

Bishop John Vitez and Early Renaissance Central Europe: The Humanist Kingmaker. By Tomislav Matić.

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Tomislav Matić has carried out a long overdue task of Central European historiography with his recent book. The topic he tackles in the volume reviewed here is of no secondary importance regarding the history of the region. John (Vitéz) of Zredna—whose life Matić attempts to grasp—was one of the most influential men in the Kingdom of Hungary in the fifteenth century. He started his career as a notary, became the bishop of Oradea (Várad in Hungarian), later the archbishop of Esztergom, and served two kings of Hungary, Ladislaus V (1444–1457) and Matthias (1458–1490), as chancellor. His cultural influence, however, may be even more important than his career as a statesman: he is often heralded as the first humanist of medieval Hungary.¹ In spite of his undeniably enormous significance, the only comprehensive biography about him until the publication of the reviewed book was the work of Vilmos Fraknói, written in 1879.² While the achievements of Fraknói as a historian are hard to deny, the mentioned book is by no means compliant with the standards of modern history writing, not just due to the advances of scholarship in the late nineteenth and twentieth century that produced substantial new knowledge, but also because of the methodology and handling of sources. For example, on the first pages of the book, the source of a piece of information is only referenced as “the charter [i.e., the charter mentioned, but not further described in the main text]

1 That John (Vitéz) of Zredna was the first humanist in the Kingdom of Hungary is a well-established commonplace in Hungarian historiography from the nineteenth century onwards. For a more recent iteration of this point, see Zsupán, “János Vitéz’ Book of Letters,” 119–22. One may find valuable insights into John’s role in the appearance of humanism in the Carpathian Basin in Kiss, “Origin Narratives.”

2 Fraknói, *Vitéz János*.

in the Provincial Archives of Zagreb,³ without any further information that could help the curious reader to locate the exact document. While more recently, in the 1990s and early 2000s, Ferenc Szakály and András Kubinyi attempted to outline the political activities of John (Vitéz) of Zredna in several articles,⁴ these texts clearly cannot supplant a proper, exhaustive biography, hence the book by Matic is certainly a welcome addition to the scholarly literature.

The book structures the life of John according to the roles he assumed during his lifetime—the politician, the priest, and the humanist—and devotes separate chapters to each role. That particular mode of biography-writing is far from new; for example, Michael Clanchy used a similar framework in his seminal book about the life of Peter Abelard.⁵ However, Matic introduces a chronological division: he covers the events before the reign of King Matthias separately from when he was the ruler of Hungary, thus duplicating each chapter devoted to each different role. Therefore, we have a total of seven chapters with a separate *Introduction*. The *Introduction* mainly situates the book itself according to the historiographical background and has a short section about the family of John Vitéz. On the one hand, this highlights that Vitéz was mainly viewed in past historical research as a humanist, and his political and ecclesiastical endeavors were often overlooked. On the other hand, the *Introduction* expounds that the bishop came from a Slavonian noble family that cannot be considered one of the leading clans in the region despite having some distinguished members.

The second chapter mainly deals with the role of John in Hungarian politics before King Matthias. According to Matic, John started his career in the lower ranks of the Hungarian chancellery in the period of Sigismund, king of Hungary (1387–1437) and Holy Roman Emperor (1433–1437), and gained more influence with the help of John of Dominis, not through the patronage of Matthias of Gotalovac, as previous research usually claimed. The first important political endeavor in which Vitéz played a role was the mission sent to Krakow to the Polish king, who later became ruler of Hungary as Wladislas I (1440–1444). Matic once again questions the notions of past historians regarding this mission, as he states that Vitéz was not neglected and left without proper reward after the accession of the said Wladislas, as has previously been claimed, especially by Ferenc Szakály. It was simply not possible to reward him immediately after the services he performed in favor of the new king in Krakow due to the chaotic state of the Hungarian Kingdom. According to Matic, Vitéz eventually got his proper reward when he became the provost of Oradea. His ecclesiastical career was boosted when his superior, John of Dominis,

3 Fraknói, *Vitéz János*, 4.

4 Szakály, “Vitéz János”; Kubinyi, “Vitéz János és Janus Pannonius”; Kubinyi, “Vitéz János.”

5 Clanchy, *Abelard*.

bishop of Oradea, was killed during the battle of Varna in 1444, and due to the backing of the immensely powerful John Hunyadi, John (Vitéz) of Zredna became his successor. Matic argues that Hunyadi probably aided Vitéz in seizing the bishopric because he thought the newcomer cleric could easily be controlled. While this can only be considered a conjecture, it is sure that the close partnership formed between John Hunyadi and John (Vitéz) of Zredna in the following years helped the new bishop to enter the scene of Europe-wide diplomacy. However, he reached the height of his pre-Matthias career when he became the privy chancellor of Ladislaus V in 1453. According to Matic, he evolved into one of the most powerful men in the court of the young king. A breaking point came in his career when he became entangled in the conspiracy against Ulrich of Celje, led by Ladislaus Hunyadi, the elder son of John Hunyadi and his successor as the head of the family estates, as the older Hunyadi died during an outbreak of plague in 1456 after he defeated the Ottomans at Belgrade. However, following a short incarceration, he became close to King Ladislaus once again, as he was in his court when the ruler left this world at a surprisingly young age.

The third chapter mainly focuses on the matters in the life of John that may be connected to his bishopric. Matic argues that Vitéz was probably not very well off during his first years of being a prelate, mainly due to his lack of personal wealth. Nevertheless, as the bishop was one of the main landowners in the region of Oradea, he routinely participated in everyday matters concerning his assets. He also tried to become a part of the local alliance system of landowners by associating himself with Albert Losonci. Matic also points out that John mainly delegated duties connected to the bishopric to clerics who were reasonably well educated but were also newcomers at Oradea, as he could easily control these individuals.

The fourth chapter covers the cultural endeavors of John before Matthias became king of Hungary. The most important claim of this chapter is that John, who could not rely on the power of a distinguished family, needed to enhance his personal prestige to really stand his ground among the great lords of Hungary. According to Matic, he tried to achieve this by emulating the strategy of Italian princes and gaining a reputation by becoming a patron of the arts. Matic argues that Vitéz mainly achieved this in two ways: on the one hand, he sent material gifts to humanists and financed the studies of men interested in humanism. On the other hand, he also composed a considerable collection of books. This is a quite new approach to the humanism of John and innovative in the sense that scholarly literature has not considered the motivation for his becoming involved in the humanist movement. To completely understand the nature of the prestige he could achieve this way, we underscore that being a patron of the arts was probably not an effective way to gain the admiration of the great secular lords of Hungary, as humanism

did not have a high standing in the Carpathian Basin at the time.⁶ What plausibly really mattered regarding John's career were the relationships he built with influential diplomats, such as Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, through their shared interest in humanism. Basically, the humanistic elements of the eloquence of John, as well as his embeddedness in the international circles of humanist learning, which became more and more intertwined with diplomacy and state administration during the discussed period, ensured that Vitéz was apt to carry out diplomatic tasks of the highest importance.⁷ The book rightly concentrates on this international element by demonstrating, for example, the considerable fame John gained in Italy through individuals he supported.

The fifth chapter inaugurates the part of the book that discusses the endeavors of John during the reign of King Matthias by outlining the political activities of the prelate in these years. Matic argues that John was very influential in the court of King Matthias to the extent that he sometimes even acted against the will of his ruler. For example, Matic asserts that John most probably negotiated the fundamentals of a draft peace treaty between Matthias and Frederick III without the consent of the king, who was not particularly happy about the arrangements John made. According to the author, we may detect a clear political program in the actions of John: Matic thinks that his main aim was to keep up good and peaceful relations between Hungary and its neighbors, especially the Holy Roman Empire, in order to obtain enough resources to counteract the impending Ottoman attack. These policies faded away as King Matthias started becoming increasingly involved in the Bohemian Crusade against George Podebrady, king of Bohemia (1458–1471), eventually weakening John's influence. However, Matic argues that in fact he did not participate wholeheartedly in the conspiracy of 1471 that is often directly linked to him: in his opinion, John certainly was not one of the main plotters; he was instead just a mild supporter of the cause, with the probability that he saw the whole conspiracy as a means of exerting some concessions from Matthias. In line with that notion, Matic also claims that he escaped the conflict relatively untouched, and the famous house arrest that ended with his death was probably a result of him still keeping contact with the Polish king, whose son the schemers wanted to make the king of Hungary after the conspiracy was basically shattered.

The topic of the sixth chapter is the ecclesiastical affairs John was involved in during the reign of Matthias. Certainly, the most important event in that timeframe and the career of John as a prelate was his becoming the archbishop of Esztergom and,

6 John himself wrote lengthily about the woeful state of the humanities in the Kingdom of Hungary in his Epistolary, see: Iohannes Vitéz de Zredna: Epistolarium, letter 2, sentences 14–16. Boronkai, ed., *Iohannes Vitéz de Zredna*, 38.

7 This was rightly pointed out by Kubinyi, "Vitéz János," 78.

thus, head of the Hungarian church. He quickly seized control over his diocese, partly thanks to the loyal men he could rely on. However, Matic points out that his influence was limited by the strong-willed king Matthias, even in mainly ecclesiastical matters. For example, during the longstanding affair of the bishopric of Zagreb, the king was often unfavorable towards Demetrius Čupor despite his being an ally of John. The seventh and final chapter is devoted to the cultural enterprises John undertook between the accession of Matthias and his death. Matic demonstrates that John was very well respected in international circles of humanists at the height of his career, largely thanks to his protégés spreading his fame, among whom Janus Pannonius was the most well-known. John also devoted considerable attention to his library, acquiring and emending several manuscripts during the mentioned timeframe. According to Matic, he was mainly interested in classics and theological and astronomical works, but we may also find some medical books in his library. It is also worth noting that his interest in astronomy, which he probably picked up when he was a student at the Viennese university, continued to define his intellectual orientation to a certain extent. His biggest intellectual project of the time was unquestionably the founding of the University of Bratislava, which turned out to be quite short-lived.

As the lengthy bibliography shows, Matic utilizes an ample number of primary sources as well as a good amount of academic literature. He bases his research on an apt combination of narrative and archival sources and applies the necessary amount of criticism toward them. Regarding the sources, we may mention a small but not insignificant issue: the volume only cites the 1568 edition of the *Rerum ungaricarum decades*, a work about the history of Hungary by Antonio Bonfini, the court historian of King Matthias, despite the fact that the text has a modern critical edition from the first half of the twentieth century that is accessible online.⁸ As the totality of a historical topic may never be fully grasped, we probably should not condemn the author for leaving out certain aspects of the life of John. However, it probably would have elevated the already substantial importance of the book if it had also incorporated some remarks on John of Zredna as a writer. Matic devotes a considerable amount of attention to his humanism and his activities as a patron of the arts, but his literary output, which mainly consists of his letters and speeches, is not considered lengthily in the reviewed book. It is probably also worth mentioning that according to the present state of research, bishop John never used the surname Vitéz during his life; he was most probably simply called John of Zredna. While Matic mentions the problems concerning the name of John in the *Introduction*, he still uses the form John Vitéz throughout the book, which is not the most precise way to name the prelate he is writing about, but certainly justifiable due to the fact that the name John Vitéz is widely known and recognized throughout academia, while the form John of Zredna has yet to become broadly used.

8 Fögel, Iványi, and Juhász, ed., *Antonius de Bonfinis*.

In conclusion, we may say that Tomislav Matić has authored an important book that will surely be useful for students of fifteenth-century Central Europe. This volume, written with immense knowledge both about John (Vitéz) of Zredna and his period, can genuinely serve as a modern and comprehensive biography of the mentioned prelate. Maybe the most valuable parts of the book are those focused on political history and the role John played in policy-making, as they not only expound the strategies and motives that defined the political actions of the bishop but also contain a large amount of relevant information regarding the period that may be immensely useful for researchers—there is no exhaustive, scholarly handbook about the fifteenth-century history of the Carpathian Basin, thus if one wants to navigate among the various political events of the period, they must rely on books like the one reviewed here. The separate analysis of John as a bishop is also a worthwhile contribution of Matić, as this aspect of the life of the famous politician and humanist is often overlooked. One may also read a good overview of John the humanist and patron of the arts in this book that looks at the endeavors of the mentioned prelate from a quite new perspective.

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