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What Did His Contemporaries Think of King Louis the Great?

Jak postrzegano króla Ludwika Wielkiego w czasach mu współczesnych?

Abstract

King Louis the Great (1342–1382) is regarded as one of the greatest rulers in Hungarian history. He is the only Hungarian king to have been honoured with this epithet. The aim of this article is to analyze the sources that offer a characterization of the king. A prominent example is a hymn of praise to Louis, written around 1356 by Peter Suchenwirt, an Austrian poet and herald. His work provides a detailed account of Louis's military campaigns, along with a brief description of each. His biographer, John of Küküllő, made many interesting observations about Louis in his work entitled *Chronicon de Ludovico rege*. We learn about the king's passion for astrology, his linguistic abilities (he was said to have spoken German, Italian, and Latin fluently), and finally, the king's physical appearance. Surviving portraits of the ruler confirm the chronicler's opinion. Finally, some Italian chronicles and the opinions about King Louis contained therein, including those of anecdotal nature, are also discussed.

Keywords: King Louis the Great, Peter Suchenwirt, John of Küküllő, opinions about the king, Italian chronicles.

Abstrakt

Król Ludwik Wielki (1342–1382) jest zaliczany do jednego z największych władców w dziejach Węgier. To jedyny król Węgier, który został obdarzony takim przydomkiem. Celem artykułu jest analiza tych przekazów źródłowych, w których znajduje się charakterystyka króla. Na plan pierwszy wybija się pieśń pochwalna ku czci Ludwika, którą napisał około 1356 r. Peter Suchenwirt, austriacki poeta i herold. Jego utwór to dokładna wyliczanka wypraw wojennych Ludwika wraz z krótką ich charakterystyką. Wiele ciekawych spostrzeżeń na temat Ludwika poczynił jego biograf Jan z Küküllö w dziele zatytułowanym *Chronicon de Ludovico rege*. Dowiadujemy się o zamiłowaniu króla, którym była astrologia, jego umiejętnościach językowych (miał ponoć mówić biegle po niemiecku, włosku i łacinie), a wreszcie o jego wyglądzie fizycznym. Zachowane wizerunki władcy potwierdzają opinię kronikarza. Wreszcie omówione zostały też niektóre kroniki włoskie i zawarte tam opinie o królu Ludwiku, w tym także o charakterze anegdotycznym.

Słowa kluczowe: król Ludwik Wielki, Peter Suchenwirt, Jan z Küküllö, opinie o królu, kroniki włoskie.

King Louis the Great (1342–1382) is regarded as one of the most eminent monarchs in the history of Hungary. He remains the sole Hungarian sovereign to have been bestowed the epithet “the Great.” A review of publicly accessible sources concerning Louis reveals that the epithet was first recorded – using the Latin term *grandis* – in the Venetian chronicle authored by Lorenzo de Monacis (ca. 1350–1428),¹ specifically in his work *Carmen seu historia de Carolo II cognomento Parvo rege Hungariae*.² In this context, the term was employed to describe the king’s actions, notably his rejection of the lifestyle of the Pannonian peoples and his efforts to lead them *ad ritum humanum*, that is, toward a more civilized mode of existence. These deeds were said to have been accomplished *grandis gloria*, or with great glory.³ It is evident, therefore, that the term was used adjectivally rather than as a formal epithet. Notably, a few verses later, the same adjective appears again – this time in its plural form (*grandia*) – to denote large dwellings into which the monarch purportedly relocated

1 Luigi Andrea Berto, Lorenzo de Monacis, in *Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle Online*, ed. Graeme Dunphy (Brill, 2016) https://doi.org/10.1163/2213-2139_emc_SIM_00863 (access: 19.11.2024).

2 Laurentii de Monacis Veneti Craete cancellarii, *Chronicon de rebus Venetis etc.*, ed. F. Correr (Venetiis: ex Typographia Remondiniana, 1758), 321–338.

3 *Ibidem*, 325.

impoverished peasants.⁴ This usage further substantiates the claim that the epithet “the Great” does not appear in reference to King Louis within the afore-mentioned poem by Lorenzo de Monacis.

The earliest known attribution of the epithet “the Great” to Louis appears to have been made by Georgius Pray (1723–1801), a Hungarian Jesuit, bibliophile, and historian, best known for his multi-volume *Historia regum Hungariae*. In the second volume of this work, published in Buda in the year of his death (1801), Pray asserts that Louis was accorded the epithet *Magnus* without envy and by the confession of all (*confessione omnium*).⁵ Concurrently, the renowned Hungarian poet Dániel Berzsenyi employed the epithet in his poem *Louis the Great and Matthias Hunyadi* (*Nagy Lajos és Hunyadi Mátyás*), composed circa 1800–1802. From the early nineteenth century onward, Hungarian historiography has consistently referred to King Louis using the epithet “the Great.”

Let us have a look at how he was perceived by his contemporaries. We have a number of accounts written by chroniclers and poets. The most important of these is undoubtedly a hymn in praise of Louis written by Peter Suchenwirt around 1356. Suchenwirt, born around 1325 and deceased before 1407, was an Austrian poet and herald, an outstanding exponent of what is known as arms poetry. Little is known of his origins; he himself referred to himself in one of his works as *knappe von den wappen*. From 1372, he lived at the court of the Austrian dukes and took part in their expeditions to Prussia, accompanying Duke Leopold III in 1372 and Duke Albrecht III in 1377. His poems are replete with heraldic descriptions, demonstrating his mastery of heraldic terminology. Suchenwirt travelled extensively and was a guest at the court of King Louis, hence the song in his honour and the meticulous description of the Angevin coat of arms. Towards the end of his life, Suchenwirt was a wealthy Viennese citizen in close contact with the Austrian court.⁶

Suchenwirt opens his poem by invoking the Holy Spirit as the one who holds the keys to the gates of art, since he himself had received little of its rewards. The body of the work is in praise of the king’s knightly deeds, which the author understands as military achievements. It is clear

4 *Ibidem*, 326.

5 Georgius Pray, *Historia regum Hungariae*, pars II (Budae: Typis et Sumtibus Regiae Universitatis Pestanae Typographiae, 1801), 144.

6 Claudia Brinker-von der Heyde, “Suchenwirt Peter,” in *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters. Verfasserlexikon*, vol. 9 (Berlin–New York: De Gruyter, 1995), col. 481–488; Philipp Plattner, “Bewaffnete Pilgerfahrt. Die Preussenfahrt Herzog Leopolds III. von Österreich (1372),” *Biuletyn Polskiej Misji Historycznej* 10 (2015): 207.

that Suchenwirt arranged them in chronological order. Let us therefore recall this part of the song:

He went boldly against Serbia with a retinue of many heroes, well-armed and well-equipped. His heart always rejoices when he finds an opportunity to enhance his glory. Twice he moved against Rus' with a bold heart, surrounded by many brave heroes. He also marched against Lithuania, to the anger of its king, to do harm there and to force him to swear an oath before him in a pagan manner. But (his) loyalty did not last; he broke his oath. The noble lord also appeared in Prussia, where he bravely fought in the service of Our Lady in the company of kings, illustrious counts, distinguished barons and vassals, brave knights and squires. He could also be seen, with great dignity and honour, in Dalmatia. At other times, he moved willingly and with great force against Croatia. For the sake of honour, he endured many hardships and inconveniences without for a moment losing courage. He showed this at Zadar, where he appeared with a mighty army to take it in a heroic battle. But how quickly the enemy learned of his intentions – they remained in the city. His bravery made him famous among the best. Against Apulia, too, he marched with a great army, accompanied by proud knights, before he avenged his younger brother; how much suffering and pain he had caused to many.⁷

The king's itinerary, which includes a detailed enumeration and brief characterization of his numerous military campaigns, demonstrates that few years passed without his participation in some form of military expedition.⁸

Further insights into Louis's character and interests are provided by his biographer, John of Küküllő, in his work *Chronicon de Ludovico rege*. Although the original manuscript has not survived, its contents have been preserved through other medieval chronicles. From the pages of his biography, we learn of the king's interest in astronomy, which is not surprising for the time, and the royal court, where astrologers were employed and consulted on all major royal undertakings. This was also the case with Louis, as evidenced by a reference in an Italian chronicle to the king's departure on his first expedition against Naples. According to this account, Louis left the capital an hour before sunrise on 3 November 1347, indicating that this was the time to set out on an expedition based on the complicated calculations of his astrologers. Trusting in

7 Alois Primisser, *Peter Suchenwirts Werke aus dem 14. Jahrhundert* (Wien: J.B. Wallishausser, 1827), 2–3.

8 Mór Wertner, "Itinerar des Königs Ludwig I," *Vjestnik kr. hrvatsko-slavonsko-dalmatinskog zemaljskog arhiwa* 5 (1903): 115–150; *idem*, "Nagy Lajos király hadjáratai (1342–1382)," *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 19 (1918): 59–97, 202–271.

the stars was believed to guarantee the success of the entire expedition.⁹ Louis's biographer also praises the king's linguistic skills. In addition to his native Hungarian, he was apparently fluent in German, Italian and Latin. According to John of Küküllő, Louis sometimes liked to withdraw from the hustle and bustle of the world and spend time alone in contemplation. This is unexpectedly confirmed in one of the city chronicles of Padua by Wilhelm Cortusius. He wrote that when Louis was encamped with his army at the walls of Treviso, he would go to the banks of the nearby River Sile every day before noon to read documents in solitude for at least an hour, away from the noise of the camp. Cortusius mentions this royal custom with some trepidation, in the context of an attempt on the king's life being planned by a nobleman from Treviso. Everything ended happily: the assassination did not take place, and for us it is a valuable piece of information that not only reveals some of the king's habits (a tendency towards solitude), but also confirms that he knew Latin, in which the documents he took to the riverbank were probably written.¹⁰

Louis's biographer also describes the king's physical appearance. He was "a shapely man, of tall stature, with a lofty look, curly hair and beard, a calm face, and prominent and slightly crooked lips."¹¹ As it happens, we have at least a few contemporary portraits of the Hungarian king to compare with this description. Let us start with a miniature from the *Illustrated Chronicle*. Here, we can see the king seated on a throne, fitted with all the royal insignia of crown, sceptre and orb, and flanked on the left and right by groups of men. In this particular case, we are particularly interested in the king's physical appearance. We can see the head, which is proportionally larger than the body, the long hair flowing over the shoulders; the eyes, which are large in relation to the face; and, finally, the beard and the large mouth. The depiction of King Louis in

9 Dezső Dercsényi, *Nagy Lajos kora* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1990) (second edition), 14.

10 *Kronika uhorských kráľov zvana Dubnická*, ed. Július Sopko (Budmerice: Vydavateľstvo Rak, 2004), 159; Dercsényi, *Nagy Lajos kora*, 14; Judit Csákó, "A padovai krónikák, Nagy Lajos és a guerra dei confini," *Világtörténet* 13 (45)/2 2023: 256–257.

11 Johannes de Thurocz, *Chronica Hungarorum*, t. I: *Textus*, ed. Elemér Mályusz, Gyula Kristó (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1988), chapter: 185: "fuit homo competentis proceritatis, oculis elatis, crinibus et barba crispis, sereno vultu, labiosius, et aliquantum in humeris curvus"; Zofia Rozanow, Ewa Smulikowska, "Jasnogórski obraz *Transatio reliquiae* św. Pawła Pustelnika jako przekaz ikonograficzny do dziejów zakonu paulinów," *Nasza Przyszłość* 31 (1969): 170; Vinni Lucherini, *La Cronaca angioina dei re d'Ungheria. Une specchio eroico e fiabesco della sovranità* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2021), 60.

the *Chronicon Pictum* is thus very similar to that provided by his biographer.¹² An artistically similar representation of the king can be found in an initial adorning the first page of a treatise called *Secretum secretorum*, the original of which is in Oxford University. The figure of the ruler is slender and youthful, with a relatively light beard on his face. Given the circumstances of the book's creation (it was written for the king), it is not surprising that Louis is portrayed in the bloom of youth.¹³ Another portrait of Louis is preserved in the frescoes of the San Felice Chapel (called St James in the Middle Ages) in the Basilica of St Anthony of Padua. They include a series of three paintings of the legendary King Ramiro of Asturias: in a dream in which Saint James of Compostella appears and encourages him to fight against the Arabs; then during a council meeting in which he recounts his dream; and finally at the Battle of Clavijo, which is believed to have taken place in 844. The frescoes were commissioned by Bonifacio Lupi di Soragna, a close associate of Francesco I da Carrara, and the work was entrusted to the eminent Italian painter Altichiero, considered to be Giotto's successor. The entire artistic project was carried out by Altichiero between 1372 and 1379.¹⁴ There is no doubt that King Louis of Hungary was depicted under the figure of the legendary King Ramiro. This is indicated not only by Ramiro's resemblance to the portrait of Louis in the *Illuminated Chronicle*, but above all by the Angevin family insignia incorporated into the frescoes in a 'clear but unobtrusive' manner.¹⁵ We could ask ourselves why the portrait of the Hungarian king appeared in a church in Padua, under the figure of King Ramiro. The answer is simple: Hungary was a faithful ally of Francesco I da Carrara, Lord of Padua, in his battles with Venice. The rulers of Padua were well aware of the political and military significance of the aid they received from King Louis. This contribution was also appreciated by the commissioner of the frescoes, Bonifacio Lupi, who acted as envoy to the Hungarian court during the heated peace talks of 1372. Francesco I's son, Francesco il Novello, nicknamed 'the Hungarian', displayed the coat of arms of King Louis on the walls of his castle in Padua. Although the fresco painter, Altichiero, never met the Hungarian king, this close political and military relationship, as well as the presence of Hungarian

12 Lucherini, *La Cronaca angioina*, 60.

13 Dercsényi, *Nagy Lajos kora*, 18–19.

14 Dezső Dercsényi, "Ricordi di Luigi il Grande a Padova," *Corvina* 3/7 (1940): 468–469; Margaret Plant, "Portraits and Politics in Late Trecento Padua: Altichiero's Frescoes in the S. Felice Chapel, S. Antonio," *The Art Bulletin* 63/3 (1981): 406–407, 412.

15 Plant, "Portraits," 413.

students at the University of Padua, provided so many opportunities to learn about the physical appearance of Louis that there can be no doubt that his artistic vision corresponds to reality.¹⁶

Another portrait from the same period as the frescoes in Padua shows Louis dressed as St Wenceslas in the parish church of the Holy Trinity at Velemér in southern Hungary. The painting is part of a cycle by Johannes Aquila, which includes the Judgement of Jesus, the Crucifixion, Saints and Evangelists, and the Adoration of the Magi. It dates from 1378. Saint Wenceslas bears the same features as King Louis and is very similar to his portrait in Padua. He has a stocky build, a broad face, a forked beard and narrow, elongated eyes. The king is shown in full armour, receiving a crown from an angel, and the whole portrait is very austere. Experts on the subject have pointed out that Louis of Anjou supported the cults of local saints, particularly St Wenceslas, a good example being his donation of a painting of this saint to a chapel in Aachen.¹⁷ Another image of Louis of the 1470s is in the silver altarpiece of St Simeon in Zadar. However, the state of preservation does not allow a detailed description of the king's features.

Another contemporary portrait of the King of Hungary is a miniature in the *Cronica carrarese*, the chronicle of Padua during the reign of the de Carrara family, by the brothers Galeazzo and Bartolomeo Gatari. The original is now kept in the Biblioteca Marziana in Venice. King Louis is depicted as a knight wearing a crown and dressed in ermine, with an ostrich on his breastplate. He is flanked by two Lords of Padua, father and son. On his right is Francesco I, known as *il Vecchio* (the Elder), recognisable by the lion's head on his sleeve, while on his left is his son Francesco il Novello, shown with the Carrara family insignia, the four wheels of the chariot.¹⁸ This rendering of King Louis is very similar to his portrait in the frescoes discussed above and corresponds to the description in John of Küküllő's biography of the king.

Despite the lack of detail, the surviving royal seals also shed some light on the appearance of King Louis. I am referring to the majestic

16 Dercsényi, "Ricordi," 478; Plant, "Portraits," 413–414; Patrizia dal Zotto, "Luigi il Grande, re d'Ungheria, nel Castello Carrarese," *Padova e il suo territorio* 24 (138) (2009): 21–24; Valentina Baradel, "A fianco di Luigi il Grande d'Ungheria: la celebrazione del potere e delle alleanze politiche nel Castello carrarese," in *Un castello per la signoria carrarese, un castello per la città. Arte di corte in un monumento in trasformazione*, a cura di Giovanna Valenzano (Padova: University Press, 2019), 63–80.

17 Plant, "Portraits," 412–413; Daniel Spanke, "Najstarejša autoportreta v Evropi? Pomen lastnih podob Janeza Aquile iz Radgone v Veleméru (1378) in v Martjancih (1392) za starejšo zgodovino portreta," *Zbornik za umetnostno zgodovino* 34 (1998): 119–128.

18 Plant, "Portraits," 424.

seals, which show the king enthroned with all the royal attributes. It is interesting to note that the Hungarian royal seals show the king's physical appearance from the time of his youth. The so-called second majestic seal, introduced in 1363 and used in the Hungarian chancellery until Louis's death, shows him as a young man without a beard and with rich curly hair falling from under his crown to his shoulders. This element of Louis's appearance – long curly hair – can be seen in all of his surviving portraits.¹⁹ In contrast, the majestic seals of Louis as King of Poland, made after 1370, show the king as a man with a bushy beard and a stern gaze. His face is fuller and older, and the whole figure gives the impression of fatigue, undoubtedly influenced by the almost annual wars the king had undergone and the sheer physical exhaustion of his body.²⁰

Opinions about Louis can also be found in contemporary Italian chronicles. Giovanni Conversino da Ravenna, whose father was the physician to the king of Hungary, left brief accounts in several of his works. These were probably influenced by the stories he heard from his father, as Giovanni, although born in Hungary, left the country soon after his mother's death and therefore could not have met the Hungarian king himself. His works include the *Dragmalogia de eligibili vite*, a dialogue between a Paduan and a Venetian about whether it is better to live in a republic or under a personal rule, and the *Memorandarum rerum liber*, a collection of anecdotes about contemporary figures, modelled on Petrarch.²¹ In these two works we find brief opinions on King Louis.

In the *Dragmalogia*, Giovanni Conversino includes a brief characterisation of Louis as an ideal ruler who carried out reforms in his own country.²² In the *Memorandarum*, he tells an amusing anecdote about how the bishop of Pécs once visited Petrarch and showed him a letter written in King Louis's chancellery. When Petrarch picked up the letter and saw the crude Latin, he is said to have advised the king to keep fewer dogs (used for Louis's favourite hunts) and to invest more money in the scribes working in the chancellery. Conversino may have heard about the letter and the visit of the Bishop of Pécs directly from Petrarch, when he visited him at Christmas of 1373. In any case, it is difficult to decide whether this anecdote about Petrarch's acerbic remarks about the Latin

19 Dercsényi, *Nagy Lajos kora*, 18.

20 Marian Gumowski, *Pieczęcie królów polskich* (Kraków: Tow. Numizmatyczne, 1910), pl. VIII, no. 11; Dercsényi, *Nagy Lajos kora*, 18.

21 Benjamin G. Kohl, "The works of Giovanni di Conversino da Ravenna: A Catalogue of manuscripts and editions," *Traditio* 31 (1975): 349–367.

22 Plant, *Portraits*, 424.

of the Hungarian king's correspondence refers to actual events or is just a literary invention of Giovanni.²³

In summary, Louis's contemporary chroniclers described him as a chivalrous king who undertook numerous military campaigns. His biographer also described his physical appearance, which is consistent with surviving contemporary portraits of the Hungarian king. Some chronicles also include anecdotal stories about Louis, as was, and is, often the case with prominent personalities about whom legends of various kinds constantly circulate.

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