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KING MATTHIAS AS A FOLKLORE HERO
HUNGARIAN TRADITION ABOUT MATTHIAS CORVIN IN 18TH CENTURY

King Matthias is the most popular historical hero in the folklore, in Hungary, but his figure also appeared in the folk tradition of the neighbouring peoples as well. When the folk poetry was discovered in the 19th century, scholars were struck by the very colourful prose folklore associated with the name of King Matthias¹. The legends and anecdotes were independent of historical knowledge and from the attitude represented by the scholarship of the age². However, the epics were closely related to international folklore. The motifs show affinity above all to themes found in German, French and Latin collections of anecdotes, such as *Gesta Romanorum*, Sachetti's collection or *Lyrum, larum, lirissimum*. This raised the question of when and how such an idealised portrayal of King Matthias entered Hungarian popular culture.

It is common to say, the basic point of departure is Heltai's Hungarian chronicle (1575) in which the author, in the manner of talented story-tellers, condensed seven legends into a single story frame³. It is impossible, however, to trace oral tradition in the

¹ King Matthias (Mátyás király) ruled in 1458-1490 in Hungary. The prominent renaissance ruler and his father János Hunyadi were popular figures in history not only in 15th century, but later too (Fraknói 1890; Teke 1990) Their deeds in folklore were far from the reality, but sometimes the peoples believed their were.

² The first collection *De egregie, sapienter, iocose dictis ac factis regis Mathiae liber* was made in 1485 by Marzio Galeotto using folklore units. The anecdotes dedicated to Alfonso Argoniae or written by Enea Silvio Piccolomini about Sigismund emperor containing many common motives (Kardos 1977: 111).

³ Gáspár Heltai wrote the chronicle in 1575 in Hungarian based on Antonio Bonfini's work. But he made an appendix to the history depicting the image of King Matthias

period from the 16th century (from 1575) to the mid-19th century⁴. As a result the question arises again and again: when and how did the written sources reach the lower strata of society and what influences shaped the figure of King Matthias in folk poetry? Today, when we wish to throw light on the historical precedents of the development of folklore, we look for the facts that influenced oral tradition and so we turn to 18th century sources as the precedents of folklore⁵.

Research into cultural history clearly shows that interest in the Hunyadi family was a function of changing political and social events. E.g. during his rule, Prince Rákóczi (1705-1711) consciously turned to the idealised figure of Matthias, the just king, holding him up as a model for the nation's rulers. In 17-18th centuries King Matthias was a popular hero of the schooldramas in Jesuits schools⁶. Interest in Hungarian history grew in the 18th century and at the same time the image of the idealised national ruler also acquired an important role. Publications on King Matthias proliferated.

As the printed materials became cheaper in the 18th century some of the publications reached the lower strata of society through broadsides. In 1779 e.g. only one single publisher Streibig in Győr printed cca 50 thousand German and 60 thousand Hungarian calendars among others⁷. The books written in Latin satisfied the

according to the oral tradition. This composition and Benczédi Székely story show, the Matthias-folklore in the 16th century was known (Heltai 1981: 392-402; Kríza 1990/b: 365).

⁴ New collection of the folk stories about King Matthias was edited by Kríza taking attention not only to the Hungarian folklore but the neighbouring peoples tradition as well (Kríza 1990/a).

⁵ Unknown epic song and chronicle about King Matthias written in 1776 (Kríza 1992).

⁶ Data is mentioned by Szilágyi to stress the importance of the almanacs concerning the popular culture (Szilágyi 1983. 397) The Jesuits schooldramas in the 17-18th century chosen oft King Matthias as a positiv national hero. We think this kind of knowlegde helped to develop the image of good king in the oral tradition (Staud 1994: 143).

⁷ The reading habit and alphabetisation in the 18th century is detailed by István Gy. Tóth. In the willage people was unilliterated, but put interest to the written stories (Schenda 1970: Tóth 1996).

demands of the educated, learned stratum, while the translations were addressed at people not conversant with Latin. The cheap printed materials reached those who were unable to read or write in Hungarian, whether in the towns or villages, through intermediaries. Often the only one literate person in the community spread information about the almanacs and broadsides produced for the broad masses. He read aloud or recounted the new information they contained. For example the Reading Circle attached to the Calvinist Church in Szentes in the 18th century, offered an organised place and time for the public interest.

The increase in the number of publications indicated the interest in King Matthias. A considerable number of the republished chronicles attributed an outstanding role to King Matthias. The most important of these were the works in Latin by Bonfini and in Hungarian by Heltai. Bonfini's chronicle reached four editions in the 18th century⁸. After two editions of the original version, it was published in German, then extracts appeared in Hungarian in the Nagyszombat almanac. The other work in Latin dating from the time of Matthias was the anecdotes of Marzio Galeotto. These humorous stories once again became the object of attention in the 18th century and after the frequently mentioned Bocatius edition of 1623 they were published again in Vienna in the 18th century⁹. The 1746 Vienna edition is regarded as the influence which led János Streibig¹⁰, a printer in Győr to publish a free Hungarian translation of the anecdotes of Galeotto around the middle of the century¹¹. Its significance should not be underestimated. Researchers so far have made no mention of the first Hungarian translation of Galeotto.

⁸ Bonfini's chronicle was a large corpus. By this reason in the 18th century the publisher chosen the "interesting" chapters to translate or to republish.

⁹ The attention to the Hungarian history increased at the beginning of the 18th century. The old sources were published again in Vienna according to the intention of the prominent scholar Mátyás Bél.

¹⁰ The scholarly publications appeared in Vienna (Schwandtler 1746). The printing houses all over the country published all kind of books. Latin, German and Hungarian were expected, but looking of the languages the mother tongue was more and more common (Tóth 1996).

¹¹ By my research the first Hungarian translation of Galeotto anecdotes appeared in 1749 in almanac *Magyar és Erdély országi ó és új kalendárium* (Győr).

A Hungarian version of Galeotto can again be found in the collection of Proverbs and Parables of Dugonics which reflect the influence of the Győr almanac. András Dugonics (1740-1818) Hungarian writer used the folklore motives and stories in his novels and dramas, too.

At the same time the scholars had a different kind of interest. This is indicated by the publication of previously unpublished sources. E.g. Imre Kelcz, a Jesuit priest, collected the unpublished letters of Matthias in four volumes. His compilation appeared three more times in the 18th century: the 1743-44 edition in Kassa was followed by editions in Nagyszombat, Kolozsvár and Pozsony. Although Ignác Fessler wrote a monograph about the famous king of Hungarian history¹².

The precedents of the 18th century admiration of Matthias reach back to the former age such as the Jagello period. There was no essential change in attitude either compared to the wise insight of Heltai. He wrote: In his life the whole country condemned him for his pride, ambition and short temper. But after his death everyone began to praise him, seeing the difficult situation of the country, the approach of the Turks, and declared that they would rather pay taxes seven times to help the country¹³.

It was quite clear already in the 16th century that the historical deeds of Matthias were remote from the heroic figure of folk tradition. But while Heltai made a sharp distinction between history and legends, over the centuries history and folklore became intertwined. Written records of the 18th century reflect the influence of oral tradition. Reality and oral tradition became inseparable. Folklore creations were printed after being reworked by writers

¹² Kelcz 1743-44; Fessler 1793-94.

¹³ Heltai wrote: *Életében mind az egész ország reá kiált vala Mátyás királyra, hogy igen kövély, nagyravágyó, hertelen haragó és felette igen telhetetlen volna. Megnyúzná és megönné az országot a sok váموkkal és a nagy rovásokkal, mert négyszer rója vala minden esztendőben az országot, etc. De mihellyt meghala, minden ember ottan dicsírni kezdé őtet, mert mindjárt meg kezdé bomlani a békesség az országba. Ottan megelevenülének a törökek is, és az ország egyik nyavallyából a másokban esék. Akkoron kezdé minden ember megismeri micsoda jeles fejedelem vót volna az Mátyás király. És akkoron kezdének mind az emberek mondani: De csak élne Mátyás király, bátor minden esztendőben hétszer róná meg az országot, etc (Heltai 1981: 402).*

and in this way the two kinds of knowledge became linked. On the other hand, popularisation could not come into conflict with public thinking. It was under this influence that 18th century scholars interpreted the name, deeds and morals of Matthias. (For example, they recommended that instead of the Latin Corvin, he be called Holló (= raven), the Hungarian equivalent. The intelligentsia committed to use of the Hungarian language and to national history consciously linked the scholarly and the popular attitudes¹⁴.

In their efforts to create a literature in Hungarian they turned to widely known figures and linked themes, motifs and descriptions of events taken from elsewhere to their names. In the stories of Salamon and Markalf was mentioned King Matthias as a wise and clever ruler. An other example of this kind of development is the activity of Dugonics, a famous writer of the period: when he translated a German romantic drama he made its hero Toldi, the knight of great physical strength, placing him in the service of Matthias.

The interaction of literature and folklore can be traced very well in the case of King Matthias. There are relevant precedents from earlier centuries too, but the 18th century in particular offers a wealth of examples on how the distinctive image of the national king was shaped. Interest in his person was an indirect expression of opposition to Habsburg rule, of a positive attitude towards centralised power, longing for a return of the country's former glory and an end to the abuse of power by the aristocracy, for relief from the growing poverty and an end to social injustice, etc. All this reflected the expectations of the peasant, village and petty noble communities at the educational level of the middle and lower strata of society¹⁵. In the 18th century cheap printing provided this social stratum with a great volume of publications.

¹⁴ The Hungarian historical personalities were introduced for the literated stratum of society with strong emotional stress of their ethnic background (Budai 1805: 281-302).

¹⁵ The literated and unliterated knowledge among the peasant society (Benda 1978: 287-306).

Here, I have selected three kinds of units from the countless broadsides, popular books and almanacs - verse-chronicles, calendars and newspapers - to show the relationship between oral tradition and general education and to demonstrate the link between the knowledge of educated and uneducated communities.

1. 18TH CENTURY EPIC SONG OF KING MATTHIAS

The fashion of verse-chronicles can be placed in the 16th century¹⁶. Later such chronicles were written only sporadically and continued the style of their predecessors. In the 18th century writers no longer used the verse-chronicle to recount historical events. This function was taken over by the specialists and newspapers or broadsheets. Nevertheless, an examination of the catalogue of publications shows that old verse-chronicles were republished. One example is the *History of King Matthias* by Ambrus Görcsöni and Miklós Bogáti Fazakas¹⁷. Görcsöni wrote the chronicle around 1570. It was obviously popular since it was already published a number of times in the 16th century and also circulated in manuscript form. In the 17th century its melody was linked to popular songs and reached new editions in this form, a further indication of the popularity of the chronicle. It was not forgotten in the Age of Enlightenment either. In the 18th century, within the short space of twenty years it was published three times in areas of the country remote from each other. At end of the same century, in 1792, it appeared again. Since rivalry among the printing-houses can be ruled out, it is only interest in King Matthias that could have justified the publication of the old verse-chronicle.

Considering the precedents, there is nothing unusual about the fact that in Buda in 1776 the Landerer printing house, which was engaged in a wide variety of publishing activities, decided

¹⁶ Historical song and vers-chronicle were popular in the 16th century, but not in the age of Enlightenment (Ghezzo 1989).

¹⁷ Görcsöni chronicle was published and copied in 16th century seven times. Later the republications reflected the common interest to this story (Haiman 1990: 37-40; Varjas 1990: 250).

to publish a cheap edition of a short and readable chronicle illustrated with poems about the Hunyadi family, in keeping with the fashion of the time. The chronicle is a unique in the literature¹⁸. As was the custom at that time, the author was unknown. The name of the writer was missing on the first page, but we could find it in secrate place. The writer is Antal Veszelszki, one of the educated figures of the day, a botanist and doctor. Writing anonymously (not disclosing his name) and drawing on the sources mentioned above - sometimes borrowing passages from them - he summed up the history of the Hunyadi family. Veszelszki wrote and compiled an almanac and produced a popular book for bee-keepers and farmers. He probably also wrote a song of praise at the death of Maria Theresa although this has disappeared without trace. It can be considered that Veszelszki carried out wide-ranging activity in popularising technical knowledge.

The lengthy title of the chronicle¹⁹ in the Baroque manner refers to the role of an intermediary. The compiler writes that he has done the work for those who wish to delight in the verse-chronicles of Hungary but who desire to learn about the famous deeds of old times at little cost (= kevés költség). In other words, he was targeting the poor people wishing to improve their education. He begins by giving a detailed account of the origin of the Hunyadi family. He drew on Heltai, and citing precise data and details, he shows the royal descent of the Hunyadi family, presenting this as historical reality. Heltai had stressed the power of oral tradition. He had objected to the genealogy invented by Bonfini because popular tradition held a different view. Veszelszki further simplified Heltai's text, supplementing it with elements from tales. In this way at the end of the 18th century a version of the origin of the

¹⁸ The 18th century took attention to the former peaces of the literature, and was ready to use them such as a chronicle written by Antal Veszelszki 1776 (Kriza 1992).

¹⁹ The titel of the chronicle is: *História Melly Magába foglalja Vitéz Hunyadi János Nemzetsége eredetét és a Török ellen viselt hadait; Ugy nem külömben Ama Hires Nagy emlékezet Fijának Mátyás Király, Örök emlékezetre méltó hadakozását, a melly-is A Magyar Országi históriákban gyönyörködőknek kedvéért (hogy kiki a mi Eleinknek derék viselt dolgaik leírásához kevés költséggel juthassan) össze-szedettetett és ki-botsátatott Budán, Katalin Landererné bet ivel 1776-ban.*

Hunyadi family came into being which folk-tale researchers find similar to folklore that fits into the international system of motifs and tale types²⁰.

He wrote about Hunyadi, defeater of the Turks, in the style of songs of praise, borrowing details from the 16th century chronicle of Mátyás Nagybáncsai. The campaign against Vienna, including the battle of Hainburg, occupies a prominent position in the list of military deeds of King Matthias. Ignoring the real facts, the serious loss of life, this figures in the verse-chronicle as a glorious battle in which King Matthias himself rides in the vanguard, girding the famous sword used to defeat the Turks, felling the enemy in his path, just like the heroes of tales. This part of the story, the well-crafted verse, is like an illustration and can be regarded as related to the anti-Habsburg poetry of the "kuruc" insurgents²¹.

From a distance of two centuries it is difficult to form an unequivocal opinion on the social background and significance of the chronicle in vers and in prosa. However, a whole series of epics on the miraculous descent, heroism and honesty of Matthias survived in oral tradition.

2. THE ROLE OF ALMANACS IN SHAPING THE MATTHIAS TRADITION

The almanacs were regarded as the almost only reading matter of the peasantry because of the large number of copies printed, their special content and the advice they contained on agriculture. However, the almanacs played an equally important role concerning knowledge about King Matthias. First of all it is worth paying attention to the chronology given at the beginning of the calendars. This list contained the most important dates in the country's history,

²⁰ The origin of the king family was always disputed. In the 18th century there was formed a folklore story (Solymossy 1933), the ideas of the literated authors were far from the object data (Dávid 1973; Fráter 1936; Foster 1918).

²¹ The good Hungarian king represented the confrontation with the Habsburg absolutism. Beginning of the 18th century was expressed the wish to create an independent national state. By this way, it is not a surprise reading some paragraph of the verse-chronicle used the terms of the poetry of war of independence against Habsburgs.

beginning with the reign of Attila and ending with the period concerned, including also the year of the death of Matthias. Folk tradition played a role here, and reverse, the almanacs made a strong influence for the popular knowledge. In that year the lions faithfully protecting the king's home died unexpectedly, a sign of the ruler's sudden death. According to folk belief, dogs kept to guard the home not only sense their master's approaching death but also die with him. For decades the almanacs of Komárom, Kassa, Kolozsvár, Pozsony and Nagyszombat regularly printed this fact.

Humorous anecdotes about Matthias first appeared in the almanacs. In the Hungarian-language Győr almanac from the 1740s János Streibig published 28 narratives. Probably the first Hungarian-language versions of the almanac - some editions of which have not survived - published the Matthias legends as a series in the 1740s. Texts (that we know) Nos. 20 and 21 appeared in 1749 and the last two in 1752. The title of the series is: *Hunyad Mátyás M.O. 37-dik királyának bölts és tréfás- beszédiről és tselekedetiről szólló fel-tételeinek continutioja*. ("Continuation of an account of the wise and humorous words and deeds of Matthias Hunyadi, 37th king of Hungary") - is reminiscent of Galeotto and the influence can, in fact, be shown because among the surviving editions that of 1752 contains two Galeotto translations²².

Streibig, the publisher did not draw from a single source. He took two student jokes about Matthias from an unknown source. In one he played a joke on the royal coachman in Prague who, in place of pleasant perfume, made the queen's journey intolerable with an unpleasant smell. According to the other legend, he exchanged the young wife of an elderly man and the young husband of an elderly woman one night in secret, explaining this deed with a single proverb: "It is not good to plant a young tree beside an old one". The latter anecdote has extensive international ramifications. Somewhat later Dugonics also included this anecdote among his collection of parables. Half a century later, Ádám Pálóczi

²² Translation of Galeotto anecdotes was made at the end of the last century, but for the unlettered stratum of society were published first in 1749, later by Dugonics' collection (Dugonics 1820; Galeotto 1867; 1977; Kríza 1995; Szilágyi 1983).

Horváth used the same story regarded it as credible and incorporated this episode into the complicated action of his drama "*A tétényi lány*" (*The Girl from Tétény*). It is not surprising that it reappears in the 19th century among the popular Matthias narratives as well²³.

The almanacs drew their information from the earlier popular books and slightly rewrote them, offering them as reading matter which presented credible or incredible stories in a manner close to the folk tale and living speech. Stories by Salamon and Markalf, also published in Hungarian in 1577, appeared in the next century as tricks of King Matthias. The two best known of these also figured in the Győr almanac: the story of the peasant saving his pennies and the man who solved a riddle then discovered the portrait of the king on a coin²⁴. In the 19th century both were narratives known throughout the country and linked to the person of King Matthias. The Latin precedents and the names of Salamon and Markalf had been forgotten.

In the 18th century the importance of deeds of King Matthias rapidly increased. The outstanding 18th century scholar, Mátyás Bél, also observed that many legends were linked to the journeys of King Matthias around the country and he presented these as real events²⁵. In the same way as Heltai's chronicle, for centuries oral tradition recounted his gift-giving. This is the reason why, in this respect, the writings of the 18th century almanacs acquired a role as substitute documents.

The almanacs were given the respect due to the printed word and their contents had special value because the printed word was indisputable, unquestionable truth. In this way, if someone cited a text in the almanac concerning a gift of land given by King Matthias, this was taken as being equivalent to a document. It is an indication of the significance of oral tradition that in the

²³ The popular Matthias tales, legends and anecdotes were used by the writer Pálóczi Horváth in his drama (Kríza 1993).

²⁴ Story about the clever peasant who has seen the portrait of king in the coin is a folklore topic (Aarne-Thompson Nr. 922; Anderson 1922).

²⁵ Geographical names e.g. *Királyföldre*, *Mátyusföld* (*Field of King*, *Field of Matthias*) were interpreted as a gift giving (Bél 1735; Ujváry 1990).

18th century, in the absence of documents, for years the Nagyszombat almanac claimed that a disputed area of land was the gift of King Matthias.

3. MATTHIAS LEGENDS IN 18TH CENTURY NEWSPAPERS

In the early years of Hungarian-language journalism, in 1792 the *Magyar Hírmondó* of Vienna published seven Matthias legends. No author's name was given and the place of source is mentioned only once. The title indicates that these are a new publication of texts from old oral tradition. Under the title "*Mátyás királyról egy régi Magyar Hagyomány*" (*An old Hungarian tradition concerning King Matthias*) we can read a variant of "the clever girl", a tale type known throughout the world. The girl answers the king's nonsense requests (such as skin the stone, bleed it, take its skin to Buda) at a similar level. It was precisely this narrative, the encounter between the clever girl and King Matthias, which gave Ádám Pálóczi Horváth the frame story for his comedy, above mentioned : *The Girl from Tétény*. This type of tale is still one of the most popular narratives associated with the name of King Matthias²⁶. The story of the strange gift also appeared in this newspaper. (The poor man gave Matthias an especially fine pumpkin and the king reciprocated the gift generously, while the rich man who gave him a fine gift received only a pumpkin in exchange)²⁷. Similarly, the explanation of the proverb "A dog market was held in Buda only once" is also among the most popular narratives in Hungary, and its first record is found in the *Magyar Hírmondó*. Other stories also appeared for the first time in this newspaper, such as the kind-hearted host who pawns his coat to provide fitting hospitality, and the name explanation which makes a distinction between King Matthias and Matthias King. (Namely in the case of Matthias King is a common person whose family

²⁶ Tale type is Aarne-Thompson Nr.875 (Binder 1902; de Vries 1928).

²⁷ The funny gift was interpreted as a tale with international relations (Binder 1893; Bolte-Polívka 1913; Kovács 1980).

name is King.) Another narrative of Renaissance origin also known throughout Europe, the conversation between the clever peasant and the king²⁸, can be read here in association with the name of the Cinkota cantor, although it was regarded as a literary creation at the end of the 18th century²⁹.

Printed materials helped the spread of the Matthias narratives, the crystallisation of the texts and solidification of the forms. The anecdotes from the *Magyar Hírmondó* appeared later in 1806 in a book of anecdotes published in Sopron by János Kis. We wish to stress, he was also an educated person, Lutheranian priest, who translated books, short stories to encreasing the mother tounge in Hungary. It seems likely that somebody either sent them to the newspaper or borrowed them from this source. Whatever the case, the Matthias legends and anecdotes that appeared in printed form basically influenced the later style of narration and the theme³⁰.

In the 18th century the Matthias narratives are characterised by easy readability, the closed structure and the recounting of a single episode. The narratives containing many mediaeval motifs and not without didactic elements influenced leading representatives of intellectual life in the 19th century (writers, poets, scholars). Familiarity with the Matthias folklore was part of the general knowledge of the educated stratum of society and even the most famous scholars were inclined to accept the folklore elements as historical fact.

Finally some words as conclusion. I choosed three examples only from the rich Matthias tradition of the age of Enlightenment. These datas reflect the world view of he scientific elit is different from the rural tradition. The vernacular literature received the sources from the oral literature, and from the unknown or hardly known literated authors. They became intermediators for the

²⁸ About the clever peasant Walter Anderson wrote a monograph having some details of the Hungarian folklore, too (Anderson 1922; Kovács 1980).

²⁹ Nonsense questions are common topic of the folklore even in song or in prose (Ördög 1973; Taylor 1951; Thompson 1956).

³⁰ The anecdotes, legends of King Matthias appeared in 18th century, were published again in the books. The rich folklore of 19th century developed by the help the literature (Benedek 1927; Tóth 1890; Ujváry 1990).

unliterated stratum of society. They used in mother tongue different kind of international folklore narratives and formed King Matthias as an idealised historic person, as a national hero in the frame of tales, legends or anecdotes. So the popular printed stories helped to increase the national consciousness among Hungarians during the age of Enlightenment.

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