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GÉZA ALFÖLDY AND RONALD SYME: A CASE STUDY

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyse Ronald Syme's view of History through the work of one of his best and most insightful critics, Professor Géza Alföldy. The two historians maintained a personal and professional relationship for a quarter of a century. This enabled Alföldy to understand the intricacies of the entire body of work of the Camden Professor of Ancient History at the University of Oxford as few others have done, thereby becoming one of his finest critics.

Key words

Ronald Syme, Géza Alföldy, Roman History, Historiography

Géza Alföldy (1935-2011), the German historian of Hungarian origin, was one of the best and most insightful critics of Ronald Syme's (1903-1989) work. Syme, Camden Professor of Ancient History at Oxford for over twenty years (1949-1970), is one of the most important twentieth-century historians of Roman Antiquity¹.

Born in 1903 in Eltham, New Zealand, Ronald Syme, from a young age onwards, stood out for his exceptional talent for classical and modern languages. He spent most of his academic life teaching and researching at Oxford. From 1929 to 1949, he was Fellow of Trinity College. Between 1942 and 1945 he was Professor of Classical Philology at Istanbul. In 1949, he moved to Brasenose College, where he succeeded Hugh Last as Camden Professor until his retirement in 1970. As Fellow of Wolfson College, he continued publishing until the end of his life.

Even though Géza Alföldy belonged to a younger generation, from 1965 onwards he and Syme entertained a personal and professional friendship based on their mutual interests in many aspects of their profession. The purpose of this paper is to discuss Ronald Syme's view of History by examining Alföldy's four most representative texts in which he analyses some key aspects of Syme's historiographical work.

These four texts – an in-depth review and three articles – cover a fourteen-year period. The first is a 1979 review and discussion of the first two volumes of Syme's „Roman Papers” (hereafter RP), which had recently been published in Oxford and edited by Ernst Badian, one of Syme's most important pupils². The second, a work published in 1983 in the proceedings of the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences, was first presented in its initial

¹ Numerous notes and biographical sketches have been written about Sir Ronald Syme. Particularly useful are the following: G. Bowersock, *The Emperor of Roman History*, The New York Review of Books, 6 March 1980, pp. 8-13; A. Birley, *Sir Ronald Syme*, The Independent, 7 September 1989; K. Christ, *Ronald Syme*, Neue Profile der Alten Geschichte, Darmstadt, 1990, pp. 188-247; G. Bowersock, *Ronald Syme 1903-1989*, Proceedings of the British Academy 84, 1994, pp. 539-563. See also F. Millar, *Style Abides*, Journal of Roman Studies 71, 1981, pp. 144-152; M.T. Griffin, *Sir Ronald Syme 1903-1989*, Journal of Roman Studies 80, 1990, pp. 11-14; V. Alonso Troncoso, *Desesperadamente ajeno: Sir Ronald Syme and The Roman Revolution*, Estudios Clásicos 97, 1990, pp. 77-92 and T.P. Wiseman, *Late Syme. A Study in Historiography*, [in:] idem (ed.), *Roman Drama and Roman History*, Exeter 1998, pp. 135-152. See finally G.A. García Vivas, *Ronald Syme. El camino hasta La Revolución Romana (1928-1939)*, Col-ecciò Instrumenta 54, Barcelona 2016. On Géza Alföldy, see: A.R. Birley, *Lo storico dell'esercito e delle province*, [in:] S. Fernández Martín et al. (eds.), *Eredità di un maestro. Géza Alföldy, storico del mondo romano*, Opuscula Epigraphica, 15, 2013, pp. 53-60 and 79-94.

² G. Alföldy, *Review-discussion. Ronald Syme, Roman Papers*, ed. E. Badian, 1-2, Oxford 1979, *American Journal of Ancient History* 4, 1979, pp. 167-185.

version by Alföldy in May the previous year³. The third article appeared the same year in „Gerión” and is based on a lecture given by Alföldy in Düsseldorf in 1982⁴. Lastly, we shall turn to a text published by Alföldy in the Italian journal „Athenaeum in” 1993⁵.

At the outset of Alföldy’s important review in the „American Journal of Ancient History”⁶ he welcomed the publication of the first two volumes of the RP – ultimately followed by five additional volumes – which represent a milestone for research into the history of Rome. This is all the more laudable considering Sir Ronald’s prolific output which spans almost three hundred articles and more than twenty monographs⁷.

This leads us to the issue of the chronological period which is covered by the corpus of Syme’s work. He studied Roman history from the end of the Republic to the turn of the fifth century AD, more precisely, the period from Julius Caesar to Antoninus Pius, while at times casting a backward glance to Marius or Sulla and looking forward to the period of the *Historia Augusta*, a source to which he devoted particular attention during the final decades of his career.

1. SYME’S RESEARCH TOPICS

Which research topics were of particular importance to Syme? According to Alföldy, the leitmotiv of Syme’s lifelong research was the analysis of the dominant group, the governing class, and how this elite wielded power, its mentality and the interactions of its members. He analysed the intellectual stimuli of this elite, to whom literature played a vital role. Syme’s narrative history should not be considered an *histoire événementielle*, in the sense of

³ Idem, Sir Ronald Syme, Die römische Revolution und die deutsche Althistorie, Sitz. Der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse 1, 1983, pp. 5-42.

⁴ Idem, La Historia Antigua y la investigación del fenómeno histórico, Gerión 1, 1983, pp. 39-61. On the bottom of the first page of all articles in this first issue of the journal, the stated year of publication is 1984 – a typographical or proofreading error. This actually corresponds to the publication year of the second issue of Gerión.

⁵ Idem, Two Principles: Augustus and Sir Ronald Syme, Athenaeum 81, 1993, pp. 101-122. This was based on the lecture given by Alföldy at Wolfson College (Oxford) in 1991, as the first annual Ronald Syme lecture.

⁶ Idem, Review, pp. 167.

⁷ An extensive bibliography on Syme from 1928 onwards, including his posthumous publications appear in the appendix to these two articles: A.M. Devine, Sir Ronald Syme (1903-1989): A Roman Post Mortem, The Ancient World 20, 1989, pp. 67-75; and Sir Ronald Syme and The Roman Revolution, The Ancient World 20, 1989, pp. 77-92.

the French school of the *Annales*. Quite to the contrary, Ronald Syme wrote *political history* and this political history was also *social history*. In his analysis of Syme's *Geschichtsschreibung*, Alföldy always defended this view of Syme as a political and social historian. The author of this paper fully concurs with Alföldy on this point⁸.

The role played by the ruling class in the Roman Empire is the central issue throughout Syme's work. He was a historian whose literary style can be described in words that he equally attributed to Edward Gibbon: „He was fortunate in discovering a historical theme of high import that was congenial to his tastes and not beyond his talents”⁹.

Syme's subject of research remained practically unchanged for over sixty years, acting as a recurring *perpetuum mobile*. It can be stated that all of his monographs, articles, and reviews were written to demonstrate the crucial role played by the governing oligarchy throughout the entire history of Rome.

In the aforementioned review, Alföldy provides keys to Syme's approach to historical fact, applying them judiciously to the first two volumes of the RP.

Syme was a true expert in classifying and studying the elite's political careers. He was a master in the *Grundlagenforschung* of the prosopographical method, a dry and difficult technique¹⁰. He was possibly the greatest authority of his time in the prosopographic technique. In the volumes analysed by Alföldy, this mastery is well illustrated in the following articles: „Who was Decidius Saxa”, „Who was Veditius Pollio” or „The wrong Marcus Turbo”¹¹. Syme's interest in prosopography – which he transmitted to Alföldy – led him to pay special attention to the geographical origins of the members of the ruling class.

Syme, a New Zealander by birth, and Alföldy, originally from Hungary, had a number of traits in common. They both came from the periphery.

⁸G. Alföldy, Review, pp. 168.

⁹R. Syme, How Gibbon came to History, [in:] P. Ducrey (ed.), *Gibbon et Rome à la lumière de l'historiographie moderne*, Geneva 1977, pp. 48 (reprinted in RP III, pp. 969-976).

¹⁰On the prosopographic method, see: L. Stone, *Prosopography*, *Daedalus* 100, 1, 1971, pp. 46-79. Applied to the history of Rome, see: C. Nicolet, *Prosopographie et histoire sociale: Rome et l'Italie à l'époque républicaine*, *Annales* 5, 1970, pp. 1209-1228. On Syme and his role in developing prosopography: A. Caballos, *La técnica prosopográfica en la Historia Antigua. Ante la pérdida de Sir Ronald Syme*, *Veleia* 7, 1990, pp. 189-207.

¹¹R. Syme, Who was Decidius Saxa?, *Journal of Roman Studies* 27, 1937, pp. 127-137; idem, Who was Veditius Pollio?, *Journal of Roman Studies* 51, 1961, pp. 23-30 and idem, The wrong Marcus Turbo, *Journal of Roman Studies* 52, 1962, pp. 87-96.

Therefore, both showed great interest in researching the lives of senators and civil servants from the provinces of the Empire. Syme referred to them as „Colonial elites”¹². Senators from Narbonese Gaul as well as those from the Hispanic provinces were always of great interest to Syme, a penchant shared with Alföldy. For Syme, Alföldy notes, this interest also entailed sociological and psychological aspects given that Syme always insisted upon the following: the meritocratic system of the Roman imperial epoch depended on both the capability of individuals as well as their belonging to and receiving support from a group or „lobby” determined by the geographical origins of its members. As can be observed, Syme’s personal experiences and the fact that he came from the antipodes are of enormous importance in explaining his research interests¹³.

For Alföldy, Syme’s most striking example epitomizing Roman aristocracy during the Empire was the *homo novus*:

the „new man” from the rising upper classes of „provincial” Northern Italy and of some provinces who devoted himself with extreme vigour and engagement to the government of the Empire and at the same time to the preservation of the *mos maiorum*¹⁴.

The evaluation of the sociopolitical interrelations of the various magnates and their family nuclei has always been central for Syme. Therefore, the influences of a German, Friedrich Münzer (1868-1942), and Matthias Gelzer (1886-1974), a German of Swiss origin, were fundamental in the Symean opus at first, from the mid-1930s and particularly until 1939, the publication year of „The Roman Revolution” (hereafter RR). We should not forget that during the first decade of Syme’s investigations he focused mainly on military history. Although it may be difficult to understand from a present-day perspective, when „The Roman Revolution” was published Syme was widely respected and known in academic circles as a reputable military historian¹⁵.

¹²Syme dedicated a volume to these elites in which he carried out an important exercise in comparative history: idem, *Colonial Elites: Rome, Spain and the Americas*, Oxford 1958.

¹³Indeed, Syme began writing a book on the condition of the provincial at Rome in 1934. One year later, when the manuscript had almost been finished, he put it aside to begin working on „The Roman Revolution”. This book is of crucial importance to understand the early Syme and has been superbly edited and published by Anthony Birley: R. Syme, *The Provincial at Rome: And, Rome and the Balkans 80 BC-AD14*, A. Birley (ed.), Exeter 1999 (hereafter TPR). Regarding the latter see the monograph by this author: G.A. García Vivas, Ronald Syme, Ch. 4.

¹⁴G. Alföldy, Review, pp.170.

¹⁵Arnaldo Momigliano cryptically alludes to this evolution of Syme in his well known, early review: A. Momigliano, Ronald Syme: *The Roman Revolution*, *Journal of Roman Studies* 30, 1940, pp. 75: „It is premature to guess how far Mr. Syme will go in this evolution of a *moralist historian*

In the two first volumes of the RP, Syme highlighted the special importance of the *Fasti*. Alföldy stressed the relevance of the relationship of consuls and provincial governors as a fundamental framework for mapping the social history of the period. The *Fasti* are a primary source which sheds light on the structure and development of imperial administration, and they reveal the changes that took place during the first century AD, particularly in the composition of the governing class. Examples of Syme's work on this particular aspect include his review of Attilio Degrassi's *I fasti consolari dell'Impero Romano* and his brilliant work on the consulates held by the legates of the pretorian provinces *in absentia*¹⁶. But as Alföldy observes: „Syme's Roman History is not identical with the whole history of Rome”¹⁷. According to Alföldy, there are several aspects of Roman history which did not seem to interest Syme: religion, the economy, society's least privileged social strata or the study of *Staatsrecht*, Roman law.

The author of this paper partially disagrees, and unlike Alföldy, suggests that Syme was drawn to the study of certain religious issues. Indeed, he even dedicated a monograph to the subject, yet from a prosopographic perspective¹⁸.

Granted, the study of artistic language and its symbols was not among Syme's priorities. In fact, as Alföldy explains in his 1993 article¹⁹, it was only possible to find an equivalent to RR in the field of Art History after the publication of Paul Zanker's seminal „Augustus und die Macht der Bilder”²⁰.

A few years before the publication of RR, two of Andreas Alföldi's (1895-1981) key works had come out. In Alföldy's opinion, which I share, these are just as important for research on specific aspects of the Principate and are comparable to Mommsen's or Syme's own writings. In both works – of utmost importance – aspects of „images” and symbols of the period have

from a first-class researcher in military history”. On these issues, see G.A. García Vivas, Ronald Syme, especially Ch. 8: Conclusiones.

¹⁶R. Syme, Review of A. Degrassi *I fasti consolari dell'Impero Romano dal 30 avanti Cristo al 613 dopo Cristo*, *Journal of Roman Studies* 43, 1953, pp. 148-161; idem, *Consulates in absence*, *Journal of Roman Studies* 48, 1958, pp. 1-9.

¹⁷G. Alföldy, *Review*, p. 177.

¹⁸R. Syme, *Some Arval Brethren*, Oxford 1980. For a similar point of view as that of the author, see the excellent contribution by: J. Scheid, *Ronald Syme et la religion romaine*, [in:] A. Giovannini (ed.), *La Révolution romaine après Ronald Syme: Bilans et perspectives*, Coll. *Entretiens sur L'Antiquité classique* 46, Vandoevres-Geneva 2000, pp. 39-72.

¹⁹G. Alföldy, *Two Principes*, p. 112.

²⁰P. Zanker, *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder*, Munich 1987. One of the first reviews of the book after translation into Spanish in 1992 was written by the author of this paper: G. García Vivas, *Imago Augusti*, *Tempus* 8, 1994, pp. 87-93.

been analysed using a combination of archaeological and numismatic evidence along with literary and epigraphic sources²¹.

The publication of Zanker's monograph in 1987 was revolutionary – a true catharsis²². Alföldy agrees that Augustus did not construct a *republikanische Scheinfassade* to deceive the Romans; instead, he created and put into practice a programme of governance with broad, new horizons. This was a programme of general renovation, an authentic 'back to basics' rooted in political and religious convictions. As stated in Zanker's thesis, this stimulating programme of 'images' established from above by the governing class was accepted spontaneously and positively by Romans of all social groups. This renovation even included inscriptions and epigraphic art. In Alföldy's words:

the epigraphic culture of the Romans underwent a revolutionary transformation under Augustus, becoming imperial both in the sense of its function in the service of the imperial monarchy and in the sense of its spreading throughout the whole Empire during a single generation²³.

The generation under Augustus witnessed a radical transformation of artistic forms. The *Princeps* and his counsellors were convinced of the moral rectitude of their governance programme. They presented and implemented it publicly in various forms – studied by Zanker in his work. They did so without a sense of „propaganda” in its modern interpretation; rather, they carried it out almost spontaneously by „trial and error”. The outcome was admirably consistent and successful.

Although it is true, as Alföldy states, that Syme showed no particular interest in artistic representation, yet in his last major publication preceding his death, the following clear definition of Augustan „propaganda” can be found:

There exist „propaganda in vacuo”, where competition is absent, the audience passive or already won over: not arts of persuasion, but the exhibition of power and beneficence. [...] Like sumptuary laws or state-enforced morality, a programme of indoctrination would arouse resentment and disbelief. There was a simple remedy:

²¹ A. Alföldy, Die Ausgestaltung des monarchischen Zeremoniells am römischen Kaiserhofe, *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Römische Abteilung* 49, 1934, pp. 1-118; idem, Insignien und Tracht der römischen Kaiser, *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Römische Abteilung* 50, 1935, pp. 1-171. (Reprinted [in:] idem, *Die monarchische Repräsentation im römischen Kaiserreiche*, Darmstadt 1970, pp. 3-118; 121-276).

²² See: G. García Vivas, *Imago Augusti*, p. 88. See also the following review article on Zanker's book: A. Wallace-Hadrill, Rome's cultural revolution, *Journal of Roman Studies* 79, 1989, pp. 157-164.

²³ See G. Alföldy, *Two Principes*, p. 112. On this topic in particular see the following significant article: G. Alföldy, Augustus und die Inschriften: Tradition und Innovation. *Die Geburt der imperialen Epigraphik*, *Gymnasium* 98, 1991, pp. 298-324.

leave it to the educated class to devise formulations or acceptance. Willing agents were to hand, some convinced and some ingenious, as well as the *falsi et festinantes*²⁴.

The Zankerian thesis on the effectiveness of the Principate's self-representation via the spontaneous acceptance by the masses could not have been better expressed in Zanker's own words, states Alföldy in an astute observation²⁵. The previous quotation is uniquely revealing. It shows that Syme's late work displayed a growing sensitivity, albeit somewhat obliquely, to the new paths in research on the Principate. In particular, on ideological aspects and, to a lesser extent, on artistic features.

2. SYME'S CONCEPTION OF HISTORY

Alföldy indicates that Ronald Syme's understanding of history is captured in this probably most quoted passage of RR: „In all ages, whatever the form and name of government, be it monarchy, republic or democracy, an oligarchy lurks behind the façade”²⁶. I suggest that this idea, with slight differences in nuance, defines Syme's entire historiographical work over a period of more than sixty years, from 1928 – the year in which his first article appeared in the „Journal of Roman Studies”²⁷ – to his death in 1989.

The omnipresence of the oligarchy, a governing elite which drives the destinies of the history of Rome, irrespective of the existing form of government in the city on the Tiber, was intrinsic to the Symean concept of history. Alföldy refers to two further constants in Syme's work. Firstly, Ronald Syme was primarily a historian of power, of power and the struggle to obtain power, of the vision of power in Rome exercised by opposing factions at the end of the Republic and subsequently directly controlled by the Emperor. Secondly, he points to Syme's immense interest in delving into and shedding light upon the literary tastes of the Roman aristocracy. An exquisite exponent of literary style, his particular „high style”²⁸, Syme was especially passionate about literature, specifically nineteenth-century French literature. Throughout his work, literary sources played a key role. From Sallust to Tacitus, to Pliny the Younger or Velleius as well as Thucydides and Gibbon,

²⁴ R. Syme, *The Augustan Aristocracy*, Oxford 1986, pp. 439 and 441.

²⁵ G. Alföldy, *Two Principes*, p. 120.

²⁶ R. Syme, *RR*, Oxford 1939, reprinted 1960, p. 7.

²⁷ *Idem*, *Rhine and Danube Legions under Domitian*, *Journal of Roman Studies* 18, 1928, pp. 41-55.

²⁸ F. Millar, *Style Abides*, *Journal of Roman Studies* 71, 1981, p. 146.

Macaulay and Toynbee – all of these merited his attention²⁹. Alföldy, like few others, captures a constant in Syme's work: Literature and History, Classical Philology and Ancient History converge time and time again. They constitute a whole, two sides of one and the same coin. Literature is a part of historical tradition. Furthermore, it is both a vehicle for transmitting facts and events as well as for expressing ideas and behaviour.

This can be observed in the following two examples: Ovid's love poetry speaks of war and politics while simultaneously being a powerful medium for conveying the moral atmosphere and mentality which permeated Augustan aristocracy³⁰. Moreover, according to Syme, Claudius' speech, of which Tacitus composed a much more coherent version in his *Annals* (11,24), advocating admission to the Senate for the aristocracy of Gallia Comata highlights the need to revitalize the senatorial aristocracy by recruiting *novi homines* from the provinces³¹.

„Subject, method and tendency”, states Alföldy³², are three issues which have always led to major disagreements between the followers and opponents of Syme and his view of history. In his well-known critique of RR, Arnaldo Momigliano reflected on the limitations of the prosopographic method³³. Momigliano's observations were valid. Nevertheless, for Syme, prosopography was more than an end in itself. Syme, who was first and foremost a political and social historian, elevated prosopography to its highest standards of excellence, as demonstrated in what is possibly his most theory-laden work³⁴.

²⁹ On Thucydides, see: R. Syme, Thucydides, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 48, 1962, pp. 39-56. See also: idem, *Three English Historians: Gibbon, Macaulay and Toynbee*, *Emory University Quarterly* 18, 1962. On Velleius see the translation by J.C. Yardley and A. Barret, *Velleius Paterculus. The Roman History: From Romulus and the Foundation of Rome to the reign of the Emperor Tiberius*, Indianapolis 2011; that continues a trend of rehabilitation of this author that started in recent years. A new and valuable book is available: E. Cowan (ed.), *Velleius Paterculus: Making History*, Swansea, The Classical Press of Wales, 2011; cf. this volume's review by E. Kramer, *Review of E. Cowan (ed.), Velleius Paterculus: Making History*, *JRS* 2013, p. 328: „This work seems intended to break the spell cast by Syme's relentless antipathy toward Velleius”. One may doubt that the „spell” actually lasted until the Conference where the originated volume took place in 2008.

³⁰ R. Syme, *History in Ovid*, Oxford 1978, p. 72 and 199.

³¹ Idem, *Ten Studies in Tacitus*, Oxford 1970, p. 26; and idem, *Tacitus*, p. 317. Note that in R. Syme, *TPR*, p. 11, he explicitly refused to believe in the existence of the *ius honorum*, calling it „pernicious belief”. See also, *TPR*, pp. 13, 92: „(...) the phrase [the *ius honorum*], so common in modern authorities but alien to ancient jurists”; pp. 105-106 and 111.

³² G. Alföldy, *Two Principes*, p. 105.

³³ A. Momigliano, *Ronald Syme: The Roman Revolution*, *Journal of Roman Studies* 30, 1940, p. 77-78.

³⁴ R. Syme, *Oligarchy at Rome. A Paradigm for Political Science*, *Diogenes* 141, 1988, p. 65.

A historian's most important quality is erudition, stated Syme. His words, while paraphrasing Gibbon, were „diligence and accuracy”³⁵. A good historian must also be well-versed in high politics and understand the intricacies of human nature. Furthermore, he highlighted the importance of travel and familiarity with various cultures. Both Syme and Alföldy were inveterate travellers. They undertook voyages to many European and African countries to work *in situ* on original inscriptions. They also travelled for the simple joy of travelling. In fact, Géza Alföldy passed away while he was in Athens visiting the Acropolis³⁶.

Alföldy remarks that Ronald Syme never wrote an article focusing on the theoretical description of his methodology. This statement is true and of the utmost importance. Syme's method was simple. In fact, we may assert that there was no such method. It consisted of „hard work and accuracy”³⁷, carried out through an in-depth and meticulous analysis of sources and facts. Obviously, his historiographical discourse is filled with ideas, but these are not to be mistaken for abstract theory. According to Syme, what is needed to write History is: „education, hard work and accuracy, composition and style, familiarity with politics and human nature”. In other words: „intelligence is the supreme virtue”³⁸.

All of these qualities had moulded his previously mentioned „high style” into something unrivalled in twentieth-century historical prose. At this point, one should mention Mason Hammond's 1959 brilliant description of Syme's literary style: „though often elliptical, staccato, and occasionally difficult to follow, is lively, stimulating and Tacitean”³⁹.

Tacitus was indeed one of his models. As Alföldy points out, Syme is the last in a line of great historians which begins with illustrious names such as Sallust, Pollio, Livy, passing through Tacitus, much later Gibbon and ultimately Theodor Mommsen. In Alföldy's words, his style: „imitates the style of the ancient literary sources which he uses, and thus they reflect from

³⁵ Idem, *How Gibbon came to History*, p. 52.

³⁶ See Alföldy's obituary by Juan Manuel Abascal in *Veleia*, 28,2011, p. 319. Alföldy had been due to go from there to Corfu to receive an honorary doctorate from the University of the Ionian Islands. The title of his lecture at Corfu, whose text has been kindly supplied to me by A.R. Birley, was: „Griechen und Römer, antike Inschriften und die Lehren aus der Alten Geschichte”.

³⁷ R. Syme, *Thucydides*, p. 41. (Cf. n.35).

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 56.

³⁹ M. Hammond, *Review of R. Syme Tacitus*, *The American Historical Review* 64, 4, 1959, p. 916.

the first something of the mentality of that élite in which Syme is interested⁴⁰.

In „The Roman Revolution” in particular, and in the Symean opus in general, a lack of tangible theory can be observed. This can be illustrated by examining the term „revolution”. Syme relied on Edward Gibbon’s use of the term⁴¹. But not once in RR did he state that a revolution, in line with the canonical definition provided for example by Alfred Heuss in 1959⁴², took place in the period analysed – from 60 BC to 14 AD.

According to Syme, the ‘revolution’ which took place in Rome during that period was „a violent transference of power and of property”⁴³ in which the traditional Republican nobility, decimated by decades of civil wars and against the devastating backdrop of the proscriptions, lost its status of the ‘governing class’. They were substituted by a new elite which was recruited in the municipalities, in the colonies of the Italian peninsula and from certain provinces, in particular, Narbonese Gaul and Hispania. This group constituted the nucleus of Caesar’s party and the support base which propelled young Octavian into power. For Syme, states Alföldy, this was the process of the „Roman Revolution”⁴⁴.

The word ‘revolution’, for Syme, chiefly fulfilled a semantic function. Indeed, he did not merely use it to describe the previously mentioned process. He stated: *es gibt recht unterschiedliche Revolutionäre und Revolutionen*⁴⁵. In fact, he used the word frequently throughout RR. The same casuistry applies to other terms used in his work.

For Syme, History was mainly the history of personal destinies. Alföldy argues that Syme showed a keen interest in the individual destinies of those who belonged to the group which held power, the aristocrats. However, he did not define what was known in Rome as ‘aristocracy’. It is indicative that amongst all German historians, Matthias Gelzer exerted a special influence on Syme through his brief but stimulating *Die Nobilität der römischen*

⁴⁰ G. Alföldy, Review, p. 176.

⁴¹ Idem, Two Principes, p. 115.

⁴² A. Heuss, Der Untergang der Römischen Republik und das Problem der Revolution, Historische Zeitschrift 182, 1956, p. 1.: „Revolution [...] ist der gewaltsame Austrag eines Klassengegensatzes, in dem eine unterdrückte bzw. von der Herrschaft ausgeschlossene Klasse den offenen und illegalen Kampf um ihre Freiheit und damit um den dominierenden, um nicht zu sagen ausschliesslichen Einfluss auf den Staat unternimmt”.

⁴³ R. Syme, RR, p. vii.

⁴⁴ G. Alföldy, Sir Ronald Syme, p. 12.

⁴⁵ Ibidem. p. 13.

*Republik*⁴⁶. This is most striking, as this work presents a structuralist analysis of the Roman oligarchy and not a prosopographical one.

The lack of structural analysis does not only concern the governing class. In RR, there is no analysis of the Senate or the magistracies, Alföldy adds. Nor is there even a great interest in unravelling the intricacies of the Augustan Principate's *Verfassung*. Consider Alföldy's statement:

Deshalb ist die Entstehung des Prinzipates – mit dem Jahre 23 v. Chr. als dem bedeutendsten Markstein auf einem langen Weg, der zum Sieg der Revolution und zur Errichtung einer neuen Regierung führte – nach Syme kaum ein Wendepunkt in der römischen Geschichte: „At Rome, it did not mark an era in dating; in the provinces it passed almost unnoticed“⁴⁷.

Who were these individuals about whose destinies Syme wrote? He did not write about the popular classes – free men and slaves – or about the military and the soldiery. Alföldy recounts a personal anecdote: when he told Syme that the first article of his he had read as a student was also the first article Syme had published, „Rhine and Danube Legions under Domitian“⁴⁸, Syme replied that later on in his career he had always been more interested in the figure of any legate of senatorial rank than in an entire legion. A similar episode occurred when, in a letter, Alföldy inquired why Syme never wrote about slaves and the less favoured classes. Syme's unequivocal and sincere reply was: „it bores me“⁴⁹.

It was essential, for Syme, to describe and represent the protagonists of history. In the 1930s, in the countries in which totalitarian systems had triumphed, a calculated cult of the individual developed, whether it was the *Führer*, the *Duce* or the *Caudillo*. In Italy, the *Mostra Augustea* marked a milestone when it was staged by Benito Mussolini in 1937 in Rome to commemorate the bimillenary of Augustus' birth⁵⁰.

During those years a series of monographs appeared which painted Augustus and his reign in a favourable light. In Germany, the work of Berlin

⁴⁶ M. Gelzer, *Die Nobilität der römischen Republik*, Leipzig 1912; For the English translation see: M. Gelzer, *The Roman Nobility*, R. Seager (transl.), Oxford 1969.

⁴⁷ G. Alföldy, *Sir Ronald Syme*, p. 15.

⁴⁸ See footnote 27.

⁴⁹ The letter from Syme to Alföldy dated 22 February 1981 can be found in: G. Alföldy, *Sir Ronald Syme*, p. 17.

⁵⁰ On the *Mostra Augustea* see the excellent monograph: F. Scriba, *Augustus im Schwarzhemd?: die Mostra Augustea della Romanità in Rom 1937/38*, Frankfurt 1995. Also idem, *L'estetizzazione della politica nell'età di Mussolini e il caso della Mostra Augustea della Romanità. Appunti su problemi di storiografia circa fascismo e cultura*, [in:] *Civiltà Romana*, 1, 2014, pp. 125-158.

professor Wilhelm Weber (1882-1948)⁵¹ was among the most influential. Alföldy discusses this in his article published in 1993. In his opinion, and I concur, Syme produced and published RR as an answer to the chorus of praise by German and Italian historians. Even before 1937, Ronald Syme had already held an unfavourable opinion of Augustus⁵².

To conclude this section, allow me to stress one of Alföldy's great insights: Syme's way of working was based on rejecting any methodological system based on theoretical premises. „To insist on *die gesunde Methode* is tedious. And it may be superfluous. Nor is the cult of methodology always a strength”⁵³. For Syme, history was self-explanatory and to write rigorous history is to write with accuracy, hard work and in the best possible literary style⁵⁴.

„The Roman Revolution”, according to Alföldy, can be classified as a model of inductive history, an exemplary text which uses the sources to reconstruct an entire historical moment. Alföldy suggests that Syme's famous sentence at the beginning of RR works as an idea and as a model of research: *por él están condicionados en su obra el planteamiento general, el método, los resultados más importantes y no menos la narrativa*⁵⁵.

3. THE RECEPTION AND INFLUENCE OF „THE ROMAN REVOLUTION” ON GERMAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Géza Alföldy concurs with Sir Fergus Millar who asserted that Syme's *Tacitus*, published two decades after „The Roman Revolution”, was his most influential work⁵⁶. I hold a different opinion. Perhaps *Tacitus* has been recognised as such in academic circles, but not even that can be affirmed. However, what is clear, as one of Syme's pupils wrote forty years after its publication, is that the impact of „The Roman Revolution” has been tremendous⁵⁷. Without any doubt, its influence has been greater than that of *Tacitus*, not only for experts but most importantly for a non-professional historical readership.

⁵¹ W. Weber, *Principes. Studien zur Geschichte des Augustus I*, Stuttgart-Berlin 1936.

⁵² G. Alföldy, *Two Principes*, p. 104. On this see now my G.A. García Vivas, „That sickly and sinister youth”, pp. 87-110.

⁵³ R. Syme, *The Historia Augusta. A call for clarity*, Bonn 1971, p. 5.

⁵⁴ G. Alföldy, *La Historia Antigua*, p. 49.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 52.

⁵⁶ G. Alföldy, *Two Principes*, p. 108

⁵⁷ G. Bowersock, *Emperor*, p. 8.

Let me discuss this by raising several points. First of all, consider the relationship between Syme and Alföldy. Both researchers had a close academic and personal relationship for more than a quarter of a century. Alföldy was chosen to present the first „Ronald Syme Lecture” at Wolfson College at Oxford on the 21st of November 1991. Alföldy himself explains clearly:

Having known Sir Ronald for almost 25 years I was very glad to undertake this task [...]. I owe him a great deal, both concerning the choice of my subjects and the historical method. But I ascribe the honour given to me by the invitation principally to the fact that I represent a German University which is proud to have counted Sir Ronald among its friends for almost four decades⁵⁸.

Alföldy’s 1993 article, in essence, corresponds to his speech held at that occasion.

In 1983⁵⁹, Alföldy begins his text with two emphatic comments on „The Roman Revolution” by two eminent British scholars, D.R. Shackleton-Bailey⁶⁰ and Sir Fergus Millar⁶¹. Both praised RR. Alföldy examines a third, less favourable opinion on RR by a German scholar, H.E. Stier⁶². It is worth noting, the Heidelberg professor adds, that RR was viewed negatively by the German, while at first sight, RR has more in common with German historiographic tradition than with that of the English speaking world. However, that is not what ensued.

From the moment it appeared on September 7th, 1939, four days after the United Kingdom had declared war on Germany, RR has been a great historiographic innovation. As Alföldy notes⁶³, the topic of RR had been addressed continuously but the focus and aims – not entirely prosopography, not entirely factual history; rather an impressive mixture of both – turned this monograph into something entirely new. Nevertheless, it is only at the beginning of the 1950s that RR became widely known in Germany. Certainly, the late reception was influenced by the war. Indeed, the first German edition was published in 1957⁶⁴.

⁵⁸ G. Alföldy, *Two Principes*, p. 101.

⁵⁹ *Idem*, *Sir Ronald Syme*, p. 5.

⁶⁰ D.R. Shackleton-Bailey, *The Roman Nobility in the Second Civil War*, *The Classical Quarterly* 10, 1960, p. 266.

⁶¹ F. Millar, *Style Abides*, *Journal of Roman Studies* 71, 1981, pp. 144-152.

⁶² H.E. Stier, *Augustusfriede und Römische Klassik, Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 2, 2 Berlin-New York 1975, pp. 9 and 11.

⁶³ G. Alföldy, *Sir Ronald Syme*, p. 8.

⁶⁴ R. Syme, *Die Römische Revolution. Machtkämpfe im antiken Rom*, Stuttgart 1957. The first copy of RR in Heidelberg was brought from Switzerland by the historian Walter Schmitthenner, see: J. Malitz, W. Schmitthenner, *Gnomon* 71, 2, 1999, p. 175 n. 3.

In Germany of the 1930s and 1940s, as in Spain today, Ancient History and Classical Philology were separate disciplines. Alföldy draws attention to a crucial detail: when reading RR, it is difficult to pinpoint whether it is the work of a philologist or that of a historian. For Syme, both disciplines went hand in hand constituting a harmonious entity. His mastery of both was impressive. Particularly striking was Syme's tremendously modern use of ancient texts, as A. Rüstow pointed out in the first review of RR published in German⁶⁵.

Alföldy astutely observes that Sir Lewis Namier's „The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III”, published in 1929⁶⁶, ten years before „The Roman Revolution”, had most probably influenced Syme while writing RR even though he never acknowledged this. Alföldy considers Arnaldo Momigliano to have been right in stressing the influence that Namier and his *atmosfera intellettuale* had on Syme and his RR⁶⁷. In Momigliano's words, Syme had *namierizzato la costituzione di Augusto*⁶⁸.

The rise of fascism in Europe and the promulgation of the Soviet Union's new constitution by Stalin in 1936 no doubt influenced Syme's state of mind while writing RR. The publication of RR – which grew out of conferences held by Syme while he was Fellow of Trinity College in summer 1937 – was a reaction against the optimistic view of the first Emperor of Rome and his reign, a prevailing view at that time in all of German and British historiography focusing on that period. Syme showed his profound disagreement with „normal Anglo-Saxon attitudes” which revered Augustus „as the archetype of the good headmaster, firm and serene, who seldom has to exert the vast authority he holds in reserve”⁶⁹.

The impact of RR in the United Kingdom and other English-speaking countries was enormous. As of the 1950s, the book became influential on

⁶⁵ A. Rüstow, Die Römische Revolution und Kaiser Augustus, Revue de la Faculté des Sciences Economiques de l'Université d'Istanbul 5, 1944, p. 244.

⁶⁶ L. Namier. The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III, London 1929. I have worked with the second edition from 1957.

⁶⁷ G. Alföldy, Sir Ronald Syme, pp. 10-11.

⁶⁸ A. Momigliano, Introduzione a Ronald Syme. The Roman Revolution, Italian transl., Turin 1962, p. 10; idem, Terzo contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico, Storie e Letterature 108, Rome 1966, p. 730. Anthony Birley drew my attention to the fact that this untenable idea is widespread. On this, see the recent remarks by Birley in A Letter from Momigliano to Syme, May 1967, Politica Antica 6, 2016, p. 159: „As Arnaldo Marcone has commented, the possible influence of Lewis Namier on Syme – which Syme himself denied – has perhaps been overstated, «anche per le suggestioni di Momigliano»”.

⁶⁹ R. Syme, History or Biography. The case of Tiberius Caesar, Historia 23, 1974, p. 482.

an international scale. Although Syme was never interested in creating a „school” – in the continental sense of the term – RR had successors in its wake. Alföldy⁷⁰ mentions the following: Howard H. Scullard⁷¹ and Lily Ross Taylor⁷². Ernst Badian may also be included in this group⁷³.

According to Alföldy, the situation was different in Germany. In the first two years after its publication, RR was of no significant influence. A. Rüstow, an expert in economic history, and W. Ensslin were the first to publish reviews of RR in German. W. Ensslin's review is a twelve-page long, detailed, chapter by chapter analysis in which he, however, dedicated only one sentence to evaluating RR⁷⁴. Later on, H.E. Stier, in a joint volume on the Augustan era, wrote an unfavourable review of RR. In it he rejected Syme's prosopographic method and his considerations of the Princesps⁷⁵.

In Germany, two groups or „schools” of researchers were particularly influenced by RR. Hans Schaefer (1906-1961), Walter Schmitthenner (1916-1997), Hans Buchheim (1922-) and Peter Sattler (1930-1961) – who, with Schaefer, was tragically killed in Ankara in an aeroplane accident – all belonged to the first group. These scholars were mainly concerned with political history during the period of Octavian's rise and the establishment of the Principate. They followed Syme's view very closely and attempted taking a step further to understand the political process as a whole. This group – which we may call the „Heidelberg school” – aimed to expand and complement, but not correct Syme's image of that period.

In the second school of thought influenced by Syme, something very different occurred. This school was led by one of Germany's most important historians of Rome, who was also Schaefer's disciple, Christian Meier (1929-). In his writings and in particular in his most well-known work *Res publica amissa*⁷⁶ he asks himself to what extent we can consider the existence of permanent political factions or „parties” within the governing class in Rome. This represents a frontal attack on what is known in German historiography as „Faktionstheorie” advocated mainly by Syme, Scullard or Ross Taylor.

⁷⁰ G. Alföldy, Sir Ronald Syme, p. 25.

⁷¹ H.H. Scullard, Roman Politics 220-150 BC, Oxford 1951.

⁷² L. Ross Taylor, Party Politics in the Age of Caesar, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1949.

⁷³ Even though he was of Austrian origin, Badian spent his youth in New Zealand. See his most representative work: E. Badian, Foreign Clientelae 264-70 B.C., Oxford 1958.

⁷⁴ W. Ensslin, Besprechung The Roman Revolution, Historia 1, 1950, pp. 128-139.

⁷⁵ H.E. Stier, Augustusfriede und Römische Klassik, p. 3 and 6.

⁷⁶ C. Meier, Res publica amissa: Eine Studie zu Verfassung und Geschichte der späten römischen Republik, Wiesbaden 1966, new edition Frankfurt am Main 1980, p. 182.

I do not think that Syme, in RR in particular and in his work in general, was defending a rigid and immanent concept of faction or party, as Meier claims. This aspect is more prominent in Scullard and in Ross Taylor. In any event, according to Meier, the latter two have based their theses on the sources in which the factions were not mentioned at all. His criticism, therefore, lies not with the prosopographic method in itself, but rather in the way in which it is applied. In his 1983⁷⁷ article, Alföldy indicates that it is not a matter of demonstrating which of the two, Syme or Meier, is right. He recalls the words of another leading scholar of Ancient History, Erich S. Gruen, an American of Austrian origin. It is worth citing the passage in its entirety:

It will not be obligatory to select between these two alternatives. The former [Syme] ignores significant changes which Roman society and politics had undergone since the era of the Gracchi. Links among noble houses cannot by themselves explain the course of politics. Too many other elements, social, economic and personal, permeated the scene. In a constantly changing political climate, those links did not possess consistency or endurance. The alternative view, however, [Meier] would appear to deny all structure to Roman politics. Aristocratic families continued to form marriage connections, to adopt relatives and friends, to flaunt their *amici*, and to feud with their *inimici*. It would be foolish to imagine that these maneuvers possessed no political connotations⁷⁸.

Alföldy suggests that a complete and effective reception of RR's content and profound historiographical weight became evident in Germany only well into the twentieth century. In 1993 he was able to assert that the influence of RR in the German academic world was similar to its reception elsewhere, unlike ten years earlier. For the Heidelberg Professor this change in tendency was decisively influenced by two works: Karl Christ's chapter dedicated to Sir Ronald in 1990⁷⁹ and the publication of Paul Zanker's book, commented on earlier⁸⁰.

As Alföldy⁸¹ states, the history of Rome as a narrative model was brought to its pinnacle of perfection by the New Zealander in „The Roman Revolution”. It is true that some of his affirmations need to be revisited. This has been carried out during the past years. In particular, Syme's image and his historical view of Augustus, and specifically his metamorphosis from *Dux*

⁷⁷ G. Alföldy, Sir Ronald Syme, p. 31.

⁷⁸ E.S. Gruen, *The Last Generation of the Roman Republic*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1974, p. 49.

⁷⁹ K. Christ, Ronald Syme.

⁸⁰ P. Zanker, *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder*.

⁸¹ G. Alföldy, Sir Ronald Syme, p. 41.

to *Princeps*, needs to be re-evaluated thoroughly to include all nuances. So much so that Syme, as his life and research moved on, reconsidered some of the aspects concerning Augustus. Nevertheless, RR will continue to be a classic and we, as academics studying Ancient Rome, are greatly indebted to Sir Ronald Syme and his entire body of work, and in particular „The Roman Revolution”.

4. CONCLUSION

From 1934 onwards, while he was Fellow of Trinity College, Syme had already held an unfavourable opinion of Octavian and as a historian he had always felt „republican in sentiment”⁸², influenced by the likes of Sallust and Pollio. As early as 1934, in an important review of one of Mario Attilio Levi’s books – seldom noticed by scholars but fundamental to understanding the early Syme prior to RR – he vindicated the figure of Marc Antony, qualifying Octavian as a „sickly and sinister youth”⁸³.

Nevertheless, as the years passed, Alföldy discerned with great perspicacity that there was a subtle change in Syme’s writings, as well as an increased tolerance for the work of other colleagues and towards the figure of Augustus. Even a modicum of humour was included: „less war and more humour”. At the end of his 1979 review⁸⁴, Géza Alföldy quotes Syme’s splendid and remarkably precise description of Tacitus which could very well be a description of himself:

Tacitus is a subtle and sophisticated writer, heir to a long tradition, and writing for men of understanding. The situations he describes are permeated with all the ambiguities of high politics – and of human nature – in any age. His manner is majestic and reticent. Perhaps in himself a complicated character, perhaps not. Who can say? Remote, austere and enigmatic, on a surface view, yet perhaps in no way a problem in his comportment towards Rome and the Caesars⁸⁵.

As time went by, Syme became more tolerant, even displayed humour, and judged Augustus less harshly. As a mature writer, Syme dedicated his efforts to lighter pursuits such as the *Historia Augusta*⁸⁶ and as his

⁸² R. Syme, RR, p. 7. See G.A. García Vivas, „That sickly and sinister youth”.

⁸³ R. Syme, From Octavian to Augustus. Mario Attilio Levi: Ottaviano Capoparte, 1-2, Florence 1933. The Classical Review 48, 1934, p. 78.

⁸⁴ G. Alföldy, Review, p. 181.

⁸⁵ R. Syme, Ten Studies, p. 131.

⁸⁶ See the entertaining anecdote of the meeting on Oxford’s High Street between Syme and the great Eduard Fraenkel at the end of the 1970s when Ammianus and the *Historia Augusta* were being printed: G. Bowersock, Proceedings, p. 558.

benevolence increased so did his view of the central figure in his work, Augustus, who was gradually divested of his sinister hue. Géza Alföldy perceives this clearly: „In the course of the years and decades, there is a clear tendency to tone down the harsh criticism given in „The Roman Revolution”⁸⁷.

Ultimately, according to Alföldy, Syme always judged Augustus severely. But in the course of half a century, he endowed him with an increasingly monumental image. Specifically, he was ever more inclined to recognise the Princeps’ coherent organisation of his own political edifice, in other words, the spectacular and positive development of the imperial administration. The Oxford don seems to have experienced, if not a feeling of affection, then at least an increased understanding of the difficult position of Augustus.

Syme, like no one else, was able to see the authentic nature of the regime created by Augustus. In fact, „The Apologia for the Principate”, the last chapter of his final great work, „The Augustan Aristocracy”, offers a scathing critique of the „doctrine of the middle path”. It is one of the most beautiful and accurate descriptions of the Principate as a form of government:

Liberty but not licence, discipline without despotism. Not an exhilarating prospect, the middle path, so it appears. It is the recourse of the opportunist and the careerist. The other name is compromise or collusion. Yet such is the nature of political life. It exploits ambiguities, it seeks to have the advantages of both ways⁸⁸.

Syme was struck by this encounter with the reality of the political system he was studying. He expressed the highest degree of tolerance that someone like himself – who had always considered himself an aristocrat and a democrat – could voice towards an autocratic regime with a leader at the top who was not subjected to any form of control.

Alföldy, having known Syme as a friend and colleague for a quarter of a century, noted that it was not Tacitus or Mommsen who had been entrusted with writing the history of the Augustan period; rather, it was our era’s greatest historian of Rome, Ronald Syme. All historians of Rome shall remain eternally grateful to him for his talent in narrating important moments in history, for his tireless capacity for work, for his literary style which still astounds us today as we read and reread his work. He was indeed an authentic *princeps* of the history of Rome⁸⁹.

⁸⁷ G. Alföldy, *Two Principes*, p. 116.

⁸⁸ R. Syme, *AA*, p. 453-454.

⁸⁹ In Alföldy’s obituary, Professor Juan Manuel Abascal states that the Hungarian scholar had been updating notes on Sir Ronald Syme during the days preceding his death: J.M. Abascal, Géza

Summary

The purpose of this paper is to analyze Sir Ronald Syme's view of History and his prosopographical approach to it, through the work of one of his better and most perceptive commentators, Professor Géza Alföldy.

Syme and Alföldy kept personal and professional contact for more than a quarter of a century. Alföldy gained a close insight into Syme's entire body of work and eventually became one of his finest critics.

Although Alföldy belonged to a younger generation than Syme's; both became acquainted in 1964 and they built a close personal and professional relationship deriving from their mutual interests in many issues of their field. The purpose of this work is to examine the vision of History that Syme had, and of his prosopographical approach to it, through the analysis of four key works in Alföldy's oeuvre, in which the German scholar of Hungarian descent offered some clues that allow us to gain a better understanding of Ronald Syme's historiographical output.

The four works cover a period of fourteen years, and they include a long review and three articles. The first one was published in 1979, providing an extensive appraisal of the first two volumes of the „Roman Papers” that came out the same year – with some considerable delay, much to Syme's annoyance – with the Oxford University Press, under the care of Ernst Badian, one of Syme's disciples. The second one, from 1983, was an impressive article by Alföldy published in a Heidelberg magazine and whose first version was a paper delivered by Alföldy in May 1982. The third one was published in 1983 in the Spanish magazine *Gerión*, having originated with another conference paper presented in Düsseldorf the year before. The last one, which appeared in „Athenaeum”, constituted his revised version of the first "Ronald Syme Lecture" given by Alföldy at the Wolfson College (Oxford) on November 21st, 1991, to commemorate the legacy of Sir Ronald Syme.

It was not by chance that Géza Alföldy had the honor of being the first scholar chosen to deliver that important lecture on such an eminent occasion.

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