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The Wolfenbüttel Corvinas
Abstract

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The object of the dissertation was to examine thoroughly the eight authentic Corvinas preserved in the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel and an additional codex of Hungarian provenance attached later to the group. The characteristic of the group is that it contains almost exclusively works by 15th century authors, no ancient author can be found among them. These 15th century authors dedicated luxury codices containing their works to the Hungarian king. Thus it is possible for us to consider the group of Wolfenbüttel Corvinas a personal part of the royal family’s (King Matthias, Queen Beatrix, and John Corvinus) book collection, which reflects their intellectual relationships with mainstream Italian humanism. Four codices contain Marsilio Ficino’s works, translations, and correspondence, one codex encompasses the complete works of Bartolomeo della Fonte in the author’s handwriting, while two further manuscripts hold Alessandro Cortese’s epic work praising King Matthias’ military deeds, respectively an aid to the computation of the planets’ movement compiled by the German astronomer Johannes Tolhopff. The Psalter prepared for Queen Beatrix is a special piece in the collection. Researchers began to regard Johannes Regiomontanus’ astronomical work commissioned by John Vitéz as a Corvina at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

All eight authentic Corvinas came into the possession of August the Younger, Prince of Braunschweig, Lüneburg, and Wolfenbüttel, one of the most important bibliophiles of the early modern times, at the beginning of the 17th century, before 1627.

The first part of the thesis is a codex catalogue giving a detailed codicological description of the eight authentic Corvinas based on the actual principles and emphases applied in the description of humanistic codices. The aim of the descrip-
tions is to record and publish as an organic whole all the data that could help further researches. The following part of the dissertation is closely connected to the codex descriptions, since it elaborates on two topics which could not be discussed in the descriptions.

I. On the origin of the Beatrix Psalter

The chapter on the Beatrix Psalter has a basically codicological character. It presents a codex description in “operation”, exemplifying how even old and contradictorily answered questions can be solved by putting the carefully collected data on the manuscript in logical order. The Beatrix Psalter has become an especially interesting piece of the Corvinian collection because its binding gives quite an oriental impression. This luxury codex was the object of lively codicological research throughout the past one hundred and thirty years. Its binding, miniatures, possible owners, provenance, and coat of arms, that is, its historical background were examined in turn. However, unfortunately no communication existed between Hungarian and international investigations, and the researchers of different subfields (binding, illumination, etc.) even ceased to take into consideration one another’s findings, not to mention the content of the codex, which was completely neglected. (The exception was the legendary palaeographer of the Bodleian Library in Oxford, Albinia de la Mare.) Although such specialized investigations yielded numerous useful results regarding the codex, no coherent image could be outlined with respect to the origin of the Psalter due to the above mentioned reasons. Hungarian researchers did not even question its Hungarian origin at the beginning, but later only Italy, Naples, and Rome appeared as possible places of origin. When describing the codex and attempting to sort out the different opinions, I had the possibility to handle the Psalter in Wolfenbüttel. Its origin from Buda seemed almost obvious in the light
of the physical characteristics of several other Corvinas. The aim of the chapter was to offer a plausible answer to the question of provenance having first reviewed the previous literature and having considered the physical characteristics and the content of the codex. During the analysis of the problem I took the technical process through which the codex had been prepared as a guideline, since certain work phases could not have been interchanged: the decoration of the edge could not have preceded the binding. The result I arrived at is the following: the interior illumination of the Beatrix Psalter (except the title page), as well as the entire binding (including the edge) was prepared in the Buda workshop between 1476 and 1481. Nevertheless, it cannot be ruled out that the entire codex was made in Hungary, since the main miniature painter of the title page, the Florentine Francesco Rosselli worked in the Buda workshop in the service of King Matthias in the period in question. On account of the striking concurrence of certain research finds even the person of the bookbinder could be identified. The supposition that the Psalter may have been bound by Felice Feliciano of Padua was first formulated by Antony Hobson, an expert of Renaissance bookbinding. However, he was not then familiar with Ágnes Ritoókné Szalay’s discovery that Felice Feliciano did not live in Italy during those years, but that he was in the attendance of Giovanni d’Aragon in Hungary.

Moreover, we assume that the codex thus prepared was a key piece, maybe a source of inspiration for the elaboration of the uniform bookbinding style in the royal library of Buda. According to Paul Adam parts of an original Persian binding were applied on the covers of the Psalter, and these were completed with all’antica motifs by the bookbinder who made the application. The gilded leather Corvinian bindings with their varied, but in their main style similar compositions seem to repeat again and again this oriental arrangement. (This evolved, became more varied later.) The other element of the
Psalter common with the other Corvinian bindings is the edge of the codex, which is basically identical with the so-called Buda type painted-gilded edge of the velvet-bound Corvinas. This edge type, which later is present exclusively on the velvet-bound codices, is still combined with leather binding on this piece.

All considered, the case study of the Beatrix Psalter offered new starting points for several aspects in the research of Corvinas, and at the same time it elucidated the specific operation of the Buda workshop around 1480: its main characteristic was the heterogeneity of masters, motifs, elements of style, and techniques even within a single codex. It resulted in an exciting patchwork characteristic to Buda. The codices thus prepared became models for the later Hungarian production.

II. The Corvinas in Herzog August’s representation

The problem constituting the centre of the thesis was also offered by the codex descriptions. This is the question of provenance, how the Corvinas came to be owned by Herzog August. There seemed to be a contradiction between the sources speaking about this on the one hand, and the codices as well as the 17th century catalogues on the other hand.

Hermann Conring’s work entitled *De bibliotheca Augusta*, written by the great polyhistor and lawyer as Duke August’s counsellor in 1661, was considered the main source for the codices’ arrival to Wolfenbüttel by earlier literature. This writing states that the Corvinas were bought for a great sum by August in Hungary (!) during his trips to the emperors in Vienna. This affirmation is quite problematic, since it is known that the Duke travelled to Vienna twice, in 1628 and in 1629, nevertheless, according to the catalogue kept by him, the Corvinas were already in his possession at that time. In case of a few Corvinas it is also known where they were before arriving to Duke August’s collection, and this was not Vienna in any of
the cases. It is also noteworthy that Conring mentioned only two groups of documents by name in the chapter presenting the enormous library collection: certain copies made in France and the Corvinas.

I therefore tried to find out the motives behind this emphatic, but obviously false statement regarding the Viennese provenance in Conring’s work, which was published probably with the Duke’s consent. Since the available facts did not offer a solution, the analysis of the codices’ function occurred as a possible line of research. Therefore I scrutinized the wider context of the main source (Conring), the literary production of the Wolfenbüttel court relevant for the topic. The analysis revealed that the Corvinas were not only present in Conring’s work, they played a role in Duke August’s courtly representation, which had for its leading motifs pietas and eruditio. Among other things the luxury codices originating from King Matthias’ court became the symbols of the latter, the erudition of August. Moreover, the entire content of the Fonzio Corvina was published by the Duke with the collaboration of Georg Rehm from Nuremberg (1612), thus the codex had a place among August’s “own works” as well. In fact Conring’s De bibliotheca Augusta can be numbered among the literary works serving the ducal representation. Another important consideration completed this observation, namely that the character of the literary works produced within the ducal court’s circle of influence was deeply determined by the patterns of the court’s cultural space. This means that, according to the declared or latent rules of courtly literature, it was allowed to write about certain subjects only within the framework of certain genres and in a given style. At this point it was already obvious that the text considered as the main source for the Wolfenbüttel provenance could hardly be used for researching the actual provenance, since it could have been greatly influenced by the requirements of the ducal representation and the courtly literary traditions.
I began the detailed analysis of Conring’s work after these preliminaries. My aim was to understand exactly the mentions of the Corvinas in the work and to interpret the meaning arrived at, firstly from the perspective of the work’s own context and inner world, secondly from the point of view of the Wolfenbüttel ducal court, thirdly from the direction of European reception of the Corvinas. In the course of the analysis, following one of the most important theoreticians of baroque literature, W. Barner, I used only the textual instruments of the age: the precepts of rhetoric and logic, the textbooks of the age, the author’s erudition, the conclusions which could be drawn from education, the generic requirements of the given period and place/places, the complexity of genres usual in past ages, the characteristics of the generic tradition, the elements of the content especially important for the age, as well as the characteristics of the wider period, the middle-German protestant Late Humanism and Early Baroque.

The conclusions that can be drawn are the following:

1. One of the main sources of Hermann Conring’s *De bibliotheca Augusta* was a work entitled *Bibliotheca Augusta (…), quae est Wolferbyti*, written by Johann Schwartzkopf, chancellor of Wolfenbüttel, twelve years earlier (1649). Conring took the passages referring to the Corvinas entirely from Schwartzkopf’s text. Therefore Schwartzkopf’s text must constitute the starting point.

2. Both Schwartzkopf’s and Conring’s works, according to the requirements of courtly literary production, are first of all laudations, all other generic characteristics (e.g. in case of Conring treatise-like features, in Schwartzkopf’s work pamphlet-like traits) are subordinated to this. Contrary to our expectations, these are not praises of libraries, but in case of both works we may speak of praises of rulers.

3. Accordingly, the formation of these texts was primarily determined by the conventions of the praise of rulers inherited from the Antiquity. Beginning with the Ancient
Times many laudations, as well as the praeceptum literature, and mainly the theoretical works of the late antique rhetorician, Menandros have demonstrated that one of the basic organizing principles of a person’s praise was the consideration of the four cardinal virtues (or some of them). (This at the same time shows the permanent close connection between moral philosophy and rhetoric.) In August’s case the authors emphasized the ruler’s prudence. *In the analyzed works the library first of all symbolizes the ruler’s prudence.*

4. Since within this framework the library has an important role, the genre of the examined works could be determined as *praise of libraries combined with the praise of rulers.*

5. While I was trying to outline this rare genre, its parts, origin, and parallels, an exceedingly complex image emerged. As far as I could find out, it had no explicit antecedents in this form either during the Antiquity or the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, its elements and topoi had. As I have mentioned before, the form and partly the content as well were given by the thousand years old rules and linguistic set of the praise of rulers. Most of its topoi originated from a group of motifs extant since the Antiquity and usually connected to the praise of erudition. (A good example to this collection of topoi is Richard de Bury’s *Philobiblon,* a work that in this respect is related to the examined genre.) The praise of libraries embedded in the praise of rulers (and the praise of rulers in general) has a thematic connection which has been neglected so far and which may offer a key to the interpretation of the works belonging to this genre: the literature on political theory. These laudations centred on the ruler’s prudence without exception touch upon the issue of the good ruler and are related to the period’s literature on the theory of the state. (If one would like to be even more precise, they are also connected to the moral philosophy of the age which is inseparable from the problem
of the good ruler.) Their central idea is the common good, the *bonum publicum*, which the ruler must serve.

6. It seems that the above mentioned elements began to merge into the discussed genre in the period when there was already a significant number of princely libraries and when the larger public too came to believe that these conferred prestige on their owner and represented a certain value. This happened sometime in the 15th century under the auspices of Renaissance Humanism. Interestingly enough, however, no praises of Italian rulers completed with the praises of libraries are known from the Italian production. It cannot be excluded that Italian humanists first wrote such texts about Matthias Corvinus and his library. In this case the birth of this rare genre may be connected with the Corvinian Library.

7. Curiously the earliest parallels to the texts praising Duke August and his library can be found in the similar works written about King Matthias. These are the following: a poem on Matthias’ library entitled *De laudibus Augustae Bibliothecae* (1480–1490) by the Florentine humanist Naldo Naldi and a letter by Bartolomeo della Fonte, another Florentine humanist, to Matthias Corvinus (January 30th, 1489). In a certain measure the report of Johann Alexander Brassicanus, a German humanist, about his 1525 visit to Buda published in the foreword of his Salvianus edition in 1530 (VD16 S 1511) can also be numbered among these, although it was not authored by an Italian scholar. All three works can be considered praises of libraries embedded in the praises of rulers presenting the above described characteristics. These texts are analyzed in detail from the point of view of their genre in the thesis.

The politico-theoretical background can be identified exactly in the case of Naldi’s work. Apart from the all-encompassing influence of the Italian podestà-literature, of the mirrors for princes, and of Cicero’s *De officiis*, Naldi drew on his narrowest intellectual medium, the ideas of Florentine Platonism marked by the name of Marsilio Ficino (e.g. the prece-
dence of the *vita contemplativa* and the motif of the philosopher king).

The thesis contains a detailed discussion of Naldi’s work from the perspective of political theory. Among other issues, I tried to offer a solution to a few long unresolved questions, such as the presence of the Law of the Twelve Tables in the work or the occurrence of the topic of medicine at a certain point (why exactly there?). The great influence of Cicero’s *De officiis* on Naldi is also explained. The new approach was completed by palaeographical observations. I pointed out that the glossator of the codex, who wrote the “list of authors” on the margins, is not identical with hand that copied the main text. The main text was copied in Florence, while the marginal notes were probably written in Buda by a person educated in Italy. This is important because the primary visual effect of the codex pages, the catalogue-like character conferred by the glosses of the author names determined (and somewhat misleadingly shifted the emphases in) the research of Naldi’s work for centuries. The example reveals the important role paratexts could play in the texts’ later, either scientific or other kinds of interpretations.

8. The praise of libraries combined with the praise of rulers written about Duke August by Schwartzkopf (and Conring) has naturally closer parallels, prefigurations. The most important source for both works with respect to their ideas, genre, and content was a short writing entitled *De bibliothecis syntagma* (1602) by the Flemish philologist, Justus Lipsius. I tried to demonstrate in my thesis that, contrary to the statements of previous literature, this work is also more than a treatise on library history. It is a praise of libraries combined with the praise of rulers, in which the ancient libraries are in fact exempla, parts of a rhetorical comparison.

In case of Schwartzkopf’s and Conring’s works the most important ideological and politico-theoretical background is constituted by Justus Lipsius’ Neo-stoicism (with
connections to 15th century antecedents and to Machiavelli), which permeated all the works of the Flemish scholar, thus the *De bibliothecis syntagma* as well, as I have tried to demonstrate in my dissertation. Neo-stoicism could have been transmitted to Schwartzkopf directly by his teacher, Christoph Heidmann, professor of rhetoric at the University of Helmstedt. Heidmann was a great admirer of Lipsius, and he also authored a work about libraries, an oration celebrating Duke Friedrich Ulrich’s donation of his book collection to the University of Helmstedt (*Oratio de Bibliotheca Iulia*, 1622). I analyzed Heidmann’s oration as well from the point of view of the genre proving that it belongs to the examined category, and that it transmits emphatically Lipsius’ idea about the good ruler, who labours for the well-being of his people day and night. Schwartzkopf must have been familiar with this work; however Lipsius’ *De bibliothecis syntagma* was a closer source. Conring not only borrowed automatically Schwartzkopf’s Lipsian ideas together with the text, but at the same time followed his own convictions, being himself a great admirer of Justus Lipsius, even if he did not agree with him in all details. In the case of Conring, however, the influence of contemporary Aristotelianism can also be perceived.

9. I analyzed Schwartzkopf’s work in detail. After I determined its genre, outlined its structure, and pointed out the direct borrowings from Lipsius, I mainly tried to present how well this brief text reflects the process by which the new library placed in a separate building had become an independent element in Duke August’s princely representation. The birth of the “Bibliotheca Augusta” name (the act of naming itself signals that a separate entity emerged) is almost tangible in Schwartzkopf’s work, since the author rewrote an epigram (a Sannazaro paraphrase) by Heinrich Julius Scheurl of Wolfenbüttel especially for this occasion, and thus he created the syntagma “Bibliotheca Augusta”. The text presents the library partly as a real space, partly as an ideal one. The writing is a
part of August’s courtly representation system; in fact it
demonstrates the Duke’s princely prudence and erudition.
Curiously Schwartzkopf only mentions the Corvinas in the
part presenting the library collection. He states here that Au-
gust bought them in Vienna. From a rhetorical point of view
King Matthias’ library and the Corvinas function as exempla
and at the same time as the elements of comparison necessary
for a laudation. The untrue statement about the Viennese pro-
venance may have been inspired by representational claims:
the Corvinas (“through Vienna”) may have formed a spatial
connection as well between the great bibliophile predecessor,
Matthias Corvinus and the court of the similarly erudite Au-
gustus, realizing thus the act of translatio studiorum/Musarum.

10. Since Conring worked basically from Schwartz-
kopf’s text, he borrowed this without a change. Nevertheless, I
considered important to analyze Conring’s monumental oe-
vre as well, in order to clarify once and for all the misunder-
standing in research caused by it. In the course of the analysis
I laid great emphasis on the precise determination of the genre.
For this I used the internal characteristics of the text and the
contemporary precepts of rhetoric and logic, as well as Con-
ring’s preserved correspondence, in which the author specifi-
cally mentioned the generic considerations regarding the work
in question. I found that the polyhistor had originally intended
to write a scholarly treatise, but at a certain point had decided
to compose a laudation. From this moment on the praise de-
termined the structure of the text. The generic change can be
well perceived in it. I also demonstrated that this work is in
fact a praise of rulers, in which the library symbolizes the
prince’s prudence. The rhetorical and logical analysis led to
several interesting results: it was discovered that Conring had
developed the inventio on the basis of Aristotelian categories;
furthermore, it was interesting to observe to what extent the
work mirrors the rhetorical tendencies of the age, the emphatic
amplification, the efforts to amaze (admiratio, argutum,
acutezza), and in its style the Ciceronianism characterizing political speeches and stressing the concinnitas.

As a next step I looked at every passage mentioning the Corvinas, and found that Conring in this respect had followed Schwartzkopf entirely. He took over the idea of the Viennese provenance, and although he made small changes on the given passage, he did not modify it essentially. In fact, he rendered the text more obscure. Otherwise Conring used King Matthias’ library as an exemplum and as an element of comparison. However, it was a fairly important exemplum. It can be well perceived that the Hungarian royal library had great prestige in the eyes of the European intelligentsia. For Conring King Matthias’ library was the most honoured legendary collection north of the Alps besides the Heidelberg library. From among the extant libraries only the Mazarin collection and Duke August bibliotheca surpassed it.

11. At a certain point Conring lengthily quotes J. A. Brassicanus’ already mentioned report on his visit to Buda. I discovered that this Brassicanus text had a basic impact on the later views about the Corvinian Library. This was the only lengthy source to give significant information on the Corvinas to later generations. We must not forget, however, that this text is in fact a praise of libraries combined with the praise of rulers with a great amount of “information” that was included only because of the genre. These data (in many cases topoi in fact), the special emphases in the text, as well as Brassicanus’ personal interests were passed on as facts into the later scholarly literature. (Such a misleading piece if information is the overemphasized presence of Greek codices in the Corvinian Library. Although there really were Greek-language manuscripts in Buda, Brassicanus, on account of his special interest, focused on them specially. This may have led later to the highlighted role of the Greek books within the collection.) Probably Brassicanus’ text served as the basic source on the Corvinian Library for Schwartzkopf and Conring as well. We can
see that the analyzed texts in fact draw on a hierarchical structure of sources which must be read with caution even in themselves, not to mention the cases when they were placed into a special context, such as the representation of the ducal court where they served the new objectives of the new medium.

Although the thesis focused on the Wolfenbüttel Corvinas and the analysis of two actual texts, it is hoped that the presented case study demonstrates the “operation” of the early modern sources on the Corvinian Library: their character and contexts, the way in which they assumed a radically new meaning when placed into a new context. The royal books getting into the context of a princely court could resume their representational function. Therefore the texts about the Corvinian Library can be treated as real sources only with the greatest circumspection.

*The history of the Corvinas after Duke August: “the thirteen Corvinas”*

The case of the thirteen Corvinas offers a good image on the operation and fluctuation of the early modern reception of the Corvinian Library. The number of authentic Wolfenbüttel Corvinas had been increased by the end of the 17th century. This can be explained basically by two reasons: on the one hand the general European prestige of the Corvinian Library, on the other hand the particular esteem for the Corvinas in Wolfenbüttel, which became interwoven with the regard for the founder, Duke August and his library, and resulted from the local courtly representation, in which, as we already have seen, the Corvinas played an organic part. At the same time the interest in the Corvinas became stronger all over Europe after the liberation of Buda in 1686.

The last part of the thesis reconstructs an interesting story on the basis of separately published correspondences. It mirrors well the livening historical interest in the Corvinas in
Hungary and it throws a light on the role of Hungarian peregrinating students in making known at home the sources referring to Hungary but preserved abroad. The letters also reveal how vague and hard to interpret these pieces of information were. The investigation was started by the Menyhért Szmertniki’s letter (July 16th, 1703). Other participants were the Jesuit historian Gábor Hevenesi, Cardinal Archbishop Lipót Kollonich, the envoy of Hanover sojourning in Vienna, Bodo von Oberg, the Hanoverian Court Counsellor Jobst Christoph Reiche, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz, who also supervised the Wolfenbüttel ducal library between 1691 and 1716. The objects of the investigation were approximately ten red silk bound codices containing texts about Hungarian history, which were supposed to be in the library of Wolfenbüttel and the existence of which was heralded in Hungary by the peregrinating students. I tried to prove in the thesis that the letters spoke about the “extended” group of Wolfenbüttel Corvinas, which were not identified with the looked for material even by Leibnitz.

The case study also exemplifies the process through which a representational phenomenon later became a scientific problem. The issue of the thirteen Wolfenbüttel Corvinas still raises difficult questions for researchers.

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All considered the case of the Wolfenbüttel Corvinas draws attention to the fact that in the early modern reception of the Corvinian Library various fields meet, such as the history of ideas, the history of mentalities, the history of philology and literature, etc. Researchers must take all these into consideration if they do not want to miss their aim, the reliable exploration of the past.

Translated by Ágnes Korondi