

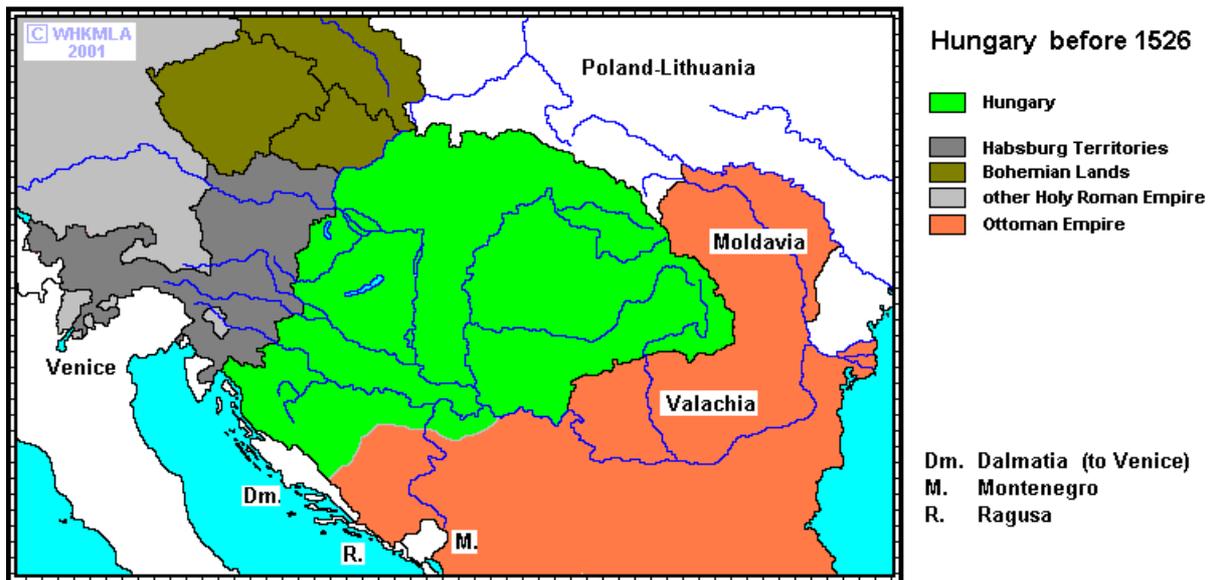
# THE EDICT OF TORDA

By Mike McPhee

[This is the text of an Address given at the Sydney Unitarian Church on 25 February 2018.]

At a time when Unitarians everywhere have joined with our confreres in Transylvania and Hungary to celebrate the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Edict of Torda, it is fitting that we revisit that pivotal event in the history of our denomination. It was on 12 January 1568 that Prince John II Sigismund of Transylvania issued that Edict, persuaded by the arguments of the Unitarian bishop, Francis Dávid, which affirmed the religious freedom of all of his Catholic and Protestant subjects.

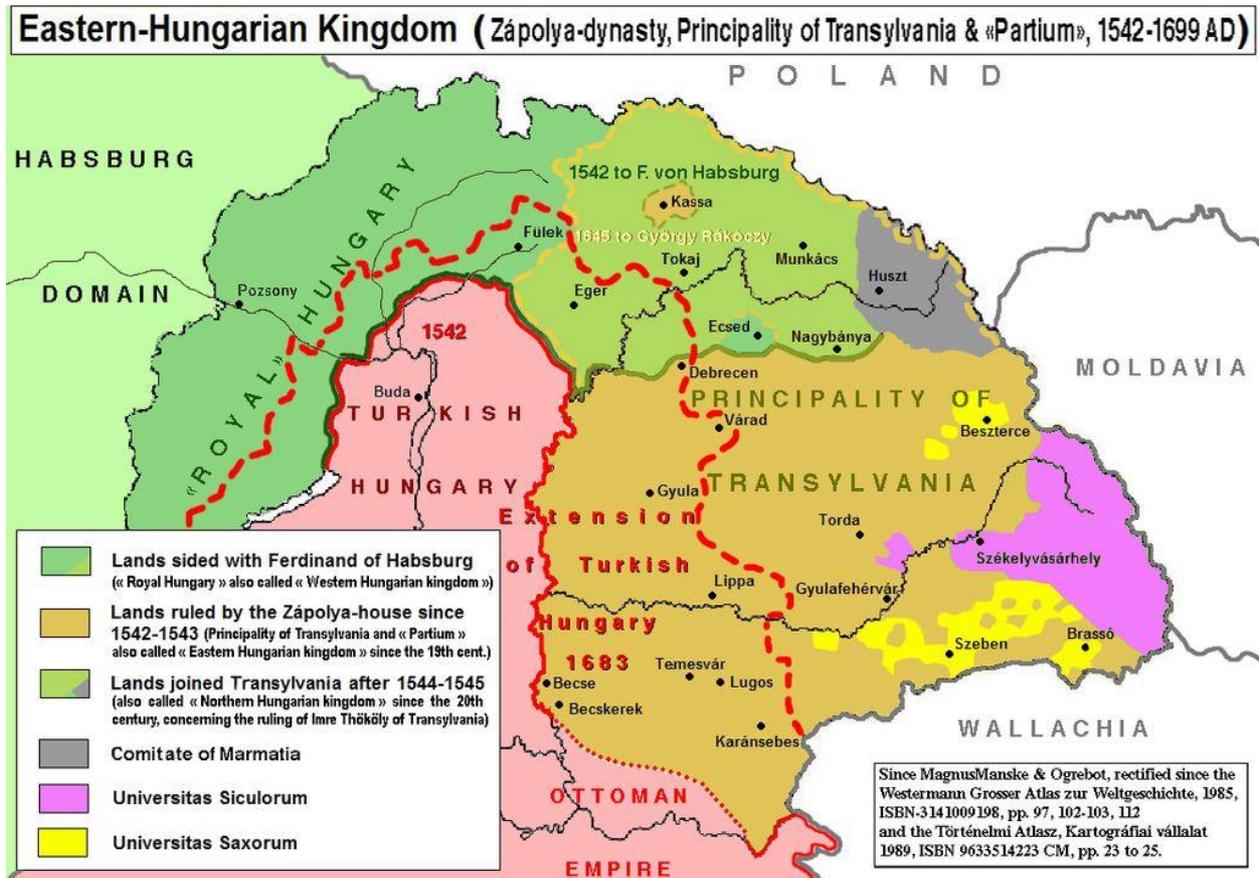
I have spoken on this event and the history of the Transylvanian church before but, this time, I want to look at that period in greater detail. Of particular importance today will be the critical geopolitical situation that was unfolding in Central Europe at that time. In order to do that, it must be understood how different the map of Europe looked in the mid-1550s.



The Kingdom of Hungary was much larger in 1500 than the country we know, taking in Slovakia, Croatia, parts of Serbia and, of course, Transylvania, which is now part of Romania. However, the Ottoman Empire was by then the second most populous state in the world and, with its powerful armies, had been expanding in the Balkans for almost two centuries. Under the personal command of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, the Hungarian fortress of Belgrade was taken in 1521, followed by the disastrous Battle of Mohács in 1526, in which King Louis II was killed. The Ottomans then invaded central Hungary and sacked Buda, the capital, before withdrawing to the south.



The Hungarian crown was then claimed by Archduke Ferdinand I of Austria (left), who was married to Louis II's sister, and by John Zápolya (right), the viceroy of Transylvania. The western magnates elected Ferdinand as king and he subsequently acquired his predecessors' titles in Croatia and Bohemia. Zápolya was crowned by the eastern and Transylvanian nobility with Suleiman's support, so he was able to make Buda his capital.



With the help of his brother, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, Ferdinand captured Buda and other centres on the Danube in 1527. Zápolya counter-attacked, but he lost two battles in the northeast of the country and had to retreat to Transylvania. Suleiman returned in 1529, recaptured Buda and besieged Vienna. The siege failed and a second incursion in 1532 was stopped before it reached the Austrian border, after which there was no further conflict for nine years. However, Christian Europe was now acutely aware of the threat the Ottomans posed to their countries.



Reinstated in Buda, King John I Zápolya married Isabella Jagiellon, the daughter of King Sigismund I of Poland, in 1539. He died the next year, two weeks after Isabella gave birth to a son, who was quickly declared King John II Sigismund. Again, Ferdinand attacked and, again, Suleiman repelled his forces – this time, he annexed Central Hungary and allocated the remainder to John Sigismund under his own suzerainty.

The infant king had four regents, principally his mother and George Martinuzzi, Bishop of Várad, who had been his father's treasurer and continued in that capacity. Isabella and her son moved to her late husband's estate at Lippa and then to Gyulafehérvár at the behest of the Transylvanians. It was there that Isabella invited some Saxon Lutherans from Kronstadt (now Braşov) in 1544 to debate the local Catholic priests before herself and Martinuzzi, much to the latter's discomfiture.

Unfortunately, this was a period of great intrigues, double-dealing and treaties signed in bad faith. Martinuzzi became convinced that Suleiman meant to annex Transylvania and, after negotiating with Ferdinand's envoy, he coerced Isabella into abdicating on her son's behalf in 1551. Ironically, Ferdinand came to suspect Martinuzzi of colluding with Suleiman and had him murdered later in that year.

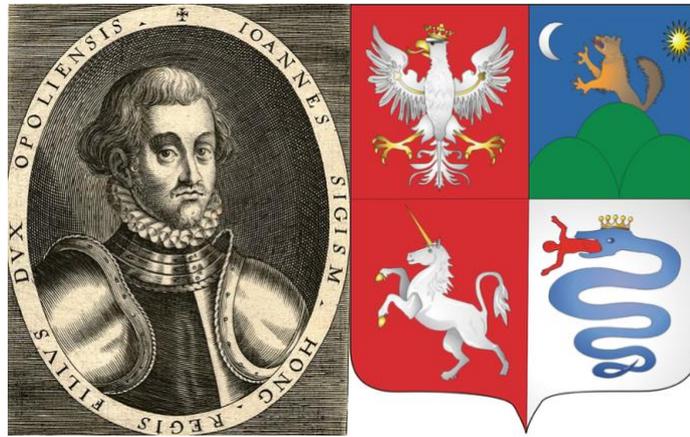


Isabella and her son went to live in Poland, where her brother, Sigismund II Augustus, was now king. Young John Sigismund was tutored by two humanist scholars, Mihály Csáky, who had left Transylvania with him, and Wojciech Nowopołski of Poland. It was the latter who aroused the youth's interest in theological debates. The Polish king was sympathetic to John Sigismund's claim to the Hungarian crown but, in 1553, he married Catherine of Austria, a daughter of Ferdinand I, and he took a neutral stance after that.



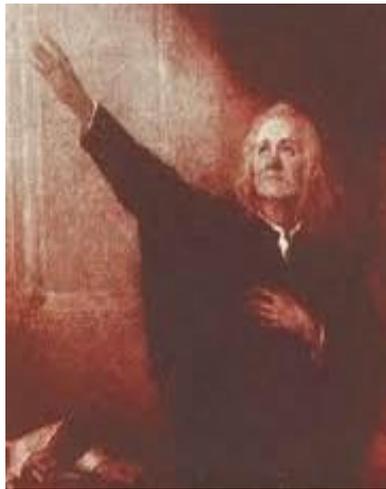
Meanwhile, Ferdinand had found Transylvania a difficult place to control, such was the level of support for John Sigismund. Suleiman the Magnificent (left) wrote to Isabella in 1553, urging her and her son to return, and gave two strategic fortresses to Count Péter Petrovics, a former regent who had risen against Ferdinand. His request was supported by his ally, Francis II of France (right), who even offered to marry one of his daughters to John Sigismund.

In 1555, Suleiman demanded that the Transylvanian lords acknowledge John Sigismund as their king and they, in turn, petitioned Ferdinand to either send reinforcements or release them from their oath of fealty to him. Petrovics stormed into Transylvania in early 1556 and the Diet swore fealty to John Sigismund, sending envoys to Poland to ask Isabella and her son to return. Ferdinand then informed Suleiman that he was withdrawing his troops from the region.



John Sigismund and his mother were welcomed with great pomp and ceremony in Transylvania's principal city of Kolozsvár on 22 October 1556. The Diet confirmed Isabella's regency, as her son was still a minor, after which several counties to the west of Transylvania rejoined his kingdom. They ruled from Gyulafehérvár, as that had been the political capital during most of this time.

Isabella adopted a tolerant policy toward religion, which enabled Calvinism to spread in her son's domain. Yet, she also started negotiations with Ferdinand to the effect that he could be the King of Hungary, provided that John Sigismund kept his domain as a principality and married one of his daughters. However, nothing came of this, as Isabella died in 1559 and John Sigismund ruled in his own capacity from that time onward.



While all of this had been going on, a young preacher had returned to his birthplace of Kolozsvár in about 1542, after having studied at Wittenberg and Frankfurt an der Oder in the German states of the Holy Roman Empire. Ferenc Dávid, whom we call Francis David, was born in about 1520 to Catholic parents and educated in that faith, both at home and in the German universities.



However, Dávid soon learned about the Lutheran reformer, Johannes Honter (left)), who had been preaching in Transylvania since 1533 and had arrived in Kolozsvár in 1542. He was also influenced in the longer term by Gáspár Heltai (right), his brother's father-in-law, who was a Lutheran at the time. He joined that movement, becoming a minister and then a bishop, while working as a high school headmaster. By 1557, he was the chief pastor of Kolozsvár.

Dávid's pursuit of the authentic Biblical Christianity was an ongoing process and, by 1559 (the year of John Sigismund's accession), he concluded that Jean Calvin's doctrines were more consistent with Scripture. He went over to the Reformed Church and was elected as the bishop of the combined non-Catholic Hungarian churches in Transylvania. He tried to reconcile the two Protestant factions but, when they formally split in 1564, he became the Calvinist bishop.



Events took a sudden turn in 1563, with the arrival of the controversial physician, Giorgio Biandrata (better known as Blandrata). Born in Italy in 1515, he specialised in the nervous disorders of women, which commended him to numerous positions with royalty and other wealthy people all over Europe. He had come to an anti-trinitarian position, probably in Geneva in 1557, where he had dealings with Jean Calvin. In 1558, he became the court physician of the Italian queen dowager of Poland, where he also argued in the churches against the suppression of unorthodox opinions.

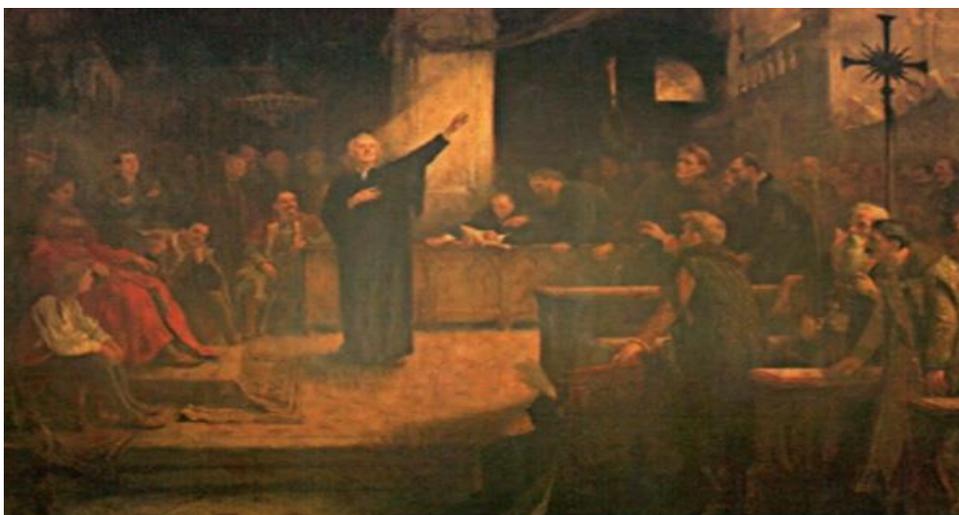
When his patroness died, Blandrata moved to Transylvania, where some of her daughters were married to local princes. He then became court physician to John Sigismund, and it was he who recommended Francis Dávid to be the king's court preacher – the irony of which we shall soon see. The king had an interest in theological debate and a practical concern about sectarian tensions in his kingdom, so he gave Dávid access to the royal library for his research, followed in 1567 by a printing house in the capital.



By 1565, Dávid had come to a more critical view of Calvinist dogma, as well. He saw religious reformation as an ongoing process of successive evolutionary steps toward the perfect truth. In his preaching, Dávid continued to scrutinise the precepts of Christianity, keeping only those which originated from the Bible and were conceivable by reason. Unable to find any reference to the Holy Spirit or the Trinity in the Bible, he rejected both as human inventions. With Biandrata, he co-authored polemic writings against Trinitarianism, the most important of which was *De falsa et vera unius Dei Patris, Filii et Spiritus Sancti cognitione* (False and True Knowledge of the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit).



With the king's permission, a series of debates were held across the country between 1566 and 1571, mainly between the Nontrinitarians (as the Unitarians called themselves at that time) and a united front of Lutherans and Calvinists, led by the aforementioned Gáspár Heltai. Dávid did well in the debates, winning a decision at the Synod of Torda in 1566 that the only definitive basis of the Christian faith was the Apostolic Creed. The next debate in that year was at Gyulafehérvár (presumably in the Royal Palace), where the question of the Trinity was openly raised for the first time. The third such event was held in Marosvásárhely.



**Painting by Aladár Körösfői-Kriesch, 1896**

The Protestants had consistently argued in those debates that their faiths should be the official religion of the country, whereas Dávid had maintained that all Christian faiths should have equal recognition and protection. In January 1568, King John Sigismund brought his entire Diet and court to Torda, ironically using the local Catholic church as the meeting place. After a week of proceedings, in which Dávid argued fervently for toleration and freedom of conscience, the Diet approved a motion to that effect, which the king made official as the Edict of Torda on 13 January:

*“Our Royal Majesty, as he had decided at the previous debates within his country about matters of religion, confirms as well at the present Diet that every orator shall preach the gospel by his own (personal) conception, at any place if that community is willing to accept him, or if it isn't, no one should force him just because their soul is not satisfied with him; but a community can keep such a preacher whose teachings are delightful. And no one, neither superintendents nor others, may hurt a preacher by this or by the previous constitutions; no one may be blamed because of their religion. No one is allowed to threaten others with prison or divest anyone of their office because of their profession: because faith is God's gift born from hearing and this hearing is conceived by the word of God.”*

While the focus of the Edict was more on congregations than on individuals, and its provisions did not extend to Orthodox Christians, Jews or Muslims, it is still seen as the first proclamation of its kind in the history of the world. Even more significant was its recognition of such a radically different denomination as Nontrinitarianism, which would have been anathema anywhere else in Europe at that time. (It should be added that John Sigismund had followed Dávid's path from Catholicism to Lutheranism to Calvinism, finally becoming a Nontrinitarian in 1567.)



Rather than putting an end to the debates, the Edict actually made them more popular, and Dávid insisted that they be conducted in Hungarian (rather than Latin) so more people could understand them. Further, the proceedings were published, so they could be read all over Transylvania and Hungary, as well. The best known events were at Gyulafehérvár in March 1568 and at Nagyvárad in October 1569, both of which lasted for a week or more.

The Unitarians (while still not using that name) acquired a school in Kolozsvár which, with the support of the king and the city, Dávid developed into a college of high standing. His printing house published books of his sermons, a Unitarian Hymnbook, and pamphlets from the works of both local and foreign Unitarian writers. The new religion spread quickly across the country and even into Hungary, winning over aristocrats, Protestant ministers and even Gáspár Heltai, Dávid's main opponent in the earlier debates.

Holy Roman Emperor, Ferdinand I, died in 1564 and was succeeded by his son, Maximilian II. In 1570, John II Sigismund came to an accommodation with Maximilian, whereunder the latter became King of Hungary while John Sigismund would be the Prince of Transylvania. Unfortunately, he died in 1571 from injuries sustained when his carriage overturned – and without an heir.



The Diet elected István Báthory (left) as the *Voivode* (governor) of Transylvania, though he later called himself its prince. Báthory was a Catholic and he promptly dismissed Dávid and Blandrata from his court; the Unitarian printing house was confiscated and all religious publications were subjected to censorship. In 1572, Báthory proclaimed the Law of Innovation, which forbade any further religious reforms. He became the king of Poland in 1576 and was succeeded in Transylvania by his brother, Kristóf Báthory (right), who proceeded with the Catholic Counter-Reformation. The Unitarian Church remained a recognised denomination, however, with Dávid as its bishop, but it was only allowed to hold synods in Kolozsvár and Torda.

When Dávid first concluded that the Holy Spirit did not exist, he left the question open as to how literally ‘God, the Son’ should be taken. However, by the mid-1570s, he came to reject infant baptism and praying to God through the mediation of a non-divine Jesus. This left a truly unitary conception of God, which horrified Biandrata to the point that the two men parted company. Not only was the latter insistent about the divinity of Christ, he also feared that the denomination would be disestablished under the Law of Innovation.



Biandrata wrote to his fellow Italian, Fausto Sozzini, asking him to come from his Swiss refuge in Basel, and dissuade Dávid from his ‘Judaic’ views. Better known to us as Faustus Socinus, he had developed an anti-trinitarian viewpoint while living in Lyons and Geneva in the early 1560s. Biandrata had read his treatise, published in Basel in 1576, in which he attributed official, but not essential, deity to Jesus. This meant that, whomever prayers were addressed to, they were transmitted to God through Christ’s mediation. While this was not Biandrata’s view, he still saw Socinus as the best man to remonstrate with Dávid.

Socinus arrived in Transylvania in 1578 and did his best for over four months to change Dávid’s mind, but the older man only became more critical of the worship of Christ in his sermons. Moreover, the synod held at Torda in that year confirmed the principle of free inquiry and declared that the Law of Innovation was not being violated by the questioning of matters which the church had not yet decided.



In 1579, Blandrata denounced Dávid to Prince Kristóf, who was happy for the excuse to ban Dávid from preaching, place him under house arrest and bring his case before the Diet. He was tried for ‘blasphemous innovation’ at Gyulaférvár and sentenced to life imprisonment in the Fortress of Déva, in the far south of the country. (It must be stressed that Socinus left for Poland as soon as Dávid was denounced and took no part in his trial. He spent the rest of his life there, founding what became a thriving Unitarian movement that later spread to Western Europe.)

Already ill from months of house arrest, Francis Dávid died five months later, having carved the following words into the wall of his cell:

*“Neither the sword of popes, nor the cross, nor the image of death – nothing will halt the march of truth. I wrote what I felt and that is what I preached with trusting spirit. I am convinced that after my destruction the teachings of the false prophets will collapse.”*

Blandrata was reviled in Unitarian circles for his role in Dávid's imprisonment and death. He reverted to Catholicism and is thought to have died, possibly by murder, in 1588. The second Unitarian bishop was György Enyedi, elected in 1592 and later known as the 'Unitarian Plato' for his writings. However, he died only five years later and the Transylvanian Church, which once had 425 parishes, declined under increasing persecution in the 1600s. However, it did survive, whereas the denomination in Hungary disappeared completely until it was revived by Transylvanian immigrants almost 300 years later.

We can deplore the fact that the Unitarian 'golden age' in Transylvania was so short-lived and ask ourselves what might have happened if Prince John Sigismund and Francis Dávid had lived longer than they did. In my opinion, the forces of reaction were so powerful at that time that the end result would have been essentially the same. In any case, the Edict of Torda still stands as a landmark of religious freedom that all Unitarians should be proud of and it is no disgrace to be the descendants of a movement that was born ahead of its time.