Anastasija Ropa

Imagining the 1456 Siege of Belgrade in *Capystranus*

The poem *Capystranus*, devoted to the 1456 Siege of Belgrade by the Ottoman Turks, was printed three times between 1515 and 1530 by Wynkyn de Worde. It survives in a fragmentary form, testifying to its popularity with the audience. Studies of the poem have tended to concentrate on its literary qualities, discrediting its historical value as an account of the siege. In this essay, I build on the work of scholars who view the narrative of *Capystranus* as a work of fiction, informed by the conventions of crusading romance, rather than as an eyewitness account. However, I reassess the value of *Capystranus* for the study of war history: I argue that, in its description of the siege, the author pictures accurately the spirit of contemporary warfare. The present essay explores, for the first time, the experiences, images and memories of war as represented in *Capystranus*, comparing the depiction of warfare to contemporary discourses on the law and ethics of war.

Keywords: *Capystranus*; Middle English romance; Siege of Belgrade, 1456; fifteenth-century warfare; later crusades

Capystranus is a Middle English verse romance devoted to the Siege of Belgrade by the Ottoman Turks in July 1456. The poem was printed three times between 1515 and 1530 by Wynkyn de Worde, and it survives in a fragmentary form, which could, perhaps, testify to its popularity with the audience.[1] The poem is anonymous, and it is uncertain whether it was written directly for print or was in circulation for some time before printing. There are chronicle sources, including English ones, that describe the siege, but the poem is based on a variety of sources, which makes it a fascinating source for studying contemporary and early responses to the siege. The present essay will, first, outline the earlier tendencies in English criticism of the poem and suggest new perspectives that highlight the romance's historical, cultural and literary significance for studying the ways in which the Siege of Belgrade was remembered and imagined in Europe. Second, the essay will trace changes in military practice and ideology that informed the poem and the context in which it was read by early audiences. Finally, I will

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1   The poem is available in three modern editions. For the present article, I used Stephen A. Shepherd's "Capystranus," in *Middle English Romances* (New York: Norton, 1995), 388–408. Shepherd edited the text from de Worde's 1515 edition. There are also two earlier editions: Douglas Gray's in *The Oxford Book of Late Medieval Verse and Prose* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 199–203, which reproduces lines 360–521 of the 1515 print, and W. A. Ringler's in *New Hungarian Quarterly* 27 (1986): 131–40.

conduct a series of close readings of the accounts of two sieges described in the poem within its historical context. Comparing the text to other accounts of the 1456 siege and to existing models of crusading romance will help me to assess the role of memory and imagination in the poem.

Introduction

In 1453, the Christian world was shaken by the news that Constantinople had been captured by the Turks. Three years later, in 1456, the successful defense of a less prominent city, Belgrade, revived the hopes of delivering the capital of Eastern Christianity, though these dreams of a new crusade proved ephemeral: Belgrade itself was lost to the enemy in 1521. Meanwhile, the Hungarian victory was of singular importance for fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europeans. Norman Housley remarks that "the victory was repeatedly cited in the decades to come as proof that the Ottomans were not invincible."[2] The Middle English poem *Capystranus* is an important witness to the impression the battle made on Europe, including the inhabitants of England, who were physically distant from the events in East Central Europe.

In what sense does *Capystranus* engage with memories of the Constantinople and the Belgrade sieges? Study of the processes by which memory works and on the interactions between memory and history by both cognitive psychologists and historians emphasizes the dynamic nature of memory. In many instances, recorded memory is communal rather than personal, a tendency explored in Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory).[3] While twentieth-century war memories are in many cases national, medieval memory was often determined through religious affiliation, particularly in the case of "holy wars." The importance of realms of memory for medieval and post-medieval audiences has been emphasized by Sharon Kinoshita, who discusses *Chanson de Roland* as a *lieu de mémoire*.[4]

J. M. Winter highlights the unstable nature of memory, stating that "the act of recalling the past is a dynamic, shifting process, dependent on notions of

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2   Norman Housley, *The Later Crusades, 1274–1580: From Lyons to Alcazar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 104.

3   Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (1989): 7–24.

4   Sharon Kinoshita, *Medieval Boundaries: Rethinking Difference in Old French Literature* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013). See also Julian Weiss, "Remembering Spain in the Medieval European Epic: A Prospect," in *Locating the Middle Ages: The Spaces and Places of Medieval Culture,* ed. Julian Weiss and Sarah Salih (London: King's College London Medieval Studies, 2012), 67–82.

future as much as on images of the past."[5] Moreover, contemporary historians draw our attention to the interaction between history and memory: history not only draws on individual and collective memories but also shapes them. Thus, one's memories of past events are influenced by accounts of the same or similar experiences; this is the case not only in modern times, but also in the Middle Ages. According to Joanna Bourke, "History and memory are not detached narrative structures; at no time in the past was memory 'spontaneous' or 'organic'; at no time has history been able to repudiate its debt to memory and its function in moulding that memory."[6] In this essay, I will consider the interaction between memory and imagination in shaping images of war in *Capystranus* as a twofold process: while the text may be based on the past accounts, it also influenced future memories and representations of crusading warfare.

Intriguingly, Éva Róna argues that the poem is based on eyewitness accounts; Róna's hypothesis presents some problems, given that, according to Róna, the poem was composed directly for the press, while the first known edition of the poem is dated to 1515. Róna indicates that contemporary English chronicles refer to the Siege of Belgrade.[7] On the other hand, Stephen Shepherd believes that the poem was in circulation prior to its printing. Shepherd points to certain corrupt rhymes and missing lines in the 1515 edition, which could have occurred if the text had existed in manuscript form before it was set for printing by de Worde in 1515.[8] Shepherd's suggestion about the dating of the romance is accepted by Rhiannon Purdie.[9] Meanwhile, Bonnie Millar-Heggie is skeptical about Shepherd's dating, and believes that the poem was written closer to 1515; Millar-Heggie's dating thus makes the influence of eyewitness accounts on the representation of events more problematic.[10] In fact, comparing the representation of the siege in *Capystranus* and other contemporary and later

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5   J. M. Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2006), 4–5.

6   Joanna Bourke, "Introduction: Remembering War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 4 (2004): 485.

7   Éva Róna, "Hungary in a Medieval Poem, 'Capystranus,' a Metrical Romance," in *Studies in Language and Literature in Honour of Margaret Schlauch,* ed. Mieczyslaw Brahmer, Stanislaw Helsztynski, and Julian Krzyzanowski (Warsaw: PWN Polish Scientific Publishers, 1966), 350–51.

8   Shepherd, "Capystranus," 391.

9   Rhiannon Purdie, *Anglicising Romance: Tail-rhyme and Genre in Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), 171.

10   Bonnie Millar-Heggie, "Sanctity, Savagery and Saracens in *Capystranus*: Fifteenth Century Christian-Ottoman Relations," *Al-Masaq: Journal of the Medieval Mediterranean* 14, no. 2 (2002): 131.

sources can be helpful in testing both Róna's suggestion about the incorporation of eyewitness accounts and Shepherd's early dating of the poem.

After its initial publication in 1515, the poem was reprinted by de Worde in 1527 and in 1530.[11] Remarkably, de Worde's editions are decorated with woodcuts, providing clues to the publisher's ideas about the attraction of the poem, its target audience and de Worde's marketing practices. Although de Worde may be simply re-using woodcuts already ordered for his other prints, decorating a text in this way raises the costs of production at the same time as increasing the book's attractiveness. Leth Seder stresses de Worde's carefulness in the "selection and placement of illustrative woodcuts" for the anonymous romances he printed.[12] Thus, the surviving fragment of de Worde's 1530 edition is introduced with a woodcut depicting the storming of a town, which, according to J. O. Halliwell, is "exactly similar to one in W. de Worde's edition of Richard Coeur de Lion, 1528."[13] The woodcut introduces the first of the two sieges described in some detail in *Capystranus*—the 1453 Siege of Constantinople.

Woodcuts contribute to making *Capystranus* a popular romance in more than one sense. The romance plays on the current anxieties about the Ottoman threat, and it was commercially successful, judging by the fact that it was reprinted. The survival of only three fragmentary copies may suggest that, like Malory's *Morte Darthur,* printed by de Worde's predecessor William Caxton and later by de Worde himself, the text was, to use A. S. G. Edwards's expression, "literally read to destruction."[14] However, the rate and condition of survival also indicates the readers' attitude towards the printed book, an object that was cheaper and less valued than, for instance, the more elaborate illuminated manuscripts. It would be interesting to see how the English audience reacted to the second and third editions of *Capystranus* after Belgrade fell into Ottoman hands in 1521.

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11   Fragments survive from all three editions: a 10-leaf fragment from the 1515 edition is in London, British Library, 14649; two leaves from the 1527 are BL, 14649.5; and four leaves from the 1530 print are in Oxford, Bodleian Library, 14650. The ending of the poem is missing. See Purdie, *Anglicising Romance,* 171–72.

12   Seth Leder, "The Wiles of a Woodcut: Wynkyn de Worde and the Early Tudor Reader," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (1996): 381.

13   J. O. Halliwell, *A Hand-List of the Early English Literature Preserved in the Douce Collection in the Bodleian Library, Selected from the Printed Catalogue of that Collection* (London: Adlard, 1860), 23. István Petrovics comments on the possible size of the printed booklets and their decoration ("*Capystranus*. Egy 1515-ben Londonban kinyomtatott névtelen angol elbeszélő költemény," in Peregrin Kálmán and László Veszprémy, *Európa védelmében. Kapisztrán Szent János és a nándorfehérvári diadal emlékezete* (Budapest: HM Hadtörténeti Intézet és Múzeum–Line Design, 2013), 127).

14   A. S. G. Edwards, "The Reception of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur,*" in *A Companion to Malory,* ed. Elizabeth Archibald and Anthony S. G. Edwards (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996), 243.

Meanwhile, romances dealing with the Siege of Jerusalem remained popular long after the city itself was taken and its delivery became a fantasy.[15] Indeed, Anthony Leopold shows that crusading proposals, originally composed for the "leading rulers of Europe as practical plans for the recovery of Jerusalem," continued to be copied for "enthusiastic nobles" well into the sixteenth century.[16] Likewise, *Capystranus* could have exercised a special, sad or nostalgic attraction after the loss of Jerusalem to the infidels.

Capystranus as Crusading Romance

Studies of the poem have tended to concentrate on its literary qualities, discrediting its historical value as an account of the siege. Millar-Heggie considers the poem to be an "intriguing work that reflects fifteenth-century ideology and fears" and provides an "exhortation to a new crusade."[17] Recently, Lee Manion highlighted the place of *Capystranus* within the tradition of crusading romance, while acknowledging its originality in focusing on a recent event, which makes the author alter certain romance conventions. According to Manion, "*Capystranus* recognizably draws on the medieval literary tradition, but the poem's revisions to that tradition and treatment of a more recent historical event reveal how subsequent early modern texts could discuss crusading subjects critically while modifying the form of the crusading romance."[18] Manion's discussion of *Capystranus,* including its use of Biblical tropes and allusions to Charlemagne's wars, builds on the work of several illustrious scholars of romance. Indeed, Philippa Hardman, Malcolm Hebron, and Diane Vincent consider *Capystranus* alongside other "siege poems": they point out that these poems draw on the *chanson de geste* tradition, alluding to Charlemagne and his exploits against the Turks.[19]

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15   Graindor de Douai's *Chanson de Jérusalem* describes the siege of 1187, purporting to present an eyewitness account. For the representation of the infidels in the text, which bears similarity to the portrayal of the Turks in *Capystranus,* see Huguette Legros, "Réalités et imaginaires du péril sarrasin," in *La chrétienté au péril sarrasin: actes du colloque de la Section Française de la Société Internationale Rencesvals* (Aix-en-Provence: University of Provence, 2000), 125–46.

16   Anthony Leopold, "Crusading Proposals in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Century," in *The Holy Land, Holy Lands, and Christian History: Papers Read at the 1998 Summer Meeting and the 1999 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. R. N. Swanson (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000), 227.

17   Millar-Heggie, "Sanctity," 113.

18   Lee Manion, *Narrating the Crusades: Loss and Recovery in Medieval and Early Modern Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 161.

19   Thomas H. Crofts and Robert Allen Rouse maintain that, while *Capystranus* itself is not a Charlemagne romance, it "shares many otherwise uncommon elements with *Sege [of Melayne]*". "Middle English Popular

In his monograph *The Medieval Siege,* Malcolm Hebron examines a particular group of romances, "siege poems," that center on a siege as the locus for the confrontation between the "Saracens" and the Christians.[20] Grouping together poems that deal with the sieges of Troy, Thebes, Jerusalem, Rhodes and many other cities may obscure the particular context in which each text was produced and the signification of each siege for the audience. However, such an approach highlights the importance of siege in medieval warfare and imagination. *The Sege of Melayne,* to which *Capystranus* is usually compared by scholars, depicts an event belonging to the heroic past, the beginning of Charlemagne's reign.[21] Indeed, Hebron claims that, drawing on the tradition of heroic poetry, the *Capystranus* poet introduces historically inaccurate descriptions of armor and weapons.[22] Hebron's opinion is contested by Millar-Heggie, who points out that "the Christian forces were in fact poorly equipped and outnumbered."[23] Later in this essay, I consider late medieval siege practices and the depiction of the siege in *Capystranus,* showing that the poet introduces a number of realistic details that would be familiar to his contemporaries. Meanwhile, he also uses motifs that are common in crusading romances, including the enemies' unnatural cruelty, their exotic appearance and Christian steadfastness.

One of the most prominent features of *Capystranus* is its hybridity. The poem embraces crusading, hagiographic and historiographical narratives, transforming them through a combination of memory and imagination. In fact, the poem seems to draw on a number of sources, among them oral and written accounts of the Siege of Belgrade, reimagined within the framework of the earlier crusading romance. Vincent comments on the generic fluidity of *Capystranus,* which stands between romance and chronicle account:

The convergence of the genres of romance and historiography allows *Capystranus* to imply that Friar Johan Capistranus and Janos Hunyadi, by lifting

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Romance and National Identity," in *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance,* ed. Raluca L. Radulescu and Cory James Rushton (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), 89.

20   Malcolm Hebron, *The Medieval Siege: Theme and Image in Middle English Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

21   See, for instance, Shepherd, "'This Grete Journee': *The Sege of Melayne,*" in *Romance in Medieval England,* ed. Maldwyn Mills, Jennifer Fellows, and Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 113–31.

22   Hebron, *Siege,* 86–87.

23   Millar-Heggie, "Sanctity," 118.

the Turkish siege of Belgrade, were replaying the opening strains of the same theme of divinely aided Christian triumph over a rival faith and rival civilization.[24]

Highlighting the symbolic importance of the Siege of Belgrade, the *Capystranus* author presents the victory as a *lieu de mémoire,* a conceptual site that may be put to different uses, including political ones.[25] Indeed, Vincent emphasizes the *Capystranus* author's political awareness and his "exploitation of contemporary religious and political issues."[26] However, in her analysis of the political and religious uses of medieval romance, Vincent seems to underestimate the component of faith, which is particularly important in crusading romances.

In fact, fifteenth- and sixteenth-century authors not only use or, in Vincent's terms, "exploit" the romance genre to present contemporary political, social and religious challenges in a certain light, but also explore or probe these issues through a kind of "thought experiment." Raluca Radulescu points out that "romances fulfill the expectations they would tackle the issue of social identity, even though they are not designed to respond to real-life crises but rather provide arenas of discussion where delicate issues may be assessed and debated."[27] Thus, *Capystranus* engages with several identity issues that were topical in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries: Christian identity, warrior identity, including the blurring borderlines between combatants and civilians, and the intersection between Christian, territorial and professional identities.

Identifying the Participants

Embracing Hebron's category of the "siege poem," Suzanne Conklin Akbari argues that *Capystranus* provides one of the last examples of this sub-genre, marking the beginning of a new cultural period in which nascent national identity ousts pan-European Christendom: "the enemy is no longer described in religious terms, as the 'Saracen,' but in national terms, as 'the Turke'".[28] In fact,

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24   Diane Vincent, "Reading a Christian-Saracen Debate in Fifteenth-Century Middle English Charlemagne Romance: The Case of *Turpines Story,"* in *The Exploitations of Medieval Romance,* ed. Laura Ashe, Ivana Djordjevic, and Judith Weiss (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), 91.

25   Nora classifies *lieux de mémoire* on the basis of their material, functional and symbolic elements ("Between Memory and History," 22–23).

26   Vincent, *Exploitation*, 91.

27   Raluca L. Radulescu, "Genealogy in Insular Romance," in *Broken Lines: Genealogical Literature in Medieval England and France,* ed. Radulescu and E. D. Kennedy (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 12.

28   Suzanne Conklin Akbari, "Erasing the Body: History and Memory in Medieval Siege Poetry," in *Remembering the Crusades: Myth, Image, and Identity,* ed. Nicholas Paul and Suzanne Yeager (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 167.

the enemy is called "Sarasyns" only twice in the text (ll. 140, 158) and is usually designated by the word "Turke(s)." According to Akbari, *Capystranus* "marks an end point in siege poetry in the crusading tradition," so that "collective identity" is formulated "in terms of national identity instead of religious affiliation."[29] Meanwhile, it is noteworthy that the enemy is often described in religious terms, such as "hethen houndes" (l. 46), while the author makes no national distinction between "Crysten men" (l. 76), even between the Eastern and the Western Christians. Indeed, the defenders of Constantinople are called "Our Crysten" on more than one occasion (ll. 122, 134, 147, 156). The union between Eastern and Western Churches, proclaimed in 1439 in the Florence cathedral by Cardinal Giuliano Cesarini and Archbishop Bessarion of Nicaea, met with little enthusiasm in Byzantium, yet it may have been symbolically important for the Western Christendom, including the English audience of *Capystranus*.[30]

As to the relieving army of Belgrade, Capystranus's recruits are "Men of diverse countré" (l. 341). Shepherd comments that "Capistrano's followers consisted mainly of local peasants," but other historical accounts mention the presence of men from across Europe, who could be mercenaries employed by Hunyadi.[31] While, the presence of soldiers from all over Europe during the siege is thus conditioned by the circumstances of mid-fifteenth century warfare, the poet uses their participation for a specific purpose. He evokes the ideal of a united Christendom and highlights Capystranus's charisma as well as the attraction of his banner with the crucifix:[32]

> The Frere with grete devocyon
> Bore the baner of Crystes Passyon
> Amonge the people all
> Dysplayed aborde, grete joye to se,
> Men of diverse countré
> Fast to hym gan fall. (ll. 337–42)

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29   Akbari, "Erasing the Body," 167.

30   On reactions to the Church union, see, for instance, Aziz S. Atiya, *The Crusade in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Methuen, 1938), 268–78.

31   Shepherd, "Capystranus," 402.

32   Images of the cross on military banners were common in the Middle Ages, particularly towards the end of the period; see Contamine, *War,* 298 and Contamine, *Guerre, État et société à la fin du Moyen Âge. Études sur les armées des rois de France (1337–1494)* (Paris: Mouton, 1972), 668–70.

Housley lists among the members of the relieving army of crusaders "Austrians, Germans, Poles, Dalmatians and Bosnians."[33] Meanwhile, modern historians take a bleaker view of Europe's involvement in the battle than does the *Capystranus* author. Thus, Pál Fodor states that "At Nándorfehérvár [Belgrade] in 1456 the only help the country's forces received came from the papal legates and a contingent of about 600 Viennese university students."[34] Indeed, the *Capystranus* author mentions among the first recruits of the "Frere" students from a university called "Gottauntas" (l. 330), apparently situated in Hungary (there was no such university in Hungary, but the author may be referring to Krakow, which Capistrano visited in 1452).[35] Certain contemporary accounts, such as Venetian reports, are skeptical about the quality of Capistrano's recruits, referring to them condescendingly as "brigna."[36]

In the poem, the crusaders' national identity is specified in the case of two knights who join Capystranus's army, "Rycharde Morpath, a knight of Englonde, And Syr Johan Blacke […] That was a Turke before" (ll. 354–56). Shepherd notes that the English knight's identity cannot be verified, adding that "English mercenaries are not known to have participated in the campaign."[37] However, for the English author and his audience the fact that an English knight participated in the famous battle was probably of singular importance. One can imagine the audience rejoicing to hear that

> Morpath and Blacke Johan
> That daye kylled Turkes many one,
> Certayne, withouten lette;
> There was none so good armoure
> That theyr dyntes might endure,
> Helme nor bright basynet. (ll. 405–10)

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33   Housley, *Crusades,* 103.

34   Pál Fodor, "The Ottoman Empire, Byzantium and Western Christianity: The Implications of the Siege of Belgrade, 1456," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae,* 61, no. 1 (2008): 48.

35   See Petrovics and György E. Szőnyi, "*Capystranus:* A Late Medieval English Romance on the 1456 Siege of Belgrade," *New Hungarian Quarterly* 27 (1986): 141–46.

36   Quoted in Alexandru Simon, "Lasting Falls and Wishful Recoveries: Crusading in the Black Sea," *Imago Temporis, Medium Aevum 6* (2012): 303–04.

37   Shepherd, "Capystranus," 401.

At the same time, the readers would sympathize with the plight of the crusaders, who, after a hard and heroic battle, retreat to the city, overcome by the sheer mass of the enemies:

> Morpath and Blacke Johan
> Had woundes many one
> That blody were and wyde;
> To the towne they flede on fote –
> They sawe it was no better bote;
> Theyr stedes were slayne that tyde. (ll. 447–52)

Remarkably, the author evokes the English knight and the convert "Blacke Johan" together, suggesting perhaps that religious affiliation overcomes national distinctions and contrasting appearances. Shepherd suggests that "Blacke Johan" could have been "a native of Walachia," a region to the southeast of Hungary under Turkish rule since 1417. Thus, Johan, though a convert, would not have been of a darker complexion than other Hungarian crusaders, and might well have had some Christian background. The poet, however, found it necessary to stress that, although Johan "was a Turke before" (l. 351), "now he is a curteys knight, […] and a wyght, And stedfast in our lore" (ll. 352–54). Miraculously, religious conversion not only bestows chivalric virtue on the former Turk but also ensures his physical strength. While the *Capystranus* author takes for granted the English Sir Morpath's valour and piety, he makes an effort to introduce the convert knight as a deserving and steadfast companion. Interestingly, although Sir Morpath and "Blacke Johan" form a pair in the poem, the exploits of "the good Erle Obedyanus" (l. 344) are mentioned separately; apparently, Christian faith and the fact of taking the cross can overcome territorial and cultural divides, but not social boundaries.

In a sense, Christians were warriors by definition, but this warfare was spiritual more often than physical. According to Contamine, "Christianity and war, the church and the military, far from being antithetical, on the whole got on well together."[38] Contamine further explains:

If the analogy or comparison between *spiritualia* and *militaria* became habitual, it was not simply because the omnipresence of war in medieval life

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38   Contamine, *War*, 296.

allowed churchmen to be easily understood by their listeners and readers, it was also more profoundly because spiritual life was, for a very long time, compared to a merciless struggle without respite, between the heavenly cohorts and the legions of the devil.[39]

In *Capystranus*, distinctions between spiritual and physical warfare are partially obscured. Capystranus himself is simultaneously a saint and a soldier. The author declares: "I dare say he was Goddes knight; An holy man was he" (ll. 231–32). Likewise, in other contemporary sources, Hunyadi appears as a hero, heir to the legendary Trojans and almost a saint. The *Capystranus* author, however, focuses on the former figure, stressing Hunyadi's obedience (proper to a Christian prince) to the spiritual authority.

Emphasis on Capystranus's figure and the secondary role accorded to Obedyanus may seem surprising, particularly in view of the fact that, as Thomas Crofts and Robert Allen Rouse maintain, the agenda of the sixteenth-century printed romances is "neither national nor religious but *chivalric*."[40] However, I would argue that the chivalric ideal these romances promote is simultaneously determined by Christian morality and transformed by changing military ideologies, ethics and practices. Indeed, contemporary chroniclers praise Hunyadi not only for his military exploits but also for his spiritual and, to an extent, feudal, virtues, including loyalty. Antonio Bonfini, in *Rerum Ungaricarum Decades,* emphasizes that Hunyadi was appointed the captain of Szörényvár (Severin, Romania) and Temesvár (Timişoara, Romania) as a "reward for his loyalty and virtue" and not only for his "heroic deeds."[41]

To capture the spirit of the Siege of Belgrade, the *Capystranus* author draws not only on the conventions of crusading romance, but also on the lived experience of fifteenth-century warfare. The battle scenes would have found particularly strong resonance with the English audience, many of whom would have heard narratives of war told by eyewitnesses or described in romances and chronicles written in the second half of the fifteenth century. As a result, the importance of *Capystranus* as a narrative of war goes beyond establishing the

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39   Ibid., *War*, 297.

40   Crofts and Rouse, "Romance," 88.

41   Antonius de Bonfinis, *Rerum Ungaricarum Decades IV et dimidia*, ed. Josephus Fógel, Béla Iványi, and Ladislaus Juhász (Budapest: Bibliotheca Scriptorium Medii Recentisque Aevorum, 1936–1941). Quoted and translated in Petrovics, "John Hunyadi, Defender of the Southern Borders of the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary," *Banatica (Resita)* 20 (2010): 65.

details of the 1456 Siege of Belgrade. In contrast to previous studies, I stress that the poem is representative of the experience of war in late medieval East Central Europe, where increasing use of new weapons and strategies of warfare led to a shift in attitudes toward warfare and the level of permissible violence. This new experience, and the response it generated, may be at the root of the poem's popularity on English soil.

Fifteenth-Century Military Ideologies: Contemplating a War

Ideologies of warfare change over time and culture; however, analyzing the notion of war in late medieval French and English written sources, Contamine concludes that there is no break between medieval and modern military ideologies.[42] While stressing continuity in the evolution of ideas, institutions, legal frameworks and technologies, Contamine points to certain shifts that took place in people's opinions and practices related to "proper" ways of conducting a war. Contamine singles out three fundamental ideas about war that emerged in the early and high medieval periods and that continued to be popular in military discourses at the end of the Middle Ages and in the early modern period: war as ordeal, the peace and truce of God and the classification of war into the categories of holy, just and unjust.[43]

The notion that war was a form of divine ordeal, *judicium belli*, in which God granted victory to the righteous or simply those who were right in the quarrel, was an attractive idea in medieval chivalric discourse. Meanwhile, the notion of *judicium belli* had many implications and was not universally accepted throughout the later medieval period. Medieval critics of the *judicium belli* ideology noted that, by entering this ordeal, the participants challenged God and that victory could be with the stronger and not with the righteous.[44] Thus, a leader who sought battle with a superior enemy could lose even if the weaker army was fighting for a good cause. In *Capystranus*, the Christians defending Constantinople are overcome even though they are led by a pious commander, the Emperor, while

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42 Contamine, "L'idée de guerre à la fin du Moyen Âge: aspects juridiques et éthiques," *Comptes rendues des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 123 (1979): 70–86.

43 For more information regarding the concepts of holy, just and unjust war in romance, see Helen Cooper's introduction to *Christianity and Romance in Medieval England,* ed. Rosalind Field, Phillipa Hardman, and Michelle Sweeney (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), xvii–xviii.

44 Contamine summarises the Church's objections to using battles as a form of legal judgment: "1) parce que l'on pouvait perdre même en ayant le droit pour soi; 2) parce que le recours à de tels procédés amenait à tenter Dieu; 3) parce que le justice devenait alors inutile" (Contamine, "L'idée," 73).

the Turks are obviously "untrue." In fact, section 2 of the poem,[45] which in 1527 print is preceded by a woodcut, begins with the words: "Mahamyte,[46] that Turke untrue To our Lorde Cryst Jhesu, and to His lawe also" (ll. 58–60).

Moreover, by rashly engaging in battle with a stronger enemy without real necessity, the commander endangered his and his followers' lives. Such rashness could arise from pride and cause divine chastisement. Alternatively, facing a dreaded enemy against all odds could be interpreted as utter reliance on divine mercy: trusting in God, Capystranus is determined to fight an invincible, uncountable Turkish army. Moreover, in some cases, fighting against a superior enemy is unavoidable: at Constantinople and Belgrade, the Christians have no choice other than defending the city or surrendering it to the infidels.

Military defeat of the side which has a "just" cause can be construed as divine punishment for sins, such as *luxuria* and pride. In fact, there is no need for a particular sin to be apparent, as God can inflict suffering in order to lead the faithful to salvation. Contamine notes that the notion of war as ordeal did not disappear entirely from people's consciousness in the late medieval and early modern periods: "Dieu n'entendait pas récompenser les vainqueurs, reconnaître publiquement leur bon droit, mais punir les vaincus pour leurs moeurs, leur conduit, leurs péchés. Ainsi expliquait-on l'échec des croisades."[47] Victory was a sign of divine election, but defeat could also be a form of God's favour, in as much as it brought about moral reform and spiritual conversion. In this respect, *Capystranus* represents an ideal turn of events: the Christians are defeated and martyred at Constantinople, but they emulate Christ, who suffered on the Cross in order to redeem mankind and rose to heaven, as the poet reminds the audience at the beginning of the romance. This purgation is effected by pagans, who appear as idolatrous, savage and almost demonic creatures. In response, Christendom rallies, and God's knight, Johan Capystranus, blessed by the Pope, leads his followers (priests and schoolmasters), Prince Obedyanus, an English knight and a Turkish convert to triumph.

The role of Obedyanus is, as his name indicates, to comply with Capystranus's orders, albeit the author of the poem depicts the prince as an exceptionally brave leader. Indeed, Obedience is one of the virtues required of a soldier for the

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45   The division of the poem in Shepherd's edition follows the indications provided by "woodcuts and/ or large capitals" (Shepherd, "Capystranus," 391).

46   Mehmed II, sultan from 1451 to 1481, commanded the sieges of both Constantinople and Belgrade; he is named only in the part of the poem devoted to the former siege.

47   Contamine, "L'idée," 74.

success of a military campaign. Strictly speaking, Obedyanus is subordinated, not to Capystranus, but to Christ himself, because Capystranus chooses as the commander of his army, his "capytayne" (l. 289), "A baner of Crystes Passyon" (l. 283) together with the papal "bull of leed" (l. 291). Interestingly, writing about an event that took place exactly sixty years before the battle of Belgrade, the Turkish victory at Nicopolis, Philippe de Mézières states that "in all military plans and directions since the beginning of wars in this world, four moral virtues have been necessary […] that is Rule, Knightly Discipline, Obedience and Justice."[48] Thus, Obedyanus incarnates the key soldierly virtues that were important both in the late Middle Ages and early modern period; his mastery of one virtue, obedience, implies the presence of rule, discipline and justice as well.[49] The true hero of the romance, however, is Capystranus, whose achievement is also presented as re-enacting, albeit on a smaller scale, Christ's victory over death. Indeed, the poem includes one episode, discussed further in the essay, where the dead literally rise up in response to Capystranus's audacious prayer.

However, in order to confirm his legitimacy as a crusade preacher, Capystranus needs a papal bull. While crusading was a legitimate form of warfare by definition, the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the early modern period witnessed renewed debate on the distinction between "just" and "unjust" war. It seems that, from the fifteenth century onwards, a "just" war was to be conducted in a "just" fashion, while the "guerre guerroyable" designated merciless, at times unprincipled, warfare. These considerations would have influenced the *Capystranus* author, who stresses the contrast between Christian and Saracen ways of conducting war. Naturally, the description of Turkish atrocities builds on the long-standing tradition of *chanson de geste*. Moreover, Constantinople was actually subjected to severe marauding by the Ottoman army, a fact that must have been known across Europe. Less well known, and certainly less popular among the western Christians, was the fact that Sultan Mehmed was bound by the Islamic

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48 Philippe de Mézières, "Epistre lamentable et consolatoire sur le fait de la desconfiture du noble et vaillant roy de Honguerie par les Turcs devant la ville de Nicopoli en l'Empire de Boulguerie," in *Chroniques de France, d'Angleterre, d'Espaigne, de Bretaigne, de Gascogne, de Flandres et lieux circonvoisins by Jean Froissart, Œuvres,* ed. Joseph M. B. C. Kervyn de Lettenhove, vol. 16 (Brussels: n.p., 1872), 444–523, cited in Contamine, *War,* 156. For a more recent edition, see Philippe de Mézières, *Une epistre lamentable et consolatoire adressée en 1397 à Philippe le Hardi, duc de Bourgogne, sur la défaite de Nicopolis (1396),* ed. Contamine and Jacques Paviot (Paris: n.p., 2008), 53–64.

49 For a discussion of contradictory accounts about the roles of Capistrano, Carvajal and Hunyadi in contemporary historical sources, see Kenneth M. Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant (1204–1571),* vol. 2 (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1978), 179–82.

law to allow his soldiers to do their will and that looting was promptly stopped. The *Capystranus* poet, indeed, leaves the impression that the Turks continued to murder Christians and commit all possible acts of violence long after the defeat. His description has much in common with scenes from European wars as depicted in chronicles, including both the Hundred Years War and the War of Roses, when the armies showed few scruples about burning and despoiling churches, towns and villages.

The Ottoman violence in *Capystranus* serves another important function: it brings to the fore the contrast between Christians and the infidels, rendering the latter almost inhumane and animalistic, if not downright demonic, figures. Indeed, scholars of crusading romances and *chanson de geste* have argued that animal imagery, often associated with violence and predatory behavior, could be viewed as both harmful and beneficial, associated with the devil and God. Thus, the Saracens are clearly devil's servants and subjects, and they go directly to hell, as the *Capystranus* author does not fail to remind the audience. The pagans are akin to dogs, even producing canine noises, such as howling and barking. At the same time, Jacques Voisenet persuasively demonstrates that subjection to animal attacks often appears as corollary to salvation not only in devotional and homiletic literature but also in romances.[50] Indeed, the Christians murdered by the Saracens at Constantinople and Belgrade are destined to heaven: they are participants in "holy" and "just" warfare, who defend their native soil in a legitimate, chivalric and "just" manner, which is a necessary condition of legitimate war in the eyes of late medieval and early modern philosophers.

Changes in ideological attitudes towards war went in hand with the evolution of military technologies and political institutions. Increasing use of gunpowder, professionalization of armies and centralization of the state apparatus contributed to the evolution of ideas about war. As all of the population became, at least theoretically, involved in war, not only through joining the army, but also through contributing to the military effort by paying taxes and supplying provisions, distinctions between combatants and non-combatants began to blur. In *Capystranus,* the participation of priests and schoolmasters in the Siege of Belgrade reflects their active role as "God's knights" as well as the fact that they were no longer immune to military violence. Not only do they celebrate mass, as was customary before battle, but, not content to stay "behind the lines,"

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50   Jacques Voisenet, "Violence des bêtes et violences des hommes," in *La violence dans le monde médiéval* (Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires de Provence, 1994), 561–70. See also Voisenet, *Bestiaire chrétien. L'imagerie animale des auteurs du Haut Moyen Age (Ve-XIe siècle)* (Toulouse: Presses universitaires du Mirail, 1994).

they engage in hand-to-hand fighting. There is a disquieting contrast between the language and ritual of Christian service, including the words and gestures associated with peace (*pax* or the kiss of peace) and the priests' hardy offensive:

> Many a .m. of preestes there was;
> The Turkes herde never suche a masse
> As they harde that daye!
> Our preestes *Te Deum* songe;
> The hethen fast downe they donge –
> Then *pax* was put awaye! (ll. 417–22)

Again, the image of fighting priests may relate the audience back to certain *chansons de geste* in the Charlemagne tradition, but it also brings to mind actual situations in which clerics had to resist the attacks of marauders or, increasingly, of the Church reformers.

Thus, while retaining notions about war that originated in the Early and High Middle Ages (including war as ordeal, peace and truce of God, holy, just and unjust war), late medieval people reinterpreted war in relation to the new political, economic and social realities. Not all of these changes are equally applicable to the Siege of Belgrade in 1456 and the narrative of this event in *Capystranus,* yet it is worthwhile to bear them in mind while analyzing the Siege of Belgrade as remembered and imagined in *Capystranus*.

Experiencing a Siege

Douglas Gray, in considering the *Morte Darthur*, which was written some years after the fall of Constantinople and the Siege of Belgrade, comments on the growing importance of siege warfare in the late Middle Ages.[51] Likewise, Contamine indicates that, while "siege mentality" was characteristic of the entire medieval military culture, the introduction of artillery at the beginning of the fifteenth century marks a turning point in both the technology of war and contemporary mentalities.[52] Changes in siege warfare at the end of the Middle Ages found reflection in both chivalric romances and in military treatises.[53] Thus, authors

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51   Douglas Gray, "Fayttes of Armes and of Chyvalrye," *Selim* 7 (2000): 6–7.

52   Contamine, *War,* 200.

53   Malory's description of Mordred besieging Guinevere in the Tower of London is indebted to Malory's own experience of sieges: P. J. C. Field notes that the "fictional siege of the Tower in the *Morte d'Arthur*

of the latter treatises often copied and even modernised the texts of classical authors, such as Vegetius, in the sections that deal with sieges. The advice of classical authors, in fact, was already dated in this period, when the spread of firearms in besieging fortified towns and castles led to the development of new types of fortification and the introduction of firearms as part of the regular town defense accoutrements. In both Constantinople and Belgrade, the Ottomans deployed considerable gunpowder resources, but the defenders, too, had some firearms, which in the case of Constantinople proved highly inadequate.

A number of historians, both medieval and modern, attribute the fall of Constantinople to the superiority of the Ottoman artillery. On the basis of the "western and the Turkish sources," Halil İnalcik concludes that "the eventual success of the Ottomans came chiefly as the result of two events: the breaching of the walls by the Ottoman artillery bombardment, and the disputes which arose between the Byzantines and the Latins defending the city."[54] Summarising the outcome of the siege, the *Capystranus* author observes: "Thus is Constantyne the noble cyté wonne, Beten donne with many a gonne, And Crysten people slayne" (ll. 207–10). Unsurprisingly, *Capystranus* is silent on the supposed discord of the Christian defenders, who seem to present unified resistance to the enemy. In fact, the author begins the account of the siege when the Turks are already inside the city, avoiding the delicate issues of crusader identity and co-operation before and during the siege. As the Turks enter the city, allegedly taking no prisoners, desecrating churches, slaying women, children and priests at mass, the Christians, seeing nothing but death before them, fight heroically:

> The Crysten saw that they sholde dye,
> And on theyr maystres layde hande quycly
> And faught a wele good spede:
> Every prysoner then on lyve
> Kylled of the Turkes foure or five;
> To helle theyr soules yede.
> Or our prysoners after were take;
> Many a Turke they made blake. (ll. 108–15)

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contains what seems to be a reminiscence of the real siege in his substitution of guns for the older siege-artillery of his sources." *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), 142.

54   Halil Inalcik, "The Ottoman Turks and the Crusades, 1451—1522," in *A History of the Crusades,* vol. 6, ed. Harry W. Hazard and Norman P. Zacour (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 314. See also J. R. Melville, *The Siege of Constantinople by the Turks: Seven Contemporary Accounts* (Amsterdam: n.p., 1977).

This description is followed by a series of three episodes, where "Macamyte" cries to his "god" ("Mahounde"), to rally his wavering ranks. The Christians combat the Turks valiantly, even killing five thousand Turks at a time (l. 126) and subsequently felling eighty thousand enemies (l. 141). However, the defenders are too few, the Turks are continuously entering the city and the Christians are eventually defeated.

The above brief summary of the siege reveals that, although the description of the fall of Constantinople in *Capystranus* draws on the existing literary tradition, recycling common tropes of crusading romances and *chanson de geste*, it is neither entirely fantastic nor deprived of literary force. The series of battles in which the Christians kill an increasing number of the Turks and are finally overridden and dispersed describe, with certain realism, skirmishes that would have taken place on the streets. According to Inalcik, "The Ottoman army entered the city through a large breach made by bombardment in the wall. Emperor Constantine was killed in hand-to-hand combat."[55] Battles within the city walls, with the Christians crying to God and the Ottomans to the prophet render the atmosphere of the event in a way that would have been easily grasped by the fifteenth-century audience.

At the same time, the episodes in which the Turkish leader appeals to Mahomet and meets Christian response are symbolic. There are three such episodes, and after the last in the series the Christians are physically overcome, but seem to score a spiritual victory:

> He [Macamyte] cryed on Mahounde as he wolde braste,
> Our Crysten on Jhesu cryed faste,
> That all the worlde wrought. (ll.146–48)

Although the Christians subsequently flee and most of them are killed, it happens because of God's will and not through the supposed superiority of the Turks. Indeed, the Christians' invocation of Christ, the creator of the world, is steadfast and almost serene, in contrast to the Turkish wild cry to their false "god." The author speaks of the Turkish victory with resignation, apparently humbling himself before divine will:

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55   İnalcik, "Ottoman Turks," 314.

Alas, saufe Crysten wyll of heven,
Our Crysten were made uneven
With a false company –
For of the Turkes and Sarasyns kene,
An .c. were, withouten wene,
Agaynst one of our meny! (ll. 155–60)

There is certainly no shame in losing a battle if the Turks number a thousand to one Christian. Indeed, the defenders of Constantinople were heavily outnumbered (though not so fantastically) and exhausted by the siege. The Christians lose their earthly holy city, yet they gain the heavenly Jerusalem. However, the *Capystranus* author appears to imply that, had it been God's will, the Christians would have won even against great odds, preparing the audience for the miraculous delivery of Belgrade.

The description of the Siege of Belgrade, given in sections IV and V (ll. 360–579) of the poem as it survives, is far more detailed than that of Constantinople. There are structural and narrative similarities as well as differences in the description of the sieges. First, while the Siege of Constantinople begins *in medias res*, following a prologue that evokes Christ's sacrifice and Charlemagne's exploits, most of sections III and IV describe the Christian preparations for the crusade. The author may have relied on the audience having at least some notion of the events that led to the siege of Constantinople, in much the same way as he expected them to be familiar with Charlemagne's "crusades." It is possible that the English audience knew less about the Siege of Belgrade, and the romance's author certainly wanted to highlight the role of his hero, Capystranus, in securing the Pope's blessing for the holy war and assembling an army. In fact, Shepherd notes that Capystranus's negotiations with the Pope are conflated with the dealings of Cardinal Juan Carvajal, who resided in Buda in 1455 and was delegated by Pope Calixtus III to prepare a crusade in Hungary, Poland and Germany. The historical St. John of Capistrano preached a holy war in Hungary under Carvajal's supervision.[56]

However, Carvajal is not mentioned in the poem. Indeed, the Pope's words "Thou prechest Goddes words wyde In the countree, on every syde, In many a

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56   Shepherd, "Capystranus," 398. The latest study of the saint in English is by Stanko Andrić, *The Miracles of St. John Capistran* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2000). In this book, Andrić analyses the accounts of the miracles performed by the saints. See also Iulian Mihai Damian, *Ioan de Capestrano şi Cruciada Târzie* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Academia Română, 2011).

diverse lande" (ll. 268–70) are equally applicable to Capistrano, whose efforts at preaching a crusade were not limited to Hungary, but extended across Europe. According to certain sources, Capistrano managed to rally 60,000 crusaders, though Shepherd explains that "many fewer probably showed up than had agreed to."[57] The poem's author gives a more modest figure: at the beginning of the crusade, Capystranus recruits "Syxe and twenty .m." [26,000] (l. 332) from the mysterious university of "Gottauntas" (l. 329). All recruits are clerics, and most of them are ordained priests. Later, Capystranus and Obedyanus arrive at Belgrade with ".xx. thousande" (l. 360): apparently, 6,000 of crusaders never made it to the city. Meanwhile, the remaining 20,000 have evolved from a motley crowd of students and priests Capystranus must have picked at the university into a splendid army, "In helme and hauberc bryght" (l. 363).

The number 20,000 in relation to the Christian army is cited four times in the poem. At the height of battle, the Turks kill as many at the bridge that leads to the citadel, naturally an important target for both attackers and defenders: "Twenty thousande of our men Were borne downe at the brydge ende, The Turkes were so thro" (ll. 438–40). The author's emotional involvement is evident: the defenders are not only "our Crysten," as they are in the description of the Constantinople siege, they are "our men." The Turks are finally recognized as deserving adversaries, who win not only because there are more of them but also because they are "so thro." A narrow bridge is just the place where numerical superiority of the attackers can be offset by the defenders' courage and professionalism, so the *Capystranus* author explains the Christian losses and withdrawal as a result of the Turks' ferocity and their exotic appearance. Fresh reinforcements riding on camels overrun both horses and riders: "Dromydaryes over them ranne And kylled downe bothe horse and man" (ll. 441–42). Finally, following Capystranus's prayer, "Twenty .m." (ll. 516 and 528) arise from the dead and attack the Turks, driving them out of the city.

The army led by Obedyanus and Capystranus would have been reinforced by the city garrison, but the 20,000 repeatedly given by the *Capystranus* author provides the poem with narrative unity and makes the details unusually specific for a genre that is notoriously hostile to "realism."[58] While the number

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57   Shepherd, "Capystranus," 398.

58   On the absence of "realism" in medieval romance, see Douglas Gray. Discussing the portrayal of the Ottoman Turks in early modern English literature, Anders Ingram dismisses *Capystranus* as a valuable source for the study of Christian involvement with Ottoman culture, commenting that "The details and language of the description of the fall of Constantinople [in *Capystranus*] could just as easily describe the

of Christians is settled and finite, the Turks attacking Belgrade present an amorphous, shapeless mass, with reinforcement continuously flowing in. Thus, Capystranus announces to the Pope the news that the "Turke," whose aim is to conquer Hungary, departed for Belgrade "With two hundred .m. [200,000] this same day" (l. 253).[59] The Christians are thus outnumbered 1:10, which is an entirely manageable ratio within the universe of chivalric romance. Accordingly, during the Siege of Constantinople, the Christians slay five thousand infidels in no time, albeit the Christian losses are not mentioned: "Anone, within a lytell throwe, Five .m. Turkes on a rowe In the stretes lay slayne" (ll. 125–27). Using much the same words, the poet tells how, at Belgrade, the first encounter between the armies resulted in five thousand dead, presumably Turkish: "Anone they togyder mette: Five .m. deed withouten lette, In helme and hauberk bryght" (ll. 390–93). Moreover, Obedyanus kills every enemy he meets, while Morpath and Blacke Johan likewise "kylled Turkes many one" (l. 406). Had it not been for the new division, counting "A .c. thousande and mo" (l. 431), in bright new armor and mounted on fearful dromedaries, one has the feeling the poem would have been much shorter and devoid of its high point, Capystranus's prayer and the subsequent miracle.

In fact, the impression of historiographical precision and veracity in referring to numbers of the armies, artillery pieces, kinds of armor worn by the fighters and the animals they ride results in offsetting the disconcerting miracle resulting from Capystranus's prayer. On the other hand, accounts of miracles worked by saints filed for the purposes of canonization had to be very detailed and verifiable. Although St. John of Capistrano was officially canonized only in 1727, he was regarded as a saint by his contemporaries.[60] Thus, the poem's author may be drawing on the formal requirements for miracle and hagiographic narratives in providing the level of detail for the romance.

As I have mentioned before, the structures of the two siege narratives in *Capystranus* display both similarities and differences. Both siege accounts are structured as series of battles, either within or outside the city walls. In both

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fall of Acre in 1291." Anders Ingram, (2009) "*English Literature on the Ottoman Turks in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries*" (Unpublished PhD thesis presented at Durham University, 2009), accessed January 26, 2015, http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/1974/, 51.

59   The estimates of modern historians regarding the size of the Turkish army differ. Interestingly, Carvajal wrote to Francesco Sforza of 200,000 Turks advancing on land in addition to those carried on two hundred large galleys and smaller boats (quoted in Setton, *Papacy,* 175).

60   See Andrić, *The Miracles,* 155–56. Damian contends that Capistrano provides "a new model of Franciscan sanctity" (*Ioan de Capestrano,* 289–300).

cases, the Christians kill many enemies, but must finally withdraw before a larger and fresher army. The battle episodes in the Constantinople siege are punctuated by the Sultan's outcries to his "god," the last of which is apparently answered. The Christians flee, though the audience would know that the Christians are defeated through God's will and enjoy the better part of becoming martyrs, their souls going straight to heaven, while the Turks are hell-bound. No individual Christians are mentioned in the first account, and the Emperor's name appears only in the narrative of his martyrdom. Clearly, there were no charismatic or at least able leaders at Constantinople, and here the *Capystranus* author and modern historians are of one mind.

By contrast, "Macamyte" does not appear at any point after the siege of Constantinople. The enemy is referred to collectively, "the Turke," while the Christian army includes several prominent individuals (Capystranus, Obedyanus, Morpath and Blacke Johan) as well as being socially stratified: there are knights, clerics, further divided into priests and schoolmasters, and, apparently, regular soldiers. The author even distinguishes between the ways in which priests and schoolmasters fight: the former enter the battle singing *Te Deum*, and the latter deal severe punishment to those who "wolde not lere theyr laye" (l. 425). At the end, Capystranus proves himself a true "God's knight" and a good leader of his men.

Like Macamyte during the Siege of Constantinople, Capystranus turns to God at the critical moment. In contrast to the Turk's animalistic, savage yells to his "god," the saint's prayers are long and elaborate, addressing his spiritual "overlord" in feudal terms. Interestingly, Capystranus's prayer offers parallels not only to Macamyte's yells but also to Emperor's words in response to the Turks' requirements of abandoning God. The Emperor answers with a praise to God, urging the Turks themselves to convert; he prefers to be tortured and put to death rather than commit apostasy.[61] Surprisingly, Capystranus actually threatens Christ and Mary that he will abandon them unless the Christians are granted victory. In historical accounts of the siege, Capistrano's prayer is mentioned, but then he beseeches God's mercy rather than demands a miracle. Philippa Hardman notes the parallel between this episode and Turpin's outburst in the *Sege of Melayne*, stating that both can be related to the "popular story cycles of the 'miracles of the Virgin,'" "where a devotee of the Virgin rebukes her for

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61 The *Capystranus* author gives an imaginative account of the Emperor's martyrdom, in which the Emperor wins a spiritual battle over his enemies, refusing to forsake Christ and the Virgin Mary. The Emperor is tortured and executed with cruelty, sawn to death with a wooden saw, ll. 181–95.

failing to prevent some catastrophe, after which Mary miraculously reverses the disaster"[62] Unlike Turpin, however, Capystranus addresses both God and the Virgin. His prayer also parallels and contrasts with the response of the Emperor of Constantinople to the Turks earlier in the poem, when the Emperor celebrates the power of Christ and Mary.

At the same time, Capystranus's prayer is far from incongruous within a chivalric romance. The author prepares the audience for the prayer already from the beginning, when he calls Capystranus "Goddes knyght" (l. 230). A knight has to obey his lord, but can demand, in return, the lord's protection. In feudal terms, a knight has obligations to those under his charge as well, and, being ultimately answerable to the overlord for his subjects' well-being, a knight can in turn require the lord's provisions and defense for the knight's retinue. Feudal obligations are mutual, not unilateral. Although by the end of the Middle Ages feudal obligations as constructed in chivalric romance were already obliterated, if ever they existed in practice in exactly this way, the ideology of chivalry persisted well into the sixteenth century. In full knowledge that he has performed his obligations well, that he fights for a just cause, as proved by the papal bull, and that he follows the only true commander, Christ, who is depicted on the banner, Capystranus utters what may seem to a modern reader a surprising, if not downright blasphemous, prayer.

The miracle is granted: as far as Capystranus's voice is heard, the dead rise up. Shepherd comments that Capystranus's reputation as healer and his enthusiastic encouragement of the troops throughout the battle would have contributed to the account. As twenty-first century readers, we need rationalizations to make sense of a miracle in a "realistic" poem, complete with numbers, descriptions of artillery pieces and arms and names of participants, many of them identifiable historical figures. However, medieval and early modern audiences lived in a culture where miracles were "commonplace," not only as part of romances and saints' lives, but also in everyday life and, particularly, in accounts of crusades.[63]

Is the story of the miracle wrought by Capystranus an instance of memory, transferred through oral accounts, or imagination? If it is the latter, then whose imagination – the *Capystranus* author's, his eyewitnesses' or even the collective imagination of the battle participants? In late-fifteenth-century and early

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62   Philippa Hardman, "The *Sege of Melayne:* a Fifteenth-Century Reading," in *Tradition and Transformation in Medieval Romance,* ed. Rosalind Field (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999), 81.

63   *The Siege of Rhodes*, also printed by de Worde, provides an account of another miracle: Christ and the Virgin appear on the city walls, and the Turks immediately flee. Some Turks even convert to Christianity.

sixteenth-century culture, where religion and war were closely intertwined, the account of a miracle becomes part of collective memory. This collective memory persists into modern culture: the bells ringing on the day of St. John of Capistrano to commemorate a *victoria mirabilis* is an example of a *lieu de mémoire*, to which the Middle English poem *Capystranus* is an early witness.

Conclusion

Nora writes that "memory has never known more than two forms of legitimacy: historical and literary."[64] In the case of memory realms, historical and literary linearities converge, and, like certain other medieval texts, *Capystranus* marks a point of their convergence. I believe that the poem was popular in the sixteenth century, occasioning de Worde's three printings, because it combined memory and imagination in the account of a recent landmark in crusading warfare. It would be reductive to read the poem only as an example of political propaganda, because memory realms emerge only when there is "a will to remember."[65] The *Capystranus* author draws skillfully on contemporary anxieties about the advance of the representatives of hostile culture and faith into Europe, a theme topical even in modern popular culture. He also uses familiar tropes and stereotypes from crusading romance—the Saracens' cruelty and animalism, the Christians' unity and steadfastness—though he presents these so as to evoke familiar experiences of war. In this essay, I have shown how the commonplaces of crusading romance were not only relevant in the context of fifteenth-century crusading warfare, but also in the context of "domestic" European warfare. New ideologies and technologies of war are related to the old ones in *Capystranus*: reading a poem, the audience would have the impression of a double *déjà vu*—that of reading old romances and that of remembering recent wars, in England and elsewhere in Europe.

Scholars of medieval and early modern English literature tend to consider *Capystranus* as a "siege poem" or alongside other crusading romances focusing on a siege (Shepherd, Hebron, Hardman and others). Such an approach is fruitful, yet it underestimates the poem's involvement with two recent historical events, the sieges of Constantinople and Belgrade. Complementing the former approach, another critical tendency is to view the poem functioning as political

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64   Nora, "Between Memory and History," 24.

65   Ibid., 19.

propaganda, highlighting contemporary threats in the Mediterranean and East Central Europe and consequently shifting the audience's attention from domestic tensions to international affairs. Elements of crusading romance, chronicle and political propaganda in the poem can be best understood if the poem is discussed within the framework of *lieux de mémoire*, commemorating miraculous delivery of Belgrade through the offices of Johan Capystranus.

Material, functional and symbolic elements of a memory site are all reflected in the poem. The material element is brought to the fore through references to a concrete place, up-to-date military technology (guns and mortars), ideologies and practices (war as ordeal of purgation, involvement of non-combatants and emphasis on the "right," Christian way of warfare). Functionally, the poem is designed to promote more active involvement in wars against the Turks in East Central Europe and boost Christian morals. Symbolically, the poem's author relates the Siege of Belgrade to events of Biblical and mythical history (the exodus, crucifixion, Charlemagne's wars). Memory and imagination are intertwined in the poem: based on chronicles, oral narratives and eyewitness accounts, the poem is shaped by earlier narratives about similar events, influencing, in turn, future memories.

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