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Making Arminius Vámbéry: British Receptions in 1864–1865

Following his pioneering travels in Central Asia, the Hungarian Orientalist Arminius Vámbéry (1832–1913) set out to make his presence felt in British academic, cultural, and political circles in 1864. Soon after his first appearance in London, he became the most recognized Hungarian in Great Britain after Lajos Kossuth (1802–1894), and remained so in Great Britain for the next fifty years. It was this foundational period that created the stable and highly marketable persona as an Anglophile, Russophobe expert in Central Asian and Ottoman affairs in the context of the geopolitical struggles between Great Britain and Russia out of the protean subjectivity of the multilayered complex human being Arminius Vámbéry. By examining some private letters, newspaper reports, academic participation, and narratives of his travels in Central Asia, we trace the process by which a marginal figure from Hungary transformed himself into a significant, recognized, and stable voice in matters involving Central Asia and the Great Game.

The year 1864 proved crucial to Vámbéry's efforts to carve out a distinguished place in British cultural and political life. With his perilous journey in the double guise of a Turkish effendi masquerading as a dervish on a pilgrimage that took him across Khiva, Samarkand, and Bokhara just behind him, Vámbéry sent a letter to his friend and fellow linguist József Budenz (1836–1892) from Tehran in February 1864. "Unhoped for, and perhaps, unmerited respect,"[1] is how he describes the attention lavished upon him in Tehran not only by the Persian authorities (as reified in the shape of a medal from the Shah), but also by European embassies that sent reports about his activities back to their foreign offices. "Furnished with official recommendations," as he puts it in this letter, the young traveler was ready to visit England and make his way to the crown prince "who as [he] hear[s] was very interested in Central Asia and [his] experiences."[2] The thirty-two-year-old Vámbéry shrewdly recognized not only the value of the ethnographic and linguistic data he amassed, but also the geopolitical value of firsthand information British political actors needed to inform foreign policy in the face of Russian advances in the region. From this letter, it becomes clear that before he ever set foot on English soil, Vámbéry had already worked to create the right conditions for a favorable reception. The reports the British embassy in Tehran sent about him coupled with personal recommendation letters written in Tehran established his credibility and opened the right

[1] Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Könyvtár (MTAK). K, Ms 5450/221 (my translation).

[2] *Ibid*.

doors. In a real sense, Vámbéry's positive reception in the West was contingent not only on his marketable experiences but also on his authentication in the East.

In his own country, Vámbéry was barely known. While it is true that Hermann Vamberger, the mostly self-taught scholar born into a Jewish family in St. Georgen near Dunaszerdahely had secured personal and academic support as early as 1855 from a small group of Hungarian intellectuals along with the yet influential former Minister of Religion and Education József, Baron Eötvös (1813–1871), he had been physically absent from Hungary for seven years, living in Istanbul prior to his Central Asian expedition. It is of no surprise then that his return from Central Asia attracted little attention from wider Hungarian society in 1864, painful as it was to the traveler himself. True to his word, Vámbéry stayed in Hungary for a month, May 1864, before setting off for Great Britain.

Days after his arrival in London on June 9, 1864, the thirty-two-year-old traveler initially set out to meet a select group of British notables with an active interest in and knowledge of Central Asian affairs. Sir Henry Rawlinson (1810–1895), Sir Roderick Murchison (1792–1871), Viscount Strangford (1825–1869), Sir Austen Henry Layard (1817–1894), and Sir Justin Shiel (1803–1871) were among the first. In the preface of his first book in English entitled *Travels in Central Asia*, which he composed in three months during his sojourn in London, he thanked Sir Shiel, retired from his Persian diplomatic post for a decade, for hosting him at his house. In his autobiography *Arminius Vámbéry: His Life and Adventures,* written two decades after the events, he expanded on some of these meetings. Here, let me highlight two: his first meeting with Sir Henry Rawlinson, whom he characterizes as "the greatest living authority on all scientific and political questions associated with Central Asia,"[3] and Sir Roderick Murchison, the longtime president of the Royal Geographic Society. Rawlinson, himself an explorer, scholar, and political agent in Persia and India, was the perfect first contact to make, for he occupied an influential position at the intersection of academics and politics. Perhaps not inconsequentially, he also shared Vámbéry's views regarding the dangers of Russian expansion in Central Asia and the need for British vigilance, which may have encouraged Vámbéry to publicize his own views. His connections enabled Vámbéry to meet other influential people. Sir Roderick Murchison received him next. Of him, Vámbéry writes, "the kind manner in which this noble-hearted gentleman treated me during my sojourn in London, and the rich hospitality which I so frequently enjoyed in his house, will be ever green in my memory."[4] Murchison proved to have been crucial in shaping the public dissemination of Vámbéry's narratives, authentication, and positive reception within the scholarly community, which translated into copious news reports in popular papers throughout Great Britain.

3 Arminius Vambéry: *Arminius Vambéry: His Life and Adventures. Written by Himself,* London, T Fisher Unwin, 1884, 328.

4 Vambéry: *Adventures,* 330.

Less than two weeks after his arrival in London, Vámbéry was reported to have been extended a favorable reception by the Royal Geographic Society at its concluding meeting. Reports about his debut at the Royal Geographic Society were disseminated in both liberal and conservative papers, reaching a wide cross-section of the reading public. *The Birmingham News* introduced Vámbéry to the reader as an "enterprising Hungarian traveler"[5] who "penetrated not only into the heart of Central Asia … but also succeeded in returning safely." *The Bradford Observer*,[6] a paper with a liberal orientation in the 1860s with a large circulation, and *The Manchester Times,*[7] also a paper with a radically liberal history, both carried an almost identical report. The conservative paper *The Morning Post* expanded on the story by reporting further details. Accordingly, at the request of the Royal Geographic Society's president, he performed a blessing in the role of a dervish. As reported in the official transcript of the Royal Geographic Society as well, he "closed his eyes and extended his arms, and with strongly accented intonation he delivered the blessing in Arabic, moving his arms to correspond with the intonation of his voice and concluding by drawing both hands over the breast."[8] The pronouncement of the blessing, which he would repeat on various occasions to the great amusement of his listeners, served to authenticate his assertion that he had performatively assumed the role of a mendicant dervish during his Central Asian travels while separating him from Muslim religious praxis.

Three British newspapers *Daily News,*[9] *The Morning Post,*[10] and *The Standard*[11] report on the meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science during which Sir Roderick Murchison praised Vámbéry's achievements. According to Murchison, "There's no record of any European visiting Samarkand until 1841," when Russians were invited to explore for gold. He credited Vámbéry with describing hitherto unexplored regions. He further referred to him as "the zealous Hungarian M. Vámbéry" almost in the same breath as William Gifford Palgrave (1826–1888), the traveler, diplomat, and linguist who published his own popular book in 1865 entitled *Narrative of a Year's Journey through Central and Eastern Arabia* (1862–1863). By this rhetorical move, Murchison valorized Vámbéry as a traveler worthy of public attention.

In addition to written accounts, Vámbéry literally shaped his image by disseminating multiple studio photographs of himself taken in London. Two such studio photographs from 1864 depict him in his dervish clothes and in a stylized turban, wearing long robes. The wide circulation of such orientalized images of Vámbéry

5 *Birmingham News*, Issue 1857, 20 June 1864.
6 *The Bradford Observer*, 23 June 1864.
7 *Manchester Times*, Issue 1585, 25 June 1864.
8 *The Morning Post*, Issue 28248, 29 June 1864. 2.
9 *Daily News,* 16 September 1864.
10 *The Morning Post,* Issue 28316, 16 September 1864.
11 *The Standard*, Issue 12513, 16 September 1864.

served to establish his eastern bona fides in line with celebrated British travelers of the age. While more research is needed to establish exactly how these images were put to use in the British advertising campaign of Vámbéry's first book, we know such studio photographs had been used to target Hungarian readers. The great Arabist, Ignác Goldziher, Vámbéry's first student, refers to a very active Hungarian marketing campaign of said book in 1865. Writing many decades later after their relationship had soured, he derisively noted that "the walls of the capital city [Budapest] were plastered with large posters praising his book at the center of which appeared the picture of the noble, Jewish dervish."[12] Besides photographs, sketches of Vámbéry's seminal and deliberately sensationalized encounters in Central Asia were also published in his first book not only in the original English edition, but also in the American and Hungarian editions as well. Amongst them, the incident in which Vámbéry is almost unmasked as a European depicts a sketch of Vámbéry in his dervish clothes sitting on the floor.

As a newcomer to London and, for the most part, unfamiliar with the intricacies of English social etiquette, the Orientalized Hungarian traveler first had to undergo a metamorphosis in order to become palatable to polite English society. He credits his hostess Lady Sheil with giving him "the necessary hints as to the complicated laws and social tone of the West End."[13] Contrary to this assertion, Emily Morese Symonds, writing under the pseudonym George Paston, affirms that it was actually John Murray's wife who taught him "how to eat and how to behave" before he could take his place as "the lion of the London Season."[14] Presumably, both women intervened. Yet what matters is not the identity of the so-called civilizing force per se but rather that such interventions by the wives of his earliest benefactors in London – performing their own civilizing mission in the heart of the Empire – were not less consequential in "making" Vámbéry in a social sense than the assistance he received in the matter of revising his ethnological papers or the manuscript of *Travels in Central Asia*.

The Explorer, as he was often called, was "lionized" following the successful launching of his first book *Travels in Central Asia*. Reports on Murray's annual trade dinner testify that 1600 books were purchased by the trade, representing one of the highest numbers as was reported by *Nottingham Daily Guardian*[15] and *The Manchester Times*.[16] In addition to the book's reach on its own with multiple successive reprints, Vámbéry's narratives trickled into a large number of popular newspapers and magazines. By early 1865, amongst the more notable publications, Charles Dickens' bi-weekly *All the Year Round* published a rather detailed, six-page feature article entitled "The Hungarian Dervish," in which many of the founda-

[12] Goldziher Ignác: *Napló* [*Diary*], Budapest, Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1984, 32–33 (my translation).

[13] Vambéry: *Adventures*, 332.

[14] George Paston: *At John's Murrays: Records of a Literary Circle 1843–1892,* London, John Murray, 1932.

[15] *Nottingham Daily Guardian*, Supplement, 25 November 1864

[16] *Manchester Times,* 26 November 1864. 384.

tional narratives of *Travels in Central Asia* are retold with a novelist's zest for detail. The article's anonymous author characterizes him as "a young Hungarian, studious of men's tongues, and versed in diverse languages of Europe and Asia … impelled by scientific thirst for search into certain Asiatic relationships of the language of Hungary…"[17] With an impressive circulation of at least 100,000 at the time, Dickens' magazine contributed greatly to the popularization of Vámbéry's persona and foundational travel narratives.

The Examiner, which at the time was still highly regarded as a publisher of leading writers and was read by the intellectual elite, published its own detailed review of *Travels* with lengthy sections lifted from the book, calling it "a curious book from its very nature, and somewhat eccentric, while deeply interesting and instructive, as giving us a personal and practical knowledge of the inner life of a people hitherto imperfectly known to us…"[18] The review calls the author "a true Magyar, and a member of the Hungarian Academy of Pesth," who "under instructions from his society, travels in the country of the Turks or Turkomans in quest of the origin of the nation to which he belongs." The positive review, mistaken in its last assertion, concludes with the following prediction, meant to emphasize the singular value of Vámbéry's work: "It may be long before we again meet with a book the materials of which have been collected under conditions so singular, and which is at the same time so authentic and reliable."[19]

One of the most famous Hungarians in Victorian England was Governor Lajos Kossuth (1802–1894). Only seven years before Vámbéry's arrival in London, Kossuth was still very much present in British public discourse, having published countless articles in English and given well-received lectures. As *The Daily News* of London reports, "The subject of Monday's lecture was 'The Origin and Plan of the Organic Structure of Modern Europe,' which was described and illustrated with the usual pathos and ability of the eloquent Magyar."[20] The article affirms that "The hall was densely filled in all parts with an enthusiastic audience, who gave the noble exile a warm and generous reception." Kossuth is often described in various publications as the "noble Magyar" or "noble Hungarian." A studio photograph of Vámbéry from 1864 by J. Schreker deliberately stages him in a way that is strongly suggestive of Kossuth's own pictorial representations during that time period. Evidently, in 1864, Vámbéry was still able to capitalize on the memories of goodwill and excitement Kossuth's appearances had generated in Great Britain and, as it were, reenact the "noble Hungarian" and bracket his Jewish origins.

Nor was Vámbéry himself ignorant of the parallels between Kossuth's reception in Britain and his own. In a letter to one of the most important Hungarian novelists of the age, Mór Jókai (1825–1904), Vámbéry writes the following: "My present

[17] "The Hungarian Dervish". *All the Year Round*, Vol. VIII, 11 February 1865. 66–72.

[18] *The Examiner*, Issue 2968, 17 December 1864. 804.

[19] *Ibid*.

[20] *The Daily News*, Issue 3532, 10 September 1857.

journey in England is such a glorious march that was last seen by Kossuth amongst foreigners … Tomorrow, I depart for Sheffield; it is strange that everywhere I am quartered at the same places where Kossuth was honored as a guest."[21] By December 1864, just six months after his first appearance and less than two months after the publication of his *Travels in Central Asia*, Vámbéry's persona was so secure that the *Daily News* describes him as undergoing his "*first* transformation from a noble Magyar"[22] to a Turkish effendi, without mentioning any of his prior metamorphoses.

While in Great Britain, Vámbéry was received warmly by influential figures in British political and cultural life. He frequently dined at the Athenaeum Club with Charles Dickens, to whom he was introduced by his illustrious publisher, John Murray.[23] He established a close personal connection with Matthew Arnold (1822–1888), the author of the poem "Sohrab and Rustum" (1853) and other influential poems and works of cultural criticism. Arnold mentions in a letter to his mother dining with Vámbéry on February 15, 1865,[24] and lending *Travels to Central Asia* to a friend in a subsequent letter.[25] He also began attending private dinners at the invitation of the famed soldier, translator, ethnographer, spy, and diplomat Richard Francis Burton (1821–1890), with whom he "sat cross-legged on cushions, swapping stories of their adventures in the East," "enthralling" the young poet Algernon Charles Swinburne.[26] Vámbéry's autobiographical accounts of his phenomenally positive reception in Great Britain are well supported not only by published reminiscences of his contemporaries, but also by numerous articles and reports published in the British press.

By 1865, a number of articles inflated Vámbéry's academic credentials, referring to the Hungarian traveler as "Dr." Vámbéry. For instance, *The Morning Post* reports that during "A special meeting of the members of the Royal Asiatic Society … a short lecture was delivered by Dr. Vámbéry 'On the Distinctions between the Religious Practices of the Eastern and Western Mahometans.'" [27] The article goes on to introduce him as follows:

> Dr. Vámbéry, who is Hungarian and recently penetrated to Central Asia in the disguise of a dervish, had had ample opportunities of noticing the differences in the religious observances in Turkey and Arabia from those of the Mahometans in Bokhara and other places in the East, pointed out some of the marked dis-

[21] Országos Széchényi Könyvtár (OSZK). Levéltár, Fond V/629 (my translation).

[22] The *Daily News,* Issue 5801, 9 December 1864 (my italics).

[23] Arminius Vambéry: *The Story of My Struggles,* London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1905, 258.

[24] Cecil Y. Lang (ed.): *Letters of Matthew Arnold,* Six Volumes, Charlottesville and London, The University Press of Virginia, 1997, 381.

[25] Lang: *Letters of Matthew Arnold*, 384.

[26] Mary S. Lowell: *A Rage to Live: A Biography of Richard and Isabel Burton,* New York, W.W. Norton, 2000, 383.

[27] *The Morning Post,* Issue 28464, 8 March 1865. 6.

> tinguishing features, which consisted chiefly of the more strict enforcement of the ceremonies of Mahometanism in the East, where fanaticism prevails in an exaggerated form…

Since Vámbéry's English, as the reporter states, was "difficult to understand" as a consequence of his "imperfect pronunciation of English,"[28] inventing a doctorate was a necessary move to bolster his authority.

Vámbéry himself was aware of just how imperfect his English pronunciation had been at this time. Of his first lecture, he later writes with characteristically self-deprecating humor: "Oh, glorious language of Shakespeare and Milton! I am sure nobody has ever tormented thee so much as I did in those thirty-five minutes; nobody has murdered the Queen's English in such a cruel way as the ex-dervish in Burlington House!"[29] As a compensatory gesture for the speaker's faulty pronunciation and lack of institutional affiliation, many publications inflated the ex-dervish's academic credentials, concealing the fact that the famed traveler did not even complete his high school education – and would have to wait for a decade and a half before receiving his first honorary doctorate. Soon after he secured an academic position at the University of Budapest later that year, many newspapers adopted "Prof. Vámbéry" as their preferred identifier, lending even more scholarly weight to Vámbéry.

The emerging expert on Central Asia boldly expressed his views even when they ran counter to prevalent opinion. *The Cheshire Observer and Chester, Birkenhead, Crewe and North Wales Times* reports a meeting of the Ethnological Society at which Vámbéry reveals a distinctly anti-racist tendency in his strong objection to a paper by one Mr. J. Crawford, which characterized the "negro" as an inferior race in terms of intellect.[30] This objection, seconded only by one of the four other respondents, did nothing to diminish the foreigner's reputation or academic opportunities. Two weeks later, Vámbéry appeared at another meeting of the Ethnological Society, chaired by J. Crawford. This time, Vámbéry stuck closer to his expertise. According to a report in *The Morning Post*, Vámbéry "mentioned that the Turcomans knew how to train horses better than the Arabs, and he described their methods of feeding them with bread and flesh." He added, "there are no bees in Central Asia, either wild or domesticated."[31] From such reports, it becomes clear that the contemporary British press positioned the Hungarian traveler as a connoisseur of Turkoman cultural practices, one blessed with the observational powers of a born naturalist.

Reports of dinners and awards at which Vámbéry was feted appeared throughout the rest of 1865, further enhancing his renown and credibility. *The Morning Post*[32]

[28] *Ibid.*

[29] Vambéry: *Adventures*, 336.

[30] *The Cheshire Observer and Chester, Birkenhead, Crewe and North Wales Times,* Issue 511, 15 April 1865. 5.

[31] *The Morning Post*, Issue 28507, 27 April 1865. 3.

[32] *The Morning Post,* Issue 28529, 23 May 1865. 2.

and *The Hampshire Advertiser*[33] both inform their readers that Dr. Livingstone and Mr. Vámbéry participated in "The anniversary festival of the Literary Fund." In addition, at least six papers reported on the annual meeting of the Royal Geographical Society. We learn from *The Pall Mall Gazette*[34] that "A testimonial of the value of 40 pounds was awarded to Dr. Armenius [*sic*] Vámbéry for his adventurous travels in Turkistan" (May 22, 1865). *The Standard*,[35] *The Belfast News-Letter*,[36] *The Hampshire Advertiser*,[37] *The Leeds Mercury,*[38] and *The Morning Post*[39] offer their own reports on the same event. By this time in 1865, Vámbéry was so popular that he was included in the toast of the chairman to such iconic travelers as Dr. Livingstone, Captain Grant, and Mr. Palgrave. The chairman calls Vámbéry "the famous Hungarian explorer of Central Asia, whose fascinating manners and great natural abilities were the best possible passport that he could give among the uncivilized tribes among whom he had so successfully travelled in the character of a dervish. (Cheers)." Less than a year after his arrival in London, "Arminius Vámbéry" was, as it were, made.

By the time he died in 1913, Arminius Vámbéry had enjoyed an almost fifty-year period of recognition as the most well-known Hungarian in Great Britain. *The Geographical Journal* summarized the life and significance of "the distinguished Orientalist traveler," highlighting his "distinctly Anglophile attitude in the political questions that arose between [England and] Russia in Central Asia."[40] As the obituary makes it clear, "to an earlier generation the name of Vámbéry was a household word in connection with Central Asian matters." Clearly, the meticulous strategy conceived and executed in 1864–65 through meetings with English academic and cultural notables, popular lecture tours, striking studio photographs, copious newspaper reports, and an exciting first book served to transform a lame, Hungarian Jewish traveler from a marginal position into a durable celebrity, in a real sense *making* "Professor Arminius Vámbéry," the political commentator, protean Eastern Brother, informant of the Foreign Office, and erudite advisor and authority on Central Asia.

33 *The Hampshire Advertiser,* Issue 2177, 20 May1865. 7.
34 *The Pall Mall Gazette,* Issue 89, 22 May 1865.
35 *The Standard*, Issue 12726, 23 May 1865. 6.
36 *The Belfast News-Letter*, 26 May 1865.
37 *The Hampshire Advertiser*, Issue 2178, 27 May 1865. 2.
38 *The Leeds Mercury,* Issue 8460, 23 May 1865.
39 *The Morning Post*, Issue 28529, 23 May 1865.
40 "Obituary: Arminius Vambéry". *The Geographical Journal,* Vol. 42, No. 5. (November 1913), 500–501.

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Abstract

This article traces the earliest receptions of the Hungarian Orientalist Arminius Vámbéry (1832–1913) in Great Britain during the years 1864–1865. By examining contemporary British newspaper reports complementing Vámbéry's letters and autobiographical works, this study sheds light on the ways in which Arminius Vámbéry, the protean subjectivity of the multilayered, complex human being, was "made" as a stable, colorful and marketable "noble Hungarian" Anglophile expert of Central Asia in British public discourse in 1864–65.

Keywords: Arminius Vámbéry, self-made man, Hungarian Orientalist, receptions, Victorian England

Rezümé

Ez a tanulmány a magyar orientalista Vámbéry Ármin (1832–1913) legkorábbi, 1864–1865 közötti nagy-britanniai recepcióit mutatja be. Vámbéry leveleit kiegészítő korabeli brit lapértesülések és önéletrajzi munkák vizsgálatának segítségével világossá válik, hogy milyen módon alakult ki Vámbéry többrétegű, összetett, próteuszi szubjektivitásából egy stabil, színes és piacképes kép 1864–65-ben a brit közbeszédben.

Kulcsszavak: Vámbéry Ármin, Arminius Vambéry, self-made man, magyar orientalista, recepciók, viktoriánus korszak