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MEDITERRANEA
QUADERNI ANNUALI DELL'ISTITUTO DI STUDI SUL MEDITERRANEO ANTICO

è una rivista dell'Istituto di Studi sul Mediterraneo Antico del Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche (ISMA-CNR)

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Stampa e distribuzione

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CONSIGLIO NAZIONALE DELLE RICERCHE
ISTITUTO DI STUDI SUL MEDITERRANEO ANTICO

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MEDITERRANEA

QUADERNI ANNUALI DELL'ISTITUTO DI STUDI SUL MEDITERRANEO ANTICO

XV
2018

ROMA
EDIZIONI QUASAR

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János György Szilágyi (16 July 1918 – 7 January 2016)

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SUPERIS DEORUM GRATUS ET IMIS
PAPERS IN MEMORY OF JÁNOS GYÖRGY SZILÁGYI

Edited by
Vincenzo Bellelli & Árpád M. Nagy

ROMA 2018
EDIZIONI QUASAR

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Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche
Istituto di Studi sul Mediterraneo Antico



**MUSEUM OF
FINE ARTS, BUDAPEST**



L'iniziativa gode del patrocinio
dell'Istituto Nazionale di Studi Etruschi ed Italici

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From Budapest to Tarquinia and Cerveteri

GÉZA KOMORÓCZY*

The classicist János György Szilágyi (16 July 1918 – 7 January 2016) was in love with Italy. He had been to many places around the world, but it was there that he felt most truly at home. Just like Mignon: “...das Land, wo die Zitronen blüh’n, / Im dunkeln Laub die Goldorangen glüh’n, / Ein sanfter Wind vom blauen Himmel weht, / Die Myrte still und hoch der Lorbeer steht...” (Goethe, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, III, 1).

He first visited Italy in the summer of 1939. After his third year at university, on a sudden impulse from his friend, the mathematician Alfréd Rényi (1921–1970), the two of them travelled to Rome for a month with hardly a penny between them. Szilágyi walked around the ancient walls of the city and visited the Villa Giulia, where he fell in love with the Etruscans. They left Rome on the day the Second World War broke out. His affection for the Etruscans and Italy had a lasting effect on his entire life. In his later letters from Rome,¹ one repeatedly reads: “[upon my arrival] I ran at once to the Villa Giulia”. Describing one of his journeys – from Rome to Siponto – he said: “I travelled yesterday, Saturday, from eight in the morning till five in the afternoon, but this was all Italy, and time flew as if in a moment. It all turned beautiful once I caught a glimpse of the sea.”

His dissertation (*Atellana*, 1941) focused on the origins of ancient Italian theatre. The subject was only apparently philological, since the sources

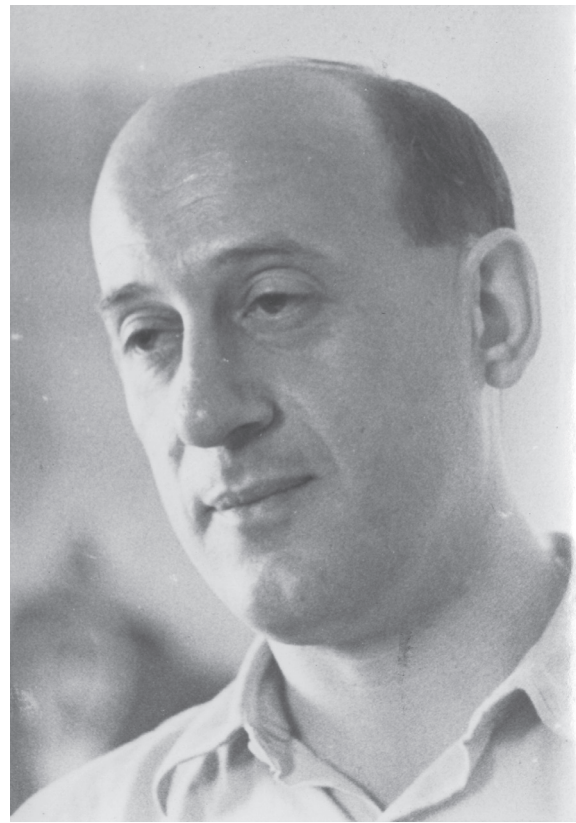


Fig. 1. János György Szilágyi, 1958.

he analysed relate to masked actors, dance and the Etruscan clown (*Phersu*). The study of the theatre remained prominent in his early scholarship. A

* Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest.

¹ For the publication of Szilágyi's personal letters, see János György Szilágyi, *Örvények fölé épülő harmónia. Interjúk, dokumentumok, levelek*, vol. II: Sz. J. Gy. személyes levelezése

(1927–2011) [*Harmony over turmoil. Interviews, documents, letters. II: Personal correspondence of J. Gy. Szilágyi*], collected and edited by Géza Komoróczy (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó – Szépművészeti Múzeum, 2018), 830 pp.

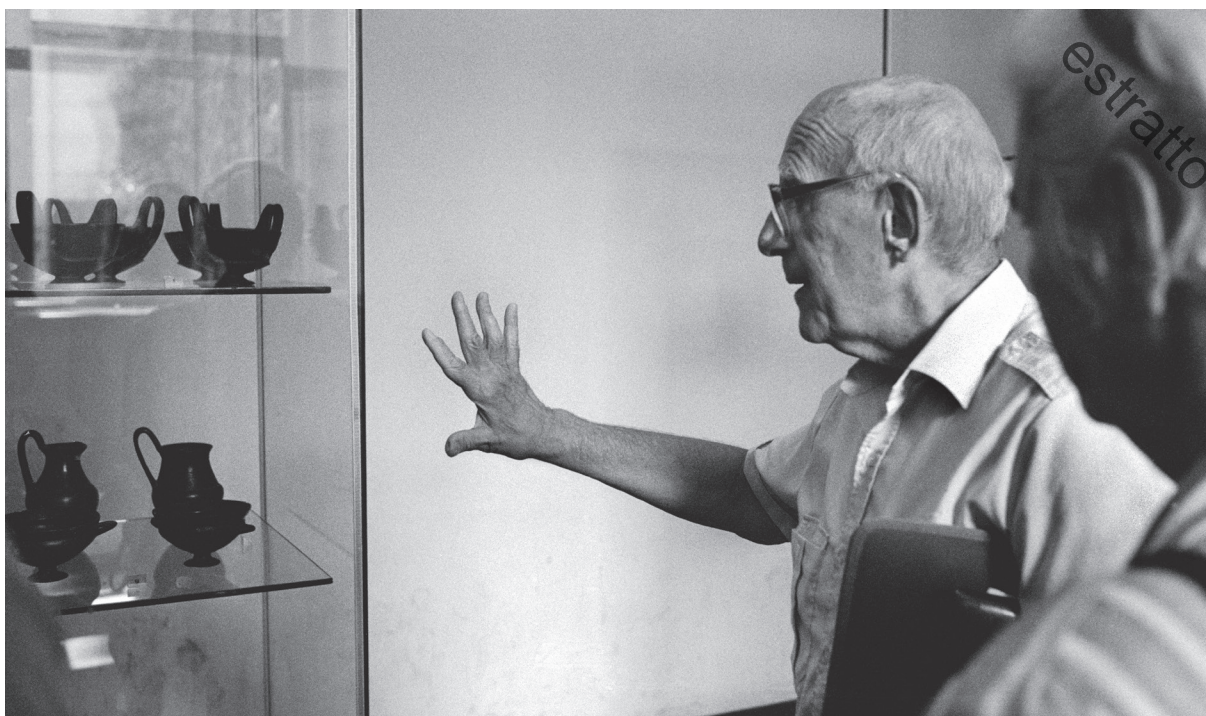


Fig. 2. János György Szilágyi in Villa Giulia 1975 (Photo ©Zoltan Nagy, Torino).

characteristic trait of his personality also manifested itself in dramatic play. At the end of the 1930s – up until they were drafted in 1942 into Hungarian Army forced labour service (the fate of Jews and unreliaables in Horthy's Hungary) – his close circle of friends, most of them (including Angelo Brelich) students of Károly Kerényi at the University, gathered every Saturday night, temporarily forgetting the stifling political atmosphere and finding freedom in play. They followed Kerényi's motto at the time: *nos manet Oceanus circumvagus: arva, beata / petamus, arva divites et insulas...* (Hor. *Epod.* 16, 41 sq.), improvising raw, satirical sketches about their lives and creating their own unique atellana, with Szilágyi often acting as the compère or master of ceremonies. His notes written while he was a prisoner of war mention Greek old comedy, the atellana, and the comedies of Plautus and Shakespeare. Later, during a study trip to Bulgaria (1953), he found the shows of the illusionist „Mister Senko” – a national celebrity there – highly amusing. When the friendly gatherings renewed, he charmed his friends' children by insisting that he was the polar bear from

the zoo. He once wrote: “without Felix Krull you cannot understand either me or human life as such.” The desire for play, for combining fantasy and freedom, remained a vivid force in his personality throughout his life. He was deeply interested in the theatre and in all manner of circuses, clowns, and showmen; he enthusiastically interviewed children and their parents about the white clown they had seen in the circus; he knew that Maccus, Bucco, Pappus and Dossennus, Pulcinella, the clown, and all the others are only different, hidden aspects of the human personality that manifest themselves in play. When he had published all his great works and, as he struggled with the bodily discomforts of old age (“an Old Comedy situation” – he wrote on 1 July 2008), could work only in his room at the Museum, he began to think again about Etruscan clowns. This may seem unexpected to an outsider, but Fellini, one of his favourite filmmakers, also returned to *La Strada* (1954) in his later film *I clowns* (1970). At ninety (2008), Szilágyi sketched, to the composer István Anhalt (1919–2012), a member of his pre-war company of friends who had emigrat-

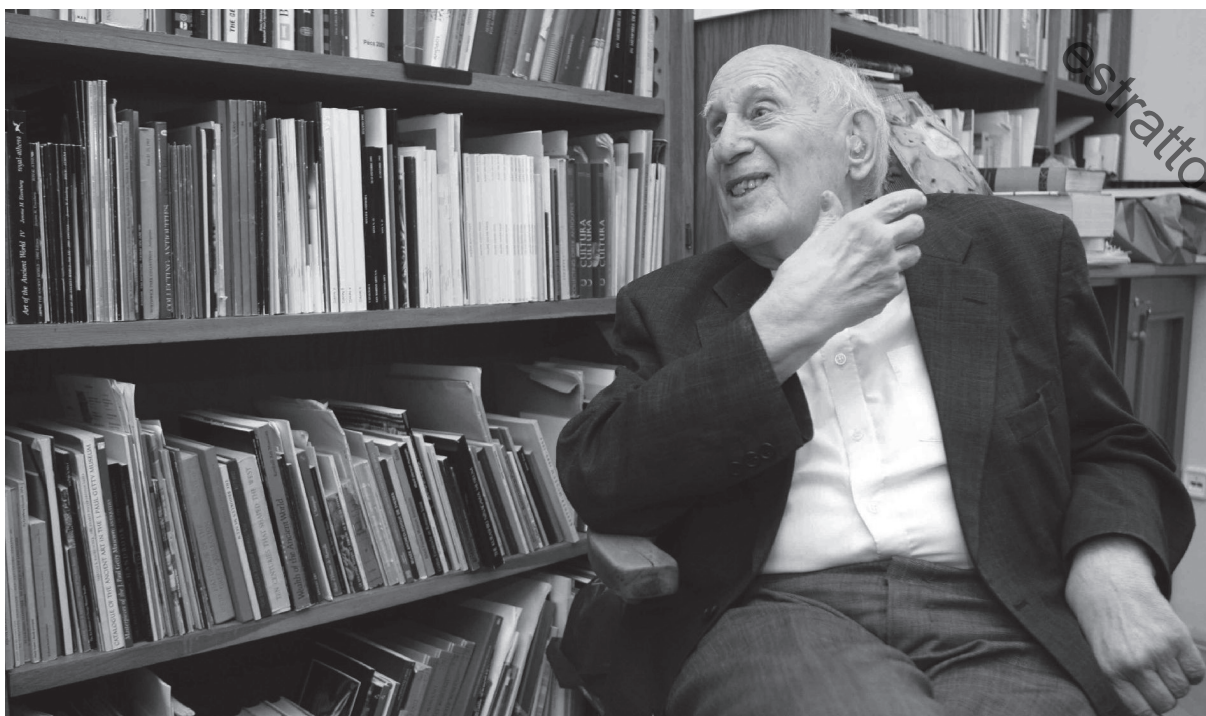


Fig. 3. János György Szilágyi in his *studio*, Szépművészeti Múzeum, ca. 2009 (Photo Mátyus, László).

ed to Canada, his plan to write a world history of clowns. The plan was never realised, and he must have known from the very beginning that the book, as he had imagined it, would have been impossible to write. Still, his last short article also focuses on the subject of the Etruscan clown in a historical perspective: “Phersu (A draft)” was published in his collection of essays *Over the Sea (A tenger fölött*, 2011), a book that, in its organization, follows the structure of a scholarly autobiography.

In 1936, Szilágyi became a student of Károly Kerényi. It was under Kerényi’s influence that he chose scholarship as a way of life. As far as his life and times permitted, he focused on scholarly research throughout his life. If circumstances were limited, he tried to make the most of what was available. While on forced labour service during the War, he read Vergil. After his capture as a prisoner of war, on a march that lasted for weeks, he learnt the poems of Horace by heart; then, in a camp in Zaporizhia, he wrote a study, accompanied by a translation in verse, of two of that poet’s odes (III., 18; IV., 7), in the latter of which he found

expressed his own feelings about the transitory and unpredictable nature of life: *quis scit an adiciant hodiernae crastina summae / tempora di superi?* After five years spent first in forced labour and then as a prisoner of war in the Soviet Union, he returned home to Budapest at the end of September 1947, and got a job at the Museum of Fine Arts, where he built the Collection of Classical Antiquities as we know it today: this was his first and only place of work. Having worked energetically to master the ancient texts, he now had to learn how to work with antiquities. He began his intensive study of classical archaeology and art history.

In 1948, he received a three-month fellowship in Rome. Till then he had only known most of that city’s great works of art from photos, and what is all that compared to Rome itself! In Rome, he finally experienced antiquity as something living: not only through museum objects which showed him the miracles of shape and size, fine hues and colours; but, perhaps more importantly, through space and the ruins of ancient buildings. His interest, which had until then primarily revolved

around the questions of religious history and philology, now focused of its own accord on the material remains of antiquity. He visited a number of other places besides the *Urbs*: Tarquinia (where he went on an excursion with Kerényi), Cerveteri, Florence, where – as he wrote in a letter – the glories of the Renaissance “make everything ancient invisible”, as well as to Naples and Pompeii in the south. He was awed by the temples of Paestum.

In 1957, when Massimo Pallottino invited him to the first Convegno di Studi Etruschi, he was serving a temporary sentence of internal exile for his valour during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. Unable to attend the conference, he sent his paper, which appeared in *Studi Etruschi* in 1958, marking the beginning of his long series of papers and books on Etrusco-Corinthian vase-painting which culminated in his grand synthesis, *Ceramica etrusco-corinzia figurata*, I.–II. published in Florence in 1992 and 1998. In Hungary, he strove to create a sphere of inner freedom in the solitary cell of his scholarly research.

After 1962, when he was occasionally allowed to go abroad, he spent at least a few weeks in Rome every year. His letters mention that he stayed at the cheapest hotels, that he walked from Cerveteri to Sasso Furbara and back, and ate nothing but pasta for weeks. About a Ford Foundation grant he received in 1968, he said: “This was my first trip that allowed me to live like a man: that’s to say, I was able for the first time to give generous tips to the custodians of Italian museum storerooms.”

For Szilágyi, travelling equalled research throughout his life. When abroad, he spent most of his time in the storage rooms of antiquities collections, carrying a briefcase packed with notes. The letters he wrote to his friends talk about what he was learning through his research and what he experienced on visits to museums and exhibitions.

He made up for the places he was unable to visit during his three-month stay in the summer of 1948 in the following decades, travelling all over the entire Apennine peninsula, visiting excavations and all the significant ancient sites, and travelling to the world’s important museums, from Moscow and Leningrad to Los Angeles, from Ankara to Barcelona

and Toledo, from Yerevan and Jerusalem to Tunisia and Stockholm. He constantly revisited museum collections, went to every temporary exhibition, and examined and described every object he could find in display cases and storerooms alike. As far as his circumstances allowed, he participated in every *incontro*, *convegno*, and *giornata di studio* on Etruscology, gave a number of papers, and was a recognised face of international Etruscology in Italy. “So many familiar faces I haven’t seen for a long time”, he wrote about a congress in 1980. “We all share a common obsession here: all of us accept doing what we do, even if others may not find this natural at all but downright absurd. For me, these *convegni* are very important, probably more important than for the others, who more easily surround themselves with people they can discuss these questions with. I am completely alone at home in this regard, where no one is interested in the problems or even the results of one’s research, so there is something utterly unrealistic in my being in such company for a few days.”

He had known the art of early twentieth-century modernism from his youth. He was well into collecting material for his *Ceramica etrusco-corinzia figurata* when he developed a keen interest in contemporary art. His first letters from abroad only mention Greek and Italian vases and the Pergamon altar. Then contemporary artists quickly appear on the horizon: Rauschenberg, Marisol and Pollock, whom the world was also just becoming familiar with; the Impressionists, of course, whose paintings he searched for in every museum, and naturally also medieval art. He followed his favourite contemporary artists on his travels, popping in to see a gallery between two antiquities collections. “I was more and more convinced that you cannot do classical archaeology without living in the art of your own age. Which is essentially what Nietzsche had already demanded – it just took a bit longer to put into practice. Since then I’ve been seeing these two problems – that of the cultures of antiquity and today – together...” It is this perspective that permeates his analyses of ancient vases. Just as Goethe wrote: “Froh empfind’ ich mich nun auf klassischem Boden begeistert, / Vor- und Mitwelt spricht lauter und reizender mir” (*Römische Elegien* V, 1-2).