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The Matthias Corvinus cultus in early modern Hungary in the works of István Illésházy, Elias Berger and Péter Révay (1608-1619).

The past is a foreign country, they do things different there. This famous phrase is very true, if we compare the rule of Matthias Corvinus (1458-1490) with that of Matthias of Austria, better known as the “second Matthias” (1608-1618) in the kingdom of Hungary. Hungary was an European superpower in the time of the so-called “divine Matthias”, who gained respect all over Europe for his support of humanist culture. Matthias Corvinus is still the most popular monarch in the history of Hungary, whose memory as a “good king” is kept alive in popular culture. Hundred years later, Hungary changed into a different country. There was only a shadow of the ancient glory left at the beginning of the rule of the second Matthias in 1608. This member of the Habsburg dynasty was definitely not like the illustrious Hungarian king he shared his name with. The British historian Robert Evans describes him as (I quote): “Of Matthias, one of the poorest of all Habsburg rulers, it may be said that he possessed all of the faults of his brother Rudolf II, but none of his redeeming qualities of kindness and cultural interests.” (End quote) Matthias the second is also the only Habsburg ruler who was never a subject of a biography. His person and rule is almost totally forgotten in Hungary and even his only statue in Budapest on the Heroes square was removed.

It may seem to us, modern historians, that these two Matthiasses only had their name in common and that neither their persons, nor their rule can be related. Still, we can observe a remarkable peak in the cult of king Matthias Corvinus between 1608 and 1618. This revival started from the assumption of power in Hungary by the “other Matthias” in 1608, which was marked by the handing over of the holy crown of Hungary in June 1608. The following coronation of Matthias as king of Hungary in November was the last in a chain of events between 1606 and 1608, during which Matthias strived to take over the authority of his brother, the emperor Rudolf, in Hungary and Austria. Matthias proved to be the winner in this conflict, because he enjoyed the important support of most of the protestant estates in the east of the Habsburg Empire, especially the Hungarians. He was elected by the Hungarian estates as king in November. The newly crowned ruler was forced to accept all the conditions the Hungarian estates imposed on him, in return for having supported him against Rudolf. This compromise turned out to be an almost complete victory of the -mainly protestant- estates-general in Hungary, who by imposing these conditions made the king and his government completely dependent on them. The political victory of the estates was symbolised by the ceremonial handing over of the holy crown of Hungary by the emperor’s men to Matthias and the Hungarian estates in June, the homecoming of the crown to Hungary and the crowning of the king with this crown, given out of the hands of a protestant.

The revival of the cult of Matthias Corvinus became an important part of the propaganda of Matthias II in Hungary before and after his crowning. In my lecture, I will show how István Illésházy, politician, Elias Berger, the court historian of Matthias, and Péter Révay, the advisor of Matthias, built a new image of Matthias Corvinus in several of their works, by relating this Renaissance figure with the recent political developments in Hungary. I will also point out how an idea of the crown of Hungary was used to relate the two kings with the same name.

If these two rulers were so entirely different, how were they related with each other? With other words, at what moment did the revival of the Matthias Corvinus cult exactly started? The first moment that archduke Matthias of Austria was related to the legendary Hungarian king was in the text of an oration, spoken out by István Illésházy in July 1608. Illésházy was the most important politician in Hungary, an influential political advisor of Matthias and the genius behind Matthias’ assumption of power in Hungary. As the leader of the Matthias faction in Hungary, he spoke during a gathering of the Hungarian estates in

Kassa, in which the estates promised to support Matthias in his strive to become the king of Hungary. Moreover, they celebrated the return of the holy crown to Hungary, which happened a month earlier.

Illésházy relates the first and second Matthias by the using the symbolic value of the Hungarian crown in his lecture. In his eyes, the return of the holy crown to Hungary is the sign of the good intentions of Matthias towards the Hungarian estates, just as it was in the time of Corvinus. Illésházy uses here an analogy between the deeds of the two rulers, because Matthias Corvinus did everything what he could do to free the crown from the hands of the German emperor and to return it to Hungary. These deeds were well known among the members of the estates through the extremely popular historical work of the court historian of Matthias, Antonio Bonfini. In the eyes of Illésházy, the second Matthias will be just as a good ruler as the first, because he also returned the crown to Hungary. Matthias of Austria, as a decent of Matthias Corvinus and filled with love of his fatherland Hungary, will do everything what is in his power to return the ancient freedom of the Hungarian estates, just as Matthias Corvinus had done.

Why was it so important for the political leader of the Hungarian estates to relate Matthias the first and the second by the symbolic value of the Hungarian crown? The explanation for this can be found by studying the political changes in Hungary which occurred in the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century. The Hungarian crown became the symbol of the political autonomy of the estates in Hungary after the disastrous battle of Mohács in 1526 and the following partition of the kingdom between the Habsburgs and the Ottomans. In Medieval times, the only constitutional right of the Hungarian estates was the free election of the king, which had to happen with the holy crown. This freedom came to an end, when in 1551 queen Izabella, the widow of the last king of Hungarian blood, János, handed over the Hungarian crown jewels to a courtier of Ferdinand of Habsburg in the Saint Michaels church in Torda. During this ceremony, she spoke the prophetic words that the Hungarians will never crown a king of their own blood with this crown anymore. In the propaganda of the Bocskay-uprising (1604 till 1606), the Hungarian crown became the symbol of the free election of an own national king.

This theme, the free election by the estates of an own national king, which will be crowned with the holy crown which is brought back to Hungary, was the corner stone of the propaganda which was done by the Matthias court. On the basis of this, a link could be made between Matthias the first and the second. This becomes very clear from the content of the speech of Illésházy. But if we look close to the historical facts, the whole comparison between the two rulers which is made by Illésházy is absolutely fictional. The second Matthias did not want to return the crown to Hungary, but was forced to do so by the estates in return for their support against Rudolf. Matthias declared himself a Hungarian only when he needed the help of the Hungarian estates and could thus hardly be considered as the desired “national king” of Hungarian blood, who would restore the lost greatness of Hungary. Also, the election of a king in Hungary in this period was only a symbolic act, because there was not and there could no have been another national or foreign candidate for the Hungarian throne. The only evidence of their victory the Hungarians could really boost was the return of their crown to the kingdom. This is the very reason that the holy crown became the symbolic centre of Hungarian politics around 1608. It was the symbol of the political compromise between the Habsburg ruler and the Hungarian estates, which was made by Illésházy.

After the coronation in November, Elias Berger, the court historian of Matthias II, held a speech during the gathering of the estates. This speech was published together with the text of the earlier mentioned oration. This fact does not have to surprise us, because Berger’s text can be considered as a continuation of the one of Illésházy. In the eyes of the court historian, the return of the crown to Hungary is not only a sign of the good intentions of Matthias II, but

also the work of God. Berger states that the holy crown of Hungary was a gift of providence in return of the virtues and deeds of the ruler and the coronation of Matthias II was the outcome of Gods will. After this, the author relates the first and the second Matthias through a description of the significance of the Hungarian crown for the history of the kingdom. He personifies the crown jewel by attributing certain qualities to it, which were the result of divine providence. Berger calls these the “holiness” of the crown. According to Berger, God influences the history of Hungary through these qualities, or virtues, of the crown. If a ruler respects the holiness of the crown and obeys these virtues, then his rule will be successful and he will be protected by God. If he does not show respect for the crown, and does not obey these virtues, he will be punished by heaven and lose his throne. This all can be called the fiction of the holiness of the crown, which was as such invented by Berger.

Berger proves this fiction of the holiness of the crown by a description of the crown jewel and a range of examples from the history of Hungary in which figures the crown. As such, he was the first who described the looks of the crown jewel and its history. An important part of these examples consist of a comparison between Matthias the first and the second. The question is here who did respect the holiness of the crown more than the other and who was, as a consequence, a better ruler. According to Berger, the second Matthias did of course a better job. Although both rulers managed to unite the same countries, Austria and Hungary, and brought back the crown to Hungary, there is a fundamental difference between their politics. The first Matthias reached his goal through war, but the second Matthias did this in a peaceful way, according to the author. The other Matthias showed in this way more respect for the holiness and virtues of the crown than the first and therefore will be more supported by the divine grace. Berger concludes that Matthias the second will be therefore a better ruler than the first.

The aim of Berger’s fiction of the holiness of the crown and his comparison between Matthias the first and the second was to legitimate the authority of the newly crowned King Matthias II in the eyes of the Hungarians, to support his political compromise with the Hungarian estates and to justify the latter’s recently acquired political rights. As we already have said, Illésházy was the architect of the political compromise between the ruler and the estates. He was also the creator of the new constitution of 1608, which had to guarantee the political stability in the kingdom and the autonomous position of Hungary within the Habsburg Empire. Berger supports with his historic fiction about the crown also the Hungarian politics of Illésházy.

In 1613, the most important and influential early modern work on the holy crown was published with the title *De sacrae coronae regni Hungariae*. Péter Révay, a trusted political advisor of Matthias of Austria and the keeper of the crown from 1608, was a close friend of Berger and Illésházy, who had died in 1609. Again, this work can be considered as a continuation of the coronation pamphlet of Berger and the oration of Illésházy. Révay creates a political theory of the Hungarian crown which he proves with the fiction of Berger about the holiness of the crown. He explains this theory in a range of historical examples from the history of the crown. Révay compares again the rule of Matthias the first and the second through their deeds with the crown. Just like Berger, Révay states that the other Matthias is a better ruler, because he reached his political goals without the use of violence and created a lasting stability in the kingdom.

But why did Révay write this book? It had originally to be published in Germany in 1612, but Révay’s friend Berger was not able to arrange this and it was printed a year later. In this year, Matthias II was crowned as emperor. From this moment, his authority did not depend anymore on the support of the Hungarian estates, like it did before. The aim of the work of Révay was therefore again to legitimize the political constitution in Hungary of 1608 within the changed political context of the Habsburg Empire. The function of the Matthias

Corvinus cult in the work of Révay was thus to preserve the political heritage of Illésházy in the period after 1612.

In the same period when Révay started to write his treatise about the crown, Berger, as court historian, began to write his main work about the history of Hungary. This book was neither finished, nor published after all. The magnum opus of Berger was lost for centuries. More than ten years ago, the historian Péter Kulcsár found the last version of the manuscript. Last year, I found an earlier version of this manuscript in the court library in Vienna, which was written between 1608 and 1619. It was bound in three volumes. The first one was devoted to the rule of Matthias Corvinus, the second to that of Rudolf and the last one to the time of Matthias the second.

Again, this history can be regarded as a continuation of the earlier work of Berger and Révay. Berger rewrites the history of Hungary according to the political theory of Révay, which was based on his own fiction of the holiness of the crown. But in this study the stress is not laid on the history of the crown, but on three crucial periods in the history of the kingdom of Hungary. Not accidentally, Berger does divide the history in three parts, in which the two parts about Matthias I and II mirror each other and the take over of power by the Habsburgs forms the middle point. In his imagination, the rule of Matthias Corvinus is a foreplay of that of the Habsburg Matthias, which is proved by the similarities in their deeds, like the return of the crown. What the first king Matthias had started will be finished by the other. Because the second Matthias does show more respect for the crown like the first, he received even more support from God and became emperor. Under the rule of the Habsburg ruler Hungary enjoys a golden age, which is even better than the rule of Matthias Corvinus, because it is more peaceful and stable, according to the author. Berger legitimizes as such the rule of the Habsburg dynasty in Hungary and the constitution of the Hungarian estates.

Why Berger did not finish this manuscript? It is remarkable the text in this version of the manuscript is full of removed names and passages. Even some pages are glued together with seal wax. The reason for this is the revolt of Gábor Bethlen, which started in 1619. An important theme in this revolt was, again, the holy crown of Hungary as the symbol of the free election of a national king by the Hungarian estates. The propagandists of Bethlen did much effort to show off their leader as the desired national king of Hungary. Berger needed therefore to rewrite his work after the end of the revolt in 1621, because the content of his manuscript was too favorable for the politics of Bethlen. He also removed the names of prominent Hungarian and Bohemian aristocrats who played a major role in the revolt against the Habsburg rule. Probably Berger gave up the whole work, and started all over again after 1621. This would explain why there exists a later version of this manuscript in Budapest, in which Matthias Corvinus plays a much less prominent role.

When Matthias the other dies in 1619, and the political circumstances change again because of the uprising of Bethlen, the revival of the cult of Matthias Corvinus in early modern Hungarian political culture and thought came also to an end. What remained of this cult was the symbol of the Hungarian crown, which remained in politics till our time.