript in the archives in Alba Iulia, unsigned, read it, and felt the need to answer the deceased *Anonymus*, as he called the author. In his work, *The Chronicle of the Romanians*, published in 1811, his outrage bursts and adopts the same trivial formula as the Transylvanian chronicler of Hungarian origins two centuries before:

*“Ast ego respondens indigno nomine dico:  
Quisquis is es, taceas et meliora sape;  
Nam fuit hic heros, qualem non protulit aetas,  
Nec feret; huic flores florida spargat humus.  
Tu qui ferre virum non vis, Anonyme! linge  
Merdam ejus, tibi quae semper in ore fuit.  
Sic etenim disces, quae sint dignissima scriptu,  
Et quid dicendum, quaeque tacenda tibi,  
because to the historian it is not allowed to write anything else, than only the  
events, as they were...”<sup>12</sup>*

In translation...

“But me, answering to one who is not worth even a name, I tell him:  
Whoever you are, shut up and learn better things:  
That this one was a hero like no other was created in that century,  
And has none; to this one, the blossomed land should lay flowers,  
You, who cannot stand this man, Anonymous! Lick  
His excrements, which have always been in your mouth.  
Because only this way will you learn what is worth writing,  
What you have to say and what you have to be silent about.”

No further comment can be added to a quarrel of two historians, separated by ethnicity, aspirations, loyalties, and 200 years!

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<sup>12</sup> Gheorghe Șincai, *Cronica românilor*, Bucharest, 1978, p. 19.