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“His Soul Is Weeping inside That He Cannot Bury the Dead as before.” Plague and Rebellion in Debrecen (Hungary), 1739–1742

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Abstract: This is a historical anthropological study of a period of social and religious tensions in a Calvinist city in the Kingdom of Hungary in the first half of the 18th century. The last and greatest plague epidemic to devastate Hungary and Transylvania between cca. 1738 and 1743 led to a clash of different opinions and beliefs on the origin of the plague and ways of fighting it. Situated on the Great Hungarian Plain, the city of Debrecen saw not only frequent violations of the imposed lockdown measures among its inhabitants but also a major uprising in 1739. The author examines the historical sources (handwritten city records, written and printed regulations, criminal proceedings, and other documents) to be found in the Debrecen city archives, as well as the writings of the local Calvinist pastors published in the same town. The purpose of the study is to outline the main directions of interpretation concerning the plague and manifest in the urban uprising. According to the findings of the author, there was a stricter and chronologically earlier direction, more in keeping with local Puritanism in the second half of the 17th century, and there was also a more moderate and later one, more in line with the assumptions and expectations of late 18th-century medical science. While the former set of interpretations seems to have been founded especially on a so-called “internal” cure (i.e., religious piety and repentance), the latter proposed mostly “external” means (i.e., quarantine measures and herbal medicine) to avoid the plague and be rid of it. There seems to have existed, however, a third set of interpretations: that of folk beliefs and practices, i.e., sorcery and magic. According to the files, a number of so-called “wise women” also attempted to cure the plague-stricken by magical means. The third set of interpretations and their implied practices were not tolerated by either of the other two. The author provides a detailed micro-historical analysis of local events and the social and religious discourses into which they were embedded.

Keywords: plague epidemic; epidemic prevention and control; urban revolt; Calvinist religion; Calvinist mentality; eighteenth-century Hungary

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Plague and rebellion in Debrecen (Hungary), 1739–1742

The original aim of this paper was to examine the religious regulations that prevailed in the everyday life of Protestant communities in Hungary during the 17th and 18th centuries¹. I explored

¹ The present study is a translation of an enlarged and updated version of an as yet unpublished manuscript written in Hungarian. A shorter version aimed at a wider audience was published in Hungarian (Kristóf 1990a). Another short version was given as a conference paper and published in (Kristóf 1991). The study itself originates in the pioneering efforts of

archival documents and wanted to analyse them from the perspectives of historical anthropology and the history of mentalities (Burke 1978; Davis 1975, 1987; Le Goff 1981, 1988; Vovelle 1983). Instead of the monotony of everyday life, however, I came across a crisis period in one of the Protestant market towns in Hungary, a trouble spot that led to a clash of divergent opinions and even to an urban riot during a great plague epidemic in the first half of the 18th century. Research topics, such as the social and cultural history of epidemics, the vernacular and “elite” interpretations of the latter, and required and alternative, non-obedient behaviour during a pandemic have received little attention in social scholarship on Hungary. The discipline of history has used epidemiological data primarily from a demographic/statistical perspective, while folklore studies have examined such data with respect to magical healing procedures and/or beliefs pertaining to the “demons” of diseases. Examples will be provided in the references below.

In the present study, I will examine a plague epidemic that raged between 1739 and 1742 in the city of Debrecen in north-eastern Hungary. I will discuss it from the perspective of social history and the history of mentalities, attempting to highlight certain points in which the prevailing religious, medical and magical approaches to the illness came into conflict with one another. Such an examination shows the heterogeneity of beliefs about the plague and the practices surrounding it in the second half of the 17th and first half of the 18th centuries. Some of these beliefs and practices evoke those occurring recently during the current COVID-19 virus crisis.

Debrecen, a city located in the Hungarian Great Plain region, was one of the centres of the early modern Kingdom of Hungary both in a commercial and cultural sense. During the 16th and 17th centuries, it saw a flourishing trade in cattle that covered long distances, and it held six national fairs (Gyimesi 1981, pp. 353–84). From the mid-16th century, as a bastion of the Calvinist Church, it played a significant role in the religious life of the country through its college and city press. Until 1693 Debrecen held the status of a market town, and then it was proclaimed a free royal city. In the early 18th century, its population exceeded 20,000, the vast majority of whom were Hungarian and Calvinist (Kováts 1981, pp. 47–48).

The plague beginning in 1739 was the last and largest in the history of Debrecen, claiming approximately 8200 lives. The history of the pandemic can be well reconstructed based on the rich archival material in the city records, birth registers, petitions, correspondence, and printed sermon literature. The current study is based on an intensive, approximately six-month research project carried out in the early 1990s in the Hajdú-Bihar County Archives in Debrecen (for other historical sources on the plague epidemic discussed here, see Kiss 1931; Moess and Román 1980).

Let us first see the most important local events of the plague years.

Debrecen started to take action against the epidemic from January 1738, after it had approached from the Ottoman Empire through Transylvania in the south-east. The city gates were kept closed and guarded; however, just a year later, the city was forced to designate buildings to serve as plague hospitals. In May 1739, the Royal High Commissioner for Health (*sanitatis commissarius*) of the Trans-Tisza Region, Count Sándor Károlyi, declared Debrecen to be infected and imposed a lockdown. One should bear in mind that from 1686/1699, the end of the Ottoman Wars, Hungary fell under Habsburg (and mostly Roman Catholic) rule, the various imperial institutions of Austria thus controlling city life. Within Debrecen, the city council attempted to prevent the devastation of the plague epidemic by implementing the regulations of the Royal Governor General. Agricultural work and social events involving a large gathering of people (such as grain and grape harvests, markets etc.) were restricted or cancelled. Infected homes were closed and guarded. In addition, very strict rules were enforced

Hungarian scholars to introduce new approaches in historical anthropology and the “histoire des mentalités” (the French history of mentalities) in Hungary in the early 1990s (see Burke 1978; Davis 1975, 1987; Delumeau 1978; Le Goff 1981, 1988; Scribner 1981, 1988; Vovelle 1983). The current study can be regarded as one of the representatives of those approaches in a Central Eastern European context. It has been translated from Hungarian by Gyöngyvér Horváth PhD. English language editor: Thomas Williams PhD.

during funerals. A separate plague cemetery was established outside the city, and extra bearers (*Träger* or *vespillones*) and carters were hired to dispatch the dead. Visitation of the dead, ceremonial burials and burial feasts (*torozás*) were prohibited.

According to archival records, however, the people of Debrecen repeatedly violated these regulations. May and August of 1739 even saw major riots and bloody clashes with the armed forces.

The plague began to ease during the winter months. In April 1740, the High Commissioner for Health released Debrecen from its almost one-year-long quarantine. The year 1740–1741 was a period of relative consolidation. Markets were held again, and agricultural work returned to normal. However, opportunities for travel into and out of the city remained limited, since the epidemic had not yet disappeared from the entire country. It was in this period that those taking part in the riots, as well as other violators, were punished. Pastors held thanksgiving services, and action was taken against manifestations of excessive merriment. Playing music and dancing were not yet allowed at the time.

In August 1742, the epidemic reached the gates of Debrecen once more. There were again certain citizens who did not comply with the travel restrictions that prohibited entry to infected places. The first cases of plague were detected in December, and the city came under lockdown again. This time, however, the quarantine only lasted two months. In February 1743, the letter of exemption (*absolutionalis*) issued by the High Commissioner arrived, and little by little life returned to normal.

The handwritten records of the Debrecen city council from between 1739 and 1743 (HBmL IV. A. 1011/a. vol. 35–38) provide an excellent insight into the social and religious background of the events.

First, it is worth taking a closer look at the social background of the participants involved in the conflicts during the epidemic.

The standard, nationwide compulsory health regulations issued by the Royal Governor General and overseen by the Debrecen city council were supported by the city's pastors, the local health organization, and the local armed forces. They all took an active part in enforcing the lockdown and restrictions on everyday life. Members of the city council came from the city's wealthy merchant and craftsman families. According to a study, almost all these members survived the epidemic. They were probably more likely to comply with the regulations, and they belonged to the over-40 age group, which was less affected by the epidemic. The plague mostly seems to have affected 2–40-year-olds: indeed, 79.8% of all the victims belonged to that group (see [Moess and Román 1980](#), p. 127).

The Calvinist pastors, themselves representing an older age group, had the task of preaching the regulations issued by the Governor General from the pulpit. Adherence to the regulations was pronounced as a matter of conscience. Only one of the preachers was allowed to come in close contact with plague patients, and only he was allowed to be called to the dying (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/a. vol. 37, p. 358).

Healthcare in Debrecen at the time left much to be desired. We do not know what would have been seen as adequate in terms of means and institutions at the time, but one can make a quick survey of what was available and what was not. There was a pharmacy in the city, but there was not enough medicine. The medicine (mostly herbs and concoctions) ordered in the spring of 1793 only arrived after the quarantine was lifted in the city ([Magyary-Kossa 1940](#), p. 110). Only three doctors were practising in Debrecen. The number of barber–surgeons are known to us only from a mid-17th-century estimate: it listed not more than thirty of them. Even from among the latter two groups of medical staff, only those assigned were permitted to come in contact with the plague-stricken ([Magyary-Kossa 1940](#), p. 108; [Takács 1984](#), pp. 459–60). Plague patients lived separately in houses emptied for that purpose, together with the so-called “plague preacher” (*pestilentialis predikátor*), a “plague midwife” (*pestilentialis bába*) and the bearers. According to the city records, bearers were very hard to find. The city council once admitted that these people came from the most unworthy social strata (*vilissimi homines*), as it were. Their exact number is unknown. It may, however, be revealing that only four of them could be found in the city in the spring of 1739 ([Magyary-Kossa 1929](#), p. 153).

The order of everyday life in the period of the epidemic was built on the permanent forces of the local army, the hayducks (*hajdúk*), on the one hand, and on the leaders of the street guard, on the other.

The city council also hired people (farmers) to safeguard the locked houses for payment (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/a. vol. 35, p. 291). During the uprisings, the city council also attempted to organize an armed force from the members of the guilds. This did not meet with much success. The council likewise drew on the help of the external, professional military, the imperial army.

Thus, the enforcement of sanitary regulations imposed from above was intended to be provided in Debrecen, on the one hand, by the urban elite and the permanent armed forces (in extreme cases, the external forces), and, on the other hand, by the “elite” of the streets, the wealthier councilmen, in collaboration with the *vilissimi homines*. Roughly speaking, this was the social structure of the urban defence system, with its upper and lower margins, which was put into operation against the plague epidemic. The problems, as it appears, occurred in greater numbers in the intermediate, middle and lower-middle strata. It seems that neither the farmers paid to guard the locked houses nor the guilds expected to operate as an army stood entirely on the side of the city council in this conflict. This also holds true for the lower strata of local society, namely agricultural workers, whom the defence system did not even wish to incorporate.

As for violators of the plague regulations, the following statements can be made.

Occasional violators ranged on a very wide social scale. There were a number of them from councilmen to craftsmen, merchants, peasants, and gypsies. It is clear that not everyone was discovered, and we know that not all historical records have survived. The fact, however, that there were only two councilmen among those convicted is telling (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/a. vol. 35, p. 310, 10 July 1739). The guilt of the latter—escaping the cordon to check the ongoing agricultural work on their land—was one of the most common offences in the period of the epidemic. Such offences also included violation of the trade ban. Examples abound of merchants travelling into or out of the city in secret, craftsmen selling to or buying (mostly food) from plague patients, and there was also a miserable woman who secretly ran a pub to be able to pay the bearers (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/a. vol. 35, p. 376, 19 November 1739). Paid guards leaving their posts or using them to trespass was also a common problem. One such guard stated that “he is not supposed to serve the Emperor with his gun, only with his taxes” (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/a. vol. 35, p. 287, 1 June 1739). Other guards stole the money that they had received from those in quarantine for buying food, became drunk and “fornicated”, as it were, with those in quarantine (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/a. vol. 38, p. 154, 30 March 1743). On the level of the bearers, the defence system described above also seemed to become unstable on several other occasions. Those men would lay down the coffins halfway to the cemetery, whereupon they would sit on them and smoke (Magyary-Kossa 1940, p. 109), curse, carouse and even fight over the grave (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/a. vol. 35, pp. 375–76, 19 November 1739). They too were caught in having invited women to their separate dwelling places to “fornicate” (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/a. vol. 38, p. 154, 30 March 1743).

City records report several cases of disregarding the regulations on funerals with no ceremony. This all-pervasive desperation was expressed by a guard, who, leaving his post, complained that “His soul is weeping inside that he cannot bury the dead as before” (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/a. vol. 35, p. 287, 1 June 1739). Not only did many people leave their dead unreported to the authorities and bury them in the courtyard of their house. They would also gather en masse at the house of the deceased, send off the bearers, mingle with those in quarantine and accompany the dead to the cemetery, thus violating practically all of the plague regulations. This sort of serial violation turned into a real riot in late August of the year 1739.

Since the city council had by then deployed not only the local army, the hayducks, to protect the bearers and to enforce the burial regulations, but also the external forces, a clash was inevitable. According to Chief Judge Márton Domonkos, the rebellious crowd consisted of “day labourers, apprentices and such lot” (Magyary-Kossa 1929, p. 153). One of the participants encouraged his fellow rioters with these words: “It is all right that they are doing this. As I said, we would only suffer until the peasants come home from the fields. Maybe even the cobblers would rise up!” (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/a. vol. 35, p. 343, 5 September 1739). It is impossible to provide exact figures, but the majority of the rebels seem to have belonged to the peasantry, that is, the “poor”. However, craftsmen and

tradesmen were also among those who were later punished: butchers, cobblers, potters, blacksmiths, and even a typographer.

Women played a very important role among the rebels. According to the city council, it was mainly they who escaped to visit their relatives from the locked-down houses and who, despite the regulations, gathered and accompanied the dead on their final journey (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/a. vol. 35, p. 335, 20 August 1739). The utterance against the armed forces noted above also came from a woman.

The rebels found an ambitious leader in István Patay, referred to as a “senior” citizen. No information is available on his occupation. His financial and social situation is revealed, however, by the fact that after he had been pardoned (*gratia*) by the Royal Court of Justice, he chose to stay at the city prison until the letter of release arrived so that he could “stay warm, because the Noble City has more firewood than he does” (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/a. vol. 36, p. 44, 14 January 1741).

The combined local and external military troops suppressed the rebellion in two days. The crowd, leaving behind one dead and a few wounded, eventually dispersed. Only occasional violations persisted in Debrecen.

Having covered the social traits, let us turn to the mentality of the participants.

There was a mutual incomprehension between the two parties engaged in this series of conflicts during the plague epidemic, the violators and the authorities. The city council described the rebels as “bad” and “disobedient people”, “restless” and “depraved from God”, and they could only “wonder at them” and “feel sorry for them” (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/e. 1.d. Letter patent, 30 December 1742). As becomes clear from the documents, the behaviour of the violators was viewed with regret and astonishment—when weapons were not being used against them. As for the violators and rebels themselves, they swore and cursed at their leaders and the armed forces—when they were not attacking city hall with sticks torn from butcher shop signage. “A rascal struck by the lightning of the devil” was the epithet a blacksmith once hurled at a notary who kept the records for the city council (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/a. vol. 35, p. 300, 11 July 1739). The general opinion of the officially appointed and paid bearers was that “they should at best be hanged” (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/a. vol. 35, p. 301, 15 June 1739). The members of the local forces, the hayducks, were similarly insulted; and one of the city leaders was told that even a hayduck is smarter than he is (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/a. vol. 36, p. 261, 12 August 1741). The city council was accused of causing a famine among the poor with the lockdown, among other things. During the riots, the combative woman mentioned above expressed her opinion about the armed forces as follows: “Now go against the Commanding Officer, the mischievous devil himself, born of a dog’s bed! Even if there were fifty of them, they would all be beaten to death like pigs. No matter how many Commanding Officers are out there on the streets, all of them will be knocked on the head. Not even God can save them from their well-deserved punishment!” (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/a. vol. 35, p. 325, 25 July 1739; HBmL, IV. A. 1011/a. vol. 35, p. 343, 5 September 1739). The leader of the rebels, István Patay, led his people straight to city hall and urged them to overthrow the council: “Do you have a city council such as this?! The entire council together with the judge must be hauled out of the building! Fear not! I will be your leader, and God will give us strength against these armed people. There are sticks here aplenty” (Magyary-Kossa 1929, p. 153).

It is remarkable that although neither side was willing to acknowledge the other’s position, both of them claimed to have the support of the supreme power, God Almighty. It was, however, the city council which was forced to explain itself, if not to apologize. When introducing the plague regulations before as well as during the rebellion, the leaders of the city sent out councilmen to explain them to the people. It was emphasized that the regulations drafted by “the Noble Council for the plague follow the will not of the Noble Council itself, but that of His Majesty [the Emperor]”. The pastors also had to preach from the pulpit that “this is the will of the Superior Power, whom we all must obey, nor are these Dispositions in conflict with Conscience” (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/a. vol. 35, p. 277, 21 May 1739).

Conscience is a key concept in the understanding of the views of the rebels and the religious background of the confronting mentalities. This paper cannot go into the details of centuries-long debates among the clergy, physicians, astrologers and philosophers over the interpretation of plague

epidemics. This debate lasted from Antiquity to the late 18th century and concerned issues like the epidemic as a test and/or a punishment from God; various scientific explanations (impure air, the thickening of humours, etc.) originating from Hippocrates and Galen; explanations from astrology; and, further, the various interpretations provided by beliefs in the spirits of sickness (like plague demons) in folk culture (Biraben 1976, pp. 5–74; Delumeau 1978, pp. 129–42). The reception and the historical evolution of such different interpretations of the plague have only partially been explored in the early modern Kingdom of Hungary. The Protestant/Calvinist direction is somewhat more researched (Kristóf 1998, pp. 70–71; Kristóf 2019). Therefore, I will undertake an examination of the Calvinist/Puritan ideas implied in the micro-context of the plague epidemic in Debrecen alone (on local Puritanism, see Makkai 1952, 1964).

During the second wave of the epidemic, in December 1742, the city council issued a printed command, a letter patent. It partly repeated the regulations prescribed by the Royal Governor General, but also provided a long explanation (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/e. 1.d. Letter patent, 30 December 1742). The explanation was most probably written by one (or more) of the pastors of the city. True to the traditions of the genre of sermon literature, the text first elaborates on a religious interpretation of its subject, the plague, then it lists possible counter-arguments to that interpretation, including, interestingly, those that seem to have formed the views of the violators and rebels during the epidemic. It refutes the latter point by point.

The interpretation of the epidemic in the letter patent follows a two-century-long Protestant/Calvinist tradition in Debrecen. The plague is interpreted there as punishment from God Almighty, whose anger has been provoked by the sins of humans. The text demonstrates both God's wrath and mercy through the lesson of the fig tree in the New Testament: "following the example of the barren Fig Tree mentioned in the Gospel, which was left alive by the Master to be tested for three years, and at the end of the third year with the scourge of the Plague, he already declared his newly inflamed anger at a few houses in our City". The idea of the plague as God's trial and punishment for humans seems to have been shared not only by the preachers of Debrecen but by ordinary citizens as well. Of the various sources, I would refer only to the testimonies in letters of petition (*instantialis*) written by recovered plague patients to the city council with the purpose of having the quarantine lifted on their houses. These letters refer to "the Sorrowful example of this ordinary judgement by the wise will of God" or "the sign of the manifested judgement of God's majesty" etc. (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/e. 1.d. Exhibitiones, 28 July 1739; 25 July 1739).

According to the letter patent of 1742, however, the violators and rebels had an altogether different opinion on protection against the plague. First, they did not accept that "the use of external means is also useful and necessary", as the letter patent proposed, and, second, they adopted practices that had been prohibited by the city and the county for centuries. They are said to have resorted to the cures and remedies of "sorcerers" (*bűbájosok*).

First of all, let us look at the religious background of the rebels' counter-opinion on the plague and their Calvinist mentality in general.

Both seem to be rooted in the late 17th-century trend in Puritanism and the Puritan interpretation of disease that their parents or grandparents could have heard in the local pastors' sermons at the time (Makkai 1964, 1981). In general, Protestant/Calvinist churches prescribed two ways of healing and prevention from diseases, an *internal*, pious treatment based on penitence and prayer and an *external* treatment or prevention that included medicine and other forms of hygiene. The historical development of such therapies found, for example, in the works of English Protestant ecclesiastical authors, doctors, and philosophers between the 16th and 18th centuries were analysed in an inspiring study by the distinguished late English cultural historian, Keith Thomas. He pointed out that internal and external treatments were not mutually exclusive among any of the contemporary thinkers. The emphasis on either of them and the choice of the dominant treatment seem to have been determined by a person's occupation as well as the historical era (Thomas [1973] 1978, pp. 90–132).

The religious arguments that the letter patent of 1742 attributes to the rebels and violators of Debrecen seem to correspond to certain passages in Reverend György Komáromi Csipkés's (1628–1678) *The Plague of Plagues* (Pestis pestise), published in 1664 in Debrecen (Komáromi Csipkés 1664). Komáromi Csipkés was a renowned pastor in the city and a prominent representative of Puritanism in Hungary (Makkai 1964). His claims and arguments convey very strict, nearly fatalistic ideas that represent and enforce the principle of predestination and that almost completely reject external means of protection against the plague. Let us see some examples. The rebels are said to have broken the rules of quarantine and come in contact with plague patients without any reservation because “according to the words of Holy Scripture, God has set the limits of human life that no one can cross and therefore they despise all plague regulations” (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/e. 1.d. Letter patent, 30 December 1742). Reverend Komáromi Csipkés believed and taught that “it is useless, if not also foolish, to lock down a village, a town, a street or a few houses to turn away the pestilence. Since [a plague] is a common disaster delivered by God, often those who attempt to avoid it will fall to it, and those who do not will be saved” (Komáromi Csipkés 1664, pp. 26–27). Arguing against preventive behaviour, based on the ancient principle of “*cito, longe, tarde*” (fly quickly, go far, return slowly) originating in Antiquity, Komáromi Csipkés raised the argument of Christian solidarity (*atyafiság*) and brotherly love (*affectus*). He warned that by “running away from the plague, Christianity, piety, love, benignity by nature, *affectus*, fatherhood, motherhood and solidarity are renounced”. He then cited a Psalm: “There is nowhere we can escape from God” (Komáromi Csipkés 1664, p. 83).

According to the letter patent of 1742, the violators despised the doctors' medicine. In parallel, Reverend Komáromi Csipkés thinks that external remedies are of no use. They are “not for expelling death, but for relieving pain”. He also cites the well-known saying “*Contra viru mortis non est medicamen in hortis*”, i.e., “there is no remedy in the garden against the power of death” (Komáromi Csipkés 1664, p. 63).

According to the letter patent, the rebellious people of Debrecen deny that the plague is contagious: “If the plague had been so lethal, those who came in contact with numerous plague patients and were lying in their beds would be infected, yet they have not caught it” (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/e. 1.d. Letter patent, 30 December 1742). According to Reverend Komáromi Csipkés, the plague is not contagious in itself, because it is “wise God whose ways cannot be scrutinized [that] brings it to whom He wishes [...] without any external cause or means” (Komáromi Csipkés 1664, pp. 45, 50).

Several other correlations could be cited between the violators' arguments and sections of György Komáromi Csipkés's treatise. It is more important to point out, however, that *besides* that strict approach, there was another set of views on the plague which was also present in Debrecen as early as the second half of the 17th century. Those views emphasized the importance of external means of protection. This direction was elaborated, for example, in a treatise by Sándor Felvinczi (1641–1686) entitled *In the Name of Jehovah: A Short Conversation on the Plague* (A Jehova Nevében. A Pestisről való Rövid Beszélgetés) and published in 1679 in Debrecen (Felvinczi 1679). Reverend Felvinczi did not deny either the contagious character of the plague or the usefulness of quarantine measures to fight it. It seems that he endeavoured to reconcile Reverend Komáromi Csipkés's stricter approach with arguments drawn from a treatise by a Dutch theologian, Henrik Alting (1583–1644). The latter had an inclusive view of external remedies, more supported by the scientific/medical ideas of the era. Such a more complex treatment of the plague, recommending *both internal and external* therapies, seems to have come forward in Debrecen by the end of the 17th century, and it (most probably) became dominant in the first half of the 18th century. The city doctor, György Buzinkai (?–1786) published a treatise during the plague of 1739 under the title *A Short Instruction: How to Protect Ourselves ... Against the Plague, or How to Treat the Plague-stricken* (Rövid Oktatás. Miképpen kellessék magunkat [...] a Pestis ellen védelmezni; vagy a Pestisben levő betegetek orvosolni). Only the introductory pages put forward religious arguments, such as the “overflowing sins” of the city as the cause of the epidemic and the necessity of daily prayer in the time of the plague. Most of Buzinkai's treatise, however, deals

with various external remedies: herbs, fumigation and other kinds of healing procedures.² Thus, it is no surprise to find that the letter patent of 1742 itself stated that God “revealed, and even ordered that we should preserve our lives as our most precious asset among our earthly possessions against all dangers, even death, as much as it is within our reach, also by external means, and in fear of the Lord, and therefore this is what we must follow” (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/e. 1.d. Letter patent, 30 December 1742). The letter patent also broadly emphasized the contagious character of the plague.

However, in the local prints and manuscript documents examined above, neither preachers nor medical doctors explain why a former stricter religious interpretation taught and popularized in the 1660s in Debrecen (re)appeared in 1739. It is not entirely clear how and why it affected the behaviour of the rebels and violators to such an extent that it became a more or less coherent set of arguments that the rebels sought to defend and justify before their peers. Unfortunately, we still have an incomplete knowledge of the Protestant/Calvinist ways of thinking in crisis situations like epidemics in Hungary (Bucsay 1985; Kristóf 1990a). We can rather raise questions about what happened in Debrecen in 1739–1742. Was the clash of views due to the well-known socio-cultural phenomenon of a change in folk beliefs following changes in the elite culture at a much slower pace? Is it likely that rural Calvinism held more rigorous—more simplified? more fatalistic?—views on the doctrine of predestination? The latter possibility seems to be supported by the findings of Keith Thomas about Protestants in 17th-century England, who resisted plague regulations and faced death with remarkable resignation: “Many middle-class observers noted how indifferent they were toward the threats of the pandemic and were shocked at their unwillingness to follow the rules adopted for their own safety” (Thomas [1973] 1978, p. 20). A similar mentality can be traced from the findings of American historian David Warren Sabean about southern German Lutheran peasants in the 16th century, who insisted on the idea that they should receive Holy Communion with a completely pure soul and, therefore, often refused to take the sacrament for years (Sabean 1984, pp. 37–60). A recent discussion about the disrupting, but at the same time creative and innovative effects of the current COVID-19 virus on the organization and concepts of Calvinist religious practice in Hungary could also be revealing in this respect (see Religious Service at a Distance: Nagy 2020).

Clearly, the city records and the letter patent demonstrate that the urban elite of Debrecen in the 1730s and 1740s was well aware that, encountering the violations and the violators themselves, they were encountering a different interpretation of the epidemic. Certainly, this is why they turned to the authority of the pastors to make people understand that the plague regulations are *not in conflict with conscience*. However, the fact that they apparently hid behind the voice of their—otherwise—superiors, i.e., behind the Roman Catholic Habsburg “emperor’s command” either just added fuel to the fire or was entirely meaningless in the light of the city’s centuries-old tradition of independence and Protestantism. The rebels knew very well that on other occasions, wherever possible, the Debrecen city council attempted to evade the demands of the same higher authorities when they wanted to impose new rules of centralization in local administration and when they continually sent Roman Catholic officials to interfere in the internal affairs of the city (Balogh 1981, pp. 143–62).

² Examples of external treatment are the following. A healthy person, whether a doctor or not, should soak their handkerchief in rose or lavender vinegar and sniff it, smoke themselves with a mixture of pipe tobacco, lavender and rosemary flowers, chew orange and lemon peel, and smoke as much as possible. They should fumigate their house with pine branches, juniper, tar, sage and incense, and steam it with hot vinegar or brandy-cooked sage, rue, violet, and rose. They should not leave the house on an empty stomach. The wealthy should take the “medicine of Mithridates”, which consists of figs, walnut kernels and the leaves of rue all chopped, salted and soaked in wine or brandy, while the poor should be content with toasted garlic bread and a glass of wine. It is very important not to be afraid of the disease because fear accelerates the flow of blood and body fluids and can clog the heart and cause death. For those who already have the plague, traditional treatments were recommended that were used for all other diseases, like bloodletting, emetic or sudatory drugs, and tisane, such as herbal teas, brews of sage, rue, sorrel, and pimpinella, etc. Mostly, however, so-called “Hippocratic medicine” was recommended, which was brewed roasted coffee, or barley and oats for the poor, with brown sugar and vinegar. As a cure for the plague, the maturation of the buboes was accelerated with herbal patches (consisting of salted mousetail leaves, grated radishes, mustard, rue and celandine leaves) and fresh warm bread or a dressing of animal origin (live plucked sparrows and pigeons had to be tied to it). In its less advanced state, cutting up the buboes was also considered an effective cure (Buzinkai 1739).

According to another remarkable charge in the 1742 letter patent, “God took the minds of the people so they follow and heed the advice of the uneducated and also sorcerers (*bűbájósok*) rather than that of those endowed with wisdom and science” (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/e. 1.d. Letter patent, 30 December 1742). Some pastors writing and publishing about the plague in Debrecen in the 17th and 18th centuries provide valuable information on the exact identity of the “sorcerers”, whose so-called “superstitious medicines” the townsfolk seemed to have preferred to those available in the pharmacies.

Protective magical practices associated with vampire beliefs, for example, were mentioned by György Komáromi Csipkés in 1664, Sándor Felvinczi in 1679 and Sámuel Köleséri in 1709 (Komáromi Csipkés 1664, p. 60; Felvinczi 1679, p. 120; Köleséri Sámuel: *Pestis Dacicae anni 1709. scrutinium et cura* (Cibinii 1709) cited in Magyary-Kossa 1940, pp. 29–30). According to these writings, during plague epidemics in the regions of Romania/Transylvania and northern Hungary, dead bodies were exhumed and then beheaded or cremated. Reverend Komáromi Csipkés also noted one such case from Debrecen; I could not, however, track down any further information about it or about any subsequent similar practice in the city (for other cases in historical Hungary, see Magyar 2020; Mézes 2019).

It is more likely that the letter patent used the term *bűbájós* (meaning sorcerer or incantator/incantatrix) to refer to local purveyors of folk medicine. Based on Reverend Felvinczi’s earlier mentions and on documents on witch trials between 1575 and 1759 in Debrecen that I examined earlier, they were so-called “wise women” or “woman doctors” (Felvinczi 1679, p. 121; Kristóf 1998). During the plague epidemic discussed here, the city council conducted a total of twenty-one criminal trials against locals who were accused of “unlearned”, “illegal” or “diabolic healing”, “witchcraft”, fortune-telling, or the possession of magical/supernatural knowledge between August 1739 and December 1743 (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/a. vols. 35–38; Kristóf 1998). Unfortunately, the testimonies from those trials are missing, so there is little information on whether those “wise women” or, sometimes, men indeed attempted to cure the plague-stricken, as the letter patent suggests. According to a trial in 1743, however, we do know that a “cunning shepherd” cured them. He was expelled from Debrecen several times, but he always came back to work and offer the people his herbal/magical treatment (Kristóf 1998, p. 216: Nos. 110, 112, 114, the cases of János Kis). It is also clear from documents from witchcraft trials that the city council made every effort to protect the privileges and scope of authority of the representatives of official, legal medicine during the epidemic. When so-called “uneducated”, “wise women”, and midwives were accused of “illegitimate healing” and/or witchcraft, it was the interests of the city’s doctors and barbers that were being safeguarded (Kristóf 1990b, Kristóf 1991–1992, 2017).

Neither from the previous period nor from the time of the last great plague epidemic, however, are there any data from Debrecen or from the villages of surrounding Bihar County on persons accused of witchcraft and also of causing/spreading the plague in magical ways. I have not found any trace of so-called *engraisseurs*, i.e., suspected plague transmitters, in the area under examination (For French and Swiss data on such mediaeval and early modern beliefs, see Monter 1976, pp. 44–45, 47–49, 52, 65, 94–95, 115–18, 121–27).

According to the explanation of misfortune and notion of diseases in the Protestant/Calvinist churches, however, witchcraft was one of the human sins that would call for God’s punishment (on early modern Calvinist demonology in Hungary, see Kristóf 1998, pp. 54–76; Kristóf 2019). Calvinist pastor Gellért Kabai Bodor (?–1681), for example, published a treatise in 1678 in Debrecen entitled *Hegyves Ösztön A’ Sátánnak Angyala* (A keen instinct is an angel of Satan). Kabai Bodor stated clearly that “the sin of magicians and sorcerers” is dreadful and should be wiped out because they are “companions and instruments of Satan when he fights against God’s chosen ones” (Kabai Bodor 1678, p. 44). The witchcraft trials and other criminal trials in the city and surrounding Bihar County testify that the people of the era did indeed take advantage of a combined possibility of scapegoating and releasing social tension. This may explain why in the years when a natural disaster or a plague epidemic struck, the number of those accused of witchcraft always grew above the annual average of one or two cases

in Debrecen. Most of them were brought to court during or immediately after the greatest plague of 1739–1742, discussed in this study (Kristóf 1998, pp. 114–24; Kristóf 2013).

The tensions that develop in a particular community during an epidemic raise diverse questions and call for further consideration. When compared to the current COVID-19 pandemic and the variety of human social behaviour tied to it, the reactions triggered by the Debrecen plague seem to manifest both structural and local as well as historical and current traits. The reception and interpretation of the two pandemics show interesting similarities.

The present study provides a rather micro-history, an analysis of a set of local events. This is, however, by no means exhaustive of all the investigative possibilities. In the case of Debrecen, the particular forms of rule violation have been explained as originating in an earlier and stricter religious mentality, occurring as a remarkable manifestation of Puritan conscience. Further, in addition to the related religious ideas and practices, certain kinds of folk beliefs also seemed to function and provide ways of healing and releasing tension. This paper has not, however, addressed the rather structural aspects of a pandemic, for example, the psychological ones. The emotional consequences of the disintegration of everyday life and its order, a feeling of “forced loneliness”, “hopelessness” caused by confinement, or a permanent fear of contagion were nevertheless present in Debrecen during those years—just as they are present in the current COVID-19 pandemic (on “solitude forcée” and “vivre sans projet”, see Delumeau 1978, pp. 114–17). Like so many disobedient COVID patients, the rebels and rule violators of Debrecen also wished to rid themselves of those depressing feelings when they visited their relatives in quarantine or wanted to continue their usual lifeways, occupation, social life, etc.

A special analysis would be necessary to address the mentality of those, mostly women, who deliberately opposed the horror of the “dehumanized death”, i.e., the funerals without ceremony, in Debrecen (Delumeau 1978, p. 115). The latter measures resulted from the rationalizing purpose of the plague regulations, but the people of the city seemed to insist on the *rite de passage* as an act of socio-religious solemnity that offered consolation in crisis situations. Which they did so even at the price of contagion or rebellion. More attention should also be paid to extreme forms of social behaviour due, most probably, to desperation, such as “fornicating” with bearers and holding a rollick in the plague cemetery (HBmL, IV. A. 1011/a. vol. 38, p. 259, 8 June 1743). Pandemic fatigue, excessive partying, drinking, etc., are also familiar within the current COVID-19 virus. A recent collection of studies written by Hungarian social and cultural historians on the plague, cholera, smallpox, tuberculosis, and Spanish flu epidemics will certainly reveal many such similarities in human/social reaction to the various epidemics (Járványtörténelem 2020).

Let me close this study with an old Eastern legend, cited by Jean-Noël Biraben, the excellent French historian of *La Peur en Occident* (Fear in the West). One day, Plague promised a fortune-teller that he would take no more than a thousand victims in Smyrna. “Oh, damned Plague, you have deceived me,” the fortune-teller moaned later. “For more than twenty thousand have died!” “I can assure you,” Plague replied, “that I kept my word and killed only a thousand. The other nineteen thousand fell victim to their own fears” (Biraben 1976, p. 37).

Questions of whether men and women at a certain time—or at any time—were more afraid of a contagious disease or the disintegration of their usual way of life and what ways they invented to avoid both perils still require a thorough investigation. This is a burdensome, but at the same time rewarding, task for a researcher—as a human being.

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