

The Stars, the Poet and the King

The elegy of Janus Pannonius, entitled *De stella aestivo meridie visa in mense Iulio Anno. Domini Millesimo quadringentesimo sexagesimo secundo CCCLXII*, that is, "The star visible on the meridian in July, 1462" is the fourth poem in the cycle of elegies which was composed probably by the poet himself.

*Quodnam hoc tam clara sidus sub luce refulget,
nec timet in medio praenituisse die?
Fulva Cleonaei certe per terga Leonis,
celsius aestivos, Sol agit acer, equos,
5 nec prodire vagas permittens longius umbras,
in caput Aethiopum spicula recta iacit.
Omnia nunc flagrant, nec caligantia puri
aspectum coeli lumina ferre valent.
Cetera caeruleam Noctis variantia pallam
10 praestructum radiis occuluere iubar,
una tamen longe reliquis audacior astris,
contempto Phoebi stella nitore micat.
Quantus conspicuo rutilans fulgore cometes
nuntiat horrenda, bella cruenta, iuba,
15 sed tu (sive Iovem mavis te forte vocari,
grata est Idaliae, seu tua flamma, Deae,
sive novum coelo modo te Deus addidit ignem,
ac solis fessae, iussit adesse, faci;
felix cui soli fas est haud cedere Phoebo,
20 non tantum noctis quae potes esse decus),
nil dirum, nil triste feras, sed lumine dextro
pelle procul quicquid fata sinistra parant.
Saturni tu frigus iners, tu Martis iniqui
ardores placida corrige temperie.
25 Perfice ne terris noceant Arcturus et Haedus,
Arcturus ventis, saevior Haedus aquis,
Grandine flavescentes ne pulset Scorpius uvas,
ne segetes nimio torreat igne Canis,
neu miseros turbet nautas nimbosus Orion,*

30 Orion clava, nec minus ense ferox,
 sed pius insanis defendat Castor ab undis
 limite quas certo duxerit Ursa rates.
 Semina centeno reddat cum foenore tellus,
 unda ferat pisces, aura salubris aves.
 35 Per te vexato redeat concordia mundo,
 Ianus et aeterna comprimat arma sera.
 Esto quidem late populis tu prospera cunctis,
 sed magis afflictas respice Pannonias.
 Verte pharetratos Phryxi trans aequora Turcos,
 40 quos male nunc Hister submovet amne suo.
 Fac regem observent proceres, rex ipse, fideli
 consilio procerum se regat et patriam.
 Omnia sic roseis cedant tibi sidera flammis,
 sic tuus occiduas nesciat ignis aquas.¹

In the research of Janus' poetry there are two excellent treatises about this poem, one by Lajos Bartha and another by János Bollók. Both treatises have fundamental results. However, there are important differences between them, and the most important of them is on character of the celestial phenomenon represented in the poem. There are two possibilities of identification, and Bartha and Bollók were both well aware of it. The first is the increasing intensity of the planet Venus, this is the more possible interpretation according to Bartha. The second way is the identification of the star with a comet whose appearance was recorded in 1462 in China.² The aim of this paper is not only the reconsideration of this question, but also to take into account the generic questions, the rhetorical structure, and a possible allegorical meaning, which may not exclusively be astrological.

In the first fifteen lines of the poem we can see a description. It is the 16th line where the poet addresses the star: there begins an invocation, which is followed by a prayer. According to its generic composition, it is a *descriptio* (*ekphrasis*) and a hymn which are connected in the *De stella*...

Let us first see the description (ll. 1-15). Janus uses four names for the star in this part: *sidus* (l. 1), *astrum* (l. 11), *stella* (l. 12), *cometes* (l. 13). It is no wonder that two eminent scholars had diverse opinions about the character of this heavenly body. Let us see the more recent interpretation of Bollók, which is based on Chinese

¹ JANUS PANNONIUS, *Poëmata ... omnia, Opusculorum pars altera*, I-II, ed. Samuel TELEKI, Alexander KOVÁSZNAI, Utrecht, Wild, 1784, vol. I, Elegiarum lib. I, no. 4., pp. 281-283. Italics in the text are mine. You can see the parallel places in the *Appendix* of this paper.

² BARTHA (Lajos), *Janus Pannonius két csillagászati verse*, in *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények [Communications in Literary History]* LXXXII (1978), pp. 340-345, about the Chinese records, p. 344, n. 18; BOLLÓK (János), *Asztrális misztika és asztrológia Janus Pannonius költészetében*, Budapest, Argumentum, 2003, 67-85, about the possibility of Venus, p. 68, n. 5.

records from 1462. According to these records, the visibility of the comet was between June 29-July 16.

The identification of this comet with the stella of Janus is based upon the interpretation of lines 5 and 6. These lines contain an allusion to Pliny's *Natural History* (2, 73, 184), the passage about the times and places where there are no shadows.³ As we can read in Pliny, in the island of Meroe, the capital of the Aethiopians (*caput Aethiopum*) there are no shadows twice a year. One of these periods is when the sun is in the 14th degree of Leo. This date is the 4th of August according to the traditional astrological calendar.

The discrepancy of the dates, that is, July 16 and August 4, is explained by Bollók by two factors. The first is the precession of the equinoxes, i. e. the slow changing of the orientation of the Earth's axis. The precession appears from the earth on the celestial sphere as the continuous change of the position of the sun in the equinox relative to the zodiac. Regarding the precession, this date has to be July 5. Another factor is the change caused by the Julian Calendar which caused 11 minutes advance per year. Regarding this difference, the date correspondent to August 4 in the age of Pliny was 14th of July in the age of Janus. This date correlates to the period of the possible appearance of the comet.

Let us return to the elegy. In Bollók's explanation *dies medius* in the 2nd line does not mean „noon” but „meridian line” (Bollók, 2003: 75-76). It is an important element in his explanation, because on July 14 the comet appeared precisely in the line of the meridian at the sunrise. According to Bollók, „there is no difference between the geographical latitude of China and Hungary, therefore in principle the comet could have been visible in this period in Hungary” (Bollók, 2003:70).

One possible consequence of this explanation is that, as Bollók supposes, Janus made independent observations with his own instruments, moreover, he took into account the precession and thus he was able to include in his poem the single record of the appearance of this comet in Europe.

It is this point where even an enthusiastic researcher of Janus Pannonius and a semi-ignorant admirer of astrology could have some doubts. As we know, Janus has learnt astrology in Ferrara, but in Padua he had no chances to broaden this

³ Simili modo tradunt in Syene oppido, quod est supra Alexandriam quinque milibus stadium, solstiti *die medio* nullam umbram iaci puteumque eius experimenti gratia factum totum inluminari. ex quo apparere tum solem illi loco supra verticem esse, quod et in India supra flumen Hypasim fieri tempore eodem Onesicritus scribit. constatque in Berenice urbe Troglodytarum, et inde stadiis IIII DCCCXX in eadem gente Ptolemaide oppido, quod in margine Rubri maris ad primos elephantorum venatus conditum est, hoc idem ante solstitium quadragenis quinis diebus totidemque postea fieri, et per eos XC dies *in meridiem* umbras iaci. rursus in Meroe-insula haec caputque gentis Aethiopum V milibus stadium a Syene in amne Nilo habitatur-bis anno absumi umbras, sole duodevicesimam tauri partem *et quartam decimam leonis* tunc obtinente. Cited and interpreted by BOLLÓK, *op. cit.*, 70-75.

knowledge, because there was not any professor of astronomy there between 1454-1458, the period of his studies (Huszti, 1931: 148). In a letter to an astrologer, Giovanni Gazulo of Ragusa, Janus asks for an armillary sphere and other instruments, but the date of the letter is missing (Janus Pannonius, 101-102). As far as I know, the leading astrologers of this time, Regiomontanus and Martin Bylica were not yet in connection with Janus when the poem was dated. Moreover, as Bollók correctly admits, these astrologers did not record the appearance of the comet.

Even if we suppose that neither Regiomontanus, nor Bylica, nor anybody else but Janus detected the star, there still remains a problem about its visual appearance. According to the Chinese sources summarized by Williams, the color of the comet was a bluish white; in his recent catalogue Kronk interprets the Chinese expression as „darkish-white”. According to Kronk, „it was basically circumpolar, but was better placed for observation in the evening sky”; on the contrary, Janus’ star appears early in the morning. Its size was moderate, while in Janus’ poem we can read about a heavenly body with a brightness comparable to that of the sun (Kronk, 282). One can refer, of course, to the poetic invention which makes possible such changes. There still remains a practically unsolvable problem, the difference of the geographical position of China and Hungary in Janus’ times. The principle of Bollók, the lack of difference between the latitude of China and Hungary is a fact today, as it is for many other countries of Europe. But in the middle of the 15th century there was a discrepancy between the two countries. The northeast point of the Great Wall, the border of the Chinese Empire was less than 42nd degrees north latitude, while the most southern point of the Hungarian Kingdom, the town of Almissa (today, Omiš, Croatia) was more than 43rd degrees north. It is not easy to find a common path of this comet for China and Hungary. Consequently, until the appearance of other evidences, I suppose it is not the comet recorded in China which gave the occasion for writing this elegy. It is still Bartha’s treatise which gives us a more reliable explanation.

Bartha’s hypothesis is based on the regularly increased brightness of the planet Venus in every 584th day when the planet comes closest to the Earth in her heavenly route (Bartha, 1987: 344-345). There is a 10-day period, when the Venus is visible not only at sunrise but even before noon. According to the Gregorian calendar, in 1462 this period fell between August 10-20. If we take a re-count of this date following the method of Bollók, that is by considering the changes caused by the precession and the Julian Calendar, we will find the date among the last ten days of July in the imaginary calendar of the poet.

This dating is not as precise as in the case of the comet recorded in China. It is possible that the sun is not precisely at the 14th degree of the „terga Leonis”. It could happen that there were some shadows at noon in the literary Meroe in July, it could be even possible that this often-used expression refers not to a specific degree

but more generally to the skin of the Leo instead of its hair or tail.⁴ As Bartha rightly notices, this kind of increased brightness could have had the same effect as the appearance of a comet, therefore at this point we cannot exclude even this interpretation (Bartha, 1987: 344-345). However, in this case the author of the poem seems to be rather an excellent poet who had Pliny or at least extracts from Pliny at his elbow, than an exceptionally competent astrologer at his *sphaera armillaris*.

There remains still a question: what kind of heavenly bodies are represented in the elegy? For an answer we must turn back to the poem and see how the comet appears in the last two lines of the description:

*Quantus conspicuo rutilans fulgore cometes,
nuntiat horrenda, bella cruenta, iuba*

Janus uses the adjective „quantus” and not „qualis”. It is not the character but the size of the heavenly body which evokes the possibility of its identification with a comet. It is also remarkable that these two lines are not included in the following invocation (15-20). I propose to interpret this description as an exclusion, or, rhetorically, an apostrophe: if such a big star were a comet, it would regularly foretell cruel wars and cannot be touched by any prayer, but there the case is different. It is this exclusion which makes possible the invocation.

This invocation appears in a parenthesis. Between the lines 15-20 there is an enumeration of possibilities. This enumeration can be interpreted as a hesitation and this is Bollók’s explanation. I would rather think there is, apparently, a permissive disjunction, as if we would say: whatever kind of planet you are, I adore you, but please help us. As the following examples show, this kind of enumeration is common in the invocations of the Latin poets cultivated by Janus.

The first example is from the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid (18, 20-24): the invocation is an apostrophe at the same time, exactly as in the case of Janus’ poem:

*... pudor est promissa precesque
blanditiasque meas contemptaque verba referre;
at tu, sive aliquid regni est in carmine, carmen
ore move sacro, sive expugnacior herba est,
utere temptatis operosae viribus herbae
nec medeare mihi sanesque haec vulnera mando,
fine nihil opus est: partem ferat illa caloris.¹*

The other example is from the *Carmen saeculare* of Horace (13-17). There is a similarity in the content and the phraseology, regarding the variety of the invoked names and the only one intention of the prayer.

⁴ For the frequency of the expression, see l. 3. in the *Appendix*.

*Rite maturos aperire partus
lenis, Ilithyia, tuere matres,
sive tu Lucina probas vocari
seu Genitalis:
diva, producas subolem...*

Finally, it is Janus himself who provides us an example where the invocation has the same structure. This is the eleventh poem of the cycle of elegies mentioned before, entitled *Ad Somnum*. We can see therein the repeated disjunctive *sive--seu--etc.*, in sum: „wherever you are, o, Deity of Dream, come here and help me“:

*Cimmeria seu valle iaces, seu Noctis opacae,
axe sub occiduo mollia strata premis;
seu tua, gentili madidum te nectare, Lemnos
Pasithea tepido detinet in gremio;
seu Iovis ad mensas, resides convivae, supernas;
inter siderei, Numina sancta, poli;
(nam quis tam mitem crudelibus inferat umbris,
Orci qua fauces, horrida monstra tenent?)
huc ades, o hominum simul et rex, Somne, Deorum!
huc ades, et placidus, languida membra leva!⁵*

Likewise, we can interpret the invocatory enumeration of the stars this way: Jupiter or Venus, old or new creature of God (which could even be a comet), this star is worth praying to for a better future.

This prayer can be divided into two parts. The first part is an enumeration of the world as a living creature (ll. 23-34). The enumeration has a descensive character: it starts with the planets and the fixed stars, and ends in the world dominated by them.

I would like to deal in detail with the second part. In the world of human beings, the aim of the prayer is harmony, *concordia*. It is a question, how and why harmony is missing in the Pannonias.

I would like to give my explanation in two ways. The first is the examination of allusions, the second is the political situation of the first period of Matthias' reign.

„Mundus“, the world and „concordia“, harmony, appear in conjunction in the *Pharsalia* of Lucan, the epic poem of the civil war (9, 1097): „laeta dies rapta est populis, concordia mundo nostra perit.“ These words are uttered by Caesar, who is watching the head of his son-in-law and foe, Pompey. *Concordia* is irrevocably lost

⁵ JANUS PANNONIUS, *Poëmata, op. cit.* vol. I., *Elegiarum* lib. I, no. 11., pp. 322-323.

in Lucan, while in Janus it is the aim of the prayer (l. 35.): per te *redeat* concordia mundo. This phrase has its parallel in the famous prophecy of Vergil in the fourth *Eclogue* about the Golden Age --- *Iam redit et Virgo, redeant Saturnia regna...* --- and in the *De stella* there are traces of this age, for instance, in these lines (33., 36.): *semina centeno reddat cum foenore tellus ... Ianus et aeterna comprimat arma sera*. In the second line the appearance of Janus the deity is an allusion to the chosen name of the poet -- the sentence can refer either to the personal importance or to the personal interests of Janus Pannonius.

However, there are important differences between the prophecy of Vergil and the prayer of Janus, too. The Pannonian *vates* does not speak about the certainty of the Golden Age. Moreover, there is no human creature in the poem whose presence can guarantee this bright future, though there appears a person in the poem who traditionally could play such a role, the king of Hungary. In the tradition of the Golden Age it is the person of the ruler, especially the young ruler which can guarantee the return of the Golden Age (Levin, 1972: 16-18). A good example for this tradition is a passage from Claudian's panegyrics on Stilicho (22, 453-467). According to a parallel place, italicised in the text, Janus used this passage of Claudian as a source. In Claudian, it is the deity of the sun and the poets, Phoebus himself declares the beginning of the Golden Age by the consulship of Stilicho:

*En, cui distulimus melioris saecla metalli,
 consul adest. ite optati mortalibus anni,
 ducite virtutes; hominum florescite rursus
 ingeniis hilares Baccho frugumque feraces.
 non inter geminos Anguis glaciale Triones
 sibilet, inmodico nec frigore saeviat Ursa.
 non toto fremat ore Leo, nec brachia Cancri.
 urat atrox aestas, madidae nec prodigus urnae
 semina praerupto dissolvat Aquarius imbre.
 Phrixus roseo producat fertile cornu
 ver Aries, pingues nec grandine tundat olivas
 Scorpius; autumnni maturet germina Virgo,
 lenior et gravidis adlatret Sirius uois.*

Instead of this role, the king is one of the actors in a world troubled and threatened by outer and inner conflicts, a world of *discordia*. Let us compare the description of this world with the events of the recent past of 1462.

Afflictas respice Pannonias (l. 38.). It is worth noting that Janus speaks about more than one Pannonia. The province was divided into two, later four parts in the Roman times, and it extended from Vienna to the Southern-Eastern part of Transdanubia, threatened by the Turks in Janus' time. In the case of Pannonia

Superior, we can think about the long conflicts and negotiations between King Matthias and the Emperor Frederick III, who possessed the Crown of Hungary and claimed himself to be the legal heir to the throne. Some three months before the date of the poem, a János Vitéz, uncle and patron of Janus had signed a preliminary agreement with the emperor but the king had to wait another year for the final agreement and the arrival of the crown (Kubinyi, 2008: 65). As for Pannonia Inferior, the constant threat of the Turks is expressed by Janus in two lines (39-40):

Verte pharetratos Phryxi trans aequora Turcos, / quos male nunc Hister submovet amne suo. The Ottoman ruler, Mehmed II, who less than one decade before 1462 took Constantinople and was hardly defeated four years later in Nándorfehérvár, was conquering the neighbouring countries of Hungary in different ways and extent.

Fac regem observent proceres, rex ipse, fideli / consilio procerum, se regat et patriam (41-42.) The fact of the prayer shows that it is possible that the upper nobility (including even the bishops) does not respect the king. It is more interesting that the source of the trouble can be that the king does not respect the faithful counsel of his most important subjects (I would say silently, not even such an important counsellor as Janus). The compromise between the opposite members of the Hungarian upper nobility which opened the way to Matthias to the throne was broken shortly after his election, both by him and also by the Hungarian barons (Kubinyi, 2008: 56-57, 60-65). The following four years seemed could be seen as a series of conspiracies against the king. What is interesting in Janus' rendering of this situation is the reciprocity: according to these lines, the king could have been also responsible for the discordia.

It is well known that Janus and his uncle, János Vitéz organized together an unsuccessful conspiracy against the king in 1472, ten years after the date in the title of the poem. As far as I know from other documents, there was no reason for supposing that either Vitéz or Janus had a decisively negative opinion about their ruler ten years before. It is possible that these lines were written or re-written later, in the end of the decade when the cycle of poems was finished. But we can also suppose that a difference between the ideals of the Humanist and the practice of the king became clear to Janus even in 1462.⁶ This ideal of concordia was never realized in the following ten years. From the viewpoint of the later events, the star represented in the poem could prove to be either a comet, or if it were a benevolent star, its power could seem to be not enough to counterbalance the influence of the ferocious Mars.⁷

⁶ On October 6, 1460 Janus and Vitéz guaranteed a contract against the king which was made between the former governor of Hungary, Mihály Szilágyi and the widow and son of László Garai, the deceased palatine of the country. KUBINYI, *op. cit.*, 62.

⁷ About the similarities between Mars and king Matthias in Janus' poetry, see BIRNBAUM (Marianna D.), *Janus Pannonius: Poet and Politician*, Zagreb, JAZU, 1981 (Razreda za filologiju, 56), 148-149; PAJORIN (Klára), *Janus Pannonius és Mars Hungaricus [Janus Pannonius and Mars Hungaricus]* in *Klaniczay-émlékkönyv. Tanulmányok Klaniczay Tibor emlékezetére [Studies in Honor*

APPENDIX

List of parallel places in the poem

1 Quodnam ... tam clara] *cf.* CIC. Brut. 13, 7 quodnam tandem genus istuc tam praeclarum litterarum fuit | sub luce] *e. g.* HOR. ars. 363 haec amat obscurum, volet haec sub luce videri || 3 terga leonis] OV. fast. 2, 77 ars 1, 68 met. 6, 123 MART. 9, 101, 6 SEN. Phaedr. 327 | Cleonaei terga leonis LUCAN. 4, 612 || 4 agit acer VERG. Aen. 3, 682 | agit equos] BOETH. cons. 3, 1. c. 10 || 6 caput Aethiopum] PLIN. nat. 2, 184 (*Bollók, 70*) | spicula iacit] VERG. Aen. 4, 609-610 || 7 omnia flagrant] *cf.* LUCAN. 3, 390 flagrantis in omnia belli | caligantia lumina] BOETH. cons. 1, 2p., 6. || 8 palla Noctis] *cf.* STAT. Theb. 2, 527-528 coeperat umentis Phoebum subtexere palla Nox et caeruleam terris infuderat umbram *cf.* FULG. myth. 13. *Helm* Tum nox stellato mundum circumlita peplo caerulea rorigeris pigrescere iusserat alis || 12 contempto nitore] QUINT. inst. 9, 4, 113. || 13 conspicuo fulgore] *cf.* PS. QUINT. decl. 9, 7, 3 fortunae conspicuus aliquando fulgor *cf.* VAL. MAX. 6, 9. ext. 5. conspicuus vitae fulgor || 14 bella cruenta] MANIL. 3, 632 tunc et bella fero tractantur Marte cruenta || 16 Idaliae Deae] OV. ars 3, 106 Idaliae similis sit licet illa deae *cf.* Ov. fast. 1, 440. Hellespontiaci victima grata deo || 17 Deus addidit] SEDUL. carm. pasch. 1, 188 ter quinos quondam regi (*Ezechiae J. L.*) Deus addidit annos PAUL. NOL. carm. 333. et pedibus pietate citis Deus addidit alas PRUD. ham. 316 Deus addidit aures || 18 iussit adesse] Claud. 23, praef. 24. OV. fast. 4, 192 PROP. 3, 16, 2 | | faci solis] *cf.* Lucr. 5, 976 dum rosea face sol inferret lumina caelo || 19 felix cui] MART. 14, 122, 2. STAT. silv. 3, 3, 188 TIB. 2, 1, 80. | cui soli fas est] SYMM. epist. 11, 27, 4 | cedere Phoebos] *cf.* LUCAN. 9, 906 qui Phoebos cessere, iacent VERG. Aen. 3, 188 cedamus Phoebos (*SERV. Aen. 2, 207* cedo cedere proprie dicitur qui contra sententiam suam alteri consentit, ut "cedamus Phoebos" || 20 noctis decus] SEN. Phaedr. 418. clarumque caeli sidus et noctis decus (*sc. Diana*) || 21 lumine dextro] ENNOD. carm. 1, 9, 109 summe deum, sancti custos qui culmine coeli omnia dextra facis, quae cernis lumine dextro || 22 pelle procul] OV. fast 4, 763 | fata sinistra] *cf.* IUV. 10, 129 | fata parant] SEN. Oed. 28 || 23 Saturni frigus] *cf.* Firm. math. 1, 4, 6. *al.* | frigus iners] OV. met. 8, 775 | Martis iniqui] SIL. ITAL. 10, 545 || 23-24. ardores Martis] *cf.* Claud. 6, 73-74. Quae tibi tum Martis rabies quantusque sequendi ardor erat? || 25 ne noceant] OV. ars 1, 667 | Arcturus et Haedus] *cf.* HOR. carm. 3, 25-32 (*Bollók, 84*) || 27 grandine ... Scorpius] *cf.* CLAUD. 22, 464-465. pingues nec grandine tundat olivas Scorpius || 28 Canis torreat] TIB. 1, 4, 42 || 29 nimbosus Orion] VERG. Aen. 1, 535 *cf.* Serv. *ad loc.* (*Bollók, 84*) || 30

of Tibor Klaniczay], ed. JANKOVICS (József), Budapest, MTA Irodalomtudományi Intézete – Balassi, 1994, 66-69.

Orion ense] *cf.* STAT. silv. 1, 1, 43-45. ense ...quanto ... minatur ... et terret Orion |
ense ferox] OV. met. 6, 557 **33** centeno fenore] *cf.* OV. Pont. 1, 5, 26 et sata cum multo
fenore reddit ager *cf.* VULG. Matth. 13, 8 alia vero ceciderunt in terram bonam et
dabant fructum aliud centesimum aliud sexagesimum aliud tricesimum || **34** unda
ferat] Prop. 2, 26c, 44 || **35** redeat concordia] *cf.* Verg. ecl. 4, 7. iam redit et Virgo,
redeunt Saturnia regna | concordia mundo] LUCAN. 9, 1097 || **39** verte trans
aequora] CLAUD. 19, 149-150 trans aequora saevas verte faces || **44** occiduas aquas]
cf. Ov. trist. 4, 3, 4. et maris occiduas non subeatis aquas

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