

Marcell Sebők

The Leading Knight of his Time

King Matthias Remembered in Hungarian Modernity¹

On October 16, 1902, a local newspaper praised sculptor János Fadrusz, the creator of King Matthias monument in the centre of Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca) for capturing just the right qualities of the ruler with the following words:

“Now we know who Mátyás was to us and who he was to the world. Everybody knows, the child, the servant, the shopkeeper, the magnate, whoever happens to pass through the main square of Kolozsvár. Organizer of armies, vanquisher of enemies, creator of Hungarian power in Central Europe. The leading knight of his time, a terrible and just emperor by virtue of his sword and his mind. This is the Mátyás resurrected by Fadrusz. And it is precisely the Mátyás we need. Not the opulent ruler, not the scholar, not the founder of libraries, not the generous patron of arts, not the builder of splendid palaces. These characteristics are valuable too, but what is needed is for the energy of power to reawaken within our national consciousness. The soul of our people must be filled with historical sentiments and with a sense of obligation to our historical calling.”²

It is known well that in 1894 the Kolozsvár town council announced a competition for a statue commemorating Kolozsvár’s most famous native son: to Matthias Hunyadi – Matthias Corvinus, who was born in Kolozsvár in 1443. Beforehand, there was a collection of money by public subscription and a donation by the city that accumulated enough funding for an open call for applications. The monument was planned for the newly redesigned main square, in front of the St. Michael church. The foundation stone, after some delay, was laid in 1896 as part of the great countrywide millennial celebrations of the Hungarian conquest of the Carpathian

¹ This paper was prepared in May 2008, for the *Mathias Rex* conference, and since then, just minor revisions have been included. I discuss other aspects of remembering in a study under preparation (*Renaissance Remembered*) in a more extensive way.

² Originally published in the local newspaper *Ellenzék*, on October 16, 1902, cited by Brubaker, 2006: 97. For the same topic see, Feischmidt, 2002: 68-77.

basin. Before the grand opening in 1902, a plaster copy was on display in Paris at the 1900 World Expo, which won the exhibition's Grand Prix.³

In 1902 the monumental statue was unveiled in a pompous ceremony attended by the highest dignitaries of the country (including for instance Duke Joseph August, Prime Minister Kálmán Széll and members of his government). The design of the monument and the rhetoric of the ceremony – since the ceremonial dedication did not referred for instance to the Romanian ancestry of Matthias – expressed a triumphalist Hungarian nationalism. Fadrusz depicted the king and the four warriors (from his famous Black Army – Magyar, Kinizsi, Szapolyai and Báthory) holding the flags of neighboring states – Czech, Austrian, Turkish and Moldavian – as trophies of military triumph. One can argue: the iconography and dedication of the Matthias-statue both exemplify the arrogance of turn-of-the-century Hungarian nationalism, and both testify to Hungarian insensitivity to Romanian national claims. In other words: it was (and still) a remarkable memorial that provoked debates for a long while, and meant the occupation of space within the symbolic and real geography of the urban landscape.

Fig.1.



In this paper I intend to focus on certain commemorations and, in a more general term, on the politics of memory related to King Matthias. I concentrate on a number of selected visual representations and textual examples appearing all along the 20th century. This approach also means that I do not look at the whole Matthias historiography, just at some pieces that could serve some political purposes, or might have had some political motivations. Since a good number of 20th-century commemorations were largely for, but not of, the people, it is worth to deal with monuments and statues, special anniversary publications and exhibitions. The way as they were presented and considered the ruler might help to see more clearly how

³ On the history of the Fadrusz statue, and the sculptor himself see Murádin, 2008.

Matthias was remembered and celebrated, used and exploited, recycled and redesigned. It seems that this method was never applied to Matthias-research, just other Hungarian rulers and historical personalities were inspected from the perspective of “exploiting”.⁴

It means, therefore, that this type of overviewing attempt could also go beyond the primary layers of interpretations: it could also lead to certain fields and contexts of research dealing with the places of memory (*lieux de mémoire*), questions of memory and oblivion, the invention of traditions, the past and future of nostalgia, the uses of historical eras in postcommunist East Central Europe. Recently, some of these approaches and contextualizing efforts have been applied to historical data – such as the conferences on the *Uses and Abuses of the Middle Ages* and *Contagious Middle Ages* –, and it seems fruitful to pertain it to the Matthias-memorials.⁵

It should also be stressed that “Hungarian modernity,” as it is phrased in the subtitle, almost equals the 20th century. I am, however, convinced that modernity in many cases should be understood not a chronological, but in an ironic way. It is exactly because of the special East-Central European historical circumstances that had given much preferences for “historical truth” as opposed to modernity, for the renewal of historical mythologies as opposed to historical research and debates. Within the series of such efforts a popular ruler was always a good fellow-traveller for certain political and scientific agendas. Therefore, we might assume at the first glance, that King Matthias could be a perfect subject for misappropriation.

It was precisely the case in 1902: Matthias was in the center of national pride, and also, by using him as the native of Kolozsvár against the Romanian so-called “Memorandum” movement, the Transylvanian Romanian nationalist political movement, he was just the right person for such a role.⁶ All along the 19th century, the cult of Matthias was cherished in Hungary, and as the richly illustrated memorial book shows – which was also published for the occasion – a prestigious list of contributors paid tribute to Matthias. This list included the famous novelist Mór Jókai’s admiring poem, Count Gyula Andrassy’s text, Elek Benedek, the great storyteller’s essay on Matthias and the people, and the leading scholars of the day, such as Békefi, Fraknói, Marczali’s works as well. Alongside, there were festivities in the city. (Márki, 1902.)

It is less known that a smaller copy of the equestrian main figure of Matthias was placed in the Buda Castle in the so-called Hunyadi Hall, designed by Alajos

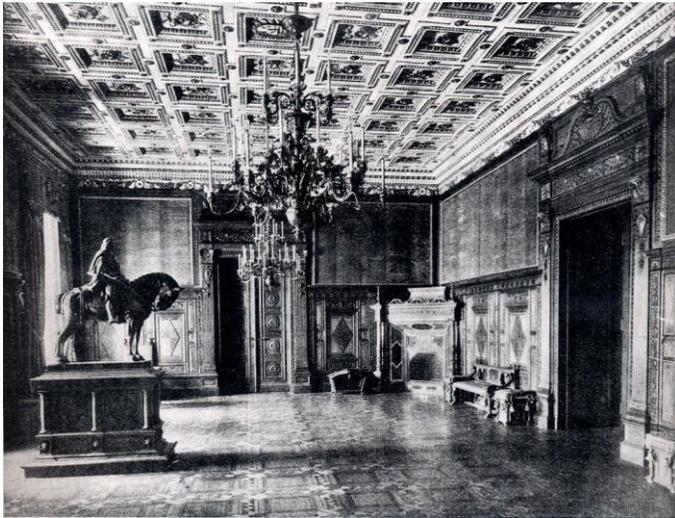
⁴ Primarily King Stephen should be mentioned in this context, whose life and legacy was heavily reconsidered at anniversary moments, see for instance Horváth, 1999.

⁵ See the exhibition <http://www.osaarchivum.org/files/exhibitions/middleages/>. As it was suggested during the conference, *damnatio memoriae* could also be a useful approach, but this would need an involvement of a more extensive source-material.

⁶ For the “Memorandum movement” and its controversy, see Brunaker, 2006: 96.

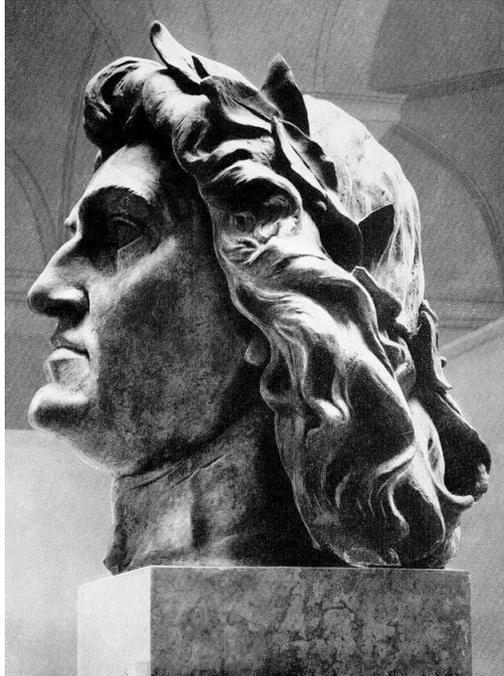
Hauszmann, and painted around by the famous Gyula Benczúr. (Bellák 2000: 654-658.)

Fig.2.



The renovation of the Royal Castle – started in 1893 – reached a point exactly in 1902 when the decoration of certain halls took place, remembering the main figures of Hungarian history. Also, the head-statue of Matthias was placed in Visegrád, and copies of the head were deposited to the National Gallery and the Fine Arts Museum in Kolozsvár.

Fig.3.



In the overwhelming construction-series of millennial monuments and practicing memory-exercises, there were several other, but parallel stories that concerned Matthias. The most spacious and massive example is the Millennial Monument on the edge of the City Park (Városliget), later named on the Heroes Square. In 1894 an ad hoc committee of the Parliament made a decision on its place arranging the statue of prince Árpád surrounded with the seven chiefs, and the millennial column with Gabriel archangel and with the Holy Crown (commissioned by György Zala). In the backside there is the semicircle of Hungarian rulers – from Saint Stephen to Franz Joseph – including Matthias in the company with his scholars, presenting him as the learned ruler.

Fig.4.



This building-enterprise lasted almost 30 years, and the official opening ceremony took place on May 26, 1929, on the memorial Day of Heroes. Its longlasting building, interrupted by the wartime, the Commune, and some changes in the regimes, meant a series of modification in finalizing the figures, their placement and design. Matthias, however, was moulded as stubborn ruler as it was the very beginning of the construction.

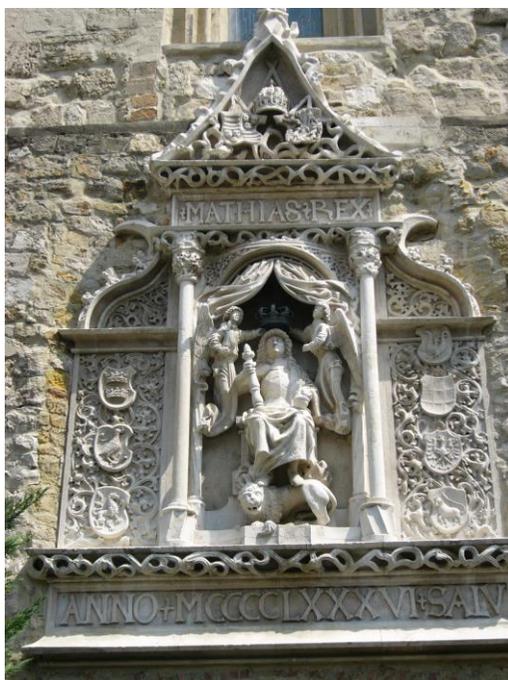
It was also in 1894 when a plaster copy of the Bautzen-Ortenburg embossing appeared in the "Epreskert" of Budapest, and this was also created for the millennial memorial exhibition.

Fig.5.



Originally, this piece of art was erected in 1486 when King Matthias occupied the Silesian city of Bautzen, and he fortified the Ortenburg. As a sign of honor the city sent a sculptor (maybe a certain Briccius Gauske) to Buda for measuring King Matthias for a realistic portraiture who finally completed the work: the ruler sits in a chamber. Another copy of this relief was commissioned by Kálmán Lux at the request of the “Hollós Mátyás Társaság” in 1930 – that can still be visited in the Buda Castle, nearby the Hotel Hilton.

Fig.6.



One more copy can be seen in Szeged at one of the walls of the local Franciscan church. Beyond these copies, a tempting question comes to mind concerning partly again the question of copying: did sculptor Fadrusz follow the portrait of the Bautzen-memorial or not? There is a long-lasting debate among art historians on this issue (Balogh, 1940.), since Fadrusz consulted a lot of materials, originals, and historical literature, as well. Whether following this pattern or not – since there is no final consent of this matter – the most obvious example that can be brought is the one-thousand Hungarian forint banknote that is a trivialized replica of the acknowledged motif and popularized head – as Ernő Marosi put it. (Marosi, 2003.) But this line of argument leads to the end of the century.

Fig.7.



Turning back again to the beginning of the century: already in 1904, another statue was exposed to the public, and that was the Mátyás Fountain in the Buda Castle, a work by Alajos Stróbl, another popular artist of the contemporary scene.

This huge statue is situated at the back-side of the royal garden – today’s National Gallery – and is more about the “popular ruler” in a hunting scene than a direct memorial. Matthias arrives to a spa, however, on the down-left-side, there is Galeotto Marzio, the court historian just making notes together with a falcon on his knee. On the right side, this is Ilonka Szép, a heroine of Mihály Vörösmarty, a famous 19th-century Hungarian poet, staring at the spa and the hunting group with fear, together with a young deer. This mixture of persons and animals looks like an absurd scene, but I would rather argue that this statue-group mirrors the contemporary popular beliefs and imagination on Matthias at its best. Stróbl sculptured a number of statues and memorials, such as the János Arany statue in front of the National Museum, the Saint Stephen equestrian statue in the Castle, or Erkel and Liszt for the main entrance of the Opera, thus this historicizing ensemble with realistic motives is not a surprising exemption in a historicizing era.

Fig.8.



The WWI and its endings for Hungary at the Trianon Castle in Versailles meant a new arrangement and meaning for the memorials now outside of Hungary. If we trace back again the history of the Matthias-statue in Kolozsvár, we see that in 1921 a counter-statue of Romulus and Remus was placed opposite the King Matthias statue, a copy of the famous Capitoline wolf in Rome. In the same spirit, a new plaque was installed on the pedestal of the equestrian statue in 1932. The inscription, written by the Romanian historian, Nicolae Iorga, described King Matthias “as triumphant in battle, defeated only in Nagybánya by his own nation, when he tried to conquer undefeated Moldavia.” This emphasized the Romanian

paternal ancestry of the king, and it also challenged the triumphalist imagery of the statue by representing Matthias as having been defeated by his “own nation”, that is, the Romanian principality of Moldavia.⁷ Not so much later a construction was begun on a gigantic Orthodox cathedral across from the newly nationalized Romanian National Theatre. The Iorga-plaque disappeared during the WWII, more precisely after 1940 when Kolozsvár once again belonged to Hungary, and in 1945, instead of reinstalling this controversial one, the authorities replaced the Hungarian inscription – Mátyás király – with its Latin equivalent, *Mathias Rex*. Much later in the 1990s, Gheorge Funar, the Romanian mayor of Kolozsvár instigated the replacement of the interwar period plaque to the statue and a series of archeological excavations just around the statue that resulted a series protest in the city.

Similarly: the birthplace of Matthias Corvinus, its main walls includes contending plaques. The one on the left side is in Hungarian, and was installed in 1889 after a visit of Emperor Franz Joseph to Kolozsvár. The other plaque on the right is in Romanian and English, and was installed in 1996. This tablet serves to correct and reframe history from a “true” perspective, saying: “According to historical tradition, in this house was born Matei Corvin, son of the great soldier Iancu of Hunedoara, prince of Transylvania and governor of Hungary. The Romanian Matei Corvin is considered, because of the accomplishments during his reign (1458-1490), the greatest king of Hungary.” It should be mentioned that unlike the plaque on the statue of Matthias, this one did not provoke any mobilization within the city (though, its phrasing could have cause some...).

There is another possible approach to look at the questions of remembering: When we review briefly the stories of Matthias-memorials and monuments, it seems strangely apparent that his anniversaries were rarely met the celebrations. Matthias was born in 1443, but nothing happened in 1943, just in 1940. His reign started in 1458, but nothing remarkable happened in 1958. These dates in the Hungarian history could explain principally, of course, the lack of festivities, though, it is still peculiar not having proper ways of commemoration. A more telling example would elucidate the bizarre nature of historical coincidences: Matthias died on April 6, 1490. Thus, its 500th year anniversary should have been on this very day, but the general and free elections on April 8, 1990 – after decades without democratic elections – simply overwrote this round anniversary.

And here we can turn to the anniversary publications. In 1940 – instead of 1943 – a two-volume memorial book was published per procuration of the “Korvin Mátyás Hungarian-Italian Association”. (Lukinich, 1940.) This was a grand summary of the best Matthias and Renaissance/late Middle Ages experts from the field, including Elemér Mályusz, Lajos Elekes, Jolán Balogh, Tibor Kardos, József Fitz and others. But for the present evaluation, it is more than interesting to look at the two

⁷ More details in Brubaker, 2006: 99-101.

introductions: in Volume I, it was written by Count Pál Teleki, prime minister, in Volume II by Bálint Hóman, minister of education and religion. Thus, in both cases a political manifesto was communicated by presenting the great ruler in both foreign policy and the *Lebensraum* of Hungary during his times. Matthias was – according to Teleki – a Hungarian lord, a true Christian, a national ruler, reigning not just in Hungary, but in Central Europe as a ruler of the regional superpower. His exaggerating words deal with the need of emerging a new kind of humanism – reflecting shortly on the ongoing world war. Bálint Hóman, in a more balanced manner, discusses the origins of the Matthias-cult, but he also considers Matthias as the last great ruler, the follower of the traditions originated by Saint Stephen, that is the Hungarian regional superpower. It is not just ironic, but so controversial that the rest of the book, the studies themselves hardly deal with questions of Hungarian superiority, or any other kind of nationalistic claims. The political messages can, therefore, easily be separated from the real content, but could show the special (and disturbed) orientation of this anniversary.

The Matthias book, remembering the 500th anniversary of his death was much simpler in terms of political messaging. Its *Introduction* – written by the Marxist canonist and academician Zsigmond Pál Pach – did not set the tone by using an overview to be put on the political agenda. (Pach, 1990: 5-28.) It was about Matthias' successes, the righteous ruler esteemed by the folks, and briefly about the Matthias historiography. No special laudatio, but pure and mostly boring political history. Here the rest of the volume is again a good selection of the current Hungarian scholarship (by Kubinyi, Szakály, Kriza, E. Kovács, Pajorin, Teke).

In between 1940 and 1990 the exhibition and the voluminous catalogue of the Schallaburg exposition – *Mathias Corvinus und die Renaissance in Ungarn* – is worth mentioning. (Schallaburg, 1982.) It is considered the largest Matthias-exhibition ever (before 2008) that could bring together as many pieces of art, scholarship, remains, archeological and historical findings as possible. These objects were first on display in Lower-Austria and then in the National Gallery in Budapest, and attracted a never seen quantity of audience. It was a sort of exposition of the grandeur and gloire of the Matthias-era, but also a summarizing event for the art historical studies after and beyond the spirit of Jacob Burckhardt.

The special and strange year of 1990 also brought some actions of remembrance, but not in a wide scale. Besides the above-mentioned publication there was only the curious monument on Matthias in Székesfehérvár by Miklós Melocco, the famous sculptor (and later one of the typical “court artists” of post-communist Hungary). It is a mixture of Gothic and Renaissance style in a baroque environment, and part of the whole is the allegories of the seven liberal arts.

Fig. 9.



What is even more disturbing is the later statues dedicated to the “memory of Matthias,” or in relation with his local belongings, or without any special reason, just for the sake of honoring him. Here we can see the statue in Szeged, Lajosmizse, Mezőkövesd, and also two more really upsetting pieces: in the thermal bath of Nagymegyer, and in Pécs, in the King Matthias street’s bank building.⁸

Fig.10.

⁸ I did not find some more dreadful pieces of seemingly artworks, but there can be more.



Fig.11.



Fig.12.



Fig.13.

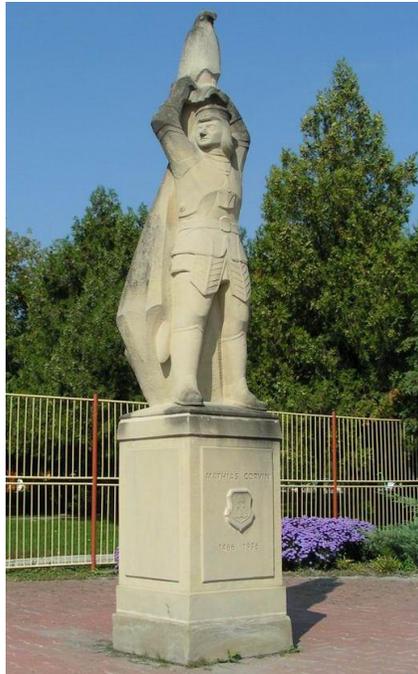


Fig.14.



As a conclusion of this short vista over images and constructions, it could be said that Matthias is, in fact, a lucky historical figure. The historical Matthias was not as popular and recurring “victim” of political appropriation as it was King Stephen and others. One can just think about the millicentennial celebrations from 1996 onwards to 2000, and the political games and appropriation of the Holy Crown – and its copies – took place at the same time. The Ópusztaszer Historical Park, that was reconstructed in the course of these events, includes the portrait of Matthias, a regular-type, historicizing bust.

Fig.15.



There is no musical, rock opera, or historical play under Matthias' name.⁹ His personality and historical achievements, the popular figure, interestingly enough, was not so attractive for the artistic production after the beginning of the 20th century. Matthias mostly remains in the domains of pop culture and folklore, within the lines of tales and anecdotes. (Kriza, 1990, 363-411.) He is not as powerful driving force for political purposes as Árpád, Stephen and other historical personalities. Thus, his story is rather that of certain oblivion not of constant remembrance. Commemorative activities – which is by definition primarily social and political – resulted a consensual image: Matthias remained the just, the wise, the good ruler of the popular stories.¹⁰

Finally, during the spring of 2008, the reconstruction of Matthias-statue in Kolozsvár has already been started. The statue was almost invisible, but as it was announced and happened, the renovation – supported by the city and the Hungarian state – will be completed in due course, by the end of 2009, as it is hoped.¹¹

Fig.16.

⁹ There was but one in 1926, titled *The Love of Mathias*, and no other attempts are recorded.

¹⁰ For a good overview and summary on commemorations in recent scholarship see Gillis, 1994.

¹¹ Though, it was planned to complete the renovation during 2008-2009, there is a substantial delay in financing and public procurement procedure.



We were also informed that a new Matthias memorial was inaugurated in Pilisszántó, mostly by the radical right-wing groups on the so-called route of Hungarian kings.

Fig.17.



And above all, the year of 2008 was the so-called Year of Renaissance, a highly publicized and subsidized series of events and programs by the Ministry of Culture

and Education. Once there will be enough historical distance, we can offer a more refined assessment about the activities and results of this thematic year, and its position within the context of political commemorations. Till that time we might want to visit the newly designed Matthias comics and literary remixes supported by the office of Renaissance Year.¹²

Fig.18.



¹² Matthias-comics: <http://www.matyaskepregeny.hu/> Matthias pulp-fiction: <http://matyas.litera.hu/taxonomy/term/6>

Selected Bibliography

BALOGH (Jolán), *Mátyás király arcképei* [Portraits of King Matthias], in LUKINICH (Imre), ed., *Mátyás király. Emlékkönyv születésének ötszázéves évfordulójára*, I. kötet, Budapest, Franklin Társulat, 1940, p. 435-548.

BELLÁK (Gábor), *Benczúr Gyula és a Budavári Palota Hunyadi-terme (1902-1919)*, in MIKÓ (Árpád) and SINKÓ (Katalin) eds, *Történelem – Kép, (History – Image) Szemelvények múlt és művészet kapcsolatából Magyarországon*, Budapest, 2000, p. 654-658.

BRUBAKER (Rogers) – with Margit FEISCHMIDT, Jon FOX and Liana GRANCEA, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006.

FEISCHMIDT (Margit), *Ethnizität als Konstruktion und Erfahrung: Symbolstreit und Alltagskultur im siebenbürgischen Cluj*, Hamburg, LIT Verlag, 2002.

HORVÁTH (Lajos), ed., *Magyar Millennium. Alkotók, alkotások, ünnepek 2000*, Budapest, Magyar Millennium Kormánybiztos Hivatala, 1999.

KRIZA (Ildikó), *Rex Iustus-Rex Clarus. Mátyás király a néphagyományban*, [King Matthias in the folklore], in RÁZSÓ (Gyula) – V. MOLNÁR (László), eds., *Hunyadi Mátyás. Emlékkönyv Mátyás király halálának 500. évfordulójára*, Budapest, Zrínyi Kiadó, 1990, p. 363-411.

MÁRKI (Sándor) ed., *Mátyás király. Emlékkönyv kolozsvári szobrának leleplezése alkalmára* [King Matthias. A memorial book for the occasion of unveiling his statue in Kolozsvár], Budapest, Athenaeum, 1902.

MAROSI (Ernő), *A tudományos ikonográfiai kutatásnak nagy művészi eredménye – Fadrusz János Mátyás-arcáról* [On Matthias' face by János Fadrusz] in *Korunk* (2003)

MURÁDIN (Jenő), *A Mátyás-szobor és alkotója, Fadrusz János* [The Matthias-sculpture and its creator, János Fadrusz], Kolozsvár, Polis Könyvkiadó, 2008.

PACH (Zsigmond Pál), *A Mátyás-kérdés történetéről* [On the history of Matthias-question], in RÁZSÓ (Gyula) – V. MOLNÁR (László), eds., *Hunyadi Mátyás. Emlékkönyv Mátyás király halálának 500. évfordulójára*, Budapest, Zrínyi Kiadó, 1990, p. 5-28.

SCHALLABURG, *Mathias Corvinus und die Renaissance in Ungarn 1458-1541*. 8. Mai – 1. November 1982. Katalog der Ausstellung, Wien, 1982.

List of Illustrations

Figure 1. Matthias-statue in Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca), the inauguration ceremony in 1902.

Figure 2. A copy of the Matthias equestrian statute in the Buda Castle, 1907.

Figure 3. Head-statue of Matthias, 1900.

Figure 4. Matthias-statue at teh Heroes' Square, Budapest.

Figure 5. Matthias in Epreskert, Budapest.

Figure 6. Matthias on the Bautzen-Ortenburg embossing, Budapest.

Figure 7. Matthias on the one-thousand Hungarian forint banknote

Figure 8. Matthias-fountain in the Buda Castle, 1904.

Figure 9. Matthias memorial in Székesfehérvár, 1990.

Figure 10. Matthias-statue in Szeged.

Figure 11. Matthias-statue in Lajosmizse.

Figure 12. Matthias-statue in Mezőkövesd.

Figure 13. Matthias-statue in Nagymegyer.

Figure 14. Matthias-statue in Pécs.

Figure 15. Matthias-bust in Ópusztaszer.

Figure 16. Matthias-statue of Kolozsvár is under reconstruction.

Figure 17. Matthias-statue in Pilisszántó.

Figure 18. Comics-version of a Matthias-story.