



Universiteit  
Leiden

The Netherlands

## **Deriving Power from a Blessed King: the Representation of King Saint Stephen I of Hungary (975-1038) for the Legitimization of the Dynasties of the Hungarian Angevins and the Hunyadi**

Koch, R.; Dijkshoorn, J.; Doesborg, D.; Hoff, W. van der; Lindeboom, D.; Noltén, M.

### **Citation**

Koch, R. (2024). Deriving Power from a Blessed King: the Representation of King Saint Stephen I of Hungary (975-1038) for the Legitimization of the Dynasties of the Hungarian Angevins and the Hunyadi. *Leidschrift*, 39(November (3) Studenten aan Zet. Onderzoek van de Historici van Morgen), 35-56. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4198856>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4198856>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# Deriving Power from a Blessed King. The Representation of King Saint Stephen I of Hungary (975-1038) for the Legitimization of the Dynasties of the Hungarian Angevins and the Hunyadi

Robin Koch

Every year, on the twentieth of August, the Saint Stephen's Crown is paraded through the capitol of Hungary, Budapest. The Crown is connected to the founder of the Hungarian Kingdom, King Saint Stephen I (975-1038), and still holds great significance for its current leaders, even more evident by its keeping place the rest of the year. Instead of being displayed in a museum or kept in some musty, dark depot, the Crown sits atop a velvet cushion in the National Parliament, furthering its status as a national symbol.<sup>1</sup> And up to this day, a tour-guide there will tell you that the Crown belonged to Stephen.<sup>2</sup> However, research has long shown that the Crown is not at all a relic from King Saint Stephen, but was only ascribed to him from the thirteenth century onwards and created no earlier than 1074.<sup>3</sup> Still, the supposed Stephen's Crown functions as a representation of Stephen and as a way of legitimizing the rule of its current keepers.

This article will examine a selection of ways in which the representations of Stephen were used to legitimize rulers to their subjects, specifically under the Hungarian Anjou (1301/1308-1395) and the Hunyadi dynasties (1458-1490). Both had to substantiate their claims to rulership after Stephen's Árpád dynasty died out in the male line in 1301.<sup>4</sup> Its ending led to a war of succession. The new dynasty had to develop tactics to connect

---

With special thanks to: Dr. A.E.D. Oostindiër, Dr. D.Gh. Năstăsioiu, Doc. Mgr. Monika Bizoňová, Krisztina Koch, Mattie Cassee, Noel Salát, Professor G. Klaniczay, Professor P.C.H. Buc, Rick Hart, Robin van Kempen.<sup>1</sup> R.C.E. Teszelszky, *De sacra corona regni Hungariae. De kroon van Hongarije en de ontwikkeling van vroegmoderne nationale identiteit (1572-1665)* (Groningen 2006) 19-20.

<sup>2</sup> 'The World of the Habsburgs', <https://www.habsburger.net/en/items/crown-st-stephen> (Consulted on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 2022).

<sup>3</sup> I. Bertényi, *A Magyar korona története* [The Hungarian crown's history] (Budapest 1986) 80-81; É. Kovács and Zs. Lovag, *The Hungarian crown and other regalia* (Budapest 1980) 18-23.

<sup>4</sup> M. Štefánik, 'The Morosinis in Hungary under King Andrew III and the two versions of the death of the Queen of Hungary Tommasina', *Historický časopis* [Historical magazine] 56 (2008) 3-15: 3.

*Leidschrift, jaargang 39, nummer 3, november 2024*

themselves to Stephen, who was not only the first King of Hungary, but also had been canonized on the 20th of August 1083, thereby gaining an aura of sanctity. That sanctity had been transferred upon the Arpadian kings of his line, but now had to be claimed by these successive dynasties.<sup>5</sup> The focus here is on how the Hungarian Anjou's and Hunyadi's utilized representations of Stephen in public spaces for the legitimization of their own (sacral) kingships. This approach has been chosen to gain a better understanding of how these dynasties sent their legitimizing messages to an audience beyond their court. Dynasties that ruled in-between those discussed have been left out, because they did not have to legitimize their rule as extensively or face succession crises after a dynastic break. The Luxembourgian and Habsburg dynasties ruling between the Anjou and Hunyadi gained power through marriages - Sigismund of Luxemburg married Mary of Anjou and Albert of Habsburg married Sigismund's daughter Elizabeth. Meanwhile the Anjou's and Hunyadi's had to fight for their positions. As such, the discussed dynasties had a stronger motivation to legitimize themselves as Stephen's rightful successors with a more elaborate representational program.

To clarify my use of the term representation, it is necessary to give a definition and to discuss the demarcations of its conceptual scope relating to the sources used. I have relied upon the work of Dragoú-Gheorghe Năstăsoiu and Bissera V. Pentcheva to define representation as follows: 'a textual, visual, material or performative pictorial statement by a commissioner about his legitimacy to rule, founded on his predecessors' sacredness, or about the belonging to a certain social category, which states loyalty towards the king and acknowledges his predecessors' sacredness.'<sup>6</sup> To demarcate the extent of all forms of representation this article covers, I will focus only on pictorial representations that could be visually or materially received by a wide

---

<sup>5</sup> G. Klaniczay, *Az uralkodók szentsége a középkorban. Magyar dinasztikus szentkultuszok és európai modellek* [The sanctity of rulers in the Middle Ages. Hungarian dynastic saint cults and European models] (Budapest 2000) 12. This work has also appeared in English under the title 'Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses. Dynastic Cults in Medieval Central Europe'; M.C. Gaposchkin, *The Making of Saint Louis. Kingship, Sanctity, and Crusade in the Later Middle Ages* (New York 2008) 100-101.

<sup>6</sup> D.G. Năstăsoiu, *Sancti Reges Hungariae in Mural Painting of Late-Medieval Hungary* (Budapest 2009) 64; B.V. Pentcheva, 'Performing the Sacred in Byzantium: Image, breath and sound', *Performance Research* 3.19 (2014) 120-128: 120. For the conception of visual representation and audience I have also taken inspiration from: A. van Run, 'Functies en waardering van het beeld' in: M. Stoffers ed., *De middeleeuwse ideeënwereld, 1000-1300* (Hilversum 1994) 342-372: 348-349.

audience, and thus for now neglecting ‘performative’ statements outside of short discussions regarding symbols and signs related to Stephen by the dynasties. The visual and material sources that served pictorial representation could reach a wider audience than performances and were meant as a ‘widespread perception of the holiness of rulership’.<sup>7</sup> For example, the use of the Holy Crown is not further looked at, because it was only used in coronation rituals and therefore not as ‘public’ as other methods, since the ‘lower’ classes of medieval Hungarian society were generally left out during the ceremony. The ceremonial performance might only take place once in the lifetime of a ruler - though multiple coronations occurred.<sup>8</sup>

In the past it has already been shown that the two dynasties represented Stephen for their own legitimization. The historians Terézia Kerny, Dragoú-Gheorghe Năstăsoiu and Gábor Klaniczay have all shown this to be the case. Kerny focused exclusively on the corona-angelica-motif, an expression of Stephen’s iconography depicting angels holding the Holy Crown. The reuse of the motif proves that the dynasties utilized representation to stress ‘continuation of history’.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, Kerny does not include source-types that represent Stephen in a different manner from the corona-angelica-motif, such as heraldry. This is contrasted by Năstăsoiu, who covers many source-types in his work. Yet, he centers his work primarily on the ‘three holy kings’, the *sancti reges Hungariae*: Saint Stephen, Saint Emeric (who during his life never became king, but is still represented as such) and Saint Ladislaus. Saint Emeric (1007-1031) and Saint Ladislaus (r. 1077-1095) will not be included in this article and are only discussed in relation to Saint

---

<sup>7</sup> J.M. Bak, ‘Folklore of the Medieval Kings of Hungary’ in: K. Jovanović and S. Miljan ed., *Secular Power and Sacral Authority in Medieval East-Central Europe* (Amsterdam 2018) 17-28: 17-18; E.B. Vitz, N. Freeman Regalado and M. Lawrence, ‘Introduction’, in Idem ed., *Performing Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge 2005) 1-14: 4.

<sup>8</sup> For a more extensive overview of the forms representation of Stephen could take, the Bachelor’s thesis upon which this article is based can be found at: R. Koch, Representation for Dynastic Legitimization. The Representation of King Saint Stephen I of Hungary (975-1038) for the Legitimization of the Dynasties of the Hungarian Angevins and the Hunyadi (Scriptie Geschiedenis, Leiden University, Leiden 2023), <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3631219>.

<sup>9</sup> T. Kerny, ‘Az angyali koronázás motívuma Szent István ikonográfiájában’ [The motif of the coronation by angels in the iconography of Saint Stephen], *Art Hungarica* 31 (2003) 5–30: 8-9.

Stephen as part of the *sancti reges*.<sup>10</sup> Klaniczay's *Az uralkodók szentsége a középkorban* traces the holiness of Saint Stephen and the use thereof by the Hungarian Angevins. However, he does not explicitly look at representation as a legitimization strategy.<sup>11</sup> This article therefore seeks to broaden the focus upon forms of representation that have not been considered before, through forms like heraldic expression in coins and church ornaments, while also including the pictorial statements previously analyzed by Năstăsoiu.

The selection of the Angevin and Hunyadi dynasties for analysis enabled a comparative study of their representations of Stephen, as each dynasty marked a departure from its predecessor, potentially adopting distinct approaches from their forebears. The Hungarian Angevins, who succeeded the Árpáds and were connected to them in the female line serve as a focal point.<sup>12</sup> King Charles Robert I of Hungary (1288-1342), the first Hungarian king of the House of Anjou, claimed the throne through his Arpadian grandmother. His son Louis the Great (r. 1342-1382) succeeded him.<sup>13</sup> These two monarchs faced significant pressure to legitimize their rule, given their succession of the Árpáds and the presence of multiple claimants to the throne.<sup>14</sup> The structure of this paper will follow a chronological outline, in order to find out if the later dynasty under Matthias 'Corvinus' Hunyadi (r. 1458-1490) - also the only king to come from this dynasty<sup>15</sup> - builds upon the precedence set by the Hungarian Anjou. After introducing the symbols which the dynasties used to connect themselves to Stephen, their expressions in different source-types will be looked at per dynasty. These will include interior church decorations such as frescoes and altarpieces, and the heraldry

---

<sup>10</sup> D.Gh. Năstăsoiu, 'Royal Saints, Artistic Patronage, and Self-representation among Hungarian Noblemen', *Herald of the University of Saint Peterburg* 66.3 (Saint Peterburg 2021) 810-827: 814; Năstăsoiu, *Sancti Reges Hungariae*, 11-16.

<sup>11</sup> In English: The sanctity of rulers in the Middle Ages. Klaniczay, *Az uralkodók szentsége a középkorban*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> E. Mályusz, *Zsigmond Király uralma Magyarországon 1387-1437* [The reign of King Sigismund over Hungary 1387-1437] (Budapest 1984) 7.

<sup>13</sup> A. Pór and Gy. Schönherr, *Az Anjouk kora az Anjou ház és örökösei (1301-1439)* [The age of the Anjou. The house of Anjou and its heirs (1301-1439)] (Budapest 1895) 7.

<sup>14</sup> Klaniczay, *Az uralkodók szentsége a középkorban*, 260.

<sup>15</sup> R. Lupescu, 'The Election and Coronation of King Matthias' in: A. Bakos, B. Basics and P. Farbaky ed., *Matthias Corvinus, the King. Tradition and renewal in the Hungarian Royal Court, 1458-1490* (Budapest 2008) 190-196: 191-192.

found on coins and exterior church ornaments.<sup>16</sup> These four material and visual representational types could find a wide audience among churchgoers, city dwellers, and everyday people, thereby not only reaching many people, but especially the lower classes on a near-daily basis, allowing for the internalization of the messages sent by the dynasties among their subjects.

### Beata stirps

The concept of *beata stirps* (blessed lineage) was used by the Hungarian Angevins as a means of tying themselves to King Saint Stephen I. They were keenly aware of their holy predecessors from both the line of Stephen and their French heritage through the Anjou line, by which they descended from holy ancestors such as Saint Louis of Toulouse (1274-1297) and King Saint Louis IX (r. 1226-1270). These lineages were called the *beata stirps Arpadiana* and the *beata stirps Angevina*. The concept was first introduced by André Vauchez and can be defined as a transfer of the sacredness from holy ancestors to oneself to gain more royal legitimacy in both secular and spiritual spheres. A king could become a saint with a *beata stirps* that was passed on to his successors, if he had been a *miles Christi*, a defender of Christendom, or a *rex iustus*, righteous king.<sup>17</sup>

The *beata stirps* were also publicly represented in visual and material form, and the *beata stirps Arpadiana*'s use increased during Charles Robert's kingship and afterwards with the rise in popularity of the worship of three ancestral royal saints. The two kings of the Arpadian line, besides King Stephen himself, were Emeric and Ladislaus. Emeric was the eldest son of Stephen and had been the crown prince, who had not fully attained kingship

---

<sup>16</sup> Frescoes had interactions with illuminations found in manuscripts around the court. This shows how rulers replicated the same legitimization strategies and representations for the elite circles in manuscript to a broader audience in other forms of public representation: Van Run, 'Functies en waardering van het beeld', 356.

<sup>17</sup> A. Vauchez, 'Beata stirps'. sainteté et lignage en Occident au XIIIe et XIVe siècles' [Beata stirps. sanctity and lineage in the West in the XIIIth and XIVth centuries] in: G Duby and J. Le Goff ed., *Famille et parenté dans l'Occident médiéval* [Family and kinship in the medieval West] (Rome 1977) 397–407: 398–400. Gaposchkin also identifies other legitimizing strategies besides 'saintly lineage', being '[...] *Christian virtue, sacral authority, and royal dignity*': Gaposchkin, *The Making of Saint Louis. Kingship*, 6–11.

but was nevertheless worshipped as a king after his death.<sup>18</sup> Ladislaus had both Stephen and Emeric canonized in 1085, and later he himself became the third royal male saint of Hungary.<sup>19</sup> Together, the three kings formed the *sancti reges Hungariae*. Although Charles Robert was the first to make use of this topos, his son Louis the Great intensified the worship of the *sancti reges*.<sup>20</sup> Because the focus is on the Arpadian line within the *beata stirps* conceptualization, the use of the term *beata stirps* will refer only to that particular lineage and exclude the *Angevina*. Devotion to the *sancti reges Hungariae* meant their worshippers implicitly acknowledged that the current kings possessed the holy blood they claimed from their ancestors.

This concept was performed in the public sphere and used as a tool to carry over the predecessors' holiness unto the Hungarian Angevin dynasty, exemplified by the public devotion to the *sancti reges* in several speeches.<sup>21</sup> Nobles replicated the *beata stirps* trope and theme in various forms, proving that the representation of Stephen was an effective tool for the legitimization of power. Apparently, the nobles felt the need to confirm to the *beata stirps* practice, thereby affirming the holy lineage of and their loyalty towards the ruling dynasty, although not excluding motivations of simple piety.<sup>22</sup> As such,

---

<sup>18</sup> Năstăsioiu, *Sancti Reges Hungariae*, 11.

<sup>19</sup> Gy. Kristó and F. Makk, *Az Árpád-ház uralkodói* [Rulers of the house of Árpád] (Budapest 1996) 119.

<sup>20</sup> D.Gh. Năstăsioiu, 'Political Aspects of the Mural Representations of 'Sancti Reges Hungariae' in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries', *Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU* 16 (2010) 93-119: 95-97.

<sup>21</sup> J. Thuróczy, *A Magyarok krónikája* [Chronicle of the Hungarians] (Brno 1488), János Horváth trans. (second edition; Budapest 1980) 229-231. Further examples where the *sancti reges* are mentioned include an *oratio* given by the Dominican Bishop Augustin Gazottus of Zagreb (1260-1323) on 10 October 1307 on the Field of Rakós and a public address given by Cardinal Gentile da Montefiore (c. 1240/1250-1312) in 1309 at a gathering of the Dominicans: Gy. Kristó and F. Makk, *Károly Róbert emlékezete* [In the memory of Charles Robert] (Budapest 1988) 71-72; Tudor Sălăgean, 'Ladislas Kán (1294-1315). The Transylvanian Nobles and the Congregational Regime' in: Idem, *Transylvania in the Second Half of the Thirteenth Century* (Leiden 2016) 166-228: 211; Klaniczay, *Az uralkodók szentsége a középkorban*, 261; Gentile Portino da Montefiore, *Acta legationis cardinalis Gentilis (1307-1311)* [Acts of the legation of Cardinal Gentile], Antal Pór ed. (Budapest 1885) 269.

<sup>22</sup> The re-use of the *sancti reges* as patrons by the nobility could also become a tool in undermining the royal dynasty. The first time the nobility repurposed the holy

the concept of *beata stirps* found expression through the *sancti reges* in frescoes and altarpieces, and through heraldry in coins and church ornamentation. To further substantiate the aristocratic replication of the royal propaganda that took place during the Angevins' rule, resulting in affirmation of the *beata stirps*, an example of a *sancti reges* fresco is discussed below. The overall use of *beata stirps* by the dynasty itself to support a hereditary claim can be regarded as a typical form of 'traditional legitimacy'.<sup>23</sup>

### **Frescoes: *Sancti Reges Hungariae***

One of the most public forms of visual communication used for expressing the representation of King Saint Stephen during the time of the Angevins were church frescoes. These wall paintings started to include the recently developed topos of the *sancti reges Hungariae*.<sup>24</sup> They did not only reach the elite or clergy; the 'ordinary' churchgoer could consume these spatial expressions of legitimization as well, albeit passively. A more active form of visual communication would seek to force itself upon the viewer, for example by playing a role in the liturgy. The frescoes' passivity however means that the viewer did not need to actively stand still and contemplate the meaning or message of the work. During the reign of Matthias, the church space would come to include artistic representations of the *sancti reges* that had to be actively consumed by the viewer, because these representations took part in the performance of the liturgical rites. Thereby the 'representational space' as

---

Arpadian kings against their own king would take place under the new Luxemburgian dynasty, with the anti-Sigismund coalition of 1402-1403. For the Angevine age in Hungary, the *sancti reges* were only employed by the dynasty itself for legitimization or by its subjects in support of the dynasty, not against it: D.Gh. Năstăsioiu, *Between Personal Devotion and Political Propaganda: Iconographic Aspects in the Representation of the sancti reges Hungariae in Church Mural Painting (14<sup>th</sup> Century – Early-16<sup>th</sup> Century)* (Budapest 2018) 8, 123-124, 129.

<sup>23</sup> Max Weber, 'Politics as Vocation' in: *Weber's Rationalism and Modern Society* (1919), T. Waters and D. Waters ed. and trans. (New York 2015) 11.

<sup>24</sup> The topos had already been developed in written culture during the twelfth and thirteenth century and found artistic expression under the reign of Charles Robert's predecessor King Andrew III (r. 1290-1301): Năstăsioiu, *Between Personal Devotion and Political Propaganda*, 42-43, 46-49.

lived through by an attendee was changed.<sup>25</sup> In the Angevin period, the placement of the frescoes within the space of a church was not necessarily predetermined. This contrasts Matthias' altarpieces discussed below, which were always dedicated either to the main altar or the altar of a chapel within the church building. The *sancti reges* frescoes only seemed to have required good perceivability upon entering the church but could otherwise be placed on any wall.<sup>26</sup>

The frescoes combined the three *sancti reges*, which also meant placing together the three different symbolic meanings of the saints who previously held separate cults and meanings. To exemplify this for the Angevins, the Church of Tileagd in current-day Romania captures these together in one fresco dating to around 1380, probably from the reign of Louis the Great.<sup>27</sup> I have chosen to focus on the Tileagd example due to its inclusion of all three *sancti reges* and its ties with the Telegdi family. The Telegdi's had close connections with the royal family and held high ecclesiastical positions. Csanád Telegdi was the archbishop of Esztergom and gave Charles Robert of Anjou's funeral speech in 1342.<sup>28</sup> Due to its patron's high status, the Tileagd fresco shows how the replication of the *sancti reges*-motif was directly implemented by the higher nobility in this visual form, previously propagandized by the Angevins.

---

<sup>25</sup> Representational space follows the definition of Lefebvre here, meaning that it is the lived space through which symbols are communicated: H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (1974), Donald Nicholson-Smith trans. (Oxford, United Kingdom – Cambridge, USA 1991) 38-39.

<sup>26</sup> Năstăsioiu, *Sancti Reges Hungariae*, 64-68.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, 90. Năstăsioiu also lists other fresco examples from the period of the Angevins of the three *sancti reges*, or a combination of Stephen and Ladislaus, in his Catalogue of Murals. They are numbered as follows: Cat.No. 5, Cat.No. 6, Cat.No.9, Cat.No. 13, Cat.No.14 and Cat.No. 21. From: Năstăsioiu, *Between Personal Devotion and Political Propaganda*, 339-348, 349-351, 366-368, 382-386, 387-389, 440-449.

<sup>28</sup> Năstăsioiu, *Sancti Reges Hungariae*, 48-49. The Csanád Telegdi's funeral speech can be found in: Thuróczy, *A Magyarok krónikája*, 229-231.



Fig. 1: The fresco with the *sancti reges Hungariae* from Tileagd as seen from the Calvinist Church (former Catholic Church of St. Stephen of Hungary) interior (on the right), ca. 1380. Fresco. Source: D.Gh. Năstăsoiu, *Between Personal Devotion and Political Propaganda: Iconographic Aspects in the Representation of the sancti reges Hungariae in Church Mural Painting (14th Century – Early-16th Century)* (Budapest 2018), cat. No. 20.1, 437. Reproduced with permission from Dragoú-Gheorghe Năstăsoiu.

On the fresco (see Figure 1), Stephen is depicted in the center as an older, bearded man with a halo, denoting his sanctity.<sup>29</sup> He holds the royal insignia, the scepter and *globus cruciger* (cross-bearing orb), and on the top of his head an unremarkable crown is seen. It is noteworthy that the fresco does not depict him with the Holy Crown, instead opting for a common, simple crown that suffices to show kingship, but not much else. His scepter is in the shape of a mace, thereby signaling royal dignity and Stephen as a *miles Christi*. Ladislaus, to the right, holds an axe, signifying him as defender of the Kingdom and Church, and Emeric to the left holds a lily-shaped scepter, which according to Năstăsoiu indicates Emeric as a chaste saint, in opposition to the more warrior-like other kings of the fresco, though the lily as a symbol

---

<sup>29</sup> I want to kindly thank Dr. Dragoú-Gheorghe Năstăsoiu for providing the images.

could have further connotations than mere chastity.<sup>30</sup> The spatial placement of the fresco is remarkable too, and highly visible from within the church interior (see Figure 1).

The overall nobility had been critical or skeptical of Charles Robert in the initial phases of his rule. When Charles Robert had established himself as king after the succession crisis, these frescoes of the *sancti reges* became a means of proving one's loyalty to the king and his new dynasty by acknowledging their ancestral saints. The nobility had these frescoes made and thereby further affirmed the Angevins' holy right to the kingship of Hungary, strengthening Charles Robert's position. Furthermore, the frescoes brought the affirming message over to the wider population.<sup>31</sup> Adapting the theme to their own chapels and churches, the Apafi, Bebek and Telegi families were the foremost commissioners.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, the theme found replication beyond the fresco art commissioned by the nobility and royal family, indicating the successfulness of the frescoes in reaching a wide audience. This can be seen from the students of the Hungarian *natio* at the fifteenth century Viennese university. By this time, the *sancti reges* had become the patron saints of the students, forming a symbol of 'national identity'.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Năstăsioiu, 'Political Aspects of the Mural Representations', 103; Năstăsioiu states the function of the lily shaped scepter of Emeric again in: Năstăsioiu, *Between Personal Devotion and Political Propaganda*, 75. For more on the symbolisms of lilies, see: M. Channen Caldwell, "Flower of the Lily'. Late-Medieval Religious and Heraldic Symbolism in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS Français 146', *Early Music History* 33 (2014) 1-60: 5-9.

<sup>31</sup> G. Klaniczay, 'Saints' Cults in Medieval Central Europe: Rivalries and Alliances' in: N. Holger Petersen, A. Mánd, S. Salvadó and T. R. Sands ed., *Symbolic Identity and the Cultural Memory of Saints* (Newcastle upon Tyne 2018) 21-41: 34-35; Năstăsioiu, *Sancti Reges Hungariae*, 43, 48.

<sup>32</sup> Năstăsioiu, *Sancti Reges Hungariae*, 68; Năstăsioiu, *Between Personal Devotion and Political Propaganda*, 121-122, 379.

<sup>33</sup> Klaniczay, 'Saints' Cults in Medieval Central Europe', 36.

### Coinage: tracing heraldry

To trace heraldry on coinage, it is necessary to first look at the heraldic symbols associated with Stephen from his own time and onwards. The two symbols related to Stephen are the so-called Árpád stripes and the patriarchal cross, which were both replicated by the Angevins on their coinage to represent Stephen. About the Árpád stripes or *Árpádsáv*, which are horizontal lines alternating in red and white or silver (usually four), a historiographical debate exists surrounding the origins of the stripes with two main positions.

The indigenous position holds that the stripes originated from the period of Stephen himself, based on the existence of a denar minted under the rule of Stephen that displays the lance of the king with the text *LANCEA REGIS* (Spear of the Kingdom), and attached to the lance is a banner upon which stripes can be seen.<sup>34</sup> The historian László Baják suggested that these lines must be the Árpád stripes. Although it is not possible to say so conclusively due to the lack of red and white color on the coins and therefore direct comparison, it is highly likely these are the Árpád stripes due to their appearance on a royal coin and their appearance upon a banner, an item usually reserved for heraldic symbolism.<sup>35</sup>

The exotic position represented by Iván Bertényi doubts the indigenous position but in my opinion he does not refute the opposing position sufficiently. He places the origin of the stripes in Spain, comparing the coat of arms of the Arpadian dynasty to those of Aragon and Barcelona from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>36</sup> Either way, the stripes were indisputably in use during and after the reign of King Emeric (r. 1196-1204) – who is not to be confused with Saint Emeric (c. 1007-1031).<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Cs. Tóth, J.G. Kiss and A. Fekete, *From King Saint Stephen to King Imre. Catalogue of Árpadian Coinage I* (Budapest 2018) 63; Cs. Tóth, 'A Kora Árpád-Kori Magyar Pénztörténetről Dióhéjban' [Early Árpadian Coinage in a Nutshell] in: Cs. Tóth, J.G. Kiss and A. Fekete ed., *From King Saint Stephen to King Imre. Catalogue of Árpadian Coinage I* (Budapest 2018) 14-38: 30.

<sup>35</sup> J. Voltz, *How the Árpáds got their Stripes. Changes in the Denotation of the Árpád stripes in the Middle Ages* (Budapest 2020) 20-21.

<sup>36</sup> Voltz, *How the Árpáds got their Stripes*, 23-26; I. Bertényi, 'Les variantes des armoiries du roi Mathias' [The variations of King Matthias' coat of arms] in: A. Bárány and A. Györkös ed., *Matthias and his legacy. Cultural and Political Encounters between East and West* (Debrecen 2009) 63-108: 84-85.

<sup>37</sup> Voltz, *How the Árpáds got their Stripes*, 35, 39.



Fig. 2: Obverse and reverse of a denar minted under Charles Robert I of Hungary. Silver. Source: Re.2.18; Hu.495; Ung. 393; own private collection.

The second heraldic symbol is the patriarchal cross, in the medieval mind linked to Stephen through the hagiographical *Legenda Hartviciana*, wherein it was described that the Pope gave him ‘the apostolic cross’, in the ‘double’ cross was of Byzantine origin, introduced into the Hungarian royal coat of arms by king Béla III (r. 1172-1196), who grew up at the Byzantine court.<sup>38</sup> Even though the cross, and the stripes for that matter, might never have been used in the time of King Saint Stephen as part of the coat of arms, the Angevins believed it to be so. Their belief is evidenced by illuminations of Stephen with both symbols from the *Chronica Picta*, a chronicle produced at the request of the royal family.<sup>39</sup>

Besides chronicles, these symbols as part of the royal heraldry found their way unto coins, especially silver coins, also known as denars, *groschen*, or in Hungarian *garas*. In the case of golden florins there seems to have been a delay before the mint changed to accommodate the royal heraldry linked to Stephen.<sup>40</sup> On the denars, the Árpád stripes appeared next to the *fleur-de-lis*, which represented the French Angevin lineage, either quartered or halved

---

<sup>38</sup> P. Gyula, *A Magyar nemzet története az Árpád-házi irányok alatt* [The national Hungarian history under the Árpád kings] (Budapest 1899) 320-321.

<sup>39</sup> Országos Széchényi Könyvtár, Budapest, Hs. 404, *Chronicon pictum* [Illustrated chronicle], Marci de Kalt, *Chronica de gestis Hungarorum (1358, 1370-1373)* [Chronicle on the deeds of the Hungarian], f. 20r.

<sup>40</sup> L. Travaini, ‘Coins and Identity. From Mint to Paradise’ in: Rory Naismith ed., *Money and Coinage in the Middle Ages* (Leiden 2019) 320-349: 329-330.

within the coat of arms.<sup>41</sup> The coat of arms featuring the stripes appears quite frequently: almost half of all silver coins minted under Charles Robert depicted this coat of arms, in various forms, on the reverse.<sup>42</sup> On the denars' obverse side, the king was often depicted sitting on his throne with full regalia: crown, scepter and *globus cruciger*. An example of such a denar can be seen in Figure 2, where a shield on the reverse contains the halved coat of arms with the lilies and the stripes, while Charles Robert I of Hungary is seen on the obverse. The crown Charles is wearing is once again not identifiable, thus not corresponding to Stephen's Holy Crown. Neither is the *globus cruciger* on the coin corresponding to the one in use during Charles Robert's reign, which did have the patriarchal cross attached on top. This particular denar may lack references to Stephen in the form of the patriarchal cross, but there are other denars from Charles Robert's reign using the patriarchal cross on the reverse instead of the coat of arms with the stripes, following a practice of mint established by King Béla III (r. 1172-1196).<sup>43</sup>

The Angevins used these silver coins as vehicles of transmission to their claim of *beata stirps*. Not only did the coins make them recognizable to a broad audience as Stephen's successors who reused the Arpadian symbols, the addition of the stripes to the Kingdom's currency also engrained it as a symbol of identity for the *natio*. Lucia Travaini substantiates the claim of currency as a vehicle for representations, which over time would become identifying markers. She has shown that users would internalize the representation, by looking at pilgrims who carried these coins to shrines, because they actualized the presence of the holy ruler depicted thereupon. Coins were 'ideal tokens of identity and personal memory to leave behind'.<sup>44</sup> Coinage disseminated the representation of Stephen in heraldry amongst a public that was as widespread as that of the frescoes presenting the theme of the *sancti reges Hungariae*. In comparison to the frescoes, coins were used more 'actively' since they were handled and carried around, and therefore the

---

<sup>41</sup> For a coin with a halved coat of arms, see Figure 2. For a quartered example, see: J.G. Frynas, *Medieval Coins of Bohemia, Hungary and Poland* (London 2015) 182.

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem, 180-188.

<sup>43</sup> K. Szelényi and E. Tóth, *A Magyar Szent Korona: királyok és koronázások* [The Hungarian Holy Crown: kings and coronations] (Budapest 2005) 53-58; Frynas, *Medieval Coins of Bohemia, Hungary and Poland*, 183, 185-186, 188. For Béla III's denars see figures H.15.9 and H.15.22 in: Frynas, *Medieval Coins of Bohemia, Hungary and Poland*, 154-155.

<sup>44</sup> Travaini, 'Coins and Identity', 335-336.

material and visual representations of Stephen on them were more effective in legitimizing the issuers of the coins as his successors.

### Compensating Beata Stirps

The Hungarian Angevins had - although not directly - descended from king Saint Stephen and utilized their possession of *beata stirps* to legitimize themselves, but King Matthias 'Corvinus' Hunyadi lacked any relationship and therefore the supposedly inherent 'holiness' connected to Stephen. In fact, he was the only medieval Hungarian king not able to utilize any hereditary claims.<sup>45</sup> His family, the Hunyadi, had come from Wallachian stock and were only first mentioned in king Sigismund of Hungary's letters from 1409.<sup>46</sup> Matthias was elected to be king, and besides lack of hereditary claims, the election itself was uncertain. From his election in 1458 to his eventual coronation with the Holy Crown in 1464, Matthias' rule was quite unstable, and so he had to make use of various legitimization strategies.<sup>47</sup>

To compensate for *beata stirps*, fabricated legends surrounding the origins of the Hunyadi were repurposed by Matthias. Among these legends is one by Italian humanist writer Pietro Ransano in his *Epitome rerum Hungaricarum*. Ransano admired János Hunyadi, Matthias' father, and provided the Wallachian with a prestigious Romano-Italian background by having him originate from the Ancient Roman Corvini family.<sup>48</sup> Matthias would use the *Corvinus* name and incorporate the raven-symbol in his coat of arms.

The raven is connotated to another legend surrounding the Hunyadi family, wherein King Sigismund of Hungary (r. 1387-1437) conceived an

---

<sup>45</sup> Radu Lupescu, 'Matthias Hunyadi. from the Family Origins to the Threshold of Power' in: A. Bakos, B. Basics and P. Farbaký ed., *Matthias Corvinus, the King. Tradition and renewal in the Hungarian Royal Court, 1458-1490* (Budapest 2008) 34-49: 35.

<sup>46</sup> Ibidem, 37-38.

<sup>47</sup> Lupescu, 'The Election and Coronation of King Matthias', 193; T. Pálosfalvi, 'From Belgrade to Vienna. King Matthias and the Ottomans, 1458-1483', in: Idem, *From Nicopolis to Mohács* (Leiden 2018) 188-277: 192; H. Marczali, *Magyarország Története*, Vol. I. (Budapest 1990) 315-316.

<sup>48</sup> A. Boreczky, 'Historiography and Propaganda in the Royal Court of King Matthias. Hungarian Book Culture at the End of the Middle Ages and Beyond', *Radovi Instituta za povijest umjetnosti* 43 (Primljen 2019) 23-35: 24; Lupescu, 'Matthias Hunyadi', 36.

illegitimate child with a noblewoman. After impregnating the woman, he gave her a ring so that the child could be recognized as his when coming off-age. At the birth of the child, a raven stole the ring, but the legitimate husband of the woman managed to retrieve the object. The ring was given to the adult boy, who we then learn is János Hunyadi, and he claimed his place at the side of the king after being sent to court by his mother. The raven, this time with a ring in his beak, can also be traced back on Matthias' coat of arms, as will be seen when discussing an example later on.<sup>49</sup> The story of the raven and the ring was written down by the court historian Antonio Bonfini (1427-1502), who was in direct service to Matthias and in close contact with the king.<sup>50</sup> The fanciful legend was meant to give Matthias' lineage a sense of high-noble birth since he could not make any claims to be the descendant of Sigismund or to be in possession of the *beata stirps Arpadiana* in any way. Lack of *beata stirps* did not prevent Matthias from making extensive use of Stephen's representation, much like the fabrication of the other legends that served his legitimization. He used it from the perspective of Stephen as a saintly and royal patron of Hungary instead of as his direct ancestor, as the Angevins used to do. He seamlessly integrated the ancestral legends of the Hunyadi together with symbols and signs associated with Stephen.

### Altarpieces

The altarpiece had been increasing in popularity in churches since the thirteenth century, and therefore had been in use even before the Angevin dynasty of Hungary. Still, it took until the late fifteenth century for the *sancti* representation of the saints gained a liturgical and spatial function, besides a symbolic one. An altarpiece can be defined as 'a panel standing directly upon

---

<sup>49</sup> L. Nagy, *A holló, a gyűrű és a sárkány jegyében. Magyar, Román és Lengyel Corvinusok Drakulától Esterházy Pálig* [In the spirit of the raven, the ring and the dragon: Hungarian, Romanian and Polish Corvins from Dracula to Pál Eszterházy] (Budapest 2014) 21; Bertényi, 'Les variantes des armoiries du roi Mathias', 86.

<sup>50</sup> Tszelszky, *De sacra corona regni Hungariae*, 27; Kovács, *Matthias Corvinus*, 195.



Fig. 3: The *sancti reges Hungariae* in Szepeshely's main altarpiece [Cathedral of St. Martin in Spišská Kapitula] with their coat of arms. Commissioned by King Matthias Hunyadi, ca. 1470-1478. Tempera on wood panel. 138 x 163 cm. Source: reproduced with permission from Archív Spišská Kapitula; special thanks to Doc. Mgr. Monika Bizoňová.

an altar table and 'labeling' the dedication of that altar'.<sup>51</sup> The altar was the focus of any church interior. Not only that, but altarpieces could also be opened and closed on the feast days of the saints they were dedicated to. The periodical opening of the pieces would have made the audience very attentive to the saints and imagery portrayed within, giving a certain dynamic to the altarpiece. This dynamic differs greatly from the frescoes' passive interaction with an audience.<sup>52</sup>

The active use of the altarpiece in liturgy and its spatial placement on top of the altar made it a very potent form of representing the royal saints, especially Stephen, to signal one's own connection to them. The focus here will be on the main altarpiece in St. Martin's Cathedral in Szepeshely, current day Spišská Kapitula, Slovakia, portraying the *sancti reges* (see Figure 3). Its dedication to the main altar exemplifies the use of such an altarpiece with the

---

<sup>51</sup> B. Williamson, 'Altarpieces, Liturgy, and Devotion', *Speculum* 79:2 (April 2004) 341-406: 341-343, 360.

<sup>52</sup> Ibidem, 364.

*sancti reges* to reach the public. A deliberate choice had been made to place it where it is most clearly visible in the Cathedral's space for an audience and a focal point within the liturgical ritual. The portrayal of these saints on a central altarpiece such as this one is quite rare, making it even more of a statement by its commissioner to have ordered such a piece.<sup>53</sup>

Regarding the commissioner, the altarpiece was probably made for Matthias between 1470 and 1478. Györgyi Poszler stipulates that besides commissioning the panel, Matthias might have equated himself with Stephen as depicted upon it. Stephen is placed closest to the center; his placement signifies his role as founder and wise ruler of the kingdom but also that of a royal predecessor. In other words, he was to be seen as the predecessor of Matthias himself, maybe not in blood, but definitely in his role as wise ruler.<sup>54</sup> The uniqueness of the main altarpiece derives from its close connection to Matthias and its use on the main altar where it was most visible to an audience.<sup>55</sup>

The saints who are depicted on the main altarpiece include several foreigners such as Saint Oswald (c. 604-642), and the *sancti reges* can be seen with their traditional attributes. Saint Stephen is portrayed as an old man on the right with a scepter and the orb; the young Saint Emeric holds lilies and a sword; and the knightly Saint Ladislaus holds his 'beheading' axe and an orb. All three saints have their coat of arms displayed at their feet, including the Árpád stripes and patriarchal cross. The addition of a coat of arms to the saints' imagery was another late fifteenth century innovation, in my view meant to highlight that these were royal saints to be seen as the predecessors of the current wielder of the same heraldic symbols.<sup>56</sup> That the *sancti reges* were no coincidental inclusion on the altarpiece is perhaps best illustrated by Saint

---

<sup>53</sup> Williamson, 'Altarpieces, Liturgy, and Devotion', 362-363.

<sup>54</sup> Gy. Poszler, 'Az Árpád-Házi Szent királyok a Magyar középkor századainban' [The Holy Kings of the house of Árpád in the centuries of the Hungarian Middle Ages] in: A. Jávör, M. Árpád, and K. Sinkó ed., *Történelem – Kép. Szemelvények múlt és művészet kapcsolatából Magyarországon* [History - Image. Snippets from the relationship between past and art in Hungary] (Budapest 2000) 170-194: 181-182; Năstăsoiu, *Between Personal Devotion and Political Propaganda*, 101.

<sup>55</sup> The altarpiece is not the only one known to portray the *sancti reges* theme, even the same Cathedral holds another altarpiece with the motif from the altar of the Death of the Virgin Mary. However, this piece was made in 1510, long after Matthias' death: Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest,

<https://www.mfab.hu/artworks/33956/> (Consulted on the 20<sup>th</sup> of July 2024).

<sup>56</sup> Năstăsoiu, *Between Personal Devotion and Political Propaganda*, 137.

Oswald, who is depicted while receiving a ring from a raven. Although Oswald does not have any other ties to Matthias, the raven – at times with a ring – is one of Oswald’s attributes.<sup>57</sup> Here Oswald’s raven has been repurposed by Matthias to reference his familial origins and coat of arms.<sup>58</sup> Just as Matthias probably chose to portray Saint Oswald in this manner, so he must have chosen to portray the *sancti reges Hungariae* as patrons of the kingdom and his own divine predecessors, thereby obtaining for himself some of that ‘divinity’. An audience’s awareness of this message must have been heightened when the main altarpiece in the Cathedral was ‘opened’ on feast days.

### Exterior Church ornaments

Coinage under the Angevins was used as a vehicle to spread their heraldic representations of Stephen, and the practice continued under Matthias.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, Matthias’ use of heraldry in public space found a new expression in the form of external church ornamentations. Internal ornamentation had already become an ‘active’ way of representing, but the external ornamentations too were highly visible. An example is the external stone ornamentation on the bell tower of the current-day Matthias’ Church. It held the coat of arms of Matthias, which included the Árpád stripes, the patriarchal cross, and a crow with a ring in a beak referencing the Hunyadi’s origins. The stripes and cross were not only used for the royal coat of arms, but under Matthias had become part of the familial Hunyadi coat of arms.<sup>60</sup> Finally, in the coat of arms references to some of the other regions under his rule can be discerned, namely the lion of Bohemia, and the three lions’ heads of Dalmatia-Croatia.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> Cora Dietl, ‘Eigenwillig und trotzig, fromm und bedacht: Der Rabe des Heiligen Oswald’ in: M. Kubisiak and J. Firaza eds., *Animal Body* (Leiden 2022) 3-26: 4-6.

<sup>58</sup> Năstăsioiu, *Between Personal Devotion and Political Propaganda*, 100.

<sup>59</sup> For my extended treatise on coinage as a form of Stephen’s representation during Matthias’ reign, see my BA-thesis.

<sup>60</sup> J. Csoma, *A Magyar heraldika korszakai (1913)* [The eras of Hungarian heraldry] (Máriabesnyő 2022) 36-37.

<sup>61</sup> Matthias’ first wife, Catherine of Poděbrady (1449-1464), was the daughter of the king of Bohemia: L. Huszár, ‘Mátyás pénzei’ [The coinage of Matthias] in: I. Lukinich

The coat of arms was originally painted and placed on the East-side of the Southern bell tower around 1470 when the ‘parish Church of the Assumption of Our Lady of Buda’ as it was then called, was renovated under Matthias. It is first mentioned in a charter from 1471 as the ‘new church of the Blessed Virgin Mary founded in Buda Castle, (...)’.<sup>62</sup> Nowadays, the object has been moved inside of the church building, but its outside placement in the late fifteenth century on the eastside meant that it would have been clearly visible both on the Buda- and Pest-side of the Danube.<sup>63</sup> The date of the ornament being moved inside the Church (1893) is given

---

ed., *Mátyás király. Emlékkönyv születésének ötszázéves fordulóján I.* [King Matthias. Memorial book on the 500th anniversary of his birth I.] (Budapest 1940) 549–574: 552–553; V. Fraknói, *Hunyadi Mátyás Király, 1440–1490* [King Matthias Hunyadi, 1440–1490] (Budapest 1890) 69–72.

<sup>62</sup> In Latin: [*Prepositi et Canoniorum*] *nove ecclesie beate Marię virginis in Castro Budensi fundate*, [...]. For the charter see: J. Teleki, *Hunyadiak kora Magyarországon* [The age of the Hunyadi in Hungary], *Oklevéltár. XI.* [Charter Archive. XI.] (Pest, 1855) 447–449; Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár, Budapest, State Archives E, 17227 [formerly Q 311 / 1526 13], <https://archives.hungaricana.hu/hu/charters/198023/>. G. Buzás, ‘A Budapesti Mátyás-templom középkori Mária-kapuja’ [The Maria-chapel of the medieval Matthias-church of Budapest], *Archaeologia - Altum Castrum Online. A Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum visegrádi Mátyás Király Múzeumának középkori régészeti online magazinja* [Archaeologia – Old Castle Online. The online magazine of the King Matthias Museum of Medieval Archaeology of the Hungarian National Museum in Visegrád] (Visegrád 2019) 2–23: 2; J. Csemegi, *Adatok a budavári főtemplom középkori építéstörténetéhez* [Details on the medieval building history of the main church in Buda] (Budapest 1941) 120.

<sup>63</sup> Csemegi, *Adatok a budavári főtemplom középkori építéstörténetéhez*, 120; J. Katona, ‘Historizmus és szecesszió határán. A Mátyás-templom ornamentális festése’ [On the Verge of Historicism and Art Nouveau. The Decorative Wall Painting of the Matthias Church in Buda] in: *A Mátyás-templom. A budavári Nagyboldogasszony-templom évszázadai (1246–2013), Budapesti Történeti Múzeum Vármúzeum és Budavári Nagyboldogasszony-templom, kiállítási katalógus* [The Matthias Church. The Centuries of the Church of Our Lady of Buda in Buda Castle (1246–2013), Budapest History Museum Castle Museum and Church of Our Lady of Buda in Buda Castle, exhibition catalogue] (Budapest 2015) 442–449: 450.



Fig. 4: The original (painted) coat of arms that functioned as an ornament for the bell tower of the Matthias Church in Budapest. Ca. 1470. Stone. Source: reproduced with permission by Noel Salát.

underneath the coat of arms, as can be seen on Figure 4. This can also be seen in the *Liber chronicarum* by Hartmann Schedel from 1493, where the cityscape prominently features the bell-tower of the church.<sup>64</sup>

## Conclusions

To trace the representation of King Saint Stephen for the legitimization of the Hungarian Angevins and Hunyadi, using the concept of *beata stirps* has been helpful in identifying expressions of pictorial representation as a form of ‘traditional legitimacy’. The Hungarian Angevins made the symbols and signs associated with Stephen a stable point of reference and were often the first ‘pioneers’ to do so. The *sancti reges Hungariae* saw dissemination in the form of frescoes during their rule and the Árpád stripes were introduced on coins as heraldic symbols, tying the dynasty back to the Arpadians; and although the patriarchal cross had first appeared on coins since King Béla III, under the Anjou dynasty it too became a symbol tying them to Stephen. The Hunyadi under Matthias repurposed the symbols and signs that the Angevins had popularized by using altarpieces for the *sancti reges* that had to be more actively consumed, and by placing external ornamentation with the coat of arms, including the stripes and patriarchal cross, on highly visible church towers.<sup>65</sup> Matthias did this despite lacking in any *beata stirps*, and instead the *sancti reges* became more like ‘national’ patrons or predecessors of his own kingship.

The Angevins pioneered various forms of representing Stephen through use of the *beata stirps* and *sancti reges*. It had been the first dynasty after the Árpáds that tried to connect itself to Stephen for the legitimization and stabilization of their own rule. Nonetheless, Matthias seems to have been more successful in reaching an even wider audience regarding public representation by form of altarpieces and exterior decoration. In this article,

---

<sup>64</sup> H. Schedel, M. Wolgemut, W. Pleydenwurff and A. Koberger, *Liber Chronicarum* [Chronicle book] (Neurenberg 1493) 138v-139r. The edition from the Utrecht University Library was used: Universiteitsbibliotheek Utrecht, Utrecht, inv.nr. 71460578.

<sup>65</sup> Another coat of arms has survived on the St. Martin’s Cathedral in Bratislava (not to be confused with the Cathedral in Spišská Kapitula): Csoma, *A Magyar Heraldika Korszakai*, 38.

I have presented a couple examples of representations these dynasties utilized. Even so, there are many more to find and analyze. Not only that, but a gap also exists between the Angevins and Hunyadi in the form of the Hungarian reign by emperor Sigismund of Luxemburg and his heirs, the Habsburgs. An extended overview of the representation of Stephen as utilized by the Luxembourgers and Habsburgs in Hungary might add some new, unexpected forms to the already identified representation that found expression when new dynasties were established without succession crises. For modern historians, applying an analysis of the types of possible representation in contemporary Hungary could give new insights as well.