

King Matthias as a popular hero in Central European folklore

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Historical folklore in Central Europe has common features and comprises a complex web of individual cases. King Matthias (ruled 1458-1490) was the most important ruler, who became a popular folklore hero in Central Europe. In his case the intertwining of oral tradition and written culture, and the folklorization of historical events could already be found 500 years ago. Latin chronicle and collection of anecdotes originated in the court of King Matthias. The motifs preserve both the elite culture and folklore. European humanism transformed the existing works to suit the given society, freely adapting the motifs. As a result, folklore associated with the name of the former Renaissance ruler can be found everywhere in his empire and outside its borders. The western limit of its geographical extension is around Leipzig; Matthias folklore is known along a line extending from Prague, through Vienna, Cracow and Lemberg, as far as Moldova, and it is found among all the peoples in the Carpathian Basin. It can be seen that the historical person of King Matthias appears as a folklore hero among the peoples of Central Eastern Europe.

The common history and geographical proximity of the peoples of the Danube region produced many phenomena which complement or, in cases, contradict each other, but the general observations can be really understood only through concrete studies. We need to know the historical sources and their relationship to international and national folklore.

The writings originating in the period of European humanism were later reshaped to suit the social demands of the given period. The sources were used with great freedom, giving special emphasis to some parts and leaving out others. This happened with the chronicle written by Antonio Bonfini in the time of King Matthias. The first Hungarian translator left out certain parts of the chronicle and elsewhere added legends from folklore to the historical data and with the passing

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of centuries these came to have the appearance of historical reality. A similar method was used by the poet Ambrus Göröcsöni. The 16th century author of a historical song simplified the historical events related to King Matthias. The data were moving away from the authentic sources and coming closer to the form and topic of oral literature. It is certainly true that the idealized image of King Matthias which can still be found in the folklore of the Hungarian and neighbouring peoples was consolidated in the 16th century.

I wish to stress, the Matthias tradition cannot be identified with a single genre. Research to date has shown that it appeared in many of genres, and among the most Danubian peoples.

An examination of the large number of sources reveals that the Matthias folklore does not have the same weight among the various ethnic groups with differing tradition and culture, and the system of motifs also differs. A particular element (e.g. the hero's birth, his election, death) may be the subject of epic song for one people, while elsewhere it figures in a legend or tale. The king in disguise is generally the hero of prose genres. Folkloristic research on the peoples of Central-Eastern Europe confirms that the Matthias tradition is found consistently. Already a century ago, Zenon Kuzelja, author of the first Matthias monograph recorded objectively the interrelations in the folk tradition of the region.

The interaction of oral and written culture is a constantly recurring question, especially in the case of the Matthias folklore. It is true for all peoples that the authentic records can be understood and interpreted in the system of oral tradition as a whole, while at the same time the individual motifs also show broad international links. With our present knowledge of the laws behind these phenomena, it is easy to explain why we find a historical song in the case of one people and a legend for another. We now know that in the 16th century, when the verse-chronicle was a characteristic genre, songs about King Matthias and his companions were sung in Hungarian too. Some of them were so popular that they were still sung two hundred years later and published again and again as cheap literature for sale at fairs, like broadside. Later, literature and oral poetry took different courses of development and the consequence of this can be followed in the differentiation of folklore.

Now I wish to detail the next topics of Matthias tradition expresses the local form of international folklore:

1. Matthias Corvinus as a sacral king
2. Matthias, the invincible hero
3. The heroes' marriage
4. The death of the hero

1) Matthias Corvinus as a sacral king

A recurring law can be observed in the portrayal of the hero in the historical songs and legends. Many similar features can be found in the portrayal of heroes in the folklore of peoples remote from each other in time and space. The common features are found in connection with the selection of the hero and his death. The Galician tales and Serb heroic epic explain the selection of Matthias as king by miraculous signs, in the same way as the Hungarian legends. The following mythical omens are found in his selection:

- an unknown hero will become the king;
- he has a special sign on his body;
- an iron table and golden bread predict his kingdom;
- the chosen one will have a dry branch putting out shoots;
- his crown is a divine gift (tossed into the air three times);
- a letter comes from the sky;
- a supernatural being (angel), bird brings the crown;
- the crown tossed into the air falls on the chosen head by divine decision;
- the lords accept the decision and fate against their intention.

The songs and legends in Central East Europe say the event such as: The banus of Buda (always Buda are mentioned) arrive for the election of the king in good time. The lords select a person among them as king. They toss the crown into the air first second and third time. The crown lands always on the head of Matthias instead of the candidate of lords. Matthias is removed from the place of the coronation, they push him into prison, but the crown lands again and again on the head of Matthias. The lords must accept him as a king, because the flying crown chooses the person by the wish of God.

In this case too, supernatural elements are intertwined with the written tradition, so there can be no doubt about Soerensen's conclusion that the Serb/Croatian songs preserved Hungarian tradition. At first the literature linked the miraculous background to Matthias' selection as king to Southern Slav folklore, but we know from the Slovakian, Ruthenian sources and Hungarian materials were collected with the same motif.

As research progressed, it was clearly demonstrated that folklore regarding the selection of the king, thought to be a Southern Slav characteristic, can be found among all ethnic groups in the Carpathian Basin. The legend on the origin of the Premysl family has a similar mythical aspects like the Matthias tradition.

According to the Premysl–Libussa tradition, the ploughman learned from miraculous signs that he would wear the crown. The miraculous omen, the sprouting of a whip handle stuck into the ground and the appearance of angels led the unknown plough-boy to take part in the election of the king, which brought him the glory predicted. In using the motif of the sprouting dry branch, Czech/Polish heraldry quite clearly shows the continued existence of a mediaeval legend.

The image formed of the unknown ploughman labourer who became ruler indicates commitment to the social hierarchy, in the same way as the 16th century chronicle was written. According to the legend Matthias' father was an illegitimate son of Sigismund von Luxemburg (emperor of Holy Roman empire in 1361–1437). According to authors who have analysed the hero types of historic legends, the two different mythical origins are in reality two variants of the same notion. Examination of the complex cultural links and the identification of similar motifs has produced many results, the details of which have been used by cultural history.

According to folk poetry, King Matthias is the chosen hero and his vocation is independent of the historical facts. The chosen ruler is expected to defend the interests of the poor in face of the nobility, and together with this to represent an idealized patriarchal society. The hero raised from anonymity to become king is a characteristic figure of myths, epic poetry and folk tales, what was detailed by Propp in his work on Morphology of Folk Tale. Dundes presumes that historical legend tradition creates heroes in this way over a long period of time.

2) Matthias, the invincible hero

Part of the creations on the life of Matthias can be ordered into a cycle, as shown by the Serb/Croatian songs. The second big unit in the cycle is King Matthias' heroic combat, that is, a presentation of the events which made him a hero. Most of the battles are struggles against the Turks, in some cases they are against Germans and more rarely against supernatural powers. The following motifs of heroic combat are found in the Matthias tradition:

- Matthias forms an alliance to defeat the enemy;
- unknown supernatural powers help Matthias;
- Matthias is first among the fighters;
- the king is helped in combat by a powerful knight;
- he has supernatural knowledge;
- he wins his freedom from foreign captivity through a trick/his beloved;
- the wealth of the defeated opponent passes to the king.

Heroic combat is a characteristic feature of epic poetry. The battle, struggle, duel is a recurring theme in the Serb/Croatian songs. Although in most cases the opponent is Turkish or German, it should be noted that emphasis of the ethnic identity of the opponent is not important. It is, however, important to magnify the strength of the opponent because his defeat increases Matthias' glory. The more fearsome the enemy, the greater the glory of the victor. The heroic battles culminate in heroic songs.

The verse-chronicle on the struggle against Vienna written in 1784 gives a glorious entry to the city, while they do not deny the bloody struggles of the battle of Hainburg, uses poetic formulas common in the 16th-17th centuries, and compares Matthias to heroes of ancient times who set an example in battle.

The figure of King Matthias as courageous scourge of the Turks was a general theme in the verse-chronicles. Ever since Bonfini the myth of the invincible ruler has existed in the common awareness, in folklore and in historiography, and his figure has been preserved in narratives that have nothing to do with the historical events.

Orality presented the presumed historical events with the appearance of authenticity, always adapting to the expectations customary in the given culture, supplemented with the necessary additions proclaiming the hero's virtues. The genre frame of the heroic battle varies; it was recounted in song, prose or cheap printed chronicles. What we find linked to the name of Matthias is the view of history taken by the given people, their ideas of their own struggles, human relations, conflict among the peoples and the idealized mode of overcoming problems.

3) The hero's marriage

According to the unwritten laws of folklore, an important part of the portrayal of a hero is the marriage, the struggle for the chosen girl, and the relationship of the marriage partners. This theme is almost entirely absent from Hungarian folklore, but the Serb, Croatian and Slovenian epic songs deal with the famous event in various ways. According to a *ženske pesme*, Matthias became the queen's third husband. In the eyes of a historian the theme is incomprehensible, but the contradiction can be resolved with a knowledge of Serb marriage customs. A number of variants of the relationship between Matthias freed from captivity and the sultan's daughter have survived. According to the song, King Matthias was taken captive by the Turks in battle. The sultan's daughter noticed him and felt sorry for him. She promised to free him if he married her. They bribe the guards and flee against her

father's will. In their flight they have their horses shod in reverse to mislead their pursuers. Later, they are protected in their flight by means of magic power.

The legend of the wife abducted in the husband's absence shows the indirect influence of the Greek epic of Digenis Achritas. Many parallels are known throughout Europe, in French, Spanish, Italian, German, Hungarian, Slovak and other folklore, in legends, heroic epics and ballads. The variant of the Serb heroic epic has survived in a Hungarian folk ballad and verse-chronicle.

4) The death of Matthias

According to the laws of heroic epics, heroes can only die in heroic battle. Because of the historical facts, heroic epics do not deal with the death of King Matthias, but two Slovenian ballads nevertheless sing of his death. The collection made by Štrekelj in the 19th century contains creations still regarded as being among the most interesting pieces of Slovenian folklore and show the distinctive development of folk poetry. Data indicate that this ballad is not related to either the Serb, the Croatian or Hungarian tradition. It recounts how the unfaithful king lies on his deathbed. When asked by his sister, he admits that his lover's husband caused his fatal wounds in a secret duel. This is God's punishment for his infidelity.

The hero suffering punishment for seducing a married woman is a well known theme in folklore. Variants of the legend of Frederick Barbarossa are the closest to the Slovenian Matthias tradition.

Since according to the laws of folklore, the death of the historical hero is just as extraordinary as his birth, other data on the death of King Matthias are of special interest. His selection as king made it obvious that he became ruler against the will of the nobles and he continued to exercise power against the nobles, in defence of the poor. This was the cause of the fatal hostility to which he fell victim. The subject of the narratives in Ruthenian, Hungarian Romany and Croatian languages is trivially simple.

The death of King Matthias, who had mythical powers, was due to his opposition to God, as recounted in Slovenian folklore. Trusting in his abilities as a military leader, King Matthias turned against God. However, the invincible ruler became entangled in a combat with consequences that he could not foresee. God punished him and the forces of nature were unleashed during the battle. As Matthias fled the earth opened up in front of him and he entered a mountain cave where he still awaits the mythical signal to return. This narrative which belongs to the Kyffhäuser legend spread in Slovenia, but there are also Hungarian variants.

Conclusions

Without entering into details of the rich theme, it can be said in summing up that the Matthias tradition of the Hungarian and the neighbouring peoples is not foreign to East and West European folklore, but it is nevertheless a folklore unit that can be set apart from it. The points of linkage and the characteristics of its separate development show the internal motivation of the different ethnic groups. Some of the mythical elements (e.g. selection of the king) are widely known, while the other branch (e.g. fatal death) became a theme of folklore in only a small region. The supranationality characteristic of the good king can be generally observed. Accordingly, all the ethnic groups in the Carpathian Basin believe that the historical person is one of their own. This attitude lived until it was transformed by official cultural policy and education strategy. The folklore data show that the good king is a person standing above the feudal hierarchy, and that is why his justice appears realistic. His deeds and appearance have a human touch and are always relevant to the social group or small community which keeps the narrative alive. However, the differences which can be observed and recorded in the folklore collections are always related to the link of the given ethnic group to oral tradition and to its historical development.

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