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## Understanding Pestilence in the Times of King Matthias

### The Plague Tract in the Manuscript of János Gellértfi of Aranyas\*

Even if medieval medicine was revealed to be powerless by the mass-scale epidemic of the mid-fourteenth century, the Black Death was far from ending the career of university-trained physicians or the continuation of their art.<sup>1</sup> To the contrary, it led to an unprecedented proliferation of medical texts based on scholastic learning. What is loosely called “plague tract” or “plague treatise” in English-language scholarship denotes, in fact, a series of genres – including *tractatus*, *quaestio*, *consilium*, or *regimen* – in which ideas about the plague were communicated to different audiences in different ways.<sup>2</sup> Karl Sudhoff, who registered and partly edited almost 300 pieces of this diverse group of texts, gave them the more fitting name of *Pestschriften* (Sudhoff, 1911–1926).

The oldest *Pestschrift* that has survived from medieval Hungary was written down at Lőcse (Levoča) in 1473 by János Gellértfi of Aranyas, a little known cleric who was active at various places in the Szepes (Spiš) region. The text has been known to Hungarian scholarship since the end of the nineteenth century when János Csontos published a detailed description of the manuscript comprising it (Csontos, 1879). Since the text starts with the author’s statement of purpose in the first person singular, which reads as “I want to write something about the plague briefly compiled from the sayings of more authentic physicians”<sup>3</sup>, Csontos considered it an

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<sup>1</sup> For the history and impact of the Black Death, see Benedictow, 2004; Cohn, 2002; Bergdolt, 1994; Graus, 1987; Gottfried, 1983; Biraben, 1975–1976.

<sup>2</sup> On this group of texts, see Weill-Parot, 2004; Cohn 2002; Keiser, 2003; Esser, 1999; Arrizabalaga, 1994; Chase, 1985; Campbell, 1931; Sudhoff, 1911–1926; Klebs and Droz, 1925; Singer, 1916.

<sup>3</sup> Budapest, Egyetemi Könyvtár, Cod. 73, f. 392r: „volo aliqua de pestilencia scribere ex dictis medicorum magis autenticorum breviter compilando.”

authentic work of its *scriptor*, János Gellértfi. A few years later, in a short note, the acclaimed historian of medicine, Gyula Magyary-Kossa, called the text “the oldest medical work from a Hungarian author” and urged to study its content in detail (Magyary-Kossa, 1929–1940, I: 215). Despite his enthusiasm, however, nobody cared about this purportedly earliest monument of medical lore in Hungary.<sup>4</sup> Apart from a few mentions in general histories of the period, it merited only a short article by Sándor V. Kovács who praised it as a witness to the reception of Avicenna’s *Canon* in medieval Hungary, and emphasised its having understood the disease in utterly non-religious terms (V. Kovács, 1961).

Synchronically to V. Kovács’s article, in the catalogue of Latin manuscripts of the Budapest University Library, where the codex has been preserved, László Mezey described the *Pestschrift* as the work of the Moravian physician and archbishop of Prague, Sigismund Albicus of Uničov who lived at the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. By this move Mezey degraded the first Hungarian medical writer to a mere scribe (Mezey, 1961: 124–129). If he was neglected even in the first capacity, small wonder that he has remained so in the second.

Mezey’s attribution, however, has proved to be wrong. In his recently completed, excellent catalogue of the same manuscript collection, Péter Tóth attributed the text to the fourteenth-century Montpellier physician, Johannes Jacobi, also known as Jean Jasme (Tóth, 2006: 165–174). As an available edition of the work, Tóth gave the *Regimen contra pestilentiam* printed in Antwerp by Mathias van der Goes between 1486 and 1491. As we will see later, the text written down by János Gellértfi is, in fact, a close variant of the Antwerp *Regimen*, even if the *Regimen* itself is merely a compilation based on Jacobi’s work.<sup>5</sup>

This new attribution represents the nadir of the text’s posthumous career. Whereas Albicus of Uničov was at least a court physician of King Sigismund for a while, which may have motivated Mezey in making him the author of the text, Johannes Jacobi had no relationship to Hungary whatsoever. Thus not only the figure of János Gellértfi has turned out to be less prestigious than thought before, but the work itself has also lost any claim to have been the first medical work written in Hungary. Nevertheless, if the denial of authorship to a compiler or scribe justified the indifference towards his text, very few things would remain to be studied in the written culture of the Hungarian Middle Ages or, *mutatis mutandis*, even in the whole European one. Most (medieval) texts are, in the first place, not monuments to the originality of their author(s) but indicators of sensibilities and

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<sup>4</sup> One of the reasons of this disinterest may have been related to the disappointment that the text was in Latin and not in Hungarian as it was supposed before Csontos has found and identified the manuscript (Csontos, 1879: 72 and 80).

<sup>5</sup> For the Antwerp edition, see Cockx-Indestege, 1999.

interests in those environments where they were written and used. The plague tract in the manuscript of János Gellértfi of Aranyas is an interesting testimony of what literate but not particularly learned clergymen were interested in (and had access to) regarding the plague in the times of King Matthias. In what follows I will first give a brief overview of the content and the textual tradition of the work written down by János Gellértfi, I will then situate it in the context of medieval plague medicine and, finally, I will try to reconstruct the identity of János Gellértfi himself as well as his motivation to copy the text.

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Johannes Jacobi, the author of the *Pestschrift* which was the ultimate source of the work in the Budapest manuscript, was no lesser personality than the chancellor of the University of Montpellier and physician of Popes Urban V, Gregory XI and Clement VII in the Avignon court.<sup>6</sup> His holding such high offices was probably instrumental in the wide diffusion of his *Tractatus de pestilentia*, at least in his lifetime;<sup>7</sup> he died in 1384 (Wickersheimer, 1936, II: 423). His *Tractatus* written in 1373 was preceded by another work on the plague, a short *Preservatio pestilentie secundum magistrum Johanem Jacobi* that was copied by a Geneva canon in 1371.<sup>8</sup> This latter text focuses on two aspects of plague medicine in a fashion resembling very much the *Tractatus*: prophylaxis and cure. As to the first, he formulates advices about evading corrupt air by fleeing infected places, frequent ventilation in prescribed ways, and by choosing the right kind of dwelling. He also makes suggestions concerning diet, bathing, sexual life, and the use of vinegar to disinfect both the air and the body. In the section about cures, he gives rules of applying phlebotomy and consuming theriac, and offers some additional prescriptions. The modern editor of this short text suggests that the Geneva cleric who copied it, and who was a licensed physician as well, may have followed the lectures of Jacobi in Montpellier. If this is true, then the restriction of plague medicine to its practical side can be ascribed more to the interests of the student than to the presumable content of Jacobi's lectures, where the explanation of disease must have played a greater role.

As to the *Tractatus* of 1373, it was probably written for a learned but non-specialist readership. According to Arnold Klebs and Eugène Droz, one of its French versions, written in verse, is in fact earlier than the Latin text, and it was read before the "clergie" of Montpellier (Klebs and Droz, 1925: 53). If true, this would also point

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<sup>6</sup> Wickersheimer, 1936, II: 422–423, doubts that he was *physicus regius* of Charles V, King of France as it was supposed by Klebs and Droz, 1925: 52–58 and others.

<sup>7</sup> The *Tractatus* is edited from the earliest manuscripts in Sudhoff, 1925: 16–32.

<sup>8</sup> This shorter text is edited and commented in Wickersheimer, 1925.

to an audience different from university-trained physicians. At any rate, either in this French or in the Latin version, Jacobi elaborated on his already mentioned prophylactic and curative advice, introducing them by a relatively detailed analysis of the causes and some words in passing about the symptoms of the disease. He arranged his material in a clear order, starting with the causes and the symptoms, and continuing with the preventive measures and the remedies.

The causes or roots are divided into three categories: pestilence can proceed from roots above, roots beneath, or the combination of the two. Jacobi, even more than his contemporaries, tends to focus on the first, that is the astrological causes. It has been argued that astrology had little significance for scholastic medicine before the Black Death, and even if it had, it was limited to special areas (Jacquart, 1990; Weill-Parot, 2004). The Black Death represented a turning point in the medical utilization of astrological lore.

In the first year of the great pandemic, in 1348, there were still writers who downplayed the relevance of astrology. The great Italian doctor, Gentile of Foligno, for example, in spite of mentioning the effect of lunar eclipses and conjunctions of planets on the quality of the air, that is, the immediate determinant of epidemic outbreaks, he regarded the former as irrelevant for practical medicine, since “for those wishing to resist the poisonous bite of a dry asp, it is enough to know that the asp was biting, whether it was generated by coition or from putrefaction” (quoted in Campbell, 1931: 38).

Nevertheless, starting with the so called *Consultation of the Medical Faculty of Paris*, drawn up at the command of King Philip VI in October 1348, some kind of astrological explanation became part and parcel of practically all writings about the plague for over a century.<sup>9</sup> The success of astrological explanations is surely not to be ascribed to the authority of Parisian doctors alone. It must have seemed impossible to imagine sublunary causes suitable to explain the speed and scale of devastation which took place everywhere in Europe. Sublunary causes of putrid air in themselves, like the frequently mentioned dissolution of unburied corpses in the aftermath of a battle, were believed to be capable of bringing about not more than a local epidemic. Furthermore, eclipses, conjunctions, and other celestial phenomena could be used to make sense of the recurrence of plague, and to offer some limited forecasting.

Johannes Jacobi considers the influence of the stars not only as a distant cause unleashing a process which leads to the corruption of the air and ultimately to the illness of particular persons, but as an immediate cause as well, which affects

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<sup>9</sup> In their view, it was the conjunction of Saturn, Jupiter and Mars in the sign of Aquarius in 1345 – followed by a number of eclipses and other conjunctions – to be held responsible for the pandemic; see the text of the *Consultation* in Michon, 1860: 52.

human health in a direct manner. In other words, he grants the possibility that corrupted air and the stars can be independent causes of the disease.<sup>10</sup> This possibility proves to be highly useful in explaining cases where corrupted air as the only immediate cause could not account for the effects of the plague. These cases – registered by other *Pestschriften* as well – fall into two categories: in the first one some people are left alive by the plague while others in their closest proximity are killed by it; in the second one people residing in places where the air is regarded as evidently corrupt, like prisons, are spared, while their fellows living in the fresh air of mountainous regions die. In both cases it is the susceptibility of certain kinds of edifices to astral influence depending, first of all, on the thickness of the roof, as well as similar susceptibilities of individuals according their complexion that explains, or explains away, the anomaly.<sup>11</sup>

Further on Jacobi poses the question “whether these pestilential illnesses are contagious” (*si tales morbi pestilenciales sint contagiosi*), and answers it affirmatively, since “such bodies [the bodies of the sick] emit venomous fumes which corrupt the air and the humours, and hence one has to flee the infected. In plague times, indeed, nobody should stay in the midst of a crowd, as someone among them might be infected”.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the idea, still widely accepted, that the contagious nature of the plague was not recognized in the Middle Ages is false – even if person-to-person transmission was not regarded as the main explanation of epidemic outbreaks. It is similarly unreasonable to suppose that the contagious nature of pestilence was first acknowledged by municipal authorities in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, and doctors followed them only decades later (see, e.g., Carmichael, 1986). It is for the fear of contagion that Jacobi advises doctors to stand back from the ill and turn their faces towards the door or the window.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, when the stars cause the disease directly, it happens, in any case, “*ad nostram apparentiam*,” since what we know is that we do not perceive the corruption of the air.

<sup>11</sup> The second case is an easy prey for modern epidemiology, since prisoners rarely communicate with the sick outside, but for an approach which tried to explain pestilence with reference to corrupted air it posed a serious problem. The first case, however, that people die in one village or house while not in the other became a widely debated issue in recent scholarship. Detailed Italian data from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, collected by urban sanitary boards, clearly show that the plague tended to kill only a part of the persons living under the same roof, which is not characteristic of the transmission patterns of modern plague epidemics. This divergence, together with other discrepancies, lead a number of scholars to believe that medieval and early modern plague was different from the one described by modern experts in the twentieth century. See Cohn and Alfani, 2007; Cohn, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> “[A] talibus corporibus effumant fumi venenosi corrumpentes aerem et humiditates [in codd. Budapest et al. humores] et ideo est fugiendum ab infectis. ymmo tempore pestilencie nullus debet stare in cumulo gencium, quia potest esse quod aliquis illorum sit infectus.” Sudhoff, 1925: 25.

<sup>13</sup> “Et ideo medici et servitores infirmorum debent stare de longe et tenere faciem versus portam vel fenestram.” Ibid,

The compilation in the manuscript of János Gellértfi of Aranyas not only incorporates (mainly word-for-word) those passages of Jacobi's text which talk about contagion but also adds a ban on common bathing underpinned – quite interestingly – by Galatians 5, 9: “A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump”<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, it also makes clear that it is the breath of the ill that transmits the disease.<sup>15</sup> Even the remedy usually regarded as the most effective, namely flight (the famous recommendation of *cito, longe, tarde*, that is “going fast and far, and returning late”), means in this context not only fleeing those places where the air has become corrupted but evading the company of the ill as well<sup>16</sup>.

One has to interpret along these lines what Bonfini writes with reference to the year 1479, when King Matthias, “because of the fierce plague raging all over Hungary in that year, was roaming in the woods and in pleasant sites in order to protect his health. He sent the Queen away from him in the direction of Kassa (Košice) lest she be infected by the crowd and the contagion.”<sup>17</sup> Bonfini differentiates between *frequentia hominum* and *contagio* as two agents which might infect the queen. It only makes sense to separate the two if a crowd can also be dangerous in itself, when not located in a corrupted area. Similarly, the reason why the king went to woods and pleasant sites, presumably lies not simply in escaping putrid air but in evading crowded places as well.

Apart from the possible independence of inferior and superior causes, and the contagious nature of pestilence, Jacobi's aetiology had a third feature as well: the absence of any reference to the plague as divine punishment for human sins, or to the role of God in the explanation of epidemics. The only concession made by Jacobi in this respect is that he commences his treatise with these words: “to the honour of the holy and undivided Trinity and of the Glorious Virgin” (*ad honorem sancte et individue Trinitatis et Virginis Gloriose*). Such an entirely naturalistic approach to the subject seems to have been a characteristic trait of medical works about the plague

<sup>14</sup> “Item ex consequenti balneum <commune> evitetur, quia modicum frustum fermenti [in cod. Budapest frustrum frumenti] totam massam corrumpit.” Budapest, Egyetemi Könyvtár, Cod. 73, f. 395r. Gal. 5, 9: “modicum fermentum totam massam corrumpit” Emendations in the text copied by János Gellértfi are justified by a collation with other manuscripts; I am currently preparing an edition of the *Pestschrift*.

<sup>15</sup> “Unde et finaliter omnis communitas et multitudo evitetur in quantum potest [in cod. Budapest possis] , ne ab anhelitibus [in cod. Budapest anhelitis] infectis aliquis inficiatur [in cod. Budapest inficeretur].” Ibid. This view of disease transmission is, of course, related to the theory of corrupted air as the main immediate cause of epidemic outbreaks.

<sup>16</sup> “Et in ista pre ceteris est bonum fugere, et qui posset, esset bonum fugere longe”; Sudhoff, 1925: 24; the parallel advice in János Gellértfi's manuscript is somewhat milder: “Sed tamen bonum est homini fugere a loco in quo homines moriuntur”; Budapest, Egyetemi Könyvtár, Cod. 73, f. 393r.

<sup>17</sup> “[I]pse per sevam pestilentiam, que eo anno per universam Ungariam late debacchata fuerat, per sylvas et amena loca valetudinis tuende gratia vagabuntur. Reginam Cassioviom versus a se dimiserat, ne qua hominum frequentia ac contagione inficeretur.” Bonfini, 1936–1976, IV: 101 (dec. 4, bk. 5).

until the second half of the fifteenth century<sup>18</sup>. Jon Arrizabalaga has shown that already the first five surviving medical reactions to the Black Death in 1348 refrained from any religious interpretation. One reason of this attitude lies in the character of fourteenth-century medicine, or of fourteenth-century natural philosophy in general. Another reason may lie in the carefully researched hypothesis of Samuel Cohn Jr. that the intensity of plague epidemics between the Black Death and the middle of the fifteenth century was continuously decreasing. The outbreaks were largely local, and were not followed by movements of flagellants or persecutions of the Jews.<sup>19</sup> From the 1450s onwards, so Cohn, the intensity of epidemics was on the rise again.

Sometimes in the first half of the fifteenth century Jacobi's treatise was considerably revised by omitting certain passages and adding several new ones. The resulting compilation was either transmitted anonymously, or – in the incunable editions – it was attributed to a certain *Kanutus* or *Kamintus episcopus Arusiensis civitatis regni Dacie*, whose identity was long debated among historians.<sup>20</sup> He was not found among the bishops of Aarhus in Denmark which *Arusiensis* was first taken to refer to. Then it has been suggested that another diocese, that of Wästerås in Sweden, whose Latin name was *Arosia* or *Westrosia*, may have been confused with the Aarhus one. And in Wästerås there lived indeed a Benedictus Canuti who was elected bishop by the cathedral chapter in 1461 (Sudhoff, 1912: 56), even if he died before his consecration in the next year (Maitz and Keil, 2002: 8). Although it is not impossible that, in spite of holding the status unofficially and only for a very short period of time, Benedictus Canuti was in fact the compiler of the revised version of Jacobi's plague tract, further evidence makes it reasonable to place the reference to Aarhus or Wästerås in a broader context.

It has been discovered recently by Manfred Franz Maitz and Gundolf Keil that the Kanutus-variant contains passages which correspond almost word-for-word to some prophylactic advice in the so-called *Sinn der höchsten Meister von Paris*, one of the earliest plague texts written in German, around 1350, and to the rules of bloodletting in another German *Pestschrift*, the *Pest-Brief an die Frau von Plauen* written before 1400 (Maitz and Keil, 2002: 10-16). This fact would already point in itself to a German-speaking area as the place of origin of the compilation. But a linguistic analysis of the German glosses added to some of the Latin plant names also permit some more precise localisations within the German Lands. Localisations in the plural because, as Maitz and Keil emphasise, the revision of Jacobi's text

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<sup>18</sup> See the quantitative analysis and the related figures in Nockels Fabbri, 2006: 182-196.

<sup>19</sup> According to Cohn, 2002: ch. 4, in these hundred years the only persecution of Jews related to the plague (apart from those during the Black Death) was in Cracow, in 1360; see also Cohn, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> For an overview of the related historiography, see Maitz and Keil, 2002

involved several stages and produced several variants which are related to different regions. Nevertheless, linguistic data correlated with the provenance of surviving manuscripts highlight the coastal area of Pomerania and West-Prussia as the most prominent among the presumable regions. This would make sense of the Danish or Swedish connection as well, whether Benedictus Canuti (who was a student at the University of Rostock in 1434) was involved in the process of revision or not (Maitz and Keil, 2002: 8 and 20).

What I would like to stress over and above this reconstruction of the afterlife of Jacobi's work is the fact that its revised version was attributed to a bishop. This attribution is in accordance with some of the supplements added to Jacobi's text – one of which, the reference to Galatians 5, 9, we have already seen – as well as with the frequent transmission of the Kanutus-variant in pastoral miscellanies instead of medical ones. The manuscript of János Gellértfi of Aranyas is such a pastoral miscellany containing texts that parish priests and not doctors were likely to read.<sup>21</sup>

The Kanutus-variant is divided into five chapters or sections, discussing first the signs of a coming plague (*De signis prognosticis*), then its causes, its remedies, the strengthening of the heart and the principal organs (*de confortaminibus cordis et principalium membrorum*), and, finally, the rules of bloodletting.<sup>22</sup> The chapter about the signs is entirely new to Jacobi's original. It mentions seven signs related to the changes of weather, the appearance of falling stars and meteors, as well as the massive death of flies caused by the increasing corruption of the air, and it ends with the following comment: "When these signs appear, a great pestilence is to be feared, save when the Lord Almighty wants to banish it."<sup>23</sup> The chapter about the remedies commences with a quotation from Jeremiah 18, 8: "If that nation against which I have spoken, shall repent of their evil, I also will repent of the evil that I have thought to do to them."<sup>24</sup> "Therefore," adds the anonymous compiler, "in times of pestilence the prime remedy is penitence and confession."<sup>25</sup> Finally, the whole treatise is closed with the following words: "Whoever behaves in the aforesaid way may avoid the danger of this contagious or pestilential disease, with

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<sup>21</sup> For the transmission of the Kanutus-variant in pastoral miscellanies, see Gecser, forthcoming.

<sup>22</sup> The separate chapter headings characteristic of the incunable editions are not found in the manuscripts known to me.

<sup>23</sup> "Et quando ista signa apparent, timendum est de pestilencia, nisi Dominus omnipotens amovere [in cod. Budapest ammovere] voluerit." Budapest, Egyetemi Könyvtár, Cod. 73, f. 392v

<sup>24</sup> Jer. 18, 8: "Si paenitentiam egerit gens illa a malo suo, quod locutus sum adversus eam, agam et ego paenitentiam super malo, quod cogitavi ut facerem ei." Quoted in János Gellértfi's manuscript (as in other manuscripts) in a somewhat distorted form: "Si penitenciam gens [in cod. Budapest agens] egerit a suo malo, scilicet culpe et pene, moderabo eam, et ego Deus penitenciam summam agam [agam' om. in cod. Budapest] de malo quod cogitavi facere." Ibid., f. 394v.

<sup>25</sup> "Et ergo summum remedium est tempore pestilencie penitencia et confessio." Ibid.

the assent of our Lord, Jesus Christ, without whom nothing can happen, who is almighty and glorious, praiseworthy and blessed for ever and ever. Amen.”<sup>26</sup>

This last passage is important not only for an increasingly religious interpretation of the plague similarly detectable in other late fifteenth-century *Pestschriften* (Esser, 1999; Keiser, 2003; Gecser, forthcoming), but also for the reception of Jacobi’s original treatise. In the view of the anonymous compiler(s) who revised and augmented the text, its relevance lies in offering advice on healthy lifestyle, a *regimen*, which – if God also wants it – helps to evade pestilence. Compared to Jacobi’s original, this practical-prophylactic side of plague medicine receives more emphasis here at the expense of the theoretical-explanatory one. Accordingly, the Kanutus-variant stresses personal experience more than the original *Tractatus*. Although Jacobi, too, refers to his own experience when stressing the prophylactic effects of sorrel against the plague by saying that *hoc in me ipso probavi*,<sup>27</sup> the Kanutus-variant uses the same formula not once but thrice (and none of them is related to sorrel).<sup>28</sup> Moreover, it tells a little story in the first person singular from the perspective of *magister Jacobus* (whose identity – and, thus, authority – is not relativised with a *quidam* but it is not explained either) that he at Montpellier was going around in the plague-ridden city, holding a piece of bread or sponge or cloth soaked with vinegar in front of his mouth and nose, and thus evaded infection.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, the Kanutus-variant tends to refrain from offering a more theoretical explanation of curative measures even at places where Jacobi does so. Jacobi, for example, recommends that “in the room a fire be always kept burning, because it impedes [celestial] impression very much. For as we observe that magnet, if rubbed with garlic, does not attract iron, we also observe that fire impedes celestial impression and purifies the air.”<sup>30</sup> The corresponding paragraph in the Kanutus-variant omits the reference to the magnet – a well-known *topos* in ancient and medieval natural philosophy (Lehoux, 2003) used here to underline the

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<sup>26</sup> “*Quicumque se rexerit secundum modum predictum, huius morbi contagiosi seu pestilencialis [in cod. Budapest pestilenciali] periculum evadere posset, prestante Domino nostro, Iesu Christo, sine quo nihil fieri potest, qui est omnipotens et gloriosus, laudabilis et benedictus in secula seculorum. Amen.*” *Ibid.*, f. 400r.

<sup>27</sup> “*Ymmo de raro vidimus, qui sumeret unum bolum acetose de mane et alium de vespere, quod pateretur in pestilencia, et hoc in me ipso probavi.*” Sudhoff, 1925: 27.

<sup>28</sup> Budapest, Egyetemi Könyvtár, Cod. 73, ff. 396v, 398r, 400r.

<sup>29</sup> “*Et ideo dicit magister Iacobus quod ‘quondam fuit pestilencia in Monte Pessulano [in cod. Budapest Peslamo], et ego non potui vitare communitatem, quia transivi de domo in domum ad curandum homines infirmos causa paupertatis mee. Et tamen partem panis vel spongiam vel pannum intinctum in aceto in manu mea portavi, et tenui prope os et nasum et sic evasi talem pestilenciam’.*” *Ibid.*, f. 395v. The first person singular is altered to third person singular in some manuscripts.

<sup>30</sup> “*In domo semper teneatur ignis, quia multum impedit inpressionem. Nam videmus quod lapis magnes, si fricetur cum alleo, non attrahit ferrum, ita eciam videmus quod ignis impedit inpressionem celestem, et purificat aerem.*” Sudhoff, 1925: 26 (punctuation and orthography are mine – O. G.).

possibility of bypassing attraction from a distance – and it limits itself to saying that “in the room a fire be always kept burning, because it impedes celestial impression very much and purifies the air.”<sup>31</sup>

Such a more practical attitude to medicine together with a more religious understanding of the disease may have ultimately been responsible for the arrival of the Kanutus-variant to Lőcse where János Gellértfi of Aranyas copied it. It would be interesting to know whether he could choose between different *Pestschriften*, but all that we know of him stems from his notes left in the manuscript containing the text. According to these, he was schoolmaster (*scholasticus*) at Csütörtökhegy (Spišský Štvrtok) in 1462, he sang his first mass as a new priest seven years later at Lőcse, and in 1473, while working on the *Pestschrift* in the same town, he described himself as a *hospitalensis* “who came from the *predicatura* of Igló (Spišská Nová Ves) and stayed with a respectable, dearest brother of his.”<sup>32</sup> János Csontos supposed that “in 1473 he was a member of the Hospitaller Order” (Csontos, 1879: 83). Although this supposition would seem to account for his having had a *frater* at Lőcse and his use of the term *hospitalensis*, but on the whole it creates more problems than it solves. Apart from its unjustified rendering of the term *hospitalensis*, it leaves the reference to the “*predicatura* of Igló” unexplained, and it does not specify which Hospitaller house János Gellértfi might have belonged to. The Knights of St. John of Jerusalem were not present at either Lőcse or Igló, where the local hospitals were founded by local burghers (Pajdussák, 1912: 7-8, 13-14), and the number of hospitals run by religious orders in general was very low in medieval Hungary (Majorossy and Szende, 2008: 422-430).

Another possibility is that he and his “brother” were not members of a religious order but belonged to the *Fraternity of the twenty-four royal parish priests* which had unified the pastors of the so called royal towns in the Szepes region since the thirteenth century (Hradszky, 1895). By the times of János Gellértfi they already had a common library, probably at Lőcse, since this was their centre. János Gellértfi may have copied the text here while staying with a parish priest from the town. Nevertheless, in itself this second hypothesis would only explain the existence of a “brother” of his at Lőcse who, after all, could also be his brother in the literal sense. The fact that he sang his first mass at Lőcse suggests that he had acquired there a

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<sup>31</sup> “*Et in domo semper teneatur ignis, quia multum impedit impressionem celestem et aërem purgat.*” Budapest, Egyetemi Könyvtár, Cod. 73, f. 396r.

<sup>32</sup> According to the colophon of the *Pestschrift*: “*Scriptus in Leutschaw feria quinta in festo divisionis apostolorum per Iohannem Gerardi hospitalensem, qui venerat de predicatura Iglóensi, apud honorabilem fratrem suum predulcem commorans.*” *Ibid.*, f. 400r.

clerical position higher than his previous schoolmastership at Csütörtökhely and family connections may well have been instrumental to this step forward.<sup>33</sup>

As to János Gellértfi's having been a *hospitalensis*, Csontosí's premature inference to the Hospitallers was already criticised by Emil Békesi who argued that *hospitalensis* simply meant the "priest of a hospital" (Békesi, 1902: 631). Later and more systematic research on medieval Latin vocabulary in Hungary drew a rather clear dividing line between *hospitalensis* defined as "*rector domus hospitalis*" and *hospitalarius* used to refer to the Knights of St. John (Harmatta, Bellus, and Boronkai, 1987, IV: 287). Thus, in the times of copying the *Pestschrift*, János Gellértfi was most probably the rector of a hospital. This hospital was not necessarily at Igló, but János Gellértfi's self-description as a *hospitalensis* "who came from the *predicatura* of Igló" suggests that these two elements of his identity were related to the same town. It is most likely that the term *predicatura* (cf. Barta, 1901: 511) refers here to the office of the preacher employed by the parish, which seems to have been quite usual in the towns of late medieval Hungary (de Cevins, 2003: 31-32, 34). His having been the Igló preacher would also account for much of the content of his manuscript, especially the inclusion of the *ars predicandi* of Francesc Eximensis.<sup>34</sup>

On the basis of the misunderstandings in his copy of the *Pestschrift*, which could have been easily corrected even if the source manuscript had similarly corrupt readings, János Gellértfi had very limited knowledge of contemporary medicine.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, in his double capacity as rector of the hospital and town preacher he must have felt it convenient to have a compendium of plague medicine in his personal collection of texts. In addition to the implications of his duties, he may have been prompted to do so by a specific outbreak of pestilence as well. Unfortunately, the last serious study of plague epidemics in fifteenth-century Hungary was written by István Szabó in 1938.<sup>36</sup> According to his data, there was no outbreak shortly before 1473 (Szabó, 1938: 36). On the other hand, a charter issued on 1 April 1474 by Erzsébet Szilágyi, the mother of Matthias Corvinus, gives a tax prorogation to her serfs in the towns of Szász, Bereg, and Munkács due to their temporary impoverishment caused by the plague (*ob paupertatem vestram [...] propter defectum vestrum per pestilentiam factum*).<sup>37</sup> Szabó is certainly right that this charter does not prove that there was a plague outbreak in 1474 as Gyula Magyary-Kossa suggested, but the epidemics in question could not take place much earlier either,

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<sup>33</sup> For career-paths available on the lower levels of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in late medieval Hungary, see Erdélyi, 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Budapest, Egyetemi Könyvtár, Cod. 73, ff. 109r-144v.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Budapest, Egyetemi Könyvtár, Cod. 73, f. 398v regarding the veins.

<sup>36</sup> Szabó, 1938; later studies – notably Szabó, 1963 (see esp. p. 64) and Fügedi, 1992 (see esp. p. 28) are based on this.

<sup>37</sup> Ányos, 1927: 71 (no. 12); see also Magyary-Kossa, 1929–1940, III: 99 (no. 387).

since that would have undermined the force of the supplication formulated previously on behalf of the *iobagiones*. This plague in 1472 or 1473, or at least the news about it, may have reached the Szepes region as well, and may have prompted János Gellértfi to copy the *regimen*. But whatever his real motivation was, the text copied in his manuscript is the only plague tract that has survived from medieval Hungary and, thus, the only evidence of the type of medical knowledge about the plague that was directly or indirectly available in late medieval Hungarian towns.

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