



# ANTONII BONFINII RERUM HUNGARICARUM DECADIS PRIMÆ LIBER PRIMUS.

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**R**UTGERS University Library had recently acquired a book written by Antonius Bonfini (1427—?), a Renaissance historian, who worked in contemporary Hungary.<sup>1</sup> This is an important historical source because it represents the first effort to write the history of the Hungarians by breaking with many of the medieval traditions of Hungarian historiography. For centuries after it had been completed, historians greatly depended upon Bonfini's work, regarding it with an awe that it only partially deserved.

Born in Ascoli, south of Ancona, Bonfini received a humanistic education studying the Latin classics, especially Livy. By the time

<sup>1</sup> The full title of the Rutgers copy reads as follows: ANTONII BONFINII RERUM HUNGARICARUM DECADES QUINQUE QUAS ILLUSTRISSIMUS DOMINUS COMES CHRISTOPHORUS ERDÖDY DE MONYOROKERÉK, MONTIS CLAUDII, & COMITATUS VARASDIENSIS PERPETUUS COMES & C. A.A.L. & PHILOSOPHIAE AUDITOR EMERITUS DUM E PRAELECTIONIBUS R.P. JONAE Á DIVO THOMA AQUINATE É CLERICIS REGULARIBUS PIARUM SCHOLARUM PROFESSORIS POSITIONES UNIVERSAE PHILOSOPHIAE PROPUGNARET; DICAVIT, & SACRAVIT

king Mathias Hunyadi (Corvinus) invited him to come to his court in 1486, Bonfini was already an accomplished historian.

King Mathias was then in the midst of one of his innumerable wars, this time with the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick III of Habsburg. He was staying in Vienna, having recently conquered the Imperial City. Bonfini was entrusted by the king to write a history of the Hungarians "from the beginnings of time." In order to facilitate his living at court, he was appointed Reader to the Queen Beatrix, a salaried position.

Bonfini, being an Italian, had hardly enough time to learn all that was needed for him to know of Hungary's past. But language problems bothered him little, only when he had to spell out Hungarian proper names. Otherwise he must have found life at court very much to his liking; the languages used at the court included, besides Hungarian, classical Latin and Italian. Mathias' library, the famous Corvina collection, contained many of the works of classical authors, and the atmosphere of the court was very similar to those of Renaissance courts in contemporary Italy.

Bonfini was a diligent researcher. He listed sixty-seven sources that he consulted while writing his book. Besides the ancient authorities, he listed the writings of Aeneas Sylvius as well as the *Annales Boemorum* [Bohemia], *Annales Polonorum* and *Annales Vngarorum*. Of these sources the chronicle of Johannes Thuróczy<sup>2</sup> left deep impressions on him. Yet Bonfini did not simply copy the medieval chronicles. He embellished these sources with his own observations. Often he put these in the form of dialogues between the heroes of his narrative, emulating Livy. He greatly improved on the enumeration of chronology that mostly made up for Hungarian historiography up to his time.<sup>3</sup>

Later research ascertained that a large part of Bonfini's work cannot be accepted as a reliable source. But the most important part of his book, that which deals with the history of the Hunyadi family, is very valuable. No wonder; he had ample opportunity to

<sup>2</sup> This chronicle is also in the possession of RUL, currently in the process of being catalogued. In another article an evaluation of this work will follow.

<sup>3</sup> The Medieval Hungarian Chronicles were apparently written for the purpose of maintaining historical continuity in the ruling families. According to a Hungarian expert, an ancient *Gesta* must have once existed, in which the continuous history of the Hungarians was being written from generation to generation. See Elemér Mályusz, *A Thuróczy Krónika és forrásai* [The Chronicle of Thuróczy and its sources] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1967).

ascertain his sources; the king not only took Bonfini with him on his remaining campaigns—he was to die in 1490—but he also ordered his statesmen and prelates to open their papers and libraries for the historian's scrutiny.

Although the genealogical table that Bonfini produced, trying to prove that the Hunyadis were descendants of some ancient Roman family, was obviously spurious, most of his other data dealing with the life of king Mathias are revealing and dependable.

Bonfini must have been a pleasant fellow indeed. His fate also shows the esteem by which the historical sciences were held at the courts of Hungarian kings of his time. When King Mathias died, he was not discharged from his official duties. The new king, Uladislav II, maintained him in his salaried position and eventually elevated him and his descendants—of whom we know nothing—to the rank of Hungarian noblemen. Bonfini eventually died at a respected old age at Buda.

The original work was organized into forty-five *Decas* pretending to cover the entire "history" of the Hungarians. Most of the early parts are too dependent upon the ancient chronicles and are, therefore, of questionable value. They contain the description of the life and work of kings and other "great men" in Hungarian history. Bonfini compared Hungarian kings and prelates to the ancient heroes of antiquity in his book. Their crimes are followed by punishment and their good deeds by reward. His objectivity understandably falters when he comes to the times of the Hunyadi family.

But despite his biases, Bonfini did contribute a great deal to our understanding of the times and life of Mathias Hunyadi. His characterization of the great Renaissance king is vivid indeed. His description of the causes of Mathias' wars, involving the king with the Czech Podiebrad and the Emperor Frederick III, is convincing. His discussion of Hungary's role in the Turkish wars of the fifteenth century is important.

These informative passages are, however, marred by minor mistakes. These were the results mostly of Bonfini's carelessness. He missed some important dates during king Mathias' reign and sometimes confused important court personalities. On the other hand, his Latin flows easily and is pleasant reading; his descriptions of the battles of the Hungarian kings, their struggles for power, really

bring the age of which he writes alive. His narrative, by seeking the sources and causes of the twists and turns of fate that directed Hungarian affairs, is much closer to modern historiography than to the style of Hungary's Medieval chronicles.

The fate of Bonfini's work was not very smooth. It was first published in Basel, Switzerland, in 1543. Paul Istvánffy, father of the later Hungarian historian, Miklós Istvánffy, studied at the University of Padua where he met Hieronymus Boner, a German student, who was preparing for a teaching career. Istvánffy had a copy of the Bonfini manuscript in his possession but this contained only the first three *Decas*. At any rate, he gave this copy to Boner for possible publication.<sup>4</sup>

The book was first published in Latin; two years later, in 1545, its German translation appeared. Further editions were based on this text until, in 1581, the rest of Bonfini's work was discovered and published in Frankfurt a.M. The copy that Rutgers University Library has was published in Pozsony—now Bratislava—in 1744. It is a valuable addition to a growing Hungarian collection.

<sup>4</sup> In János Horváth, *A Reformáció Jegyében. A Mohács utáni félszázad Magyar irodalomtörténete* [Under the banner of the Reformation. History of Hungarian Literature in the half century following the Battle of Mohács] (Budapest: Gondolat, 1957), p. 103.

