

**Benedek Láng**

## **Astrology, Alchemy and Mysticism at King Matthias' Court - old statements revisited<sup>1</sup>**

The year 1940 was as noteworthy for the scholarship on king Matthias as is 2008. That year Hungarian historians celebrated the five-hundredth anniversary of the birth of the renaissance king, and – among others – published a two-volume collection of essays on his rulership. One of these essays was written by the Hungarian historian of science, László Szathmáry, who emphasized the importance of astrology, alchemy, and mysticism in the entourage of Matthias (Szathmáry, 1940). From the article we learn that Szathmáry meant by the fairly vague and confusing word 'mysticism' such fields as physiognomy, necromancy, geomancy, palmistry, and other divinatory methods. In other words, he used the category of mysticism for what we could call today practical magic (with the exception of physiognomy, of course, that rather belonged to medicine!).

This article intends to clarify to what extent Szathmáry was right reclaiming the significance of these fields in the late fifteenth century Hungary. One could object, however, pointing out how fruitless it is to reassess and correct such an old study, almost 70 years after it was published, not least because it was fairly unreliable even in its own time: as we know Szathmáry handled the question of footnotes and other references with an embarrassingly great amount of freedom: sometimes he indicated his source, sometimes he did not. The reason why I believe it makes sense to do some detective work in order to identify Szathmáry's non indicated references, is that in several cases he proved to have found something that other scholars did not. One such example is the case of the early sixteenth century alchemist, Nicolaus Melchior, whose alchemical mass was interesting enough to render its author a fairly recurrent topic in the secondary literature of alchemy, and still, nobody seemed to have noticed something that Szathmáry had published as early as in 1928, namely that Melchior's alchemical mass survived not only in printed editions, but also in two manuscripts kept today in Vienna. When Gábor Kiss Farkas, Cosmin Popa-Gorjanu, and myself followed this – exceptionally indicated – reference of Szathmáry, thanks to him we could add something new to present scholarship (Kiss,

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Láng, and Popa-Gorjanu, 2006) Consequently, I think it *does* make sense to take a look at how further research confirmed or disconfirmed Szathmáry's claims.

The appreciation of astrology in late fifteenth century Hungary, and particularly in the Neoplatonic milieu of the royal court has been thoroughly researched by scholars such as – among others – József Huszti, Zoltán Nagy, Péter Kulcsár, Tibor Klaniczay, Lajos Bartha, Jolán Balogh, Katalin Barlai, and Ágnes Boronkay. (Huszti, 1924 and 1925., Nagy, 1976., Kulcsár, 1983., Bartha, 1976 and 1979., Klaniczay; Jankovics, 1994., Balogh, 1985., Barlai ; Boronkai, 1994). Although the patronage of cultural life was centralized in Matthias' time, the places where traces of astrological interest can be found are scattered. The celestial sciences were not exclusively the king's fascination; they played a crucial role also in the life of Johannes Vitéz (1408-1472), (Csapodiné Gárdonyi, 1984., Klaniczay, 1988). first Bishop of Várad, later Archbishop of Esztergom, as well as in the life of his nephew Janus Pannonius (1434-1472), the famous Hungarian poet, whose astrological knowledge and even his own nativity can be reconstructed on the basis of his poems – as János Bollók and Lajos Bartha pointed out,<sup>2</sup> (however, very recently László Jankovits has challenged parts of this theory)<sup>3</sup>. Vitéz, who had been formerly the educator of the young Matthias, invited humanists and astrologers to his court from abroad which became, in turn, a model for the future king. Vitéz also arranged an astronomical center and observatory in Várad that was later transferred to Esztergom. From his archiepiscopal court, there is also pictorial evidence for his fascination by the celestial sciences: a fresco of a surviving archway was decorated with the signs of the zodiac in order to use it for the purpose of observation (Nagy, 1975).

Pozsony (Pressburg, Istropolis, today's Bratislava) and the newly founded university, the so-called *Academia Istropolitana*,<sup>4</sup> was another crucial intellectual center for a short period of five years (1467-1472). Vitéz and Matthias invited the most prominent representatives of astronomy and astrology to the quadrivial chair of the university: Johannes Regiomontanus (1436-1476), Martin Bylica de Olkusz (1433-1493), and supposedly even Galeotto Marzio (ca. 1427-ca. 1497).<sup>5</sup> The astrologers, who were requested to construct the nativity of the university,

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<sup>2</sup> On Janus Pannonius' astrology, see Huszti, 1927., Bartha, 1978., Bollók, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> See the article of Jankovits in this volume.

<sup>4</sup> The widespread name of the new university, *Academia Istropolitana* was not a contemporary denomination, it was probably first used in the eighteenth century. In those days, the university was never referred to as *academia*, but rather as *universitas*, *studium generale*, or *universale gymnasium*; the word *academia* (still without the adjective *Istropolitana*) appears first at the end of the fifteenth century. Whatever the university was called, it was a real institution with faculties, scholarships, and a well identifiable building.

<sup>5</sup> As the secondary literature of this Hungarian attempt at creating a university is too extensive, it suffices here to quote a few titles: Schier, 1774., Domonkos, 1969., Klaniczay, 1990.

prognosticated flourishing future for the new institution.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, this prophecy turned out to be wrong, and the *Academia Istropolitana* could not avoid the destiny of the former Hungarian attempts at establishing university in Pécs and in Óbuda. After a very short golden period it began to break up because of the humanist king's conflict with his humanist prelates – Archbishop Vitéz and Bishop Janus Pannonius – who organized a plot against their ruler, and who subsequently lost their power, had to escape from the court, and died soon after.

The somewhat disappointed king surrounded himself with humanists from abroad, mainly Italians, among them with those who arrived with his second wife, Beatrix of Aragon. Matthias was also aware of the fact that among those cultural duties that were expected from a real Renaissance king, not only the financial support of scientists and artists was included, but also the foundation of a representative library, which provided mental fodder for the courtiers and a learned place where the debates could take place. If we consider a library as the mirror of its collector's literary and scientific interest, we have every right to expect that a significant portion of Matthias' books would be on astrology and a lesser but still significant part of them on alchemy, geomancy, palmistry, that is, learned practical magic. King Matthias' enthusiasm towards the sciences, including astrology and the occult arts, and the scientific orientation of his Corvinian library have been subject to the admiration of the contemporaries and the studies of modern scholars.<sup>7</sup> Reports left by the actors of Matthias' court contain a variety of exciting hints regarding the intellectual attitudes of the king. The famous Italian humanist Galeotto Marzio, who spent long years in Hungary as a notable guest of the court, gave an enthusiastic account of the Neoplatonic, scientific, and astrological interest of Matthias, claiming in particular how the king liked astrology and the works of Apuleius, who was a recurrent attributed author of divinatory methods.<sup>8</sup> Another Italian humanist guest of the court, Antonio Bonfini (1427-1502), specifies in his *Symposium* that the intellectual debates held in the court were often organized around the topic of Neoplatonism, and included such authors as Plato, Hermes Trismegistos, Zoroaster, Plotinus, and Pythagoras.<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere Bonfini adds that Matthias asked for astrological prognosis before all his military campaigns, and that he surrounded himself with astronomers, doctors, mathematicians (meaning also astrologers), and did not even abhorred magicians and necromancers (Bonfini, 1941: 276).

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<sup>6</sup> The nativity is extant, see Schier, 1774.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Csapodi, 1985.

<sup>8</sup> "*Tenebat preterea astrologiam et in operibus Apulei Platonoci ita detritus, ut eius dogma omnino calleret, unde et apud eum theologi, philosophi, medici, poetae et oratores et astrologi et qui omnes disciplinas profitebantur, frequenter erant.*" Juhász, 1934: 9.

<sup>9</sup> Bonfini, 1943: 119-200. For general overviews on the question, see the following: Kulcsár, 1983., Balogh, 1985 and 1966.

To what extent does the Corvinian book collection reflect these themes?<sup>10</sup> Among the approximately two hundred extant codices, twenty items – that is, ten percent – can be related to Neoplatonism (Kulcsár, 1983: 44). We find works by Plato, Victorinus, Cicero, Porphyry, Synesius, Pseudo-Dionysius, Calcidius, Theophrastus, William of Conches, and Ficino. Another considerable portion of the books is devoted to astrology by Ptolemy, Firmicus Maternus, Regiomontanus, Peurbach, and so forth. In addition, the library included a book originally prepared for Emperor Wenceslas IV, the *Commentarius in Ptolomaei quadripartitum* (*Commentary to the Tetrabiblos of Ptolemy*) by Haly Aberudiam Heben Rodan (translated into Latin at the court of Alfonso the Wise), and a number of calendars and prognostics.<sup>11</sup> This selection would have been extremely useful material for any (hypothetical) anthology of a medieval astrologer. The observatory of the library was rich in astronomical instruments, including gnomons, astrolabes, and horologiums, most of them made by a Viennese metallurgist, Hans Dorn.<sup>12</sup> The astrological nature of the library is also stressed on the vault of one room of the library, where a starry sky was painted with the horoscope of Matthias and a short Latin poem catching the attention of the visitors:

*Aspice Matthiae micuit quo tempore regis  
Natalis coeli qualis imago fuit*<sup>13</sup>

We have all reasons to suppose that a copy of the military handbook written by Conrad Kyeser (1366-1405) spent also a few decades on the shelves of the Corvinian Library. Kyeser's work, the *Bellifortis* is as rich in techniques of military technology and engineering as in magical recipes, and talismans.<sup>14</sup> If we open the book at random, we might find an Archimedes screw here and a magic ring there. On one page, we see colorful astrological symbols, while other pages depict terrifying siege machines. Bathhouses on one page, demons on the other. The codex that we suppose to have come to us from Matthias' court has not survived in its integrity, only in fragments that were found in the nineteenth century in the archives of

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<sup>10</sup> For a reconstruction of the library, Csapodi, 1973., Csapodi and Csapodiné Gárdonyi, 1990.

<sup>11</sup> Barlai and Boronkai, 1994. For the scientific codices of the library, see also Csapodi, 1985.

<sup>12</sup> Balogh, 1985: 418., Balogh, 1966: 447-449, on astronomical tools and clocks, and 583-584, on mechanics. The most beautiful pieces of this collection were given to the University of Krakow, after the death of the court astrologer of King Matthias, the Polish Martin Bylica of Olkusz.

<sup>13</sup> Look, what the image of the sky looked like in the time when King Matthias was born. Translated by Benedek Láng. Balogh, 1985: 105. For descriptions on the library and the observatory, see Balogh, 1966: 62-65 and Véghe, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> For the text, see Kyeser, 1967. The editor, Götz Quarg published the text of Ms Göttingen, Universitätsbibliothek, Cod. philos. 63 in a facsimile edition, in a transcription of the Latin text and a German translation, providing also a detailed introduction. For further secondary literature, see the following: the review article by White, 1969., Eamon, 1983 and 1994: 68-71.

Constantinople. The only plausible explanation of how it could have gotten there is that it had belonged to the Corvinian Library, a great portion of which was brought to the center of the Turkish Empire in the sixteenth century.

Three Corvinae contain works and letters by Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), the father of renaissance hermetic philosophy and magic, who was in fairly close correspondence with the members of the royal court.<sup>15</sup> An indication of the extensive intellectual relationships is that the Florentine philosopher dedicated a copy of his Commentary to Plato's *Symposium* to Janus Pannonius,<sup>16</sup> and Books III and IV of his collected letters to King Matthias (Wolfenbüttel, Cod. Guelf. 12, Aug. 4°). (To this famous work Ficino attached a lesser-known writing against those astrologers who did a different kind of astrology from the one practiced by Ficino. This note is entitled *Quantum astronomi metiuntur, tantum astrologi mentiuntur*, or in other words, "as much as astronomers measure, that much astrologers lie." Csapodi, 1972) Last but not least, Ficino dedicated the third book of his masterpiece (*De vita libri tres – Three Books of Life*), entitled *De vita coelitus comparanda* (*On Obtaining Life from the Heavens*), to the Hungarian king (Florence, Bibliotheca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 73. Cod. 39.). Ficino discusses here not only such topics as the effect of the sky on earthly beings, but also the secret virtues of herbs, animals, and stones, and the effect which these powers exercised on human life. He argues that not only natural beings but even artificial objects may receive occult virtue from the stars, and that images are able to serve the aims of the operator. He furthermore explains how the human operator can make use of these occult powers and how through their manipulation one can influence nature (Kaske; Clark, 1989). Among the "three books of life," this is the only one containing magical elements, and these elements – the virtue of words, stones, talismans, planetary images, and the power of spirits involved – are partly taken from medieval talismanic magic (*Ibid.*, 45-55).

At this point, we can try to give a preliminary answer to the main question of this article, it seems that research has by and large confirmed what Szathmáry sixty-eight years ago wrote. But has it really confirmed? As far as astrology is concerned, the picture is very clear, astrology was indeed a central interest and preoccupation in and around the royal court, as it was actually in basically each court (including the papal court) of renaissance Europe.

With alchemy, we have to be more cautious. Szathmáry himself was quite careful when speaking about this field, and came to the conclusion that – naturally – there is no evidence that any gold-making was going on in the Buda palace. Then however, he went on to enumerate the main alchemists of the time, among them

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<sup>15</sup> Besides the king, Janus Pannonius, and Vitéz, Ficino sent letters to Nicholas Báthory, the Bishop of Vác, Péter Váradi, and János Váradi. For those, see Rees, 1998. and Ficino, 1975; see also Balogh, 1923-1926.

<sup>16</sup> Ficino, *Commentarius in Platonis Convivium* dedicated to Janus Pannonius around 1470 (Vienna, ÖNB, Cod. 2472, M. C. 38).

Ficino, whom he called a theoretical alchemist. As research since Szathmáry has pointed out, it was indeed rather the fame of the Hungarian court that had something to do with alchemy, not its real activity. Ágnes Ritoókné Szalay convincingly demonstrates that a certain Felice Feliciano from Verona (1433-after 1479), an enthusiastic antiquarian and an admirer of alchemy, who almost never left the Italian lands in his life, came once to Hungary, partly because the country was famous of its antimonum stocks, that is a kind of mineral relevant for alchemical research (Ritoókné Szalay, 1983). Another sign of the alchemical notoriety of Hungary, or more precisely of king Matthias, is the manuscript that already Szathmáry described, but that lately Alessandro Scafi investigated more in details. The manuscript is in Musée Condé in Chantilly, it is from the seventeenth century, and contains among other alchemical texts, a recipe on gold making attributed to Matthias himself (Szathmáry, 1940: 439-446., Scafi, 1993). As Scafi pointed out, it was probably the Hermetical, astrological, and magical fame of the renaissance king that might have been the real reason of this strange attribution.

Practical magic is again, more problematic than we would expect. Physiognomy, that Szathmáry considers a branch of magic, is simply a part of medical knowledge in the time, and has not much to do with magic in the fifteenth century. Kyeser's military and magical handbook, which Szathmáry did not know about, but a copy of which was in all probability in the royal library, had undeniable and strong magical, talismanic, astrological, and alchemical content, however, as later research emphasizes, the whole book with its beautiful illustrations depicting not only military devices, but also baths with naked women, and other things quite alien from engineering, was more a means of entertaining its readers than a manual for actual use. Finally, as far as the equally magical content of Ficino's *Third book of life* is concerned (*De vita coelitus comparanda* dedicated to Mathias), we have to admit that it was never consulted by the learned courtiers of Hungary; the book did simply not reach Buda. The manuscript was not ready in Matthias' life, it was dedicated on July 10, 1489, and the king died in 1490, and therefore it remained in Florence, where it still is, and Matthias' coat of arms was covered by that of the Medicis.<sup>17</sup>

All in all, if we can identify any magical influence on the Buda court, it was primarily through the dissemination of *Renaissance Hermetism of the Italian humanists* such as Galeotto and Ficino,<sup>18</sup> and not through the distribution of *medieval genres* of practical magic. Surprisingly, we see the complete lack of practical magic (geomancy, palmistry, and divination) in Matthias' library. Texts of medieval natural, image, and ritual magic have no trace in the king's book collection; the Hermes who was held in great respect at the royal court was clearly not the

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<sup>17</sup> Together with Ficino's *De vita*, several dozens of codices have been identified recently in Florence which were commissioned by King Matthias, but which, because of his death in 1490, were not sent to his Buda court, and remained in Italy. See Dillon Bussi, 2002: 186.

<sup>18</sup> For an exhaustive study on Galeotto Marzio, see the series of articles: Miggianno, 1992-1993.

medieval Hermes of the Arabs (the attributed author of many texts of practical magic), but the Renaissance Hermes Mercurius, introduced into the intellectual discourse by Ficino's translations.<sup>19</sup> What has been many times emphasized on the cultural life of Hungary, seems to be true for learned magic too: Hungary was probably never so "up-to-date", the intellectual relations between the country and the rest of Europe were never so close as in those days; Matthias' Renaissance court followed the Italian pattern in the field of learned magic too.

On a final note, it should be added that although the Corvinian library has been a continuously researched topic in the last century, only about ten percent of the original codices have been identified.<sup>20</sup> Scholars estimate the original number of the *Corvinae* at two or two and a half thousand, of which slightly more than two hundred have been found. This ratio makes every claim about the nature of the Corvinian library necessarily conjectural. In consequence, it cannot be excluded that handbooks of medieval practical magic were present on the bookshelves of King Matthias, but it is not very likely that the emergence of new sources would change the general consensus that the king's completely up-to-date interest oriented towards the new philosophical Hermetic trends rather than the "old" practical methods.

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<sup>19</sup> I do not want to argue here against the continuity of medieval and Renaissance magic – this issue deserves, and in fact it has deserved, separate studies: Kieckhefer, 2006. On Ficino's debts to medieval sources, primarily to the *Picatrix* and Al-Kindi's *De radiis*, as compared to his Late Antique sources (Plotinus, Iamblichos, Proclus, and Hellenistic Hermetism), see Kaske and Clark, 1989: 46-51. On Galeotto's reception of astral magic, medical astrology, and divination, see Miggiano, 1993 (IV).

<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, thanks to the recent finding of the Florentine Corvina codices, the proportion of the identified codices drastically increased. See Karsay, 2002.

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