

Matthias Corvinus and His Library

Rose (Rózsi) Stein

Hungary in the fifteenth century was threatened by the danger of Turkish invasion. Only a central power, such as that created by King Matthias (Mátyás) Corvinus (1440?–90), could muster enough strength to withstand the onslaught of the Turks.

Matthias's whole regal concept since 1458, the year of his coronation, was centred on the unification of European strength against this menace. In his domestic politics he preferred common men of talent to the dissenting oligarchy; abroad he made alliances to build an empire. His great personal qualities, his political concepts, and his pursuit of dynastic policy led him to prefer the humanistic spirit of the Renaissance to that of medieval scholasticism. A love of lavish splendour and culture resulted in a flourishing of royal residences in Buda and Visegrád, both situated on the Danube, and to the establishment of the Bibliotheca Corvina in Buda in 1471.

Matthias Corvinus did not claim any substantial heritage of manuscripts as his own; a small number of codices originating from the collections of earlier kings of Hungary formed the nucleus of his library. Louis (Lajos) the Great, of Angevin lineage, ordered the illuminated chronicle of Hungary's history to be executed by Márk Kálti, a Hungarian canon. It contained the history of the Magyars until 1330 and included miniatures and the portrait of Louis the Great.

Another patron of codices was Sigismund (Zsigmond) of Luxembourg, king of Hungary and later ruler of the Holy Roman Empire (1368–1437) whose *Liber de Septem Signis* also came into the Corvina Library.

The sidereal sciences: astronomy and astrology, stood in high favour in Matthias's court. His interest in both was demonstrated by a globe placed at the entrance of the library, showing the constella-

tion of stars at the time of his coronation as king of Bohemia (twenty years after having been elected king of Hungary). The palace was also decorated with the twelve signs of the zodiac carved from wood and gilded.

The library itself consisted of two spacious rooms with vaulted ceilings; one housed the Latin the other the Greek and oriental manuscripts. The rooms were arranged somewhat similarly to those of the Laurentiana in Florence. The reading pulpits were covered with red velvet decorated with gold. Books were arranged "in foruli" (on shelves) with a label attached to each one. They were shielded by curtains of silk interwoven with gold. The books in the lowest section were only encased, not labelled.

There was a royal couch between the two rooms for the king so that discussions with his scholars, as well as reading would be more relaxing. Sometimes, appropriately for a great builder, he enjoyed reading Vitruvius and Leon Battista Alberti: sometimes he conferred with diplomats and envoys of foreign courts. It can be said that this bibliophile, when not at war, made the library the centre of his activities in cultural and political matters as well. The passionate collector was well known to his contemporaries; this was the origin of the dictum that to earn the good graces of the sultan one had to send him beautiful odalisks but to earn those of Matthias one had to present him with books that he enjoyed "avec une sensualité cérébrale" (A. de Hevesy's expression).

Archbishop János Vitéz, possessor of the first great library before Matthias, was his preceptor from his early youth. The archbishop transmitted his humanistic interest to the young king, and this was a decisive factor in the foundation of the Corvina library. A nephew and another pupil of Vitéz was the well-known humanist and poet, Janus Pannonius (1434-72), the bishop of Pécs. He was sent by his uncle to the humanistic school of Veronese Guarino (1370-1460) in Ferrara, and through him many of his former fellow students, later great humanists themselves, were invited to Buda. In 1465 Janus Pannonius went as ambassador to Italy where he made contacts with the Academies of Florence and Rome and also purchased manuscripts for Matthias. At that time he was introduced to the most important personage in the book trade, Vespasiano da Bisticci, through Galeotto Marzio (1427-97), who later held the office of historian at the court of Buda until the king's death.

Vespasiano's shop bore the inscription "Vespasiano procurante," since he served the Medici, Matthias Corvinus, Federico da Urbino (Montefeltro, 1422-82) and many other bibliophiles. His opinion was that it is shameful to house printed books together with worthy

handwritten codices. This remark may have reflected some bias against the new trade of printing. In his memoirs Vespasiano accused King Matthias of ingratitude toward János Vitéz, one of his shop's regular customers.

The historical background of this remark, which later had some impact on the holdings of the Corvina library, was as follows: the oligarchy rebelled against the strong rule of the king. János Vitéz, who lost his influence on his former pupil, led the insurrection. Matthias, after quelling the rebellion, confiscated many treasures of the magnates, among them the Latin manuscripts of János Vitéz and Janus Pannonius.

The year 1476, when Matthias married Beatrix, daughter of the king of Naples, furthered his interest in the miniators of Naples and also those of Ferrara, the court of his queen's sister, especially since his contacts with Vespasiano da Bisticci had been severed owing to the latter's opinion about the royal ire towards János Vitéz. At the time of his marriage the library contained about one-third of its subsequent total.

Italian humanists and artists followed the young queen to join those who already resided there and Matthias's aim began to form out of "Pannonia altera Italia." Famous names at the court of Buda were Antonio Bonfini (1434-1503), the humanist who wrote the history of Hungary in a style imitating antiquity; and Galeotto Marzio, librarian and preceptor of the king's natural son, János Corvin, whom Matthias hoped to make his successor. Galeotto collected anecdotes about the king as well as his witty and clever remarks and formed a kind of biography from these mosaics entitled: "Galeotti Martii de Egregie Sapienter locose Dictis ac Factis Regis Matthiae ad Ducem Johannem Eius Filium Liber."

Johann Müller of Königsberg, called Regiomontanus (1436-76), was a renowned astronomer and a special favourite of the king, who invited him to the court of Buda. Later he was a professor at the Academia Istropolitana (Pozsony-Bratislava). In 1467 he wrote the "Ephemerides Budenses." In time he left Hungary to establish a printing press in Nürnberg in 1471.

Lodovico Carbone (1436-82), professor at the University of Ferrara, dedicated his work "Dialogus de Mathiae Regis Laudibus" to the king (Budapest, Hungarian Academy of Sciences). In this eulogy he alluded to the king's dream of being chosen Holy Roman Emperor.

Even before his marriage to Beatrix a great scriptorium was installed in Buda, where a staff of thirty men worked as painters, miniators and scribes, according to the report of Bishop Miklós

Oláh. One of the superintendents of this scriptorium was Bartolomeo Della Font (Bartholomaeus Fontius, 1445-1513) of Florence. On occasion complete codices were executed here; others were ordered from Italy, where four masters in Florence were engaged to copy Greek and Latin manuscripts. Often added in Buda were the decoration of the borders, the coats-of-arms of Hungary and of the king with symbols to illustrate Matthias's personal qualities such as the dragon representing courage; the beehive representing industry; the well representing profoundness of thought; the hour-glass representing right timing of action.

The codices of the early period were primarily decorated in the so-called style of the Danube valley (A. de Hevesy), which evolved from Tyrol to the Carpathian Mountains. The charming freshness of local plants, flowers and fruits bordered the text (e.g., "In Ptolemaeum" by Regiomontanus).

The king turned to Italy for more sumptuous manuscripts. Francesco d'Antonio del Chierico was the illuminator of the "Corvin Psalterium" (Wolfenbüttel, Staatsbibliothek). The Canto del Garbo shop was the work place of the brothers, Gherardo and Monte del Fora, masters of the Codex "Hieronymus" of the Vienna National Library. More ornamental was the art of Attavante degli Attavanti (1452-ca. 1517), whose shop provided thirty-one of the known Corvina, eighteen of his own handiwork, for example, the "Brussels Missal."

Matthias's imperial ambitions were expressed on some manuscripts, for example, the codex of Didymus Alexandrinus's "De Spiritu Sanctu" (New York, P. Morgan Library) where the initials on the frontispiece "M A" stand for Matthias Augustus. This codex was illuminated by Gherardo and Monte del Fora and written by Sigismundus de Sigismundis in 1488. The political tendency in the illustration of the frontispiece is further enhanced by the picture of János Corvin in addition to the portrait of the king and queen.

Some codices of the later period were called the Beatrix codices, as the one by Giovanni Ambrogio da Predis (b. ca. 1455) known as the "Marlianus" Corvina with the coat-of-arms of János Corvin and Bianca Sforza (Volterra Library) as evidence of a marriage plan. The superb "Sforza Book of Hours" was planned originally as a wedding gift from Bona Sforza to her daughter. The illuminations are attributed to Ambrogio da Predis. After the death of Matthias (1490) the marriage was called off, and Bianca married Emperor Maximilian I in 1493. The pages referring to Matthias Corvinus had been removed but were later reinserted by the order of Emperor Charles V.

The king showed a keen interest in the content of books. Some records of printed books in his possession can be found. Marsiglio Ficino (1433-99), an Italian philosopher, sent him his work printed in Basel in 1461. Taddeo Ugoletti (d. ca. 1514) wrote to the king that Bonfini would bring some printed books from Rome.

In 1470 the provost, Bishop László Karai (d. ca. 1485), was on a diplomatic mission to Rome. At that time he acquired some familiarity with the new art through the printers Sweynheym and Pannartz. In Rome Karai also met Andreas Hess whom he invited to set up a printing press in Buda. Hess ordered the type used by Sweynheym and Pannartz to be cast in Hungary, and he used it to print the *Chronica Hungarorum* and *Magni Basilii de Legendis Poeticis*. As King Matthias was involved in warfare at that time, he did not show great interest and the dedication of these works quoted Karai as the books' patron.

A Hungarian scholar, József Fitz, studied the history of many printing presses in Rome and compared the type used by Hess with that of Georgias Lauer. Fitz came to the conclusion that Hess had been apprenticed in Lauer's shop and that Lauer's type was used in Buda. Hess's shop, the first Hungarian printing press, was manned by fourteen men besides himself.

Fitz also cited the fact that the king had sent Blandius, one of his illuminators, to Rome to buy books. On this occasion Pomponius Laetus (1428-97), the editor and corrector of the Lauer shop, sent a gift to the king, the printed edition of Silius Italicus's "Punica." Matthias thanked him in a gracious letter, referring to the great pleasure he had derived from several readings of a work printed with so much care and fine ornamentation.

Fitz's book about Hungarian printing, *A magyar nyomdászat, könyvkiadás és könyvkereskedelem története*, adds more to our knowledge about the king's contacts with the printing trade. The Corvina contained a great number of contemporary works, some quite simple in appearance. Bishop Miklós Oláh reported in his "Hungaria" that the books were arranged by classes in the library; consequently handwritten and printed works were shelved together. It is also of interest that all three of Matthias's librarians: Galeotto Marzio, Taddeo Ugoletti and Bartholomaeus Fontius, were exposed at one period of their lives to experience in a printing shop.

Besides the printing press of Andreas Hess, which operated, as far as is known, from 1473 to 1749, another press was established in Brünn in 1486 that also belonged to Matthias's kingdom. In Buda, a prosperous publisher-businessman, Theobaldus Feger, ordered

liturgical books for the sees of Zagreb, Olmütz, etc., to be printed in Germany under the king's patronage. There is every reason to believe that the king's library had included works such as the *Thuróczy Chronicle*, printed in Augsburg, or the *Missale Strigoniense*, printed by Anton Koberger in Nürnberg (1484).

The king's versatile mind also made modern use of a new art. He ordered propaganda leaflets to be printed in Germany and had them posted on buildings in Vienna before he occupied that city. Although none of these has been found, the facts can be ascertained from a written complaint by Emperor Frederic III, who was driven out of Vienna by Matthias. This document was addressed to the Councils of Nürnberg and Strassburg, objecting to their permitting such printing to be done.

In 1666 Austrian Emperor Leopold I sent his librarian, Peter Lambeck (Lambecius, 1628-80), to the Sublime Porte in search of the remnants of the Corvina taken from Buda earlier by the Turks. Lambeck was conducted into a crypt-like room where 300-400 stacked volumes presented a dismal picture. He stated that many of them were printed books. After lengthy persuasion he was able to rescue three codices (housed today in the National Library in Vienna).

The bindings of the codices show great variety. Some were bound in the Italian manner in red silk or velvet. More important are those which reflect the king's own taste. These are covered with calfskin or maroquin, and the centrepieces bear the royal coat-of-arms. The ornamentation with blind tooling and gilding is enclosed in a rectangle. The covers had a balanced appearance, some of them reminiscent of the harmony of the sixteenth-century Grolier bindings. Others were richly ornamented in the Renaissance style. The binding of "Xenophon" (Vienna, National Library) had patterns of Hungarian motif in the floral design.*

János Csontos, the former curator of the Hungarian National Museum, gave us the description of the Corvina returned by the Sultan to Emperor Francis Joseph I. As a gesture of courtesy the damaged original bindings had been removed and the codices were rebound with great care in leather. One side of the cover carried the insignia of Matthias, the opposite side that of the Turkish Empire. The original bindings could not be recovered.

Special mention should be made of the "Graduale" (National Széchényi Library, Budapest). It was a gift from Charles VIII, king of France, in return for the lavish presents of Matthias, who sought his alliance against Frederic III, the German emperor.

The codex (503 × 370 mm) contains 201 leaves and is bound in

leather. It was made in France about 1487 by French scribes and miniators. Four initials were added in the scriptorium in Buda, the initial "I" having been executed by Giovanni Cattaneo de Mediolano (d. ca. 1531). This Dominican monk, master of the "Averulinus" Corvina in Venice, found his way to Buda through the court of Ferrara in 1482. The description of the historiated initial "I" on leaf 7a of the "Graduale" (185 × 195 mm), entitled "The entrance of the Jews in the Holy Land" (The Land of Milk and Honey), is as follows. The landscape of the miniature was a riddle until recent years; now it is accepted as the contemporary picture of Visegrád, the royal residence on the Danube. Against the hills and fortresses in the background and the gentle slopes in the middle ground with trees full of fruit, a scene is depicted of a peasant milking a goat and another tending sheep. In the left-hand corner, half-hidden by the column-shaped "I" a beehive (also an emblem of Matthias). On the road a procession of richly clad men is led by Joshua. These men are to be viewed as a group of humanists with the king in their midst. Two of them carry codices. One personage deserves special attention, since he is dressed in Dominican garb and his face is portrait-like, presumably the artist himself. God the Father in his Glory, surrounded by seraphim and holding the Hungarian orb in his hand, blesses the scene from above.

The initial "I" is represented as a purple column decorated with green acanthus leaves and the halls so familiar to the style of Lombardy. Remarkable for their local importance are the tulip-like flowers and a figure of the child Hercules (in humanistic interpretation Matthias himself) strangling the hydra. The latter motif is represented on the Matthias fountain in the court of Visegrád made out of red marble, the spouts of which poured forth different precious wines on festive occasions. This fountain was reconstructed during the excavations of Visegrád carried out after World War II.

The bottom of the column shows a putto playing the lute, with a white dog, a frequently applied motif in the Lombard school, listening attentively. The dog probably stands for the artist in the interpretation of Dominicans as "Domini canes," the faithful dogs of the Lord.

The miniature is in a frame on a golden background with the familiar attributes of the horn of plenty, flowers in a harmonious blending of the colours of purple, blue and green with white bells between. Although the style of the bordering flowers reoccurs in other works of the Lombard school, it may be that their shape represents the influence of the surroundings and is a mixture of the styles of the masters of Italy and Hungary.

Matthias died suddenly in Vienna in 1490, and the ensuing years of indecision offered easy spoils to anyone. János Corvin was the first to try to save his patrimony. Queen Beatrix, when her marriage plans to Matthias's successor, King Wladislav, were not realized, took her treasures back to Naples. Wladislav, himself a weak ruler burdened by debts, was easy prey to the cupidity of foreign potentates (e.g., Emperor Maximilian I) and ambassadors; he even distributed codices as gifts.

After the defeat of the Hungarians by the Turks at Mohács in 1526, where King Louis (Lajos) II died in battle, his widow, Maria, a Habsburg, brought some Corvina to The Netherlands, for example, the "Corvin Missale" (Madrid, Escorial Library). After Turkish troops sacked Buda, 7,000 chests of loot were shipped via the Danube to Istanbul. Some manuscripts were sold and became known as the "Budenses," enjoying great popularity from Venice to Paris.

No catalogue of the library has yet been discovered and the exact number of the holdings of the Bibliotheca Corvina since 1471, the year of its beginnings, is unknown. Today the Corvina are dispersed in many countries. Most are in Hungary; others can be found in England, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland, Germany, Italy, Turkey and the United States.

Author's note:

* Earliest record of gold-tooled binding: record of payment to Baldassare Scariglia for binding seven volumes in Cordovan leather tooled in gold for Corvinus (Document of 1480 from Naples).

Editor's note:

A selected bibliography of the subject, prepared by the author, is available from our journal's editorial office.