

THE GIFT OF THE SULTAN FOUR CORVINAS FROM THE LIBRARY OF THE SERAI

– EXHIBITION IN THE NATIONAL SZÉCHÉNYI LIBRARY –

APRIL 24, 2014 – MAY 6, 2014



One of the highlights of year 2014 was the exhibition organized by the National Széchényi Library in cooperation with Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centre and the Embassy of the Republic of Turkey in Budapest between April 24th and May 6th 2014.

The XXI. International Book Festival in Budapest, with Turkey as its honorary guest, provided the occasion for the exhibition. The National Széchényi Library organized the exhibition as a tribute to the excellent representatives of the Turkish cultural life who visited Hungary, and to salute the Turkish-Hungarian cultural connections. High ranking representatives of both, the Turkish and the Hungarian government participated at the grand opening – between others, Sakir Fakili, the Turkish Ambassador to Hungary. The professional

opening speeches were held by Pál Fodor, President of the Philosophical Research Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and Géza Szőcs, ministerial counselor and president of the Advisory Board of the National Library.

The central pieces of the exhibition constituted those four Corvinas which sultan Abdul Aziz donated to Franz Joseph in 1869. This important diplomatic gesture took place when the emperor paid a salutary visit to the sultan in Istanbul with the occasion of the opening of the Suez Canal. Continuing the diplomatic gesture – because only two years have passed since the Compromise with the Hungarians – Franz Joseph donated the four magnificent Corvinas to the National Széchényi Library, an event mediated by Count Gyula Andrásy.



Detail from the exhibition



Plautus Corvina

The volumes are priceless, but the fact that they were the first ones to be returned to Hungary from abroad since the 16. century destruction of the library, makes them even more special. Furthermore, it is the first time that the public was able to see these presentation copies in this context.

From Buda to Istanbul

By the end of Matthias Hunyadi's reign (1458-1490), the magnificent library located in the Buda Castle, consisting of approximately 2500 volumes, the first humanist royal bibliotheca in Europe beyond the borders of Italy, was established as substantial part of the Hungarian regal representation. According to contemporary cultural understanding, the library was also a sign of the king's legitimacy. This tendency was strengthened by the conscious development of the library lead by the Italian humanists serving the king; by the constant demand for editions of lux; and by the representative location allotted to the library in the central part of the palace, close to the throne-chamber. The library was furnished with inlaid shelves-system and decorated with the coat of arms of the ruler and an illustrative mural of the constellation ruling at the time when Matthias was elected king of the Czechs, in

1469. The visual elegance of the books was provided by the uniform silk-, velvet-, and gilded leather binding. The library became the precious stone of the crown and the Hungarian Kingdom, indeed. Contemporary humanists traveling to Buda transmitted its fame, generations to come passed on to each other.

But the decline of the library had started right after Matthias's death. Since its main reason, its legitimacy-provider and representative role have ceased to exist, its development and protection lost their importance also. Furthermore, King Vladislaus II. (1490-1516) and King Ludovic II. (1516-1526) did not possess the necessary means for the development of the library. Vladislaus II. has made some attempts in this direction, codices were still made in the first years of his reign, and he even inquired in 1498 about the codices ordered by Matthias which remained in Florence, but his efforts were far less intensive and energetic than the late Matthias's. Mostly Viennese humanists on diplomatic travel to Buda, as well as members of the Czech chancery started to „carry off” the collection, but the rulers also liked to gave away codices as diplomatic presents.

The Ottoman conquest caused the sudden destruction of the library. Soldiers of Sultan Suleiman devastated the Buda Castle after the battle of Mohács in 1526, and,

most probably, they carried away the remnants of the library (or part of it) together with other Hungarian materials to Istanbul. According to another view, the complete destruction of the library happened when the Turks had captured the Castle of Buda in 1541.

Nevertheless, the legendary memory of the library did not disappear. The Hungarians knew that part of the collection went to Istanbul, and they also assumed that some of the volumes remained in the castle, occupied by the Turks. Thus, the surviving codices of the Corvina Library became symbols of the sovereign Hungarian state, as well as means of the periodically reviving Matthias-cult – like in the time of Transylvanian rulers: Gábor Bethlen (1613-1629) and György Rákóczi I. (1631-1648). Therefore, their recuperation transcended all actual political or cultural-political tendencies, and always had a symbolic meaning.

From Istanbul to Buda

Since the middle of the 18. century, researchers of the Hungarian national past had put more and more efforts into the compilation of written relics and other historical artifacts also. The scattered Corvina Library constituted an emphasized part of this process. Furthermore, the Corvinas, which ended up in Istanbul, acquired a special importance in the almost one-and-a-half century long struggle to find and bring back the Corvinas. Their return to Hungary was the only real success in this endeavor.

There were no Corvinas in the collection of the National Széchényi Library at the time of its founding, in 1802, and only three or four of them altogether circulated in the country. In the same year, the orders turned to King Francis I. (1792-1835), to make attempts at the recovery of the Corvinas kept in Istanbul. But their request gained hearing only in the 1830's, when Chancellor Metternich (1821-1848) – who, under the influence of the European revolutionary movements, wanted to make gestures towards the Hungarians – entrusted count Ottenfels, the court's internuncios in Istanbul, to gather information about the Corvinas. But according to the count's report from 1836, there were no Corvinas either in the Sarayi, or in private property.

In the 1860's, they started to deal with the question of the Corvinas in a more scientific manner, and the slowly recovering Academy also took it up. Flóris Rómer, Benedictine teacher and archeologist, art historian, and later provost-canon of Nagyvárad (Oradea) (1815-1889) had brought into attention the importance of the studying of the individual volumes in the process of the reconstruction of the Corvina collection. In consequence, three academicians, Ferenc Kubinyi



Rhetorica of Trapezuntius

historian (1796-1874), Arnold Ipolyi historian-prelate (1822-1888) and Imre Henszlmann archeologist, art historian (1813-1888) went to Istanbul in 1862 to survey the codices kept in the Sarayi. The scientists were able to look up sixty codices in the Sarayi library, and they identified eleven of them as authentic. This was a unique discovery in the areas of both, science and politics and influenced even international politics. Thus, when Emperor Franz Joseph visited Istanbul in 1869, with the occasion of the opening of the Suez Canal, sultan Abdul Aziz (1861-1876) offered as a gift to him four, carefully selected Corvinas. Perhaps the sultan didn't even realize that he made one of the oldest Hungarian dreams come true.

The donation represented not only a cultural event, but also an important symbolic gesture between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire. The diplomatic contacts between the two of them had intensified, and the collections of the Sarayi became available for the scientist of the Monarchy.

The four plus one Corvinas

The four exhibited codices, Saint Augustine's *City of God* (Cod. Lat. 121.), Polybios's *Roman History* (Cod. Lat. 234.), the complete oeuvre of the comedian Plautus (Cod. Lat. 241.), and the humanist Trapezuntius's *Rhetorica* (Cod. Lat. 281.) are

outstanding representations of the one-time Corvina Library, regarding both, their content and their form. Especially since, besides the three Italian manuscripts, the fourth one, the Trapezuntius codex was crafted in the copying and illuminating studios in Buda, founded during Matthias's reign. Their style of illustration was very close to the style of the leader of the workshop, Francesco Castello d'Ithallico. The master came from North-Italy and brought with himself the Lombardy style of book painting, and naturalized it in Buda. Thanks to him, this style of a specific modeling and somewhat abstract character became the leading trait of the illumination studio of Buda, and its influence

intriguing story: the owner of the Corvina was a certain Ibrahim Maczar for a while in the 16. century. The Plautus-Corvina is exceptional also because it contains János Vitéz's own margin notes, which indicates a strong relationship between the Corvina Library and the library of János Vitéz.

The proximity of the Turks has triggered curiosity besides fear in Europe, at the end of the 15. and the beginning of the 16. century. The so-called Petancius-Corvina, also part of the exhibition, documents this in a fascinating manner. This scroll of an exceedingly subtle workmanship contains Felix Petancius's (d. before 1522) opus entitled *Genealogia Turcorum*



Rhetorica of Trapezuntius



Saint Augustine Corvina

was felt for decades not only on the Hungarian but on the Central-European book art, in general.

The three codices kept their original, magnificent velvet-binding, which show the professional knowledge of the binder from the Buda studio, who created a unique binding type for Matthias's representative library. The brilliant crimson velvet-binding of the Saint Augustine- Corvina is simply the most beautiful surviving velvet-binding of a Corvina, and few of its original, gilded silver-buckles have survived also. The restaurateurs of the NSZL are to be honored for the current beauty of the Corvina.

The Polybios-Corvina made in Florence has an interesting possessor-notice, which tells us of an

Imperatorum, describing the history of the Turkish Empire, dedicated to Vladislaus II., and executed in the first half of the 16. century, in the Buda studio (Cod. Lat. 378.). According to certain scientists, this author is the same with that Felix Petancius Ragusinus, who was the leader of the Buda copying studio from 1487, and he himself illuminated the *Genealogia*.

Connections between collections from Istanbul and national collections

A copy of the *Antiphonary from Istanbul* was on display also as a demonstration of the two book cultures' influence on each other. The original is kept in the Topkapi Sarayi of Istanbul. The codex, made in the

second half of the 1350's, is one of the most important relics of the Medieval Hungarian liturgy and of the Hungarian book culture from the Anjou period. The codex had lurked for centuries in the collection of the Topkapı Sarayı, it was „discovered” only a few decades ago. The restoration of the codex and the production of the facsimile-edition in 1996 constitute a remarkably beautiful phase of the cultural collaboration between Turkey and Hungary. In accordance with both presidents' express wishes, the codex was restored also. Experts of the NSZL executed it in Istanbul, and the Turkish state covered the work.

Medieval codices and original Turkish manuscripts from the collection of the NSZL were also on display, among them the only defter that was discovered in our country, in the castle of Nógrád, which subsisted since the years of subjection, and was kept safe here.

Interactivity, conclusions

The attendance at the exhibition was as high as we expected. Besides individual visitors, many groups participated in professional guided tours lead by our well-prepared colleagues (László Herendi, Endre Liphay, Ferenc Földesi and Edina Zsupán). László Herendi presented an interesting collage from contemporary coverage of the „gift of the sultan”, published by daily papers. Liliána Reich and Lilla Sebestyén compiled an exercise book for museum educators dealing with two different generations, which were downloadable from the website of the NSZL. Many groups have arrived with these printed out already. A special treat was that the visitors could thumb through the facsimile-editions of the original Corvinas displayed in cases, and they could look at the whole, digitized versions of the Corvinas. Furthermore, there were bilingual labels and guidelines, in Hungarian and English language.

Beyond its content, the exhibition was exceptional regarding its complexity and its good construction. Besides the traditional promotion, Péter Tóth conducted a large scale, online campaign, which drew attention to the Corvinas in the virtual space well before the actual exhibition. Also, short YouTube movies were made about the Corvinas, with additional professional content.

The closing event, entitled *Without a Veil* attracted a huge audience. With this occasion, the curator of the exhibition, the writer of these lines, presented the four codices in a way only professionals were able to see them until now: outside their cases, leafing through their invaluable pages, and interpreting them. We repeated three times the presentation due to the good turnout. The media covered with special attention the exhibition; many cultural programs, conversations,

interviews done by the most various television and radio channels were dedicated to it.

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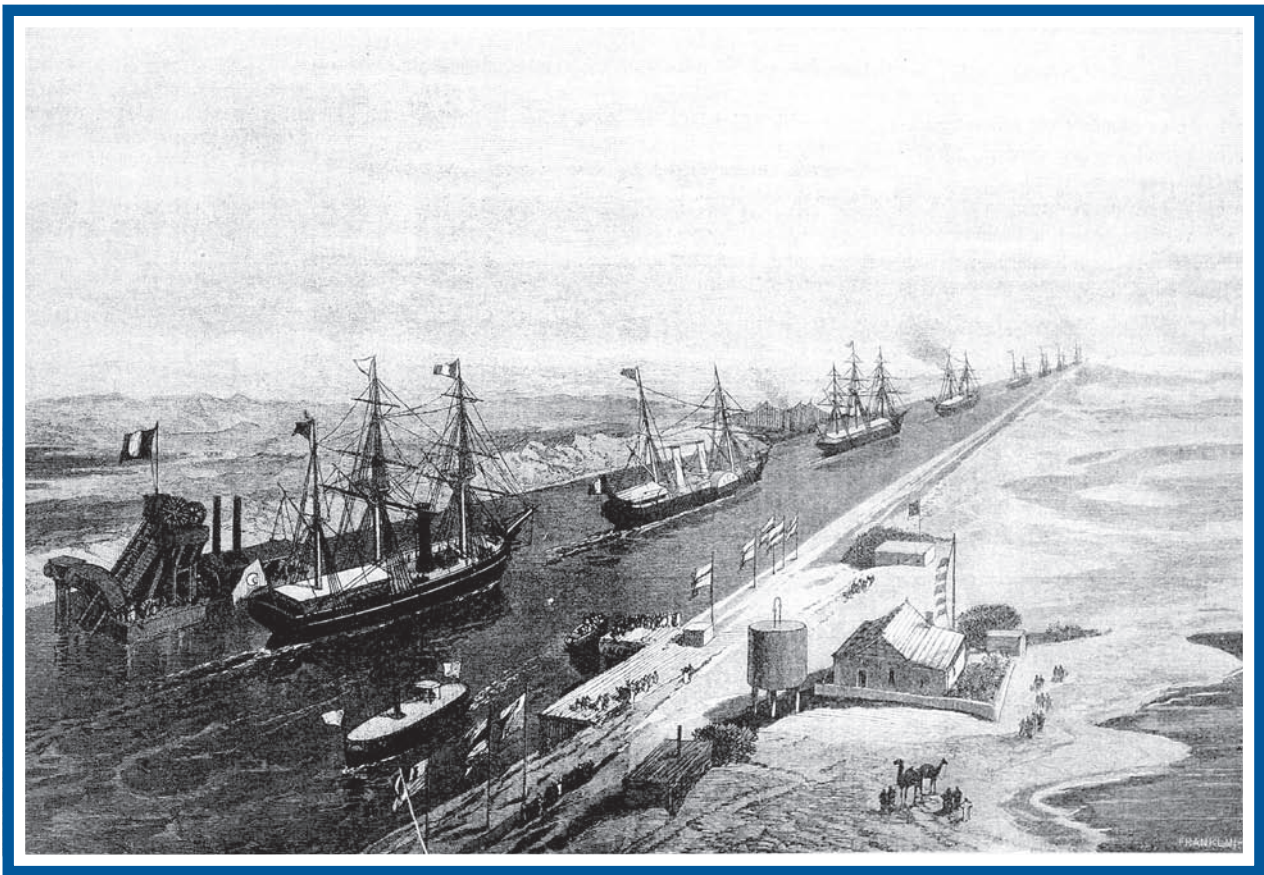
With the occasion of our Corvina-exhibition and of Turkey being the honorary guest of the Budapest Book Festival 2014, two additional, smaller but rich exhibitions were put together in our Library. One of them documented the opening of the Suez Canal, as the occasion with which sultan Abdul Aziz restituted the four Corvinas to the Hungarians, through donating them to Franz Joseph, who visited him at this event. The other exhibition aimed at presenting the history of the Turkish literature from the beginning until today, as a tribute to the contemporary, illustrious representatives of Turkish literature visiting Budapest.

THE GATE OF ORIENT – A NEW INTERNATIONAL ROAD

– THE SUEZ CANAL HAS OPENED 145 YEARS AGO –

„The attention of the whole world is focused on East, where a great spirit has decided to change geography. He broke away two continents in order to connect two seas. Everybody who can afford it is off to see this wonder, which made an heir and an object of gratitude out of the name of Lesseps. Rulers, high nobility, scientists, tradesmen and writers are going there. The Hungarian king is going also, in order to be the first king after Endre II. who saw Constantinople and Jerusalem. If it were only a pleasure trip, we would be sighing while thinking about the money it costs, but this a business trip as well, because the Suez Canal is close enough to the Adriatic Sea in order for us to benefit from it, if we care to. The problem was until now that the Hungarian kings living in Vienna were traveling to Frankfurt instead of looking in the direction of east. Count Gyula Andrassy is accompanying the king, and since the viceroy of Egypt sent him five tickets, few state officials and writers (supposedly Aurél Kecskeméthy and Emil Pongrácz) are traveling with him, too. They will visit Egypt, where so many people wish to go now and so few can make it, on the expense of the viceroy.” The journalist of the magazine entitled *Hazánk s a külföld [Our Homeland and Abroad]* wrote these lines on October 25, 1869.

The scientists of the Antiquity were already preoccupied with building a canal which would



The gate of Orient

connect the Red Sea with the Mediterranean Sea. But these scientist-engineers came up with the plan of an east-west bound canal, instead of a north-south one, which thus became a new fork of river Nile, in the eastern part of the Nile-delta, across Vadi Tumilat. The ancient canal had silted up and was spoilt many times, and attempts were made at its recovery. According to the sources, they used it more or less until 767, but it took a long time after that to come up with the idea of building a new canal.

Baron Ferenc Tóth of Nyitra or Baron de Tott, as the French used to call him, had brought up in the 18. century the idea of building a north-south bound canal to sultan Mustafa III., whose trust he won earlier with the fortification of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles. Tóth traveled to Egypt in 1771, mentioned the Suez Canal in his Memoires also, and possessed an extensive topographical knowledge of it. He proved that Darius's engineers were wrong when they stated that the Red Sea is higher than the Mediterranean Sea. Unfortunately, the sultan's sudden death put an end to Tóth's plan.

In 1798, during his Egyptian expedition, Napoleon instructed his engineers to create an artificial waterway. But they rejected the plan based on his surveyor's, Jacques-Marie Le Pere's wrong calculations, according to which the Red Sea was 10 meters higher than the

Mediterranean Sea. In 1846, an international team of scientists researched again the executability of a north-south bound canal, and discovered that it was possible to build one, according to the new calculations. One of the team-members, the Italian-born Austrian Luigi Negrelli elaborated a detailed plan, but he died before they started the work, in 1858. Finally, the constructions begun in 1859, after Ferdinand de Lesseps had persuaded the Egyptian viceroy Muhammad Said in 1854, and had received from him the concession. It had taken ten years of hard work to build the canal, and they opened it on November 17, 1869, accompanied by bright festivities. When it was built, the canal was 164 m long and 8 m deep, and soon enough problems had arisen because of its depth. Bigger ships could move only slowly and even so had often foundered. According to the Big Lexicon of Pallas „in 1882, in the case of 3198 ships, 416 had foundered which resulted in 21.643 hours of waste.” Thus, in a very short time, the enlargement of the canal became unavoidable. By today, according to data from 2010, it is 193.30 km long and 24 m deep.

Franz Joseph, Hungarian king was present at the ceremonial opening of the canal. The domestic newspapers covered in detail his eastern travels. Thus, the newspapers wrote about his stop in Istanbul, where

he was sultan Abdul Aziz's guest. Also, as mentioned by the newspapers, Franz Joseph was the first Hungarian king after Endre II. to visit the Holy Land. After participating at the opening festivities of the canal, he traveled around in Egypt, visited some ancient monuments, and climbed the Pyramid of Cheops. We can read about the opening of the canal, besides newspapers, in travel logs and memoirs of writers and journalists accompanying the king.

The opening of the Suez Canal made the headlines of the newspapers not only because it was a sensational and splendid event. Besides the facts regarding the engineering feat, pragmatic questions and the analysis of the prospective profit were also followed by great interest. Right after the beginning of the constructions, in 1860, the Revoltella-Committee from Trieste had started to make plans for an Austro-Hungarian East-Asian expedition with the aim of researching the advantages and possibilities of the export in connection with the opening of the canal. The expedition took off finally in 1868 and it was made up of two frigates (a smaller and a bigger one), the „Donau” and the „Friedrich”. Manó Cserei, Ivor Kaas, and János Xántus were on board. Besides studying commercial possibilities, they planned to institute diplomatic relationships, to set up consulates, and last but not least, to gather scientific data which was János Xántus's assignment from the Hungarian National Museum.

In addition to documents from our main collection, we selected Suez Canal maps from our Map Collection and exhibited them.

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TURKEY, OUR GUEST

Due to its specific geographical location, at the dividing line of the Islamic and western civilization, and due to its past as an empire provide a particular feature to contemporary Turkish novels, short stories and exotic poems. The whimsical trajectory of the Turkish history – from the old times until the modern European state of the 21. century – can be traced back through human destinies presented in old and new literary works.

The first written records of the Turkish literature are from the 8. century. However, the classical European

literary genre turned up in Turkey only in the beginning of the 19. century. Before that, they didn't write in European genres, but mostly in ritualistic, symbolic style characteristic to the diwan-poetry, which influenced history-writing, folklore, but even the poetry of Bálint Balassi. The social reforms initiated in the second half of the 19. century had affected the literature also, renewed the written language and new genres had started to emerge. The literature of the Republic of Turkey, established in 1923, wasn't very different from the National Literature promoted by a nationalistic movement, but made use of the values of the Turkish folklore and of the western, modern trends also. A huge step forward was that Kemal Atatürk abolished the Arabic writing and introduced the Latin alphabet. Realism and naturalism dominated the contemporary prose, the so-called social and village novels had appeared (Orhan Kemal, Yasar Kemal). In poetry, they continued to follow the Ottoman Turkish traditions, the traditional syllabic poetry flourished. A follower of Mayakovski and well-known in Hungary also, poet Nazim Hikmet was the one who introduced the free verse in Turkish literature.

The strength of Turkish literature is the prose, the short story, though. *Török elbeszélők* [Turkish storytellers] (1974), *Van, akit a sólyom karmol meg* [Some are scratched by the hawk] (2004), *28 török novella* [28 Turkish short stories] (2011), are collections of prose which were published in Hungarian language. Of course, the post-war, socialist Hungary published mostly those works which depict the misery, the exploitation and the backwardness of the peasantry and the working class. Novel-reading Hungarians of the last decade have been able to read about exciting stories which venture back into the Islamic history, besides the familiar world of the globalization. The fact that Yasar Kemal was nominated repeatedly to Nobel Prize in literature, and Orhan Pamuk received the Nobel Prize in 2006, adds to the international recognition of the Turkish literature.

The National Széchényi Library paid tribute with its small exhibition to the contemporary Turkish literature, displaying that modest segment of works which is available to Hungarian readers also, hoping that their number will increase in the near future.

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