

Classical Feudalism (1301–1526)

Charles Robert of the Angevin dynasty of Naples (1308–1342) emerged victorious among the foreign pretenders to the throne; basing his claim on the female line of descent. He first drove his rivals from the country and, by ingenious political manoeuvres, gradually destroyed the principalities of the pretenders. Initially he managed to secure only the support of the pope and financial loans from Italy, but within a few years he had assembled his own faithful band of followers. **He established his court at Visegrád, on the Danube Bend.** The new king, coming as he did from the more developed West, perceived that the gradual development of commodity production and currency circulation would enable him to switch the revenue base once more from land to royal rights. Hungary (especially the mountains of the north and the east) could boast some of the greatest gold deposits in contemporary Europe and Charles Robert enforced the crown's monopoly on mining and minting; the extraction of precious metal deposits was encouraged by the promise of a one-third share of the revenue with the landowners. Precious metals had to be exchanged for currency, and the treasury could therefore make a handsome profit. He minted forints of stable value – modelled on the Florentine florins – and put an end to the circulation of devalued money. He levied a uniform tax on the peasantry, and, as a result of urban growth, the tax revenues from the towns also provided an impressive sum. The king encouraged the growth of trade, and he coordinated his foreign policy with Bohemian and Polish rulers. He created a national network of chancery institutions to enable more efficient financial administration, and at the same time, passed the burdens of the military on to the magnates, who were obliged to appear in the king's camp with their own troops and under their own flags. These *banderia*, as they were called, proved to be a modern and not too costly form of military organisation.

Exploiting the weakening position of the pope, the king levied a tax on papal revenues and placed his own trusted men in vacant ecclesiastic positions. Knowing that he could rely on the support of the Bohemian-Polish alliance, he led a number of campaigns to secure the throne of Naples. **Central power was consolidated and high royal revenues turned the Hungarian kingdom into a strong European power.**

The might of the realm was put to the test by Charles Robert's son, Louis I (the Great) (1342–1382), the only Hungarian king to receive the epithet 'Great' and one of the last chivalric sovereigns. Eminent painters, sculptors and goldsmiths were visitors to the court of the king, who himself collected a valuable library (whose treasures included the magnificent, richly illustrated *Chronicon Pictum*, a valuable compendium of earlier historical chronicles, which he himself commissioned), and even founded a short-lived university at Pécs in 1376.

He was awarded the epithet 'Great' by his contemporaries on the grounds of his military campaigns. During the four decades of his rule he led sixteen campaigns himself and organised a further thirteen. On the pretext of avenging the murder of his brother, the husband of Queen Joan of Naples, he led a series of campaigns against Italy, his real target being the procurement of the throne of Naples. As a result of these exacting and costly wars the Hungarian army spent long years in Italy, although the goal of acquiring the throne eluded Louis. However, he did succeed in forcing the voivode of

Wallachia¹ into vassaldom, and led a series of victorious campaigns against Venice in order to bring the Dalmatian towns² under his rule. He also led a victorious war against the Turks in the Balkans, but the Turks also successfully invaded Hungary for the first time in 1371. As part of his maternal inheritance he gained the Polish throne in 1370. The two countries did not unite, but remained in a state of personal union until his death.³

He established his court in Buda, and limited the power of the barons by introducing a new system of royal donations; the donated estates were linked to offices, as a kind of payment for services rendered to the crown, but with the obligation to muster a certain number of troops. In response to the demands of the lesser nobility, a law passed in 1351 stated that "the nobles of the realm should all enjoy the same liberties," i.e. he eliminated all legal differences between the barons or magnates and the gentry. This law marked an important step towards the creation of an unified legal group of nobility. At the same time, the nobles' right to free disposition by will was abolished: if there were no direct heirs then relatives could inherit feudal holdings (*avicitas*), but if the line died out then they reverted to the crown (*fiscalitas*). The collection of one ninth in tithes was made compulsory in order to prevent the magnates from luring the peasants away from the gentry with promises of exemption from this tax. However, the peasants' right of free movement remained in force and this allowed them a certain measure of economic power.

Although attempts by the gentry ('lesser nobility' is the common term in Hungarian) to organize themselves into a distinct order proved successful, the majority of the land – and thus also the greater part of the power – remained in the hands of the magnates, thereby putting the bulk of the realm under the control of just a few families. Some of them could boast more than a thousand villages, while the royal territory made up less than five percent. **Louis the Great died without a son, and after his death rival pretenders and even enemy kings became mere pawns in an intricate game pursued by the baronial cliques. Even though the son-in-law of Louis the Great, Sigismund of Luxemburg (1387–1437) eventually secured the throne for himself, his fifty-year rule was unable to break the power of these cliques.** Sigismund tried to base his power on the towns and took certain measures to create an estate for them. Although towns prospered and underwent spectacular development, they never became an independent political factor. As king of Hungary, Sigismund tried to seize the Bohemian and German thrones, and regarded the Hungarian throne as a stepping stone towards European power. His efforts were crowned with success as he eventually became Holy Roman emperor, though he never succeeded in establishing real power; his political skills were severely tested by the Hussite wars⁴ in Bohemia and by the

¹ *Wallachia*: Medieval name of the territory lying southeast of Transylvania, bordered by the Lower Danube in the south and the Black Sea in the east. It is essentially a fertile plain, populated mostly by Vlachs, ethnic ancestors of modern Romanians (the term 'Romania' and 'Romanian' are 19th century inventions, which were meant to emphasize the linguistic and supposedly ethnic and cultural connection between this group and the ancient Romans).

² *Dalmatia*: Name of the northeastern coastal region of the Adriatic Sea, which was once populated by an ancient ethnic group, the Dalmatians. The coast and the numerous islands are cut off from the internal regions by steep mountains, therefore the primary means of Dalmatians has always been sea trade. The kings of Hungary and the rich merchant city of Venice (northeastern Italy, on the other side of the Adriatic Sea across from Dalmatia) struggled for control over the wealthy Dalmatian ports for centuries. Ultimately, Venice emerged victorious in the 15th century, and controlled the region until the end of the 18th century, when it passed to the Habsburgs together with Venice itself.

³ After Louis's death, his younger daughter, Jadwiga (Hedvig) inherited the throne, who married the Grand Duke of Lithuania, Wladislaw Jagiello, creating the Polish-Lithuanian kingdom, one the major powers of Early Modern Europe. The Jagiellos came to the Hungarian throne as well in the 15th century.

⁴ *Hussites*: a heretic Christian sect following the teachings of Jan Hus, a professor at the University of Prague. Hus severely criticized some of the theological doctrines and morally dubious practices of the

concerted actions of the baronial cliques in Hungary. The Transylvanian peasant revolt, led by Antal Budai Nagy, broke out towards the end of his reign, and led to the ruling classes of Transylvania, the Hungarian nobles, the Székely freemen and the Saxon burghers, organising themselves into an order (the so-called Union of the Three Nations of Transylvania) in 1437. The Hungarian-Vlach peasant revolt, which was greatly influenced by Hussite teachings, was eventually quelled.

The political dominance of the baronial cliques curbed the political ambitions and independence of the gentry. Although all nobles now enjoyed the same rights and privileges, the gentlemen who had smaller estates sought the protection of the great barons. They assisted them in their administrative and juridical functions and became soldiers in their *banderia* in return for the offer of protection. Gentlemen who had no estates or whose estates could not provide an independent livelihood moved into the baron's castle and managed his estates. This relationship, reminiscent of western European vassalage, is a characteristic feature of Hungarian social development. In this sense, a member of the gentry joined the family of a wealthier baron and became his *familiaris*. This *familiaris* relation was occasionally passed from father to son, but since the great baron changed with each generation, the *familiaris*, more often than not, had to search for a new patron.

The gentry nevertheless remained an important political factor thanks to its great number and its potentially great military strength. If a wealthy magnate could secure the support of the majority of the gentry he could be encouraged to attempt to secure the crown for himself (as was to be the case with King Matthias I).

Matters of national policy were debated at the diet of the estates.⁵ All nobles had the right to be present, and indeed on some occasions the diet was attended by a great crowd, but only if the wealthy barons were accompanied by their *familiares*. The counties sent deputies (usually two) and the towns were also represented. Four privileged estates emerged in Hungary: the prelates (church leaders) and the magnates (who held their councils in the upper house from 1608), the free royal towns – not the burghers! –, and the gentry (the latter two sent their deputies to the lower house).

The laws of the realm were passed at these diets; they were ‘sanctified’ (approved) by the king and came into effect when they were announced in the county. The most oft-debated issue in the 15th century was the order of succession. In the 14th century, succession in the female line from the Árpád dynasty was in force, and later the principle of the succession of the king's son was accepted, but since none of the 15th century kings had lawful successors, the diets allowed free elections. However, the kings took little notice of the fact that they had no free disposition over the throne and proceeded to sign marriage contracts, alliances and inheritance pacts.

This state of affairs was to lead to conflicts later. **The realm was also threatened by the Ottoman Turks who established a huge empire in the Middle East and the Balkan Peninsula by the early 15th century, and whom – as the contemporaries rightly perceived – Hungary was unable to resist alone.** Several attempts were made to

Catholic Church, and his conclusions were similar to those of the Protestant leaders of the 16th century. He was declared a heretic and burned at the stake in 1415. His followers, the mostly Czech Hussites, broke with Rome and established their own church. From 1420, Sigismund, who inherited the Bohemian throne, declared a crusade against the Hussites, but he could not defeat them and the long war ended with a compromise in 1436.

⁵ *Diet of the estates*: It is essentially a medieval Parliament, where the country's population was ‘symbolically’ represented by members of the social elite. The magnates and the archbishops and bishops of the church were present in person; they gradually became the upper house (equivalent to the House of Lords in England). The lower house consisted of the representatives of the gentry; the gentlemen of each county had the right to elect a few deputies out of themselves. The royal cities (cities enjoying special privileges guaranteed by a royal charter) were also represented, but the peasantry, which made up the great majority of feudal society, had no representation at the diet.

unite the similarly threatened neighboring countries under one crown and to create an anti-Turkish coalition. The Polish-Lithuanian Jagiello dynasty secured first the Bohemian, and then the Hungarian thrones. The Habsburgs of Austria also reigned for some time in both countries during the 15th century. From time to time some of the magnates also attempted to occupy the throne (the gentry generally supported the idea of a 'national' kingdom) and if these attempts were successful, as in the case of Matthias Hunyadi, military campaigns were soon mounted with the aim of uniting the neighboring countries under one rule.

János (John) Hunyadi (1407?–1456), a gentleman of ethnic Vlach origin, rose from obscurity to become one of the wealthiest and most powerful magnates by the 1440s. But his fame rests on his great victories against the Turks, who considered Hunyadi their greatest enemy. After his initial successes he was appointed the voivode (leader) of Transylvania, the *ispán* of Temes (a county in southern Hungary north of the Lower Danube), and the chief captain of Nándorfehérvár (present-day Belgrade), i.e. he held the most important posts when fighting against the Turks. His estates lay in the southern part of the realm, and he spent his wealth on organising the defence of the country. He assembled a modern mercenary army, mobilised his *familiares* and, if the need arose, also recruited the village population.

After Serbia came under permanent Turkish occupation, the Hungarian nobility was alarmed. In response to the imminent threat, Hunyadi launched a winter campaign across the Balkan peninsula in 1443, which saw the 35,000 strong army of Hungarians, Serbs, Bosnians, Bohemians and Poles advance as far as the Balkan Mountains in Bulgaria. Following the victories, both the pope and Venice promised their support for the liberation of the Balkan from Turkish rule. The next campaign, led by King Vladislas I (1440–1444) clashed with the Turkish army at Varna on the Bulgarian coast in 1444. However, the promised fleet from Venice never came, the Hungarian army was routed, and the king himself fell in battle; Hunyadi barely escaped.

The young king had no child; the next successor to the throne, Ladislas V (László) Habsburg was a small child. Hunyadi was elected governor of the realm (1446–1452) to control the increasing feudal anarchy, but the rival baronial families schemed against him at every turn. A few years later the all-conquering **sultan, Mehmed II, marshalled a mighty army of 150,000 and set out northwards against Hungary. He besieged Nándorfehérvár (Belgrade), the kingpin in the Balkan defences at the confluence of the Danube and the Sava rivers,** which was held by a garrison of 5,000 soldiers. The pope called for a crusade against the Turks, and a Franciscan friar, Giovanni di Capistrano, recruited thousands of crusaders. An army of 50,000 assembled, but the majority of them were not trained in the art of warfare. After breaching the naval blockade of the Turks on the Danube, Hunyadi's army joined the defenders of the fortress. The Turks launched their final assault against the fortress on July 21, 1456, but were finally beaten after a long and exhausting battle, and the next day, the defenders overran the Turkish camp and captured their cannons. **This key stronghold was saved, and Hungary, along with the rest of Central Europe, was relieved of the Turkish menace for many decades. Unfortunately, Hunyadi died of an outbreak of plague shortly after the siege.**

Hunyadi's fame, his vast estates and the consent of the baronial cliques and the pressure of the gentry secured the election of his fifteen-year-old son, Matthias, to the throne after the sudden death of the still teenager King Ladislas. **Matthias was the first (and last) ruler of non-royal descent to sit on the Hungarian throne.** Regardless of his father's partial Vlach (Romanian) origin, he is commonly considered a 'national king' in the Hungarian tradition, because he did not belong to any foreign dynasty, and was very popular among the gentry. Although he was merely 17 when he became king, he refused to become the puppet of the magnates; having overthrown the baronial cliques which opposed him, he began to establish a strong, centralised rule.

He imposed new and heavy, but not excessive taxes, and the revenues of the royal treasury, which had previously amounted to 250,000 forints, now swelled to over 800,000 through new taxes – primarily the “extraordinary military tax,” which was levied regularly. The magnates were outraged by his tax policy, which, they felt, placed the burden of the peasantry at their expense. Matthias’ firm control of state power, the peasantry’s right of free movement and his encouragement of urban growth were coupled with the modernisation of the state apparatus. He allocated the chief offices to his most trustworthy and loyal followers, who were chosen from the ranks of the lesser nobility; he also employed officials who enjoyed regular pay. His long rule (1458–1490), however, was not a peaceful one. The magnates, including some former supporters, conspired and rose up against him several times. Matthias did not depend on the magnates for his military power. He spent most of his revenues on the armament and maintenance of his famed Black Army of mercenaries. This 10,000 strong army had to be kept occupied and its upkeep logically called for a series of military campaigns. In the case of foreign expeditions the army could partly maintain itself from the booty it seized. Aside from small campaigns, Matthias did not mount a major anti-Turkish war; he would have had little hope of success even if he had done so. Instead, he organised a network of border fortresses in the south, which became increasingly costly to maintain. The Balkans did not promise much booty for the Black Army, so Matthias launched various campaigns aimed at seizing the Bohemian throne, and also against Austria, Moravia (present eastern Czech lands) and Silesia (a region in southwestern Poland today) which were, more often than not, successful. After his death, however, the territories conquered by Matthias threw off the Hungarian yoke.

After he secured the Bohemian throne, Matthias became one of the seven German electors,⁶ and he harbored hopes of winning the imperial throne. **In 1485 he captured Vienna (the only Hungarian king ever to do so) and moved his royal court there.** However, the country lacked the necessary military power to maintain the territories they conquered. **He had no lawful son from either of his two marriages,** and during the last years of his reign he tried to ensure that his illegitimate son, János Corvin, should ascend the throne. After his father’ sudden death at the age of 40, however, the young prince was unable to gain recognition for his claim to the throne; the Black Army was disbanded and the country’s baronial clans took over gain at the expense of central power.

Vladislas II of the Jagiello dynasty (1490–1516) ascended the throne and was, in turn, succeeded by his son, Louis II (1516–1526). According to a contemporary chronicler these kings were firmly controlled by the magnates. Royal estates and revenues were leased out, and the sources which formerly replenished the royal coffers ran dry. Even the soldiers garrisoned at the border defences did not receive their pay. The diets, which were held with increasing regularity on Rákos Field near Pest, included more and more participants and issued many decrees in the interest of the gentry. These, however, were rarely carried out due to the opposition of the magnates. The leading officials of the state apparatus were replaced regularly and as a result, state administration discharged its functions with much difficulty. The political life of the country began to resemble that of the Polish ‘republic of nobles,’ with weak central power and increasing feudal anarchy. The constant rivalry between various factions supported by the dissenting baronial clans made steady state government virtually impossible.

The nobility saw their main interests as procuring for themselves the profits of agricultural production, monopolising production on their own estates and keeping the peasants at subsistence level. The struggle between the nobility and the peasants

⁶ *German electors*: seven German princes who gained the right from the 14th century to elect the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. They were: the King of Bohemia, the Duke of Saxony, the Count Palatine of the Rhine, the Margrave of Brandenburg, and the archbishops of Mainz, Trier and Köln (Cologne).

eventually came to a head with the peasant uprising of 1514.

A crusade was called against the Turks in 1514, and a surprisingly large number of dissatisfied peasants took up arms in the hope that a victorious campaign would lead to the granting of a legally more secure status, and that as soldiers their social standing would improve. The ruling classes refused to support the crusade against the Turks, and regarded the peasant-soldiers as their enemies. The peasant army turned against the lords and rallied under the leadership of György Dózsa, a Székely soldier, with the aim of a return to the old conditions reminiscent of the Székely freedom, and the foundation of a free peasant state without nobles. Although they enjoyed some initial victories, the sizeable but untrained peasant army suffered a crushing defeat at Temesvár (today Timisoara, southwestern Romania). The rebels were cruelly punished: the peasants were deprived of the right to move and were bound to the land “for all time” and were forced to provide free manpower for the nobles. Even from the very beginning, these measures were not enforced strictly, but nevertheless, they marked the main trend of social and economic development towards a ‘second serfdom,’ in other words, the reinforcement and extension of feudal social and economic conditions in Hungary, while feudalism was already in decline in the West.

The fate of medieval Hungary, however, was sealed by the unavoidable Turkish expansion, rather than by internal struggles. Hungary's defence policy had little, if any, chance of resisting the most powerful war-machine of the age. The cost of the maintenance and armament of the southern fortifications far exceeded the state revenues; all attempts at unification foundered and no allies were to be found. Medieval Hungary was unable to preserve its independence and integrity against the Turks. The weakness of central power, the constant internal strife and the expropriation of royal revenues undoubtedly hastened the fall of the medieval Hungarian state.

Hungary finally fell in 1526. Süleyman II the Magnificent, who had come into power in 1520, directed the main thrust of his military power towards Europe, and within a few years the southern line of fortification and border forts, including Belgrade, had fallen. The path to central Hungary now lay open, and the Turkish advance began in the spring of 1526. The teenage king, Louis II, rallied a sizeable army, but the various troops who answered his call could not unite in time. **On August 29, 1526 the Turkish army, which far outnumbered the Hungarian one in both men and cannons, routed the Hungarian army within two hours at Mohács, along the Danube.** Many leaders of the state, prelates, barons and gentlemen, as well as Bohemian mercenaries and thousands of Croatian peasants, died in the battle. The young king himself met his death while fleeing the battle. Even if this battle had been won, the Turkish advance would eventually have overcome the realm; the expansion of the Turkish empire and its crushing of the medieval Hungarian state was inevitable.