

7. THE UNKNOWN BARDS

(Hungarian literature before the XVIth century)

Hungarians take pride in many artistic and historical achievements. While some of these claims may be somewhat exaggerated, the unbiased observer cannot help finding at least two fields in which the genius of this unique people has created values equal to the greatest human achievements. These are the fields of music and poetry. But while Liszt, Kodaly and Bartok are known universally, as their art does not require translation, the creation of the Hungarian poets appeals only to the speakers of Hungarian and to the few foreigners who have learnt the language. Heine, the great German lyric poet of the XIXth century, learnt the language with the sole aim of reading Hungarian poetry. Very few foreigners feel such a strong motivation nowadays. For the others translations offer the only access to Hungarian literature.

When translated, however, Hungarian poetry loses much of its characteristic flavor: its rich imagery, the impact of its figures of speech, the easy flow of its flexible vocabulary, the musicality of its alliterations and assonances and the wide spectrum of decorative adjectives. The harmonious sequence of the clear vowels and melodious consonants together with the unusual rhythm caused by the accentuation of the first syllable in each word produce the impression of a cool, pure, harshly beautiful musical language, somewhat reminiscent of the untamed freshness of the folksong.

The same applies, to some extent, to prose. Historic novels, the most popular genre in Magyar prose, are just as difficult to translate as poetry. Jokai, Gulacsy, Makkai and Fury wrote epic poetry in prose form. The enjoyment of their art not only requires a knowledge of the imagery and semantics of the language, but also a deep understanding of the emotional patriotism of the Hungarians and, by the same token, some knowledge of their history: the bitter pride and sorrow of their romantic Christianity and their constant struggle in the defense of an ungrateful Europe.

The understanding of the Hungarian character, art and history will, therefore, make it easier for the reader of this book, to enjoy even translated Magyar literature, such as the extracts quoted in the Appendix.

It is a remarkable fact that, while Hungarian literature is hardly known outside its country of origin, foreign authors have always been translated into Hungarian with an amazing degree of understanding. Shakespeare has always commanded the Hungarians' admiration and the greatest poets made it their task of pride to translate some of his works. More Shakespeare plays are produced in Budapest than anywhere else in the world. French, Italian, Spanish and classical Greek and Latin poets are also popular and available in excellent Hungarian translations. The mysticism of the Germans and Russians does not seem to appeal to the same extent. The Magyar language is a particularly suitable vehicle for poetry translations. It can render both modern meters based on accent and ancient metros based on syllabic quantity and rhyme because of its flexibility of vocabulary and its clever use of prefixes and suffixes.

Another barrier between Hungarian and non—Hungarian readers is that of evaluation and emphasis. To the Hungarian, poetry is the bread and butter (bread and wine?) of the arts. No festival is complete without a recital of poetry. Editions of poetry run to the hundreds of thousands in a nation of 14 million and even so there seems to be a constant shortage of classics. There is not always a clear dividing line between prose and poetry. Many passages of novels, short stories and essays read like poetry and descriptive, narrative poetry — a very popular genre — often resembles, in its contents if not in its form, passages in novels or short stories.

Hungarian writing — poetry or prose — is the most cherished heirloom of Magyars everywhere in the world: it represents for them that mystic, unidentifiable notion which is Hungary.

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Three poems, chosen from poets of various periods and differing themes, are given in the Appendix in Hungarian and English in order to give the reader a foretaste of the great wealth of Hungarian poetry.

The first, “THE END OF SEPTEMBER” is a love-legend by the fiery poet of the Hungarian struggle for freedom, *Sándor Petöfi* (1823-1849). He wrote it to his young bride on their honeymoon, one of the few poets who wrote love poems to his own wife. His melancholic prophecy in the poem came true: he died in battle not two years afterwards and his wife did “abandon his name” — she remarried a few months after the poet’s death.

The second poem is from *Endre Ady* (1877-1919), the mercurial genius of modern Hungarian literature. He was a lusty, melancholic, scolding poet of fiery images and the possessor of a vast vocabulary (some of it of his own making). In the vivid poem entitled “*THE OUTCAST STONE*”; he expresses his feelings about his impulsive fellow-countrymen.

In the third poem, “*FOR MY BIRTHDAY*”, *Attila Jozsef* (1905—1937), the tragic modern poet of the city, pours his heart into a defiant satire of his own hopes and frustrations on his birthday — a few weeks before his self-inflicted death.

The beginnings of Hungarian literature

Folk songs, legends, ballads and references in contemporary chronicles bear witness to the fact that poetry and descriptive literature were the constant companions of the Hungarians even before their arrival in the Carpathian basin.

There exist, however, few written texts of Magyar literature before the XVIth century. There are two reasons:

(a) With the introduction of Christianity, the King and the Church made Latin the official written language. Chronicles, official documents and laws were recorded in Latin. The art of the Hungarian—speaking minstrels (the “regos” or “igric”) was not in favour, as the Church feared that their pagan-inspired songs and legends might endanger the recently, and rather reluctantly, accepted Christian faith. All we find in Latin chronicles of these times are some scornful references to the “silly. songs and legends” of the minstrels.

(b) The second reason — a more tragic one — is that Hungary was twice devastated during her history, in the XIIIth, then in the XVIth - XVIIth centuries. No one knows what literary treasures were destroyed during these periods.

It is beyond the scope of our examination to study the Latin literature extant in the chronicles of the first five centuries of Christian Hungary, though they present the picture of a very rich medieval and Renaissance civilization. The Latin poems of the humanist bishop, Janus Pannonius (Csezmicei) (XVth century) were well-known in the humanist world.

The earliest surviving text in Hungarian dates from the end of the XIIIth century. It is the "Funeral Oration", written by an unknown monk. It displays remarkable qualities of style, proving that Magyar language literary activity must have reached a fairly advanced degree at that period.

The earliest written example of Hungarian *poetry* is the "Lamentations of the Blessed Virgin" ("Omagyar Maria Siralom") from about 1270. It is an inspired hymn, characteristically in honor of the Virgin Mary, "Our Lady of Hungary". Legends of Saint Margaret (daughter of King Bela IV) and of other Hungarian saints were also written in Hungarian at the end of the XVth century.

Book printing began in Buda in 1473 (three years earlier than in England), while the first university was founded in 1367 (20 years before Heidelberg, Germany's oldest university). The first Hungarian translation of the Bible dates from 1430. A verse legend of Saint Catherine and hymns about Saint Ladislas are among the texts extant from this period . . . The impressive Hungarian re-creation of the popular "Dance of Death" poem in a codex (copied and possibly translated by a nun called Lea Raskai) illustrates in its rhythmic prose the poetic potential of the medieval Magyar language.

Secular topics are treated in a few remaining examples of court poetry of the XVth century. The satire of Ferenc Apati (around 1520) directs its witty criticism against prelates, aristocrats and peasant alike, unwittingly heralding the imminent great tragedy of Hungarian history, the defeat at Mohács (1526).

8 THE MAGNIFICENT TWILIGHT

(The era of the Anjou and Luxembourg Kings)

After the death of the last Arpad King (Endre III) lengthy disputes followed in Hungary, but eventually the majority of the nation accepted Charles Robert of Anjou, Prince of Naples, as its ruler.

This was a fortunate choice; for *CHARLES ROBERT* (1307-1342), a descendant of Arpad on his mother's side and of the French Capetians on his father's side, became a good king and the founder of a short-lived but truly Hungarian dynasty. At the beginning, many rich magnates opposed his election and Charles had to enforce his rule with arms in several cases. In this task he received the enthusiastic support of the lesser nobles and freemen, who had been suffering from the tyranny of the semi-independent feudal barons during the preceding decades. Charles rewarded his loyal followers with the highest offices, giving the nation an entirely new, honest government of poor nobles.

In the characteristic Hungarian variant of the medieval State structure, the free members of the nation owed services to the King not through feudal tenure of their estates (for it was their freehold) but by virtue of the King's power, conferred on him by a nation which had freely elected him. A "feudal" relationship in the western sense existed only between the free members of the nation and their serfs, who worked as tenant (share-) farmers, paid one tenth of their produce to the landlord and one tenth to the Church. (They were better off than today's taxpayers). Otherwise they were free to change their landlords or enter ecclesiastical or military careers (as many did).

Charles Robert reorganized the nation's finances. By the economical use of the country's mineral wealth — almost all of it crown property — he made the Hungarian florin the most stable currency in Europe. Related by birth to the French and Spanish dynasties and by marriage to the Polish and Czech royal families, he used his family connections to extend Hungary's authority well beyond the frontiers. Under his rule Hungary became the most respected power in Central Europe, a leader of 'economic and political alliances, such as the Czech-Polish-Hungarian bloc, a medieval "common market" created to counter German economic domination. The Polish-Hungarian alliance proved itself also during the common campaigns against Poland's pagan enemies and the quarrels with the Teutonic Knights.

His sumptuous court at Visegrad (north of Buda) represented the best of the western and Hungarian ideals of Christian chivalry and became a centre of late-gothic culture and knighthood.

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Charles Robert's son, *LOUIS I (THE GREAT)* (1342-1382), inherited the crown of a prosperous, strong country. He was called the last of the knight-kings a truly Christian monarch, like his ideal, Saint Ladislas. He saw the danger of the Osmanli Turks' advance in the Balkans against the declining Byzantine Empire. So he improved on his father's somewhat hesitant foreign policy and created in the south and northeast of Hungary a protective belt of vassal states under various degrees

of Hungarian supremacy. After King Casimir's death, the Poles invited him to their throne (1370). During this successful (albeit, short) personal union, the dual empire represented a giant zone of peace and prosperity between the east and west of Europe.



A knight of Louis I's court (mid-XIVth century)
(From the gothic statues found in Buda castle, cf Chapter 10).

Ironically the Anjou kings of Neapolitan origin had little success in their dealings with their own home-state, Naples. Louis' brother, Andrew, had inherited, the Neapolitan throne but he fell victim to the intrigues of the court (and of his own Neapolitan wife) and was eventually assassinated. Louis reluctantly led two campaigns into Italy to punish the criminals but achieved only partial success.

Louis was also a patron of arts and sciences, founder of the first Hungarian University at Pecs (1367)

Appointed by the Pope "Captain of Christendom" to head a crusade against the Turks, he led several victorious campaigns against them in Bulgaria with his Hungarian troops. He could not fully exploit these victories as the other Christian nations gave him no aid in the "crusade". Venice, the great sea power actually supported the Turks.

Louis died in 1382 after a long illness, probably leprosy, which he had contracted during his campaigns. He had no male heir: only two daughters.

In the century which saw the twilight of the Middle Ages, the beginning of the Hundred Years' War at Crecy (1346), the internal wars in Italy, France and England, the struggle between the Pope and The Holy Roman Emperor, the "Black Death" (1347-1350) and the Turkish landing at Gallipoli, a prosperous and strong Hungary was the bulwark of stability, strength and peace in Europe.

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As a mark of particular respect for Louis, the nation accepted, with some reluctance, the succession of twelve-year old *Mary* to the throne of her father. Her younger sister, Hedwig (Saint Jadwiga), inherited Louis' Polish throne. While the barons were looking for a suitable King-Consort for Mary, the temperamental dowager queen, Elizabeth, ruled in her daughter's name. This impetuous woman and her friend, the Palatin Gara, caused a series of tragic incidents. A pretender to the throne, the Neapolitan prince Charles of Durazzo, who was the favorite of the Croatian barons, was killed in Queen Elizabeth's court under obscure circumstances. In revenge, the Croats abducted the two queens and eventually killed Elizabeth. On being freed from her captors, Mary married Prince Sigismund of Luxemburg, the son of the German emperor, who was thus accepted as King-Consort and, after Mary's death, as the ruling king.

SIGISMUND (1387-1437) was an energetic young man. Some Hungarian nobles refused to accept him for a long time, such as the legendary Kont of Hedervar and his 30 fellow nobles who were executed for treason.

Soon after his ascension, Sigismund organised a crusade against the Turks with the participation (for the first and last time) of the great western powers: the French, the English and the Poles. However, the battle of Nicopolis (1396) was lost for the crusaders for lack of co-operation among the various Christian contingents.

After the defeat, Sigismund turned his attention to Germany. After the crown of Bohemia, he soon gained the crown of Germany and in 1410 was elected Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Upon his election he presided at the famous Council of Constance, trying to heal the ravages of the schisms, quarrels and internal wars of Christianity. He had the Czech reformer, John Hus, executed. This roused the Czechs and caused a long, bloody civil war in Bohemia, Sigismund's home-country.

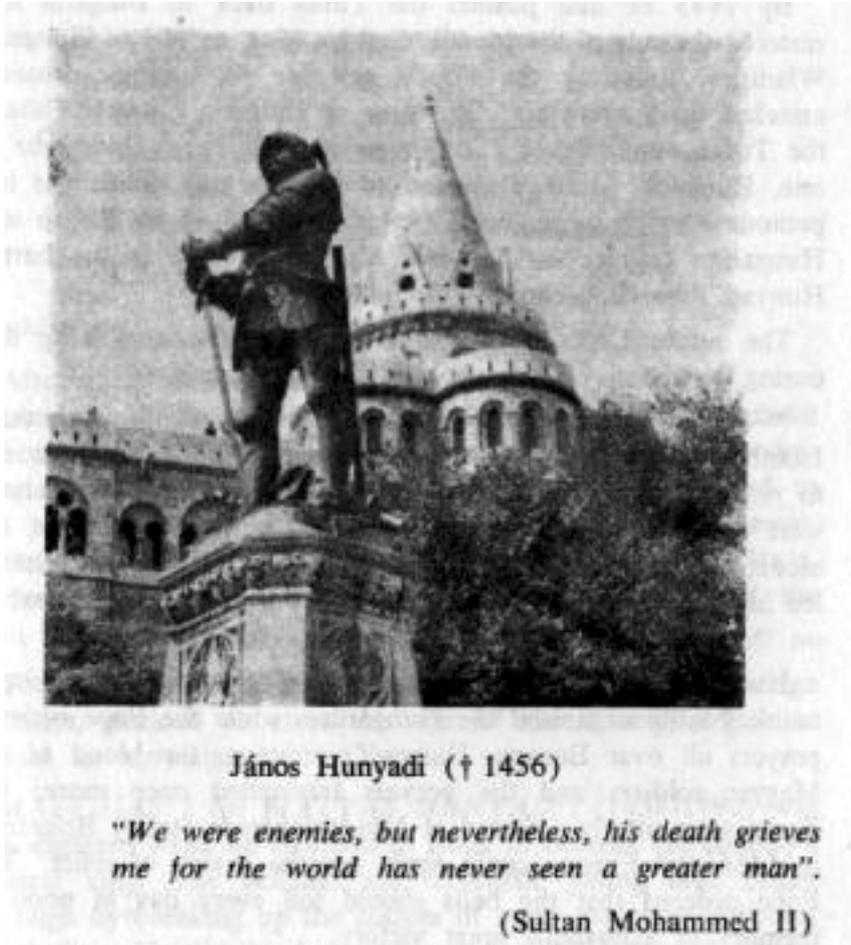
Sigismund used Hungary's considerable economic, military and political resources in obtaining his goals in Germany, but cared very little for the country, which gave him his strength. He gave up his plans to chase the Turks out of Europe. It was a tragic omission, as it was during this period that the Mongol ruler, Timur Lenk (Tamerlan) inflicted several crushing defeats upon the Turks in Asia and it would have been relatively easy to chase them out of Europe.

During his last years Sigismund tried to make up for his "absenteeism" and to befriend the Hungarians, but the resentful Magyars never quite accepted him as a truly Hungarian king

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After Sigismund's death the Hungarians turned to their traditional friends, the Poles, and invited the brave Prince *Wladislas* (1440-1444) to the throne. Wladislas accepted the invitation and

immediately undertook the struggle against the Osmanli Empire with the assistance of the greatest Hungarian general, *JOHN HUNYADI*. This great soldier of the Turkish wars was a professional officer of humble origins. By 1441 he became the commander of the southern forces of Hungary and the richest landlord in the country. He used his immense fortune to finance his campaigns against the Turks. His victories contained the Turkish advance for decades. Hunyadi was the typical representative of the militant Christian Hungarian who united religious fervor with ardent patriotism.



By 1443 he had pushed the Turks back to Bulgaria and restored the rule of the friendly Serbian king, an ally of Hungary. Wladislas, following the Pope's call for yet another crusade, attacked the Sultan's army at Varna, in Bulgaria (1444). Though the Turks outnumbered the Hungarians and their allies four to one, Hunyadi's strategy seemed to win the day. Then the impetuous King charged the Turks at the head of his Polish and Hungarian cavalry — and lost his life as well as the battle. Hunyadi himself escaped with difficulty

The infant Ladislas V (1445-1457) was elected king and during his infancy Hunyadi was elected Regent.

Sultan Mohammed conquered Byzantium (Constantinople, today Istanbul) in 1453. The Pope again urged the western nations to raise a crusade but this time no one came: the Hungarians were alone as Hunyadi wrote to the Pope: ". . . we only, left alone, have endured the fury of the war . . ."

The Sultan led his huge army, reinforced with heavy artillery (a new feature on the battlefields of Europe) against Hungary.

Hunyadi and his friend, (Saint) John Capistrano, a Franciscan monk, hastily organised the Hungarians while the Pope ordered prayers all over Europe. Hunyadi's strategy, the blood of the Magyar soldiers and the prayers triumphed once more: the Turks were utterly defeated at *Nandorfehervar* (today Belgrade) in 1456 and Europe could again breathe a sigh of relief. The Pope ordered that the bells should toll every day at noon in memory of Hunyadi's great victory.

There was rejoicing in Europe — but mourning in Hungary. On the morrow of the victory Hunyadi and his friend, the survivors of countless battles died victims of the plague....

9. DARKNESS AFTER NOON

(Hungary's history from 1456 to 1540)

Matthias' flamboyant Empire

After Hunyadi's death in 1456, the king, Ladislas V, succumbed to the intrigues of his courtiers and perfidiously arrested and executed the great general's elder son, Laszlo. This understandably angered the nation so much that the king had to flee to Prague, the capital of his other kingdom, Bohemia. He took with him Hunyadi's second son, Matthias, as a hostage. A few months later king Ladislas died — ironically of the same plague that had killed John Hunyadi.

The nation, tired of the misrule of foreign kings and foreign courtiers, decided to elect the son of the country's greatest soldier as sovereign.

MATTHIAS I (or MATYAS HUNYADI) (1458-1490) was only eighteen when he returned to Buda to become the country's greatest king. The brilliant and energetic young man began his reign by breaking up the cliques of some magnates opposing his election. He did this by using a judicious mixture of charm, strength and cunning: he simply moved his enemies to higher offices — away from the court, the seat of power. Thus he made his family's archenemy, Ujlaki, the king of Bosnia, Hungary's southernmost province. He had more trouble with his friends, especially with his domineering uncle, Mihaly Szilagyi, who had been appointed regent during Matthias' minority. Matthias, made it abundantly clear that he was mature enough to rule alone and disposed of his impetuous uncle by making him Captain-General of the Turk-harassed southern frontier.

Then he dealt with the marauding Hussite Czech raiders in the north, recruiting the useful elements among the defeated raiders into his future mercenary army. From these adventurers he eventually formed the greatest mercenary troop of his era, called the "Black Army".

He stabilised the nation's *finances* by imposing upon the entire nation a fair and equitable system of taxation, based on each person's income, and complemented the royal revenue with the yield from the mines and crown-estates. In addition to these regular revenues, he also imposed special levies when the need arose. He was thus able to finance the "Black Army" and conduct his many campaigns without undue loss of Hungarian blood. The treasury, not the poor, bore the burden of his immense social and cultural expenditure, which raised the nation's economic and cultural standard above that of the rest of contemporary Europe.

Matthias understood the importance of urban development. By strengthening the status of the towns he added a powerful 'third estate', the town burgesses to the other two estates (clergy and nobility). Promotion into this new "middle class" was made free to any serf who had the will and talent to improve his status. Had peaceful times followed Matthias' reign, Hungary would have built the most equitable and progressive social system in Europe. His legal reforms protected the lower classes, allowing them the right to appeal against the sentences of the baronial courts to the royal courts ("Tabula", "Curia"), which were headed by professional jurists (often of lower-class birth) or by himself.

Matthias' *foreign policy* disappointed those who expected him to continue his father's crusades against the Turks. He realised that the Magyar nation was not strong enough to chase the Turks out of Europe without bleeding to death in the process. He was also realistic enough not to count on the "help" of the West. So he prepared a long-range plan, aiming ultimately at possession of the crown of the Holy Roman Empire so that he could use the empire's military might to deal with the Turkish menace. As Hungary had never been a member state of the Empire, he tried to gain the crown of Bohemia, which was one of the member states with the right to vote in the election of the Emperor. Thus he fought a long war against the king of Bohemia and his allies and also against Emperor Frederick, allying himself first with the one, then with the other. Eventually he managed to obtain the Bohemian crown — without the right to vote — and then he also conquered Austria from the Emperor — without decisively defeating him.

He also led short, mainly defensive campaigns *against the Turks* and managed to build up a defensive belt in the south with the inclusion of such vassal states as Bosnia, Serbia, Wallachia and others governed by his troublesome friends or placated enemies. He refused, however, to commit his beloved Magyars or expensive mercenaries to adventurous campaigns deep in Turkish territory.

Matthias, a son of the *Renaissance*, was a true and intelligent patron of art and literature. He had the castle of Buda rebuilt in French "flamboyant" style and gathered his humanist friends to court. His third wife, Beatrice, brought from Italy many artists and scientists who helped Buda to become one of the great centers of humanism. Matthias' library of illuminated codices, the "Corvina", was one of the largest in Europe. As part of his cultural program, he founded a university in Pozsony (the third Hungarian university). Book printing began in Buda in 1473.

Matthias' apparent passivity in regard to the Turkish question, his obscure western policy and the increasing financial burdens resulting from his policies led to unrest among the magnates. Though Matthias managed to deal with these dissensions in his autocratic way, he soon found himself friendless among the barons.

Increasing loneliness cursed his *family life, too*. His first wife died while they were both still children. His second wife, Catherine, the daughter of the Bohemian king, died in childbirth together with the newborn child, a son. His third wife, Beatrice d'Este, Princess of Naples-Aragonia, bore him no children. Between his marriages he met Barbara Krebs, the daughter of the mayor of Breslau, who bore him a son. Matthias took his illegitimate son to his court, giving him a fine education and the title of a duke (John Corvinus). Not having any legitimate children, it was his wish to make the intelligent, courageous boy his heir and successor — an arrangement not unusual in those times.

By 1490 Hungary was a powerful state with a population of 4 million (the same as England) and Matthias, now fifty, was the most influential ruler of Central Europe. His far-reaching plans seemed to be approaching their realization: he was king of Bohemia, Austria was a Hungarian province, the Turks had been chastised and he had powerful friends supporting his imperial ambitions . . . Then, one day, while visiting Hungarian-occupied Vienna, he fell ill and died under somewhat suspicious circumstances.



King Matthias (Mátyás) I (1458-1490)

The dowager queen and the barons disavowed their previous promises and rejected John Corvinus, who would have made a better king than any of Matthias' successors — just as his mother would have made a better queen than any of Matthias' wives.

National self-destruction

The magnates wanted a weak king and the queen wanted a husband. Wladislas Jagello obliged in both respects and so he was elected king under the name *Wladislas II* (1490—1516). He married Beatrice in a sham ceremony, which was later annulled, disbanded the “Black Army” and promptly lost Austria. Otherwise he obligingly left the government of Hungary to the barons. The magnates, possessed by a madness of self-destruction, swept away the fine state structure of social justice and equal taxation, stripped the country of practically all revenues and defense ability. Instead they concentrated on endless and barren parliamentary debates with the representatives of the lower

nobility over decisions which were rarely formulated and never respected. They then attempted to impose further tax burdens on the lower classes and the burgesses who refused to pay.

Then, in the face of the increasing Turkish menace, the Primate-archbishop, Cardinal Bakocz, received, in 1514, the Pope's authority to raise a crusader army. The poor nobles, over-taxed citizens of the towns and the serfs flocked to the army, which was placed under the command of an able officer, the Szekely nobleman, *Gyorgy Dozsa*. The barons became suspicious, besides they did not want to lose their serfs at the time of the harvest. They tried to restrict the recruiting and to penalize those who had already signed up. Soon clashes began and the crusaders (who called themselves "kuruc", a distortion of the Latin "cru": "cross") turned against the barons and prelates. Soon a full-scale civil war broke out in the south between the barons of this region and the "kuruc". The Primate hastily withdrew the crusaders' commission but Dozsa still considered himself the king's commander and continued fighting the magnates who obstructed the army's movements with their own private troops. Battles of increasing vehemence were followed by retaliations of increasing cruelty on both sides. A few weeks later, the inexperienced kuruc army was crushed by the regular army of the governor of Transylvania, John Zapolya. The victor — who was destined to become one of the most fateful figures of Hungarian history — punished the captured leaders with the savage cruelty usual in the rest of Europe in those times, but which the humane Hungarians have found monstrous.

Subsequently the revengeful Diet — for once unified — inflicted various *restrictions upon the serfs*, whom they held responsible for the uprising (which, however, had been led by noblemen, burgesses and lower clergy). The worst of these measures was the abolition of the serfs' right to change their domicile. They were not condemned to "eternal servitude", as some prejudiced historians have mistranslated the words "perpetua rusticitas" ("eternal farmwork"). The true meaning is that of their exclusion from other occupations, especially higher ecclesiastical careers. This was a censure of Cardinal Bakacs who was the son of a serf (as were many high dignitaries in Hungary). We also have to remember that at that time no European serf had a free choice of landlords; and they were all restricted to "farmwork", having much less chance than their Hungarian counterparts to gain higher offices. All these vengeful articles of law did was to deprive the Hungarian serfs of certain privileges they and they alone, had enjoyed before the uprising.

The jurist Werboczi codified these and preceding laws in a remarkable legal work called "*Tripartitum*", a three- volume compendium of the *Hungarian constitution*. The work defines the "free nation" (i.e. the nobility), as one body, the "members of the Holy Crown", the symbolic source of all law and power. The nobles elect the King and invest him with sovereign powers through the coronation. Legislation is exercised in the Parliament (Diet) by the King and the nobles.

The less theoretical — and more unfortunate — part of the *Tripartitum* summed up the privileges of the nobility. Apart from repeating the legal safeguards already codified in the Golden Bull of 1222, the compendium emphasises that the noble does not pay taxes and has no obligation to render military service, except in a defensive war. The right to resist "unconstitutional" royal acts was also reaffirmed.

The flexible interpretation of “defensive military service” and the exemption from taxes were soon to bring catastrophic results to the nation, which was by then facing the greatest trial of its existence: the onslaught of the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire. The Tripartitum and the nobles’ vengeful attitudes, were stripping the nation of its ability to levy taxes, to raise an army and, especially, to rely on the patriotism of the oppressed peasant in war and peace.

Mohacs

LOUIS II (1516—1526) was only ten when he succeeded his father. During the years of his minority, his relatives and courtiers ruled the country in his name.

In 1521 Nandorfehvar (then a Hungarian frontier town, today Belgrade), the scene of Hunyadi’s great victory fell to the Turks. Even this key defeat failed to arouse the nation, which was in the grip of constant power struggles. The treasury was empty (the nobles did not have to pay taxes, the others could not). The barons refused to believe in the seriousness of the Turkish danger and refused to mobilize their own troops. Pal Tomory, a former professional soldier and Franciscan monk, now archbishop of Kalocsa had been appointed Captain-General of the southern frontier. He had only his own finances and the help of the papal nuncio, Burgio, Hungary’s true friend.

The destructive power-struggle was in no way an isolated phenomenon in Hungary. All over Europe class and religious wars, peasant wars and ferocious retributions of apocalyptic magnitude heralded the downfall of the gothic order of the Middle Ages. These senseless wars surpassed Hungary’s mercifully short peasant war of 1514 both in cruelty and in duration. Any European country would have collapsed if the Turks had been able to turn their armies against them. It was Hungary’s geographical tragedy to be situated in the path of the Ottoman aggression.

Convinced by Tomory of the magnitude of the danger, the intelligent young king began to send desperate messages to the Christian rulers of the West, asking for help against the Moslems. “His Most Catholic Majesty”, Charles V, who ruled the largest empire the world had yet seen, the Holy Roman Empire, promised to pray for him, but he was too busy fighting France’s Francis I (“His Most Christian Majesty”). Francis’ had already made a secret pact with the Turks, urging them to attack Charles’s empire through Hungary. Henry VIII (“The Defender of the Faith”) replied that he was having “domestic trouble” the understatement of the century. The important ‘Christian’ sea—power, Venice, had long been in open alliance with the Turks.

Hungary stood alone, divided, paralyzed, condemned. In the spring of 1526, Suleiman the Magnificent set out from Istanbul with an army of 300,000 to conquer the world. The Ottoman army crossed into Transdanubia practically unopposed. King Louis left Buda at the head of his guard — a pathetic 4,000. Some prelates and barons, on learning this, mobilized their own troops and joined the king. John Zapolya, the richest baron of the country, had 40,000 troops but showed no haste to join the royal army.

The Hungarians, totaling about 26000 with late reinforcements and armed with 50 old cannon, decided to wait for the Turks on the plain of *Mohacs* near the Danube, in Transdanubia.

Having decided that it would be “unchivalrous” to attack the Turks while they were struggling to cross the marshy terrain, they watched with detached interest the deployment of the huge army and 300 heavy cannon on the advantageous hilly part of the plain. They also decided not to wait for Zapolya’s army but to attack the Turks immediately. Whatever other faults the Hungarians have, timidity has never been one of them.

It was the *29th of August 1526*, the Feast of Saint John the Martyr. When the Hungarians decided to attack, the young bishop Perenyi remarked: “Let us rename this day the “Feast of 20,000 Magyar Martyrs.”

Tomory’s impetuous cavalry (the “hajdus”) attacked and broke through the first Turkish lines. In that moment, the young King, (he was 20), exuberant with the strength of his newly found confidence, took command of his guard and led them against the Turks, who remembered the lesson of Varna, where Louis’ predecessor lost the battle for the Hungarians by his suicidal charge. The Turks concentrated on Louis’ bodyguard, which was wiped out, and the wounded King escaped with great difficulty. The attacking Hungarian cavalry was then cleverly lured into the murderous fire of the Turkish cannons and the musket fire of the elite Janissaries. Tomory and the other leaders died fighting. In little more than two hours the battle was over. About 16,000 Hungarians died and two thousand taken prisoner were killed after the battle. The rest escaped under the cover of a sudden rainstorm. Two archbishops, five bishops (including the young prophet, Perenyi), and most of the high dignitaries were among the dead.

The wounded, king was on the run, escorted by two of his bodyguards. As he crossed a flooded creek, he fell off his horse and his heavy armor dragged him down. He drowned and his body was only found days later. The last Jagello king of Hungary has joined the “twenty thousand Magyar Martyrs.”

Two kings

The loss of life at Mohacs was not irreparable. Hungary still had larger, undefeated armies. However, the fact that the King and most of the nation’s leaders were lost had such a paralyzing effect that Hungary never recovered from the effects of this disaster.

Many of the rich magnates and nobles, who had so criminally mismanaged the country’s affairs, had atoned for their mistakes in full. They did not know how to live for their nation — but they certainly knew how to die for it magnificently. Unfortunately, while many, brave young men died, some of the evil old men managed to survive to continue their destructive intrigues, such as the Palatin, Bathori and the enigmatic Zapolya. The lesser nobility of the counties had sulkingly stayed away from the battle —as did the peasants. They were all to pay later: the burden of the coming 160 years was to be borne by the poor nobleman and the peasant.

The battle of Mohacs was a strictly aristocratic parade, the last, splendid, foolhardy charge of medieval knights led by a brave, young King. There was hardly an aristocratic family left without at least one fallen hero at Mohacs. Some great families were completely wiped out at Mohacs and in the years following it.

Suleiman could not believe that this small, suicidal army was all that powerful Hungary could muster against him, so he waited at Mohacs for a few days before moving cautiously against *Buda*. The young queen had already fled with her German courtiers to her brother, Ferdinand of Austria (without even waiting to find out whether the king was dead or alive). Buda was undefended; only the French and Venetian ambassadors waited for the Sultan to congratulate him on his great victory. The Turks ransacked Buda and returned to the south with 200,000 slaves — the first of the millions who were to pay for the sins of their ancestors. Zapolya and his army — almost twice the size of the King's — stood at Szeged, practically watching the Turks move home with their booty.

Zapolya had always wanted to be King. Now with Louis II dead, he had no difficulty in convincing the few remaining magnates that he was the right choice for a King. He was crowned by one of the surviving bishops as *JOHN I (1526-1540)*. He was the last of the Hungarian-born Kings —and probably the least. That foolhardy Polish boy at Mohacs was much more of a Hungarian than the cruel, cunning, cowardly John could ever hope to be.

Queen Mary's brother, Ferdinand of Habsburg, promptly claimed the Hungarian throne by virtue of his double relationship to the deceased King. His sister, Mary, was Louis' queen and Louis' sister, Anne had married Ferdinand. Thus Anne was the only "Hungarian-born" queen in the nation's history. The fact that she had lived in Vienna since her childhood, that she could not speak a word of Hungarian and that she hated Hungarians made the irony even deeper: the daughter of a "Hungarian" king (Wladislas II), she was the pretext for the Habsburgs to gain their 400 years' rule over Hungary.

Ferdinand managed to gain the support of a large segment of the aristocracy (many of whom had promptly deserted the cowardly John) and soon he, too, was crowned as *FERDINAND I (1526-1564)*.

Thus the country had two kings — a divided and confused leadership. The barons continued their self-destructive policy of squabbles and quarrels while the Turks stood in the south, probably wondering what could have happened to Matthias' great nation. This tragic division, more fatally than Mohacs, ended five centuries of Hungarian independence. The entire Carpathian basin became a power-vacuum, the open freeway of external aggressions.

Thus Mohacs, the "tomb of our national greatness" (as the Hungarian poet put it), also marked the end of a peaceful, independent Central Europe.