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John Hunyadi in Hungarian Folklore and Historiography

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Abstract. The folk epic songs of a nation are often associated with heroic actions of famous historical figures of the given nation, whose names are often known beyond Balkan folklore, thus becoming characters of epic folk songs and tales preserved in South Slavic or Romanian folklore. The paper analyses Hungarian, Serbian, and Romanian folklore sources about John Hunyadi's ethnic origin, with the intention to present the biography of this historical figure from the aspect of Hungarian historiography and his folklore heritage through the eyes of some Hungarian and Serbian folklorists. One of these emblematic heroes was certainly John Hunyadi, whose feats (as well as the feats of other members of the Hunyadi family) are told throughout the cycles of Hungarian epic folk tales, as well as the folk tales of the peoples in the surrounding area. This paper is based on the analysis of the collection of Hungarian historical folk tales by Dénes Lengyel, which contains a dozen texts about John Hunyadi. These texts have several points of contact with Romanian and Serbian history and folklore. The second part of the paper presents the biography of John Hunyadi in the light of Hungarian historiography as well as the discussion of his origins.

Keywords: John Hunyadi, folklore, historiography, legends

1. Introduction

The Hungarian archaic folk epic in the realm of historical epic / historical narrative is relatively rich in the genre of heroic texts, whose action is often associated to some significant individual, famous figure from the Hungarian history. For example,

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to Hungarian King (Saint) Ladislaus, to King Matthias Corvinus, to the uprising leader Dózsa, to Ferenc Rákoczi, Lajos Kossuth, etc.[1] Many of them outgrew the local frameworks of the Hungarian folklore and (as former real historical figures) became regional, Central European heroes, whose feats are evidenced by epic folk songs and short stories preserved in South Slavic and Romanian folklore, pointing to their former, historical significance and popularity in region.

One of these emblematic heroes was certainly John Hunyadi (Janko Sibinjanin, Szebeni János, Iancu de Hunedoara), whose feats (as well as the feats of other members of the Hunyadi family) are told throughout the cycles of Hungarian epic folk tales, as well as the folk tales of the peoples in the surrounding area.[2] Thus, the collection of Hungarian historical folk tales by Dénes Lengyel contains about ten texts, and, in fact, it forms a special cycle about John Hunyadi (Lengyel 1978: 273–301). As the primary sources of these historical narratives, Dénes Lengyel used the chronicle of Gáspár Heltai, the narrative of József Teleki, the chronicle of John Thuróczy, the text of András Dugonics, the narrative of László Mednyánszky, etc. The topics of these historical narratives include the origins of the Hunyadi family, the youth of John Hunyadi, his successful fight against the Turks, the defeat in the Battle of Kosovo, the famous, victorious battle for Nándorfehérvár (Belgrade), the death of John Hunyadi, the duel between László Hunyadi and Ulrich Cillei, and the death of László Hunyadi. These texts have multiple tangential points with Romanian and Serbian history and folklore.

John Hunyadi's origins gave rise to many legends, the most famous of them allegedly making connection with King Sigismund of Luxembourg, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Hungary. The story of John Hunyadi's royal origin also explains why the coat of arms of the Corvin family has a raven holding a gold ring in its beak. The one who would have contributed the most to the spread of the legend was chronicler and printer Gáspár Heltai in 1574. Heltai stated that he had heard the story from a former courtier of the Hunyadi family.

As Dénes Lengyel was inspired by Gáspár Heltai, he took from him the idea about John Hunyadi's origins, being the illegitimate son of Holy German Emperor and King of Hungary, Sigismund of Luxembourg.

Accordingly, from the story about John Hunyadi's origins, we learn that he is the illegitimate son of Hungarian King Sigismund (Zsigmond), who, while living in Transylvania and fighting there against the Turks, on one occasion met the beautiful daughter of a Romanian boyar of noble descent, Erzsébet Morzsinai. She conceived a child with the king, and the king, in order to provide for his yet unborn child, gave her a written proof of paternity as well as a ring of recognition. Erzsébet, as a pregnant woman, confided her secret to a boyar named Vojk Buthi,

1 *Magyar néprajzi lexikon* (2006). Arcanum Adatbázis Kft. (available at: https://www.tankonyvtar.hu/hu/tartalom/tkt/magyar-neprajzi-lexikon/ch12.html; accessed on: 26 April 2019).

2 Ibidem.

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who, seeing her beauty and wealth, married her. She soon gave birth to a son, Jankula. Being at war against the Turks in Transylvania, the king, after some time, again had the opportunity to meet the mother of his illegitimate son. He rejoiced greatly when he saw his child and ordered Erzsébet to come to Buda with his son to his court. While preparing for the trip, a crow abducted Sigismund's ring from little Jankula, but Erzsébet's brother, Gáspár Morzsinai, eventually managed to shoot the crow and return the precious royal ring.[3] After that, Erzsébet and her son, Jankula, enjoyed the hospitality of King Sigismund in Buda for a certain amount of time, during which the king often played with his extramarital son and showered various valuable gifts upon him. Before the mother and son returned to Transylvania, the king had given them the Hunyad Estate along with its surroundings and ordered the Duke of Transylvania to take care of their safety. Like all members of the Morzsinai family, Jankula received a noble coat of arms, which featured a crow holding a ring in its beak. In addition to that, Erzsébet also received some valuable gifts from the king. This is how Jankula was named after his estate, Hunyad (Lengyel 1978: 273–278).

The Hungarian historical narrative of John Hunyadi's youth established ties between him and the Serbian despot Stefan Lazarević, in whose court he served and where he became an outstanding young soldier. This text tells about the joint hunt of the despot and the young John Hunyadi when a wolf suddenly appeared in front of them. Despot Stefan ordered the young Hunyadi to go after the wolf and kill it. So he did. He pursued the wolf both on dry land and across the river, caught up with it, killed it, and brought its pelt to despot Stefan as evidence. He was very surprised by Hunyadi's success and predicted "that this young man will go a long way" (idem: 278–279).

One of the most brilliant military successes of John Hunyadi was certainly the victory in the battle of Nándorfehérvár (Belgrade) in 1456 (idem: 290–295). One of the Hungarian historical narratives describes in detail this famous battle, in which John Hunyadi played a prominent role as a military commander of a fortress which defended itself against a much larger Turkish military force (ibidem). And not only was it defended, but the defence famously ended in success. Unfortunately, not long after, an infectious disease broke out, and John Hunyadi also succumbed to it. His death is specifically described in one Hungarian historical narrative (idem: 295–296).

Of all the members of the Hunyadi family, by far the most popular figure in the Hungarian folklore was Hungarian King Matthias Corvinus (son of John Hunyadi), who was represented in the Hungarian historical folk prose by nearly eighty texts (idem: 305–462) and who, like his father, was known not only in the Hungarian folklore but also in the folklore of the surrounding peoples.

3 The ring motif, which is evidence of one's noble origins, known as the "travelling" motif of the Eurasian folklore.

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According to research done by Hungarian folklorists, historical stories about members of the Hunyadi family were extremely popular in the Hungarian literary works of poetry and prose in the 15th and 16th centuries. The later oral tradition of the Hunyadis was partly based on these works and partly formed independently. For example, in his *Krónika az magyaroknak dolgairól*[4] (1575), Gáspár Heltai also notes that he has heard and recorded the folk tale of the Hunyadi family's origin from the descendants of the soldiers under his command.[5]

It is very interesting that the epic heritage of Hungarian folklore does not know, that is, it records next to nothing about the battles that John Hunyadi led against the Turks, which are one of the main themes of South Slavic historical tales and epic folk songs.[6] The eminent Hungarian expert in ethnology, Vilmos Voigt, brings to our attention that several Hungarian heroes, members of the Hunyadi family, are represented in South Slavic heroic, epic folk songs, and, as he says, even these broader correlations cannot be fully understood unless we look at the somewhat further context of historical and ethnological data of Albanian, Czech, Austrian, and Italian folklore, that is, if we do not consider their interpretations (Voigt 2012: 61–72).

The emergence of Janko Sibinjanin as an army commander and hero of the battles against the Turks in the Serbian folk tradition, more precisely in the Serbian epic folk songs, was among the first to be explored by Hungarian writer, educator, and translator Mihály Románecz, who published a separate work on him in 1890 in Pančevo (Románecz 1890: 3–24). It was based on a Pančevo edition of the publishing house of the Jovanović brothers from 1881, entitled *Janko Sibinjanin in Folk Songs* (ibidem). From this edition, he translated six epic folk songs into Hungarian: *Marriage of Janko Sibinjanin to a Fairy*; *Janko Sibinjanin and Marko Kraljević*; *Sibinjan Janko with a Fairy; Janko Sibinjanin and the Fairy*; *The Death of Banović Sekula*; *Janko Sibinjanin and Đurđe Smederevac* (ibidem). Of course, he also gave relevant comments and notes regarding the role of Janko Sibinjanin in Serbian folk poetry. Thus, he emphasizes, among other things, that "the great Hungarian hero John Hunyadi appears under the name of Janko Sibinjanin in Serbian folk poetry" and explains that he received his surname after the seat of a duchy, Szeben (Sibin) (idem: 4). Furthermore, he correctly concludes that various historical narratives were created about Janko Sibinjanin in the Serbian and Hungarian folk traditions. In the Serbian folk tradition, Románecz says, Janko Sibinjanin's origins, his fight against the Turks and the fairies, and his family ties with various Serbian heroes (which Hungarian historiography does not record) are represented in epic folk songs "in naive poetic lines" (ibidem).

4 *Hungarian Chronicle* (Bibliotheca Hungarica Antiqua VIII).

5 *Magyar néprajzi lexikon* (2006). Arcanum Adatbázis Kft. (available at: https://www.tankonyvtar.hu/hu/tartalom/tkt/magyar-neprajzi-lexikon/ch12.html; accessed on: 26 April 2019).

6 Ibidem.

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According to Románecz, what the Serbian historical narration says about Janko Sibinjanin's origins is that his father was no one else but despot Stefan Visoki [The Tall]). He happened to be in Buda on one occasion, where he was warmly received and hosted by Hungarian nobles and where he amazed everyone with his grand stature. That is where despot Stefan met a beautiful Hungarian woman, and as a result of that love twins were born: one male and one female child. The mother named their son Janko and their daughter Janka. Despot Stefan left a ring to the mother as a pledge to take care of her extramarital children. When she grew up, Janka married and gave birth to a son, (Banović) Sekula. According to Románecz's interpretation, this is the reason why in Serbian folk poetry Janko Sibinjanin is often seen in the company of Banović (Bánfi) Sekula (ibidem). In the meantime, as a young man, John Hunyadi lived in Buda, where he became noted for his physical skills. When he asked his mother about his ancestry, she handed him the ring of despot Stefan, and, according to the engraved text, he realized that he was a descendant of the Serbian ruler. And, of course, he went looking for his father. As Románecz puts it in Hungarian, "fate brought him to Serbia, where, by fighting against the Turks, he became a hero of another people, although he was also a Hungarian hero" (Románecz 1890: 5).

2. John Hunyadi's biography from the aspect of Hungarian historiography

Independently from its rich folklore heritage, Hungarian historiography, on the basis of historical sources and documents, compiled a biography of John Hunyadi, which contained all the facts that historians could access. Accordingly, it was established that John Hunyadi was born between 1407 and 1409 (without indicating his place of birth) and died in Zemun on 11 August 1456.[7] He was the first-born son of a Romanian boyar from Walachia (*Țara Românească*), who moved to Hungary around 1395. In his youth, he served in the service of István Csáky and before 1427 also in the service of Serbian despot Stefan Lazarević. After 1427, he was a member of the banderium of Mačva Ban László Újlak and later a member in Demeter Csupor's unit. In 1430, he entered the royal service, and he was accompanying King Sigismund when he was in Italy, while between 1431 and 1433 he was in the service of Filippo Visconti in Milan. In 1433, he rejoined King Sigismund, whom he had accompanied on his visit to Basel, and then, in 1437, he accompanied him when the king was visiting the Czech Republic.

Until 1437, he had learned various skills of the existing (contemporary) warfare and armed conflict from the best mercenary military commanders of his time

7 *Magyar Életrajzi Lexikon. 1000–1990*. Revised edition. Ed.: Ágnes Kenyeres (available at: http://mek.oszk.hu/00300/00355/html/index.html; accessed on: 27 April 2019).

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and had gained extensive experience on the Turkish way of warfare. He then assembled his army of mercenaries – made up partly from insurgents recruited from among the people – , together with whom he achieved great victories. He also slowly climbed the social ladder: from 1439 to 1446, he held the title of Severin Ban, and from 1441 to 1446 he was the Duke of Transylvania and the Count of Temes. He also became a trusted advisor to Hungarian King Ladislaus I and at the same time supervised the defence of the border with Turkey together with Miklós Újlaki. That is how in 1442 he also won two great victories over the Turkish army. As his life goal, he set out to defend his homeland and to drive out the Turks, and these efforts elevated him above the contemporary, selfish Hungarian nobles. In the summer of 1443, when Hungarian King Ladislaus I embarked on his Balkan campaign, led by John Hunyadi, penetrating the territory towards Niš and Sofia with troops of armoured horsemen, he won several victories against the Turks. His military successes and victories represented a glimmer of hope that the Turks could be pushed out of Europe. After the Balkan campaign, the Hunyadis wanted to rush a new battle against the Turks; however, with King Ladislaus I's uncoordinated moves, there was an unexpected turn for the worse. Thus, at the Battle of Varna (November 10, 1444), which ended in defeat, John Hunyadi managed to escape with his life but was captured by the Romanian Duke Vlad, who later released him, but only after his Hungarian palatine, Lőrinc Héderváry had made serious threats of war.

In 1445, Hunyadi was appointed to be one of the seven chief captains and a member of the state council, and on 5 June 1446 he was appointed state governor.

On 18–19 October 1448, he led an army in the bloody Battle of Kosovo, which was lost due to the betrayal of Đurađ Branković. Hunyadi was captured by Branković, who released him on humiliating terms. After his return, he sought to unite forces in the country and strengthen the central government. Later he also fought against the Turks. Thus, on 2 October 1454, he utterly defeated Firuz Bey's army at Kruševac. In the panic caused by the fall of Constantinople, Hunyadi saw a great opportunity to push the Turks out of Europe completely. To that end, he proposed organizing a combined army of 100,000 warriors, but his proposal was not met with understanding and support. Moreover, the Turkish army launched an attack on Nándorfehérvár (Belgrade). That is where, on 21–22 July 1456, Hunyadi with his army and the army gathered by John Kapisztrán won a glorious victory over a far superior enemy, and this news resonated throughout Europe. Unfortunately, not long after, due to a plague rapidly spreading in his military camp, he died on 11 August. He is buried in St Michael's Church in Alba Julia (Gyulafehérvár) (Jung 2006: 39).[8]

8 Ibidem – It is important to note that, according to Serbian folk tradition, better said according to a local belief, John Hunyadi was buried in Šumadija, in Topola, where his burial place is allegedly located.

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As a famous and recognized figure of the Hungarian history and a prominent historical figure, he was a favourite subject for painters, sculptors, and writers alike. Thus, János Arany, Sándor Kisfaludy, and Lajos Hollós Corvin wrote a play about him, Gergely Czuczor and István Komjáthy dedicated a poem to him, and his life was the subject of novels written by József Darvas, Géza Hegedűs, József Hunyadi, and Mór Bán.

3. Discussions on John Hunyadi's origins, the father of King Matthias Corvinus

These historiographic-ethnological debates on John Hunyadi's origins have been going on for several centuries, and they still continue to this day.[9] The reason for this – at least according to the testimony of available (in part already mentioned) rich scholarly literature – are certainly various folk traditions recorded in the Serbian, Hungarian, and Romanian folklore, as well as other written (Byzantine, Greek, and Serbian) sources about his origins, the place where he was conceived, and his national affiliation, that is, the person of his father and mother.

Of course, the question arises as to why there is so much dispute. Gyula Moravcsik offers a legitimate reason, saying that "during his lifetime Hunyadi belonged not only to his own nation but became a hero of all those peoples who fought in the 15th century a battle of life or death with the Ottoman Turks, and after his death his character continued to live on in the national tradition of these peoples" (Moravcsik 1922: 96–99). This later became a source of debate about who Hunyadi really was and to which people he belonged. Basically, there are four of these "appropriations", the four sides being: Hungarian, Serbian, Romanian, and Greek (ibidem).

In the book *Ungurii despre români. Naşterea unei imagini etnice* (Hungarians about Romanians. The Birth of an Ethnic Image), the authors Melinda Mitu and Sorin Mitu presented the way in which the image of Romanians is reflected in Hungarian culture, that is, "the past of Romanians in the mirror of Hungarian history", in the context of which the dilemma regarding John Hunyadi's origins viewed through the eyes of Hungarian historians and researchers is presented. The authors mention three works that try to prove the thesis of the Szeklers' origin of John Hunyadi. They are signed by György Aranka, Ferenc Kazinczy, and John Kriebel, compiled and published by József Ponori Thewrewk in a book entitled *Három értekezés Hunyadi Székely János [...] törvényes ágyból lett születésének bebizonyítására* (Ro: Trei disertații în vederea dovedirii naşterii lui Hunyadi Székely János dintr-o legătură legitimă; En: Three Dissertations to Prove

9 For further relevant sources on this topic, see the *References* at the end of this article.

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the Birth of Hunyadi Székely John from a Legitimate Connection) published in Bratislava in 1825.

After just eight years, a new book was published on the question of John Hunyadi's origins; the book was authored by poet Gergely Czuczor and was titled *Hunyadi János viselt dolgai Engel és Fesslerből* (Ro: Faptele lui Iancu de Hunedoara, după Engel şi Fessler; En: Acts of John Hunyadi after Engel and Fessler). From the title, it becomes obvious that the author draws on Johann Christian Engel's and Ignaz Fessler' studies on John Hunyadi. Eighteenth-century Transylvanian historian Sándor Aranyosrákosi Székely also wrote a historical work on the Romanians' connections with the Hungarians throughout history. His book is entitled *Erdélyország történetei hiteles kútfőkből* (Ro: Istoriile Țării Ardealului din izvoare autentice; En: Stories of Transylvania from Authentic Sources) and was published in Cluj in 1845.

4. Folklore heritage about John Hunyadi through the eyes of some Hungarian and Serbian folklorists

In *Serbian* folklore, historical narratives about Hunyadi comprise a whole cycle, and – as the famous Hungarian poet János Arany testified in the 19th century – Serbian young men and girls sang even to that day, accompanied by the sounds of gusle, about who Janko Sibinjanin had been (ibidem). Writer and translator Mihály Románecz also collected some of these Serbian epic folk songs and, at the end of the 19th century in Pančevo, published in the Hungarian translation, together with his comments, those relating to Janko Sibinjanin (Románecz 1890: 3–24). From them, it is possible to conclude the following: the name of this hero comes from the town of Seben (Sibinum, Sibinj), and all Serbian sources unambiguously confirm that he comes from the son of Tsar Lazar (who died in the Battle of Kosovo), despot Stefan, whose wife was a Byzantine princess from the lineage of the Palaiologos (Moravcsik 1922: 96–99). According to Serbian epic folk songs, despot Stefan (who ruled between 1389 and 1427), when returning from Moscow, stopped to rest in Buda, where he conceived a child with a Hungarian girl, and thus Janko Sibinjanin was born. According to another Serbian epic folk song, Janko Sibinjanin was the extramarital child of despot Stefan Lazarević and one girl from Sibiu (Ibidem). And, finally, according to a third source, Janko Sibinjanin was a descendant of despot Stefan and a Greek girl, and various tokens of recognition (for the later identification by his father) – a ring, a sword, and a mace – appear here as well. Regarding this Serbian version, researcher Dezső Szegedy has proved that it is one of the variants of a very widespread type of historical narratives, of Iranian-Caucasian origin (ibidem). Therefore, it is not disputed that in the Serbian folk

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tales about Janko Sibinjanin's origins the motifs of national tradition and those of foreign origin intertwine and blend (ibidem).

In the 19th century, several researchers were concerned with John Hunyadi's (János Szebeni, Janko Sibinjanin) origins; thus, among others: Vilmos Tolnai, Ferenc Toldy, József Székács, and Gusztáv Wenzel, who heard the Serbian version about Janko Sibinjanin directly from Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (Szegedy 1917: 35–42). According to this version, Janko Sibinjanin was the illegitimate child of Serbian despot Stefan (Visoki) and a Hungarian woman of noble origin. It also mentions the ring as a token of recognition, except that young Janko came with his ring to Serbia, to his father, showed it to him, who then let him serve in the Serbian army. In the first edition of his *Srpski Rječnik* [Serbian Dictionary] (1818), Vuk Stefanović Karadžić states that the conception took place on the initiative of Hungarian nobles who hosted despot Stefan and, seeing his grand stature and handsomeness, offered him to sleep with a young Hungarian noblewoman in order to have offspring (ibidem). This gesture is known by the professional literature as "sexual hospitality" (Čajkanović 1924: 1–24). According to Stefanović Karadžić, a Hungarian noblewoman gave birth to twins, a boy and a girl, and it had been previously agreed that if the child were male, he would be named Janko, and if she were female, she would be called Janka (Szegedy 1917: 35–42). When she grew older, the girl married and gave birth to Sekula Banović, who is often mentioned in Serbian epic folk songs in the company of his uncle (ibidem).

What the Serbian poetry and storytelling relates about Stefan Lazarević (son of Tsar Lazar) is that he grew up in Moscow and was the father of Janko Sibinjanin and the grandfather of John Székely (Banović Sekula). His wife was a Greek woman from the lineage of the Palaiologos Dynasty, and the title of despot was given to him by the Greek emperor in 1402. He fought against the Turks, as did his son Janko Sibinjanin (Szegedy 1917: 35–42).

The *Greek* version of Hunyadi's descent, which was, among others, recorded by Sima Milutinović Sarajlija in the first half of the 19th century (according to the narrative of Rade Knežević, a priest from Martinica), suggests that on one occasion Milica, Tsar Lazar's widow, asked her son Stefan to return home from Moscow. His journey with the army led him through Greece, and he asked the Greek king to let him have dinner and rest there with the army. The king allowed it but on the condition that he would leave behind a descendant. He agreed to that, and in the evening they brought him a nice slender Greek woman, with whom he spent three days. On the fourth day, the beautiful Greek woman complained to Stefan, asking him what she should do if she got pregnant and gave birth to a child. Stefan gave her a scimitar and a ring, saying that if she gave birth to a son, she should give the scimitar to him, and if she gave birth to a daughter, she should give her the ring – as a token and proof of fatherhood (Szegedy 1917: 35–42).

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When collecting folk songs, in his collection published in Belgrade in 1878, Valtazar Bogišić also recorded one, which was entitled: *Despot Stjepan Lazarević and Sibinjka Girl, the Parents of Janko Sibinjanin*.[10] Analysing in detail the content and structure of that epic folk song, Rezső Szegedy establishes an unmistakable resemblance to foreign, more precisely to Iranian-Caucasian folk motifs, which can, in his opinion, be found in the historical narrative of *Rostam and Sohrab*, but above all in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*. This similarity, according to Szegedy, can by no means be accidental, but it gives the right to the assumption that this "travelling" motif from Iranian-Caucasian historical narratives, most probably from the period of the Turkish rule (as early as before the 17th century), entered Serbian folklore at a time when the Iranian and Caucasian peoples often traversed areas inhabited by Serbs and when the practice of raising the children of the South Slavs as Janissaries came to be established (ibidem). The 17th-century chronicle of Savina Monastery (Savinski letopis) also contains an interesting description of Hunyadi's origin, that is, conception. The text states that despot Stefan married the daughter of Kantakouzenos Palaiologos, who was barren and could not give birth to an heir for the Serbian despot. On one occasion, when despot Stefan went to the emperor with his entourage, he arrived in the Sibiu valley, where he stopped to spend the night at a Romanian man's house, who was called Bogut, or Budimir. When he saw his beautiful, young daughter, Ruta, he felt a burning desire. Seeing all this, the noblemen from this area searched for the mother of that beautiful girl and told her that the despot could not have children. The mother persuaded her daughter to have a relationship with the despot, and she did so in order to conceive a child with him. The next day, despot Stefan gave her a ring as proof of paternity in case she remained pregnant. Ruta soon gave birth to twins: Janko and Mandeljna (Jung 2006: 26–51).

It should also not be disregarded that in 1802 Hungarian author István Sándor, referring to Kraljević Marko, among others, also states that Serbs in their epic poems mention John Hunyadi under the name of Jankula (ibidem).

Hungarian folklorists and researchers also analysed in detail the folklore heritage related to John Hunyadi. According to the research of the esteemed ethnologist, Károly Jung, the first Hungarian source to mention John Hunyadi's origins, as the extramarital child of King Sigismund and Erzsébet Morzsinai, was a book by the court historian of King Matthias Corvinus, Antonio Bonfini, on the history of the Hungarians (*Rerum Ungaricarum decades*) written in Latin as early as the 15th century (Jung 2006: 26–51). At the same time, Byzantine sources of the period (Chalkokondyles, Doukas, and Sphrantzes) mentioned John Hunyadi under the name Janko. One of them who touched upon Hunyadi's origins and his youth is Laonikos Chalkokondyles (*Historiarum libri*). He tells us that Janko

10 This poem entitled *Lazarevics István és a szebeni lány, Szebeni János szülői* was translated into the Hungarian language for the first time by Rezső Szegedy in 1917.

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originated from the Transylvanian city of Hunyad, and he came to the court of a Serbian ruler, where he spent some time in his service. There he stood out due to his courage and perseverance. Laonikos also mentions the motif of killing a wolf, as an example of his courage. According to this Byzantine source, the young Hunyadi, before arriving at the court of the Serbian despot, also spent some time working as a stableman for Ali Evrenos. Hungarian historiographers assume that Laonikos could have heard the story of Hunyadi from Hungarian captives with whom he came into contact (Moravcsik 1922: 96–99).

The above-mentioned Bonfini's version was later taken over by Gáspár Heltai, who prepared and published the part of Bonfini's manuscript that referred to King Matthias Corvinus.[11] In Thuróczy's work, a ring motif also appears as a means of identification.

Towards the end of the 18th century, more precisely in 1787, Ádám Pálóczi Horváth formulated a *Hungarian literary version*, probably based on folk tradition, of Hunyadi's origins in one of his literary works, published in Győr.[12] According to him, this is the son of Hungarian Queen Mary and King Sigismund of Luxembourg (Moravcsik 1922: 96–99), and there are even two versions of the story. In one, John Hunyadi was born by Queen Mary in the Krupa Fortress, where she was held captive. She entrusted the boy to one of her officers, Butus, who raised him along with his own newly born child. The Bishop of Zagreb later mediated that the child, together with Butus, could flee to Rome. Mary was told the false news that his son, along with Butus, had been killed while trying to escape. In Rome, John Hunyadi was raised by priests until the death of Queen Mary. Then, the Pope, along with a ring obtained from her mother, which was a token of identification, brought the young Hunyadi back to Hungary, to King Sigismund (ibidem).

According to another variant, King Sigismund of Luxembourg's wife, Mary of Anjou, was already in the advanced stages of pregnancy when on one occasion she went horseback riding on her own. Somewhere in the Buda forest, she fell off a horse and broke her neck. Despite this, she gave birth to the child, prematurely, in the eighth month of pregnancy. It could not be known whether it was an accident or a murder. Either way, the public was informed that both the queen and the child were dead. The queen was buried, and the baby was secretly, with the consent of King Sigismund, given for adoption to Erzsébet Morzsinai, who then married Vajk, whose silence was ensured by the king by giving him the

11 *Chronica az magyaroknac dolgairol, mint iöttec ki a nagy Scythiaból Pánnoniában, es mint foglaltác magoknac az országot, es mint birtác aszt hertzegröl hertzegre es királyról királyra, nagy soc tusakodássockal és szántalan soc viadallyockal, mellyet Heltai Gaspar meg irta magyar nyeluen, es ez rendre hoszta az Bonfinius Antalnac nagy könyuéböl és egyéb historias könyuekböl nem kiczin munkáual*. Heltai Gáspárné, Kolozsvár. 1575.

12 *Hunniás*, vagy Magyar Hunyadi, az az Ama híres Magyar Vezér Hunyadi János életének egy egy része, mellyet a Vergilius Éneisse formájába öntve, négy sorú Magyar Strófákkal le írt Horváth Ádám. Győrben, Streibig Jósef betűivel. 1787.

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Hunyad Estate so that the potential assassins would not find out that he had a living heir to the throne.

Due to the richness of the material, we cannot, of course, present in detail the attitude of each of the authors who dealt with the topic of Hunyadi's origins, but we should certainly mention that this was the most vivid topic in the 19th century, when the subject was dealt with by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, Sima Milutinović Sarajlija, Valtazar Bogišić, and, as far as the Hungarian authors are concerned, by Mihály Románecz, Vilmos Tolnai, Ferenc Toldy, József Székács, Gusztáv Wenzel, and others. The first half of the 20th century brought some progress in the study of this topic, especially through the works of Rezső Szegedy (1917: 35–42), Gyula Moravcsik (1922: 96–99), and Istvan Lajti (1919: 181–182). This was followed by the researchers' detachment and lack of interest in this subject until in the second half of the 20th century, owing primarily to the professional works of Károly Kiss, Stojan Vujičić, and especially András Dávid and Jelka Ređep, the question of Hunyadi's origins came back into the focus of interest of the scientific public. Analysing the available material related to the topic of John Hunyadi/Janko Sibinjanin, Jelka Ređep concluded that it seems to her that Hungarian folklore had an influence on the Serbian folk tradition, since despot Stefan was a vassal of Hungarian King Sigismund, and the Serbian folk tradition about him was undoubtedly created under the influence of the Hungarian historical narrative on John Hunyadi's birth (Jung 2006: 26–51).

We mentioned above Gáspár Heltai from whom Dénes Lengyel was inspired when stating that John Hunyadi was the illegitimate son of Holy Roman Emperor and King of Hungary Sigismund of Luxembourg. He was also inspired by the chronicle of Antonio Bonfinius, who believed that John Hunyadi's father was a boyar named Buthi Voyk, a descendant of the Roman family of the Corvins, and his mother was a Greek woman from an imperial family.

5. Conclusions

Gáspár Heltai's opinion made a decisive contribution to the creation of historiographical traditions regarding John Hunyadi's origins. The central text for creating these traditions was the chronicle of Gáspár Heltai, who originated the Hungarian folk legend about King Sigismund's ring stolen by a raven. By combining the information from Bonfinius, Heltai forms his own opinion about the origin of John Hunyadi, which is the basis of Dénes Lengyel's work. This collector of epic folk tales is not an isolated case in terms of his opinion. The theories of Heltai and Bonfinius were taken over by almost all Hungarian historians from the 17th-18th centuries, as well as by some authors from the 19th century, who will interpret them in new ideological contexts of their time. Some

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of those historians support the idea that John Hunyadi had Romanian origins and others that he had Hungarian origins.

The dilemma over the "appropriate" origins of János Hunyadi/Iancu de Hunedoara by the Hungarians and Romanians seems to have been resolved by a good connoisseur of the subject, András Kubinyi, who in his book on King Matthias Corvinus (Kubinyi 2001) stated that the Hunyadi family was of ethnic Romanian origin. According to him, this is also indicated by personal names used in the family and the fact that in the beginning the gubernator-to-be was called John *Olah* Hunyadi (Olah = Vlah) and later the "white knight of Wallachia" (the Romanian country). Therefore, there is no doubt as to his origins, though there have always been those who have challenged it (ibidem).

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