

Discovering America for the third time

Review on Gyöngyössi Márton: *Iránytű. Módszertani bevezetés Magyarország történelmének tanulmányozásához* (Ludovika Egyetemi Kiadó, Budapest, 2024.) ISBN: 9789636530938

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Columbus was the third to find the Americas after the Vikings and the Chinese, but he found a new route to India according to his intentions and knowledge. Amerigo Vespucci conclusively proved that Columbus did indeed reach the Americas. This does not diminish Columbus' merits. The question in this context is, which way Márton Gyöngyössi's *Compass* (Iránytű) points.

When reviewing a text, the reviewer basically has two choices: either to interpret the work in its own dimension, within its own fixed framework (objectives, methods, etc.), or to take account of his or her own external aspects in some form. The second is not always justified. However, the author's volume is thought-provoking and inspiring – which is rare for a handbook of this kind – and its aim was to provide a 'general guide' for university students in the form of a modern pocketbook (13), so the reviewer felt justified in characterising it in both respects but preferred to give the second aspect only as a supplementary reflection.

The *Compass* is published with an aesthetic cover, in a digestible format (around 240 pages), with a high-quality layout and language, and is available to all interested parties in e-book format, requiring only a quick and easy registration (<https://webshop.ludovika.hu/rooms/conyvek/tarsadalomtudomany/iranytu/>) Therefore, before any further additions or critical comments, it is important to note that the volume is a serious undertaking, that its author is an insightful teacher of the auxiliary sciences, and that he has achieved his goal of providing university students and interested readers with an accessible and useful introduction to the methods of historiography. The content of the volume is classically structured, i.e. 'as it should be', and as it is usually taught in history departments in Introduction to History classes and various auxiliary science courses.

The introduction is followed by the first major section, Historical Sources. Here, the classification of sources is transparent, and the author presents the types of sources in short, concise subsections, as in other topics. Each section concludes with a bibliography, which is thorough, the titles accurate, and the Internet access where available. Specific sources are also briefly cited, but essentially only narrative sources. For these, the limits of description should be reconsidered. The reviewer feels that in the case of certain sources (which of course shows the reviewer's bias) Gyöngyössi has drawn the line too narrowly. Antonio Bonfini's *The Decades of Hungarian History*, for example, raises many questions that are particularly topical today, but only one: did King Matthias wear a disguise? In other words, the source-oriented presentation could have included a problem-focused dimension. But even in the bibliography of the description of the Battle of Mohács written by István Brodarics, it is a lack of a sense of purpose that the most recent Hungarian translation¹ (and its controversies) is not included, and only one of the three previous editions is listed.

The second major part of the volume focuses on the ancillary sciences of history. The author groups the auxiliary sciences (as well as the sources), describes their main findings and tasks, and provides a precise bibliography of the most important handbooks and relevant studies.

The last part of the volume is about methodology. It contains everything a historian needs to do his or her job: description of public collections, reference works, the most important handbooks, databases, journals, and how historians prepare narratives, such as theses for students. This is followed by a description of mathematical statistics and the use of computers. The reviewer would have preferred to place these last two sections before the sub-chapter on *Processing Techniques*.

The greatest strength of the volume – that it is a synthesis based on finest Hungarian and German traditions – is also its weakness. The author, like the Hungarian historian profession in general, neglects the achievements of the last sixty years of historical theory. In his volume, there is no summary of domestic (written in Hungarian, by Hungarian authors) works on history theory, and in his defence, he would not find much, but could have referred to Zoltán Erdős, Gábor Gyáni, Péter Illik, Ágnes R. Várkonyi, István M. Szijártó and a few authors of anthologies and volumes of studies. Thus, Gyöngyössi's infinite respect for the traditional rules of the profession has not allowed him to step outside its framework, which, according to the reviewer, needs to be renewed. This has practical consequences for the content and approach of the book. This is how Gyöngyössi defines the concept of the historical source: "*History is the science of systematically processing sources from ancient times or the recent past. Sources can be defined as all the memories that have accumulated throughout the history of mankind, and that can provide information and data for the historical evaluation*

1 Botlik Richárd: Brodarics István magyar kancellár és szerémi püspök leghitelesebb története a magyaroknak a törökökkel, Mohácsnál vívott ütközetéről. In Botlik Richárd – Illik Péter: *A mohácsi csata (1526) másképpen. A nagy temető?* Unicus Műhely, Budapest, 2018. 35–71.

of a given period. As Ernst Bernheim put it: ‘All texts, objects and facts from which we can gain knowledge of the past.’ As long as historiography has existed, historians have done no more than use them in their work.” (p. 19.) But in fact, to use a postmodern distinction, the past is not the same as history, because the latter is a narrative about the former. It follows that many sources from the past never become historical sources because they are not the focus of anyone’s (in this case, the historian’s) attention. But the reverse can also happen: the historian constructs a story – for example, Titus Dugović dragged the Turkish soldier from the castle tower during the siege of Nándorfehérvár (1456) – which became a “fact” for 150 years until it was revealed that the Hungarian soldier was certainly not Dugović. A further consequence of this is that history as narrative is constructed in such a way that the person constructing it interprets the past sources he uses under the influence of his own psyche and the present, so that the historical narrative is as much – in more extreme postmodernist terms, entirely – about the present and the personality of the historian as it is about the past. This has several implications for Gyöngyössi’s volume. Only one of them is presented in detail in this review. The *Critical Examination of Written Sources* (pp. 29–30) is a precise summary of traditional source criticism and draws attention to the fact that the authors of the sources were always working on commission or for a purpose. It is important to note, however, that the historians who analyse them do so themselves, i.e. that the historian’s interpretation is far from being objective. Therefore, what really should distinguish historians from everyone else who produces historical narratives is not just method – for which Gyöngyössi’s volume is a great help – but self-reflection. A further consequence of this omission is that the *Compass* includes among the auxiliary disciplines of history the disciplines that traditionally assist history, but not psychology. Yet, the latter contributes much not only to the subject of the operation and errors of historical interpretation, but also to the use of source criticism, on which Zoltán Erdős has written an excellent summary.² In fact, the findings of modern psychology can no longer be ignored either in historical theory or in its practical application, in the reflection and self-reflection of historians’ interpretations, and thus, according to the reviewer, in a modern historiography handbook. It should be noted that this is not a new idea either, Klára Rákosné Ács’s psychographics volume³ published 40 years ago already caused a storm among historians in its day, although unfortunately it did not have a lasting effect, and is not included in the *Compass* either.

Gyöngyössi’s volume is a high-quality summary of the traditions and knowledge of Hungarian historiography, its methods and sources, examined according to the criteria he himself has established. However, from the reviewer’s externally octroyed point of view, it is a partly missed – but replaceable – opportunity to work out a compass for the future of historiography. The author has certainly found India but has not yet discovered America.

2 *A történelmi pszichológia a magyar történettudományban*. https://epa.oszk.hu/03300/03304/00068/pdf/EPA03304_fons_2014_04_389-430.pdf Letöltés időpontja: 2024. 09. 05.

3 Rákosné Ács Klára: *Vallanak a betűk*. Magvető Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 1985.