

## **Hungarian Matthias Cult in the 18th Century**

King Matthias is the most popular hero in Hungarian folklore. But Mátyás Hunyadi is known as a folklore hero by all the peoples of the Carpathian Basin. There is a very extensive body of literature on his person, mainly based on research by historians. (Kubinyi, 2008) Oral tradition linked to his name has been widely collected, mainly by folklorists. The data of folklore are very far from historical facts. The king's figure appears in many different ways: above all in prose genres, tales, anecdotes, legends and origin stories. There are also proverbs, songs, ballads, historical songs, children's rhymes and popular plays associated with his name. Over the centuries he has been the main hero of a variety of genres. (Kríza, 2007)

In the light of historical development we know that in the 15th century (his own period) his name was preserved in songs of praise, anecdotes and chronicles, and his deeds were recorded, mainly in Latin. (Bonfini, 1995:1011) In the following century chronicles (in verse and prose) were written about him in Hungarian, supplemented with anecdotes drawn from oral tradition that cannot be linked to historical events. (Jankovics-Klaniczay, 1994) The written records refer to the folklore elements. (Benczédi Székely, 1960) We find very little data referring to folklore in manuscript and printed records dating from the 17th century. Typically, the importance of his deeds and the significance of his figure were compared to Attila, victorious leader of the Huns and he was regarded as a descendant and successor of Attila. According to 17th century songs, King Matthias inherited Attila's sword, and the invincible leader conquered and defeated his enemies with this weapon.

The 18th century, the Age of Enlightenment, saw a great increase in stories about the idealised king, the wise and just ruler, who liked jokes and went about his country helping others. The data that has survived in writing or spread through performance and oral tradition show that this popularising, idealising picture of King Matthias spread in Hungarian culture. On this occasion I shall outline the main characteristics of that period, showing that the veneration of the national king – that became one of the representative themes of 19th century folklore – kept alive the tradition of earlier periods. (Kríza, 1999/a)

## 1.

In his rich oeuvre, the versatile 18th century writer András Dugonics strove to shape and spread the cult of Matthias. His drama *Toldi* featured the figures of two characteristic folklore heroes. One was the strong, brave, loyal soldier and the other the just king; they achieved their success by helping and strengthening each other, and became defenceless without each other. Toldi is thus King Matthias's loyal servant and unconditional helper. The just, good-hearted, wise ruler who helps the poor, but is not free of errors, is King Matthias. (Dugonics, 1794) The drama is based on a little-known play described by the author as an "intrigue play": Karl Christmann: *Der Statthalter von Corfu*. (Christmann, 1782) The translation is very free, only the main threads of the plot are similar. In the notes Dugonics gives his reasons for changing the names of the protagonists. He placed the historical heroes in the drama so that he could once again focus attention on their figures and rescue them from oblivion. He stressed that every means should be used to arouse interest in Hungarian historical figures, and by recalling their deeds turn the spotlight on the values of the historical past. He linked the demand for use of the native tongue with praise of the historical past. It should be noted that, independently of this particular play, writers in that period often turned to works of literature from earlier centuries. They revived, rewrote and republished forgotten works. The anecdotes of Solomon and Markalf are an example. (Salamon, 1782) It was in this period that the 16th century Hungarian translation came to be included in collections of anecdotes, with the important difference that the hero was no longer Solomon but King Matthias and Markalf became a simple peasant. Pieces from the collections of jests in mediaeval literature also became known in this period as adventures of King Matthias.

András Dugonics compiled an important collection of sayings, *Példabeszédek* [Proverbs]. The merit of the collection is that it explains the proverbs. (Dugonics, 1820) It attempts to determine the story, anecdote or event from which the given saying was derived. He linked 28 sayings to the name of King Matthias. He took a number of these from Galeotto Marzio (a contemporary writer of the king). Dugonics himself lists the source in his notes. It can be said that the writer in the Age of Enlightenment turned consciously to the 300-year-old source when he revived anecdotes praising King Matthias. (Kríza, 2005:128) Despite this, he did not publish a simple translation because he gave all of them in enjoyable form and strove to record the context of the saying. We also know that Dugonics again wrote down and published in the *Győri Kalendárium* between 1756-1790 a few of the texts he had borrowed from Galeotto Marzio and that had since become popular. (Marzio, 1593) He probably recorded for us the version that had been passed down orally because the language is simple and easily understood. He added his own explanations in footnotes. For example, commenting on the proverb: "only the pike

from Csór has a liver”, Dugonics notes that King Matthias was, in fact, very fond of fish liver, but he must have heard the anecdote circulating in oral tradition about the pike liver stolen in an inn, that became the basis of the saying. In another communication he notes that the anecdote given without the king’s name very soon became associated with Matthias and became a popular story. The still popular saying “There was a dog fair in Buda only once” first appeared in 1792 in the newspaper *Magyar Hírmondó*. Dugonics, following exactly the source he knew, wrote down the case of “A dog fair is held only once in Buda”. A comparison of the two texts shows both the evolution of oral tradition and the spread of the cult of Matthias. Dugonics published not only proverbs in his collection *Példabeszédek*. In his notes on the set phrases he gave details on the antecedents of the saying. He liked to link the given expressions to deeds of King Matthias. All this demonstrates how the Matthias cult was spread consciously in the age of enlightenment.

One of the oldest and still one of the best known sayings – “King Matthias is dead, justice is lost” – is not included by Dugonics in his collection although it appeared in the writings of his contemporaries in a number of variants, either in verse, summing up lessons or as a paraphrase. However rich the *Példabeszédek* collection of sayings may be in folklore creations associated with King Matthias, it is far from complete. We now know that the generally anonymous writers of almanacs linked a number of anecdotes known from the international literature to the name of King Matthias. (Kríza, 1993) Gedeon Ráday, - writer of that age - for example, does this in his poem about the participants in a competition for laziness when he speaks about the lazy people of jesting King Matthias. We know today, that the antecedents can be linked to Persian sources.

## 2.

The school dramas played an important part in shaping the culture of the Age of Enlightenment. Besides the students and participants, many people must have seen the performances and been familiar with their themes. The most popular historical hero of these performances was King Matthias and with him, the entire Hunyadi house. (Staud, 1996) In recent decades research on the school dramas has contributed to our knowledge of this important branch of 18th century culture with the publication of source material. The themes and heroes of the school plays were far removed from the historical events, including in the case of the Hunyadi family. The performances with historical themes followed the genre requirements for school dramas. The heroes generally appeared as allegorical figures and emphasised the moral message as the lesson of the play. (Varga, 1992) In dealing with their themes they ignored the real events of the past. The famous ruler, the just king and historical figure serves as an example for the whole Europe proved to be an

excellent hero for the anonymous authors of school dramas. Attention was already focused on the figure of King Matthias in a 17th century drama performed in Nagyszombat. This portrayal probably served as a model for later plays. Very few complete dramas have come down to us, but the documents listing the scenes and actors give some idea about the actual performances. We know from such sources, for example, that a Jesuit school drama performed in Kolozsvár in 1702 presented the splendid wedding of King Matthias and Catherine Podjebrad. The marriage was the culmination of a happy love. The trust and affection that finally led to marriage arose between them during the king's imprisonment in Prague. The intercession of the princess did more for the release of Mátyás Hunyadi than the ransom, not mentioned at all on the playbill. The young girl's role before the marriage and the intrigues against the relationship between Matthias and Catherine that the young couple had to overcome, added to the significance of the sumptuous wedding. The narrative unit of the "girl freeing a slave" known from folklore appeared in the Baroque school drama. Folk poetry can help to throw light on the theme. (Kríza, 1999/b) We know a number of southern Slav ballads and heroic songs about how King Matthias was freed from captivity with the help of the daughter of the emperor or the sultan. When choosing secular themes the school dramas drew on elements from popular poetry. As a result, when the two young people meet, folklore elements can be found in all the scenes showing the course of their love and marriage. According to the drama, external factors raise obstacles to their relationship and by overcoming them they become heroes, their wedding is a veritable triumphal procession. The Jesuit school drama on the marriage of King Matthias was probably influenced by the romance of unknown author of Szendrő telling the story of Szilágyi and Hajmási, or by the Slovene ballad about the flight of Matthias. (Kríza, 2007: 101) The idealised relationship between King Matthias and Catherine Podjebrad also figures in other contemporary works. While the 15th century sources barely mention this marriage, two hundred years later Catherine appears as an ideal wife, as the play by László Szentjóbi Szabó proves. (Szentjóbi Szabó, 1792)

### 3.

The popular works, such as the drama by Szentjóbi mentioned above, also appeared in cheap editions. However, most of these writings were intended for listeners rather than for readers. The texts were shorter, the sentences less flamboyantly Baroque, they followed natural speech, and the narration of the story proceeded towards a climax. Stories about King Matthias were included among the literary pieces in the almanacs published annually. Between 1741 and 1752 the Győri Kalendárium [Győr Almanac] published 28 anecdotes under the title Hunyad

Mátyás M.O. 37-dik Királyának bölts és tréfás beszédiről és tselekedeteiről szolló fel-téteinek continuatioja [Continuation of the account of the wise and humorous words and deeds of Matthias Hunyad, 37th king of Hungary]. The title appears to suggest that these were the sayings of Galeotto, but the surviving data indicate otherwise, because the unknown author drew on the *Gesta Romanorum*, the stories about Solomon and Markalf, and other sources unknown to us. In the 18th century many different collections of anecdotes appeared in the neighbouring countries, and Hungarian writers drew on these, indeed the same publisher issued compilations in both Hungarian and German. It was here that Matthias the jest-loving student first appeared as the hero of anecdotes that became a popular literary topos in the following century.

In 1749 the Győri Kalendárium published an anecdote about the sweet-smelling coachman. It was set in Prague, in the time of George Podjebrad. According to the story: On a particular feast day the court coachman wanted to kiss the queen's hand, and so he would like to make himself sweet-smelling because the queen detests the smell of the stables. After long preparations the coachman reaches the young Matthias who recommends an apothecary's product with caraway and a pleasant perfume. The long-awaited moment arrives when the queen enters his coach, but after a while the product begins to cause an "intestinal storm" and he "emits clouds of smoke like an old woman". The queen was highly indignant. Of course, he is unable to kiss her hand and the young man in his shame is forced to leave not only his work but also the town. The whole story is marked by informal, outspoken jest. The text is not vulgar or coarse, but it pokes fun simultaneously at foppishness, vain aspiration and simple-mindedness. The antecedent to this popular style of jesting anecdote can be found in the chronicle of Thuróczy, but it also fits the image of King Matthias later recorded by folklorists. (Thuróczy, 1978) Folk tradition includes the figure of the womanising king, the hero with a big appetite for good food, cheerful adventures and practical jokes, as well as the just and wise ruler. The constructed figure of Matthias as a young man, the prince who never was, is found not only in oral tradition: in the following century the jesting young Matthias figured prominently in literature.

In 1784 the Győri Kalendárium printed the story of the peasant budgeting his pennies, linking it to King Matthias. The tale that figures in the Catalogue of Folktale Types (MNK 921) with an enormous international comparison, is told in a good performing style. The brief introduction, the metaphors used there, the formulas of address and the short, clear replies are all signs of a routine performer. The popularity of the almanac was almost certainly enhanced by the enjoyable stories it contained. It is quite clear that this series in the Győri Kalendárium was produced with literary intentions. Although we have no proof, it is quite possible that the series was used as a source by József Péczely a few years later who diligently awakened the memory of King Matthias and Hunyadi with his verse. In the works

of literature, not only by Péczely but also by Gedeon Ráday, the Matthias legends are full of moral lessons, adapted to the taste of the age. As a result, they are less effective than the folklore creations, but their names of these authors are known in the literature on the subject.

The Matthias anecdotes published in the 1792 issue of Magyar Hírmondó, the first Hungarian magazine, are known to have been popular. This can be seen in the fact that the same texts were used a few years later at the beginning of János Kis's collection of anecdotes that was published twice. Then, just a few years later, the writer Ádám Pálóczi Horváth used them as the basis for a play, spiced up with his imagination. (Pálóczi Horváth, 1816) The adventures and jests of the clever girl – known to folkloristics as type number MNK 875 – was probably the frame the writer used for his work. The tale of the clever girl – which is actually of Persian origin and became widely known in the middle ages through the story of Pontianus – has been recorded in many variants in the Hungarian-speaking territory. We know of its variants linked to King Matthias from the 18th century; they were related to the spread of popular poetry about the king.

In the age of enlightenment attention turned towards earlier historical events, and to classification of the results. The publication of sources began. Among them were the decrees and correspondence of King Matthias and the literature on him. Antonio Bonfini's compilation on the history of the Hungarians saw four editions. It was never published so much in any other period. The Hungarian translation of Bonfini's work, Heltai's Magyarok krónikája [Chronicle of the Hungarians] was brought out by the same publisher who had earlier published the 28 Matthias anecdotes in the Győri Kalendárium. A new edition of Thuróczy's chronicle was published in 1769, as well as a monograph on literature in the time of King Matthias (Thuróczy, 1978) More and more aspects of the spread and strengthening of the cult of King Matthias can be observed.

#### 4.

Besides satisfying the demands of the literate, popularising works also appeared in cheap editions for the lower social strata. The historical writings of Heltai were published in serial form at this time in Buda and Pozsony. The section on King Matthias was also published separately under the title of *História...* in a small format octavo booklet by the Landerer press. The original text was simplified, eliminating old-style expressions and adopting modern usage and speech style. Such popularising publications satisfied the interest in Hungarian history. The Landerer press operated in Buda and in 1776 published a compilation on János Hunyadi's battles against the Turks and the glorious deeds of King Matthias. The long, Baroque-style title, *História...*, states the content of the work, the publication's aim of

popularising history, and the reading public it targeted. It was intended for people of modest means with an interest in history. (Kríza, 1993)

The chronicle as a genre was no longer in fashion in the 18th century. It has been shown that the antecedents and source of the *História...* of 1776 were from two centuries earlier, the 16th century Hungarian chronicles and chronicle songs. The verses presenting János Hunyadi are almost identical word for word with the poems of Mátyás Nagybáncsai, but the author has treated his source very freely in the description of the battles, combining several events, and stressing the significance of feats of arms even if they end in defeat.

The reports circulating about the descent of Hunyadi are presented in a fabulous form, mainly on the basis of Heltai's work. (Heltai, 1981) The compiler took care to preserve credibility. Painting realistic pictures, he tells how the woman from Marsina came with her young son to the king, to offer the child to the king. The woman shows him a gold ring to remind him of an old, amorous adventure. The king blushes but takes the child and calls him János Hunyadi. In the following century this became the most popular story about the origin of the family.

It is almost impossible to identify the authors of popular literature if they wished to conceal the writer's identity. This is the situation in the case of the Matthias chronicle too. It can be determined that the Landerer press tried to issue works of quality and undertook an important task with the publication of popular books. The name of the author was not important in the latter cases. The *História* was one of those publications. The aim set out on the title-page as "a compilation for those who delight in the chronicles of Hungary" avoids mentioning the name of the author. The *História...* is thus a short, general outline for readers interested in past events. Research has shown that the writer of the chronicle drew on the writings of Heltai, Göröcsöni and Nagybáncsai for both the prose and verse passages. The only exception is the part about King Matthias's battle of Hainburg. (Kríza, 2007: 117)

## 5.

The battle of Hainburg was given an insignificant role in the chronicles on the deeds of King Matthias, although it was very protracted and involved considerable losses. The reality did not fit into the idealised picture of the invincible king. The compiler of the *História...* in the late 18th century, a time of growing anti-Habsburg sentiments, wrote a new chronicle with song on the battle preceding the capture of Vienna. A new chronicle and in part a verse-chronicle was created at the end of the 18th century. The author adopted the style of earlier periods, using an archaic form to describe an important event, the victory over the Germans. He gave great significance to the merciless fighting by using exaggerating expressions and listing gods of the ancient world. King Matthias called the entire population of the country

into battle. Hungarians, Croatians, Romanians, Slovaks, Serbs and Szeklers came running. Mercenary soldiers, dignitaries from the royal court, townsmen and nobles stood beside him, in other words the whole population was represented in all its diversity. The king led them into battle on his mount Pegasus, the hope of victory in his heart. The army, representing the single, common will, “crushed the enemy”.

The 86-line verse-chronicle is actually a historical vision of the victory of the national king, the combined efforts of the people of the country and the victory over the enemy. This very conscious formulation must be the work of a cultured and well-informed person. This is also confirmed by the inclusion of the ancient gods and the faultless versification. Hidden among the lines we find the confession: the author of the verse was Antal Veszelszki. The author of the verse-chronicle is not known to literary historians. My research shows that he was probably born around 1730 (perhaps in the vicinity of Sopron) and died around 1800, probably in Vác. He was a medical doctor and botanist, who wrote a number of popular science works. Wishing to advance the culture of the age, he turned to the historical past to strengthen the national consciousness. What he really undertook was the transmission of a source; he simplified the chronicles he knew, made them more colourful, and rewrote them for people with little education but a desire to learn. Veszelszki displays the same conscious aspiration declared by Dugonics, of bringing forgotten history to people’s attention. He wrote:

I strove to make the histories of our country the subject of my writing, and especially the histories of those people in our country who, in their lifetime enjoyed great fame and respect: but after their death they fell into oblivion, so that after such great deeds their names are not known either in modest little writings or in the mouths of peasants, because our writers left nothing written about them and they are forgotten forever.

## **Conclusion**

18th century written sources contain many-sided evidence that the cult of King Matthias was part of the culture of the age. Facts living in oral tradition were recorded by literate persons and when writing prose or plays in Hungarian authors consciously turned to historical heroes, especially King Matthias. For this reason, when popularising national history and literature they devoted special attention to the 15th–16th century antecedents, to sources in Latin and Hungarian. They coloured the historical facts with elements drawn from folklore. History, literature and oral tradition were intertwined. The figure of King Matthias became far removed from the real historical person and his name linked to all the anecdotes, tales and works of any genre in the international sources featuring a wise, just, jest-

loving national king. In the varied folklore the hero can be typified in differing, seemingly contradictory ways. Nevertheless, it can be said in very general terms that King Matthias is characterised by the social role he plays. He is the one who helps peasants in trouble, scolds lords abusing their power, gives money to the poor, helps the bold, and punishes the wealthy. King Matthias is in direct contact with his people, he meets them personally in towns and villages, fields and forests, and they fight, eat or even till the soil together. Explanations of place-names are linked to King Matthias with stories characteristic of folk tales; according to folklorists these explanations are a genre that arose in recent times. All these characteristics made it possible for the person of King Matthias and the folklore related to him to be independent of the different ethnic groups. King Matthias is a hero of Slovene, Ruthenian, Slovak, Serb and Croatian as well as Hungarian folk poetry. It was in this way that the Matthias tradition became part of popular culture in the 18th century.

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