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The Image-Anthropological Approach to Historiography

Gypsies in 19th-Century Hungary

Readers of this paper may have no doubt that the iconic turn has a profound impact on all sections of our life, including daily activities, doing regular work, creating arts and practicing science. The picture is a key element not only of any communication, but scientific research as well, step by step winning back the role it enjoyed before the emergence of writing. However, the science of history is not really affected by this new development yet. Or more accurately, it is in opposition to pictorial representation; most historians seem to make a stand against the attack of the “barbarian hordes” of pictures, defending the strongholds of the text to the last man.

If they do so, they are wrong. The picture is an eminent source of the historian’s evidence, especially (as Peter Burke underlines it) in cases when not the protagonists of history, but different minorities – children, women, ethnic minorities, etc. – are concerned¹. The latter are barely covered by the contemporary texts, but frequently depicted as accessory, or even main, figures of the contemporary pictures.

Let us take an example. Although the number of publications dealing with the greatest minority of Europe increases rapidly (including essays on Gypsy history) in the last decades, in that field there is a significant paucity of the 19th century or earlier written historical sources. But luckily we have numerous images from this era depicting them. For example, analyzing the etchings depicting Hungarian Gypsies in the 19th century illustrated magazines (eminent sources for the icon-anthropological² approach to the 19th century history), we can obtain several new pieces of information, from small details to general conclusions. Through the analysis of the pictures we can observe the changing attitude of the majority towards the gypsies from acceptance to rejection. They clearly show the visual – and conceptual – stereotypes of the majorities. Nevertheless the pictures testify to a great break in the life of the Middle-European Gypsy society and how they lost their ability to take part in the general production of the surrounding societies.

Quantitative analysis

The illustrations of those magazines are numerous enough to use them even for quantitative analysis. In a research study I examined 181 pictures (some of them was not magazine illustration) from Hungary from the 19th century depicting gypsies. In general I identified 24 visual stereotypes (behavior, clothes, crafts, etc.³), as information units⁴. Naturally no pictures hold all those stereotypes. In one picture the maximum I identified was 14, and some

hold none of them. The 181 pictures contained altogether 753 visual stereotype elements. I found that among others 12 percent of the pictures showed gypsy blacksmiths, another 14 percent showed caldrons (partly as goods for sale). On the other hand, only 3 percent showed trading, 2 percent wood-craftsmen and 1 percent (one single picture in deed) horse dealers. This data show clearly the real importance of those crafts in the life of the gypsies in the examined period in Hungary (contrary to the common opinion).

Qualitative analysis

We can use pictures for qualitative analysis too. Let’s see three examples of this: the appearance and disappearance of Kalderash Gypsies in Hungary, the idea of the coquettish, attractive Gypsy girl and the apparel and way of work of the wanderer Gypsy blacksmith.



Picture 1. Calderash Gypsies, around 1865. In: Jerzy Ficowski: *The Gypsies in Poland*, 1989, picture 10.

The Kalderash clan

There is little data about the Kalderash clan⁵ in Hungary, mostly because in the second half of the 19th century, when they turned up here, the majority society knew prac-



Picture 2. Kolompar Gypsies. *Vasárnapi Újság* (Sunday Magazine), vol. 1863. page 313.

tically nothing about the tribal division of the Gypsies⁶. They gave the typology almost exclusively on the basis of the external characteristics (tent dweller or settled, wood-crafter or metal crafter or musician). From sources from other countries, for example from the famous book of Ficowski⁷, we know how the Kalderash people of the 19th century looked like (great silver buttons on men, thick silver necklaces and the use of plenty of silver in general – see Picture 1.), so we can identify them in any contemporary images even if the artist himself had no knowledge about whom he depicted.

From the illustrated Hungarian magazines of the time we can clearly see that the typical Kalderash clothes emerged in Hungary in the 1860s (Picture 2.), after the Romanian Gypsy slavery had been repealed in 1855. Out of the earlier mentioned 181 analyzed pictures I find 7 pieces (4 percent) that depicted Kalderash (none of them mentioning that fact in the caption or in the corresponding article). The first picture appeared in 1862, the last in 1872. We know from other sources that the majority of this metal crafter tribe really left the Carpathian basin and migrated to the North and to the West⁸.

The coquettish Gypsy girl

Another example is the relationship between eroticism and the Gypsies, the emergence of the idea of the beautiful,

coquettish Gypsy girl. Before the 19th century we cannot find any reference to this phenomenon, neither in the pictorial, nor in the textual sources. Although some 18th century criminal documents talk about Gypsy prostitutes, but it was not regarded as ethnically determined in the time of their origin either. The textual sources are modest in the whole 19th century too, but the image of the coquettish Gypsy girl appears (Picture 3.). This is not the only erotic theme of the age; classical art provided numerous representations of the beautiful female – and sometimes male – body. For instance, the idealized image of the Turkish harem, full of beautiful female bodies, reappears again and again in the illustrated magazines of the second half of the 19th century. Still, the Gypsy girl is somehow more blood-stirring in her reality, or we could say, in her attainability.



Picture 3. Pharaoh's people. *Ország Tükre* (Country's Mirror), vol. 1863. page 101.

When analyzing the photos of the time not manipulated yet with the intention of artistic representation, it turns out that the idea of the coquettish Gypsy girl is the product of a misunderstanding between two cultures not knowing each other well. It is about the bare breasts, which was intolerant



Picture 4. Wanderer Gypsies – postcard, Brasov (Transylvania), 1917.

ble in most European cultures, and was the sign of becoming a prostitute, but which, on the other hand, is natural in Gypsy culture (Picture 4.). Behind this we may assume to stand the concept of cleanness-uncleanness tradition in Gypsy culture⁹: according to this, human body is unclean under the waist, thus it should be covered¹⁰, whereas above the waist it is clean so there is no reason to cover that part¹¹.

The members of the majority society did not sense it, only that the Gypsy girls were doing something that the women of their social circle would never do – they showed their breasts for a few cents (Picture 5.). This erotic experience sublimed then into the stereotype of the coquettish Gypsy girl with snow-white teeth and red lips laughing to the audience, and at the same time into a still existing and significant element of how the majority society views the Gypsies.



Picture 5. Gypsy girls
Unknown photographer, around 1920, possibly Transylvania

Metal craft

It is widely known that the history of the Gypsies is connected to metal craft somehow, but even the experts do not realize how close this connection is. The 19th century magazine illustrations proves clearly that the wanderer Gypsy blacksmith was a part of the everyday rural life, a well-known figure, whose service was applied by the peasants regularly.

Comparing that information with the written sources it became clear that the rural metal craft was a fundamental part of making a living for the Gypsies in Hungary in the 19th century. As I mentioned above, a significant percentage of the contemporary etchings depict gypsies working as smiths, but at first glance it is not clear which one is authentic and which is not. Most people have (and that time had too) an idea how village blacksmith workshops used to look like and many artists used this knowledge to create a picture of gypsy metal craftsmanship. To tell the

truth, many of them depicted the details wrong. The Picture 6 is a definite proof of this phenomenon. Comparing it with other pictures and contemporary photos (practicing the methods of source-criticism) it is clear that for example the anvil and hammer used by the wanderer gypsies was much smaller.



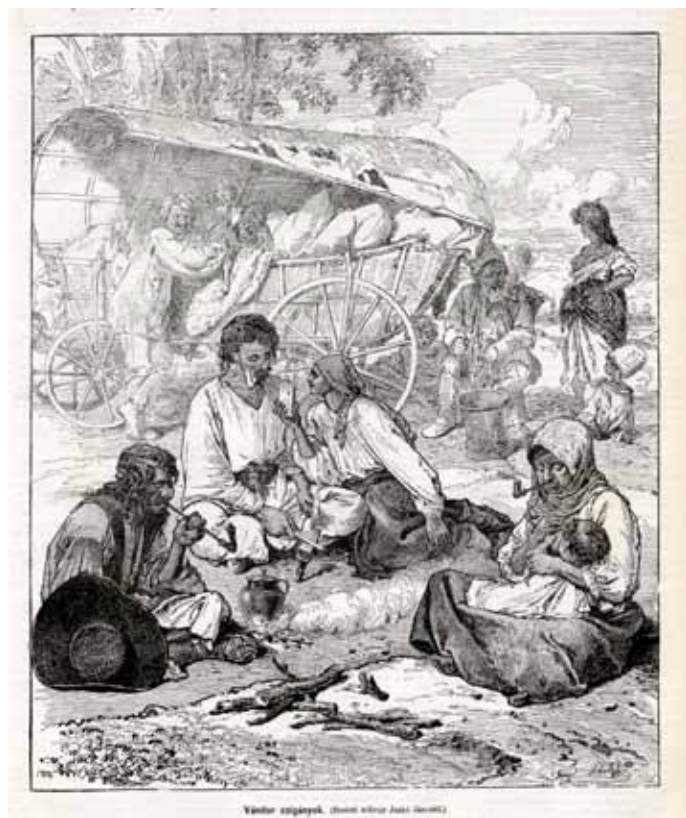
Picture 6. Wanderer Gypsy family
Vasárnapi Újság (Sunday Magazine), 1864, page 93.

The authentic tools of the gypsy smith can be well identified in Picture 7. This picture was made by the Frenchman Theodore Valério, who did a study tour in Hungary in the middle of the 19th century to create an album on the Hungarian village life. Being a foreigner Valério didn't share the visual stereotypes with the Hungarian colleagues, so he created lithographs without those stereotypes. That fact helps us to use his data as clues for identifying the authentic details.



Picture 7.
Hungarian
Gypsy black-
smith
Theodore
Valério, 1854

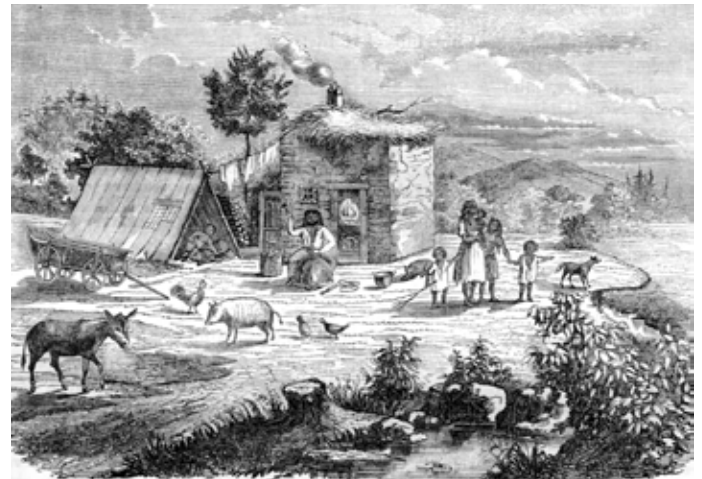
With that we can prove the authenticity of Picture 8. This picture made by the well known artist János Jankó¹² is a noteworthy one. The abundance of the visual stereotypes indicates a studio origin, and it is clear that the artist wanted to meet the visual preconceptions of the contemporary viewer. But the four figures in the front clearly seem to be made after photos¹³, and the details are based on personal experience. The broad helmet of the man in the left side indicates Wlach (Rumanian) Gypsy tribe, so the mother with her baby in the right side, while her pipe could be later amendment to fulfill the needs of stereotyping¹⁴. It is almost sure that the smith in the middle was created after photograph or after in situ delineation, and can be well compared with the mentioned lithograph of Valerio. Taking into consideration that some other pictures depict the same set of tools, we can identify these tools as authentic. Here we have a well composed picture that depicts quite well the everyday life of a 19th century Hungarian wanderer Gypsy blacksmith family.



Picture 8. Wanderer Gypsies
Magyarország és a Nagyvilág (Hungary and the World), 1871, page 453.

Another etching (Picture 9.) bears a very interesting and important information. We can at first glance realize that the creator of this picture was not a practiced artist, the composition is quite conventional. Even so, in spite of the limited artistic quality or just because of it we feel the air of authenticity. The main figure of the composition is the smith, who is working in front of a forge, around him farm animals indicating a kind of a settled way of life. Quite noticeable

is that the family lives in a tent, but they use a fire-place built of brick. This can be considered an important document of the wanderer gypsy lifestyle. By the visual information it tells us that the gypsy wandering didn't mean traveling all time, but from time to time settling down in a place for weeks or even months (no one builds such a forge only for a day or two), and moving only when there is no more work to do.



Picture 9. Pictures from the country life - Gypsy farm
Vasárnapi Újság (Sunday Magazine) 1861, page 136.

Attitude of the majority society

While identifying an authentic set of gypsy smith's tools, demonstrating the appearance and disappearance of the Kalderash tribe in Hungary, clarifying the connection of the gypsy tradition of clearness-unclearness with the erotic ideas of others can be done more or less exactly, proving the altering attitude of the majority society towards the gypsies is much more a subjective matter. Even so we can do it, by the analysis of the pictures we can get valuable outcomes.



Picture 10. Pictures from the country life - Gypsy brickmakers
Vasárnapi Újság (Sunday Magazine) 1862, page 557.

In Hungary it was the sixties of the 19th century when most illustrated magazines started, so gypsies in magazine-illustrations started to appear in that period too. If we glance at those first pictures, we will find an attitude of acceptance towards gypsies. They appear as regular, well known figures of the rural life. An example is Picture 10., in which we can see a gypsy family that makes sun dried bricks on the brink of a village. Not a single detail of the attitude of rejection can be detected on this picture, on the contrary we can feel the air of normality, even friendliness. It is out of question that there were (sometimes severe) conflicts between gypsies and others at that time, but this picture and many contemporary others show the idea of looking at the gypsies as interesting (or even exotic) parts of the well-organized, beautiful world of God.



Picture 12. Fox dance
Magyar Salon (Hungarian Salon), 1885/86, page 248.



Picture 11. Tent-dweller gypsies with the gendarme
Vasárnapi Újság (Sunday Magazine), 1894. page 108.

Just ten years pass, and the gendarme appears in picture (Picture 11.) questioning the gypsies. The situation shows definite difference between them: the gendarme sits on horseback, looking downward, while the gypsies are standing barefooted on the ground, ready to answer the raised questions. The naked kid (the *purdé*, as Gypsy kids were and sometimes even today are called in Hungary) seems to be afraid of the gendarme's dog. There is no specific indication of any conflict, but we feel that something changed.

Let us proceed a decade. Picture 12. shows another sit-

uation. This picture is a proof of the altering relations between Hungarians and Gypsies. The situation is commonplace existing even till now: for a penny the Gypsy kid is dancing the famous fox dance¹⁵. The jovial, well-to-do peasant couple looks at the dark, skinny child, as he is doing his job almost naked, with his brother and sister as skinny as he is at the background. This picture is not an evidence of the real Gypsy life, but the new attitude of the majority. If we leave the 19th century, in the magazine-illustrations we will meet the direct rejection as well – but it is another chapter of the story.

Summary

As a conclusion, let me underline again: though using pictures as historian's evidence is a new method, and its methodology is not ready yet, there is no doubt that the achievements of the visual anthropology offer a basic contribution to the science of history. We are living in the age of iconic turn; historians have to renew their forgotten capacity of reading pictures. All scientists have to realize that it is not a question of their decision. Iconic turn is a fact, and the only thing we can do with fact is to accept them.

Footnotes

1. Peter Burke: *Eyewitnessing. The Use of Images as Historical Evidence*. London, 2001. p. 103-117.

2. There is no final consensus on the terms of this matter, icon-anthropology, visual anthropology and picture-anthropology is used for the same meaning.

3. Adult barefooted, sitting in the field, musician, absence of head-dress, tent and hovel, naked child, cauldron, noble-like dress, cart, ragged dress, vlach-gypsy dress, metal craft, horse, woman piping, erotic moment, chaffering, kalderash dress, soothsaying and wizardry, wood craft, brush-making, thievery, sun-dried brick making, gold washing, horse-dealing – in order of frequency.

4. To my opinion visual stereotypes have a role in visual communication to a certain extent that the words have in written communication – to explain this idea would need another study.

5. There is no consensus on how the different levels of the division of the Gypsy community should be called: clan, tribe and group are used among others.

6. In Hungary or, better to say, in Central-Europe there are three main (and some minor) Gypsy groups: the so called Romungros (descendants of Gypsies living in Hungary since several centuries, and having a Hungarian-influenced Gypsy language), the Beash tribe (having an unknown origin, living in Hungary since the 18th century and speaking an ancient version of the Romanian language) and the Olah/Wlah Gypsies (descendants of Gypsies immigrated from Romanian territories – Moldavia and Walachia, partly Transylvania – mainly in the

19th century and speaking a Romanian-influenced Gypsy language). The third itself was and partly is divided into several tribes, as Lovari, Kalderash, Cholari, etc. All main groups and sub-groups have their own traditions.

7. Jerzy Ficowski: *The Gypsies in Poland, 1989*, no place of publication indicated.

8. The Kalderash (from the Romanian word caldera – cauldron) is one of the most remarkable tribe of the so-called Wlach-romani gypsies. Contemporary sources described them as proud, well-to-do people, who kept their integrity in any country they visited.

9. Isabel Fonseca: *Burly me standing*. Page 71.

10. Most Hungarian Gypsy women wear long skirt even presently, not knowing anymore what tradition they keep with it.

11. Since the body of the young child is all over clear the kids are allowed to be naked.

12. Hungarian painter and graphic artist, 1833-1896.

13. In the second half of the 19th century many painters used photography as an excellent tool to collect motives and details.

14. In Hungary that time women were not allowed to smoke pipe (even today it is considered definitely not womanish), and depicting a woman with pipe was an unambiguous sign of her being a gypsy.

15. In reality foxdance is not a certain folkdance, but an unclear idea of the male gypsy dance: something exotic, wild, virtuoso. In Hungary everybody, even the gypsies know about it but there are no general rules; if they dance it, they do it in their own way.

