Narratives about Hungarian Saints in 18th–19th-Century Slovak Catholic Chantbooks

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XIXth Annual Conference of Young Slavists,
Prague, 5 December 2025

Introduction

The 19th century brought a wave of national awakenings, language codification efforts (Anton Bernolák 1787; Ľudovít Štúr 1843), and increasing demands for the cultural and political emancipation of the Slovak ethnic community from the dominant Hungarian political and especially ethnic nation. These developments created tensions between Hungarian political allegiance and emerging Slovak national identity. But we can as well see multiple cases when Slovak identity was not in contrast with Hungarian political allegiance. Catholic chantbooks of the 18th and 19th centuries provide a distinctive lens through which to observe how religious literature responded to these shifts and different issues of certain periods.

Two authors are especially important:

- Juraj Paulín Bajan (1721–1792) – a Franciscan priest and leading representative of Slovak Baroque devotional literature;
- Ján Hollý (1785–1849) – a major figure of Slovak Classicism and advocate of Bernolák's codification.

Key figures

The songs discussed concern three central figures of medieval Hungarian sanctity:

- St. Stephen (997–1038) – the first king of Hungary,
- St. Emeric (1007–1031) – his son and heir,
- St. Ladislaus (1040/45–1095) – later king of Hungary.

Bajan's vision

Bajan understood himself as a citizen of the Kingdom of Hungary, despite occasional conflicts with his superiors. In his songs he invokes the saint-kings as intercessors for a realm described as sorrowful, endangered by heresy, and in moral decline. Possible historical references include the rise of Enlightenment and secularisation or the persistence and growth of Protestant communities. Yet these concerns stand in partial tension with the rest of his works, which avoids and actually outperform Counter-Reformation polemics. His typically refined, sensitive and vital poetic is pushed off in this cases.

Hollý's vision

Within less than a century, the emphasis on heresy disappears. Hollý's songs about the same saints are shaped primarily by liturgical motives and by the desire to commemorate their exemplary lives. His treatment is markedly atemporal, oriented toward eternal values rather than current political or religious conflicts. The saint-kings cease to function as protectors of the Hungarian polity and instead become figures of spiritual contemplation. And although Hollý's chantbook is issued in 1842 and 1846 (thus close to 1848/49 revolutions), his allegiance with Hungarian political nation is still visible. And it is not contradicting with his effort of using (Bernolák's) Slovak language norms in every aspect of his life.

Conclusion

The narratives of "political" saints in Slovak chantbooks demonstrate the malleability of saintly veneration. The same figures could serve as advocates for a threatened kingdom (which needs to be seen as a wider problem), as timeless models of Christian virtue, or could vanish entirely from the repertoire when they no longer fit prevailing cultural and political narratives. The cases of St. Stephen, St. Emeric and St. Ladislaus show how religious poetry reflects—and is reshaped by—changing notions of national identity and historical memory.

Comparative context

Similar patterns can be observed in contemporary Czech chantbooks, which highlight Czech or Holy Roman Empire rulers rather than Hungarian saints (logically). Changing political contexts could also lead to the disappearance of certain saints from later hymnals: for instance, the Slovak Jednotný katolícky spevník (1937) omits songs devoted to the historical kings of Hungary altogether.

This paper is output of the Comenius University Grants, project no. UK/1365/2025: "Štúdium a uchovanie archívnych kancionálových prameňov 18. a 19. storočia."