

Szentmártoni Szabó Géza

## The cult of Matthias in the 16th century

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Debrecen, 1778.



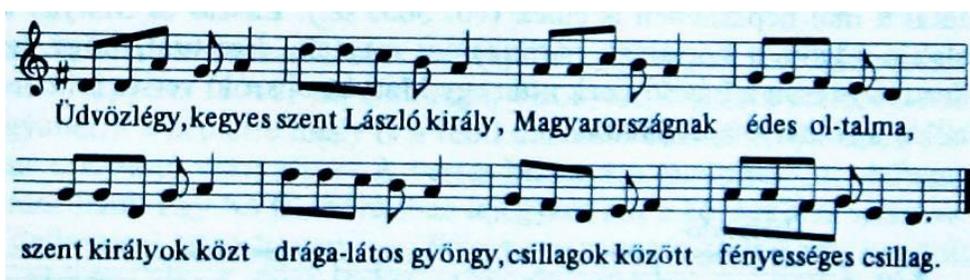
*Én nem hallok oly jó énekszerzőket,  
Kik előhoznák jó fejedelmünket,  
Mátyás királt, régi jó vezérünket,  
Elfelejtjük mi jótött emberünket.*

*I do not hear any minstrel  
Singing about our good lord,  
King Matthias, our ancient leader,  
Soon we will forget his kind reign.*

Ambrus Görcsöni wrote these lines around 1560, as a preface for a collection of historic songs about King Matthias, that was printed several times during the 1570's. Görcsöni was a minstrel serving a Hungarian lord named Gáspár Homonnai Drugeth. As a reward for his works, he was ennobled by King Ferdinand in the August of 1557. His main source for his songs about the life of King Matthias was János Thuróczy's *Hungarian chronicle*, printed in 1488, but he also used anecdotes stemming from oral heritage. The folk tale about the origins of John Hunyadi first appeared in his songs. The noble minstrel was not exaggerating when he claimed that there weren't any historic songs about the deeds of King Mathias in Hungarian before his works.

Sebestyén Tinódi, ennobled by Ferdinand in 1553, the most famous Hungarian minstrel, was more concerned about the age he lived in. Most of his works reflected actual events, following the affairs of the time. However, he also tried writing about the past. He studied the chronicle of János Thuróczy, but he wasn't concerned about King Matthias, rather King Sigismund (1384–1437) and his reign, which inspired him to write two historic songs.

Only an epico-lyrical song based on the melody and pattern of „Üdvöz légy kegyes Szent László király” (Be welcome merciful King Saint Laslow) around 1510, can considered to be the forerunner of the literary cult of Matthias in hungarian language. It's author wrote the poem in a secular style, but the actual praise was in the vein of the cult of the saint kings in the middle-age:



*Néhai való jó Mátyás király!  
Sok országokat [mikoron] bírál,  
Nagy dicséretet akkoron vállal,  
Ellenségednek ellene állál.*

*Matthias our late good king!  
Ruler of many great countries,  
Praiseworthy were all your deeds,  
You conquered all your enemies.*

In the beginning, the praise of Matthias mentioned only his military successes. His righteousness and culture-building activities became toposes later on. Many eulogies had been written in latin after the death of Matthias, but only one became widespread and often-quoted, having an effect on hungarian texts.

*Mathias iaceo rex hac sub mole sepultus  
Testatur vires Austria victa meas.  
Terror eram mundo, metuit me Caesar uterque  
Mors tantum potuit sola nocere mihi.*

*I, King Matthias, lie beneath this tombstone  
The conquered Austria promulgates my power  
Once, the world was startled, both emperors feared me  
Only death could defeat my reign*

Ludovicus Tubero abbej (c. 1459-1527) who was born in Raguza, wrote *Commentarii de rebus suo tempore* (Records on History) which was issued only in 1603, and in which he presented the deeds of King Matthias in an objective and critical way. He mentions that when emperor Miksa visited the memorial tomb of King Matthias at Székesfehérvár, and at the same place where badges were hung upon the ceiling, he read the following epitaph: „Marmore Mathias hoc Corvinus situs est, quem facta Deum ostendunt fata fuisse hominem”. (Beneath this marble lies King Matthias, whose deeds were dedicated to God, his death to mankind).

Geszthy László, who was a student and a member of the court, wrote a poem that he addressed to the parliamentary gathering at Hatvan. The poem's verse that mentions King Matthias does not praise the late king, rather the obedient dependents of the country.

*Szegény Mátyás király vala békességben,  
Mert országa v[ala a szép] egyezésben  
Vitézek valának nála tisztességben,  
Az urak v[alának] nagy egyenességben.*

*Kind King Matthias was at peace,  
As his country was in great unity,  
The valiants in function,  
The lords not corrupted.*

After the battle of Mohács, the reign of Matthias was only appreciated in the Transylvanian Miklós Oláh's *Hungaria* among the works of humanist scholars. The value of the role of King Matthias was restored after 1541, in the country that was split into three. They saw the role model for a gifted and conquering king of the nation in him. As the above example of Tinódi revealed, it was not expedient politically to praise the King that once ruled Vienna, during the reign of the Habsburg Ferdinand. The situation was different in Transylvania. This part of the country was the cradle of the Hunyadi family, as King Matthias was born in Kolozsvár. The city that was inhabited equally by Hungarians and Saxons during the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was very thankful to Matthias, who gave many privileges to his birthplace, contributing highly to the ascension of Kolozsvár. It's no wonder that Hungarians and Saxons, who united in the anti-trinitarian denomination and shared the same Hungarus views, contributed greatly to the birth of the Matthias cult. In Transylvania, which gained independence during the reign of prince John Sigismund, the idea of a national kingdom became important again, and the archetype for this idea was found in the figure of Matthias. When former Transylvanian prince István Báthory became the King of Poland in 1576, the search for parallels with him gave another boost to the Hunyadi and Matthias cult.

The works of Bonfini remained in the form of a manuscript until the first three decas were finally issued in print in Bazel in 1543. However, the content of the third decad only covers the first part of Matthias' reign. These works were translated into German and French two years later. The first publisher of Bonfini's work was the Transylvanian Saxon Márton Brenner (14??-1553). He also published Aurelio Lippi Brandolini's (14??-1498) book on righteousness that featured Matthias. The manuscript of Galeotto Marzio's book that contained several anecdotes of Matthias, was found and published in Vienna in 1563 by Zsigmond Gyalui Torda, a philologist from Transylvania. The poems of John Bocatius were based on these comic stories, a few were written into examples of both protestant and catholic preachers, and Peter Bornemissza also referred to them later on.

The hidden manuscripts of Bonfini were acquired and published in 1565 by Gáspár Heltai, who was of Transylvanian Saxon origins, but worked as a Hungarian writer and printer at Kolozsvár from the 1550's. This issue contained the first six books of the fourth decas, covering most of Matthias' story. Students from Kolozsvár wrote elegies praising Matthias as a preface for the almost complete Bonfini tome, and an elegy of the takeover of Jajca (written by Janus Pannonius) was placed at the end.

This issue motivated János Zsámboky, the acclaimed philologist and historian of kings, to collect the remaining parts and issue the complete tome at Basel in 1568 for the first time. He was still not satisfied though. Aiming to make an up-to-date history of Hungary, he wrote a sequel covering the events of seventy years that passed since 1496.

In the emblem book of János Zsámboki, there is a picture accompanied with a latin poem (*Emblemata*. Antwerpen, 1564, 161.) titled *Mathiae Corvini symbolum, symbolo Ioannis Regis auctum*. This translates as „the meblem of Corvin Matthias expanded to the emblem of King János. The text on the strip at the bottom of the picture: „Sua alienaque nutrit”, means „it feeds not only his own, but others too”. The emblem might refer to the mysterious relationship between the Hunyadi and the Szapolyai family, that connected King Matthias and Szapolyai Imre (? -1487).

Mathiæ Coruini Symbolum,  
*Symbolo Ioan. Regis auctum.*



The east-Hungarian Peter Ilosvai, who summoned the age of Ludwig the Great earlier with the story of Miklós Tholdi, prepared a sequel to Göröcsöni's Matthias-history in 1575. In this history, that was written at Nagybánya, he versified the last five years of the reign of Matthias, combining the chronicle of Bonfini and oral heritage. His work did not gain any popularity though, and remained a manuscript.

Gáspár Heltai made the biggest contribution to the birth of the Matthias cult when he wrote the first cohesive history of Hungary in hungarian language using Zsámboki's edition of Bonfini. His work was titled *Krónika az magyaroknak dolgairól* (*Chronicle on the deeds of the Hungarians*). It reviewed the fate of the Bonfini manuscript, emphasizing that the birth of the chronicle, that Bonfini wrote with proficient latin, was due to the generosity of King Matthias. However, Heltai did not fully agree with the italian writer. For example he was critical about the origins of the Hunyadi family: „As the italian Bonfinius wanted to compliment King Matthias, originated him from the romans and made him an italian.”

In his book he also included the well-known apocryphal story about John Hunyadi being the illegitimate son of king Sigismund, therefore Matthias being born from royal blood. Ransano and Bonfini derived the king's family tree from the roman Corvinus family. Heltai wrote about the birth of King Matthias (the 27<sup>th</sup> of February in 1443, three o'clock in the morning) with great detail. He emphasized that the king was born in the house of a rich Saxon grape producer and he also spent his childhood there.

„And he granted the city great, grand privileges and freedom, the precious certificate of which is still there.”

Heltai wrote a chapter with the title: „The great laudation of King Matthias”. Besides the enumeration of his martial merits and contributions to architectural development, fictional stories also appeared, that told King Matthias adventures in disguise. The longest being about the punishment of the judge of kolozsvár, that is still well known. Other tales about the king followed a similiar plot, and even more were created during the following centuries, for example the one titled *Mátyás király Gömörben* (*King Matthias at Gömör*), that János Garai wrote in 1840. Even though most of the stories were built on common folklore motifs and not real events, they share the same view about King Matthias, who is always depicted as a humorous and outspoken man. Heltai also shared this view:

„Furthermore, King Matthias was a clever and wise man. When he talked, he did not boast, but spoke in a soft and clear manner, with his speeches being well-formed and all having a clear point. Otherwise, between his friends, he spoke cheerfully, sometimes mocking them.”

Heltai summarized: „During his life, King Matthias was often frowned upon by the people of the country and was said to be overly ambitious, quick-tempered and extremely pretentious. He would skin and devour the country with his great taxes and costly tolls, collecting taxes four times a year, etc. But as he died, the people began to praise him suddenly, as the country became less peaceful. The turks were approaching and other diseases plagued the country. It was during that time, that people began to realise what a great ruler was King Matthias, and they said: „If only King Matthias would still live and collect taxes seven times a year, etc.”

The expectations of the readers of the age required the versification of the life of Matthias in the form of historic songs. Ambrus Göröcsöni’s unfinished history could have been continued at that time using Zsámboki’s Bonfini issue and Heltai’s works. The Transylvanian antitrinitarian Miklós Bogáti Fazekas completed this extension in the May of 1576 at Torda, and his work was published to celebrate István Báthory’s crowning as the king of Poland. The proverb of the righteous King Matthias appears here for the first time:

*Csoda, mint változék hazánknak dolga,  
Igen igaz ám a magyar közpéllda,  
Mátyás király mióta megholt volna,  
Az igazság megholt Magyarországba.*

*Strange how the fate of our homeland changed,  
There is much truth in the issue of Hungary,  
From the time our King Matthias died  
The truth in Hungary died with him as well.*

István Temesvári, who was a school master at Telegd, also used Bonfini as the source for his historical piece about the victory at Kenyérmező in 1479, which he wrote in 1569. This story made Pál Kinizsy, who was supported by King Matthias, recognised as the great defeater of the Turks.

However, the image of King Matthias created by the humanist scholars would not have been enough for the rise of the Matthias cult. The interpretation to the everyday language of peasants and civilians was also needed. The image of the witty and humorous king getting on well with simple people, not avoiding rude language, appeared first in an anecdote filled with satirical metaphors, issued in a world chronicle written by the Transylvanian István Székely in 1559 with the title '*Mátyás királynak egy trufája*' (A joke of King Matthias):

When King Matthias went to the fields to have a good time with the lords, he saw a man passing by, heading towards Buda. Matthias came up to him and asked: „Uncle, where are you going?” The man answered „To Buda”. Matthias asked again „Where are you taking that goose?” Then the man replied „The abbot of Szekszárd had just married your whore mother and I’m taking the goose to the wedding” The man did not have a goose though, he was just grizzled. Upon hearing this, the king told him: „Old doggish men like you, are sown in acres” The man replied „We were sowing them too, but we reaped nothing more than your old doggish father.’ Upon hearing this, the king ran back to the lords with joy, and told them what happened.

After they had enough, they left for Buda, but the king was restless until he found the poor man he was talking to by the roadside earlier. He prodded the horse on which the man was sitting and said: ‘Uncle! How much for this checkered cubit of damask cloth? – As the horse of the man was checkered – upon hearing this the man turned around, and spoke to the king as he raised the tail of the horse: ‘Come on in bumpkin to the shop, we’ll make a deal’ When the king heard this, he took the man into the castle, and gave him freedom and other gifts. Matthias had many other jokes like this, but I won’t write about them now.

The genuinity of the jokes mentioned by István Székely were confirmed by other sources. Matthias greatly respected the Order of Saint Paul, the First Hermit, that was established during the reign of Lajos the Great. The history of the only hungarian order was written by chief monk Gergely Gyöngyösi (1472–1545) at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century using original documents. King Matthias appears in humorous situations numerous times. The king liked the chief monk Gregory so much that he visited him regularly at the Budaszentlőrinc monastery, near Buda, to talk himself out and have a glass of wine with him in the cellar. When the king was told that Gregory died, he began to cry. The king told who asked him why he was crying: ‘A prelate has died in my country, I admire that no one is asking for his benefice.’ He saw once how the monks were punishing themselves. On an other occasion, when he was having them pray for rain in the procession, he gave them a

feast in the Zsigmond palace at the Buda castle, with the condition that the table clothes had to remain clean.

The enthusiastic admiration of Matthias in the forming cult in Transylvania comes to a halt in 1475, when he marries Beatrix. Matthias was not the old and direct man anymore, but a hostage of the distinguished aristocratic customs imported from Naples. Miklós Bogáti Fazakas accentuated this in his historic writing:

*Egy olasz asszonyért, ím, mint változék,  
Magyar erkölcsből olaszban öltözék,  
Hogy már módját tartja fejedelemnek,  
Véle szembe nem mindenha lehetnek.*

*For an Italian woman changed his self,  
No more Hungarian morality  
Keeps himself for his principality  
On not all occasions would face he.*

The frowning soon turned into laudation, as Matthias' constructions, his library and other unfinished great plans, justified that his orientation towards Italy was a wise decision.

By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Matthias-praising writings of Bonfini, Galeotto Marzio and other great humanists, gain popularity. Still, there were many interesting things noted down about Matthias, which remained unknown to the people of the age. We could say that Matthias had a secret cult among scholars.

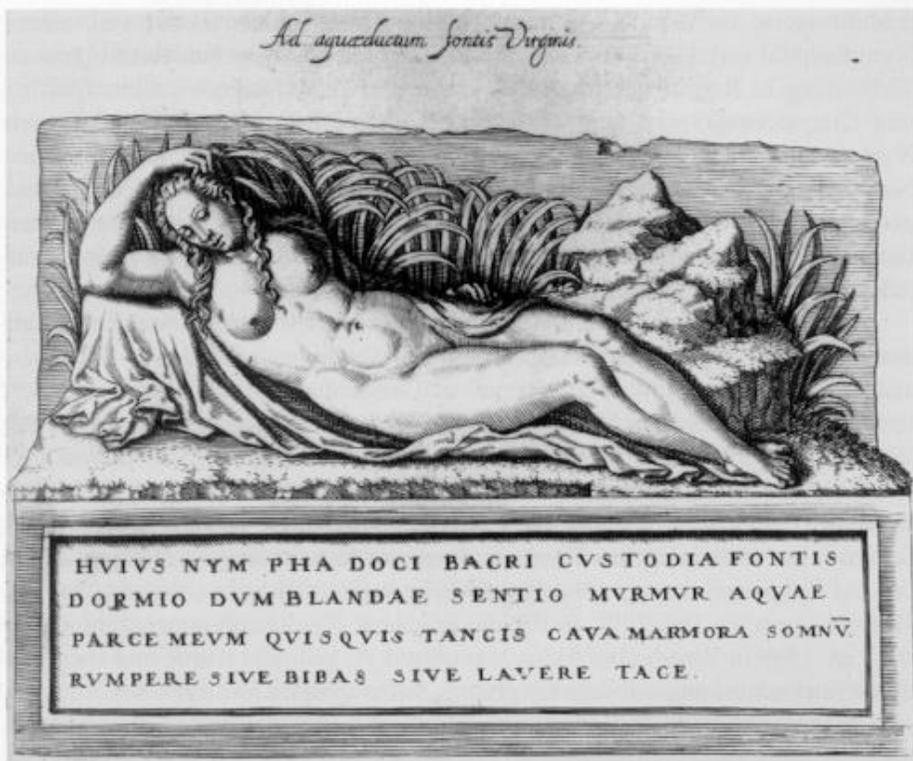
For example, Bálint Balassi praised Matthias for his astrological knowledge in the prologue of *Szép magyar komédia* (*Beautiful Hungarian Comedy*). One of the Bonfini-editions issued in 1565 at Kolozsvár was the property of Tamás Jordán (1539–1585), a doctor born at Kolozsvár. He noted down the following sentences:

„Perennialibus pactis cum Turca induciis Mathias rex Hungariae fontem solido exornatum marmore Budensi arce dicitur exsculpsisse cum dormientis nymphae expressa imagine, Marti postmodum vale dicturus extremum hac inscriptione:

*Fontis nympha sacri, somnum ne rumpe, quiesco  
Dormio dum blandaie sentio murmur aquae.*

It is said that when King Matthias made truce with the Turks that lasted for years, he had a fountain carved from marble at Buda castle, ornamented with the image of a sleeping nymph, he wanted to say final goodbye to Mars with the following inscription:

*I rest here, the nymph of this holy fountain, don't disturb my dreams,  
I shall sleep until I hear the soothing sound of the trickling water.*



There were many studies on this obscure inscription and the statue of the sleeping nymph in the last 50 years of the international neolatin-research.



The praise of Buda castle was also a part of the Matthias cult. The famous multilingual dictionary of Calepin was extended with Hungarian definitions in 1585. The dictionary had eleven languages, and in the middle of the 16th century, Konrad Gessner's *Onomasticon*, an annotated register for the personal and geographic names, was attached to it. The Hungarian contributor, perhaps Péter Laskai Csókás, participated to the extension of the nominal list. The entry regarding Buda, contains the following sigh referring to the reign of King Matthias: „Haj, régi jó Buda!” (Alas, good Buda!). At the end of the entry there is a proverb: „in tota Europa tres omnium pulcherrimas esse urbes, Venetias in aquis, Budam in monte, Florentiam in planitie.” (Of all European cities, three are the most beautiful: Venice on the water, Buda on the hills, Florence on the plain.) Albert Szenci Molnár in his Latin-Hungarian dictionary, edited in 1604, rewrote the laudation mentioned above in metrical verse:

*Tres superant urbes toto loca cetera mundo:  
Buda iugo, Venetae pelago, Florentia campo.*

*Three cities surpass all places of the world:  
Buda on the hill, Venice on the sea, Florence on the field.*

In the 1488 Brünn edition of the Thuróczy chronicle, someone wrote the following lines near a portrait of Matthias at the end of the 16th century: „Óh, Matthia, ha te mostan élnél, gondunkról gondolnál.” (Oh, Matthias, if you would live right now, you would help us.)

These examples illustrate that while science and art sought more elaborate stories of Matthias, the common people cultivated the image of the righteous king. The popular image of Matthias appears in the poem of Imre Pécselyi Király written in 1631 about looters:



*Régi Mátyás király hogyha felkélhetne,  
És szép szemeivel ha reánk nézhetne,  
Mint a sebes eső rajtunk könnyezhetne,  
És sok gonoszévőt méltán büntethetne.*

*Elkölt az igazság, megholt Mátyás király,  
Kegyves Isten, csak te fejünk felibe állj...*

*If our late King Matthias could rise,  
To look down on us with his fair eyes,  
Like wounded rain he would cry,  
And punish the many evil and vile.*

*Truth is spent, King Matthias died,  
Mercyful God, please protect us ...*

\* \* \*

(English translation by Ferenc Kerecsen Kiss)



King Matthias: A XVI<sup>th</sup> Century woodcut by Tobias Stimmer