

“TALKING” OBJECTS, TALKING HEADS Documentaries on Hungarian archaeologists. Part 1

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It would be an interesting experiment to ask the man on the street which Hungarian archaeologist's name comes to mind. In all probability, few names would be recalled. Therefore, it is worth to review what movies are available on video sharing platforms for those who would like to acquaint themselves with the lives and works of Hungarian archaeologists.

In case of archaeological discoveries, public interest naturally focuses on treasures, settlements, cemeteries, castles and skeletons discovered there, everyday objects, jewellery and weapons, which is understandable. The names of excavating archaeologists are usually mentioned in TV and radio broadcasts, yet the emphasis is definitely not on their person, and as we well know, “words are wind”. The written words remain, yet it is not irrelevant where they were written, since nowadays journals that are fast becoming outdated and published in ever decreasing copies have ceased to be indispensable news sources. This leaves periodicals whose number is also decreasing, and textbooks, which sadly barely mention archaeologists. It is mostly museums and (open-air) exhibitions that place emphasis on presenting their colleagues to the public, yet visitors must be lured in first.

From Generation Y onwards, the world of printed books and periodicals has become less and less the primary source of information, their role taken over by television, internet, movies and to some degree, video sharing and online gaming. It is worth considering how to convey the works of outstanding professionals through these means and channels.

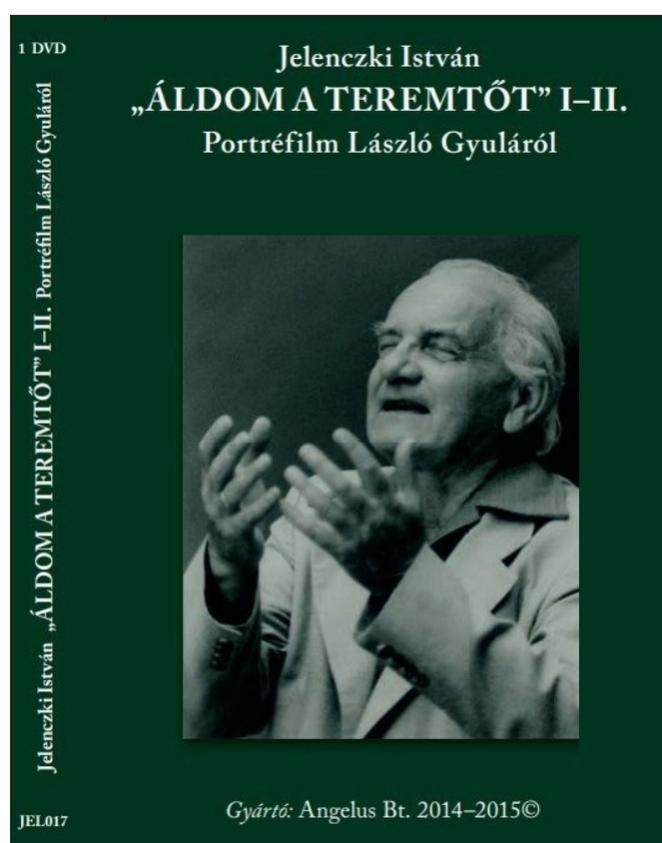


Fig. 1. DVD cover of the portrait film on the life of Gyula László

PORTRAIT FILM OF GYULA LÁSZLÓ

The longest instructional documentary with the most extensive display, presents the life of Gyula László. It sports a 104 minute runtime and was released on DVD in 2015. It is available as two Youtube videos titled “[I praise the creator](#)”. Perhaps this is not a mere coincidence, and it is certainly not surprising as for generations of both Hungarian archaeologists and interested members of the general public, Gyula László was “the archaeologist” for decades. He was teacher to generations and not only at the university: his popular books, drawings, artwork and filmstrips acquainted archaeology and archaeologists to many interested in the past as non-professionals. It is understandable that one of the most important archaeological film portraits is centred around him. The movie was directed by István Jelenczky, a visual artist dubbed “the

founder of artful movie documentaries”. He said to have started out following the encouragement of the Hungarian Academy of Arts. The prompt was not merely verbal, but consisted of a currently undisclosed amount of funds. It is known however, that judging the grant by the HAA too little, he expanded the movie budget to 9 000 000 HUF by means of other tenders. Jelenczky clearly defined his goal with making this movie: “My movie strove to depict the professor of archaeology, the artist and the Man, who loved his family, his Country including Transylvania and Szekler Land with passion. Who kept his faith in the Creator despite every ordeal.” Thus, in favour of the noble cause far transcending the topic of archaeology, the director made several important decisions prior to shooting. One such resolution was, that apart from Gyula László himself, only his son, Zoltán László shall speak throughout the movie. On one hand, this was a reasonable choice, since this way the director could avoid one of the common pitfalls of documentaries, when subjects “outtalk” the movie with too many people crowding the screen. On the other hand, it did not grant others the opportunity to appraise the oeuvre of the legendary archaeologist, nor provide critical evaluation. One of the main theories in Gyula László’s lifework, namely the theory of a “double Hungarian conquest” was expounded in the documentary in detail. It is unfortunate that no opinions and arguments were voiced besides his own. For this reason, throughout the film, one mostly sees and hears previously recorded interviews of Gyula László. Jelenczky is not the first director to have made a movie about Gyula László. The director of the movies “Hungarian conquest” (Hungarian: *Honfoglalás*) and *Trianon*, Gábor Koltay already made a portrait film of the archaeologist in 1995 titled “I am one of them” (this movie is not available online at the moment). Gyula László died in 1998, thus Jelenczky could not make interviews of his own, but evoked him through Koltay’s movie and several other earlier recordings. At other times, when Gyula László was not on screen, viewers were presented his finds or other relating images, with the scholar present through narrations pieced together from his publications. This means set the tone and atmosphere of the movie, and we are presented with an epic flow of history instead of a dialogue. The advantage of this genre is that it is storylike, and can easily be understood by all generations without any prior training. We were also granted a glimpse into how the professor taught the generation of archaeologists who have “come out of his overcoat” as the saying goes.

Another important goal of the director was to present numerous different artifacts and drawings. Jelenczky mustered an abundant material, from drawings by Gyula László and illustrations by Mária Vidra, his wife, up to the archaeological finds he examined. All the while presenting the rich private, scientific and historic photo collection from the archaeologist, codices as well as frescoes depicting St Ladislaus I of Hungary in churches throughout Transylvania. Expertise and high budget are reflected in the quality of the footage, composition, and lighting. Setup is excellent in both outside and inside scenes, proportions are spot on as is background music. Selecting and editing texts must have meant tremendous work. It is a clear strength of the film, that it touches upon so many subjects while offering a glimpse into the life and professional work of Gyula László. The archaeology professor recounted how writer Péter Veres encouraged him to study not only the life of princes, but those of the people, thus making him the “archaeologist of the common people”. He recalls how his mother, a librarian at the Hungarian National Museum, gave him the first books that inspired him to pursue his profession. Through her, he had acquainted himself with Count István Zichy, who was director-general of the Hungarian National Museum between 1934–1944. He also remembered Nándor Fettich, who was the subsequent head of the museum. Gyula László also recalled his published works, more than 600 studies. He specifically highlighted the volume titled *Life of the Hungarian people during the time of conquest* (Hungarian: *A honfoglaló magyar nép élete*), noting that “that book of mine raised generations”.

It is without a doubt, that even in present times, common knowledge concerning the period of Hungarian conquest relies heavily on the theorems of Gyula László. Unfortunately the results of new research are almost unknown outside academic circles. There is a significant group of Hungarian archaeologists who no longer consider Gyula László their teacher, either because they were not trained at Budapest or because they belong to a subsequent generation. Either way it raises the question, when did this shift occur. One task of national archaeology is clarifying the role Gyula László played in shaping archaeological concepts in Hungary (LASZ-

LOVSZKY & SIKLÓDI 1991, LANGÓ 2006), and through publishing his notes and letters evoke the professional environment in which he operated (SZENTPÉTERY 2019). It is a substantial task, as his name has been adopted by research programmes and institutions, thus it would be beneficial to see clearly what Gyula László represented as an archaeologist and a public figure. Analysing movies focused on his person are important aspects of understanding his role. The movie directed by Jelenczky is an homage to the most well-known Hungarian archaeologist and is a unique motion picture of the genre both in terms of runtime and quality.

LÁSZLÓ GEREVICH – A HUNGARIAN SCHOLAR ON SCREEN

There is another scholar, who is without a doubt a prominent figure of Hungarian archaeology, also a researcher of the Middle ages, yet possessing a completely different character and career. By favour of the Budapest History Museum, [Episode 17 of the series “Hungarian Scholars”](#) is available on Youtube presenting László Gerevich, a Kossuth Prize recipient archaeologist, former director of the Budapest History Museum and the Institute of Archaeology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The approximately half an hour long documentary was created for a television audience sometime in the late 1960s, as attested by the hairstyle and dress of reporter Mária Kerényi and the choice of background music (Bilbao Song). The movie was directed by István Kardos, its cinematographer was the recently deceased Mihály Ráday a member of the Society for the Conservation of Budapest City. The film portrait was shot in black and white, some parts were recorded in the halls of the Budapest History Museum, others in the Pilis Hills. It begins with the scholar, who began his career as an art historian, recounting the history of the excavations conducted in Buda Castle since 1946, as well as reconstruction methods, e.g. the restoration of the two storeyed chapel of the palace. Looking back from 2021, his short digress on the centralization of power and its effects are quite fascinating as is the fact, that the reporter inquired on the parallel between Île-de-France and Buda, which contemporary viewers could not have experienced first hand. According to Gerevich, similarly to the Île-de-France “Buda was a forge for new styles and new technical processes, which then served as a model for different northern, southern and eastern cities...”. He explained how the results of archaeology, and tangible evidence affect the work of historians and drew the conclusion, that “a true historic perspective cannot be shaped without archaeology” and quickly added that “considering the distant past”. At the same time, he underlined, that past patterns do affect our present and provide lessons to consider. The most intriguing bit of the report is his reasoning, that archaeology is related to almost every other discipline, a statement which has been notably confirmed by present-day methodology and interdisciplinary research. Afterwards professor Gerevich guided viewers to one of the locations of the story of Gertrudis from the play *Bánk Bán* by József Katona, namely the ruins of the Cistercian abbey in the Pilis Hills, located between Esztergom and Buda. So far only the upper body of the archaeologist was seen on screen with mostly his face shown up close, alongside a model of Buda castle and a photograph of the Gothic chapel, yet with the change of scenery, the visuals of the movie became more varied. Viewers were shown the ruins of a large abbey, covering an area of 50 × 27 m, founded in the Pilis during the 12th century. Gerevich is no longer seen in the suit he wore in previous shots, but in a trenchcoat, the obligatory workwear of the time. Apart from the ruins of the edifice, he spoke about the funerary monument of Queen Gertrude which was restored from numerous small pieces, as well as its intricately carved decorations. Gerevich pointed out the intermediary role Hungary played between France and the Middle East, noting

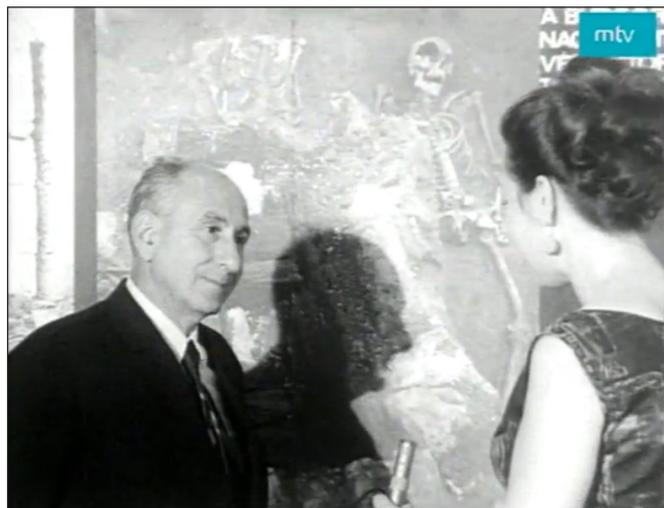


Fig. 2. Interview with László Gerevich. Screen capture from the series “Hungarian scholars”, Episode 17. © BTM; MTVA

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how the kingdom was an important political base and marching route during the Crusades. These are noteworthy facts, all the more so, because the existence of this past political and commercial axis and resulting connexions are mostly outside today’s general knowledge.

At the end of the portrait film, the reporter asked her subject on the topic of archaeology itself. Gerevich responded saying “archaeology is perhaps not a single discipline, but a conglomerate of many. Archaeology is a methodology, a process through which we may reconstruct the past and can elaborate this reconstruction. It is related to every discipline, every practical activity, diverse tools and work procedures and we can evoke these again through different finds. Furthermore, archaeology also meets an intriguing social necessity, as it practically recreates those pieces of art, sanctuaries and edifices, that have been destroyed. It rediscovers them and recreates them, thus claiming the role of secondary creation.”

Other parts of the report have already revealed, that Gerevich considered his work related to art history, architectural history and archaeology mainly as a creative process founded upon research. In the closing commentary, on behalf of the audience and herself, Mária Kerényi concluded that “we learned to respect archaeology, which is being developed into a social science by present-day scholars”.

This movie is an interesting historic document, as the excavations conducted by Gerevich shown on screen (at Buda Castle and Pilisszentkereszt) involve archaeological sites of national significance, which are important cornerstones of Hungarian history and cultural history. Rediscovering and understanding Gerevich’s work is essential for various disciplines, a significance that has been well reflected in the conference and professional events organized at the Budapest History Museum for the 100th anniversary of his birth. The same can be said of the excavations conducted at Pilisszentkereszt: the 800th anniversary of Gertrudis’ story provided a key opportunity for organizing a scientific congress and exhibition, as well as the subsequent publication of the related exhibition catalogue and proceedings volume (MAJOROSSY 2013; 2014). Uncovering the lifework of Gerevich and the critical evaluation of his theories is of utmost importance. This portrait film is an exciting complement to this process and it can also be used in clarifying phases and results of his excavations.

The upcoming sequel to this article will focus on Jenő Fitz and documentaries on archaeological projects and research that are in the process of making.

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