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## Hungary and Crusading in the Fifteenth Century

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The Hungarian 'long fifteenth century' – in this case, from the defeat of the crusaders at Nicopolis in 1396 to the crusade-turned-rebellion of 1514 – was characterized more by the political use of crusading ideas than by actual military actions against 'enemies of Christendom', supported by papal indulgences. Late medieval crusade in this part of the world meant almost exclusively the fight against the advancing 'infidels', the Ottoman Empire. The rhetoric of crusading in this age began with the reforms introduced in the wake of the failure at Nicopolis, became significant during the interregna between 1439 and 1458, and constituted the central element in the diplomacy of King Matthias I Corvinus (1458–90). Actual crusading campaigns were rather few: one leading to the defeat at Varna (1444), the other relieving Belgrade in 1456. Both have been extensively studied and described, as have the events of 1514, in which the 'peasant' *crucigeri* (in Magyar: *kurucok*) turned against the 'enemies inside', that is, the lords and prelates, who, in their eyes, were not just failing to defend them against the infidel, but were actually worse than the latter.<sup>1</sup>

Once he managed to return home after the disaster of Nicopolis, King Sigismund called a diet to Temesvár (today: Timișoara, Romania), which met and approved a number of reforms some time in October 1397.<sup>2</sup> This decree contained a renewal of the Golden Bull of Andrew II, first issued in 1222, and a few other specific rights and privileges of the nobility. However, Article 7 of the old text was expanded by a fairly long arrangement for military obligations. The reference was usually to the present war (*guerra presens*), but the obligations remained in force essentially until the end of the medieval kingdom. They specified the obligation of landowners (noblemen) on the occasion of a general levy, and imposed heavy fines for those who proved reluctant to fight.

The radical innovation was, however, the duty of all landowners to equip and send to war a number of 'archers in a soldierly fashion' (*pharetrarii more exercituancium*), according to their holdings. One such soldier was to be supplied for every 20 peasant plots, the so-called *portae*; hence, the name of this auxiliary force, *militia portalis*. Considering that in Sigismund's time the kingdom may have had some 400,000 tax units (plots), such an infantry (or light cavalry?) would have been quite a valuable force. It is unclear whether the idea was to arm peasants (1 in 20?), or to expect landowners to hire warriors according to their means, in the manner of some sort of 'scutage'. In subsequent decades the ratio of peasants to militiamen was altered more than once, but we have, unfortunately, no unequivocal evidence of the *portalis* troops' participation in any campaign. What is important, nevertheless, is the attempt at a widespread arming of commoners (or, alternatively, the hiring of professional soldiers), reflecting the perception that the kingdom's defence called for a constant supply for troops. Other types of evidence suggest that a good percentage of the peasantry, especially those engaged in animal husbandry, were quite well-trained fighters.<sup>3</sup> Whether this was due to the *portalis* system or other reasons cannot now be specified.

Article 63 of the 1397 Temesvár diet also addressed military necessities and adumbrated a reform, albeit a temporary one, of finances. The assembly decreed that 'all clergy give and render half of their income for the defence of the realm' and that this half (essentially half of the tithe) was to be retained by the landowners, handed over to special collectors of this 'war tax', and not be employed for anything else.<sup>4</sup> This was the first step towards an 'extraordinary' taxation for anti-Ottoman defence, and it was followed by many more, becoming almost regular by the second half of the fifteenth century. Had it been collected, such a levy would have been a significant contribution to defence expenses, but there is no evidence that the clergy and the papacy ever agreed to repeat it until the very last years of the medieval kingdom. It has also been pointed out that the allocation of income to specific purposes should be seen as a first step towards establishing a regular budget, which was unknown in medieval states. The Hungarian estates attempted more explicit reforms of state finances, mainly for defence, in the early sixteenth century, and this example pointed in a direction that was elaborated later.<sup>5</sup>

Soon after this diet, Sigismund and his barons, above all his Florentine counsellor and general, Pipo Scolari and later the Ragusan brothers Tallóci (Tallovac), began to build up an elaborate system of defences on

the kingdom's southern border.<sup>6</sup> The backbone of this system was a line of border fortifications beginning (in the south-east) along the lower Danube and ending, once it was finally completed in mid-century, at the Adriatic. After the fall of Serbia and then Bosnia, the system came to include fortresses beyond the immediate border of the kingdom; and a second line of forts was also established, situated some 80–100 km further north, deep inside the kingdom. Aside from the most significant castles, the defensive perimeter as a whole was garrisoned by the *banderia* ('private armies') of the lords of the region, such as the bans of Croatia-Slavonia, the *ispán* (*comes*) of Temes and the voivode of Transylvania. These individuals were assigned sizeable incomes from several other counties, or royal revenues such as the salt monopoly. In addition, increasing numbers of South Slav lords and their retainers and peasants (or warrior-peasants, called *vojniki*), found refuge in the kingdom and they supplied defensive mobile forces of considerable value, especially because they were highly familiar with the Ottoman tactics of raids and marauding auxiliaries. All in all, this system, usually under unitary command, withstood Ottoman advance for some 60–70 years; its last outpost, Jajce, fell only years after the defeat of the royal army at Mohács in 1526. Of course, this success was not unconnected to fluctuations in the priorities of Turkish expansion, and the internal conditions of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>7</sup>

I list these steps, which can be regarded as lessons learned from the defeat at Nicopolis, because I wish to argue that in the fifteenth century the central theme of Hungarian politics was what I should like to call 'defensive crusading'. The key term in this cluster of ideas was the claim that Hungary functioned as the bastion, the shield, the wall against the infidel: *antemurale Christianitatis*. This may sound paradoxical, since we usually understand crusading ideas as justifications for offensive military campaigns against the enemies of faith (or at least of the accepted version thereof). But if one also considers, for example, St Augustine's arguments concerning the 'just war', one that is waged in defence of the Christian world, or even the early crusading sermons that had emphasized the danger posed by the infidels to the Christian commonwealth, it may perhaps be accepted.

It is not quite clear when and in what context this notion first emerged. It is already adumbrated in a letter of King Béla IV from 1242 to the pope after the Mongol devastation of Hungary, and connected, as it was usually to be later as well, with complaints that the country was left alone to defend 'the West'.<sup>8</sup> In the fifteenth century both the popes of Rome and the Hungarian chancellery used a wide range of

expressions defining Hungary as the bastion of Christendom. One of the earliest may have been a letter of Pope John XXIII to Sigismund of Luxemburg in 1410, in which the pontiff characterized Hungary as *scutum atque murus inexpugnabilis nostreque et christianae fidei fortitudinis brachium* ('the shield and insurmountable wall and the arm of our strength and that of the Christian faith').<sup>9</sup> King Wladislas, who fell at Varna, introduced the twin expression, also to have a long history into modern times, of both Hungary and Poland constituting 'the wall and shield' (*murus et clipeus*) of the faithful.<sup>10</sup>

The functions of these metaphors were manifold. In 1440 the Hungarian estates argued that they had to elect an adult king instead of Ladislas, the already crowned posthumous baby of Albert of Habsburg; otherwise the kingdom, surrounded as it was by enemies, especially the heathen, would lack a suitable leader (*idoneum rectorem*). That is why they invited Władisław Jagiełło to be king.<sup>11</sup> Five years later Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini tried to convince the archbishop of Esztergom to accept the young Ladislas as their king, because 'our Christian faith cannot be protected unless its wall, which is Hungary (*murus eius qui est Ungaria*), is firm'.<sup>12</sup> The later Pope Pius II seems himself to have coined the formula *murus et antemurale sive clipeus* ('wall, bastion or shield'), which later became widespread, in a letter that he wrote to Pope Calixtus III in 1458.<sup>13</sup> In 1447 Pope Nicholas V warned Emperor Frederick III to make peace with Hungary, 'that has always offered itself as a shield ... and fought for the defence of the Christians.'<sup>14</sup> The papacy used these *topoi* most frequently in connection with attempts at securing peace for the Hungarians, so that they could wage the war against the infidel: in this sense it fits well into the many similar concerns connecting crusading with peace among the Christian powers. The Hungarian chancellery usually inserted these expressions into letters asking for financial assistance, mainly from Rome. For the most part their efforts met with some success, even if the sums that were finally sent were mere fractions of the needs.

In concert with the defensive rhetoric, the Hungarian leadership was not promoting offensive crusading projects in the Balkans, despite the fact that the Ottomans increasingly threatened the kingdom's southern border. The dominant strategy, in so far as one existed at all, was to assist the 'buffer states' of the northern Balkans, and to attempt to secure their loyalty to Hungary, in other words, to encourage them to resist Ottoman subjection. This worked well enough when the Hungarian forces seemed to be strong enough, but less well when the Porte appeared to gain the upper hand. One element of religious warfare, though not explicitly

a 'crusading' programme, was, however, detrimental to this attempt: Hungarian advances, above all in Bosnia, were often connected to efforts to force the 'heretics' to return to obedience to Rome. This made the local population and its leadership suspicious of their northern neighbour, to the extent of preferring Muslim tolerance to Latin 'persecution'.<sup>15</sup> It seems that in regard to the Serbian and Wallachian Orthodox 'schismatics' who fled to the kingdom from the Ottoman occupation, the policy pursued was, or became in the course of time, a wiser one. Royal legislation protected them from overzealous Hungarian bishops.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, Hungarian nobles were in no way 'pacifists'. It has been pointed out that offensive warfare, mainly into the northern Balkans, was highly popular among them, not only because of the general medieval ethos of heroic combat, but also because these campaigns were the best ways to earn royal favours and the land grants that went with them. The highly positive image enjoyed by Louis of Anjou, characteristically the only Hungarian king who was traditionally called 'the Great', was mainly due to his leading Hungarian troops into Italy, Wallachia and Bosnia. In contrast, Sigismund's 'bad press', which has lasted into our own time, was partly due to his defensive stance, well considered though it was.<sup>17</sup> There is a more material explanation. After the decline of the royal domain in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the estates available for royal grant shrank to almost none. To earn donations from the Crown, it was necessary to wait for the extinction of noble lineages, and these escheated possessions were granted almost exclusively on the basis of military merits.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, the spiritual rewards that were offered for crusading do not seem to have mobilized the nobility; or at least, there is no evidence that they did. Mention should be made here of the crusades against the Hussites. In the first two, in 1420–1, Hungarian troops took an active part, but as far as one can see, they fought, as usual, within the context of baronial contingents under their king's command. In the first anti-Hussite crusade Sigismund was accompanied by the private troops (*banderia*) of those great lords who belonged to his trusted entourage, together with a few lesser nobles who tried their luck in the campaign. In 1421 the general levy was called up and command entrusted to the able Scolari, but they accomplished little, and there does not seem to have been much enthusiasm. No Hungarians are known to have participated in the subsequent three crusades, all defeated by the Taborites.<sup>19</sup>

The most conspicuous instance of Hungarian ambivalence towards a crusade was that of the campaign that ended in the disaster of Varna.

The general history of this campaign is well known: on 10 November 1444 an international force, led by the young Polish king, Wladislas, the experienced general John (János) Hunyadi, and the papal legate Cardinal Cesarini, was defeated by the army of Sultan Murad II at the shores of the Black Sea. Of the commanders only Hunyadi survived. The background is, perhaps, less well known. It is, however, interesting in so far as it sheds some light on the person and motives of the most famous commander of Hungarian (and allied) armies in the mid-fifteenth century, John Hunyadi.<sup>20</sup> More than two decades ago, Pál Engel called for a closer scrutiny of the image of Hunyadi that had been handed down by scholarship and national tradition ever since his death, that of the 'hero who had only virtues, no vices'.<sup>21</sup> Hunyadi, son of a lesser nobleman of Romanian (Wallachian) origin, began his career under Sigismund and spent some time learning the craft of war in Italy. Aside from some successful campaigns against the Turks, he established his reputation as a victorious general in decisive encounters with the Habsburg party after the dual royal coronation of 1440–1. Once Władisław I had established his rule in Hungary, Hunyadi became voivode of Transylvania, then also ban (commander) of Severin. In 1442 he scored a victory against Shehabeddin Pasha, the beylerbei of Rumelia, the head of the Ottoman forces in Europe. Next year, at the encouragement of Pope Eugenius IV, the Hungarian army went onto the offensive, for the first time since Nicopolis. During this, so-called Long Campaign, Hunyadi led the Hungarians, together with some of their Balkan allies, almost as far as Sofia, and returned undefeated. The offensive had achieved nothing of military or political significance: no territory was recovered or occupied. But it boosted the reputation of the general and made the idea of driving the Ottomans out of Europe once again conceivable. Whether it was a realistic objective remained to be seen.

Politicking and planning began as soon as the army returned to Belgrade in January 1444. It seems that the sultan was ready to make concessions, as he was involved in a domestic conflict. Despot Đurađ (George) Branković of Serbia, whose daughter was married to the sultan and who had lived in Hungary since his expulsion from his country in 1439, was eager to do anything to bring about his return to his native land. Most likely, he was offered this and the release of his two blinded sons from Ottoman captivity, should he manage to dissuade the Hungarians and their allies from war. Burgundy, Venice and Genoa, were seen as likely participants in a crusade. The hawks in Hungary were very influential; let us remember that the diet had elected Wladislas through the use of the argument that he would be the leader of the

struggle against the Ottomans. But on 25 April 1444 the king agreed that Branković should send an envoy to the Porte. Preparations for war, on the other hand, continued apace, and were very actively promoted by the papal legate Cesarini. A preliminary peace was signed in Edirne on 12 June, promising Branković Serbia and the Hungarians a tribute of 100,000 ducats. The details of the ensuing double-deal are quite complicated. The king swore an oath to keep to the truce with the Turks, but this was secretly annulled, as one given to infidels, by the cardinal. Peace negotiations continued, but letters from Wladislas were dispatched to the allies and to his Polish subjects arguing the 'necessity to go to war'. The Ottoman envoys were moved to Várad (Oradea) from Szeged, probably to conceal from them the evidence of military preparations. What was significant was the oath sworn on the peace treaty by Hunyadi on 15 August 'in the name of the king, himself, and the whole Hungarian people'.<sup>22</sup>

Clearly, the Ottomans knew full well that Hunyadi's reputation, influence and military fame were the best guarantee of peace, even better than that of the young king. The question arises, why this famous commander took the risk of the damnation of his soul for a false oath, however sophisticated the cardinal's canonical arguments may have been. 'No matter how much he trusted the wily prelate,' writes Engel, 'Hunyadi had to have a very serious reason for his action. It can only be surmised that his reason was a previous agreement with Branković.'<sup>23</sup> A property dispute which began in 1448 between the despot and the, by that time regent of Hungary, sheds light on what might have happened four years previously. According to this lawsuit, Hunyadi held sizeable properties, including an important castle and several towns, which rightfully belonged to Branković. The contested estates amounted to about half of the very extensive properties bestowed on the despot after his flight from Serbia. The conflict was finally resolved in 1451 with an agreement that allowed the regent to hold a good part of the estates 'for a certain appropriate reason'.<sup>24</sup> The details of all this are unclear, but the usually well-informed Polish historian Jan Długosz maintained that there was an *occulta pactio* between Hunyadi and Branković to the effect that the former would support the peace that allowed the latter to return home.<sup>25</sup>

What is of interest here is that the acclaimed hero of Christendom could apparently be convinced to give up crusading plans in return for a number of villages and towns that would be added to his, already quite impressive, landed property. In turn, this possible exchange makes the modern student of events raise the question of the famous warrior's

motives and aims. However, it would be anachronistic and also futile to ask whether Hunyadi was driven by his desire for property, fame and power or by Christian crusading ideals. The two did not exclude each other, especially if one takes into account that most of Hunyadi's campaigns were fought by his 'private' army, his retainers as landowner and voivode, and as ban, and that the prerequisite for fielding it was the possession of royal office and material wealth. These could be augmented both by such merits as victories and successful defence, and by transactions that were usual for his time, even if they sometimes became questionable in the eyes of a post-Renaissance morality. Engel was surely right in pointing to the dangers of a one-sided romanticization of Hunyadi's image: he was a man of his age, condottiere, politician, warrior and crusader, all at the same time. And his memory as a hero in shining armour was transmitted not only by national historians, but also by popular memory, not unlike that of the similarly contradictory figures of King Marko or Skanderbeg.

Of course, the only successful crusading event of the age was connected to Hunyadi's name: the relief of Belgrade by the peasant crusaders led by Giovanni da Capistrano.<sup>26</sup> Reacting in all likelihood to the news of the fall of Constantinople, Capistrano asked for a crusading bull and began to recruit people all the way from Bohemia. This crusade was not a strictly 'Hungarian' matter: it was part of the Franciscan's wide-ranging activities in central Europe, from inciting to pogroms, burning the corpses of dead heretics and other inquisitorial acts, typical for popular preachers.<sup>27</sup> It was, however, a highly successful recruiting project, and, finally, even a military success, however 'unorthodox' in terms of siege tactics: the crusaders, eager to fight and trained in the rudiments of warfare by Hunyadi, attacked the besiegers who, apparently surprised by the massive force, retreated.<sup>28</sup>

There was an intensive debate, mainly à propos the events of 1456, among Hungarian historians in the 1960s about the 'patriotism of the masses' in the Middle Ages. Surely, those contributors were right who denied anything comparable to modern 'national' feelings amongst the thousands equipped with sticks and scythes who finally made the sultan give up the siege. However, many of them had already experienced the horrors of Ottoman raids, the burning of their villages and the dragging of their fellows or kinsmen into slavery. They were ready to fight for their *patria*, which in those times meant the village or town of one's birth.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, or perhaps even in the first place, the dramatic preaching of Capistrano mobilized their feelings, inculcated by many a Sunday sermon, of the Christian's 'duty' to fight against the



infidel. Finally, as the events that followed the siege proved, there was some kind of eschatological fervour about the 'poor and downtrodden' bringing about the final victories. At any rate, the aftermath of 1456, when the 'peasant crusaders' became restless because they felt that the lords had claimed credit for the victory that they had achieved, and were sent home by the commanders, foreshadowed the last crusade on Hungarian soil, the one that less than 60 years later turned into overt insurrection.

The son of Hunyadi, King Matthias (1458–90), assisted by able chancellors, was a past master of crusading rhetoric. This is not the place to rehearse the centuries' old debate about the 'final aims' of the king's policies. In fact Matthias, whom the Hungarians expected to follow in his father's footsteps, led only a few, limited and (therefore) mostly successful, campaigns against the Ottomans, spending most of his reign in wars and diplomacy that were aimed at acquiring territories in the north and west.<sup>30</sup> Many historians argued that these expansionist efforts were prerequisites for a major anti-Ottoman project, and that the king aimed to establish the wide power base necessary for its success. These theories of the older schools of historians were to serve above all as 'excuses' for the king against the charge of power hunger and self-aggrandisement.<sup>31</sup>

As late as 1931 Elemér Mályusz wrote: 'The new empire [of Matthias] was to include all those territories whose riches and population would guarantee the success of a Turkish war.'<sup>32</sup> A generation later, the best expert on Matthias's army, Gyula Rázsó, was somewhat more sceptical in his judgement of the king's long-term policy:

The beginning of his Bohemian campaign in 1468 marked a decisive turn. His aim now, and in all likelihood to the end of his life, was to establish a European, or at least central European, power under Hungarian leadership. Had he succeeded, the Ottoman threat would indeed have been blunted with the resources of such a Hungarian empire ... . It was a great concept, but essentially misguided – though Matthias may not have recognized its defects.<sup>33</sup>

No doubt, the lesson of his father's life was that Hungary alone stood little chance of stopping the Ottoman advance, to say nothing of expelling the Turks from Europe. But it is also true that Matthias's main concern was to establish his own position as a *homo novus* vis-à-vis the 'historical' dynasties of Habsburg and Jagiełło.<sup>34</sup> It cannot be decided whether Matthias would have fulfilled his many promises, to the popes and others, to march against the sultan, once a wider territorial base had

been established and an efficient standing army had been built up, because he died in the midst of his victories.<sup>35</sup>

The king's correspondence, mainly his letters to the popes, did not spell out this 'grand design' in so many words. Rather it reiterated his unwavering commitment to the Turkish war, if only his enemies within and outside his realm would not hinder him in marching south. At the very beginning of his reign, Matthias even called on Emperor Frederick III, the obvious, though not yet open, opponent to his succession to the throne, to fight together with him *pro communi causa fidei Christiane*, and his uncle, Michael Szilágyi, the regent for the young king, requested the papal legate to call a crusade against the Ottomans.<sup>36</sup>

Interestingly, the diplomatic correspondence, mainly with Rome, contained many more personal formulations referring to the king's role than statements of the general *antemurale* topos. Pope Paul II called Matthias 'the unique column of Christian hope and strength', or 'the most powerful champion of Christ'.<sup>37</sup> The king, in turn, pointed out that, as a son of the hero, he was destined by 'birth and education' to be *perpetuus Turci hostis*. That said, however, he added in one letter that 'if the pope does not want him to make peace with the Turk, then he should take care that he [Matthias] is able to sustain the fight'.<sup>38</sup> The 'remnants' of crusading ideas show up above all in Matthias' insistence that his wars, wherever they were fought, were waged in the interest of the *respublica Christiana*, thus positing an imaginary unity of Christendom, which may have been a reality only in the true Age of Crusades.

One anti-Ottoman crusade Matthias did take seriously: that of the Sienese pope, Pius II. Like many late medieval crusading projects, this one was combined with attempts to establish peace between warring kings and princes, so that they could join forces against the infidel. Initially, it seemed to succeed at the meeting in Mantua (1459), but the pope's death in 1464 had the effect of cancelling everything. Matthias was prepared to send troops in support of this venture, and he conducted a campaign into Bosnia during the autumn of 1464, but normally he preferred to remain at 'peace' with the sultan as long as the Ottomans did not attack. This 'peace', of course, was qualified on both sides by the fact that border skirmishing and minor incursions never ceased. None the less, Matthias received from Pius's successor, Paul II, all that was left in the papal treasury at Pius's death, 40,000 gold florins, augmented by another 17,000 florins.<sup>39</sup> The popes regularly sent subsidies 'for the Turkish wars' to Buda, for example, between 1469 and 1471 all told 43,000 florins.<sup>40</sup> Such sums, however, have to be compared with

the 150,000–200,000 florins that constituted the minimal amount required annually for the upkeep of the southern defence perimeter.<sup>41</sup>

The crusade that Matthias fought with quite some success was the one against King George of Bohemia, denounced as a heretic. To be sure, Hungarian troops were already moving into Moravia when on 19 April 1468 Pope Paul II called for a crusade against the recalcitrant and ‘perjurious’ George. Matthias had offered his services to the Holy See against his former father-in-law for some years,<sup>42</sup> and was only too happy now to have formal sanction for his campaign in support of the Catholic estates that offered him the crown of Bohemia. As far as the record allows us to judge, little ‘crusading fervour’ was involved in the ten-year war, fought for the most part by the king’s new mercenary army, in the course of which Matthias acquired a good part of the lands of the Crown of St Wenceslas.<sup>43</sup>

After Matthias’s death, under the Jagiełło kings, the country’s defences deteriorated. This was partly due to financial problems and partly to the lack of able commanders. In these decades even the traditional rhetoric of Christian militancy decreased. It is, for example, remarkable that the crusade called for in the Jubilee of 1500 had no resonance in Hungary, at least as far as one can see. The rhetoric in the noble diets, summoned almost every year, and sometimes twice a year, came to emphasize a new ideology: that of Scythian valour and national greatness. The decree passed at the 1505 diet about the succession to the throne described the Hungarians as *Scythica gens*, one that had conquered and defended its country by blood and iron, and whose native kings had spread the Scythian virtues far and wide in the world. True, the *antemurale clypeusque* formula was also mentioned, but the key argument was not, as in 1440, that of needing an able war leader against the Turks, but the inadmissibility of electing a ‘foreign’ king.<sup>44</sup>

As is well known, the crusade of 1514 originated in the political ambitions of Archbishop Bakócz. Having failed to convince the other cardinals to elect him pope, he did not want to return home empty-handed. Once again the call to crusade, this time even more actively supported by Observant Franciscans, was followed by masses of commoners, peasants and town dwellers.<sup>45</sup> It is understandable that after the most murderous and widespread rural uprising in Hungarian history, usually called the peasant war of Dózsa, during that summer, the Hungarian prelates and nobles did not want to hear any more about a crusade. In the last decade of the independent kingdom, the nobility did all it could to rid itself of defence duties, while the treasury was less and less able to maintain the *antemurale Christianitatis*.

At the bitter end, crusade or not, the noble levy, most of the magnates and all the prelates gathered with their retainers and hired soldiers under the king's flag to oppose the Ottoman imperial army. How can one explain the strange and tragic paradox that after years of haggling about military duty and trying to place the entire burden on the Crown, when it came to the moment of truth, the country's elite heroically fought and fell within less than two hours on 29 August 1526 at the field of Mohács? Seven out of the ten bishops and archbishops, more than 20 *barones*, the cream of the aristocracy, and uncounted lesser noblemen in their train lost their lives, and the king died while trying to flee. The Ottoman danger was well known to all of the country's inhabitants. Nobles had to fear the loss of property, status, political role; burghers their houses and towns, peasants their villages, their cattle and their lives. There were plenty of Balkan refugees everywhere to tell the tale even to those who had not themselves experienced Ottoman raids. But, as several historians have put it, the 'natural reflex of self-preservation' of the thousands of nobles who annually, or more frequently, gathered at tumultuous diets, did not preclude their refusal to take effective action, which bore a cost to themselves, for the defence of the realm. No one has yet offered an answer to this conundrum.<sup>46</sup> But it may be worthwhile considering the opinion of the papal nuncio, Baron Burgio, who resided in Hungary during the kingdom's last fateful years. In 1525 he described the elements of the nobility that alone had the right to decide about action or inaction in the following words:

The first part is soldiering, fighting on the borders in the pay of the magnates; they are the best and the most courageous ... Another part consists of those nobles who live on their country estates, pursue husbandry and trade, never go to town, and do not attend the diet but merely cast their vote on the delegates sent by the county to the national assemblies. The third part is made up of those eight or ten wealthy and well-bespoken noblemen who take part in public affairs and are sincerely concerned with the affairs of the country.<sup>47</sup>

Maybe what happened was that *la bona parte et la più audace* did come to the aid of its country under the banner of its lords, and died for it. But that was not enough, except for establishing a *lieu de mémoire* for the centuries to come.<sup>48</sup>