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HUNGARY

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The origins of the Renaissance in Hungary

There hardly was a country with more favourable conditions for the reception of the Italian Renaissance than Hungary. In the fourteenth century the Neapolitan Anjou (Angevin) dynasty ruled the country, whose policy was involved in the affairs of Italy in more ways than one. Louis the Great (1342–82), led campaigns to Naples (1347 and 1350), fought a victorious war against Venice (1378–81), and strengthened control over the Dalmatian coast; Hungarian mercenary troops on Italy's soil became a frequent occurrence, and an Italian traders' colony was established in Buda, the capital, while Hungarian students frequently attended the universities of Bologna and Padua. The ever-increasing cultural contacts facilitated the constant flow of material and spiritual values between Italy and Hungary.¹ This process gained momentum under the rule of King Sigismund (1387–1437), especially when, in 1410, he became the ruler of the Holy Roman Empire, and his royal seat, Buda, had become one of the centres of European policy. Of the first generation of Italian humanists Filelfo and Traversari spent months, Branda Castiglione and Giuliano Cesarini years, while Pier Paolo Vergerio nearly three decades (1417–44), in Hungary; Poggio Bracciolini was to have received a promising position at the court, but eventually he did not come to Hungary. This was the country where Filippo Scolari (Pippo Spano), famous from Andrea Castagno's portrait, had a brilliant career, and it was in Hungary where Masolino painted some of his works, paintings that have not come down to us, unfortunately. The historical sources also testify to a constant influx of Italian bishops and other church dignitaries, of surgeons, physicians and bankers, who settled down in Hungary. Giovanni da Serravalle translated the *Divina Commedia* into Latin for King Sigismund, and Vergerio translated Arrianos' *Anabasis Alexandri* for him. When Sigismund was in Italy between 1431 and 1433, touring Italian towns at the occasion of his coronation as emperor, his retinue already found the world of the Renaissance *in statu*

nascendi. János Hunyadi (c. 1407–56), later to become the great military leader and statesman, was hired by the Viscontis at this time.²

This, of course, was only the potential reception of the Renaissance: Hungary's society was still leading very much a medieval life with no sign, at the beginning, of openness towards the new type of learning. When Petrarch chanced to read one of Louis the Great's charters worded in a barbaric Latin, he remarked despisingly that the King of Hungary had better hire good scribes instead of spending his money on bloodhounds.³ On his arrival in Austria, decades later, as secretary to Frederick III, Enea Silvio Piccolomini complained to Cesarini, who chanced to be at Buda at the time, saying that it was 'as foolish a thing to look for Rome in Austria as it is to inquire about Plato among the Hungarians'.⁴ A humanist, however, did not have to come from Italy to feel without equals in learning and aspiration in Hungary: the greatest of Hungary's humanist poets, Janus Pannonius (1434–72), who had spent eleven years in Italy, complained in 1458 that, 'this barbaric land compelled him to use barbarous words, and if Virgil or Cicero came to see the country, they would fall silent too'.⁵

On the other hand, this was also the time when Matthias Hunyadi (Matthias Corvinus) succeeded to the throne, and it was largely due to him that the Italian Renaissance in Hungary quickly became a reality. He was the son of János Hunyadi (at the time of his accession dead for two years), who had staved off the Turkish conquest of Hungary for seventy years and secured the country's integrity with his victory at Belgrade in 1456.⁶ It was this victory that had obviously allowed the Renaissance to flourish in Hungary, and it was in the person of Matthias that Europe saw the first-ever ruler outside Italy to have received a sound humanist education.

Vergerio, author of the first humanist treatise on pedagogy – *De ingenuis moribus et liberalibus adolescentiae studiis* (1400–02) – did not live and work in Hungary for such a long period without some success: however slowly, his teachings began to bear fruit. It was on the basis of his principles that Enea Silvio Piccolomini wrote his *De liberorum educatione*, a work which he composed for the infant King Ladislaus V in 1451. The first Hungarian humanist, Johannes Vitéz (c. 1408–72) was also Vergerio's follower, and they jointly organised the first learned humanist *cenacolo* in Buda in the early 1440s. The same Johannes Vitéz was one of the associates of János Hunyadi and also educator of the young King Matthias, who was himself the embodiment of the new type of learning and human ideals. As heir to enormous wealth and the son of a glorious father, Matthias Corvinus this *homo novus* among European monarchs who had been brought up under the influence of humanist pedagogy, must have been literally predestined for the role of the Renaissance ruler.⁷

The age of Matthias Corvinus

Under the shadow of expansionist Turkish policy and threatened by the German king who contested for Hungary's crown, Matthias needed the most modern means available if he was to achieve his goals.⁸ These included a strong centralisation of power, new taxation policies, a permanent army, as well as humanist propaganda and the splendour of a Renaissance court. Johannes Vitéz, who had been Matthias's teacher and was now his chief chancellor, understood that efficient diplomatic ties – especially with the Holy See and the Italian states – could only be kept up in a humanist 'coat-of-arms'. He himself had set an excellent example in his epistles and orations.⁹ He was also perfectly aware that the state's future politicians and highest-ranking officials had to be provided with the best possible education, and that is why he sent those under his patronage – including his nephew, the poet Janus Pannonius – to learn from the best Italian masters, such as Guarino da Verona. In this way a humanist chancellery was created from those who had received the best Italian education, and by now Petrarch himself would not have found fault with the writings that they were producing. Political argumentation in correspondence and orations, laudatory prose and poetry in praise of the king, the urging of Europe's nations to Christian solidarity against the Turks, the rewriting of the history of the nation in the spirit and style of humanism – these were some of the themes of the new humanist literature just being born in Hungary. The demand for humanist literature started to attract men of letters from other countries, mainly from Italy, such as Galeotto Marzio, Antonio Bonfini, Bartolomeo Fonzi, Aurelio Brandolini Lippo, Francesco Bandini and many others, all of whom served the king for different lengths of time. Hungarians, Croatians, Italians, Germans, and Poles together had made up this humanist elite who, besides serving the king, were beginning to shape their own lives in constant debate and argument, studying the ancient authors and taking part in symposia modelled on antique and Italian patterns. In addition to propagandistic writings, humanist poetry was now beginning to accommodate personal lyrical poems, especially in the work of Janus Pannonius.¹⁰

For all that, books – mainly those by the ancient authors – were needed. These were also available: already Vergerio had transferred his excellent library to Buda. Johannes Vitéz was to become Hungary's first humanist bibliophile, who established a library at his bishop's seat at Várad and later at his archbishop's palace at Esztergom and who, in the little free time that he had, devoted himself to the emendation of ancient scientific texts together with Galeotto Marzio and the German astronomer, Regiomontanus.¹¹ The greatest achievement, however, was the king's: he founded what came to be known as the *Bibliotheca Corvina*, a library of world renown, on which a host

of humanists, scribes, illuminators and book-binders worked in the workshops of Buda and in the *botteghe* of Florence, on the king's order. This great cultural centre of Renaissance Hungary (destroyed in the sixteenth century) became one of the major seats of learning in central Europe, with its enormous quantities of ancient literary works and humanist writing.¹²

The library frequently hosted learned meetings and discussions, modelled on Lorenzo de' Medici's and Marsilio Ficino's *Accademia Platonica*. The *coetus Ungarorum*, according to Konrad Celtis' term, can be considered a branch of the Academy at Florence, largely due to the fact that its main organiser had been Ficino's associate Francesco Bandini, who himself had spent fourteen years at Buda. The great Florentine master himself did not accept the invitation to come to the court, but he did send all of his works, some of them dedicated to the king and Hungarian humanists. The dominant trend of early humanism in Hungary became neo-Platonism: Plato was now being discovered in Pannonia too, and it was his spiritual influence as well as the works of Plotinus, Ficino and the hermetic writings that permeated the finest poems of Janus Pannonius and other authors.¹³

The humanist spirit of Matthias's court took root in the artistic soil of the Quattrocento, especially from 1476 onwards, when the king married the daughter of the King of Naples, Beatrice of Aragon. The Gothic royal castle of Buda was partially rebuilt, and new Renaissance wings were added to it. According to Vasari, Chimenti Camicia was in charge of the reconstruction and alteration project, and it was also he who built the famous hanging gardens of the palace, based on the Urbino model. The king intended to have the town of Buda restructured altogether, and for that purpose he asked Bonfini to translate Filarete's *De Architectura* from Italian into Latin,¹⁴ but he did not have time enough to create the ideal city. He did, however, spend a good deal of time decorating and embellishing his royal palace. Benedetto da Maiano, Giovanni Dalmata and Ercole de' Roberti worked personally in Buda, and many other artists got commissions from him: Andrea Mantegna painted his portrait; Filippino Lippi made the altarpiece of the palace chapel; Antonio Pollaiuolo designed the drapery for his throne and Verrocchio made the bronze relief for one of the palace gates. Actively engaged in the work were the best illuminators of the time, such as Attavante degli Attavanti, Gherardo and Monte di Giovanni and many others. Mention has to be made of the king's summer palace at Visegrád, the ruins of which can still be seen today, as well as of the famous court ensemble and choir, about which Bartolomeo de' Maraschi, the leader of the papal choir, remarked that it was second only to his own.¹⁵

Antonio Bonfini wrote of King Matthias that 'he strove to transform Pannonia into a second Italy'.¹⁶ He certainly did everything in his power to make his country – especially his royal court – equal in rank to the Italian

Renaissance centres. How did contemporary Hungarian society respond to all this? Could it appreciate, and was it in a position to act upon the king's initiative? Obviously enough, many people despised foreign ways and customs, frowned upon the exorbitant spending, and looked upon all that was happening with incomprehension. Matthias had to protect Miklós Báthory, Bishop of Vác (c. 1440–1506) from the scorn of the lords in his court when he was immersed in his Cicero, instead of chatting away with the others while waiting in the ante-chamber.¹⁷ Matthias was, however, first and foremost a politician, and cultural innovation was not an end in itself to him, even though he was an ardent supporter of the Renaissance. When it was necessary he knew how to be a shrewd statesman. He won the favour of the nobility, who were hostile towards anything foreign, by supporting and propagating the cult of the supposed Hun origin of the Hungarians. Matthias, in this way, did not mind the nobility welcoming the second Attila in his person, while the humanists glorified in him the new Hercules. On the one hand, the person with whom he spent the most time discussing matters of philosophy was the Epicurean and atheist Galeotto Marzio; on the other, he assumed the role of defender of Christianity and the church, carrying on crusades against the infidel Turks and the heretic Czechs. He supported the mendicant orders – the Franciscans in particular – and had churches erected for them, in Gothic style, giving an enormous impetus to the late efflorescence of Gothic art in Hungary too. At the time of his death in 1490, his country was one where the upper elite was the adherent of, and actively engaged in, Renaissance and humanist culture, but the bulk of the society still lived according to the standards of a traditional medieval culture.¹⁸

Expansion of Renaissance culture and political catastrophe

The emergence of humanism and the quick prevalence of the Italian Renaissance in Hungary led to a coexistence of the old and the new type of culture in the decades that followed Matthias's death. It turned out that ever broader strata of the society were showing a strong sensitivity towards Renaissance values. Obviously, it was mainly the aristocrats' courts and those of the large noble families and the prelates that quickly developed into seats of Renaissance learning and culture: palaces and churches were being built, old buildings were being transformed and medieval cathedrals were receiving new, additional chapels in the style of the Renaissance. In the early sixteenth century, Renaissance tabernacles were appearing in small villages, and many noblemen were having Renaissance tombstones made even in the most remote parts of the country. Most of these were no longer the works of Italian masters, even though their presence could still be felt in the major centres. Beside the leading Italian artists, more and more Hungarian masters had been

working in the workshops of Matthias's court, but now these were spreading their activities all over Hungary.¹⁹ All this activity was closely related to the changes in the political sphere: Matthias had enormous revenues, thanks to his strong central power and the efforts of his associates as well as his severe taxation policies, while the kings who followed him to the throne – Wladislas II (1490–1516) and Louis II (1516–26) of the Jagello dynasty – did not have the necessary power and capabilities, which meant that the state became poor because revenues remained in the hand of the privileged classes of the society. The country however benefited from this change since more and more prelates, magnates and wealthy burghers could afford to spend money on architecture and the arts. This explains how such gems of the Renaissance as Tamás Bakócz's – the Archbishop of Esztergom's (1442–1521) – chapel was built.²⁰ Humanist learning was also gaining ground, with the *studia humanitatis* becoming the core of both secular and clerical education at schools, the Greek language being introduced in several places, and more and more authors writing in the humanist spirit.²¹

One special feature of the Renaissance in Hungary was that it attained a height right at the beginning, during the reign of Matthias, which it was never to achieve again. An extraordinarily lucky historical situation made possible this brilliant start, but the conditions that could have sustained it were lacking. This unique example, however, was sufficient to secure the adequate spread of humanist learning and Renaissance taste. In the decades that followed Matthias Corvinus's reign, the country's political orientation had also changed: contacts with Italy had remained, but those with Austria, Bohemia and Poland were now more important than before, if only because humanist teachings had got a strong foothold in these countries too by the year 1500, and the Vienna and Cracow universities had become the major central European bases of humanist thought. Hungary was now looking to these regions, partly for dynastic reasons: Wladislas II and Louis II were also Kings of Bohemia, with their closest relatives on Poland's throne, and with a double bond of matrimony tying them to the Habsburgs of Austria. A cosmopolitan humanist central Europe was beginning to take shape: humanists from Hungary joined with their colleagues from Austria and Bohemia under the aegis of Konrad Celtis' *Sodalitas litteraria Danubiana*; the leading personality from whom they were expecting guidance, however, was no longer Ficino, the Italian, but the greatest European thinker north of the Alps – Erasmus of Rotterdam.²² In 1526 the humanist officials at the court at Buda, short of money but full of expectations, were now looking towards the Dutch scholar. Many of them carried on correspondence with Erasmus, and their enthusiasm was shared by the young Hungarian and Bohemian king, Louis, as well as his wife, Mary of the Habsburg dynasty, who also had leanings towards the teaching of Luther. The learned gatherings at Buda, and

Hungary's Renaissance court, however, were not to be long-lived: in a few months' time the independent Hungarian kingdom and state would come to an end. Suleiman the Magnificent had a decisive victory over the king's army in the battle of Mohács on 29 August 1526. The king himself died on the battlefield and the sultan captured Buda, admired and ransacked Matthias's palace, destroyed the Bibliotheca Corvina, taking as booty some of the books as well as some of the sculptures outside the palace including the colossal Hercules symbolising the king. Erasmus consoled the young widowed queen, who was fleeing from Buda castle, by writing for her his *Vidua christiana* and Luther by dedicating to her his *Vier tröstliche Psalmen*.

The political consequences are well-known: the military catastrophe brought with it not only the plundering of the greater part of the country, but also the political partitioning of Hungary. In one part, the country's mightiest baron, John I of Szapolyai (1526–40), in another, Ferdinand I (1526–64), the younger brother of Charles V was crowned king. Neither of the two could get the upper hand over the other. Ferdinand and his successors were only able to keep power over the western and northern part of the country, while John and those who succeeded him established power in eastern Hungary. It was here that the Hungarian principality of Transylvania evolved, under Turkish tutelage. Finally, the occupation of Buda in 1541 meant Turkish rule in the middle part of the country. Hungary was split into three for 150 years. What could the fate of the Renaissance be in these circumstances?

The survival of the humanist tradition and the victory of Reformation

Destruction was immense: many new Renaissance works of art and a great part of Hungary's medieval buildings and institutions was destroyed. The royal court ceased to function in its earlier form, and the same happened to the bishops' seat (that had been made into magnificent centres of humanist learning), either because they were taken by the Turks, or had to be converted into military strongholds, or because they were terminated by the triumphant Reformation. Continuity was only observable in western, northern and eastern cities and in barons' courts in these regions, which were less seriously affected by the warfare. Social development in towns, however, was rather slow in fifteenth century Hungary, and the middle class were leading their lives according to medieval standards as late as the early sixteenth century, which meant that they were not a dynamic force promoting the new type of culture. The aristocracy, on the other hand, suffered severe losses in the war, with the majority having fallen either at Mohács or having died in the decades to follow. It took more than a quarter of a century before a new aristocracy was born from talented and unscrupulous individuals, one that was receptive to a higher brand of culture. In want of a suitable social basis

and institutional background, there was only one stratum of society that could become the repository of humanism and Renaissance values – the intellectuals.

Under the reign of King Matthias and his successors, the rapid flourishing of the economy, administration and education had enormously increased the demand for professional people. This had meant an accelerated increase in the number of church clericals, and even more so in the number of secular intellectuals.²³ An important circumstance for the spread of humanism was that a significant part of these people had attended foreign universities. The universities of Hungary, founded by Louis the Great, Sigismund and Matthias, had not survived, and by the sixteenth century not a single one remained in Hungary. Higher education was coming from abroad, and this practice assumed great proportions. In the fifteenth century, for example, about 5,500 people attended foreign universities from a country with a population of 3.5 million. Only the well-to-do could afford Italy or Paris, but from the late fifteenth century onwards, people were already importing a humanist education from the less remote universities of Vienna and Cracow. From the 1530s, Wittenberg took the leading role in that respect, where students from Hungary became staunch adherents not only of the Reformation, but also of Melancthon's humanist ideals concerning education. Towards the end of the century, Heidelberg replaced the ever-more orthodoxical Wittenberg as a centre of learning for Hungarian Protestants, to be followed, in the next century, by Dutch and English universities. In the mean time, the attraction of the Italian universities did not wane; worthy of mention here are the universities of liberal Padua, which Protestants could also attend, and Rome, notably the Collegium Germanicum-Hungaricum, where the supporters of Catholic restoration received an excellent education. However disadvantageous it was for the country to have no university from the people's point of view, the fact that Hungarian students had to go abroad did have advantages: students required first-hand information about the most important achievements in science and scholarship, and could be present at the birth of the most up-to-date intellectual and religious doctrines.²⁴

The intellectual stratum in the age of the Renaissance was, of course, extremely diversified. Those in the highest layer (made up mainly of people that had attended Padua University) were in top administrative posts either in the Habsburg-ruled part of the country or serving the prince of Transylvania; but in either case they remained devoted to humanist Latin literature. The fields in which they created lasting values were poetry and, in particular, historiography. The two new capital cities which substituted for Buda Pozsony in north-west Hungary (today, Bratislava in Slovakia) and Gyulafehérvár in Transylvania (today, Alba Iulia in Romania) – saw major intellectual academic centres emerging, but these could not compensate for

Matthias's capital.²⁵ Those sixteenth century Hungarian humanists whose work was appreciated by the whole of Europe and the scholarly world at large had to go abroad sooner or later: this is how Johannes Sambucus (1513–84), the philologist and author of emblem books, went to work in Vienna,²⁶ while Andreas Dudich, the philologist and philosopher (1533–89), continued his work in Poland.²⁷ The same is true, unfortunately, for other outstanding figures of the cultural élite: Valentin Bakfark (1507–76), perhaps the greatest lute player and composer of the century, had his successes in Poland, France and Italy, and was able to publish his work abroad only.²⁸

It is the middle layer of the intelligentsia, whose members first went to Cracow and later chiefly to Wittenberg to study, to whom the credit goes for the introduction and dissemination of the Reformation in Hungary. The country, including the parts under Turkish rule, was 90 per cent Protestant by the end of the sixteenth century. Everywhere, the emergence of the Reformation was closely tied to the intellectual fermentation produced by the Renaissance and Humanism, but this was particularly true in the case of Hungary, where it was not only a religious movement but had also a social political, cultural and national character. The merits of the Reformation in the improvement of the nation's cultural and educational level can hardly be exaggerated. It was within the framework of the Reformation that schools in the smallest villages were organised and the spread of literacy began. In the cities, people with a humanist education were establishing excellent secondary schools, which sometimes provided, in addition to the *artes*, theology and philosophy at a level comparable to foreign universities. The leading figures of the Reformation wrote and published textbooks, and foreign books were reprinted for these schools, for example the minor works of Erasmus. The children were taught Greek and Roman classics. They were encouraged to perform plays especially written for them. Printing presses were needed to provide all this material, and for this sponsorship was obtained from the local authorities and individual aristocrats.²⁹ Theological debates, both written and oral, were going on, not so much between Catholics and Protestants as might be expected, but between particular reformist trends, each and every one of which was now gaining ground and finding adherents in Hungary. Besides the supporters of Luther, Melanchthon, Zwingli and Calvin, the more extreme movements were present, such as anabaptism, anti-trinitarianism, and Judaising sect (Sabbatarians) that rejected the New Testament.³⁰ In the literary field, those religious reformers whose careers are worthy of mention include Péter Melius Juhász (1536–72), organiser of the Calvinist church in Hungary; István Szegedi Kis (1504–72), who wrote his Latin theological works in the Turkish-ruled part of the country and published them in Geneva and Basle; Ferenc Dávid (c. 1510–85), the leading figure of anti-trinitarianism and the founder of the Unitarian church; and Péter Bornemisza (1535–85), Lutheran minister, and outstanding playwright of his time.³¹

The rise of Hungarian literature

One of the novelties of this literature, however, was that the majority was written in the vernacular, not in Latin. The first written text in Hungarian (i.e. Magyar) dates back to the twelfth century, but the role of the vernacular had only been secondary up to the sixteenth century. This did not change during the humanist period, only beginning to alter with the collapse following the battle of Mohács. National aspirations, however, were already in evidence in the Latin-language literature, not as an antithesis to humanist cosmopolitanism but rather intricately interwoven with it. Johannes Vitéz, Janus Pannonius and the historians of King Matthias had been unswerving in their patriotism, devoutly serving Hungaria – or Pannonia, to use the humanists' term. In face of constant threat, this nationalistic-patriotic fervour was especially emphasised in their literature, leading to the creation of myths of a particular kind. This was how, in the battles against the Turks, the image of the country as the 'bastion of Christianity' was born, while the confrontation with the German empire revitalised the Hun myth about the origins of the Hungarians. Later, after the battle of Mohács and under the influence of the biblicism of the Reformation, the ideology of a Hungarian-Jewish historical parallelism appeared: both were a chosen people, punished by God for their sins, to be relieved of their suffering only if they regained their faith. The cult of Attila, characteristic of a great and powerful nation, was replaced by the image of a small nation being threatened from many sides, and this latter image badly needed the cohesion provided by a unified national language.

Even the Italophile King Matthias had not been insensitive to the Hungarian language and the old traditions. As Galeotto Marzio tells us, Hungarian 'heroic sagas', and love-songs were often sung on special occasions in the king's court, alongside the international, 'modern' Burgundian-Flandrian music.³² In his charters the king reproached Emperor Frederick III, for his wish to extirpate 'the Hungarian language', while István Werbőczy (1458–1541), the eminent jurist, when acting as envoy for Louis II in Venice in 1519, made his opening speech before the Doge in Hungarian, in spite of his excellent Latin. This cult of language and its role in the country's literature was even more emphatic in the decades after the battle of Mohács, when it served as a defensive reflex for the nation. To this was added the stress of the Reformation on the vernacular languages, one of the most effective means against the old church. The new religious teachings had to be got across to the widest masses, who spoke no Latin. Hungarian became the language of the service and the scriptures had to be available to the people in vernacular. Several partial bible translations had been made before, but the publishing of a complete Hungarian Bible was a task for the Reformation to carry out, a patriotic undertaking and a humanist achievement at the same time. The first complete New Testament in printed form appeared in 1541, the work of

János Sylvester, who used Erasmus's text. He made an excellent translation and, to facilitate his work, wrote and published the first grammar of the Hungarian language. The year in which Sylvester wrote that 'the nation could now be proud of reading God's message in Hungarian' was the year when the Turks occupied Buda.³³

This was the beginning of the sudden proliferation of works in Hungarian: actively engaged in it were not only learned humanists and protestant theologians, but also village teachers, scribes and office clerks in cities and towns, the entire lower stratum of the educated people. The dominant genre – besides translations of the Bible, treatises on theology, religious polemics and devotional books – was poetry of all kinds. Much in demand during the Reformation, a host of liturgical hymns, rewordings of Luther's chants, paraphrases of psalms, didactic and satirical poems, as well as a vast number of versified chronicles were written. In the middle of the century, these latter had become the predominant genre, an interesting amalgamation of medieval (partly oral) tradition, new religious ideals and vulgarised humanist learning. A variety of themes appeared in versified form, ranging from books of the Bible (mainly the Old Testament), old Hungarian sagas, motifs from Hungarian history (including the deeds of János Hunyadi and Matthias), the events of the wars against the Turks, the heroic defence of the border fortresses, to some of Boccaccio's stories, the *Aeneis* and Enea Silvio Piccolomini's *De duobus amantibus*. The form of these versified chronicles did not resemble the poetry of the Renaissance. The content, however, showed a strong affinity, with its unity of humanist, Reformation and national ideals. The valour of those fighting the Turks was praised in terms of the Renaissance concepts of *humanitas* and *virtus*: the love-stories rejoiced over the lovers overcoming social inequalities; the story of the prodigal son appeared in a colourful form to suit Renaissance tastes; and the figure of Judith and those of the Maccabees manifested as national heroes. The prose and the drama of the age were written in a similar vein: the play *Magyar Elektra* by Péter Bornemisza (1558) and the fables and short stories by preacher, writer and printer Gáspár Heltai (+ 1574) are cases in point.³⁴

The second efflorescence of Hungarian Renaissance

The victory of the Reformation and the flourishing of the new Hungarian literature compensated for the slowing down of the Renaissance advance that had once been so vigorous. This also facilitated the second efflorescence of the Renaissance, on an unprecedented scale, when the country could take breath after the series of political and military crises. This took place during the last decades of the sixteenth century. As a result of the mutual recognition of the status quo (1570) between the Habsburg king and the Hungarian prince of

Transylvania; as well as of the fragile peace treaty (1568) with the Turks, a period of relative consolidation followed, to last several decades. The major beneficiary of this process was the new aristocracy, which, by fair and unfair means alike, had accumulated enormous economic and political power during the troubled years following the battle of Mohács. The wealth of some of the aristocracy compared with that of smaller Italian or German princes. These people were genuine creatures of the age of the Renaissance: they often changed allegiance between the two Hungarian rulers, betraying first one and then the other; they exploited the peasants and oppressed them, yet at the same time they fought heroically against the Turks, risked their lives in battle leading their underlings' troops against the enemy, initiated modern business enterprises and, most importantly, were not at all insensitive to culture. These new magnates sent their sons to the universities of Italy and Germany, led a Renaissance way of life in their fortresses (which also served as strongholds against the Turkish threat), tried to obtain for their libraries the best of contemporary Italian and French literature, and, on special occasions, displayed everything that had once been characteristic of the Renaissance splendour of the royal court. The royal court no longer existed but about twelve aristocrats substituted their own seats for it, and although they could not compete with the king's court, they still preserved the values of Renaissance culture for later centuries.³⁵

The eminent scholar, Johannes Sambucus, published the most complete edition of Janus Pannonius' poetry in 1569. A year before, he had published Antonio Bonfini's *Rerum Hungaricarum decades*, to be translated by Gáspár Heltai into Hungarian after a few years. Several works written in the humanist era of Matthias similarly saw the light in this period. The aristocrats tried to obtain some of the relics that had once been in the king's possession, and to emulate his interest in Italian art and culture. The Italian orientation was especially strongly felt in the court of the Transylvanian princes. Since 1571, the Hungarian princes of Transylvania had come from the Báthory dynasty, the founder – Stephen Báthory – later becoming King of Poland. In his time, the prince's court at Gyulafehérvár (Alba Iulia) very much resembled an Italian court, but the similarity became even more striking in the reign of his nephew and successor, Sigismund Báthory. Foreign diplomats, travellers and envoys often wrote in surprise that all the leading politicians of his country spoke Italian, and sometimes they used Italian in their private correspondence. Sigismund Báthory was mainly enthusiastic about music: he had an Italian orchestra and choir, and he himself played several instruments besides composing music.³⁶

The 'renaissance of the Hungarian Renaissance' was not, however, confined to the courts aristocrats. In the regions a safe distance away from the areas controlled by the Turks, nobles and aristocrats built mansions and

castles one after the other, in the towns rich burghers competed with one another in decorating their houses in Renaissance style. The most spectacular development, however, was in literature: the new works written in the epic poetry genre in the last decades of the century already showed the hallmarks of the Renaissance, and bespoke a literary language brought to perfection. This was the time for the genuine adaptation and assimilation of Latin and Italian Renaissance poetry into Hungarian, in which no small role was played by the first real classic of Hungarian poetry, Bálint Balassi (1554–94).

Educated by the Protestant writer Péter Bornemisza, Balassi was also a member of the new aristocracy, who spent years fighting the Turks in several fortresses along the border, and was well versed in traditional Hungarian poetry. His readings, however, included mainly works by Latin humanists and Italian Renaissance poets, and his own poems created what could be called the Hungarian version of Petrarchism. His cycles of love-lyrics and his pastoral play testify to a fully matured poetic language, and his disciple, the poet János Rimay (c. 1570–1631), rightly said of him that the language of his works had reached the summit of eloquence. Balassi created a synthesis of the poetry-writing tradition of the time: his poems, on the life of the common warrior fighting the Turks, display the rigidly closed composition of Renaissance poetry. In the tradition of the religious poetry of the Reformation, he wrote the gems of Hungarian religious verse in the spirit of the psalm paraphrases of Théodore de Bèze and George Buchanan, which are unsurpassed even today.³⁷

The country's history did not make it possible for the Hungarian Renaissance to come up to the highest European standards in the fine arts, music, philosophy, science and scholarship, notwithstanding the promising beginnings. This was not to be. It was only in poetry, written in the isolated Hungarian language and hardly understood outside the country, that the Hungarians excelled. This explains why the Hungarian Renaissance is given so little credit in Europe's intellectual circles. Its significance from the nation's point of view, on the other hand, can hardly be over-emphasised: this was the period when the foundations of Hungarian national culture were laid down. The greatest monarch of Hungary's history is Matthias, that Renaissance king whose example remained one of the sources of the national consciousness for centuries. At the same time, while the most calamitous and tragic era in Hungarian history is the sixteenth century, it was this same period which forged a national identity which has remained one of the strongest points of Hungarian culture.

NOTES

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