

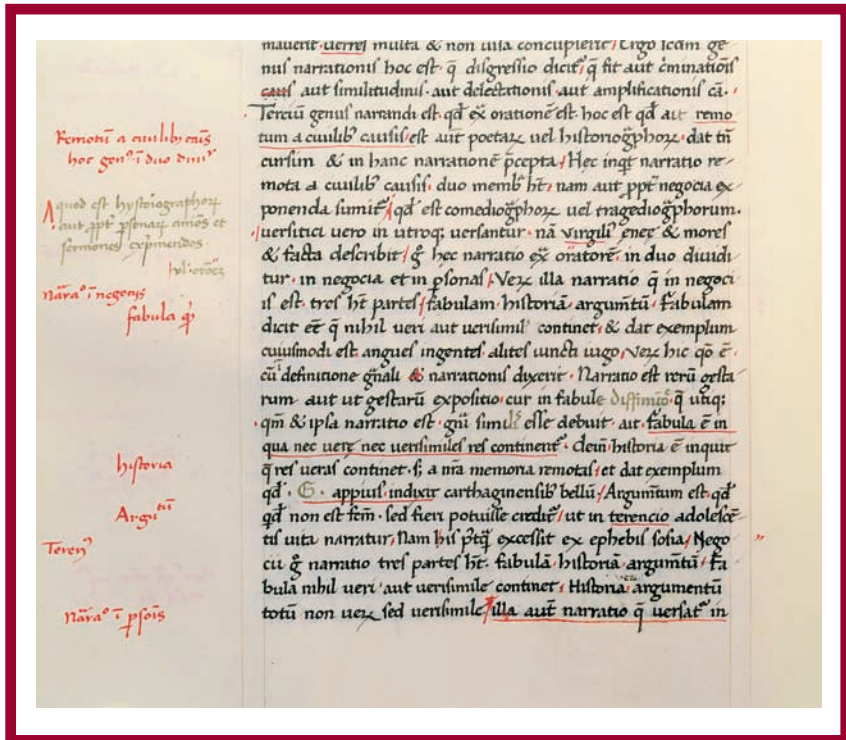
A STAR IN THE RAVEN'S SHADOW



The National Széchényi Library's exhibition in the framework of the Renaissance Year had the beginnings of Hungarian humanism in its focus, concentrating on the personality, library and cultural activity of János Vitéz.

Hungarian scholarship unanimously agrees that Vitéz is the “father of Hungarian humanism”. Without his life work, the beginning of the process that might be called Hungarian High Renaissance cannot be interpreted. In other words, the classical humanist education, book culture and Renaissance courtly and scientific life of the second half of the 15th century would be impossible to understand without him. By introducing his scattered library, Hungarian book history and humanism research has filled an old gap. Thanks to foreign loans, this was the first time that such a large number of Vitéz's own codices have been on joint display. A narrow community of scholars had last seen some of them in 1876 at the Literary Exhibition of the National Museum's Széchényi Library, as the anonymous reporter (who may have been Vilmos Fraknói or János Csontos) recounted on the pages of Magyar Könyvszemle [Hungarian Book Review]. The names of Fraknói and Csontos feature at the head of any publication on Vitéz not merely as a tribute to them. The 1879 monograph by the scholarly high priest Fraknói is still Vitéz's most comprehensive biography, which may have been modified by micro-research, but its accomplishments have never been challenged. On the contrary, historical tradition now accepts some of the assumptions that Fraknói was unable to conclusively prove. The general public does not know that the 550th anniversary of King Matthias's enthronement coincides with the 600th anniversary of János Vitéz's birth in 1408. Anyhow, that is what Fraknói's monograph asserts, although without providing any reference to confirm his conjecture. It has to be admitted though that neither has any data surfaced to refute the hypothesis. No one has done more for introducing Vitéz's codices that for centuries were thought to be lost than the little known János

Csontos. Until the last third of the 19th century the world knew nothing about Vitéz's library. While private scholars had started collecting the remains of the most significant Hungarian Renaissance library, the Bibliotheca Corviniana, as early as the 16th century, and from the 17th century onwards politicians' interest and attention repeatedly turned towards it as well, it was only in the 1870s that research started to recognise Vitéz's codices. That is the time when remains of the scholar's collection were identified in foreign collections. Besides Fraknói, we owe most to János Csontos, the codicologist of the Széchényi Library.



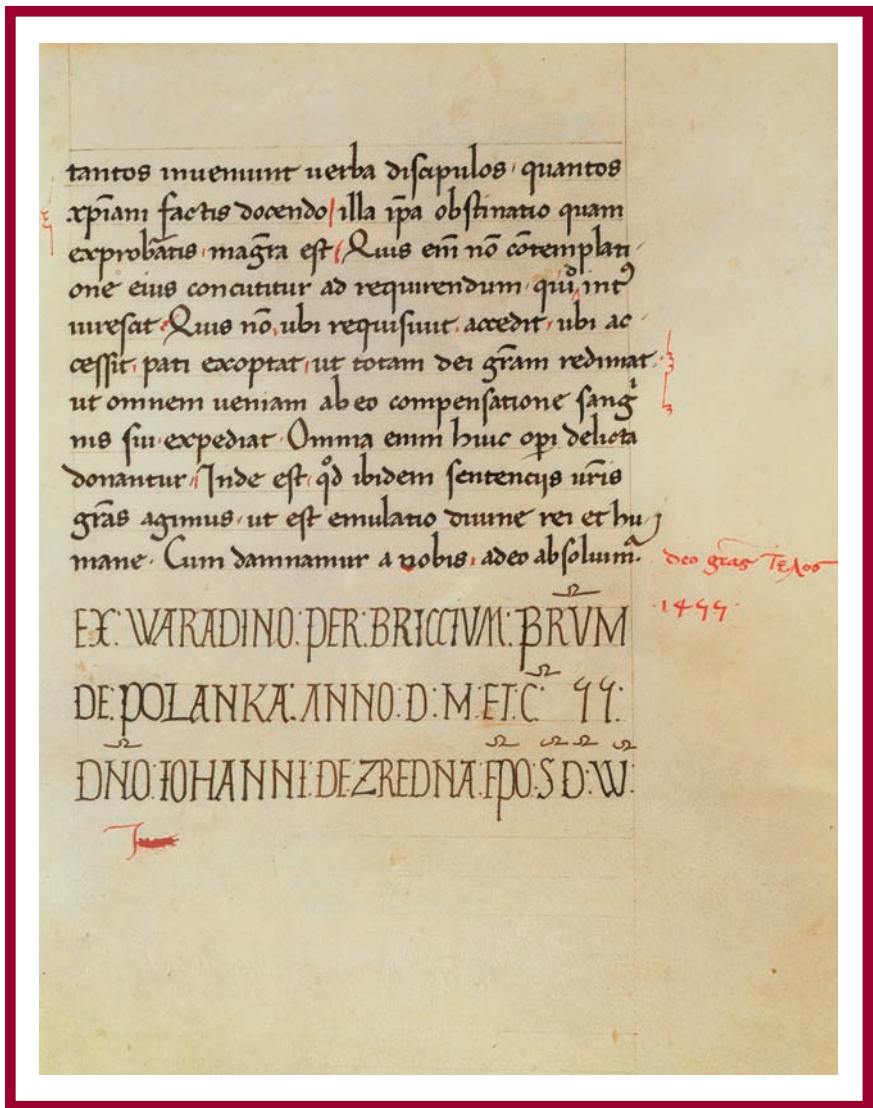
János Vitéz's notes in the Victorinus Codex

The exhibition's title *A Star in the Raven's Shadow* intended to reflect the image fixed in Hungarian cultural history and embraced especially by the general public associating the late 15th century modern classical humanist culture almost exclusively with King Matthias. János Vitéz with the star in his crest, the personality that scholarly consensus attributes the beginnings of 15th century cultural switch to, always and in every sense stayed in the king's shadow. Since the end of the 15th century, historical memory has regarded Matthias's reign as the country's golden age, and in tense historical situations, especially since the decades following the Battle of

Mohács it has almost continuously been growing into a personal legend integrated into Hungarian historiography as well as the world of folk tales. Naturally, it was not without reason that this historical legend went hand in hand with the legend of the king creating culture, whose main deed was the establishment of the Corvina Library. Therefore, it is no surprise that the bishop of Várad, who at the end of his life turned against the king and whose literary reputation did not match the European fame of Janus Pannonius, received no more than a single paragraph in history books.

The most comprehensive introduction of Vitéz's collection to the general public is thus a major tangible step towards the rediscovery of this extraordinary personality. It needs to be added that for a number of decisive elements of Hungarian classical humanist culture, the source, the model and the initiator of processes is no other than Vitéz. One of these vital elements is the library and collecting books, an issue which was introduced in the second room of the exhibition, displaying both domestic and foreign material. (In addition to codices from Kalocsa, Győr and the Budapest University Library and, naturally, the codices and early prints of the National Széchényi Library, there were books loaned from the Austrian National Library in Vienna and the Scottish Benedictine library, from Munich, Salzburg and the Vatican. As supplementary objects, the National Gallery provided Gothic statues and the only surviving figure of the baluster of the completely destroyed Renaissance castle of Péter Váradi at Bács.) Vitéz's collection was a primary impulse for Matthias to set up his royal library. It requires further research to establish whether the unquestionable parallels that relate the Vitéz library and especially the early layers of the Corvina are, in fact, due to a direct impact or stem from having a shared source, namely the antique canon of humanism.

The clearly defined mission of the exhibition was to present the double-faced nature of the primate (and naturally of his age) but also to ensure that the emergence of



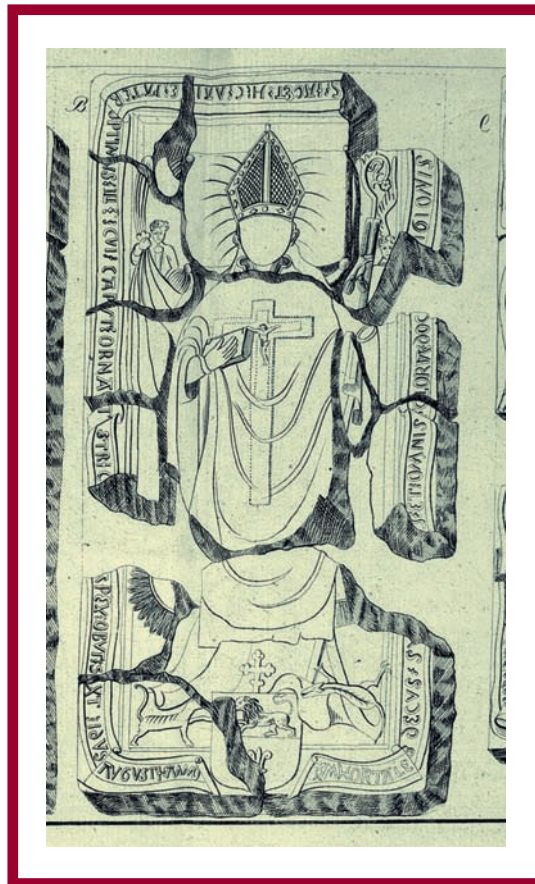
The colophon of János Vitéz's Tertullianus Codex. The manuscript was copied by Bereck Polánkai in Várad in 1455

humanism and the Renaissance should not overshadow the country's medieval church culture and the still surviving late Gothic art, which produced some outstanding products and novel artistic values. This purpose was served by the assemblage in the first room highlighting the main segments of 15th century non-humanist culture, namely the manuals used in education and pastoralisation, liturgical codices, historical works and contemporary relics of Hungarian literacy. The parallel existence of the two cultural processes raises a number of important questions. In particular, with Vitéz it is intriguing to study not only the position and value of his Renaissance and Hungarian Gothic ornamented codices in the library, but also the medieval-humanist ambivalence of his most important work, namely the *Book of Letters*. The *Book of Letters* was the centerpiece of our exhibition. It includes the official missives of the bishop of Várad written between 1445 and 1451, diplomatic letters produced in the service of Governor János Hunyadi. His style does

not seem to bear the marks of humanist ideals diffused from “modern” Italy, but is much rather the perpetuation of the medieval Hungarian chancellery style. On the other hand, compiling a book of letters and “publishing” them is already the outcome of the intellectual movement of humanism, which the bishop acutely sensed when attaching introductory agenda-setting letters to the volume, filling them with quotes from and references to antique authors.

In addition to the fact that this was the first time that Vitéz’s codices had been together in such totality, as a result of the exhibition our image of the scholarly high priest has been greatly refined. On thorough scrutiny of Vitéz’s extant pieces, it may be quite safely suggested that the bishop is the first and in a certain sense an unparalleled Hungarian scholarly reader of the 15th century. Using a modern term of textology, it might be said that in his codices he left behind a number of marks of close reading, ranging from grammatical corrections to factual and rhetorical notes. In this respect too, we have moved forward. Now we see that Vitéz was not reading and annotating unselectively. He leafed through important antique authors without note-taking – or intensive reading – only to pay even more attention to each work of historiography and rhetoric. The exhibition organizers made an effort at presenting the full oeuvre. The third room was labeled as “Works beyond the library”. In our interpretation, Vitéz’s role in cultural history cannot be measured simply by the size and reputation of the collection. In this section, we tried to demonstrate the activity of the patron and high priest who acted as a cultural manager. His influence on King Matthias has already been touched upon. It is at least as decisive in the cultural profile of the second half of the century that quite a few members of the Hungarian literate elite were launched into their careers by Vitéz. We presented the portraits of three scholarly writers, who had very different lives and reputations but were equally significant: Janus Pannonius, Péter Garázda and Péter Váradi. Strangely enough, patronage, this un-institution-

alized system became more decisive than the actual institutions associated with the archbishop’s name, with the University of Pozsony, which is mostly referred to as King Matthias’s university. It is clear however that its establishment and partial development is the Esztergom archbishop’s attainment in the same way as the fact that András Hess was invited to Buda. With Vitéz’s death in 1472 these initiatives were discontinued. Over the course of the following few years the king rejected everything that had been created by Vitéz, who turned against him. Nor did he do anything later in order for his once most trusted man to take the place he deserves in his own century as well as in the memory of future generations. Nevertheless, the basic principles of the beginnings of Hungarian humanism were laid down by historiography rather than by the king: Without Vitéz Matthias’s court would not have developed into what it did. Without Vitéz the Hungarian humanism of the 15th century is impossible to interpret.



János Vitéz’s broken tomb stone in its state in the early 19th century

was provided by the Photo Laboratories of the National Széchényi Library, the Bindery and Restoration Department, the Technical Department and the staff of the Security Department. The catalogue bearing the same title as the exhibition and published in three thousand copies was edited by Ferenc Földesi and typographically designed by János Lengyel.)

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