

# Christian-Muslim Relations A Bibliographical History

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# Ferenc Zay

DATE OF BIRTH	Between 1498 and 1505
PLACE OF BIRTH	Near Valkóvár/Vukovar, present-day Croatia
DATE OF DEATH	1570
PLACE OF DEATH	Uhrovec/Zayugróc, present-day Slovakia

## BIOGRAPHY

Ferenc Zay was a high-ranking military officer and a diplomat of King Ferdinand I Habsburg (r. 1526-64) as well as a memoir-writer and historiographer. He originated from near Valkóvár/Vukovar, in present-day Croatia and attended the University of Padua. He must have had an excellent humanist education, since he is the first Hungarian nobleman about whose library there is any detailed knowledge: he owned over 90 books, many of them on philosophical and historical topics. Although his family were not wealthy, through family relationships on his mother's side he gained access to the royal court and started his career as a secretary to King Louis II (r. 1516-26).

After the battle at Mohács (1526) in which he took part, he became strongly committed to the Habsburg side in the rivalry between Ferdinand I and János Szapolyai, and being convinced that János's overtures to the Ottomans would lead to disaster, he became a close follower of King Ferdinand. In his early years, between the late 1520s and early 1530s, he fought in battles and skirmishes against the Turks, being incited to resist them by the loss to them of his family estates. He was in the Habsburg army that attempted to recapture Buda in 1542, and in 1546 he was one of the leaders of the force against the Protestant League of Schmalkalden, for which he was rewarded with estates. In 1548, he was appointed vice-castellan of Eger, one of the strongest fortresses in central Hungary, and between 1552 and 1560/67 he was vice-captain of a protective flotilla on the Danube.

Zay's major diplomatic commission was to Istanbul between 1553 and 1557, during which time he also followed the court of Süleyman through Anatolia. He had close relationships with high Ottoman dignitaries and reported information of much significance to Vienna. In 1557, he negotiated the peace treaty between Hungary and the Porte. He reached the summit of his career when he was nominated as assessor of tribunals and

was appointed captain-in-chief of Upper Hungary from 1560 to 1565. In 1559, he became a member of King Ferdinand's Hungarian Council, and in 1560 he was raised to baronial status.

Among Zay's works are *Az János király árultatása* ('The betrayal of King János'), directed against János Szapolyai, and a short piece, *Az chazar Ellen walo coniuracionak Ky Nylathkozzassa* ('A declaration of the conspiracy against the emperor').

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E. Bartoniek, *Fejezetek a XVI-XVII. századi magyarországi történetírás történetéből* [Chapters from the history of 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian historical literature], ed. Z. Ritoók, Budapest, 1975, pp. 44-51

J. Horváth, *A reformáció jegyében* [In the spirit of Reformation], Budapest, 1957, pp. 125-9, 492-3

## WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

*Az Landor Fejrjár elvesztésének oka e vót és így esött; Az Lándorfejrjár; Az Landor Feyrwar el weetzesenek oka e woht es így esewth*, 'The loss of Belgrade and reasons for its fall'

DATE About 1535-8

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Hungarian

## DESCRIPTION

*Az Landor Fejérvár elveszésének oka e vót és így esött* (in the original, *Az Landor Feyrwar el weezetesének oka e wotth es így esewth*, though it is usually referred to by its modernised title) is a memoir of the 1521 Ottoman campaign against Hungary and the siege of Belgrade (in contemporary Hungarian, Nándorfehérvár). The original text in Ferenc Zay's own hand is extant, and there is also a Latin translation, *Historia de Belgradi amissione et causis*, 37 folios long, probably around 1790.

The work is a remarkable example of the Hungarian linguistic heritage, and one of the first extant works of historiography in the Hungarian language. However, it is much more a work of literature than a genuine piece of history writing. Some scholars go as far as labelling it a work of historical propaganda, a polemical pamphlet, or an 'indictment' against the aristocracy for the loss of Belgrade. It contains factual errors, and the chronology of events is disordered. Some claim that Zay's exaggerations and distortions are deliberate in places, and they can even appear to be a manipulation of historical facts since Zay was pro-Habsburg, loyal to Ferdinand I (r. 1526–64) and biased against his rival János Szapolyai (r. 1526–40). Nevertheless, although it may have to be approached with much caution as a historical source, it has its strengths.

It gives minute details of the various stages in the siege of Belgrade as well as those of the nearby castles of Zimony (Zemun) and Sabac, the looting and burning carried out by the Ottomans in the surrounding region, and the counter-measures of the Hungarian leaders. It provides a shockingly realistic description of the derelict and neglected Hungarian frontier fortresses, lacking in ammunition, food and supplies, as well as the unpaid garrison forces, of whom only a handful remained at their posts. It serves as a first-rate source for the political situation in Hungary and the conflicts between the aristocrats, and it judges 'the enmity of the lords' as a major cause of their own disaster.

One of the main values of the work is the insight it gives into the workings of the Ottoman military machinery, so detailed that it records the debates of Ottoman military leaders regarding strategy and tactics. It also gives a clear picture of the fall of the key stronghold of the frontier castle system of Hungary, focused on Belgrade, opening a way into the heart of Hungary.

## SIGNIFICANCE

One of the most intriguing elements of *Az Landorfejérvár* is the so-called 'peace offer of Süleyman', a subject of heated debate in Hungarian

historiography. When Süleyman became sultan he sent a messenger to King Louis II of Hungary to renew the peace treaty between the two powers. The messenger did not receive a prompt answer, and was kept prisoner in Hungary. It has been speculated (though without evidence) that this was because the Hungarian nobles refused to agree to new conditions that Süleyman wanted to impose, which were tribute and free passage for his armies through their country. Zay, one of the nearest in time to the 'peace offer', mentions Süleyman's embassy but speaks only of tribute: 'in order to renew the peace, [the sultan] wished and asked for tribute'. He also says that the Hungarians mutilated Süleyman's envoy, possibly picking up this rumour from other accounts, among them that given by the Dalmatian chronicler, Ludovicus Tubero, who wrote in 1522 that the mutilation and the 'violation of the law of nations' was deliberately spread by the propaganda of the Ottomans as a *casus belli*. The point that Zay makes is that the arrogance shown by the Hungarian nobles when they kept Süleyman waiting and humiliated his servant, gave the sultan an excuse to invade, and so the Hungarians brought their fate down on their own heads.

Zay has little but contempt for the Hungarian nobles and commanders. He goes into great detail about the disputes between custodians of the fortresses around Belgrade and the king, and their pursuit of these even in the face of the threats from the Turks. At Sabac, István and Balázs, Sulyok refused to let the king's soldiers into the castle until the very last moment, even though the garrison forces were few and lacking food, gunpowder and cannons. He also blames the self-centred and conceited nobles for not recruiting fighting men or for arriving too late to mount a proper defence, so that the Ottomans were free to move around 'with many gains without any resistance'.

Many Hungarians are inspired by crusading fervour and sacrificial zeal, preferring to die as martyrs than to surrender. Their heroism is highlighted by the contrasting example of the traitor János Morgay, who deserted to the Ottoman side, but did not receive the reward promised by Süleyman and disappeared after the fighting. The Hungarian Christians never surrender and never lay down their arms, but fight to the last man, true to their oath to the king and loyalty to their country. Thus, in his last speech, vice-castellan Oláh desires 'to die amongst his fellows, but never serve the Turk'. In contrast, the Turks, who are generally portrayed as cruel and treacherous, are dismayed at such heroism, and the sultan even contemplates withdrawal (this is historically improbable).

Zay even suggests that the only reason for the capture of Belgrade was treason: had the traitor Morgay not revealed the weakest points in the city wall, Süleyman would have ordered retreat since thousands of Turks had been killed.

The story fits into the centuries-long ‘shield of Christendom’ (*propugnaculum Christianitatis*) ideology, Nándorfehérvár being the very bulwark of the whole of Christianity and its loss having tragic consequences, because it could no longer protect the believers against the infidels. It had served as a bastion, ‘where many thousands of heathen lost their heads’, a theme of crusading martyrology that is discernible throughout the text.

#### MANUSCRIPTS

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