

GENIUS LOCI

LASZLOVSZKY 60

edited by
Dóra Mérai
and

Ágnes Drosztnér, Kyra Lyublyanovics,
Judith Rasson, Zsuzsanna Papp Reed,
András Vadas, Csilla Zatykó



ARCHAEOLINGUA

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Table of contents

Tabula gratulatoria	v
Kiadói előszó	vi
Publisher's Preface	viii
Köszöntő	x
Salutation	xi

Boundaries, Frontier Zones / Határvonalak, határvidékek

ALEKS PLUSKOWSKI – ALEX BROWN – SEWERYN SZCZEPANSKI – ROWENA BANERJEA – DANIEL MAKOWIECKI What Does a Frontier Look Like? The Biocultural Dynamics of the Lower Vistula Borderland in the Middle Ages	2
STEPHEN POW The Mongol Empire's Northern Border: Re-evaluating the Surface Area of the Mongol Empire	8
IAN WOOD Two Roman Frontiers and Their Sub-Roman Afterlife	14

Crossing Borders / Határokon át

SZAKÁCS BÉLA ZSOLT Gyulafirátót, avagy a rendi építészeti hagyományok átjárhatósága	19
CRISTOPHER MIELKE A Queen's Crusading Connections: Yolanda of Courtenay, the Fifth Crusade, and the Military Orders	25
BÁRÁNY ATTILA Angol keresztes a magyar végeken: Robert de Champlayn	28
CRISTIAN GAȘPAR Trespassing Pigs, Sons of Whores, and Randy Dogs: Marginalia on a Medieval Document from Caransebeș/Karánsebes	32
VADAS ANDRÁS A kecskeméti marhahajtók megpróbáltatásai és egy végvár jóllakott őrsége	38
LÁSZLÓ KONTLER Borders and Crossings: A Jesuit Scientist in the Whirlwind of Enlightened Reform	41
PAUKOVICS GERGŐ Hajszá az örök fiatalságért. Dr. Voronoff és a dübörgő 20-as évek	45
PINKE ZSOLT – STEPHEN POW A Gangesz-deltából a globális porondra: történeti ökológiai szempontok a kolera kórokozó (<i>Vibrio cholerae</i>) elterjedési területének átalakulásához	50
MARCELL SEBŐK Tangible Cultural Heritage: The Early History of Blue Jeans	55

Inhabiting the Landscape / Élet a tájban

SÓFALVI ANDRÁS	
A Barcaság határai és 13. század eleji településképe a Német Lovagrend adományleveleiben	60
NIKOLINA ANTONIĆ	
The Hospitallers' Estate of Čičan and its Neighbors: Spatial Analysis Yields New Information	64
ÜNIGE BENCZE	
The Abbey of Meszes: New Insights on the Site Location	68
MÓGÁNÉ ARADI CSILLA – MOLNÁR ISTVÁN	
Kísérlet a bárdudvarnok-szentbenedeki premontrei prépostság környezeti rekonstrukciójára	72
BEATRIX ROMHÁNYI	
Monasteries along the Danube	77
PUSZTAI TAMÁS – P. FISCHL KLÁRA	
A dél-borsodi síkság bronzkori és középkori településstruktúrájának összehasonlítása	82
VIZI MÁRTA	
Komplex régészeti kutatás egy egykori dél-dunántúli mezőváros területén	89
BATIZI ZOLTÁN	
Fagyosasszony és Kammerhof	95
PÁLÓCZI HORVÁTH ANDRÁS	
A középkori Kenderes településszerkezete	99
SZŐCS PÉTER LEVENTE	
Adatok Nagybánya és vidéke középkori egyházi topográfiájához	103
ZATYKÓ CSILLA	
Eltűnt berzencei malmok	108
SZABÓ PÉTER	
Középkori cseh erdőgazdálkodás a choustníki uradalom erdőszámadásainak tükrében	113
ANDREA KISS	
Before and After the Great Heat and Drought of 1540: Multiannual Trends of Grape and Grain Harvest Dates in the Vienna Hospital Accounts	117
LÁSZLÓ BARTOSIEWICZ	
“Kleine Fische, gute Fische” – But Sturgeon is Great	121
LYUBLYANOVICS KYRA	
Vad háziállat, házi vadállat: Számi rénszarvastartás a középkori és kora újkori Norvégiában	126
JUDITH RASSON	
Mountains in the Lifeways and History of Northern Macedonia	138
JEREMY MIKECZ	
Crossing the Abyss: The Apurímac Canyon at the Time of the Spanish Invasion of Peru (1533)	142

Busy Places / Nyüzsgő terek

PETROVICS ISTVÁN	
Újabb adatok Pécs késő középkori történetéhez	147
URBÁN MÁTÉ	
Lokális búcsújáró helyek a késő középkori Nyugat-Dunántúlon	151
BALÁZS NAGY	
The Marketplace of Csütörtök – A Local Market in Fourteenth-Century Hungary	156
KATALIN SZENDE	
The Sopron Fish Market	159
GERHARD JARITZ	
The Craftsman's Voice and Words in Late Medieval Austrian Urban Space	165

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ANA MARIA GRUIA Healthcare in Cluj in the Sixteenth Century: Overlapping Professions	168
ANA MARINKOVIĆ John Capistran's Mantle and the Early Propaganda of Franciscan Observant Cults in Dubrovnik	171
SABINA MADGEARU Ceremonial Space in Front of Medieval Buda: An Illuminated Fifteenth-Century French Vision	175
VÉGH ANDRÁS Óbuda látképeken	177

Layers of the Past / A múlt rétegei

KODOLÁNYI JUDIT Templomok és temetők a visegrádi Sibrik-dombon	181
ROSTA SZABOLCS Egy új lehetőség kapujában – tatárjáráskori védművek a Kiskunságban	186
BOTÁR ISTVÁN Árpád-kori edényégető kemence Csíksomlyón	193
PETAR PARVANOV Fire and Stone: Placing Flints in Graves in Late Medieval Kaliakra	197
GYARMATI JÁNOS Kumpi Wasi. Textilműhely egy inka tartományi központban	201
ZSUZSANNA PAPP REED Post It: Notes from Thirteenth-Century St Albans	207
VALERY REES The Salt of Genius: Marsilio Ficino on Food, Spices, and Nutrition	213
ROSSINA KOSTOVA The Mother of God Monastery near Varna, Bulgaria: More about Missionary Monasteries in Bulgaria in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries	217
DANIEL ZIEMANN The Imperial Abbey of Corvey in the Ninth and Tenth Century: At the Crossroads of Power	221
VIRÁGOS GÁBOR Kartal vagy Cyko? Kísérlet egy középkori nemesi család történetének rekonstruálására	226
TÓTH BOGLÁRKA – BOTÁR ISTVÁN A sepsikilyéni unitárius templom tetőszerkezeteinek kormeghatározása	244
RÁCZ MIKLÓS Egy tiszazugi újkori négyosztatú ház – Dokumentálás és építéstörténet	248

Objects beneath Our Feet / Tárgyak a föld alól

LANGÓ PÉTER A Tiszakeszi-Szódadombon talált kora Árpád-kori kereszt	254
RÁCZ TIBOR – NAGY BALÁZS Tatárjárás kori kincslelet Jászkarajenőről	258
SZENDE LÁSZLÓ Lehetett-e hadijelvény a csajági kereszt?	267
NÓRA UJHELYI Thoughts about Medieval Book Fittings from the Castle of Visegrád	270
MÁRIA VARGHA – THOMAS KÜHTREIBER Treasures of the “Lower Ten Thousand”? Hoards of Iron Objects	273

TABLE OF CONTENTS

K. NÉMETH ANDRÁS „Sarlóját ez okért bőszen fegyverré köszörülte” Késő középkori kiegyenesített sarló Kospa falu helyéről	280
MAXIM MORDOVIN A Collection of Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Cloth Seals from Szolnok	285
TÜNDE KOMORI Ottomans in Pest in the Light of “Luxury” Ceramics: Four Cups from Kígyó Street	289
WICKER ERIKA A 17. századi rácszentpéteri kincslelet	294

Marking the Place / Helyek és jelek

CSERNUS SÁNDOR Keresztes családtörténet és kőbe vésett emlékezet	300
LŐVEI PÁL A pilisszántói keresztes kő legendája	305
MÉRAI DÓRA Sügérek a Nyárádmentén: Sigér Mátyás síremléke leporolva	311
VESZPRÉMY LÁSZLÓ A bambergi lovas szobra és Szent István	316
TAKÁCS MIKLÓS A pétervárad-tekiai reneszánsz kőfaragvány	321
ANNELI RANDLA What and Whom Should We Remember? The Case of the Teutonic Order’s Church and Castle in Pöide, Livonia	325

Heritage Sites, Sacred Places / Örökségi helyszínek, szent helyek

ALEKSANDAR PANTIĆ The Ambiguity of Heritage Interpretation: A Late Roman Tomb in Brestovik, Serbia	330
GYÖRGY ENDRE SZÖNYI Rocamadour: Monastic Center, Pilgrimage Place, Art Historical Interest, World Heritage Site	335
KATEŘINA HORNÍČKOVÁ A Penitent Judas Iscariot: An Exemplum of Christian Morals on the Eve of Hussitism?	339
JAMES PLUMTREE Buddha, Lenin, and the Prophet Muhammad Approaching the Landscape and Cultural Heritage of Issyk-Ata	343
ROBERT SHARP The Thames Estuary: The Cultural Heritage and Memory of the Thames Estuary at Southend-on-Sea	349
ESZTER SPÄT Constructing Religio-Ritual Heritage: The New Shrine of Shekhsê Batê in Khetar, Northern Iraq	353
ZSUZSANNA RENNER Delhi, Old and New: Changing Cityscapes and the Cultural Heritage of India’s Capital City	357
FELD ISTVÁN Pseudovár vagy történeti rekonstrukció?	364
ILON GÁBOR A velemi régészeti témaparkról	371
WOLLÁK KATALIN Örökség alapú fejlesztés Kölkeden	374

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Places of Memory / Az emlékezet helyei

JÁNOS BAK	
Nádor 20 Capriccio	380
SZENTPÉTERI JÓZSEF	
Pilistől Tételig. Elektronikus levélféle a 60 esztendő's Laszlovszky Józsefnek	382
RICHARD HODGES	
Scarlino in the 1980s, Forty Years On	386
KLANICZAY GÁBOR	
Egy hozzászólás Kremsben	390

The Salt of Genius: Marsilio Ficino on Food, Spices, and Nutrition

VALERY REES*

How many philosophers have engaged directly with food? For some, it is not a proper subject for contemplation, because only subject to direct sensory perception and subjective judgment.¹ Even for Locke, who wrote about the vineyards and fruit trees of Montpellier, food and drink were hardly matters for philosophical speculation.² But an interest in how food is prepared need not mean a departure from philosophic standards. Shortly after a very special event held in the summer palace at Visegrád in June, 2014, I was invited to speak at the Warburg Institute about food in the thinking of a Platonic philosopher, Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499).³ My experiences in the kitchens of Visegrád, helping to prepare a wedding feast with Renaissance tools and ingredients, gave a most useful perspective for this, and provided me with appropriate images (Figs. 1-5). There was also a real link between Ficino and Visegrád, in that Ficino entered into correspondence with King Matthias and his court (Fig. 6).⁴ May I record here my lasting gratitude to József Laszlovszky, who first introduced me to the palace at Visegrád in 1991 and has remained a dear friend and source of inspiration ever since.

Heavenly banquets

Ficino first wrote about feasts in his commentary on Plato's *Symposium* in 1469, known by its short title, *De amore*. In Plato's original, we learn of conversation, drinking habits, and even dancing girls, but nothing of the food served. In Ficino's commentary, food makes a minor appearance as the proper object of desire for that part of the soul which governs the life of the body.⁵ The three lower powers of the soul, taste, touch and smell, guide a person to appropriate choices of

food and drink,⁶ but these do not reach as far as the soul itself, whose food is truth, the pursuit of which is served by the three higher powers, sight, hearing and reason.⁷ It comes then as no surprise in a later section, when those who attain heaven sit down to a banquet consisting merely of courage, justice, temperance, and love.⁸

Another heavenly banquet is described in a letter to Lorenzo de' Medici on the feast of Saints Cosmas and Damian, September 27, 1476.⁹ The annual celebration had been cancelled on account of plague. He therefore tells Lorenzo to look up at the heavens where the birthday feast has not been cancelled. The banquet there consists of nectar and ambrosia, but more earthly foods are represented by the constellations—milk, fish, crab, goat, bullock, young ram, the swan, and the eagle—with other deities bringing in wine, water, grain, and game. Sweet scents from the Elysian fields perfume the proceedings.¹⁰ In this banquet, “one food is all food,” and desire is always satisfied.

Earthly banquets

In the same year, an earthly banquet was the subject of a letter to his friend Bernardo Bembo, the Venetian ambassador in Florence.¹¹ A dinner party is to be considered successful if all the parts of a man are satisfied, that is to say, both body and soul. A good dinner party will “restore spirit, delight the senses and will foster and awaken reason.” It will bring “rest from labours, release from cares and the nourishment of genius.” At such a banquet there will be “a demonstration of love and splendour,” and the guests will partake of “the food of good will, seasoning of friendship, leavening of grace, solace of life.” All these were very much in evidence at Visegrád in the summer of 2014!

* School of Economic Science, London.



► Fig. 1. Good order in the kitchen. Preparing a wedding dinner at Visegrád castle, 2014 (photo: Chris Rees)



► Fig. 2. Cleanliness and order in the hearth (Visegrád, 2014, photo: Chris Rees)

Ficino finds the Latin word *convivium* more useful than the Greek *symposium* (drinking together) because it emphasizes what he calls a “sweet communion of life,” specifying that the sharing goes beyond physical food to a sharing of the life of the mind, and a common purpose.¹² Regarding provisions, austerity is to be shunned, as it would produce more of a “dying together” than a “living together.”¹³ Extravagance is equally shunned, as it brings its own form of bondage and ruin. But misery and gloom can be countered with a smooth, clear wine.

Cleanliness and order are important (Figs. 1 and 2), and, above all, *omnia ingenii sale condiri debent*, “everything should be seasoned with the salt of genius.” He is using “genius” not in the sense of intellectual originality, but as a translation of *ingenium*, that inborn quality of a human

being that gives character, ability, and mental powers and is also nurtured by one’s own particular *genius* or guiding spirit.

Into the kitchen

To see Ficino “in the kitchen,” we must turn to his more medical works. His *Consilio contro la pestilentia* of 1478¹⁴ gives precise regulations on what to eat and drink and how to prepare it, both when trying to avoid catching the plague, in chapter 5, and for feeding a plague sufferer, in chapter 8. The latter includes a number of refreshing beverages ranging from pomegranate cordial to mixtures of rose-sugar, myrobalans (a type of cherry plum), tamarind, quince, and ground dried peach.¹⁵ He gives Gentile da Foligno’s recipe for potable silver or gold. He includes several detailed recipes for fruit syrups and encourages the reader to experiment with more, blending acidity and sweetness. Solid food should be little and light, moist and nutritious, as taught by Rhazes and Avicenna.

Chapter 5, describing foods for warding off infection, allows a wider range of ingredients, and traditional rules are sometimes relaxed. For example, fish has often been banned, but it may be used if it comes from clear, running streams, and can be fried, salted, and served with *agresto* (a purée of nuts, parsley, basil, verjuice, salt, and oil), or with orange, salt, and cinnamon. Ancient authorities need not be followed blindly, as they often wrote for climates very different from that of Italy.¹⁶ Nevertheless, many vegetables are rejected here, but some fruits are allowed which other authors reject. He speaks of various ways of preparing fowl with sour and cooling herbs, just as we prepared it for the wedding feast at Visegrád – in that case with sour cherries and a sauce close to Ficino’s *agresto* (Fig. 3).

Later views

In his later work, *De vita*, we can read more general dietary advice, and further recipes.¹⁷ Book I starts from the premise that health of mind is as important as bodily health, and he addresses especially the factors that increase melancholy. Chapter 10 is replete with warnings, against hard, dry, burnt, stale, salted or fried food; beef,



► Fig. 3. Preparing capon with sour cherries and agresto (Visegrád, 2014, photo: Chris Rees)



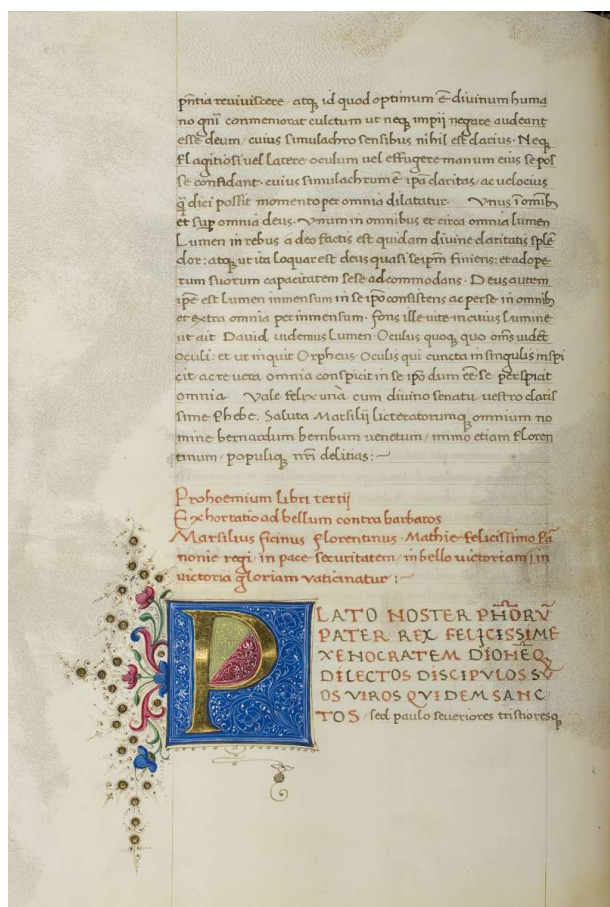
► Fig. 4. Well balanced, light, herb dumplings (Visegrád, 2014, photo: Chris Rees)

old cheese, pickles, and a whole range of vegetables. But equally harmful are psychological factors – anger, fear, pity, sorrow, idleness, or being in the dark. Aware that he has placed many restrictions on diet, he works out ways to satisfy the stomach within these restrictions. Chapter 11 advocates eating just twice a day, and only when hungry, and various things are suggested as aids to digestion, of which myrobalans are the best.

Book II of *De vita* is based on a famous medical work, the *De conservanda iuventute et retardanda senectute* of Arnald of Villanova. Or so Ficino thought. He may instead have been reading a copy of Roger Bacon's *De retardatione accidentium senectutis*—included without identification in a volume of Arnaldo. Either way, the dietary advice is clear. It is based on the concept of *euchima*, wholesome foods that impart good nour-



► Fig. 5. Vegetables and herbs appropriate to the time (Visegrád, 2014, photo: Chris Rees)



► Fig. 6. A page from Marsilius Ficinus, *Epistolarum ad amicos libri III–IV*, 1481–1482. Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf. 73 Aug. 2° (© HAB), <http://diglib.hab.de/mss/73-aug-2f/start.htm>, accessed October 24, 2018.

ishment and allow a good humoral balance to the blood (Figs. 4 and 5). Chapters 5 and 6 relate especially to diet. In chapter 6, he brings in the idea of cutting out meat altogether, on the authority of Porphyry and the Pythagoreans. He asks, “Have we not heard that people before the flood lived a

long time and left their animals alone?” Ficino is coming closer to vegetarianism, but he specifically permits a variety of animal foods later in the chapter. Chapter 7 also opens with the requirement that “all the animals which come under our keeping must be nourished with fine and choice foods before we eat them.”¹⁸

In Book III of *De vita*, which was dedicated to King Matthias, many of the fruits and foods that have been spoken of are linked to planetary influences of a Proclan type, though not always in obvious ways. Sweetness may be related to Venus, Mercury, Jupiter, or the Sun. Gold, saffron, and the cock are unequivocally solar, and pigeons are of Venus. But ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, and fennel may be solar or Jovian, and so on (III.11). To follow the details of Ficino’s Proclan and Plotinian theory in this book takes us back out of the kitchen and into the *studiolo*.

Essentially, by the 1480s, Ficino seems to have fully merged his original interests in medicine with his years of work as a philosopher; besides the plague treatise and the three books *On Life* we also glimpse him in his letters offering advice on health and well-being, even though he turned down a chance to translate Hippocrates because his own work as a priest, philosopher, and physician was so demanding.¹⁹ He did not have to cook his own suppers, but he certainly understood food from a practical as well as a theoretical point of view. Within his philosophical framework, the soul requires no corporeal food, but it does take care of the body and is in no way tainted by paying attention to the proper means of doing so.

Notes

- ¹ See, for example, Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, section 9.
- ² John Locke, *Observations upon the Growth and Culture of Vines and Olives; The Production of Silk; the Preservation of Fruits* (London: W. Sandby, 1766), published by the Shaftesbury family long after Locke’s death in 1704.
- ³ This contribution is a shortened version of the paper I presented there, by kind invitation of Guido Giglioni and Cecilia Muratori.
- ⁴ I have written elsewhere on Ficino’s connections with King Matthias, most recently: Valery Rees, “Buda as a centre of Renaissance and Humanism,” in *Medieval Buda in Context*, ed. Balázs Nagy, Martyn Rady, Katalin Szende, and András Vadas (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 472–493.
- ⁵ Ficino, *Commentarium in Convivium Platonis De amore*, VI, 1 (hereafter: Ficino, *De amore*). A copy of this work was sent to Janus Pannonius in 1469. For a good edition of the Latin text, see Pierre Laurens, *Commentaire sur le Banquet de Platon, De l’amour* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2012) or Dilwyn Knox, *De amore* (forthcoming, Harvard University Press).
- ⁶ Ficino, *De amore*, III, 3.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, V, 2.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, VI, 6.
- ⁹ Third-century physicians and martyrs, Saints Cosmas and Damian were honored by the Medici family.
- ¹⁰ *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, trans. members of the School of Economic Science (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1975), 10 vols. to date, vol. 2, Letter 15 (hereafter: Ficino, *Letters*).
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, Letter 42.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, vol. 2, Letter 39. Cf. Cicero, *De senectute*, xiii, 45.
- ¹³ When commenting later on the passage prescribing austerity for Plato’s guardians (*Republic*, II, 372), Ficino makes no remark beyond calling it a life that is “healthy and adequate;” see Arthur Farndell, *When Philosophers Rule* (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 2009), 10.
- ¹⁴ Teodoro Katinis, *Medicina e filosofia in Marsilio Ficino: il Consilio contro la pestilentia* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2007) (hereafter: *Consilio contro la pestilentia*).
- ¹⁵ *Consilio contro la pestilentia*, 187.
- ¹⁶ *Consilio contro la pestilentia*, 165–166.
- ¹⁷ Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, ed. C. V. Kaske and J. R. Clark (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1989), hereafter *De vita*.
- ¹⁸ *De vita*, II, 7.
- ¹⁹ Ficino, *Letters*, vol. 7, 24, to Pier Leone of Spoleto.