

A Few Considerations Regarding the Name of Matthias Corvinus

IOAN-AUREL POP

*Not only books have a fate of their own (*Habent sua fata libelli*), but also the names of certain individuals.*

THE FAMILY of King Matthias Corvinus (1458–1590) has long been the object of complex investigations, but also of historiographical and even political-national disputes. The main reason behind these disputes is the scarcity, the ambiguity and the distortion—deliberate or not and operated since the Middle Ages—of the data regarding this issue. Another reason is the occasional interpretation of the data in question from the vantage point of modern and contemporary mentalities, of the national perspectives that dominated the investigation of the past and other fields of spiritual creation starting chiefly with the 18th century.

The debate has been structured on several levels, focusing on the ethnic origin of the family, on its place of origin, on the denomination embraced by its members, on the precise identity of the paternal grandmother of Matthias, on other relatives of the Hunyadis, and even on the names they bore. No serious historian would nowadays question the Romanian origin of the family, even

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if they may rightfully discuss the importance played by this ethnic origin at that time. Still, beyond the significance of the medieval nation,¹ since this ethnic origin was mentioned even in the 15th century—in a neutral fashion, with admiration, or with contempt—it is the duty of the historian to take note of it and to interpret it. Also, it is almost certain that nearly all of the known family members were born in Transylvania and in Hungary, but it is difficult to say whether the more distant paternal ancestors of Matthias were themselves local Transylvanian Romanians or came from the lands south of the Carpathians. In what concerns their religious affiliation, we can only assume that the paternal grandfather of the king (*Vojk/Voicu*) and some of his relatives having Slavic-Romanian names, not present in the Catholic calendar (*Sorb/Șerb* or *Șerban*, *Radol/Radul*, *Magos/Mogoș*, another *Radul*), had initially been of the Byzantine rite, like most Romanians at that time. Elisabeth of Marsina (*Margina?* *Mușina?*), *Vojk*'s wife—probably coming from the *Marginea* district or from the Land of *Hațeg* (a member of the *Mușină* family of *Densuș*)—could have been a Catholic, in light of her given name, but she may have just as well belonged to another denomination.² Apart from two certain marital alliances with two Hungarian families belonging to the middle nobility—*Dengeleg* and *Rozgonyi*—the other known paternal relatives of Matthias are families of *knezes*, *voivodes*, and small Romanian nobles from the region of *Hunedoara-Hațeg*.³ Here, in the Land of *Hațeg*, the father of King Matthias had “co-owning brothers,”⁴ with whom he shared certain lands.

In Romanian historiography, the name of King Matthias Corvinus has always been a particular and distinct issue, given certain specific circumstances related to the specificity of the Romanian language, the origin of his family, and certain Romanian-Hungarian controversies that emerged together with nationalist doctrines in Central and Eastern Europe. More recently, exaggerated claims were made about “a true strategy concerning the use of onomastic errors”⁴ in Romanian historiography, as if a conspiracy well prepared by occult communist forces had caused deliberate distortions of some 14th century names. This is why we decided to discuss the name of the illustrious king of Hungary, born in Transylvania. Any Westerner, or anyone familiar with Catholicism and even with the Protestant doctrines, knows that the name Matthias or Mathias or Mathia (with several variants) comes from the homonymous apostle and was given to boys in Western Europe quite frequently in the past and more rarely nowadays. The feast of Matthias the Apostle was celebrated in the Catholic calendar of medieval Hungary on February 24 (in normal years) or on February 25 (in leap years). As the future king was born in the *Mech House* (later known as *Matthias House*) of *Cluj* (*Klausenburg*, *Kolozsvár*), in the *voivodate* of Transylvania, probably on 23 February 1443, he was given the name of

Matthias, in celebration of the apostle whose feast was celebrated the following day, on February 24.⁵ It is also possible that the future king was actually born on 24 February 1443, as suggested by a document issued by John Corvinus of Hunyadi (*Ioannes Corvinus de Huniad*) on 24 February 1495 (*in festo beati Matthiae apostoli*) in memory of his father and confirming a paternal donation to Jozsa of Som, deputy *comes* of Timiș.⁶ Besides, Nicholas Bethlen ordered that a sermon be delivered in memory of Matthias every year, precisely on the feast of Matthias the Apostle.⁷

In the Romanian environment, however, the name Matia, Mathias, or Matthias is not used and was never a given name. This might seem strange, since the Byzantine calendar does include the day of the saint in question. Thus, in the Romanian Orthodox calendar, the name of the saint—*Sfântul Apostol Matia*—is mentioned twice, once directly, on August 9, and once indirectly, on June 30, the feast of the 12 apostles. Of course, these were not major feasts and enjoyed little attention. They were merely names of saints in the calendar, and there were some for every day. At any rate, Romanians do not use the name Matthias. One name they do use, however, is that of Matthew the Evangelist (*Matei*), as the gospels and their authors were always mentioned by priests in front of the congregation. When later Romanian chroniclers (in the 17th century) began writing in the Romanian language, they rendered the name of the Hungarian king as *Matiaș* or *Mateiaș*, starting from the Hungarian name *Mátyás*.⁸ Quite possibly, in those days the name was pronounced not in the customary Romanian but in the Hungarian fashion, with the stress on the first syllable (*Mátiaș*). Interestingly enough, Slavonic documents from Moldavia mention a deacon named *Matiaș*, who lived at the time of Stephen the Great, but this is an isolated case.⁹ Romanian historians from Transylvania operated in the same fashion. For instance, in the late 18th century, Gheorghe Șincai constantly referred to “Matiaș, king of Hungary.”¹⁰ Even Nicolae Iorga—the greatest Romanian historian—systematically used the form *Matiaș*/*Mateiaș*. *Matiaș* gradually changed into *Mateiaș*, used in Romanian as a diminutive for *Matei*; the immediate consequence was that the king was renamed *Matei*. Consequently, modern Romanian historiography rendered the name Matthias as *Matei*. A. D. Xenopol, the author of the first critical synthesis of Romanian history (13 volumes published between 1896 and 1912 and relevant as a model even nowadays), systematically used the form *Matei Corvin*.¹¹ The form *Matei* was thus adopted in Romanian historiography and by the Romanian public.¹² Still, this was no occult “strategy,” but rather a particular case concerning the use of a proper name. Such situations are common in all historiographies, as proper names are adapted to the specificity of certain languages and become “invented,” adapted names, used by virtue of custom and of tradition, and in such cases no

one even suspects a conspiracy or an occult strategy. Precisely during the communist period, initially through the voice of Francisc Pall, the Cluj school of history pointed out the error generated by the confusion between the name of Matthias the Apostle—the actual name of the Hungarian king—and the name of Matthew the Evangelist, given to the sovereign by Romanian historians. Currently, historians and especially those specializing in the Middle Ages use the correct Romanian form *Matia*, but the name *Matei* is still solidly rooted in the popular mentality. It is used strictly by virtue of tradition, custom, and sometimes ignorance, but not because of a “strategic” pressure or because of the “immaturity of our medievalists,” as it has been tendentiously and disparagingly claimed.¹³ It is absurd to draw such dramatic and catastrophic conclusions starting from trivial, minor, and fully explained matters. We shall only mention here the fact that even a contemporary Italian chronicle (predating the death of the sovereign) mentioned the Hungarian king not as *Mattia*, as it would have been proper in the Italian language and as the name appears in other Italian documents, but as *Matteo*, the equivalent of the same *Matei*/Matthew.¹⁴ This Milanese example foreshadowed the onomastic diversification of the modern era and which began with the Late Middle Ages.

EQUALLY PROBLEMATIC is the cognomen *Corvinus*, *Corvin*, or *Corvinul*. Some things are certain in this respect.¹⁵ Albeit a famous sovereign, Matthias was still the target of ironic and sarcastic jabs because of his modest “Wallachian” origins, because of the fact that he was related to his “schismatic” subjects and had therefore taken a number of measures concerning them. *Valachorum regulus* is the customary title used by Bonfini (to whom we shall return later) for both Matthias and for Stephen the Great. A deliberate offense against the *Corvinus*—accused by the “pure blooded” Hungarian elite of being just a “Romanian princeling”—the title is quite flattering in the case of Stephen the Great, who had gained (in 1492) the admiration of the dead king’s chronicler for having protected Hungary by preventing the Tartars and the Ottomans from attacking Transylvania by way of Moldavia.¹⁶ *D’origine humile de progenie de Valacchia*¹⁷ was the formula (taken up by Stefano Magno) used by the Venetian bureaucracy to describe Matthias upon his coronation,¹⁸ drawing on the rumors circulating in Hungary. Also, Emperor Frederick III contemptuously declared that *Matthias was natus a Valacho patre*.¹⁹ It is true that the Romanian origin of the king was sometimes mentioned in a positive context in the foreign sources (thus, in 1475–1476 Venetian envoy Sebastiano Baduario praised the Romanians, whom he described as being the people of the “most serene king” Matthias, for their constant bravery in the battles against the Turks, “alongside his father and alongside his majesty”²⁰), but this did not

change the negative perception within the kingdom. It seems that the king himself did not always make a secret of this embarrassing origin: according to the late 16th century testimony of Polish author Varsevicius (Krzysztof Warszewiecki), who drew on the work of authors from the time of Matthias, the Hungarian king received some Moldavian envoys (whom the Polish author called “Wallachians”²¹) dispatched by Stephen the Great.²² When they began their message with the Romanian words “*Spune domnului nostru*” (Tell our lord...), he told them that if that was their language, then he did not need an interpreter.²³ Nicolae Iorga believed that Matthias’ refusal to use an interpreter after hearing the three Romanian words in question may have been “a way of showing that he understood the language of his ancestors, so similar to Latin.”²⁴ It is unclear whether the king could understand Romanian just because it was so close to Latin, or because it was the language of his ancestors and of some of his subjects. However, beyond any doubt, the episode confirms the similarity between Romanian and Latin. Still, by declaring in front of the entire court that he did not need an interpreter, after hearing a few words in Romanian, the great politician fueled and confirmed the rumors concerning his Romanian ascent. Generally speaking, the Hungarian elites knew that the king was “of humble Wallachian origin” and that his alleged descent from Sigismund of Luxembourg was more of an invention, just like the idea of his kinship with the Basarab princes of Wallachia. At any rate, princes or not, kinship with a “schismatic” Romanian dynasty, whose members were vassals to the Hungarian kings, did not automatically bring with it the prestige desired by the sovereign of a Catholic country like Hungary. Still, the obvious connection between the king and the Romanians (rumors about it were circulating all over the place!), as well as the presence of the raven holding a ring in its beak on the family escutcheon were two important elements that could be used in order to “ennoble” the sovereign. The one entrusted with this task was the Ascoli-born Italian secretary and lecturer to Queen Beatrice, Antonio Bonfini (Antonius Bonfinius in Latin), who wrote (precisely in order to demonstrate the Roman origin of the king) so expressively about the Latin origin of the Romanians: “For the Romanians are descended from Romans, as indicated until today by their language which, even if they were surrounded by various barbarian peoples, did not perish . . . Swollen by the barbarian wave, they [the Roman colonies and legions in Dacia, our note] still exulted the Roman language and, in order to keep it at all cost, fought more fiercely to preserve their language than they did in order to preserve their life.”²⁵ For many foreigners, someone’s descent from the Romanians could only be honorable and glorious, as the Romanians in question (regardless of whether they lived in Transylvania and Hungary or in Wallachia and Moldavia) possessed two great qualities, in the context of that

time: 1. they were descended from the great and noble Roman people, and 2. they were bravely fighting for Christianity in the crusade against the Turks. Bonfini knew for a fact that the Romanians were the descendants of the Romans, that they had always fought bravely to preserve their identity and keep the Ottomans at bay, and that King Matthias was of Romanian origin (on his fathers' side, the side that mattered in those days). From here there was just one small step to constructing a credible genealogy for the king, related to an illustrious Roman family. After all, if Romanians were descended from the Roman colonists and legionnaires, and Matthias was himself a Romanian, then he most likely descended from a Roman family. Since the king's father was a Romanian, and Romanians were descended from the Romans—as all humanists knew and wrote—, then one did not have to invent a Roman origin. One merely had to find a suitable illustrious Roman family. In this respect, one valuable clue was already available, namely, the raven (*corvus*, *corvinus*) holding a ring in its beak and featured on the family coat of arms. Thus, in October 1486, the king was presented with the book called *De Corvine domus origine libellus* (Book on the origin of the House of Corvinus), in which it was “proved” that the illustrious King Matthias was descended from the family of Valerius Volusus²⁶ or *Valerius Messala Corvinus*,²⁷ a Roman nobleman whose ascent actually predated Rome itself and whose illustrious descendants had reached the area of the Danube and of the Carpathians, where the Romanian people was born.²⁸ Of course, the occasional ironies concerning the modest and uncertain Wallachian origin of the king continued to circulate, but, by finding an ancestry in the Roman Valerius, Bonfini immensely pleased his royal patron and came up with a name that remained in historiography. In a later hypothesis, the same Bonfini spoke about a possible descent of Matthias from King Sigismund, also starting from the presence of the raven on the family escutcheon. Thus, in the history dedicated to the Hungarians and completed after the death of Matthias (in 1496), the Italian historian included both the version of the descent from the illustrious Roman family and that of the descent from Sigismund. Bonfini and many other people knew quite well that these were merely hypothetical constructs or oral traditions, but they continued to circulate.

At any rate, the name Corvinus remained in use, but we believe it can only be used in the case of Matthias and of his descendants, namely, his only son, John (deceased in 1504), and his only male grandson, Christopher (deceased in 1505). Of course, Matthias's granddaughter, Elisabeth, Christopher's sister, was herself a Corvinus, but she also died prematurely, in 1508, leaving no heirs. Thus, to use the name Corvinus in connection to Matthias' father is a serious

error and is most likely to create a lot of confusion. The name “John Corvinus” or “John Corvinus of Hunyadi,” coined during the Romantic period and used since the 19th century—even by some major historians²⁹—in connection to the name of the hero of Belgrade, a name present even today in some popularization texts, only comes to continue the fallacy. The Ban of Severin, Voivode of Transylvania and Comes of Timiș, also called in his youth by the name of *Johannes Olah*, had no idea that his name was also Corvinus. Besides, to call this great crusader “John Corvinus of Hunyadi” can create confusion, as his grandson, the only son of Matthias, used the exact same name for himself.

We see, thus, that not only books have a fate of their own (*Habent sua fata libelli*), but also the names of certain individuals. Although historians and philologists do not have the power to change certain customs and stereotypes deeply entrenched within collective mentality, they nevertheless have the professional obligation to point out the errors and indicate the correct forms, those that are conform to reality.

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Notes

1. Ioan-Aurel Pop, *Geneza medievală a națiunilor moderne (secolele XIII–XVI)* (Bucharest, 1998), passim; Stelian Brezeanu, *Identități și solidarități medievale: Controverse istorice* (Bucharest, 2002), passim.
2. Antonio Bonfini claims that this grandmother of King Matthias was of Greek origin, probably referring to the Orthodox Church—also called “Greek”—and to the fact that the Romanians belonged to this Church. See András Kubinyi, *Matthias rex* (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2008), 9–10. The possible kinship between Matthias Corvinus and the sultans Mehmed II, Bayezid II, and with Djem the pretender are not the direct object of the present study and are irrelevant when it comes to the names used by the family members or given to them by their contemporaries and successors.
3. We shall not discuss here the family of Nicolaus Olahus (1493–1568)—archbishop primate and regent of Habsburg Hungary—related through marriage with the Corvins: it seems that a sister of John Hunyadi—Marina—married a paternal uncle of the illustrious humanist and clergyman. This kinship is irrelevant for the purposes of the present study. The same applies to the alleged kinship between John Hunyadi and the Moldavian ruling family (also through one of Vojk’s daughters, married to Voivode Peter III, who ruled, intermittently, in 1447–1448). See Constantin Rezachevici, *Cronologia critică a domnilor din Țara Românească și Moldova a. 1324–1881*, vol. 1, *Secolele XIV–XVI* (Bucharest, 2001), 98, 192, 505.
4. Adrian Andrei Rusu, *Ioan de Hunedoara și românii din vremea sa: Studii* (Cluj-Napoca, 1999), 22.

5. Quite symptomatic is the fact that a boy named Matia/Matthias, the son of a Transylvanian voivode of Romanian origin and who would become an illustrious king of Hungary, was born in a town that *intra muros* was still dominantly German (as was the case with Cluj around 1440).
6. Erdődy Archiv (kept at the Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv), Vienna, no. 970; old classification: Ladula 94, fasc. 4, no. 5(6).
7. Maria Lupescu Makó, “Item lego... Gifts for the Soul in Late Medieval Transylvania,” *Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU* (Budapest) 8 (2002): 172 (n. 44), 180 (n. 85).
8. Grigore Ureche, *Letopisețul Țării Moldovei*, ed. P. P. Panaitescu (Bucharest, 1967), 63–78.
9. Silviu Văcaru, “Scriitori de acte din cancelaria domnească a lui Ștefan cel Mare,” in *Ștefan cel Mare la cinci secole de la moartea sa*, eds. Petronel Zahariuc and Silviu Văcaru (Iași, 2003), 93–106. We may be dealing with a Catholic deacon bearing the name of Matthias, a member of the Moldavian Catholic community of Hungarian extraction.
10. Gheorghe Șincai, *Cronica românilor*, ed. Florea Fugariu, vol. 2 (Bucharest, 1978), 154–194.
11. A. D. Xenopol, *Istoria românilor din Dacia Traiană*, 4th edition, ed. Al. Zub, vol. 2, *De la întemeierea țărilor române până la moartea lui Petru Rareș* (Bucharest, 1986), 252 sqq.
12. Camil Mureșanu, “Matia Corvinul: O imagine în opera cronicarilor și a câtorva istorici români,” in id., *Națiune, naționalism, evoluția naționalităților* (Cluj-Napoca, 1996), 131–136. He did not feel the need to explain why the name Matia is the correct one, but simply used it as such. An important role in the circulation of the name Matia in the 20th century could have been played by Vasile Pârvan, who was extremely interested in the history of the Middle Ages, especially around the year 1900. However, the great historian, who invariably used the form *Mathias*, quickly abandoned these pursuits and turned his attention to ancient history and to archaeology. See Vasile Pârvan, “Relațiile lui Ștefan cel Mare cu Ungaria,” in id., *Studii de istorie medievală și modernă*, ed. Lucian Nastasă (Bucharest, 1990), 129–206; originally published in *Convorbiri literare* (Iași) 39 (1905): 869–927, 1009–1080. In the long run, the form most widely known in Romania was that of *Matei Corvin*.
13. Rusu, 22.
14. *Cronica gestarum in partibus Lombardie et regionis Italie* [A.A. 1476–1482] (= *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, new ser., XXII, 3), ed. Giuliano Bonnanza (Città di Castello, 1904), 88.
15. We shall not discuss here the idea initiated by Petrus Ransanus and then taken up by Antonius Bonfinius, according to which Matthias’ father was born in the village of *Corvinus* (recently embraced by Péter Kulcsár), because it lacks credibility and has been seen as a deliberate distortion related to the propaganda meant to strengthen the descent of the family from the old Corvins. Contemporary Hungarian and Transylvanian sources make no mention of this fact. It is hard to believe that two foreigners, two Italians who resided in Hungary only for a limited period of time and much later, knew more about the birthplace of the king’s father and about the origin of his family than the local people.

16. Antonius de Bonfinis, *Rerum Hungaricarum decades*, eds. József Főgel, László Juhász, and Béla Iványi, vol. 3 (Lipsiae, 1936), 224, 243; vol. 4 (Budapest, 1941), 212. On a previous occasion, the Italian secretary had criticized Stephen.
17. "Of humble origin, of Wallachian extraction."
18. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, Codices, 6215, Ad annum 1457 [MV 1458], f. 6r.
19. Adolf Armbruster, *Romanitatea românilor: Istoria unei idei*, revised edition (Bucharest, 1993), 67–68.
20. Nicolae Iorga, *Acte și fragmente cu privire la istoria românilor*, vol. 3 (Bucharest, n.d.), 101; Ioan Drăgan, *Nobilimea românească din Transilvania între anii 1440–1514* (Bucharest, 2000), 380.
21. In Polish medieval sources, Moldavia is often called "Wallachia" and its inhabitants "Wallachians." In order to make the necessary distinction, Wallachia proper was referred to by the Poles as "Multana," maybe a distorted form of the Romanian "Muntenia." Just like the Hungarians, the Poles designated the Romanians using a name very similar to the one they gave to Italians, implicitly alluding to the kinship between the two peoples.
22. For an interesting and original comparative analysis of the two leaders, see Alexandru Simon, *Ștefan cel Mare și Matia Corvin: O coexistență medievală* (Cluj-Napoca, 2005).
23. "Idioma valachicum est corruptum, nec tamen latinitati admodum absimile; adeo ut rex Mathias Hungariae, cum legati valachici per interpretem apud eum verba facere sic incepissent: 'Expone, inquit, domino nostro,' se, si hac lingua uterentur, etiam sine interprete intelligere eos posse responderit." Mentioned in Nicolae Iorga, "Dovezi despre conștiința originii Românilor," *Analele Academiei Române: Memoriile Secțiunii Istorice*, 3rd series, tome 17 (1935–1936): 265; also present in Armbruster, 119–120.
24. Iorga, "Dovezi," 265.
25. Maria Holban, ed., *Călători străini despre Țările Române*, vol. 1 (Bucharest, 1968), 482–483.
26. E. Kovács Péter, *Mattia Corvino* (Rome, 2000), 12–13. The idea whereby the name *Corvinus* and the Roman origin of the king were embraced only in 1484, strictly in connection to the planned marriage of Matthias' son to Bianca Sforza, is not supported by any evidence (Péter Kulcsár, "Legenda Corvineștilor," published in Hungarian in *História*, no. 1, 1993: 15–17; www.adatbank.transindex.ro). The fuss around the name *Corvinus* and of the illustrious ascent of the Hunyadis may have helped in perfecting this matrimonial alliance, but the raven featured on the coat of arms (the source of the name), as well as the idea of the Roman origin of the king, born to a Romanian (= *Olah*) father, descended from the noble and ancient Romans, are much older than that. If the year 1484 was so important, if it was of capital importance to the king, then how come that Bonfinius' opuscle was written only in 1486? It is therefore inaccurate to claim that "King Matthias assumed a Roman ascent only for the sake of his son." However, it is obvious that the sovereign did use his "Roman kinship" to the advantage of his son, in order to provide him with a glorious life and a throne, and in order to establish a solid dynasty.

27. Kubinyi, 9.
28. Armbruster, 69–70.
29. George Bariț, “Ioan Corvin de Hunedoara: Originea, genealogia, faptele sale imortale,” *Transilvania* (Sibiu) 6, 5 (1873).

Abstract

A Few Considerations Regarding the Name of Matthias Corvinus

The family of King Matthias Corvinus (1458–1590) has long been the object of complex investigations, but also of historiographical and even political-national disputes. The debate has been structured on several levels, focusing on the ethnic origin of the family, on its place of origin, on the denomination embraced by its members, on the precise identity of the paternal grandmother of Matthias, on other relatives of the Hunyadis, and even on the names they bore. No serious historian would nowadays question the Romanian origin of the family, even if they may rightfully discuss the importance played by this ethnic origin at that time. In Romanian historiography, the name of King Matthias Corvinus has always been a particular and distinct issue, given certain specific circumstances related to the specificity of the Romanian language, the origin of his family, and certain Romanian-Hungarian controversies that emerged together with nationalist doctrines in Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords

Matthias Corvinus, Hunyadis, Antonio Bonfini, medieval Hungary

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