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“TO MY GRACIOUS AND HONOURABLE LORD, YOUR EXCELLENCY”
AN ITALIAN ACCOUNT OF THE 1543 TURKISH CAMPAIGN
IN HUNGARY

In the State Archives of Modena, in the fonds containing the Hungarian embassies, we find a letter by a certain Giovan Anselmo Bonini, written in Komárom (Camarum, Komorn) on 12 September 1543, which reports on the military activities of the Ottoman Empire in that year, conducted within a kingdom that was already under the absolute control of King Ferdinand I Habsburg¹ after the death of John I Szapolyai,² rival co-holder of the title “King of Hungary”. The aim of the campaign, following the capture of the castle of Buda in 1541, was primarily to expand the border zone around the castle (and at the same time to occupy the medieval *medium regni*), together with further expansion along the river Drava.³

In his formal introduction the letter’s author refers to the fact that the unidentified addressee – clearly someone of superior rank – must already have heard of the events in question, and he apologises in advance for the potential inaccuracies in his records of these. Then he begins his description of the events with the capture of Soklós⁴ and “the castle of Valpó over the Drava”⁵ by the Turks, then records that the Ottoman forces approached Esztergom (Strigonium, Gran) via Buda and began to surround the fortress.⁶ According to his description, the archiepiscopal seat had to withstand three sieges within eighteen days – after this, a sixty-year-old Neapolitan defender, referred only

¹ Ferdinand I Habsburg (1503–1564), Archduke of Austria (1521–1564), King of Hungary and Bohemia (1526–1564), Holy Roman Emperor (1558–1564).

² John/János I. Szapolyai (1480/1487–1540), King of Hungary (1526–1540).

³ ASMo ASE C. Est. Amb. Ungh. b. 4 /34, ff.1r–3r.

⁴ The castle, which was both in the period discussed, and is also today part of county Baranya – nowadays named Siklós –, was captured around 23 June 1543 by the Ottoman forces. See: Szántó, *Küzdelem a török terjeszkedés ellen Magyarországon*, 20–22.

⁵ The siege of Valpó (today Valpovo, Croatia), part of county Baranya in the first half of the 16th century was by all accounts conducted in two parts: the Christian defenders of the castle were able to repel the first attack on 24 May 1543, but they proved to be powerless against the main army led by Sultan Suleiman I (1520–1566) in the period between 23 June and 7 July. See: *Török történetírók*, II, 296–297. (Sinan Çavuş).

⁶ The sultan could march into the centre of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary between 17 and 25 June 1543, and the Ottomans could begin the siege of Esztergom after this date. See: József Bánlaky: “A magyar nemzet hadtörténelme.” <https://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0013/978.html>. Last accessed 30 March 2023.

to as a “craftsman,”⁷ left the castle and showed the Turks the weakest parts of the fortress, pointing out where they should position their artillery. As a result of this betrayal, the besieged were forced to surrender on 8 August 1543; moreover, in contrast to the preliminary agreement – as noted by Bonini – after the capture of the castle, the Ottomans interpreted free withdrawal only in regard to the soldiers’ person, but not to their goods. As a result, those who left Esztergom were divested even of their clothes. What is more, by taking all children, regardless of their gender, into captivity, even the *devshirme*⁸ was collected. According to the account, the casualties of the Turks were approximately five thousand men (among whom three hundred were killed in the castle), while the Christians had one hundred and fifty casualties during the siege, and two hundred defected to the Turks. Those leaving the castle were led by the Spanish captain Lascano⁹ and his second-in-command, Salamanca,¹⁰ who were, Bonini falsely claims, stopped in Pressburg (Posonium, Pozsony, today Bratislava, Slovakia), on their way to Vienna, and beheaded, together with their companions. As a consequence of the betrayal and the cowardice the Germans developed a particularly negative view of Italians – regardless of the Spanish origin of their captain –, whom they referred to, even in the mildest case, as traitors. Afterwards the Turks set off in the direction of Székesfehérvár (Alba Regia, Stuhlweißenburg), via a certain settlement called “Tatt”, which they captured without a single gunshot, even though the castle was full of defenders.¹¹ Here, however, according to Bonini, the treason did not remain unpunished: the colonel, Count “Philip the Black”, condemned the guilty to beheading.¹² After he

⁷ Giovanni Massa, the Italian standard-bearer of the castle. For his betrayal on 8 August 1543 his superiors first threatened him with beheading, but eventually they also cooperated with the Ottoman forces during the surrender of the castle. See: Bagi, “Esztergom 1543. évi ostroma,” 18–21.

⁸ Violent collection of Christian children to assure the resupply in the Ottoman–Turkish army; the so-called “child tax” or “blood tax” in Europe.

⁹ “Lascano” – originally called Martín Musica – was the leader of the Spanish mercenaries in Esztergom, and also the captain of the castle. After the surrender of the castle, he was allowed free retreat from the Ottomans in the direction of Komárom. In spite of what the text implies (although he was indeed summoned before a court-martial), he was later acquitted of the charge of treason. See: journal “Esztergom és Vidéke,” 24 February 1994, 8/5.

¹⁰ Francisco de Salamanca, vice-captain of Esztergom replaced the captain when Lascano was injured. After the surrender of the castle, he was also brought to Komárom by the Turks, and from there he went on to Vienna. The court-martial led by Nicholas, Count of Salm (?–1550, imperial captain) charged him also with treason, and he was released after one year of imprisonment, in 1544. See Laczlavik, “Egy politikus főpap a 16. század első felében: Várday Pál esztergomi érsek, királyi helytartó pályafutása,” 73.

¹¹ In all likelihood, the author misspelt the name of Tata, which was also conquered by the Ottomans in the summer of 1543.

¹² “Philip the Black” – originally Filippo Tornelli – was the captain of the Italian mercenaries of Ferdinand I. Between May and June 1543 he spent two months under Vienna with his sol-

arrived in the vicinity of Székesfehérvár with his troops, together with a “tall knight,” he strengthened the area of the moat with piles of wood, and the artillery faced the expected storm of arrows from the janissaries, which duly arrived on 28 August 1543, a Tuesday. The morning attack was followed by another one the day after; on Sunday 2 September however – when the defenders could reinforce the damaged battlements – such a thick mist descended on Székesfehérvár that the defenders of the city could not even see each other, therefore they were forced to withdraw, at this time confined to the defence of the town’s gate against the renewed Ottoman attack, with the help of the citizens. The defence, however, was unsuccessful: the majority of Hungarian, German and Italian soldiers were killed, and among the latter, Bonini – with reference to Tornelli – mentions only 250 survivors out of 1100. Among the victims we can find Giovanni Domenico Tornelli, the cousin of Filippo; a certain “Carlo Secco Bressano”¹³ and an Ottoman captain – interestingly, as the author also emphasizes his controversial information, all of them were from Milan... Apart from the death of other, unnamed but high-ranking military leaders, Bonini writes about one hundred and fifty more casualties, and says that the few survivors were forced to spend the night in the moat, in some cases hiding among piles of corpses. The Italian captain who managed to escape did likewise, and subsequently tried to make the town’s citizenry understand that his orders were to defend Székesfehérvár to the last – they, however, chose surrender, in the absence of munitions. On the following day, Monday, they sent three men from among themselves to negotiate with the Turks on the conditions of surrender, and since by this time the surviving soldiers defending the town were already in a minority against the citizens, they could no longer protest against the decision. The Ottomans promised free retreat both to the citizens and the soldiers, and the opportunity to take their movables with them. In the execution of the withdrawal, which was carried out in a manner so honourable that Bonini considers it unparalleled, a central role was played by a Turkish captain whom his people subsequently condemned to death by beheading, while according to the accounts, two of his companions were preparing to return from Székesfehérvár to Constantinople at the end of 1543. The recently captured fortifications were,

diers, waiting for the provisions that would have provided their sustenance during the sieges. He did not accept the commission as the captain of Székesfehérvár (as opposed to György Varkocs), and remained the leader of the Italian mercenaries. On 27 July 1543 we find him under Esztergom with his troops, but in the end, they did not take part in the fighting. He could, however, extend the resistance of Székesfehérvár until 5 September 1543, when the approximately 500 soldiers (300 Italian and 200 German) participating in the defence were forced to surrender their arms and leave under Turkish escort. See: József Bánlaky: “A magyar nemzet hadtörténelme.”

¹³ The death of Carlo Sicca and other Italian soldiers on 21 August 1543 is recorded in the Hungarian sources as well. See: Istvánffy, *A magyarok történetéből*, 155–166.

however, so strongly reinforced that the author considered their recapture most difficult. Bonini also expressed his worries that unless the emperor sent a relief army, the following fortification to be under siege would be Komárom, at a distance of thirty miles from Esztergom and forty to fifty miles from Székesfehérvár, and where only one German and one Italian unit were garrisoned. From among these – approximately ten thousand cavalry – one or two thousands were sent across the Danube every day, even during the siege of Esztergom, and – though they were few in number – the Turks could not force them to retreat. These units were thus successful in disrupting Turkish military activities, and stalled the Ottoman advance.

Giovanni Anselmo Bonini – before offering himself and his addressee to the mercy of God – concludes his text with the hopeful thought that after the dissolution of the armies, the emperor might attempt to recapture the lost territories in a battle with his sixty thousand soldiers, since an army of such size would certainly terrify the Turks who remained in Hungary in much smaller numbers.

(Translated by Kinga Földvály)