

BOOK REVIEWS

The Art of Medieval Hungary

(Bibliotheca Academiae Hungariae – Roma. Studia 7)

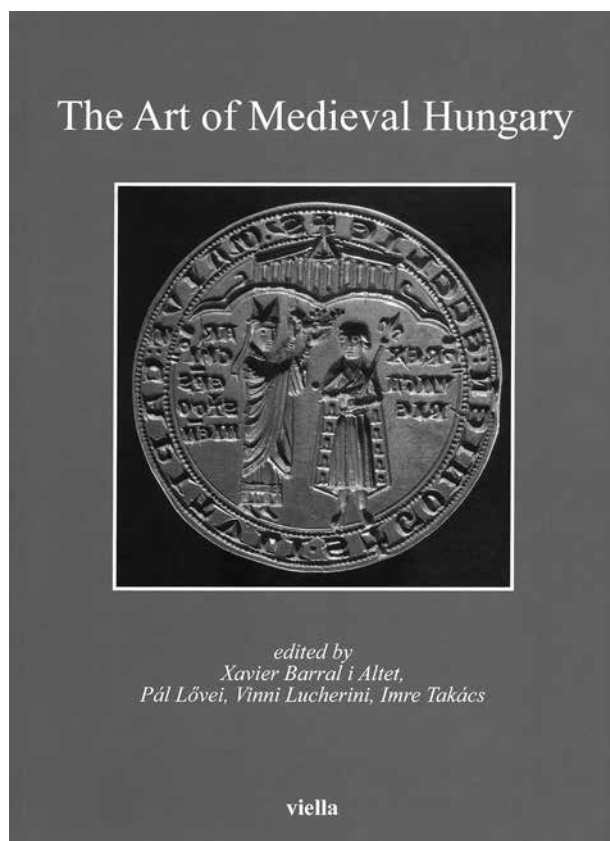
Edited by Xavier BARRAL I ALTET – Pál LÓVEI – Vinni LUCHERINI – Imre TAKÁCS.

Roma: Viella, 2018. 553 pages, 250 b/w + 94 colour illustrations

A very important contribution to the international recognition of medieval Hungarian art is to be reviewed below. The art of the countries playing decisive roles

in European history as the nourishing soil of decisive artistic styles and venues of the activity of the most prominent artists is generally well known, but the art of Northern, East-Central and Central Europe is given undeservedly less attention. Disastrously isolated by her language, Hungary is no exception, although there are a few Hungarian periodicals on art history that appear in a foreign language or are bilingual. Besides, several Hungarian authors publish in journals or books of studies abroad. In these cases not speaking Hungarian doesn't cause any problem

The book to be discussed differs from the studies in periodicals and conference proceedings in that it covers a long period, the centuries of Romanesque and Gothic art up to the beginnings of the Renaissance. It analyses the very centuries the products of which in the richest central part of the country including the royal seat and the majority of episcopal towns were almost entirely destroyed by the 150 years of Ottoman occupation and by the liberating wars terminating it, leaving behind no more than ruins or foundation walls to be excavated by archaeologists. It is noteworthy that the book was published in Rome and not in Hungary, nor was the idea itself initiated there. The *spiritus movens* of the undertaking is the noted medieval researcher Xavier Barral i Altet. The papers were all explicitly written for this book and represent the currently most up-to-date state of research. Most, but not all authors are Hungarian. It applies to the book in general that although the analysed topics are Hungar-



Cover illustration: Great seal of the Chapter of Esztergom Cathedral, 1319–1324, Cathedral Treasury, Esztergom

ian monuments, the studies aim to expose the Hungarian development primarily in an international context, obviously trying to find West and South European connections in the first place.

In view of a foreign readership evidently less familiar with the Hungarian situation, each essay begins with a historical introduction. Some historical-geographic facts occur in several chapters, but hardly anyone would want to read the book continuously. The authors differ on the extent to which they mention preceding researchers by name. Some might have been afraid of turning their work into a historiographical dissertation with too many names included, but they were mistaken. It would be a good guide for a foreign reader unfamiliar with the Hungarian art his-



Fig. 1. Stone panel with fighting animals from Óbuda Provostry church, ca. 1150, Budapest History Museum



Fig. 2. Reconstruction of the portal from Jásd Abbey, third quarter of the 12th century (Photo: P. Lővei, in the Lapidarium of Tihany before 2015)

torical literature to choose the right items from the bibliography attached to each chapter.

Barral i Altet starts his introduction by stressing that the subject-matter of the book is medieval Hungary, so it must be understood within its that-time borders. In the studied centuries it was a decisive medium-large power in the region, in which the strong central power holding sway over the entire country resulted in extremely valuable art works, often directly upon royal initiative. It is also intriguing that Hungary was subject to strong waves of influence from German, French or Italian areas and occasionally from Byzantium. It cannot be decided safely whether our topic is “Hungarian art in the Middle Ages” or “art in medieval Hungary”, but it is beyond doubt that the products of culture and art are tied with untearable threads to their place of origin. The editors were determined to evade the question of nationality, being aware that from the nineteenth century onwards historians and art historians were intent on finding the nation-creat-



Fig. 3. Ócsa, Premonstratensian church, early 13th century
(Photo: K. Szelényi)



Fig. 4. View from east of Lébény Abbey church,
ca. 1210 (Photo: A. Mudrák)

ing traits in the past and in art, respectively. Though this zealous search has relaxed by now, yet the editors deemed it important to steer clear of this problem in the book. One of the aims of the volume is to make it easier for as many unbiased researchers as possible to address themselves to these issues objectively, thereby helping the artistic relics of medieval Hungary to find their place in the context of European art.

The two chapters in the first part look into the characteristics of research so far and the available sources. Ernő Marosi reviews the past of the discipline from the mid-nineteenth century when for both the public and the researchers the “glorious past” – that is, the Middle Ages highlighted in the book – was of paramount importance. He ends his inquiry in the 2000s, not keeping quiet about the difficulties of recent decades. The next introductory study is by Kornél Szovák about the written sources, which are sparse compared to West Europe, owing to the mentioned devastations. He enumerates the direct and indirect sources, allusions in quasi historical sources like chronicles and legends, facts in testaments, deeds of endowment, and even an informative word or two on seals, tombs.

The second part investigates the geographic setting of the work. Katalin Szende surveys the towns and their networks, stressing that in order to explore and comprehend the intra- and interurban connections and the social and economic relations the researcher must simultaneously consider the written sources, the relics of material culture excavated by archaeologists, and maps. The upswing after the Mongol invasion was considerable, entailing the birth of autonomous administration which brought with it the use of seals.



Fig. 5. Seal of the city Újbánya (Nová Baňa, Slovakia), mid 14th century, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

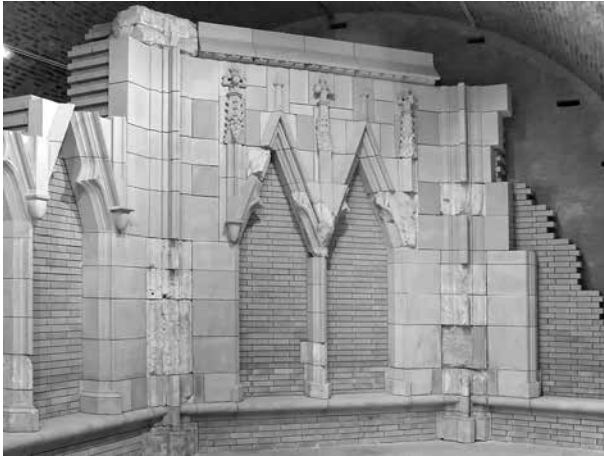


Fig. 6. Reconstruction of a planned chapel in the royal palace at Visegrád, 1330–1340, Castle Museum, Visegrád (Photo: P. Lóvei)

It is most spectacularly demonstrable in the mining towns which evolved at that time and were thus devoid of shackling traditions. Thematically linked is Pál Lóvei's paper on urban architecture concentrating on public buildings erected in towns, with a few built on commission from burghers. Of them a conspicuously high number of defensive constructions, town walls, fortresses survive, best withstanding the devastations of the centuries. Taking stock of them, the author largely exceeds the otherwise generally observed time limits and ends his survey in the mid-sixteenth century. Zsombor Jékely writes about rural architecture. As it almost exclusively means ecclesiastic buildings, he begins with the introduction and expansion of the church organization. He goes on with a summary enumeration, grouping buildings by type and mentioning occasional enlargements, rights of the founding families, fortifications to ward off external attacks. In a separate section he presents the decoration of the churches: exterior and interior carvings, items of furnishing, wall paintings – the Transylvanian ones in conspicuously more detail as relatively many new relics have been found there lately – and even winged altarpieces from the fifteenth century. István Feld highlights partly defensive, partly residential fortresses, castles, country houses. The most impressive ones were built for the rulers, but remarkably executed buildings can also be found among those ordered by aristocrats or lower-ranking actors. Special features are the Renaissance elements indicative of Italian influence: most often they are window frames, and some affluent constructions included arcaded galleries, too.

Béla Zsolt Szakács takes stock of the abbeys and cathedrals of the Romanesque period. He points out

that the first episcopal churches were strikingly small; alone the Székesfehérvár church of provostal rank was larger than the rest – after all, the first king of Hungary, (Saint) Stephen I (997/1000–1038) and his son Prince (Saint) Emeric (†1031) were buried in it and the coronation regalia were also kept there. Church size increased around 1100, at first that of Pécs cathedral, which also has a conspicuously large undercroft. The new religious orders had great importance in the thirteenth century, particularly the Cistercians; their building style massively influenced the reconstruction of the century-old arch abbey of the Benedictine order in Pannonhalma. The clan monasteries built in the late Romanesque age had almost Gothic, ribbed vaulting. The author of the other article devoted to the Romanesque style, Krisztina Havasi embarks on sculptural works in a stricter sense after discussing the first, mainly architectural fragments (capitals, cornice fragments). The earliest and most important item of them is the sarcophagus of St Stephen (or, as others presume, St Emeric), followed by powerful capitals (Dömös), subtle but fragmentary figural carvings



Fig. 7. St John's Chapel in the Franciscan church of Pozsony (Bratislava, Slovakia), ca. 1360 (Photo: A. Mudrák)

(Székesfehérvár, Óbuda royal castle, Somogyvár). Pécs cathedral is seen as a venue of innovation in this regard as well; the author shares the more recent assumption that the origin of the style of the extremely rich sculptural decoration can be traced to Burgundian sculpture which paved the way for the early Gothic. That applies to the majority of reliefs, while there are a few pieces that lead toward Italy, precisely to Emilia, similarly to the somewhat later pediment of Szentkirály, while the latest Romanesque statues – like the ones on the façade of the church in Ják – display ties with Bamberg.

The first paper in the section on the Gothic is by Imre Takács. He regards the archiepiscopal chapel in Esztergom as the advent of the new style; he makes a point of stressing that this primacy applies to the whole Central European region. The earliest remains in Hungary were endowed, or supported by the ruler. From among the Cistercian abbeys founded in the period he looks most attentively at that of Pilis. He reconstructed the basin of a fountain from a fragment, and from other fragments reconstructed the sepulchral

monument of a queen, Gertrude of Andechs-Merano (†1213), which perfectly tallies with the French royal tombs of the 1220s-1230s. The formal details added during the rebuilding of the Pannonhalma abbey display – in his opinion – similarities with those on Rheims Cathedral. In place of the churches demolished during the Mongol invasion of 1241–1242 new ones were built; the best known is the church of Our Lady (“Matthias” church by its popular nineteenth-century name) in today’s Budapest. From fear of the Mongols’ return, several up-to-date castles were also constructed including the walled-in royal town on the Castle Hill in Buda, then new capital of the country (now part of Budapest). Pál Lővei and Imre Takács are the co-authors of the study about the fourteenth century predominated by the Anjou dynasty arriving in Hungary from Naples. In this period the Italian influence was palpable in whole Central Europe, most obviously in Hungary: from architecture to manuscript illumination works by several Italian artists or artists trained in Italy survive, most of them are frescoes (an outstanding example is the decoration of the



Fig. 8. Chapterhouse of the Franciscan Church in Szécsény, 1360–1370 (Photo: P. Lővei)



Fig. 9. Fragment of a stone retablo from the Virgin Mary's Chapel in Pécs, ca. 1360–1370, Janus Pannonius Museum, Pécs



Fig. 10. Tombstone of royal painter János (d. 1370), Budapest History Museum



Fig. 11. Tomb monument of Provost Georg Schönberg, 1470, collegiate church, Pozsony (Photo: P. Lövei)



Fig. 12. Fragment of a knight figure, Buda, ca. 1410, Budapest History Museum

archiepiscopal chapel in Esztergom), Nevertheless, the researchers present examples from the mostly overlooked seal art as well. Some cathedrals were rebuilt or enlarged in the spirit of the French Gothic, e.g. Esztergom, Nagyvárad (today Oradea, Romania), Eger. At the same time, the influence of Austria was also marked, particularly in the western areas, as reflected by churches in Sopron, Pozsony (today Bratislava, Slovakia). The most important fresco painter known by name – Johannes Aquila – was an itinerant Styrian artist. During the reign of Louis I (the Great, 1342–1382) the towns grew in strength, their parish churches were enlarged and modernized, town walls were erected. The most exquisite sculptural masterpiece of medieval Hungary, later moved to Prague – St George and the Dragon – was made in this period. A separate chapter is devoted to the art of the winged altarpieces, written by Gábor Endrődi. He discusses works ranging from some panel pictures that lost their original contexts to the huge high altars in Kassa (today Košice, Slovakia) and Lőcse (today Levoča, Slovakia) in a time span from around 1400 to the 1520s. While the rest



Fig. 13. Pietà from Nagyszeben, ca. 1400, Museum Național Brukenthal, Sibiu, Romania (inv. no. S 311)

of the articles aim to summarize the research findings, this paper presents a brand new approach with several new dates, some new stylistic definitions and workshop attributions. For pressure of space, however, he had no opportunity to verify his statements: scholarship awaits the substantiation of his often startling hypotheses in studies to be written in the next years. (The theme he discusses is illustrated by a mere thirteen pictures. The number of Romanesque capitals, jambs and cornice details is the high multiple of it.)

Chronology is interrupted after this paper and articles encompassing the entire Middle Ages follow suit. Gábor Klaniczay discourses on the emergence of the cult of saints, first of all East-Central European saints, and on the recent elaborations of the theme. Among the latter a salient place is ascribed to the iconographic studies, which draw closer to art history again. Vinni Lucherini writes about the visualization of the idea of royalty. Her paper is not so much a summary as an autonomous dissertation in its own right. She devotes distinguished attention to works serving the legitimation of the Anjou Dynasty rising to power



Fig. 14. Super initial, liturgical book of a goldsmith's guild, illuminator of the bishop of Vác, 1423, Széchényi National Library, Budapest (Ms. Cod. Lat. 377)

in the early fourteenth century. She starts with the introductory text of the Pictorial Chronicle (*Chronicon Pictum*) which extols royal power and lists the virtues of a king. She carefully enumerates the Biblical passages and contemporary theological authors which were used for, or at least exerted some influence on the introduction. Tracing the antecedents of certain compositions, e.g. the throne of Louis the Great on the title-page, she finds links even with Giotto. Pál Lóvei looks into epigraphy and tombstones, research topics of two distinct but well fitted disciplines. After discussing the different kinds of Hungarian lettering and the inscriptions containing them from the tenth to the sixteenth century, he switches over to the sepulchral monuments which always carry inscriptions with just a few very early exceptions. Connected to the sometimes fragmentary but always intriguing funerary monuments is the passage on the "red marble", actually a compact red limestone, regarded as a Hungarian specialty. He tends to attribute the introduction of this stone material to Byzantine influence, which was present prior to the accession of King Béla III (1172–1196), but largely intensified after his decade-long stay in Byzantium: the would-be king of Hungary must have been captured by the beauty of porphyry reserved for use by the sovereign there.



Fig. 15. Pentecost, Vladislaus Gradual, attributed to Janíček Zmílelý z Písku, early 16th century, Archiepiscopal Library, Esztergom (Ms. I. 3.)

The next article was written about luxurious goldsmith's objects and textiles by Evelin Wetter. Destruction was immense in this field because of the great value of the raw materials: she cites a municipal document from Brassó (today Braşov, Romania) which mentions twenty-six chalices in the parish church, of which five exist today. Even ornate vestments were sometimes burnt to glean the gold from the embroidery. The goldsmith's works that evaded destruction were held in very high esteem later, being mementos of a glorious past. She takes the objects one by one, often tracing their vicissitudes along the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries. She mentions a proportionally higher number of objects from Transylvania. Unlike the rest of the articles, she only present works from the fifteenth century onward. In her essay on medieval Hungarian book art Anna Boreczky faces the difficult question of what to regard as genuine Hungarian, since the extraordinary magnitude of devastations disables any effort to identify a long-working Hungarian school of illumination. The practice of current research is to subsume under this heading all illumined manuscripts that were used in Hungary or, in case they are preserved abroad today, some unambiguous signs (coat

of arms, former owners' notes) make their Hungarian origin highly probable. She takes stock of the most important manuscripts from the early eleventh century to Matthias Corvinus' library, giving high priority to royal book culture in each period and concludes that far less is known about the private sphere. Such typological manuscripts as the *Speculum humanae salvationis* or *Biblia Pauperum* are missing altogether, and there are very few books of hours, too. The most valuable items owed their existence to the intense cultural exchange with the West.

The next part (in which the principle of chronology observed at the beginning is returned to) has a peculiar subtitle: "Middle Ages after the Middle Ages". Its two articles present the "medieval" fifteenth century – a term certainly accepted by scholarship for Hungary. The first by Imre Takács sums up the art of the decades of Sigismund of Luxemburg's reign (king of Hungary: 1387–1437), at the beginning of which the Italianate artistic line of his Anjou predecessors was aligned with. The most significant products of his art patronage are the castles in Buda (Budapest) and on the Castle Hill of Pozsony, both royal residences. Highly important products of his reign are the high-quality sculptures made for the decoration of the former but interrupted before completion for unknown reasons and buried in the ground. They are unparalleled relics of the Parisian-Netherlandish style in our region. From enormous churches to tiny goldsmith's objects a whole range of masterpieces can be attributed to his patronizing activity or to the climate during his reign. What may attract even more attention is perhaps the higher number of portraits than of any of his contemporaries, as well as the surprisingly many incognito portraits the real portraits gave rise to. This is presumably a sign that his was a new type of ruling personality pointing beyond the Middle Ages. The other paper is devoted to another great ruler figure, Matthias Corvinus (1458–1490) by Árpád Mikó. He is generally recognized as the patron of modern Renaissance art, but that only applies to the last years of his reign. Earlier he was in favour of Gothic art, though of its most advanced variant. His court included luxurious Italian maiolica and furniture items earlier, too, and such magnificent names as that of Andrea del Verrocchio is also associated with him. The sculptures made from local materials are thought to be the works of local sculptors, though a Croat – Ivan Duknović known as Giovanni Dalmata by specialists of Italian quattrocento sculpture – is also reckoned among them. The life-sized bronze statues on antique



Fig. 16. Part of the double title page of the *Philostratus Corvina*, Boccardino il Vecchio, 1487–1490, Széchényi National Library, Budapest (Cod. Lat. 427. fol. Iv)

themes in Matthias' palace were perfectly unknown north of the Alps. *Bibliotheca Corvina* was among the most famous libraries of the age: vying with the greatest Italian art patrons the ruler purchased or commissioned ornate manuscripts in Florence, but there was an illuminating and book-binding workshop in his own seat, too. The next reading is – somewhat surprisingly – about the nineteenth-century medievalist trends in Hungarian architecture. Besides listing the most important buildings, Gábor György Papp also enumerates the arguments adduced for the choice of the given style and concludes that in the case of the major churches – St Elizabeth's in Kassa, the Church of Our Lady ("Matthias" church) in Budapest – what actually took place was reconstruction instead of res-

toration. The writing is very good, but it is highly unlikely that anyone interested in nineteenth-century architecture would want to consult a book which features *medieval* Hungary in its title.

The chapters on evolution and different connections are followed by two “Annexes”. The term is somewhat misleading, as the two add up to more than a third of the entire length of the book. What justifies their designation is the important and useful information they provide but not in the temporal order applied so far. The first Annex presents mini monographs of the most important relics, more than two-thirds of which are architectural constructions. Since many of them preserve works of art, the decorative stone reliefs, sculptures, frescoes are also mentioned. The rest of the items are works of fine arts and crafts: sculptures, reliefs, illuminated codices, coronation regalia, even winged altarpieces. Each entry begins with the history of the building or item, the historical situation and the peculiarities of the genesis, but the main point is the description of the work, its special features, the stylistic connections, the concordant or contradictory views of research. The entries are not restricted to the praise of the beauty of the items. Each ends with a short bibliography of 4-5 items, except for a few maximalist authors. As for the authors, they are great authorities in their respective fields, most of them also the writers of the main papers in the historical section.

The second Annex lists the major museums that preserve medieval works from Hungary. The presented collections are adequately selected, but their descriptions are not homogeneous, the stress being now on collection history, not on the main groups of objects. The last item, Collections of Stone Carvings,

is not about a distinct collection but lists all the museums, cathedrals, lapidaria of castle excavations where large groups of stone carvings can be found, not all arranged for exhibiting. Each item is followed again by a bibliography of diverse length, including a few monographic elaborations of salient pieces.

The 24 authors born in the 1950s, '60s and '70s belong to the generation of researchers in the prime of their activity (with only two being older). Their main endeavour was to expose the more recent results, the bibliographies also containing a conspicuously high number of works from the last decade or even the last two or three years. There was a conscious effort to list articles and books in other than Hungarian languages too, which was not always possible. Though the entire literature of a problem or object was impossible to list, the first items are usually from the nineteenth century, which were predominantly in Hungarian. Being the leading specialists of their fields, they inevitably refer to their own earlier works – the rate depending on the scholar's degree of modesty. There is a palpable effort to list recent references, the rate of which differs by authors. An extreme example is István Feld's study who cited a mere four books from before 1990. The references fill one or two pages, though Kornél Szovák's, for example, cover eight. The best reading list is Gábor Klaniczay's, who arranged the titles strictly in the order of his train of thoughts, and thus a reader may easily probe deeper into the topic that has aroused his/her interest. His references fill even more space than Szovák's (almost ten pages). The best solution would have been the use of notes: since the volume was meant for scholars, it was a pity to shrink from this time-tested method.

János Vég