

RETHINKING JAGIEŁŁO HUNGARY (1490–1526)

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Introduction

Whereas in western Europe, the fifteenth century compares badly with the sixteenth, in Central Europe the reverse is the case. During the sixteenth century, the region suffered on its eastern and southern flanks from the advances of Muscovy, the Crimean Tatars and the Turks and, on its western, from the dynastic ambitions of the Habsburgs. Caught between Turks and Habsburgs, the medieval kingdom of Hungary collapsed. Along with the Bohemian crownlands, the western part of Hungary was after 1526 incorporated in the newly-emerging Habsburg Empire: its other portions were either occupied by the Turks or by degrees transformed into what was to become the principality of Transylvania. In both Bohemia and Royal (Habsburg) Hungary, the liberties of the estates were soon challenged by the new rulers. In Poland, however, the decree *Nihil Novi* of 1505 introduced a period of unprecedented noble liberty under a powerful but divided parliament. These developments stand in marked contrast to those of the later fifteenth century: a period of consolidation, of 'national' or even 'Renaissance' monarchy, of successful wars and territorial enlargement (at least for Hungary and Poland), of economic advance and diversification, and, in the case of Bohemia, of *de facto* recognition of a national confession.

The contrast between the two centuries is nowhere more pronounced than in Hungary. During the reign of Matthias Corvinus (1458–90), the kingdom not only held out against the Turks, but also waged successful wars against Bohemia and Austria, occupying substantial chunks of territory (most notably Vienna and Lower Austria, Moravia, Silesia and the Lusatias). During Matthias's reign, the royal income may at its highest point have reached about 800,000 florins or ducats a year, putting Hungary on an almost equal financial level to England and France.¹ For its part, the library gathered by the king in the palace of Buda was second in size only to that of the Vatican.² All of this was lost under Matthias's Jagiełło

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¹ The figure of 800,000 florins is speculative. The Hungarian florin was worth fractionally more than the ducat.

² János M. Bak, 'Monarchie im Wellental. Materielle Grundlagen des ungarischen Königtums im fünfzehnten Jahrhundert', in Reinhard Schneider (ed.), *Das spätmittelalterliche Königtum im europäischen Vergleich* (Vorträge und Forschungen, 32), Sigmaringen, 1987, pp. 347–84 (360); Martyn Rady, 'The Corvina Library and the Lost Royal Hungarian Archive', in James Raven (ed.), *Lost Libraries: The Destruction of Great Book Collections since Antiquity*, Basingstoke and New York, 2004, pp. 91–105 (92).

successors, the Polish-born Władysław II (1490–1516) and his son, Lewis II (1516–26). Władysław's own election, called because Matthias had left no legitimate male heir, was contested and ushered in an interlude of civil war. As king of Bohemia since 1471, Władysław had a proven incapacity for government. Indeed, it was partly for this reason that he was chosen as king of Hungary in 1490 since the leading barons and nobles preferred a ruler 'whose braids they can hold in their hands'; a later account likened him alternately to an ox and a donkey.³ Władysław's son and successor, who came as a child to the thrones of Bohemia and Hungary, proved as easily tethered, not least by his independently-minded wife, Mary of Habsburg. During the course of the two reigns, the royal revenues declined, Matthias's acquisitions were lost, factionalism became rampant, the library in the Buda palace was dispersed, and, following their brutal *jacquerie* in 1514, Hungary's peasants were formally tied to the land. As the diet demanded ever greater control of royal policy, the king was obliged to look for succour to whichever league of magnates was in temporary ascendance. On several occasions, outright civil war beckoned. In 1526, Lewis II, or more probably his wife, was obliged to mount through a secret society a coup to replace a government which the king himself had only recently installed.⁴ The final blow came later in the same year. After two decades of constant raiding along the southern, Ottoman frontier (the so-called 'armed peace') and, after 1521, five years of 'hot war', the royal host was on 29 August destroyed in a two-hour engagement with the Turks on the field of Mohács. The young king perished in the rout, leaving no successor and thus an inheritance for the taking.

To contrast the achievements of Matthias's reign with the ignominies of the Jagiello monarchy is a commonplace among historians. The most recent book-length study of the Jagiello period, now almost a quarter-century old (for Jagiello Hungary has few achievements for historians and conferences to celebrate), thus starts with a balance sheet of Matthias's military successes and concludes with a backward glance, contrasting Hungary's 'great-power' status in 1490 to its impoverished and internationally isolated position on the eve of Mohács.⁵ The contrast did not go unnoticed by contemporaries either. In 1521, the Venetian ambassador reported back in detail on the condition of the royal finances, contrasting current income to that obtained in the last years of Matthias's reign.⁶ A year before, the politician, lawyer and judge, István Werbőczy, delivered a rousing speech to the diet complaining that foreign kings, by which he meant the two Jagiello rulers, had dissipated the national wealth and energy gathered by their illustrious predecessor.⁷ In the popular literature of the early sixteenth century, recollection of the age of 'good king Matthias' is sufficiently common to constitute a genre in its own right.⁸

It is not the purpose of this essay to redraw the balance-sheet, either of the royal finances under the Jagiello rulers or indeed of the period as a whole. It is rather to invite an alternative perspective on the period which to a partial extent rests on the experience of west European

³ János M. Bak, *Königtum und Stände in Ungarn im 14.–16. Jahrhundert*, Wiesbaden, 1973, p. 62; 'Introduxerunt bovem in regem, constituerunt ac elegerunt': Georgius Sirmiensis, *Epistola de perdicione regni Hungarorum* (Monumenta Hungariae Historica, Series 2, vol. 1), Pest, 1857, pp. 32, 35.

⁴ Vilmos Fraknói, 'Werbőczy István a mohácsi vész előtt', *Századok*, 10, 1896, pp. 437–69, 597–639 (626–30).

⁵ Péter Kulcsár, *A Jagelló-kor*, Budapest, 1981.

⁶ *I diarii di Marino Sanuto*, vol. 23, Venice, 1888, col. 350.

⁷ *Történelmi Társulat*, 1877, pp. 138–48.

⁸ Rabán Gerézdi, *A magyar világi líra kezdetei*, Budapest, 1962, pp. 105, 248.

kingdoms and principalities at this time. I am not the first to attempt this. In an enlightening essay, János Bak has contrasted Hungary with the type of ‘Renaissance state’ proposed by Federico Chabod.⁹ As Bak concludes, Hungary falls far short of the ideal, even during Matthias’s reign, but so too do most countries, for Chabod’s conception relies on specifically Italian examples and practices. I wish instead to look at the experience of Jagiello Hungary through the prism of ‘political growth’ as recently put forward by Jean-Philippe Genet. As Genet argues, the demands of war prompted late medieval rulers to consult more. Consultation and consent necessitated in their turn the growth of representative assemblies, of an ‘institutionalization of the dialogue between the ruler and his men’, and thus the creation of a public sphere. Although never replaced, factionalism was now accompanied by political debate and by discussion of the extent, location and uses of power. In the ensuing struggles, specific readings of history were deployed as part of the arsenal of argument. Furthermore, as an increasing body of public opinion was enlisted in support of positions taken, politics underwent a ‘cultural revolution’ which reached downwards through the development of a new, mobilizing political literature.¹⁰ In the main part of this article, I also build on the more specific research of András Kubinyi. For more than thirty years, Kubinyi has investigated the history of institutions, taxation, military administration, foreign-policy making and constitutional organization in the Jagiello period. In much of what follows, I rely on Kubinyi’s research and findings.¹¹

1. *Taxation and the Diet*

As György Bónis has argued, the growth in power of the estates in Hungary depended to a large extent on crises.¹² The succession crisis of the mid-1380s together with Hungary’s earliest engagements with the Turks prompted the reconvening of the diet, which had been allowed to languish under Hungary’s Angevin kings. The political impasses of the 1440s and 1450s, during which the kingdom found itself either without a king or with an absentee-child filling the role, lent the diet new powers both in regard to the selection of the kingdom’s provisional leadership and, ultimately, its monarch. During Matthias’s reign, power returned once more to the ruler. Nevertheless, Matthias still considered it prudent to associate the diet with his decisions, even though these were usually made in advance without its counsel.

⁹ János M. Bak, ‘The Hungary of Matthias Corvinus: A State in “Central Europe” on the Threshold of Modernity’, *Bohemia*, 31, 1990, pp. 339–49; Federico Chabod, ‘Was There a Renaissance State?’, in Heinz Lubasz (ed. and trans.), *The Development of the Modern State*, New York, 1966, pp. 26–42.

¹⁰ See in particular, Jean-Philippe Genet, ‘L’État moderne: un modèle opératoire?’, in Genet (ed.), *L’État moderne: Genèse*, Paris, 1990, pp. 261–81; ‘Which States Rise?’ *Historical Research*, 65, 1992, pp. 119–33; ‘Politics: Theory and Practice’, in Christopher Allmand (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 7, Cambridge, 1998, pp. 3–28. See also M. Balard, J-P. Genet, M. Rouche, *Le Moyen Âge en occident*, Paris, 2003, pp. 243–48.

¹¹ The starting-point must be András Kubinyi, ‘The Road to Defeat: Hungarian Politics and Defense in the Jagiellonian Period’, in János M. Bak and Béla Király (eds), *From Hunyadi to Rákóczi: War and Society in Later Medieval and Early Modern Hungary*, New York, 1982, pp. 159–78. Further references to Kubinyi’s principal works are given in the notes which follow.

¹² György Bónis, *Hűbériség és rendiség a középkori magyar jogban*, Kolozsvár, no date (allegedly 1947), p. 592. The same point is made more generally by Wim Blockmans, ‘Representation’, in Allmand (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 7, pp. 29–65 (61–62).

Altogether about thirty diets were held during Matthias's reign. In the *decreta* recorded at their conclusion, the fiction was preserved of a partnership between crown and estates.¹³

Matthias had over the last six years of his reign sought to ensure that his illegitimate son, John Corvin, would be elected in his place. But Corvin was on account of his inexperience widely distrusted, and it was further considered that his election would lead the country into a prolonged civil war.¹⁴ Other contenders waited in the wings: Maximilian of Habsburg, who rested his claim on a succession-contract agreed by his father and Matthias in 1463; the Bohemian king, Władysław; and Władysław's younger brother, John Albert, Grand Duke of Lithuania. Each of the rivals had his own biological claims to press, his supporters in the royal council and the diet, and his own armed retinues ready to effect a coup. Ultimately, Władysław's personal disqualification for the role of monarch, combined with his promulgation in 1490 of an electoral capitulation that guaranteed his enfeeblement, secured his appointment by the diet.¹⁵ It took, however, several short wars to force the other contenders from the field. In the meantime, Vienna and Lower Austria were repossessed by Maximilian and those parts of the Bohemian crownlands previously annexed by Matthias were returned to Władysław in his capacity of king of Bohemia.

Notwithstanding his election and subsequent coronation as king of Hungary, Władysław remained dependent on the diet. The reason for this was almost wholly financial. Matthias had overtaxed the country. During his reign, the burden falling on the peasantry from ordinary (that is prerogative) and extraordinary taxation had increased more than fivefold, but even this had proved insufficient to maintain the largely mercenary army on which the kingdom's defence relied.¹⁶ Accordingly, Matthias had deployed the bulk of his forces abroad, in the Lower Austrian and Bohemian lands, where they could be funded from local revenues, rather than concentrate them in the militarily more important parts of southern Hungary and Croatia, where they would have to be paid out of the Hungarian kingdom's resources.¹⁷ After 1490, this expedient was no longer possible and the army had henceforth to be deployed within Hungary and paid out of the kingdom's own revenue. The problem was twofold. First, ordinary revenues were insufficient to meet costs and so any shortfall had to be made up either by the mortgage of future revenues or by the levying of extraordinary taxes. Yet Władysław had in his electoral capitulation pledged no longer to raise extraordinary taxes after the fashion of Matthias and he had expressly committed himself not to impose the *subsidium* of one florin previously charged on all peasant plots. Secondly, Władysław had no access to the vast private wealth of Matthias, the largest part of which had passed in 1490 to his illegitimate son while, in the disorder that accompanied his own succession, many royal rights had been usurped. The consequence was that by the mid-1490s, the ordinary revenues on which the king could rely had fallen to under 100,000 florins.¹⁸

¹³ Zsuzsa Teke, in Georgius [György] Bónis, Franciscus [Ferenc] Döry, Geisa [Géza] Érszegi, Susanna [Zsuzsa] Teke (eds), *Decreta Regni Hungariae 1458–1490*, Budapest, 1989, pp. 11, 23.

¹⁴ Pál Engel, Gyula Kristó, András Kubinyi, *Magyarország története 1301–1526*, Budapest, 1998, p. 329 (the relevant chapters for the Jagiello period are by Kubinyi); Georgius Sirmiensis, *Epistola de perdicione*, p. 32.

¹⁵ The *capitulatio* of 1490 is included in all editions of the *Corpus Juris Hungariae*. Its terms were subsequently incorporated in the *decretum* of 1492. Capitulations of this type were usual in Hungary from 1387 onwards. See András Kubinyi, 'Die Wahlkapitulationen Wladislaws II. in Ungarn', in Rudolf Vierhaus (ed.), *Herrschaftsverträge, Wahlkapitulationen, Fundamentalgesetze*, Göttingen, 1977, pp. 140–62 (140).

¹⁶ Bak, 'Monarchie im Wellental', p. 358; András Kubinyi, 'Politika és honvédelem a Jagellók Magyarorszáგában', *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, 113, 2000, pp. 397–413 (397–98).

¹⁷ Kubinyi, 'The Road to Defeat', pp. 160–61.

¹⁸ Engel et al., *Magyarország története 1301–1526*, p. 345.

Accordingly, Władysław had to go back on his electoral capitulation and re-impose the one-florin *subsidiium*. In view of his earlier commitment, this could only be achieved with the consent of the diet. In 1491 and thereafter, the *subsidiium* was, with the diet's approval, raised on an almost annual basis. Indeed, in some years the *subsidiium* was levied several times and, by the 1520s, was running at two to three florins a plot.¹⁹ Even so, the sums raised proved substantially smaller than those obtained during Matthias's reign. Surviving account books for 1494–95 indicate that overall annual revenue had fallen to less than 400,000 florins, of which three-quarters came from the *subsidiium*.²⁰ This was little more than half the royal income a decade earlier. It seems, moreover, that a large part of this income never made its way into the treasury but was either left unpaid or diverted into the hands of leading barons and common nobles. Subsequent accounts, although much less reliable, present a picture of continued decline — to just over 200,000 florins in 1516, and to well under 200,000 in 1523. Of this income, the overwhelming amount went on maintaining the garrisons and fortresses along the southern frontier.²¹

Deterioration in the royal finances certainly took place under the Jagiello kings, but the statistics commonly advanced by historians require some qualification and attention to context. First, however parlous at face, the resources available to the crown were sufficient under the Jagiello kings to sustain a court of 650 persons, including no fewer than seventy chamberlains to the ruler. This figure excludes the queen's own entourage which was in 1525 sufficient to consume 118 cows, 80 fresh pigs, 300 cured pigs and 40 barrels of wine.²² Moreover, the latest research suggests that the army fielded at Mohács was far from antiquated or small. Even without the voevode of Transylvania's contribution (he had been asked too late to attend), the Hungarian army comprised about 25,000 troops, and included 85 cannon, 5,000 battle-waggons and 500 arquebusiers.²³ The Hungarian host at Mohács was more than a match for any army in Christendom and, moreover, it was mostly financed out of domestic sources. Secondly, the figures on which an estimate of royal resources are based are themselves open to criticism. Apart from the 1494–95 accounts, which are in any case incomplete, our knowledge of the state of the royal revenues is derived either from the reports of foreign envoys, who may have been fed underestimates of income in the deliberate hope that their governments would be more helpful to Hungary, or from projections intended for the diet's deliberation, the aim of which may have been to magnify the shortfall in ordinary revenues so as to permit continued raising of the 'extraordinary' *subsidiium*.²⁴ There is, however, an additional problem.

¹⁹ György Bónis, 'Ständisches Finanzwesen in Ungarn im frühen 16. Jahrhundert', *Nouvelles Études historiques*, 2 vols, Budapest, 1965, 1, pp. 83–103 (101).

²⁰ Engel et al., *Magyarország története 1301–1526*, p. 345. Two recent articles by István Kenyeres ('I. Ferdinánd magyarországi pénzügyigazgatási reformjai és bevételei', *Történelmi Szemle*, 45, 2003, pp. 61–92; 'A királyi Magyarország bevételei és kiadásai a 16. században', *Levéltári Közlemények*, 74, 2003, pp. 59–103) underestimate by a half the income received in 1494–95.

²¹ Bak, 'Monarchie im Wellental', p. 359; Kenyeres, 'I. Ferdinand magyarországi pénzügyigazgatási reformjai', p. 63; Zsuzsanna Hermann, 'Államháztartás és a pénz értéke a Mohács előtti Magyarországon', *Századok*, 109, 1975, pp. 301–56 (303, 330–31).

²² Engel et al., *Magyarország története 1301–1526*, p. 385; András Kubinyi, 'Alltag und Fest am ungarischen Königshof der Jagellonen 1490–1526', in Kubinyi, *König und Volk im spätmittelalterlichen Ungarn*, Herne, 1998, pp. 184–206 (185).

²³ János B. Szabó, 'A mohácsi csata és a "hadügyi forradalom"', *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, 117, 2004, pp. 443–80 (454).

²⁴ Bak notes the possibility that the figures for income under the Jagiellos may be underestimates — 'Monarchie im Wellental', p. 360. See also Hermann, 'Államháztartás és a pénz értéke', pp. 301–03.

From the 1490s onwards, the barons responsible for raising the companies or *banderia* of armed retainers and mercenaries needed for war against the Turks helped themselves to taxes at source in order to support their own contingents. Therefore, although the sums reaching the treasury suggest a substantial decline in revenue, these may not always represent the total amount raised through taxation. Nevertheless, in respect of the taxes gathered by the barons to furnish their own *banderia*, no accurate accounting was undertaken. The suspicion thus remained that the leading barons were diverting revenues intended for military purposes in order to sustain their other, personal needs. Recent research suggests that this apprehension was not unfounded and just how the trick might have been played. Additionally, the county authorities also collected and withheld a portion of the *subsidiium* in order to support the *banderia* which they were expected to deploy at time of war under the command of their own captains.²⁵

However much we do the sums, we will still find a shortfall in the royal revenues, for expenditure consistently exceeded income. This in its turn made necessary increased reliance on the diet, the consent of which was needed to secure every new round of extraordinary taxation and thus make up the deficit. During the Jagiello period, diets were held at least annually, and sometimes more often. Only a few yielded *decreta* or formal legal agreements between king and estates. Certainly, we know that some diets broke up without any agreement, but many were also called with the sole purpose of consenting to the *subsidiium*, an act which did not require a *decretum* as its formal outcome.²⁶ The diet, however, was not content to act at one remove, approving or denying royal requests for monetary assistance. In view of the belief that revenues were being misappropriated, the diet demanded a voice in royal government and, ultimately, management of the royal finances. In Hungary, as in Bohemia at this time, the diet aimed at acquiring the right not only of consent to taxation but also to control and direct the executive.

The earliest intrusion by the diet into the work of government occurred in 1495. On this occasion, the diet demanded both a reform of procedures within the royal council in order to speed up its deliberations and that in the interests of justice fourteen noble 'assessors' henceforth be represented within the principal sessions of the royal court.²⁷ As the diet lamented, at this time many cases of trespass and seizure of estates took place in the disorder following Matthias's death but which had not yet been satisfactorily resolved by the kingdom's judges. Three years later, the number of assessors was increased to sixteen, of which a half were now permitted to attend meetings of the royal council when matters touching on the whole realm were under discussion. At this stage, the noble assessors were expected to be *potiores, et praestantiores hujus regni, jurisperiti* and their appointment to be negotiated *per regiam majestatem et regnum*.²⁸ In 1500, however, the diet made the office of assessor subject to election, thus an office over which the king had no formal powers of appointment.²⁹ The diet also began at this time to influence the direction of foreign policy. At the beginning of the 1490s, it refused

²⁵ Engel et al., *Magyarország története 1301–1526*, p. 347; Kubinyi, 'The Road to Defeat', p. 166.

²⁶ Teke, in *Decreta Regni Hungariae 1458–1490*, p. 11.

²⁷ 1495: VIII and XXV. The demand that ordinary noblemen be appointed to the royal council was not new. It was first voiced at the close of the thirteenth century and repeated on several occasions in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. See Kubinyi, 'Die Wahlkapitulationen', p. 153.

²⁸ 1498: II and VII.

²⁹ 1500: X; Engel et al., *Magyarország története 1301–1526*, p. 349.

to ratify the Peace of Pressburg (1491), considering the terms of Władysław's treaty with Maximilian to be too generous. In 1505, the diet condemned the latest compact between Władysław and Maximilian, according to which the emperor would succeed to the Hungarian throne in the event of the king's death without heirs. In defence of its right to elect a 'national king', the diet showed itself ready even to go to war with Maximilian. Only the timely birth of Władysław's son, Lewis, prevented an outbreak of hostilities. Five years later, the diet took its stand by having Hungary join the League of Cambrai against Venice (by this time an otiose gesture).³⁰ It is a measure of the new powers accumulated by the diet in respect of foreign policy that in 1518 it should have elected the envoys sent to negotiate with Poland and the Pope, and four years later have appointed members of the mission sent to gather assistance from the imperial estates in Nuremberg.³¹

The main interest of the diet was, however, in controlling appointments to the principal royal offices. In 1486, Matthias had entrusted the diet with the right to elect the palatine, but this was at his own initiative and formed part of his strategy of having his illegitimate son succeed him under the guardianship of a leading figure in whom the estates could vest their trust.³² The diet was unable, however, to build on this precedent. Unlike the Bohemian diet, where by the last years of the fifteenth century the curias of lords and knights selected most of the kingdom's leading officials, the Hungarian diet was unable 'to strip office-holding of its royal character and make it of the estates'.³³ The diet might score single victories, demanding that individual officials resign their seals of office, or use its right to elect a palatine to secure the appointment of its choice. Nevertheless, the king still retained the upper hand in selecting the government. Thus even when deprived of his seals, the chancellor might continue in office and, as István Werbőczy found to his cost in 1526, an elected palatine might yet be overthrown by a faction organized around the king.³⁴

In one important respect, however, the diet did achieve more than the Bohemian estates. In Bohemia, the office of treasurer remained in royal hands, the only stipulation being that the person so selected be chosen from the estate of townsmen. In Hungary, by contrast, on a number of occasions (in 1511, 1518 and 1523) the diet was able successfully to demand that it choose treasurers of its own (*thezaurarii regni*) who would either replace the royal treasurer (*thezaurarius regius*) or work in collaboration with him.³⁵ The election of treasurers representing the interests of the estates was accompanied on each occasion by provisions aimed at the comprehensive revision of the tax system.³⁶ The measures put forward indicate that the leaders of the diet grasped in a fairly sophisticated manner just how tax revenue was being siphoned off at source by the barons and counties. Accordingly, from 1511 onwards, the diet

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 333, 337–38.

³¹ András Kubinyi, 'A királyi tanács köznemesi ülnökei a Jagelló-korban', in Éva H. Balázs, Erik Fügedi, Ferenc Maksay (eds), *Mályusz Elemér Emlékkönyv*, Budapest, 1984, pp. 357–68 (258); József Holub, 'Az 1522-iki országgyűlései és törvényezikkek', *Századok*, 52, 1918, pp. 496–509 (499, 507).

³² János M. Bak, Leslie S. Domonkos, Paul B. Harvey (eds), *The Laws of the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary 1458–1490*, Los Angeles, 1996, p. 120. The diet had in 1439 claimed as customary its right to be consulted over the appointment of the palatine, although no such custom actually existed. See Bak, *Königtum und Stände*, p. 40.

³³ Otto Peterka, *Rechtsgeschichte der böhmischen Länder*, 2 vols, Aalen, 1965 (first published 1928–33), 2, pp. 42–43.

³⁴ Engel et al., *Magyarország története 1301–1526*, pp. 342–43, 389–90.

³⁵ The Bács diet of 1518 thus apportioned salaries both to the *thezaurarii regni* and to the *thezaurarius regius*.

³⁶ For this and what follows, see Bónis, 'Ständisches Finanzwesen in Ungarn', *passim*.

sought to 'nationalize' the system of revenue collection by having agents responsible to the treasurers collect all dues and pass them on directly to the treasury from which the appropriate disbursements for military expenditure would be made. In order to complete the circle, it was additionally proposed that one of the estates' treasurers assume overall command of the kingdom's army. So sweeping were the arrangements proposed that the only financial room left to the monarch was in deciding the payment of his cooks. These new provisions were accompanied by the development of 'audit trails', the purpose of which was to identify fraud, and by the promise of harsh penalties for embezzlement. Nevertheless, the inexperience of the personnel employed in the new financial tasks, combined with the resentment of both king and barons at their loss of tax-raising authority, brought an end to these ambitious experiments. By the early 1520s, even István Werbőczy, architect of the most ambitious of the treasury reforms of this period, had turned his attention to the debasement of the coinage as an alternative to raising money through taxation. The office of treasurer returned to the king's disposal.

2. *Common Nobles, Barons and Counties*

Between 1490 and 1516, approximately thirty diets convened — the number must be left imprecise because some have left little or no trace, while others may in reality have only been meetings of the royal council. During Lewis II's reign, at least sixteen diets were summoned, with three in 1518 alone. Diets were, however, not only much more frequent but were also attended on a far larger scale. Although mass diets had met in the past, most notably in 1440 and on several occasions during Matthias's reign, for the most part a meeting of the diet usually involved only a few hundred persons. These were in the main elected representatives of the counties together with members of the royal council. By contrast, the diets of the Jagiello period regularly drew not just the elected deputies of the counties but also many thousands of noblemen who attended in a personal capacity: altogether about 2,000 such noblemen gathered at the Rákos Diet of 1505, and as many as 10,000 at the 1525 diet at Hatvan.³⁷ After 1505, the participants were frequently armed and proceedings were inevitably rowdy. Indeed, the term 'Rákos', the name of the diet's preferred place of assembly on the plain east of Pest, passed into Polish as 'rokosz', meaning an unruly assembly of the *szlachta*.³⁸ The obligation of all noblemen to attend meetings of the diet was first laid down in 1490 and, eight years later, swingeing fines were imposed for absence. One of the aims behind this provision was to ensure that sufficient common noblemen were present to intimidate the royal court and council. All too often in the past, the council had fixed in advance the agenda and proceedings of the diet, and at its close published in concert with the court and chancellery a *decretum* which did not reflect what had actually been agreed.³⁹

³⁷ Engel et al., *Magyarország története 1301–1526*, p. 388.

³⁸ The term was mediated through the Habsburg chancellery as 'Rakusch' — see Dezső Szabó, 'Rákosnak hívták-e Magyarországon az országgyűlést', *Századok*, 48, 1914, pp. 760–66.

³⁹ During Matthias's reign, the king and council might thus prevent promulgation of a *decretum* or else publish a second version which contradicted the original. See Zsuzsa Teke, 'A dekrétum fogalma és társadalmi szerepe Mátyás korában', *Történelmi Szemle*, 29, 1986, pp. 178–218 (207–08). The most notorious example comes, however, from a later period. In 1604, the royal council inserted in the *decretum* agreed with the diet an article of its own devising which restricted confessional freedom, thereby contributing directly to the Bocskai rebellion. See György Bónis, 'The Hungarian Feudal Diet (13th–18th Centuries)', *Recueils de la Société Jean Bodin*, 25, 1965, pp. 287–307 (302).

The extent to which the ‘tumultuous diets’⁴⁰ of Jagiello Hungary were the subject of manipulation by leading circles among the barons and in the royal council must, however, remain an open question. Certainly, the diet’s insistence on a ‘national’ (that is, Hungarian and Hungarian-speaking)⁴¹ monarch served the interests of the powerful Zápolya family, whose headman, John, voevode of Transylvania, never tired of promoting himself as champion of the ‘national’ cause and ‘king-in-waiting’. István Werbőczy, speaker of the diet, stood in Zápolya’s service and had the right oratorical gifts to lead the massed nobility in the direction he chose. Moreover, many of the nobles attending the diet were, like Werbőczy himself, the servitors or *familiares* of greater men, receiving from them pensions, protection and preferment. The implication is therefore that the diet’s steady erosion of royal power took place at the bidding of a powerful group of barons and others, who were able either to influence the diet’s proceedings or to force large sections of the nobility into sullen resignation. In this respect, the comment of the papal nuncio in 1525 is frequently advanced by historians. As the nuncio explained, while a part of the Hungarian nobility, mainly those working in the administration, looked to their country’s good, the majority either fought in the service of their patrons or lived on their estates, never venturing far from them and seldom showing interest in the affairs of the diet.⁴²

There are three main objections to this view. It may, indeed, be the case that sections of the diet were on occasions enlisted by powerful factions within the baronage and deployed as a way of forcing individuals out of office or favour: the chancellor in 1497 and 1514, the palatine in 1523, the royal bankers in 1525, and so on.⁴³ But that was all that baronial manipulation amounted to — a highly personalized comprehension of power which aimed either to elevate or to eliminate individuals. By contrast, the demands of the diet were remarkably consistent: to free the country from foreign influence, most obviously through the establishment of a monarchy that was responsive to Hungarian needs, and to capture the heart of government through the development of new organs that were accountable to the diet itself. In the 1490s, the diet thus won places at the principal sessions of the king’s court as well as in the royal council, and over the next two decades fought to win partial control of diplomacy, the treasury and taxation. Repeatedly, moreover, the diet called for a ruler who was a Hungarian. Whereas the barons sought to encompass the king and the principal officers, the diet aimed to control the monarchy as an institution and at mastery of the offices of government. In short, the diet was led by a long-term programme of its own rather than acting vicariously as the instrument of party and faction.

Secondly, we should consider the identity of those who filled the offices of assessor, treasurer and other elected positions. To begin with, the nominees of the diet consisted of a disproportionate number of former royal councillors and ‘castled’ nobles. Thereafter, however, representatives of the leading sections of the nobility declined in number — during Lewis’s reign only one fifth of the assessors came from their ranks.⁴⁴ The majority belonged to the middling nobility, owners of a few villages, without a significant income or a manor house

⁴⁰ The phrase is János Bak’s. See Peter F. Sugar, Péter Hanák, Tibor Frank (eds), *A History of Hungary*, London, 1990, p. 77.

⁴¹ See below, p. 15.

⁴² Erik Fügedi, *Úram, Királyom . . . A XV. századi Magyarország hatalmasai*, Budapest, 1974, p. 208.

⁴³ Engel et al., *Magyarország története 1301–1526*, pp. 342, 379, 386.

⁴⁴ Kubinyi, ‘A királyi tanács köznemesi ülnökei’, p. 262.

of their own. Interestingly, however, these appear not to have been the servitors of local lords. Indeed, most originated from counties which comprised predominantly small landowners or where the larger landowners had neutralized their influence through rivalry.⁴⁵ The same applies to those delegates of the counties who were specifically elected to represent their communities at the diet. Of the 452 identified for the reign of Lewis II, most belonged to the common nobility and, indeed, in many cases to its more impoverished members.⁴⁶ Evidently, the richest families that had previously been selected by the counties had either been ousted from influence or had abandoned their former role.⁴⁷ Just as, therefore, the diet was formulating a programme of its own, so its leading representatives were increasingly drawn from those who were either independent of the large-landowning and baronial classes or from humbler families that had previously taken little part in public life. Thirdly, even if in a relationship of service to powerful lords, nobles did not automatically forfeit their political independence. Individual careers demonstrate that at meetings of the diet, noblemen often acted without regard to their lords, assuming positions according to their conscience or to other personal concerns. As in the English parliament at this time, 'The Commons were overwhelmingly a body of county gentlemen, often returned by the interests of the peers, but by no means subordinate to them'.⁴⁸

For all the independence and resolve of its members, the diet was, nevertheless, an unwieldy and uncertain instrument. It not only frequently reversed its decisions, passing even in the same year contradictory *decreta*, but also lacked any committee structure that might have lifted its procedures out of the hands of the unruly mob of nobles who dominated, at least vocally, its proceedings. It was in this respect as structurally impoverished as its English counterpart, functioning as much as an event as an institution.⁴⁹ The diet was not, however, the only representative institution in Hungary. During the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the local county administration grew in significance. Its appointed officials acquired additional powers in respect of the organization of military retinues, in the collection of the taxes needed to support these retinues, and in the enforcement of law. The self-awareness of the county grew accordingly, but it was also spurred on by contemporary changes at the very heart of government. Under Matthias, membership of the royal council had been fluid and had consisted of the principal office-holders, leading churchmen, and the largest landowners. Inclusion in the ranks of the council generally merited the title of baron. In the 1490s, however, permanent membership of the council and thus qualification for the title of baron, was narrowed down to the main office-holders and churchmen — the so-called *barones veri*. To their number was added a fixed group of powerful landowners and their heirs who were considered sufficiently rich to be able to field their own *banderia* — the so-called *barones*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

⁴⁶ 'Common nobility' corresponds to the Hungarian *könemesség*, which is often rendered into English as 'lesser nobility'. Latin texts of the period simply record these nobles as *nobiles*, and distinguish between them and the upper ranks of the nobility, the *barones* and *proceres*. On the composition of the baronial class, see immediately below. By *proceres* should be understood wealthy landowners who were neither office-holders nor the sons of barons.

⁴⁷ Kubinyi, 'A királyi tanács köznemesi ülnökei', p. 265.

⁴⁸ Conrad Russell, *The Crisis of Parliaments: English History 1509–1660*, London, 1971, p. 41; Elemér Mályusz, 'Les Débuts du vote de la taxe par les ordres dans la Hongrie féodale', in *Nouvelles Études historiques*, 2 vols, Budapest, 1965, pp. 55–82 (80–81).

⁴⁹ See thus Russell, *Crisis of Parliaments*, p. 39; also Russell, *Parliaments and English Politics 1621–1629*, Oxford, 1979, p. 3.

naturales. These two groups, the *barones veri* and the *barones naturales*, were alone entitled to style themselves as *magnifici*, could use red-wax seals, received personal invitations from the king to attend any forthcoming diet, and were entitled to attend meetings of the royal council. Although it was still possible for individuals to break through into the baronage, this became an increasingly rare phenomenon.⁵⁰

The definition of a hereditary group of barons presaged the eventual emergence in the early seventeenth century of an upper house of the diet. For those, however, who had been used to considering the royal council as the stage and focus of their public activity, but who now found themselves excluded from its deliberations, this development was unwelcome. Indeed, it may well be that the institution of appointed assessors was partly promoted by the ruler as a way of alleviating discontent by providing a mechanism for restoring to the council some of those otherwise excluded from its membership.⁵¹ The majority, however, were thrown back on the county, almost literally. Whereas in the past, they had led their own retinues to war, now they were expected to contribute their troops to the *banderia* fielded by their respective counties.⁵² Accordingly, the focus of their activity became localized and, in the manner described by the papal nuncio, limited to the immediate noble community in whose destiny they now shared. Unsurprisingly, however, the presence of these 'new men' within the counties contributed to the political muscle that the counties were now able to exert. This was most notably felt in respect of the terms of appointment of the deputy-sheriff (*alispán*), who was the principal administrative and judicial officer of the county. Hitherto, the deputy-sheriff had always been the appointee of the county sheriff (*ispán*), a royal officer and often an absentee, who had invariably selected for this role one of his own servitors. In the 1480s, the first restrictions on the sheriff's right of appointment were laid down — namely that his deputy-sheriff should be drawn from the ranks of the local noble community. In 1504, however, the sheriff's influence on the selection of his deputy was formally ended by the diet. Henceforth, the deputy was to be elected by the local nobility.⁵³ Just as the powers of the diet were becoming more entrenched, so evidently were those also of the noble community of the county.

3. Popular Ideology

In reviewing the treasury reforms undertaken in the first two decades of the sixteenth century, György Bónis has indicated a waning *Steuermoral* within the diet.⁵⁴ In similar fashion, András Kubinyi has suggested that political morale more generally within the kingdom was weakening among the nobility, prompting disillusion and a withdrawal from public life.⁵⁵ The evidence put forward by these historians does not, however, support their contentions. As Bónis himself argues, the diet was not convinced that taxes needed to be raised further, but rather that they should be collected more efficiently, and it put forward programmes to this end. Likewise, the history of the diets held under the Jagiello kings and the new authority

⁵⁰ András Kubinyi, 'A Jagelló-kori Magyarország történetének vázlata', *Századok*, 128, 1994, pp. 288–319 (289–90).

⁵¹ Kubinyi, 'A királyi tanács köznemesi ülnökei', p. 262.

⁵² Kubinyi, 'Politika és honvédelem', pp. 402–03.

⁵³ Martyn Rady, *Nobility, Land and Service in Medieval Hungary*, Basingstoke and New York, 2000, p. 170.

⁵⁴ Bónis, 'Ständisches Finanzwesen in Ungarn', p. 102.

⁵⁵ Kubinyi, 'A királyi tanács köznemesi ülnökei', p. 265.

gathered by the counties suggests 'political growth' and a 'thickening' of politics rather than a retreat from it. Although the majority of noblemen chose to risk fines rather than to attend the tumultuous diets of the sixteenth century, the many thousands who did could comprehend for the first time their membership of a national community which transcended region and kindred and, however much at a distance, they could recognize themselves to be actively involved in the making of the kingdom's foreign and domestic policy. I develop here a vocabulary introduced by János Bak and take it further: the nobles of the early sixteenth century might no longer be able to pose convincingly as *bellatores*, for they were incapable of defending their peasants against Turkish raiders, but they could at least see themselves as *legislatores*.⁵⁶

Unsurprisingly, it was during the early sixteenth century that popular political literature, mainly in the form of pamphlets, made its first appearance in the kingdom. Most of this had an ephemeral character and has not survived, but sufficient indications remain to suggest a genre that was widespread enough both to earn censure in contemporary sermon literature as well as to provoke alarm among resident diplomats.⁵⁷ The pamphlet literature was partisan and of uneven quality. Often it consisted of verses which were copied out and distributed in the vernacular. In this category belong László Geszti's poems and the satirical verses of Ferenc Apáti. Geszti's poem, which was circulated in the 1520s at the behest of the court, recommends itself to the king and wishes him well in his imminent discussions with the diet. It conspicuously recalls the age of Matthias when the land was at peace, its people united and when knights behaved as they should. Apáti's verses poke fun at the better-off nobles, congratulating them on the ceremonial purposes to which they have put their swords, begging them desist from their plans to defeat the 'poor pagans', and all the while lamenting the misfortune in which the kingdom found itself, not least on account of the avarice of the secular clergy.⁵⁸ Other pamphlets were little more than vulgar lampoons that poked fun at personal failures, made accusations of corruption, and begged the release of local strongmen-turned-brigands.⁵⁹ We do have, however, evidence of more sophisticated endeavours. In 1525, on the occasion of the Hatvan Diet, a verse-cycle of 900 couplets was printed in Vienna, composed in the most elegant Latin. The poem was addressed to the leading men of the kingdom and it urged them to unite behind a programme of reform in order to prosecute a successful war against the Turks. Again, the poem contrasted the ruin of Hungary to the kingdom as it stood under Matthias, which was itself compared with Rome during the age of Cicero.⁶⁰ The choice of printer (Singrenius) strongly suggests that publication of the pamphlet was arranged by circles close to István Werbőczy and thus to the interests of the common nobility.⁶¹

⁵⁶ See thus János M. Bak, 'Delinquent Lords and Forsaken Serfs: Thoughts on War and Society during the Crisis of Feudalism', in S. B. Vardy and A. H. Vardy (eds), *Society in Change: Studies in Honor of Béla K. Király*, Boulder and New York, 1983, pp. 291–304 (esp. 296).

⁵⁷ Gerézdi, *A magyar világi lira*, pp. 248–50.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 94, 213–30.

⁵⁹ András Kubinyi, 'István Werbőczy als Politiker in der Zeit vor Mohács (1526)', in Balázs Nagy, Marcell Sebők (eds), ... *The Man of Many Devices Who Wandered Full Many Ways ... Festschrift in Honor of János M. Bak*, Budapest and New York, 1999, pp. 558–82 (571).

⁶⁰ László Bóka, Pál Pándi (eds), *A magyar irodalom története 1849-ig*, Budapest, 1957, p. 49; Gerézdi, *A magyar világi lira*, pp. 103–05.

⁶¹ Both Werbőczy's *Tripartitum* and his *Decem Divinorum Praeceptorum Libellus* (1524) were printed in Vienna by Singrenius.

Pamphlet literature of this type was, however, only one form of popular mobilization. During the last decades of the fifteenth century, it became generally accepted that a *decretum*, in order to hold validity, should be formally distributed to the county authorities for promulgation.⁶² This task was undertaken by the chancellery which both drew up the *decretum* at the diet's close and had its scribes make multiple copies. Once received by the counties, acts of the diet were read out at meetings of the local nobility and further copies made. In 1490 the deputy-sheriff of Nógrád county had printed in Leipzig the text of a *decretum* issued four years earlier, and this is unlikely to be an isolated instance.⁶³ Often, however, *decreta* sent to the counties were rewritten in garbled form, to the future confusion of lawyers and historians.⁶⁴ The wide circulation obtained by acts of the diet made them, however, an effective vehicle not just for circulating the laws announced at the diet but also for disseminating political and other programmes. These were inserted in the text of the laws, masquerading as their explanation. The proemium to the 1498 *decretum* thus included a disquisition on the duties of kingship which included the obligation to maintain unimpaired the freedoms of the Hungarian nobility as recognized over the preceding three centuries. For its part, the opening section of the 1525 *decretum* of the Rákos Diet complained of the continued influence of foreigners (that is, Poles, Czechs and Germans) in the royal council and over the government of the country, a point which was repeated in the resolution of the Hatvan diet held later in the same year.⁶⁵ By contrast, the first article of the 1518 *decretum* of the Tolna diet was as much directed at foreign as at domestic consumption. It adumbrated the military plight facing the country following the fall of the Bosnian fortresses, pointed to the imminent capture of the castle of Jajce, and explained the Turkish threat not only to Slavonia but also, and more menacingly, to Carinthia, the Austrian lands and the Holy Roman Empire.

The most extreme example of the circulation of political programmes through the written instruments of the diet occurred in 1505.⁶⁶ The resolution of the 1505 Diet thus began with a learned discussion derived from civilian legal literature on the naturalness of human society and on the common obligation to defend the *communis patria*. From this followed an account of the travails afflicting the Hungarian kingdom, which was already *vehementer dilaceratum debilitatumque et ad hanc turpem desolacionem et in omnibus suis membris deformitatum* [...] *reductum*. The contrast between present and former conditions was emphasized and an age recalled when the name and splendour of the 'Scythian nation' had resounded throughout the world, even to the heavens. Responsibility for the present state of affairs was unequivocally laid on the present government of Hungary which was 'under foreign domination and not of its language', which had undermined the warlike qualities of 'this Scythian nation', and under whose leadership large swathes of the kingdom had been lost.⁶⁷ The solution proposed was, once the still heirless Władysław had departed this life, to elect by equal and unanimous vote (*parili voto et unanimi consensu et voluntate*) a national king who spoke the Hungarian language. Although the resolution of the 1505 Rákos diet did not receive royal approval (and thus did

⁶² Béla Iványi, *Mossóczy Zakariás és a magyar Corpus Juris keletkezése*, Budapest, 1926, p. 55.

⁶³ Ilona Hubay, 'Magyar király törvénykönyve?', *Magyar Könyv-Szemle*, 63, 1939, pp. 234–46 (235).

⁶⁴ Stephanus Katona, *Historia critica Regum Hungariae Stirpis Mixtae*, vol. 11, Buda, 1792, p. 437.

⁶⁵ Dezső Szabó, *A magyar országgyűlések története II. Lajos korában*, Budapest, 1909, pp. 265–66.

⁶⁶ The text is given in Henrik Marczali, *A magyar történet kútfőinek kézikönyve*, Budapest, 1901, pp. 317–20.

⁶⁷ This was an exaggeration. The list of lost territories included for the most part lands which had only intermittently or in name alone belonged to Hungary — Bulgaria, Serbia, Lodomeria and so on.

not formally constitute a *decretum*), it was none the less still circulated.⁶⁸ It continued, moreover, to act as the manifesto of the common nobility, so much so that in November 1526, on the occasion of John Zápolya's election to the throne, a copy of the resolution was pinned on a lance to serve as the standard and rallying point for John's supporters.⁶⁹

A particular feature of the secular literature of the later fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is its use of history and, in particular, its deployment of an imagery based upon the mythological origins of the Hungarian people. Certainly, from no later than the end of the twelfth century, chronicle literature had identified the Hungarians with the people of Attila and with the Huns and Scythians of antiquity.⁷⁰ Early accounts of the Hungarians' origin and conquest of Pannonia conjoined this mythic descent with a passage deriving ultimately from Isidore of Seville which described how in the earliest phases of 'state-building' a covenant had been reached according to which the right to make law and pass judgements had been transferred from the people to elected representatives.⁷¹ The chronicles of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, while principally intent upon narrating the deeds of Hungary's rulers, retained an account of how at the time of the conquest the early Hungarians had appointed their own *rectores* and charged them with the administration of justice. The achievements of Hungary's ruling houses, as presented in the royal chronicles, were accordingly prefaced with an account positing an earlier period of popular and republican rule under elected captains.

Interest in Hungary's past had by the later fifteenth century, if not before, expanded beyond a royal or courtly audience. The first book printed in Hungary, by Andreas Hess of Buda in 1473, was thus the *Chronica Hungarorum*. Although it traced the history of the Hungarians from the time of Noah to the reign of Matthias, the printed chronicle abbreviated its account of the more recent Hungarian rulers while still retaining a full discussion of the Hungarians' early history and primitive constitutional arrangements. Johannes Thuróczy's chronicle of the Hungarians, published in Augsburg and Brno in 1488, likewise contained an extensive section on the history and prehistory of the Hungarian conquest. Hess's and Thuróczy's volumes were printed in quantities which anticipated a wide readership. The Hess chronicle had a print-run of no fewer than 400 copies.⁷² In respect of the two 1488 editions of Thuróczy's chronicle, at least a dozen copies survived into the nineteenth century, not counting (among others) the four currently held in the British Library. The number of extant copies suggests an ambitious programme of publication. Moreover, not only was Thuróczy's chronicle republished in subsequent editions, but it was also supplemented by abbreviated versions and verse-compilations, most notably Andrew Farkas's *Cronica de introductione Scytтарum in Ungariam et Iudeorum de Aegypto* (Cracow, 1538).

In view of the evident popularity of these accounts, it is unsurprising that their populist, republican content should have been enlisted in the political conflicts of the Jagiello period. The 1505 resolution of the Rákos Diet thus recalled for propagandist purposes the valorous *mores et consuetudines* of the ancient Scythians, and lamented their attenuation under the rule of

⁶⁸ Katona, *Historia . . . Stirpis Mixtae*, vol. 11, pp. 425–36.

⁶⁹ Bak, *Königtum und Stände*, p. 70.

⁷⁰ Martyn Rady, 'Recollecting Attila: Some Medieval Hungarian Images and their Antecedents', *Central Europe*, 1, 2003, pp. 5–17 (12–17).

⁷¹ László Veszprémy, 'Mythical Origins of the Hungarian Medieval Legislation', *Parliaments, Estates and Representation*, 15, 1995, pp. 67–89.

⁷² *Chronica Hungarorum 1473*, facsimile edition, Budapest, 1973, p. xvi (conclusory essay).

foreign kings.⁷³ For its part, the 1524 Diet proposed ‘to elect captains in the manner of Attila’.⁷⁴ The most extreme statement came, however, from István Werbőczy, spokesman of the common nobility at the diets of the early sixteenth century, and author of the leading edition of Hungary’s laws, promulgated in 1514 and printed three years later in Vienna.⁷⁵ In the first place, Werbőczy borrowed directly from Thuróczy’s account of the division of Hungarian society between a class of warriors and a class of drones that was incapable of responding to martial summons. Thuróczy’s account was thus used by Werbőczy to buttress contemporary legislation which drove a wedge between nobles and peasants, condemning the latter to servitude.⁷⁶ Beyond this, however, Werbőczy sought to demonstrate through his use of early Hungarian history that the kingdom’s nobles were of the same rank, for its members were the equal electors of the Hungarians’ first rulers and thus in possession of the same privileges and rights. In a famous phrase, culled regardlessly by Werbőczy from a quite different legal context,⁷⁷ all Hungary’s noblemen — barons and common nobles alike — enjoyed *una eademque libertas*. The distinction between noble and baron, evident since 1498, was consequently presented by the author as artificial, not breaching the principle of equality. Indeed, Werbőczy went further, repudiating the existence of a hereditary class of barons and, in condescending fashion, he described its purported members as ‘barons in name alone’.⁷⁸ For much the same reason, Werbőczy skirted over the relation of lord to noble servitor, failing even to acknowledge the jurisdictional relationship that bound the one to the other, for such a relationship upset his scheme of an undifferentiated noble estate. As far as Werbőczy was concerned, the original pact between rulers and subjects made all noblemen equal to each other and permitted no distinction between higher and lower. Moreover, as Werbőczy understood matters, the original electoral deed, whereby the Hungarians had selected their earliest rulers, had forged a reciprocal bond between monarch and nobleman. The one enjoyed rank and property by gift of the ruler; the other was elevated to supreme office by the will of the nobility.⁷⁹ The two thus existed in a reciprocal relationship, *per quamdam translationem reciprocam, reflexibilemque connexionem*.⁸⁰ The republican tradition of elective government, as evinced through Hungary’s chronicles, was thus conjoined to kingship in such a way as to serve the interests of an elected, ‘national’ monarchy. Werbőczy’s statement on the internal relationship of the nobility as well as on the nobility’s relationship to the ruler retained an almost undisputed authority until the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

After the battle of Mohács, Habsburg rulers took possession of most of the kingdom. The institution of assessors was abolished; the office of palatine allowed to languish; the Hungarian

⁷³ Marczali, *A magyar történet*, p. 318.

⁷⁴ Engel et al., *Magyarország története 1301–1526*, p. 383.

⁷⁵ *Tripartitum Opus Iuris Consuetudinarii*, Vienna, 1517 (and many subsequent editions).

⁷⁶ See Bak, *Königtum und Stände*, p. 164.

⁷⁷ 1351: XI.

⁷⁸ Pál Engel, *The Realm of St Stephen: A History of Medieval Hungary*, London and New York, 2001, p. 343.

⁷⁹ ‘Neque enim princeps, nisi per nobiles eligitur neque nobilis, nisi per principem creatur, atque dignitate nobilitari decoratur’: *Tripartitum*, I: 3 [7].

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, I: 4 [6].

treasury apparatus was subordinated to Vienna; and the mass diets of the preceding period were replaced by more tractable meetings of the estates. The balance between crown and estates, wobbling precariously under the Jagiełło rulers, tilted once more in favour of the ruler and of the *dicasteria*, the organs of royal government.

Nevertheless, the gains of the late fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries could not be undone. The demands of war and finance had in the first place rendered frequent assemblies of the diet necessary. The diet itself had claimed a right of supervision of the government, even to the extent of asserting its authority over appointments to offices, particularly those relating to the assessment, collection and disbursement of tax-revenues. The diet's meetings had, moreover, become more than occasional assemblies of notables and had developed into mass and frequent meetings of the nobility. With this had come a growth of politics, the dissemination of programmes and the circulation of political agenda, often, as we have seen, in the form of *decreta* and resolutions of the diet. And into all this had been fed the force of history. István Werbőczy's account of the laws of the Hungarian kingdom implanted a reading of the past that preserved a tradition of elected national monarchy and of a reciprocity of legal relations between ruler and nobility. This confusion between law and political programme was as typical of the early sixteenth century as of the twenty-first, but it served to cement principles that would endure and that would act as a vital bulwark against absolutist ambitions. More important, however, the period of the Jagiełło kings saw politics reaching downwards, embracing sections of Hungarian noble society which had hitherto remained at a distance from the country's politics. Their inclusion in politics not only yielded new levels of participation but also put the diet firmly at the centre of the community's life. In short, then, we may certainly make an unfavourable contrast between the period of the Jagiełło rulers and the reign of Matthias. We should not, however, overlook the important changes which took place during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries in respect of institutional growth, political discourse and ideology, the uses of history and the construction of a polity founded on the principles of dialogue and consent.