The Corvina Library and the Lost Royal Hungarian Archive

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Within a single fortnight in 1526, two of the greatest collections of Hungarian manuscripts were lost. On 29 August of that year, the Turks defeated the Hungarian army on the field of Mohács. The young king of Hungary, Louis II (1516–26), was trampled and killed in the rout. News of the catastrophe reached the capital, Buda, on the evening of the next day. During that night, the citizens of Buda loaded wagons and boats by torchlight and buried what they could not take with them. Meanwhile in the palace, the king's widow, Mary of Habsburg, ordered that the royal archive be transferred to a barge and conveyed upstream along the Danube to the relative safety of Hungary’s second city, Bratislava (Pozsony, Pressburg). Shortly after negotiating the Danube bend, which is about twenty miles north of Buda, the barge sank somewhere near the archiepiscopal city of Esztergom. Almost the entirety of the Hungarian royal archive thus lies today in the mud of the Danube. Only a few fragments which were either separately transported by cart or left behind in the royal palace, survived the general ruin.¹

In her flight, Queen Mary of Habsburg took with her a missal from the library of the royal chapel.² She did not, however, attempt to rescue the royal library that had been amassed by her husband’s predecessor, King Matthias Corvinus (1458–90). Possibly, she was thwarted by the chains that bound the most precious volumes to the shelves. Mary's haste was not groundless, for only two days later Turkish raiders had reached the outskirts of Buda, effectively blocking the routes of escape.³ It was not, however, until 12 September that Suleiman, the Turkish sultan, made his triumphant entry into the city. In the intervening period, some books were evidently pilfered from the unguarded library.⁴ These losses were, however, as nothing compared to the ruin which followed the entry of Turkish troops into Buda and their ransack both
of the royal palace and of the library itself. Nevertheless, although the
Ottoman soldiery tore off the precious gilt and enamel furnishings of
many of the volumes held there, a good number were rescued for the
sultan. These were taken back in Suleiman’s train to Constantinople and
deposited in the seraglio. There, some were given away as gifts by the
sultan to visiting ambassadors. Others were stolen and sold on the open
market. The remaining volumes were, however, left in a condition of
neglect, their provenance forgotten until the last half of the nineteenth
century. Thus perished what had been at its height in the 1480s the
second largest library in Christendom.

We can in the case of the royal library founded by Matthias Corvinus
arrive at some estimate of the loss. In its heyday, the so-called Corvina
library held between 2,000 and 2,500 codices, almost entirely manu-
scripts. Only 216 survive today, and these are dispersed as far afield as
Italy, Ireland, Spain and the United States. Perhaps some more survive
given that, contrary to common opinion, not all were marked with the
Hungarian royal coat of arms and with Matthias’s insignia of the black
raven. In the case of the Hungarian royal archive, by contrast, we can
only make guesses as to its contents and to the nature of the loss.
Although many private archives have survived, yielding altogether the
texts of well over 300,000 individual charters, we cannot be sure that
these are at all representative of the type of material that was housed
in the royal archive. Since these private collections mostly originate
from Transylvania and the north of the kingdom, it may well be that
they convey a distorted impression of medieval Hungarian institutions
and practices.

The loss of the royal archive and the history of the Corvina library
carry additional implications for our understanding of medieval Hun-
garian history as a whole. Without the royal archive we have little way
of assessing just how the kingdom was administered and the extent to
which Hungary was effectively governed. Surviving charters are in their
form, use of seals, calligraphy and language almost identical to those
published in western Europe. Their number is, however, much smaller.
More than 40,000 documents thus survive from thirteenth-century
Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands. From Hungary we have
over the same century only several hundred. More specifically, from
the reign of Philip Augustus of France (1206–23) over 1,200 charters are
extant, but from the reign of his Hungarian contemporary, Andrew II
(1205–35), a mere 300. Likewise, from fourteenth-century Hungary the
texts of several tens of thousands of charters remain, but from England
and France at this time quantities which reach well beyond a million.