

Research Article

John Hunyadi (ca. 1395-1456).

An Outline of His Political and Military Career According to the Latest Research

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Abstract:

The lack of modern scientific work on John Hunyadi led us, six years ago, to initiate research for a monograph dedicated to his life and times. This work is based on a critical re-evaluation of the sources, as well as both older and newer literature on the topic. In the following pages, we present a synthesis of our research to the international academic community, focusing not only on John Hunyadi's anti-Ottoman campaigns, as most historians have done before us, but also on his involvement in the complex politics of Central Europe in the mid-15th century.

Key Words: John Hunyadi, The Kingdom of Hungary, Later Crusades, military history, Central Europe, Ottoman Empire.

Introduction

The "latest" Romanian monograph on the life, career, and times of John Hunyadi was published by Professor Camil Mureșan from the

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University of Cluj in 1968.¹ It was only in the last three decades, that the medievalists Adrian Andrei Rusu, Ioan Drăgan, and Ioan-Aurel Pop published a series of studies related to the ethnicity, confession, and social background of John Hunyadi and his family.² One might think that Hungarian historiography abounds in specialized works on this particular historical topic, but the latest scientific monograph dedicated to Hunyadi belongs to the medievalist Elekes Lajos and was published in 1952.³ This well-documented work, but biased by the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the time, was the basis of all subsequent popularization works, signed by Zsuzsa Teke (1980), Dezső Dümmerth (1985) and Pál Földi (2004).⁴ A simple parallel reading reveals that even the work of Camil Mureșanu is largely tributary to the monograph signed by Elekes Lajos.

Recent studies by medievalists Pál Engel and Tamás Pálosfalvi should also be mentioned. These works clarify essential aspects of John Hunyadi's history, emphasizing his early career and his first battles with the Ottomans, as well as his itineraries as Lord Governor of Hungary (1446-1453).⁵ Even in Western historiography, there are only three monographs on John Hunyadi, written by Charles-Louis Chassin (1856), Vilmós von Zsonlay (1967), and Joseph Held (1985).⁶

Because of the great significance of historical sources on John Hunyadi, some recently published and others still unpublished but accessible online (especially in the database: hungaricana.hu), the historiographical works mentioned above are outdated. Thus, it is necessary to bring the topic "up to date." We propose a critical re-

¹ Camil Mureșanu, *Iancu de Hunedoara* (București, 1968) (2nd edition).

² Adrian Andrei Rusu, *Ioan de Hunedoara și românii din vremea sa* (Cluj-Napoca, 1999); Ioan Drăgan, *Nobilimea românească din Transilvania între anii 1440-1514* (București, 2000); Ioan-Aurel Pop, *Hunedoreștii. O familie europeană* (Cluj-Napoca, 2020).

³ Elekes Lajos, *Hunyadi* (Budapesta, 1952).

⁴ Teke Zsuzsa, *Hunyadi János és kora* (Budapesta, 1980); Dümmerth Dezső, *A két Hunyadi* (Budapesta, 1985); Földi Pál, *Hunyadi János a hadvezér* (Budapesta, 2004).

⁵ Pál Engel, "Hunyadi János itineráriuma," *Századok*, 118, 5 (1984), 974-997; Pál Engel, "János Hunyadi: The Decisive Years of His Career, 1440-1444", János M. Bak, Béla K. Kiraly (eds.), *From Hunyadi to Rákóczi. War and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Hungary* (New York, 1986), 103-123; Pál Engel, "János Hunyadi and the 'of Szeged' (1444)," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, XLVII, 3 (1994), 241-257; Pál Engel, "Hunyadi pályakezdése", Marius Diaconescu (ed.) *Nobilimea românească din Transilvania/Az erdélyi román nemesség* (Satu Mare, 1997), 91-109; Tamás Pálosfalvi, „Az 1442. márciusi törökhadjárat. Adalékok Hunyadi János első törökellenes harcainhoz,” *Történelmi Szemle*, XLIII, 1-2 (2001): 43-54.

⁶ Charles-Louis Chassin, *La Hongrie. Son génie et sa mission. Étude historique suivie de Jean de Hunyadi. Récit du XV^e siècle* (Paris, 1856); Vilmos von Zsolnay, *Vereinigungsversuche Südosteuropas im XV. Jahrhundert - Johann von Hunyadi* (Frankfurt-Koblenz, 1967); Joseph Held, *Hunyadi: legend and reality* (Boulder, New York, 1985).

evaluation of all traceable sources and historiography to prepare a scientific monograph on the military career of John Hunyadi, which we plan to complete next year. Until then, we present the latest results of our research on the life, career, and times of John Hunyadi to the international academic community.

The Hunyadis

From the Romanticism of the 19th century, through the National Socialism of the first half of the 20th century, and up to certain extremist currents of our times, nationalist historiographies have sought (and found) the most original arguments to claim John Hunyadi for their nations. He has been depicted as Romanian, Hungarian, Szekler, Serbian, and more recently, Cuman. Of course, this kind of debate no longer deserves a place in the dialogue between scholars, which should be based exclusively on sources. However, it is addressed in a work of historiography, such as the one published by the medievalist Radu Lupescu from Cluj, which examines historical writings about John Hunyadi in the 19th and 20th centuries.⁷ For our approach, three essential documents from 1435 and 1439 attest to "John called the Wallachian, son of the late Voicu of Hunedoara."⁸ Thus, it is clear that at the Court of Buda and among the nobility of the Kingdom of Hungary, the Hunyadis were perceived as Romanians. In the Middle Ages, ethnicity was secondary; the Hungarian nobility included Croats, Slovenes, Serbs, Romanians, Poles, Czechs, Germans, and Italians. The only two conditions to be part of the Hungarian nobility were belonging to the Catholic faith and holding an estate in the kingdom, either granted or confirmed by the monarch.⁹ As we shall soon see, the Hunyadis fulfilled both.

Another issue related to the rise of the Hunyadis is their geographical origin. Inspired by Professor Ștefan Pascu, academics from Cluj have insisted over the past half-century on the Transylvanian origin of the Hunyadis, considering them local Wallachian noblemen from the District of Hațeg in Hunedoara County. This theory is based on the late writings of Humanist and Enlightenment scholars from the 16th and 18th

⁷ Radu Lupescu, "Istoriografia română și maghiară referitoare la Ioan de Hunedoara (I-II)," in *Studii și Materiale de Istorie Medie*, XXVI, 2008, 139-162; *ibid.* XXVII, 2009, 311-332. For the alleged Cuman origin of the Hunyadis, see László Rásonyi, "The Old-Hungarian Name *Vajk*. A Note on the Origin of the Hunyadi Family," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungariae*, XXXVI, 1-3 (1982), 419-429.

⁸ Pop, *Hunedoreștii*, 83-92.

⁹ Ioan-Aurel Pop, „*Din mâinile valahilor schismatici...*”. *România și puterea în Regatul Ungariei medievale (secolele XIII-XIV)* (Cluj-Napoca, 2017) (2nd edition), 445-464.

centuries, who, recording rumors or mere suppositions, stated that John Hunyadi's father was a Transylvanian Wallachian. The kinship between the Hunyadis and the *cneji* (Romanian gentry) of Hațeg was also invoked, but recent research has shown that this relationship developed after the family immigrated to Transylvania.¹⁰

The academics of Cluj deliberately ignored the chronicles of John of Thurocz and Anthony Bonfini, written at the behest of Matthias Corvinus, which state that Voicu/Buth, the grandfather of their royal patron, came from Wallachia and immigrated to Transylvania at the invitation of Sigismund of Luxembourg. It seems unlikely that the cultivated monarch would have tolerated a simple author's license that highlighted the not-quite-illustrious origins of his family.¹¹ On the contrary, King Matthias doesn't seem to have been pleased by this story, thus, Anthony Bonfini tried, by humanistic literary means, to link the Hunyadis to the *ginta* Corvina of Ancient Rome.¹²

An independent source, the anonymous Chronicle of the Styrian Counts of Cilli, political enemies of the Hunyadis, confirms the narrative of the two chroniclers. It clearly states that John Hunyadi was born into a low-ranking knightly family from Wallachia.¹³ We believe that these three independent sources from the 15th century unequivocally prove the Wallachian origin of the Hunyadi family, a fact that any serious Hungarian historian no longer questions.¹⁴

Anthony Bonfini, the humanist chronicler of Matthias Corvinus, calls the village of origin of the Hunyadis *Corvina* or, in the Hungarian edition of the text, *Hollos*¹⁵, a toponym that would be translated into Romanian as *Corbești* or *Corbeni*, that is "The Descendants of the Raven". Could it be about one of the homonymous villages in Argeș County? This is an unanswered question, but we cannot overlook the fact that by the middle of the 15th century, the villages of Corbeni and Corbii de Piatră

¹⁰ Ștefan Pascu, "Rolul cnezilor din Transilvania în lupta antiotomană a lui Iancu de Hunedoara," *Studii și Cercetări de Istorie*, VIII, 1-4, 1957, 25-27, note 1.

¹¹ Johannes de Thurocz, *Chronica Hungarorum*, vol. I, Elisabeth Galántai, Julius Kistó (eds.) (Budapest, 1985), 237; Antonius de Bonfinis, *Rerum Ungaricarum Decades*, tomus III. Decas III, I. Fögel, B Ivány, L. Juhás (eds.) (Lipsiae, MCMXXXVI), liber IV, 95.

¹² *Ibid.*, liber IX, 219-224.

¹³ Franz Krones v. Marchland, *Die Freien von Saneck und ihre Chronik als Grafen von Cilli*, vol. II *Die Cillier Chronik* (Graz, 1883), 102.

¹⁴ See the point of view of the Hungarian historiography in Pál Engel, *The Realm of St. Stephen. A History of Medieval Hungary, 895-1526*, Translated by Tamás Pálosfalvi, English edition by Andrew Ayton (London-New York, 2001), 283.

¹⁵ Bonfinis, *Rerum Ungaricarum Decades*, III, liber IV, 95.

were in the possession of a certain Mogoș, a familiar name among the Hunyadis. Of course, any attempt to establish a concrete connection between the Hunyadis and these two villages with raven names in Argeș County remains speculative.¹⁶

The available sources are silent about the social status, the wealth, and the exact place of origin of the Hunyadis. From John of Thurocz, we learn that the fame and military virtue of Voicu reached the ears of Sigismund of Luxemburg, who invited him to Transylvania, where he was granted the royal estate of Hunedoara. Anthony Bonfini takes over the story but confuses Voicu with *Corvinus* himself, who is none other than John Hunyadi.¹⁷

The chronicles are confirmed by documentary sources, specifically four charters from 1409-1410, which attest that Sigismund of Luxemburg, the king of Hungary, granted the royal estate (not the castle) of Hunedoara, located in Alba County, to Voicu the Wallachian, a knight of the royal household, and his family. Contrary to earlier interpretations, the donation did not include the Hunedoara Castle, with its extensive domain of market towns, villages, forests, and mines. Instead, it was the modest royal estate of Hunedoara in Alba County. In the medieval Kingdom of Hungary, owning castles and fortresses was a prerogative of royalty and barons, not knights of the royal household, who were considered gentry. A monarch could appoint a knight as castellan of a royal fortress, but this was not the case for Voicu, who received only the Hunedoara estate from King Sigismund. As the Hungarian version of the toponym *Hunyadvár* attests, the estate was a remnant of the domain that once served the homonymous Árpáadian *castrum* (located on the Sânpetru Hill, near today's Corvin Castle), abandoned long before the Great Mongol Invasion of 1241. By the mid-13th century, the local nobility took control of the royal counties of Hungary, turning them into "noble counties." Consequently, the Árpáadian hillfort of Hunedoara was abandoned, and its domain was divided. During the 14th century, the seat of Hunedoara County was moved to the nearby Deva fortress, strategically located on the middle course of the Mureș River, while the domain of the former Árpáadian hillfort, reduced to a simple royal

¹⁶ Liviu Cîmpeanu, "Ex bono tirone miles fortissimus, ex milite imperator optimus emersit. Reflections on the Beginnings of John Hunyadi's Career", Zoltan Jusztn (ed.), *Politics and Society in the Central and South-Eastern Europe (13th - 16th centuries)* (Cluj-Napoca, 2019), 179; Rita Emőke Szilágyi, Levente Nagy, "Câteva date noi despre genealogia familiilor Olahus, Hunyadi și Dracula (Vlad Țepeș)," *Studii și Materiale de Istorie Medie*, XL, 2022, 137-138, 141-145, 156.

¹⁷ Thurocz, *Chronica Hungarorum*, I, 237; Bonfinis, *Rerum Ungaricarum Decades*, III, liber IV, 95.

possession, was annexed to Alba County. This modest estate was the object of King Sigismund's grant to the knight Voicu and his large family in 1409. The remains of the royal fortress at Hunedoara, specifically the right to own a fortified residence there, were acquired by John Hunyadi only in 1439, in historical circumstances that we will discuss further below.¹⁸

One can trace the first three generations of the Hunyadis in the donation charters of the Hunedoara royal estate. The first attested member is Șerb, the family's patriarch, though nothing else is known about him, and he probably never left Wallachia. The second generation includes Knight Voicu and his paternal brothers, Mogoș and Radu. Knight Voicu of Hunedoara is specifically mentioned only once, in 1414, during a dispute with his neighbors from the village of Zlaşd, now part of the municipality of Hunedoara. It has been claimed, without documentary support, that Voicu served the famous Italian *condottiere* Filippo Scolari, naturalized in the Kingdom of Hungary. However, it was actually John Hunyadi who was in Scolari's military retinue, as we shall see below. Voicu disappears from the sources after 1414 but is not recorded as deceased until 1435. Notably, at the Court of Matthias Corvinus, Voicu was known as *Buth*, a term in old Romanian meaning "grandfather." From the third generation of the Hunyadi family, the charters mention *Johannes* (the future John Hunyadi), *Johannes* the Younger, and Voicu the Younger. John the Younger was his brother's loyal companion until 1441. Additionally, John Hunyadi had five sisters, all married to nobles from his entourage, the so-called *familiares*, and his political allies.¹⁹

The Wallachian origin of the Hunyadis strongly suggests that the family originally belonged to the Orthodox rite. However, shortly after immigrating to Transylvania, they converted to Catholicism. Except for Radu-Ladislau, who appears to have converted in a special ceremony evidenced by his adoption of a Hungarian name, the rest of the Hunyadis seem to have adopted the Latin rite simply by attending Catholic mass with the other nobles of Transylvania. Thus, by converting to Catholicism and receiving the royal donation diploma in 1409, the Hunyadis fully met the conditions for being admitted into the ranks of the nobility of the

¹⁸ Cîmpeanu, "Ex bono tirone", 180-181; Liviu Cîmpeanu, "Prestige and Power: The Estates of John Hunyadi (1409-1456)", Mihai-Bogdan Atanasiu, Cristian Ploscaru, *Social and Administrative Elite in the Romanian Space (15th - 19th centuries)* (Konstanz, 2021), 191-195.

¹⁹ Radu Lupescu, "Matthias Hunyadi: from the Family Origins to the Threshold of Power", *Matthias Corvinus, the King. Tradition and Renewal in the Hungarian Royal Court 1458-1490* (Budapest, 2008), 39-44; Cîmpeanu, "Ex bono tirone", 179, 181-184.

Kingdom of Hungary. These were the main premises for the brilliant career of John Hunyadi in the following decades.

Squire, Knight, and Baron of the Hungarian Kingdom (1410 - 1439)

Most historical papers on John Hunyadi focus on his great anti-Ottoman campaigns, overshadowing the beginnings of his career, which were at least as spectacular. A notable exception is the eminent Hungarian medievalist Pál Engel, who analyzed the decisive years of Hunyadi's early career in two comprehensive studies, published in 1986 and 1997.²⁰ Based on these papers, I conducted a new critical analysis of all the sources on the topic, attempting to provide answers, even if provisional, to questions regarding John Hunyadi's parents, the year and place of his birth, his name and confession, as well as his *cursus honorum* - from squire to knight, and from knight to baron of the Hungarian Kingdom.

At the end of the 15th century, the Italian humanist Anthony Bonfini recorded the following legend in his *Rerum Ungaricarum Decades*, written under the patronage of King Matthias Corvinus: During one of his travels in Transylvania, King Sigismund fell in love with a beautiful and clever Romanian girl of noble origin, whom he left pregnant. The sovereign gave her a ring engraved with his coat of arms as a sign of recognition, instructing her to appear at court after their child was born. To avoid disgrace, the girl married a Wallachian nobleman who understood and accepted the situation. She gave birth to a son and named him John. One day, while the mother was holding her son on her lap, a raven swooped down and snatched the royal ring from the child's hand, flying away. Devastated, the woman sent her husband after the "cursed bird," which was eventually shot down with an arrow, and the ring was recovered. When John reached adolescence, his mother sent him to King Sigismund's court, where the king immediately recognized his son by the coat-of-arms ring she presented.²¹ Not coincidentally, this beautiful legend was written by Anthony Bonfini around 1490, when Matthias Corvinus, his royal patron, was attempting to secure the succession to the Hungarian throne for his illegitimate son, Duke John Corvinus.²²

The reality, however, was less spectacular. Preserved sources reveal that John Hunyadi was the son of Voicu the Wallachian and, probably,

²⁰ Engel, "János Hunyadi: The Decisive Years of His Career," 103-123; Engel, "Hunyadi pályakezdése," 91-109.

²¹ Bonfini, *Rerum Ungaricarum Decades*, III, liber X, p. 224-225.

²² András Kubinyi, *Matthias rex* (Budapest, 2008), 140-144.

Elisabeth Mușina of Răchitova from Țara Hațegului (not from Marginea in Banat, as previously stated in the earlier literature). Their marriage took place before they immigrated to Transylvania. At that time, kinship ties between Wallachian boyars and the *cnezi* (Romanian gentry) of Hațeg were common.²³

Recently, historians have agreed that John Hunyadi was born in 1405 or 1407, overlooking sources that attest to him entering King Sigismund's service as a teenager,²⁴ which happened in 1431. Under no circumstances can a man of at least 24 years of age be considered a teenager, especially by medieval standards, where adult life began at 14, the age at which noblemen's sons were knighted. A thorough reading of the sources, especially of two diplomas issued by Ladislaus the Posthumous in 1453, containing essential information for the early career of John Hunyadi, reveals that he entered the services of King Sigismund twice, once as a teenager, as a squire (*ipse Johannes, regnante gloriosissimo principe domino Sigismundo, tunc rege [...] annos Juveniles laudabili indole exegit...*), and the second time when he was already a knight, in 1431 (...*preclare enim indolis miles [Johannes de Hunyad], et imperiali obsequio dignus, tunc primum regis militibus connumeratus, et succesive consiliis admissus, integra fide deuotisque obsequijs, prefato auo nostro [Sigismundo] [...] pro susceptione imperialium Infularum [...] procedenti [...] fideli semper sollicitudinis diligencia, inseparabiliter adhesit*).²⁵ Thus, it is very likely that the young John Hunyadi entered the service of Sigismund of Luxembourg around 1409/1410, when his father Voicu received the Hunedoara estate from the sovereign. Therefore, he must have been born around 1395–1396.

Voicu and Elisabeth Mușina baptized their son with the name of *Ioan*, John, but throughout his life, he was known as Iancu/Janko, both among friends and foes. This variant of his name is attested the earliest in 1444.²⁶ Peter Ranzanus, one of the humanist scholars in the service of

²³ Ioan Drăgan, "Familia Mușina de Densuș/Morsinai de Răchitova - rudele Hunedorenilor", Gianina-Diana Iegar, Péter Levente Szócs, Gabriela Rusu, Florela Vasilescu (eds.), *Evol Mediu neterminat/A befejezetlen középkor/The Unfinished Middle Ages. Omagiu profesorului Adrian Andrei Rusu cu ocazia împlinirii vârstei de 70 ani/Tanulmányok Adrian Andrei Rusu professzor közöntésére 70- születésnapja alkalmából/Studies in honour of Professor Adrian Andrei Rusu on his 70th birthday* (Cluj Napoca, 2022), 127-141.

²⁴ Engel, "Hunyadi pályakezdése," 91-92.

²⁵ Magyar Nemzeti Országos Levéltára (MNL. OL.), Diplomataikai Levéltár (DL) 37618 and MNOL, DL 14605 (transumpt)/ József Teleki, *Hunyadiak kora Magyarországon*, vol. X, (Pest, 1853), 347-356, nr. 174; MNOL, DL 37617 and MOL, DL 14604 (transumpt)/ Teleki, *Hunyadiak kora Magyarországon*, X, 356-363, nr. 175 (transumpt).

²⁶ *Gazavât-i Sultân Murâd bin Mehemed Hân/The Holy Wars of Sultan Murad Son of Sultan Mehmed Khan*, Colin Imber, *The Crusade of Varna, 1443-1445* (ASHGATE, 2006), 41-106, *passim*.

Matthias Corvinus, wrote that the father of his royal patron was known by the Romanian name of *Iancu*, a diminutive of the name of John.²⁷ It is impossible that the king, from whom the author gathered his information, did not know the very name of his illustrious father. Last but not least, we must mention that in the Kingdom of Hungary, our hero was known as Hunyadi János, a name phonetically adopted by both the Germans and Austrians as *Hun[i]adt Enusch*,²⁸ as well as by the Romanian voivodes of Moldova and Wallachia, who referred to him as *Ianăș voevod ot Huniadia*. (1450, 1452, 1453).²⁹

As shown above, John of Thurocz, Anthony Bonfini, and the anonymous chronicler of the Cilli counts, independent of the first two, state clearly that John Hunyadi was born in Wallachia. Given his ethnicity and geographic origin, it is certain that he was baptized in the Orthodox rite. Still, he converted to Catholicism along with his entire family after they immigrated to Transylvania sometime before 1409. Even the most intransigent theologians of the Latin rite did not question baptism in the eastern rite, except in extremely rare cases. Thus, there was no need for a new Catholic baptism. The preserved sources do not even suggest that the Hunyadis converted in a special ceremony, meaning they, including young John Hunyadi, began to attend Catholic mass along with the other nobles of Transylvania.³⁰ Andreas Pannonius, a veteran of John Hunyadi's campaigns who dedicated his old age to both God and the pagan Muses of the Old, provides some plausible data on the early conversion of the Hunyadis. The old scholar recalled in the second half of the 15th century that his former captain, when he was a young squire at the Court of Sigismund around 1410, distinguished himself by his military skills and piety, spending his nights in prayer at the chapel of the royal residence in Buda, which could only have been of the Catholic rite.³¹ However, it should also be emphasized that later on, John Hunyadi became a crusader champion of the Catholic Church and the Church Union from Ferrara-Florence, concluded in 1439. At the same time, he was a persecutor of the

²⁷ Petrus Ranzanus, *Epithoma Rerum Hungararum*, P. Kulcsár (ed.) (Budapest, 1977), 34.

²⁸ *Die Cillier Chronik*, 93, 97, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 108, 118, 119, 120, 121, 149; Constantin I. Karadja, *Poema lui Michael Beheim despre cruciadele împotriva turcilor din anii 1443 și 1444. Publicată după manuscrisele Pal. Germ. 334 și 312 din Biblioteca Universității de la Heidelberg* (Vălenii de Munte, 1936), 22, 29, 38, 42, 44.

²⁹ *Documenta Romaniae Historica*, seria D. *Relații între Țările Române*, vol. I (1222-1456), Ștefan Pascu et alii (eds.) (București, 1977), 410-412, nr. 300, 413-415, nr. 302, 421-422, nr. 306, 432-433, nr. 316.

³⁰ Rusu, *Ioan de Hunedoara*, 26.

³¹ Andreas Pannonius, in Fraknói Vilmos, Ábel Jenő, "Két magyarországi egyházi író a XV. századból," *Irodalomtörténeti emlékek*, vol. I (Budapest, 1886), 23.

anti-unionist Orthodox priesthood, headed by the "pseudo-bishop" John of Caffa.³² There are historical sources suggesting that he was a protector of the Orthodox Church in Wallachia, whose hierarchs embraced the Church Union of Florence in 1439.³³

The modest estate of Hunedoara could not cover the material needs of Knight Voicu's large family. Thus, around 1410, the young John Hunyadi sought his fortune at the Court of Buda, like many other sons of nobles in the Kingdom of Hungary during the late Middle Ages. The humanist Andreas Pannonius, who knew him personally, wrote that Voicu's son began his career as a squire in the king's entourage. He quickly stood out for his vigor and skill during daytime military exercises and, as mentioned earlier, for his deep religiosity, manifested during overnight prayer hours in the Court chapel.³⁴

However, in 1412, King Sigismund embarked on a prolonged European journey to organize a new anti-Ottoman crusade.³⁵ Young John Hunyadi was left behind; thus he entered the service of Filippo Scolari, also known as Pippo Spano of Ozora, Count of Timiș. Much later, Matthias Corvinus stated that his illustrious father learned the craft of war under the severe authority of this famous *condottiere*, first becoming a knight and then a captain of the troops. After being in Pippo Spano's retinue for several years, around 1420, John Hunyadi somehow joined Evrenosoğlu Ali-Beg, the *akıncı* chieftain of Ottoman Albania. The circumstances in which this drastic change took place are not known; our hero was either captured or deserted from under the iron fist of the Count of Timiș, as suggested by the trust he enjoyed from the Ottomans. First, *Janko* groomed the pasha's horses, but in time, he joined the raids of Evrenosoğlu Ali-Beg's *akıncı* raiders, learning not only their language but also their military tactics. Around 1425, probably to escape a conversion to Islam, John Hunyadi fled to Despot Stefan Lazarević of Serbia. He remained at the chivalric court in Belgrade until the death of the Serbian sovereign in 1427. During this period, he met Ladislaus Szilágyi of Horogszeg, whose daughter, Elisabeth, he married in 1429. The marriage

³² Iulian Mihai Damian, "The Greek Rite Transylvanian Church in the 1450': Archbishop John of Caffa and the Crusade in East-Central Europe", Ana Dumitran, Loránd Mádly, Alexandru Simon (eds.), *Extincta est lucerna orbis: John Hunyadi and his Time* (Cluj-Napoca, 2009), 143-153.

³³ *Documenta Romaniae Historica*, D, I, 384-387, nr. 276.

³⁴ Andreas Pannonius, in Fraknói, Ábel, "Két magyarországi egyházi író a XV. századból," 23.

³⁵ Jörg K. Hoensch, *Kaiser Sigismund. Kaiser an der Schwelle der Neuzeit 1368-1437* (München 1996), 162-190.

of John Hunyadi and Elisabeth Szilágyi resulted in their first son, Ladislaus, being born in 1430.

Given the family ties of the Serbian despots with the Styrian counts of Cilli, it seems that after 1427, John Hunyadi was briefly in their service, already commanding his own "lance," a military unit consisting of a man-at-arms (heavily armored horseman) and three or four mounted archers. Despite the visceral antipathy between the Hunyadis and the Cillis, the young knight went with his men, whose number increased to three "lances" (three men-at-arms and nine horse archers), into the service of the Croatian nobleman Demeter Csupor de Monoszló. In 1431, John Hunyadi accompanied Csupor as a member of his retinue to Italy to witness the coronation of Sigismund of Luxembourg as emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. On this occasion, John Hunyadi, who had meanwhile been knighted, entered the service of the monarch for the second time. However, upon arriving in Lombardy, he was dismissed along with other courtiers due to the royal treasury's insufficient funds. Consequently, John Hunyadi entered the military service of Filippo Visconti, Duke of Milan. For two years, the wandering son of a Wallachian boyar served one of the most illustrious princes of the Renaissance. Some historians even claim that he met the famous *condottiere* Francesco Sforza, the future Duke of Milan. Hunyadi certainly acquired the military art of *quattrocento* Italy, combining heavy cavalry and infantry units armed with firearms, which he later applied successfully in his anti-Ottoman campaigns. Moreover, John Hunyadi saved a substantial sum from his wages, making him attractive once again to the eternally indebted Sigismund of Luxembourg, who had received the imperial crown in the meantime. In 1433, upon the emperor's return to the Holy Roman Empire, the young knight rejoined his retinue, lending his sovereign considerable sums, for which he was richly rewarded with donations and pledges consisting of estates, market towns, and entire districts. Additionally, John Hunyadi became a knight of Sigismund's household, accompanying him in his travels to Germany, Hungary, and later Bohemia. Returning to Hungary for a short time in 1435, John Hunyadi and his brother John the Younger distinguished themselves in battles with the Ottomans on the southern frontier of the kingdom, temporarily entering the service of the Transylvanian voivode Ladislaus Csáky. In the autumn of 1436, John the Younger also joined the military campaign launched by the Transylvanian voivode to support Vlad Dracul, lord of Wallachia, who was facing a massive invasion of *akıncı* raiders from the lower course of the Danube.

In the meantime, John Hunyadi, as a knight of the royal household, had to accompany Sigismund of Luxembourg to Bohemia, where he took

part in battles against the Hussite heretics. During this period, he gained further military knowledge and had the opportunity to observe the effectiveness of the formidable wagon fortress, *wagenburg*, and the Hussite heavy infantry against cavalry. It is certain that he implemented Hussite tactics, as he later successfully applied them against the Ottomans in the campaigns he led as voivode of Transylvania..

At the court in Prague, John Hunyadi became known, admired, and envied for his appearance, wealth, and dancing skills with the ladies of high society. After the death of Sigismund of Luxembourg on December 9, 1437, he remained in the service of Albert of Habsburg, Sigismund's son-in-law and heir to the throne. Hunyadi took part in battles against the Hussites, who challenged Albert's rule, and against the Ottomans, who threatened the southern frontier of the Kingdom of Hungary. At the court of King Albert, who reigned simultaneously over the Holy Roman Empire, the Kingdom of Bohemia, and the Kingdom of Hungary, John Hunyadi joined the entourage of the Hungarian baron Nicholas Újlaki, through whom he obtained his first military dignities.

According to Anthony Bonfini, another key figure in the early career of John Hunyadi was *Franciscus Cenadio*, identified by the Hungarian medievalist Pál Engel as Francis Tallóci, captain of Belgrade and *ban* (military governor) of Severin. Under his authority, John Hunyadi and his brother, John the Younger, took on the defense of the fortresses in the Banate of Severin as a kind of private enterprise. Around September 20, 1439, Francis Tallóci was captured by a group of Ottoman *akıncı* during a campaign south of the Danube. Consequently, King Albert appointed John Hunyadi and John the Younger to the vacant dignity of the Banate of Severin, whose defense had been entrusted to them by the former ban, recently enslaved by the Ottomans. Practically, the king confirmed *de jure* a situation that existed *de facto*. The close connection Hunyadi had with Francis Tallóci (both then and after the latter's ransom) and the political influence of Nicholas Újlaki, the ban of the neighboring military province, the Banate of Mačva (today Mačva, Serbia), contributed to John Hunyadi's appointment as ban of Severin.³⁶

With this office, John Hunyadi also became a baron, as the Banate of Severin was considered one of the most important military provinces in the Kingdom of Hungary, after the Voivodeship of Transylvania and the Banates of Dalmatia, Croatia, and Slavonia. Two documents from 1457

³⁶ See the critical analyses of the sources and bibliography of this outline at Cîmpeanu, "Ex bono tirone", 186-198.

unequivocally attest that King Albert of Habsburg donated the fortresses of Hunedoara, Geoagiu, and Șoimuș to John Hunyadi, likely as a result of his promotion to baronial rank. In the Kingdom of Hungary, possession of fortresses was a baronial privilege. Although the donation charter for the three fortresses is not preserved, it is interesting that the diploma by which John Hunyadi was given possession of Hunedoara fortress was kept until the mid-16th century in the archive of the noble family Cârdea, whose ancestors were members of his retinue. It is clear that it was not Voicu but John Hunyadi who received the fortress of Hunedoara, which by that time was, at best, a ruin located on Sânpetru Hill, near today's monument. Practically, Hunyadi received the right to hold a fortress on his parental estate. However, he did not have the financial means to build the current castle "on a rock, in the outskirts of the market town Hunedoara" (Bonfini) until 1442, when he was appointed as Voivode of Transylvania.³⁷

Voivode of Transylvania (1441 - 1445)

After the sudden death of King Albert of Habsburg in the fall of 1439, a civil war broke out in the Kingdom of Hungary between the loyalists of Queen Elizabeth, the pregnant widow of the deceased sovereign, and those of Wladislas III Jagiello, King of Poland. Among those who pledged allegiance to the Jagiellonian candidate in 1440 were Nicholas Újlaki and his companion, John Hunyadi, who, as ban of Severin, had already earned a reputation as an anti-Ottoman hero. As it turned out only a few months later, King Wladislas gained a loyalist in John Hunyadi, described by John of Thurocz as "born to bear arms and fight wars." Hunyadi also had a private army of 50 "lances," comprising 50 men-at-arms and 150 mounted archers, totaling 200 men.

In the first days of 1441, the royal army led by Nicholas Újlaki and John Hunyadi defeated the loyalists of Queen Elizabeth near the Benedictine abbey of Bâtaszék, in Tolna County (today in Hungary), in a terrible battle where the soldiers of both camps slaughtered each other "as if they were foreigners from overseas and countries" (John of Thurocz). In recognition of this victory, Wladislas Jagiello rewarded Nicholas Újlaki and John Hunyadi with the joint dignity of Voivode of Transylvania around mid-February 1441 at the latest, not a month later, in March, as stated in earlier historiography. Our hero was about 45 years old when he occupied this important position, becoming the fourth most powerful

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 198-200; Cimpeanu, "Prestige and Power", 196-198.

man in the Kingdom of Hungary after the king, the palatine, and the judge royal of the Court.³⁸

In the summer of 1441, Murad II allowed Ishak Beğ, the *akıncı* chieftain of Semendria (the former seat of the Serbian Despotate, conquered by the Ottomans in 1439), to undertake a massive raid on the southern borderlands of the Hungarian Kingdom. John Hunyadi secretly mobilized his troops in Timișoara and set out against the Ottoman invaders, whom he surprised about 14 km from Semendria. In the ensuing battle, the Transylvanian voivode relied on his heavy cavalry, which was clearly superior to the lightly armored Ottoman horsemen. This tactic, learned in his youth while in the service of the Milanese duke Filippo Visconti, proved effective. Although it was not a large-scale confrontation, John Hunyadi's success over Ishak Beğ represented a significant moral victory. It demonstrated that the feared Ottoman *akıncı* could be defeated and inspired the Christians to resume the anti-Ottoman offensive.³⁹

Following this defeat, Sultan Murad II planned a military campaign of retaliation in the spring of the following year, as the Republic of Ragusa informed Wladislas Jagiello as early as September 17, 1441. Contrary to the claims of medieval chroniclers, the Ottoman attack in the spring of the following year didn't take John Hunyadi by surprise. He had enough time to call all the Transylvanians to arms by carrying a bloody sword through their settlements. No later than February 1442, Mezid Beğ, *mirahor* (master of the horse) at the Sublime Porte, invaded Transylvania leading an Ottoman army of 16,000 men. The army entered the province through the Iron Gate, devastating the southwestern counties of Hunedoara and Alba.

The Transylvanian host gathered in Cluj and then moved camp to the episcopal city of Alba Iulia. In the first skirmish at the nearby village of Sântimbru on March 18, 1442, the personal contingents (*banderia*) of John Hunyadi and György Lépes, the bishop of Transylvania, were defeated by Mezid Beğ's *gazi* warriors. However, only four days later, on March 22, 1442, the voivode and his entire host managed to catch up with the Ottoman invaders and inflicted a decisive defeat on them at the Iron Gate of Transylvania while they were retreating loaded with slaves and booty. John Hunyadi sent the captured trophies to King Wladislas in Buda, including a large wagon loaded with severed heads, on top of which the heads of Mezid Beğ and his sons were impaled on separate

³⁸ Liviu Cîmpeanu, "Războiul civil din Ungaria 1440-1442 și începuturile carierei lui Iancu de Hunedoara," *Anuarul Institutului de Cercetări Socio-Umane Sibiu XXVII* (2020), 35-67.

³⁹ Liviu Cîmpeanu, "Magnificus Johannes de Hunyad, wayuoda Transylvanus, validam potentiam seivissimos Turcorum debelasset, triumphum victoriae reportando," *Transilvania* 4 (2019), 88-89.

spears. The sovereign decreed public celebrations in honor of his captain and announced the victory throughout Christendom.⁴⁰

In the meantime, Sultan Murad deposed Vlad Dracul from the Wallachian throne on the pretext of collaborating with John Hunyadi during the recent military events in Transylvania. The padishah granted the princely seat of Târgoviște to an Ottoman pasha, probably with the rank of *beğlerbeğ*, whom he sent north of the Danube at the head of 12,000 Ottomans. Alarmed, the Wallachian boyars called the voivode of Transylvania for help. In July 1442, John Hunyadi crossed into Wallachia with his troops and defeated the contingent of the pasha, whose name is not even mentioned by the sources. John Hunyadi then granted the rule of Wallachia to Basarab II, considered the true heir of the ruling house.

Enraged beyond measure, Murad II sent Şehabeddin, the *beğlerbeğ* of Rumelia, leading a host estimated by contemporaries to be around 80,000 men to solve once and for all the question of the Wallachian voivodeship. In August 1442, John Hunyadi and his army passed south of the Carpathians, where they merged with the Wallachian army of Basarab II and set out together against Şehabeddin. The decisive battle took place on September 2, 1442, on the upper course of the Ialomița River, north of Târgoviște. The Ottoman horsemen were defeated by the heavy cavalry and the Hussite war wagons of John Hunyadi, who used, for the first time in his career, the *wagenburg* tactic, which he had learned during his stay in Bohemia. The *beğlerbeğ* and the surviving Ottomans retreated chaotically south of the Danube, leaving Wallachia in the anti-Ottoman alliance. In response to the invasion of Wallachia, the voivode of Transylvania launched two campaigns of retaliation against the borderlands of the Ottoman Empire, the first in the fall of 1442 and the second in the spring of 1443. John Hunyadi sent war trophies again to Buda, from where Wladislas Jagiello announced the miraculous victory from *Germany to Italy and Turkey* (Anthony Bonfini).⁴¹

⁴⁰ Liviu Cîmpeanu, "Bătălia inexistentă: Sibiu, 22 martie 1442. O analiză critică a izvoarelor privind bătălia decisivă dintre Iancu de Hunedoara și Meziid Beğ", Gianina-Diana Iegar, Péter Levente Szócs, Gabriela Rusu, Florela Vasilescu (eds.), *Evul Mediu neterminat/A befejezetlen középkor/The Unfinished Middle Ages. Omagiu profesorului Adrian Andrei Rusu cu ocazia împlinirii vârstei de 70 ani/Tanulmányok Adrian Andrei Rusu professzor közöntésére 70-születésnapja alkalmából/Studies in honour of Professor Adrian Andrei Rusu on his 70th birthday* (Cluj Napoca, 2022), 149-161.

⁴¹ Liviu Cîmpeanu, Claudiu-Ion Neagoe, "Iancu de Hunedoara versus Şehâbeddin. Un bilanț al izvoarelor/Jean Hunyadi versus Şehabeddin. Un bilan des sources," *Istros XXVIII* (2022), 305-376.

News about the victories of the Transylvanian voivode over the Ottoman invaders reached the Holy See. The Pope was trying to organize a crusade to support the Byzantine Empire, which had recognized papal supremacy at the Council of Ferrara-Florence in 1439. Thus, Cardinal-Legate Giuliano Cesarini was in charge of the diplomatic, political, and military preparations for the upcoming military expedition, which lasted until the fall of 1443. King Wladislas appointed John Hunyadi as captain-general of the army, which was composed of the retinues of several Hungarian prelates and barons, Polish volunteers, 8,000 Serbian horsemen under the command of George Branković, the exiled despot of Serbia, 600-700 Bosnian horsemen, a contingent of Wallachian light cavalry under Voivode Basarab II, crusaders, and Bulgarian *voynuk*.

By mid-October 1443, the great crusader army crossed the Danube near the fortress of Belgrade and marched along the Great Morava River in the direction of the Haemus Mountains. Following the old Roman road known as *Via Militaris*, their main objective was the conquest of Edirne (Adrianople), the European capital of the Ottoman Empire. In a proper tour de force, the army commanded by Wladislas Jagiello, John Hunyadi, George Branković, and Giuliano Cesarini engaged in five major battles, three of which were against the army of Murad II himself. After conquering the cities of Niš and Sofia, the Crusaders forced the Pass of Trajan's Gate but were repelled by the Ottoman defenders. They marched further east, guided by Bulgarians who joined them, attempting to force the Zlatitsa Pass. However, according to the later chronicler Idris Bitlisi, the padishah "surrounded that pass with the iron sabers of the *gazi* warriors," leading to a decisive confrontation on December 12, 1443, in which the crusader army failed to break through the positions of the main Ottoman army.

Faced with the numerical superiority of the enemy and threatened by the cold and the danger of running out of supplies, King Wladislas's war council decided to retreat along the same route. On the way back, two more major confrontations took place, at Meštitsa and Kunovica (in today's Bulgaria and Serbia, respectively), where the rear guard commanded by John Hunyadi and George Branković managed to repel the Ottoman attacks. In the battle of Kunovica on January 2, 1444, John Hunyadi captured Çandarlı Mehmed Beğ, the brother of the grand vizier Halil Paşa, who would play an essential role in future events. After arriving back in Belgrade, Wladislas Jagiello and John Hunyadi decided to

demobilize the army, despite requests from despot George Branković to remain under arms and resume the offensive with the arrival of spring.⁴²

This tour de force by the Crusader army "persuaded" Sultan Murad to ask George Branković, his father-in-law, to mediate a truce with King Wladislas of Hungary. Sultana Mara Branković wrote to her father, asking for the release of Çandarlı Mehmed Beğ, but she secretly communicated the sultan's "offer": the restoration of the lost Serbian Despotate in exchange for the mediation of a Hungarian-Ottoman peace and, of course, the acceptance of the suzerainty of the Sublime Porte. With political cunning, George Branković made John Hunyadi an offer he couldn't refuse: he promised him the entire fortune he owned in the Kingdom of Hungary in exchange for concluding a peace treaty with Murad II. Greedy for power and wealth, the voivode of Transylvania accepted, and thus, he and the despot sent a messenger to the Sublime Porte to conclude peace.

In July 1444, George Branković and his family donated a considerable part of their immense fortune to John Hunyadi under the guise of compensation for the expenses incurred during the previous anti-Ottoman campaigns. In reality, this was proof of honoring the previously concluded agreement. Meanwhile, an Ottoman envoy arrived with the ten-year peace treaty, which was ratified by John Hunyadi and George Branković on August 15, 1444, in Oradea (not in Szeged, as earlier historiography claimed). A week later, the Ottoman garrisons evacuated the fortresses and lands of the Serbian Despotate, allowing George Branković to regain his lost realm. The entire "affair" was a masterstroke by Sultan Murad, who, despite the territorial concessions, deprived the Christians of the valuable military aid of the Serbs and gained time to organize the defense.⁴³

It is impossible to specify whether Wladislas Jagiello and John Hunyadi foresaw the consequences of the agreement with Murad II. They tried to replace George Branković with Vlad Dracul, re-enthroned by Murad II in the spring of 1444, but not through direct military intervention, in order not to jeopardize the delicate negotiations with John Hunyadi, but through the Byzantine emperor, John VIII Palaeologus, who

⁴² John Jefferson, *The Holy Wars of King Wladislas and Sultan Murad. The Ottoman-Christian Conflict from 1438-1444* (Leiden-Boston, 2012), 295-356; Tamás Pálosfalvi, *From Nicopolis to Mohács. A History of Ottoman-Hungarian Warfare, 1389-1526* (Leiden-Boston, 2018), 105-120.

⁴³ Pál Engel, "János Hunyadi and the Peace «of Szeged» (1444)," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* XLVII, 3 (1994), 241-257.

supported the Wallachian pretender to recover his paternal throne by sea.⁴⁴

The battles during the Long Campaign proved that the fierce Ottoman army was not invincible, but according to the Hungarian historian Tamás Pálosfalvi, this was only a "war of illusions." The successes achieved on the battlefield convinced Giuliano Cesarini that the crusade had to continue, being one step away from excommunicating John Hunyadi and George Branković, the artisans of the Peace Treaty signed in Oradea.

However, the voivode of Transylvania concluded this peace not only for personal reasons but also for strategic ones, to gain time for the military preparations of a new crusader army. During the peace negotiations with the Sublime Porte, this army was already under banners at Szeged, where its commanders, King Wladislas and John Hunyadi, took the crusader oath on August 4, 1444. The plan for the new military expedition was much more complex than the previous one: Emir Ibrahim of Karaman was to lure Murad II into Anatolia, while a crusading fleet would blockade the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits to prevent the sultan's passage to Europe. Meanwhile, the crusader army led by the King of Hungary and his voivode would attack the Ottoman provinces in Rumelia with all its might, aiming to remove the Ottomans from Europe once and for all.

The new crusader army had approximately the same composition as the one that fought in the Long Campaign, with the difference being that the Serbs were partially replaced by a contingent of 4,000 Wallachian horsemen provided by Vlad Dracul. Once again, Wladislas Jagiello appointed John Hunyadi as captain-general of the army. On September 20, 1444, the Crusaders crossed the Danube at Orșova and advanced towards Varna through Ottoman Bulgaria, following the route Vidin-Nicopolis-Shumen. Unlike the previous campaign, King Wladislas's army encountered no serious resistance from the Ottomans, except for the garrisons of the fortresses along their way, which were easily conquered by the Crusaders. To everyone's surprise, the Venetian-Burgundian-Papal fleet in the Bosphorus could not prevent Murad II's army from crossing the Bosphorus Strait from Asia to Europe, due to the effective use of Ottoman artillery, which kept the ships at bay. Contemporaries also

⁴⁴ Liviu Cîmpeanu, "Relațiile lui Iancu de Hunedoara cu Țara Românească și Moldova, 1442-1456. O reevaluare (I)," *Analele Putnei* XV, 2 (2019), 12-14; Liviu Cîmpeanu, "Vlad Dracul, diplomația ungaro-otomană și răscumpărarea de robi creștini în contextul Cruciadei de la Varna (1444)," *Studii și Matoriale de Istorie Medie XXXVIII* (2020), 151-152.

suspected the treachery of the Genoese from Pera, whose ships were believed to have ferried the Ottomans across the strait.

On the evening of November 9, 1444, Sultan Murad pitched his camp only a few kilometers from the Crusader positions near Varna. The next day, on November 10, 1444, while the two enemy armies were facing each other, according to the Franciscan Andreas de Palatio, an eyewitness of the events, a strong wind arose that tore the flags and banners from the Crusaders' lances, which was an ominous sign for the further course of the battle. John Hunyadi and his elite cavalry dominated the battlefield almost the whole day, but, contrary to the advice given by the captain-general, Wladislas Jagiello was convinced by his entourage to try a cavalry charge against the janissaries defending Sultan Murad. This reckless attack was fatal to the king, which led to the collapse of the entire crusader army, fleeing in disarray. Cardinal Giuliano Cesarini also lost his life in the chaos that ensued. By nightfall, the battlefield was won by the Ottomans. John Hunyadi managed to regroup around him a good part of the "Hungarian cavalry" (Andreas de Palatio), with which he retreated in close ranks towards the Danube, which he crossed at Târgul de Floci in Wallachia.⁴⁵

Lord Governor of Hungary (1446-1453)

Shortly after crossing the Danube into Wallachia, John Hunyadi was arrested by Vlad Dracul, seemingly due to a long-standing conflict over the coinage in the Transylvanian-Saxon city of Sighișoara. Vlad Dracul owned the city until 1442, when he was deposed from the Wallachian throne by the sultan, and the Transylvanian voivode took over the coinage without any intention of returning it. John Hunyadi may have also been considered responsible for the temporary disappearance of Mircea, son of Vlad Dracul, who led the Wallachian horsemen during the Crusade of Varna.

Some contemporaries believed that the voivode of Wallachia intended to deliver his Transylvanian counterpart to the sultan. Certain retainers of John Hunyadi reached Palatine Lawrence Hédervári, who was appointed as regent of Hungary during the absence of King Wladislas. The regent, along with other prelates and barons of the realm, sent an ultimatum to the ruler in Târgoviște, demanding the release of the

⁴⁵ Jefferson, *The Holy Wars of King Wladislas and Sultan Murad*, 357-487; Pálosfalvi, *From Nicopolis to Mohács*, 120-141. See also the report of the Franciscan Andras de Palatio in Anatolii Lewicki (ed.), *Codex epistolaris saeculi decimi quinti*, tomus II. (Cracovia, 1891), 459-469, nr. 308.

voivode of Transylvania and threatening a military invasion otherwise. The threats from Buda, combined with the safe return of Mircea to Wallachia, compelled Vlad Dracul to release John Hunyadi after only a few days of captivity. To smooth things over, the lord of Wallachia loaded the Transylvanian voivode with gifts and assigned him an armed escort to accompany him to Braşov, where he arrived on November 25, 1444. Despite this gesture, the break between the two great men was definitive. Only certain political reasons led to temporary collaboration between them, such as the Hungarian-Ottoman truce concluded in the summer of 1445, mediated by the Wallachian voivode.⁴⁶

The disappearance of King Wladislas Jagiello in the Battle of Varna once again brought the Kingdom of Hungary to the brink of the abyss, in a situation even more precarious than after the sudden death of Albert of Habsburg in 1439. During the first months of 1445, the strangest rumors circulated about the missing king. Some claimed that he had been miraculously saved by a band of Greek volunteers and was presumably continuing guerrilla warfare against the Ottomans in the Balkans,⁴⁷ or that, on the contrary, he had been captured by the Byzantines and was being kept under heavy guard in a fortress,⁴⁸ or even that he had arrived in Poland and was expected to return to the Kingdom of Hungary at any moment.⁴⁹

However, most rumors heralded the death of King Wladislas, leading the Estates of Hungary to meet in Pest for a Diet on May 7, 1445, to debate the dire political situation of the realm and to find solutions, even if temporary ones. Besides measures for the internal pacification of the kingdom, such as returning all usurped castles, cities, and estates to their rightful owners and dismantling some illegally built fortifications, the main decisions of the Diet concerned the election of seven captains. These captains were to ensure peace and prosperity within their areas and to bring the underaged Ladislaus the Posthumous to the Hungarian throne if Wladislas Jagiello was not found by the feast of the Holy Trinity on May 30 of the same year. The first measure practically confirmed the *status quo*: the Kingdom of Hungary was divided among seven mighty

⁴⁶ Cîmpeanu, "Relațiile lui Iancu de Hunedoara cu Țara Românească și Moldova (I)," 15-16; Mihai-Bogdan Atanasiu, Liviu Cîmpeanu, "Beiträge zum Münzwesen des Johannes von Hunyad. Ein unbekannter Denar aus dem Jahre 1447," *Transylvanian Review* XXXII, Supplement No. 2 (2023), 182-183.

⁴⁷ *Codex epistolaris saeculi decimi quinti*, II, 454-458, nr. 306.

⁴⁸ Walerand de Wavrin in Imber, *The Crusade of Varna*, 133-134.

⁴⁹ Rudolf Wolkan (ed.), *Der Briefwechsel des Eneas Silvius Piccolomini*, I. *Briefe aus der Laienzeit (1431-1445)*, vol. I. *Privatbriefe* (Viena, 1909), 567-568, nr. 192.

barons, including John Hunyadi, who controlled all the regions east of the Tisa, i.e., the Voivodeship of Transylvania, the Banate of Severin, and the Captaincy of Belgrade. Although the second measure seemed clear, it was not easy to implement, as Ladislaus the Posthumous, along with the Crown of Saint Stephen, was in the "custody" of his uncle, Frederick III of Habsburg, King of the Romans. With the stubbornness and perseverance typical of his dynasty, Frederick III did not give up the infant king, who represented his advantage in relations with the Hungarian Kingdom.⁵⁰

Present at the Diet in Pest was also Pietre Vasquez, the envoy of the Veneto-Burgundian-Papal fleet that had failed the previous year to block the passage of Murad II's army across the Bosphorus and had wintered in Constantinople. Rumors about the miraculous survival of Wladislas Jagiello after the Battle of Varna had reached the Byzantine capital, prompting the captains of the fleet, the Burgundian knight Walerand de Wavrin and Cardinal Francesco Condulmieri, to plan an expedition to conquer all the fortresses of "Thrace" to find the lost king. For this adventure, however, they needed the support of John Hunyadi's land army, so they sent Vasquez to the Kingdom of Hungary.

The voivode of Transylvania and the other prelates and barons at the Diet in Pest promised the envoy to support the crusader fleet with 8,000 - 10,000 men, who were meant to reach the Danube by mid-August. The positive answer received by Pietre Vasquez was the signal that Walerand de Wavrin and Francesco Condulmieri were waiting for to set off with their fleet of eight war galleys, through the Black Sea, up to the Danube, where they would merge with John Hunyadi's army. In the first phase, the crusader fleet joined Vlad Dracul's cavalry in Brăila, and the combined forces subsequently conquered the Ottoman fortresses of Turtucaia, Giurgiu, and Rusciuk. Meanwhile, at the beginning of August, a message arrived from the voivode of Transylvania, announcing that the mobilization of his army was still in progress and that it would reach the Danube only in the first decade of September. In fact, John Hunyadi arrived there on September 14, when the Crusader fleet and the Wallachian horsemen were besieging the fortress of Turnu (Măgurele).

The Christian forces, whose numbers increased considerably with the troops brought by the Transylvanian voivode, besieged the Ottoman outpost at Turnu (Măgurele) in vain. Their attempt to conquer the mighty fortress of Nicopolis, located across the Danube on the southern bank,

⁵⁰ János M. Bak, Pál Engel, James Ross Sweeney, Paul B. Harvey Jr. (eds.), *Decreta regni mediaevalis Hungariae / The Laws of the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary*, vol. II. 1301-1457 (Salt Lake City, 1992), 106-111.

was also unsuccessful. In the meantime, the recently mobilized troops of the Ottoman borderlands appeared near Nicopolis, where the Christian allies also drew up their battle lines. Against all expectations, the Turks did not engage in battle but turned their backs and headed south into Ottoman Bulgaria.

As he later explained to Walerand de Wavrin and Francesco Condulmieri, John Hunyadi forbade his army to pursue the Ottomans due to the lack of supplies and the danger of being routed by a massive Ottoman counterattack, which could jeopardize the entire Kingdom of Hungary. After this failed campaign, the Transylvanian voivode dismissed the crusader fleet, which sailed back to Constantinople, while he and his land army returned to the Kingdom of Hungary.⁵¹

John Hunyadi actually intended to keep the peace with Murad II, mediated in the same summer by Vlad Dracul, to regroup his forces for an offensive anti-Ottoman campaign in retaliation for the defeat at Varna. Peace with the Sublime Porte was also necessary due to the threats from Roman King Frederick III of Habsburg and the Styrian count Ulrich Cilli. In the summer of 1445, the King of the Romans attacked the western counties of the Kingdom of Hungary, occupying several cities, including Kőszeg, under the pretext that Hungarian border troops had plundered his Austrian dominions on several occasions. In the autumn of the same year, the Hungarians tried through diplomatic means to recover the lost fortresses and cities and to release Ladislaus the Posthumous and the Crown of St. Stephen from the "custody" of King Frederick III. However, all negotiations failed, making it clear to everyone that the succession to the Hungarian throne would remain unresolved for many more years.⁵²

In 1445-1446, Ulrich Cilli tried to take the Banate of Slavonia by force, ruled by the family of Francis Tallóci, the spiritual father of John Hunyadi. During this armed conflict, two members of the Tallóci family lost their lives, and many of their estates were usurped. Thus, besides his duty to maintain the internal peace of the Hungarian Kingdom, our hero had personal reasons to begin a full-scale *vendetta* against the Styrian count.⁵³ In March-April 1446, John Hunyadi launched a retaliation campaign against the Styrian domains of the Cillis, employing the *akıncı*

⁵¹ Walerand de Wavrin in Imber, *The Crusade of Varna*, 134-134-165; Pálosfalvi, *From Nicopolis to Mohács*, 142-144.

⁵² Engel, *The Realm of St. Stephen*, p. 288; Georgius Fejér, *Genus, incunabula et virtus Joannis Corvini de Hunyad, regni Hungariae gubernatoris* (Buda, 1844), 103.

⁵³ Tamás Pálosfalvi, "Cilleiek és Tallóciak: küzdelem Szlavóniáéért (1440-1448)," *Századok* 134, 1 (2000), 74-84.

tactics he had learned in his youth. The Transylvanian voivode also hired Ottoman and Wallachian mercenaries due to the peace he had concluded with the sultan. Despite the devastation caused by this campaign, it had no significant political or military consequences, as the voivode's mixed troops failed to conquer any fortresses. Moreover, during the same year, John Hunyadi was forced to recognize Ulrich Cilli as the ban of Slavonia.⁵⁴

The prelates, barons, and nobles of Hungary realized that the succession to the throne would not be resolved soon and that anarchy was about to sweep the entire kingdom, which was threatened from the outside by both the Habsburgs and the Ottomans. Thus, on June 13, 1446, the Estates gathered for a new Diet in Pest, during which they unanimously elected John Hunyadi as lord governor of the Hungarian Kingdom. His enormous prestige, immense wealth, and the popularity and support he enjoyed in the Hungarian army, of which he had been captain-general during the great anti-Ottoman campaigns of 1443-1444, greatly contributed to his election. "I took the heavy burden of the governorship on my shoulders," stated John Hunyadi in the diploma confirming his election as lord governor, as well as the rights and obligations derived from this dignity. By means of this diploma, his authority was limited to the power of the previous kings. The main tasks of the governor were to ensure internal peace, defend the kingdom from external threats, and bring Ladislaus the Posthumous to the throne in Buda.⁵⁵

The negotiations between Frederick III and the great Hungarian embassy delegated to Wiener Neustadt in the spring of 1446 got bogged down due to the stubbornness of the Habsburg monarch. All subsequent diplomatic interventions remained fruitless. Thus, in November-December of the same year, John Hunyadi undertook a military campaign of retaliation against Lower Austria. The governor was accompanied by several barons of the kingdom, at the head of their private retainers (*banderia*), and by several contingents of Ottoman and Wallachian mercenaries, whose presence terrified the civilian population. Although the campaign reached the suburbs of Vienna, it had no concrete military results, serving instead as a demonstration of force intended to bring the King of the Romans to the negotiating table. However, the only condition Frederick III accepted was the surrender of the city of Győr to its

⁵⁴ Pálosfalvi, "Cilleiek és Tallóciak", 88-90.

⁵⁵ Bak, et alii (eds.), *Decreta regni mediaevalis Hungariae / The Laws of the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary*, II, 112-115.

suffragan bishop, Augustus Salánki. Thus, the new round of Hungarian-Habsburg negotiations in 1447 remained without any notable results.⁵⁶

Moreover, in the spring of 1447, Lord Governor John Hunyadi needed to preserve peace with Roman King Frederick III to address a new internal conflict with the Bohemian John Giskra, who had held Upper Hungary (today Slovakia) under his iron fist since the Civil War of 1440-1442. Despite the alliance treaties of 1444 and 1446, and the fact that at the Diet of May 7, 1445, he had been "elected" (i.e., recognized) as one of the seven captains of the kingdom, Giskra and his Hussite mercenaries terrorized the entire northern region of the realm, attacking and plundering the nobility and neighboring towns.⁵⁷ To put an end to this unrest, in June-July 1447, John Hunyadi attempted to deliver a decisive blow by attacking the fortress of Zólyom (today Zvolen, Slovakia), the "headquarters" of Giskra's dominions in Upper Hungary. However, the garrison repelled the attack, forcing the governor's army to withdraw without achieving their objective.⁵⁸ By mid-July, the Lord Governor concluded a new peace treaty with the famous mercenary captain at Rimaszombat (today Rimavská Sobota, Slovakia), which however was ignored by the Hussite rebels.⁵⁹

In the meantime, John Hunyadi prepared a new military expedition to avenge the defeat Murad II inflicted on him in the Battle of Varna on November 10, 1444. Unlike the previous campaigns, this new expedition was not supported by the Holy See. The new Pope, Nicholas V (elected on March 6, 1447), did not proclaim a crusade and urged John Hunyadi to postpone the war up to the last moment. Similarly, the other princes of Christendom were reluctant, providing John Hunyadi with nothing more than generous promises. For instance, Alfonso of Aragon, the King of Naples, promised him no less than 100,000 gold florins.⁶⁰

Instead, John Hunyadi concluded an alliance with the Albanian hero Skanderbeg and replaced the Serbian military power with that of Wallachia and Moldavia, bringing them again under the hegemony of the Hungarian Kingdom. In the fall of 1447, John Hunyadi killed Vlad Dracul

⁵⁶ Teleki, *Hunyadiak kora magyarországon*, X, 205-206, nr. 95; 206-207, nr. 96.

⁵⁷ Cîmpeanu, "Războiul civil din Ungaria 1440-1442," 54-55, 59-62, 66; Bak, et alii (eds.), *Decreta regni mediaevalis Hungariae / The Laws of the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary*, II, 108.

⁵⁸ MNOL, DL 14128.

⁵⁹ Francisc Zichy (ed.), *A Zichy és Vászonkeői gróf Zichy-család idősb ágának okmánytára / Codex diplomaticus domus senioris comitum Zichy de Zich et Vászonkeő*, vol. IX (Budapest, 1899), 169-171, nr. 129.

⁶⁰ Guglielmo Fraknói, "Alfonso re di Napoli, candidato di Giovanni Hunyadi al trono di Ungheria dopo la battaglia di Varna," *Corvina* 2 (1922), 50-59.

after accusing him of betraying the Christian cause. He granted the Wallachian rule to Vladislav II, a member of the rival ruling house called *Dăneștii*. At the beginning of 1448, the lord governor also provided military support to Peter II to seize the Moldavian throne. Voivode Peter managed to overthrow his nephew, Roman, who was left without support after Vlad Dracul lost his throne and life a few months earlier. Consequently, the new voivodes of Wallachia and Moldavia provided a significant military force of approximately 8,000 men to the lord governor of Hungary.⁶¹

On the other hand, the lord governor enjoyed the broad support of the prelates and barons of the Hungarian Kingdom, who not only approved the levy of a series of extraordinary taxes for the material support of the future campaign but also joined his army in large numbers, leading their retinues. In September 1448, John Hunyadi wrote to Pope Nicholas V (who had urged him until the last moment to postpone the armed conflict with the Ottomans) that the war had already been decided, the army gathered, and the orders given, so that no one and nothing could prevent this offensive war, which was started not to be won, but to be ended. The ultimate objective of the campaign was the decisive defeat of Murad II and the expulsion of the Ottomans from Europe. In his correspondence with the princes of Christendom, the lord governor of Hungary described the Turks as aggressors, although, this time, the real aggressor was himself.

The attack signal was the Ottoman siege of the Albanian fortress Svetigrad, in the summer of 1448. After the siege, Sultan Murad retreated to Sofia, but in a brief time, the pashas at the Danube sent him word that the army of the "accursed Janko" crossed the river and headed towards his Balkan dominions. The Padishah ordered the urgent mobilization of Rumelia and Anatolia to set out against the infidels. On October 17, 1448, John Hunyadi and his 24,000 men, including the Wallachian and Moldavian allies, reached Kosovo Polje, where they were intercepted by Murad II's army. Unlike most medieval battles, which lasted only a few hours, this military confrontation lasted three days and two nights between October 18-20, almost without interruption. Despite the technical superiority (consisting of heavy cavalry, firearms, and the Hussite war wagon camp - *wagenburg*), the Christian army was numerically

⁶¹ Liviu Cîmpeanu, "Relațiile lui Iancu de Hunedoara cu Țara Românească și Moldova, 1442-1456. O reevaluare (II)," *Analele Putnei* XVI, 1 (2020), 26-30; Tamás Pálosfalvi, "Skanderbeg and the Hunyadis: Myth and Reality", Csaplár-Degovics Krisztián (ed.), "These were hard times for Skanderbeg, but he had an ally, the Hungarian Hunyadi": *Episodes in Albanian-Hungarian Historical Contacts* (Budapest, 2019), 16-18.

overwhelmed by the Ottoman *gazi* warriors, in their vast majority light cavalry. John Hunyadi and his retainers were separated from the rest of the army and forced to flee during a night attack from October 19 to 20, resulting in the loss of the much-desired revenge battle with Sultan Murad II. The next morning, *wagenburg* and the bulk of the infantry were routed by the janissaries led by the sultan himself.⁶²

Captain-General of Hungary (1453-1456)

After the retreat from the battlefield at Kosovo Polje, John Hunyadi headed north, attempting to reach Hungary. However, while crossing the Serbian Despotate, he was taken prisoner by George Branković. The despot released the lord governor only after John Hunyadi left his eldest son, Ladislaus Hunyadi, as a hostage in Semendria. This episode sparked a political and military conflict between John Hunyadi and George Branković, which persisted for three years, spanning from 1449 to 1451.⁶³

After several rounds of negotiation, on August 7, 1451, the two leaders concluded a peace agreement, solidified by the marriage of Matthias Hunyadi and Elisabeth Cilli-Brankovici, the despot's granddaughter. Additionally, as part of the peace terms, the Serbian sovereign had to pay a substantial compensation of 150,000 gold florins to the governor. However, given the immense sum, George Branković was unable to fulfill this obligation entirely. Instead, he ceded a significant portion of the cities, fortresses, and estates he still possessed in the Kingdom of Hungary to John Hunyadi, thereby significantly augmenting the Hunyadi family's wealth.⁶⁴ The marriage between Matthias Hunyadi and Elisabeth Cilli-Brankovici occurred in December 1453, with the groom being merely ten years old and the bride, twelve.⁶⁵

In 1449, John Hunyadi initially planned a retaliatory campaign following the military setback at Kossovo Polje. However, facing opposition from the prelates and barons of the Hungarian Kingdom, who sought peace, he turned to George Branković to mediate with Murad II. Vladislav II, the voivode of Wallachia, facilitated the first Hungarian-Ottoman truce for one year. Only after the dynastic alliance between the

⁶² Pálosfalvi, "Skanderbeg and the Hunyadis: Myth and Reality," 17-18; Pálosfalvi, *From Nicopolis to Mohács*, 148-166; Emanuel Antoche, "Hunyadi's Campaign of 1448 and the Second Battle of Kosovo Polje (October 17-20)", Norman Housley (ed.), *Reconfiguring the Fifteenth-Century Crusade* (London, 2017), 245-284.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 166-167; Engel, *The Realm of St. Stephen*, 291-292.

⁶⁴ Fejér, *Genus, incunabula et virtus Joannis Corvini de Hunyad*, 149-157, nr. 55; MNOL, DL 37614/Teleki, *Hunyadiak kora magyarországon*, X, 305-312, nr. 147.

⁶⁵ Bonfinis, *Rerum Ungaricarum Decades*, III, liber VII, 166.

Hunyadis and the Branković family was solidified on August 7, 1451, did the aged despot go to Adrianople and mediate a three-year truce between John Hunyadi and Mehmed II, who ascended to the Ottoman throne earlier that year. Mehmed II made peace with all the enemies of his empire to focus on military preparations for the conquest of Constantinople. Taking advantage of the peace on the southern border, the Hungarian lord governor initiated measures for the internal pacification of the kingdom.⁶⁶

John Hunyadi's campaigns against the Hussite rebels in Upper Hungary, led by John Giskra and other mercenary captains, between 1449 and 1452, proved challenging due to resource limitations. Despite his efforts, which relied on his personal wealth, royal revenues, and support from the Hungarian Estates, Hunyadi faced significant obstacles. Giskra, in contrast, had direct control over valuable resources such as mines, royal chambers, and merchant towns, bolstering his military capabilities with Hussite veterans and reinforcements from Bohemia. The disparity in resources hindered Hunyadi's ability to quell the rebellion effectively. His attempts to restore peace in the kingdom fell short, and it wasn't until a decade later, in 1461-1462, that Giskra surrendered the fortresses and cities under his control. This surrender occurred when Giskra entered into the service of King Matthias Corvinus, exchanging his loyalty for a substantial payment.⁶⁷

John Hunyadi faced the challenge of Ladislaus the Posthumous's succession to the Hungarian throne amid conflicts with George Branković and John Giskra. Frederick III, King of the Romans, employed delaying tactics until 1450, focusing on his own political agenda, including preparations for his coronation as Roman Emperor in Rome. By fall 1450, Frederick III reached an agreement with Hunyadi, recognizing him as Lord Governor of Hungary until Ladislaus reached the age of 18 in 1458. This settled the first phase of the succession crisis. However, in spring 1452, Bohemians, led by George of Poděbrady, pressed for Ladislaus's release. Frederick III dispatched his loyal secretary, Aeneas Sylvio Piccolomini, to Prague to address the situation. Piccolomini's diplomatic skills helped ease tensions, persuading the Bohemian Estates to accept Frederick III's proposal to release Ladislaus after his imperial coronation

⁶⁶ Liviu Cîmpeanu, „*Volo pacem per tres annos. O nouă ediție a tratatului dintre Mehmed al II-lea și Iancu de Hunedoara (Adrianopol, 20 nov. 1451)*,” *Studii și Materiale de Istorie Medie* XXXIX (2021), 247-272.

⁶⁷ Kubinyi, *Matthias rex*, 57-59.

in Rome. This resolution marked the end of the second phase of the succession crisis surrounding Ladislaus the Posthumous.

The Austrians, under the leadership of Ulrich Eizinger and the cunning Ulrich Cilli, were less willing to compromise. In the early summer of 1452, Frederick III of Habsburg and Eleanor of Portugal, his new wife, recently crowned in Rome as Emperor and Empress of the Holy Roman Empire, returned to Wiener Neustadt. After the emperor rejected their ultimatum for the release of the young sovereign, the Austrian rebels besieged the imperial residence throughout the summer. Several lay and ecclesiastical princes from the Holy Roman Empire present at the events managed to smooth out the conflict and mediate an agreement between Emperor Frederick and Count Ulrich Cilli, to whom he ceded the custody of Ladislaus the Posthumous in the first days of September 1452.⁶⁸

According to this agreement, in November-December of the same year, a grand Diet took place in Vienna, during which the Austrian, Silesian, Moravian, Bohemian, and Hungarian subjects swore allegiance to the young sovereign. Arriving at the Diet only at Christmas, John Hunyadi also pledged allegiance to Ladislaus Posthumous and relinquished the title of lord governor to him in a lavish ceremony. The young sovereign rewarded our hero with the rank of hereditary count of the Transylvanian-Saxon city and district of Bistrița as a token of appreciation for his military and political merits throughout his entire career, especially during his tenure as Lord Governor of Hungary.⁶⁹

At the insistence of the Hungarian delegation, Ulrich Cilli took Ladislaus the Posthumous to Pressburg (today's Bratislava, Slovakia), where he convened a grand Diet of the Kingdom of Hungary in late January and early February 1453.⁷⁰ On that occasion, the king received the homage of his Hungarian subjects, who, in turn, received confirmation of their ancient liberties, privileges, and laws. Ladislaus the Posthumous issued several solemn charters for John Hunyadi, granting him the

⁶⁸ Heinrich Koller, *Kaiser Friedrich III.* [Darmstadt, 2005], 130-133.

⁶⁹ Thurocz, *Chronica Hungarorum*, I, 263-264; Johannes de Thurocz, *Chronica Hungarorum*, vol. II. *Comentarii*, 2. *Ab anno 1301 usque ad annum 1487*, ed. by Elemér Mályusz, Julius Kristó (Budapest, 1988), 362-363; Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, *Historia Bohemica*, vol. I. *Historisch-kritische Ausgabe des lateinischen Textes*, ed. by Joseph Hejnic și Hans Rothe, translated in German by Eugen Udolph (Köln-Weimar-Viena, 2005), 506-507; Thomas Ebendorfer, *Chronica Austriae*, ed. by Alphons Lhotsky (Berlin-Zürich, 1967), 421.

⁷⁰ Piccolomini, *Historia Bohemica*, I, 510-511; Bonfinis, *Rerum Ungaricarum Decades*, III, liber VII, 175; Bonfinis, *Rerum Ungaricarum Decades*, IV/II, 143; Ebendorfer, *Chronica Austriae*, 420.

Transylvanian-Saxon city and district of Bistrița,⁷¹ the fortresses of Deva and Gurghiu (previously received from King Wladislas),⁷² as well as a new coat of arms. This new coat of arms depicted a red lion with a golden crown in its right claw on a white background, which now accompanied his family crest showing a black raven with a golden ring in its beak on a blue background.⁷³

After the conclusion of the Diet, Ulrich Cilli did not allow Ladislaus the Posthumous to enter the Kingdom of Hungary, fearing the loss of this powerful political asset to the Hungarian Estates. The Styrian count took the young sovereign back to Vienna and then to Prague, where Ladislaus became entangled in the complex political struggles of the Duchy of Austria and the Kingdom of Bohemia until early 1456. Temporarily disgraced due to Ulrich von Eizing's political maneuvers, Ulrich Cilli always remained close to Ladislaus the Posthumous, using him to consolidate his power and political influence. In the spring of 1455, the ambitious count even attempted to assassinate the captain-general of Hungary, but Hunyadi was warned in time by his allies at Court.⁷⁴

Since the Diet of Vienna in the final days of 1452, Ladislaus the Posthumous's hereditary domains fell under the control of a true triumvirate consisting of Ulrich Cilli in Austria, George of Poděbrady in Bohemia, and John Hunyadi in Hungary. After relinquishing the title of lord governor, the king appointed Hunyadi captain-general of the kingdom, tasking him with overseeing the administration of royal revenues. However, in 1453, Hunyadi receded into the background, spending much of his time in Transylvania, where he surveyed his new county of Bistrița and assessed the condition of fortifications along the province's southern frontier.⁷⁵

His opportunity arose in the summer of 1454 when, despite the Treaty of Adrianople of 1451, which had yet to expire, Sultan Mehmed II personally led a large army to attack the Serbian Despot. George Branković left Semendria and sought aid from John Hunyadi in the Kingdom of Hungary. The captain-general swiftly assembled an army and marched directly against the sultan's forces, who were already

⁷¹ MNOL, DL 37618 /Teleki, *Hunyadiak kora magyarországon*, X, 347–356, nr. 174; MNOL, DL 14605 (transumpt)

⁷² MNOL, DL 37617 /Teleki, *Hunyadiak kora magyarországon*, X, 356–363, nr. 175; MNOL, DL 14604 (transumpt).

⁷³ MNOL, DL 24762/Avar Anton (ed.), *A Hunyadiak címereslevelei 1447-1489* (Budapest, 2018), 44-49, nr. V.

⁷⁴ Piccolomini, *Historia Bohemica*, I, 550-565.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 506-511.

besieging the fortress of Semendria. To avoid a bloody clash with the Hungarian forces, Mehmed II lifted the siege and withdrew to Adrianople, leaving 32,000 men under the command of Firuz Beğ to secure his rear guard. In October 1454, John Hunyadi's army defeated Firuz Beğ and his *gazi* warriors at Kruševac, capturing the *akıncı* chieftain and other Ottoman nobles. Following this victory, Hunyadi launched a campaign of plunder and devastation in the Ottoman territories of Western Bulgaria, ranging from Pirot to Vidin.⁷⁶

Dissatisfied with the outcome of the previous campaign, Sultan Mehmed II launched a new military expedition against the Serbian Despotate in 1455, capturing the mining town of Novo Brdo. The news of this conquest spread consternation and concern throughout the Kingdom of Hungary and Christendom at large. A few months after the fall of Constantinople, Pope Nicholas V declared a crusade, intended to be led by the Roman Emperor, Frederick III of Habsburg. The proposal for the new crusade sparked prolonged discussions within the Imperial Diets of 1454 and 1455. The victory achieved by John Hunyadi against Firuz Beğ served as a significant impetus for the forthcoming offensive against the Ottoman forces. With extraordinary efforts, the Franciscan friar John of Capestrano managed to rally a substantial army of crusaders from the Holy Roman Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary by the early summer of 1456. Additionally, in the spring of the same year, Ladislaus the Posthumous pledged before the cardinal-legate Juan de Carvajal to personally lead the new crusade.⁷⁷

The military preparations of Christendom proved crucial, as by the time the crusaders arrived at King Ladislaus Posthumus' camp in Vienna, Sultan Mehmed II had already besieged the fortress of Belgrade with his formidable Ottoman army, numbering between 40,000 to 50,000 men. Belgrade, deemed "the key to Hungary," was a critical strategic point. The defense of this vital stronghold was entrusted to the forces led by John Hunyadi's retinue and the crusaders under the command of Friar John of Capestrano. Recognizing the urgency of the situation, the king appointed John Hunyadi as captain-general of Hungary on April 7, 1456. However, due to the scarcity of resources caused by a famine the previous year, the

⁷⁶ Pálosfalvi, *From Nicopolis to Mohács*, 171; see also John Hunyadi's report to Emperor Friedrich III, sent on November 10, 1454, in MNOL, DF 290201 f. 83 v. – 84 r./Fejér, *Genus, incunabula et virtus Joannis Corvini de Hunyad*, 202-204, nr. 67.

⁷⁷ Pálosfalvi, *From Nicopolis to Mohács*, 171-174; Kenneth M. Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant (1204-1571)*, vol. II. *The Fifteenth Century* (Philadelphia, 1978), 149-160; 163-173; James D. Mixson, *The Crusade of 1456. Texts and Documentation in Translation* (Toronto-Buffalo-London, 2022), 21-24.

mobilization of the army he was to lead could only commence after the harvest, beginning on August 1, 1456.⁷⁸

Therefore, John Hunyadi could count on approximately 500 horsemen (including around 150 men-at-arms) from his personal retinue, along with another 500 horsemen under the command of John of Kórógy, the *ban* of Mačva. Kórógy's forces hailed from the southern military province, which was directly threatened by the Ottoman invasion. Despite the efforts of both the Serbian army led by George Branković and John Hunyadi's troops, the advance of Sultan Mehmed II's army, along with his river fleet, could not be halted. By July 3, 1456, the Ottoman forces had completely encircled the fortress of Belgrade.

After an unsuccessful attempt to confront the Ottoman fleet at the Danubian fortress of Cuvin, John Hunyadi retreated inland, considering for the first time in his career giving up the fight against the Turks due to lack of military support from the Court and distrust in the military capability of the crusaders recruited by John of Capestrano. It was only through great effort that the Franciscan friar convinced the captain-general of Hungary to join the anti-Ottoman crusade, subsequently devising a coherent strategic plan to assist the besieged fortress. Thanks to this plan, on July 14, 1456, the fleet assembled by John Hunyadi upstream at Slankamen, supported by his retinue's horsemen and John of Capestrano's crusaders, who advanced in parallel on the right bank of the Danube, successfully broke the blockade imposed by the Ottoman galleys on both riverbanks of the fortress, thus reopening the naval supply route to Belgrade. Fresh troops, weapons, ammunition, and provisions arrived as a result of this victory. Following this success, John of Capestrano's crusaders and John Hunyadi's retainers established a camp at Zemun on the left bank of the Sava river, where they were later joined by the horsemen from John of Kórógy's retinue. Between July 15-21, 1456, John Hunyadi and his elite troops played a crucial role in reconstructing and defending the south-eastern land fortifications of Belgrade, which had been destroyed by the formidable Ottoman artillery. During the decisive Ottoman assault on the night of July 21-22, 1456, John Hunyadi and the knights under his banner led a heroic charge against the Ottoman forces, who attacked violently for the third time under the direct command of the sultan. The Christian defenders, aided by the garrison of the fortress and the crusaders, repelled the assault, securing Belgrade's defense. Concerned about a potential counteroffensive by Mehmed II, John Hunyadi strictly forbade anyone from leaving the city. Despite his orders,

⁷⁸ Pálosfalvi, *From Nicopolis to Mohács, 174-178*.

some Crusaders disobeyed and chased retreating enemies. In response, John of Capestrano crossed from Zemun to Belgrade, where more crusaders gathered around him, launching an attack on nearby Ottoman artillery positions. Surprised, the Ottoman artillerymen and guards fled, leaving their guns to the attackers. The Crusaders, reinforced by new contingents from Belgrade and Zemun, launched a chaotic assault on the Ottoman camp, where a fierce battle ensued, involving Sultan Mehmed II himself. The use of captured artillery aided the success of the crusader offensive. The two armies separated only at dusk, and the next day, on July 23, 1456, the Ottoman besiegers unexpectedly broke camp. Though earlier accounts suggest John Hunyadi and his elite troops were involved in the decisive Crusader attack on the Ottoman camp, historical sources do not support this claim. Witnesses attest that John Hunyadi and his aides did not visit the deserted Ottoman camp until July 23, when the captured artillery was brought into the fortress of Belgrade.⁷⁹

It should be emphasized that the "shameful retreat" of Mehmed II's army was not only caused by the chaotic yet heroic counter-offensive of the defenders of Belgrade but also by the approach of Ladislaus the Posthumous's crusader army.⁸⁰ Drawing from the lessons of the significant Hungarian-Ottoman conflicts of the previous decade, it appears that in 1456, the sultan opted to avoid direct armed conflict with the Kingdom of Hungary, much like he did in similar situations in the years 1463, 1464, and 1476.⁸¹

For John Hunyadi, the victory at Belgrade proved fatal, as the multiple wounds he sustained in battle led to his infection with the plague that ravaged both Christians and Ottomans throughout that entire summer. Consequently, our hero succumbed to the dreadful disease in his military camp at Zemun on August 11, 1456. His family laid him to rest in the Catholic cathedral of Alba Iulia, yet for reasons unknown, his tomb remained unadorned with a knight's effigy until 1533. It was then, at the behest of King John Szapolyai, seeking to legitimize his reign through alleged kinship with the Hunyadis, that the last Catholic bishop of

⁷⁹ I have reconstructed this historical outline of the battles that were fought around Belgrade in the summer of 1456 from directly on the reports of John Hunyadi, John of Capestrano, and John of Tagliacozzo, as key-figures and eyewitnesses of the events, see Mixson, *The Crusade of 1456*, 87-88, nr. 7, 88-91, nr. 8, 91-93, nr. 9 and 10, 93-95, nr. 11, 95-104, nr. 12, 104-107, nr. 13, 149-216, nr. 25.

⁸⁰ For the approach of King Ladislaus' crusader army o Belgrade, in the late summer of 1456, see Held, *Hunyadi*, 171-172.

⁸¹ Pálosfalvi, *From Nicopolis to Mohács*, 203-221, 256-258; Liviu Cîmpeanu, "Campaniile lui Ștefan Báthory, căpitanul lui Matia Corvinul, în Moldova și Țara Românească, în vara-toamna anului 1476," *Analele Putnei XV*, 1 (2019), 51-69.

Transylvania, Johannes Statileus, adorned the tomb with the effigy.⁸² However, John Hunyadi's tomb fell victim to raiding and destruction during the unrest that swept through the Transylvanian Principality at the turn of the 17th century.⁸³

Conclusion

Synthesizing our research alongside recent historiographical works, it becomes apparent that within the entourage of various Christian and Muslim warlords and princes, John Hunyadi acquired the tactical knowledge and confidence necessary to confront the expanding Ottoman Empire. Victories over the *akıncı* raiders early in his career reignited the phenomenon known as the Late Crusade. However, major armed confrontations during campaigns such as those in 1443-44 and 1448 revealed that technical superiority alone - encompassing heavy armor, portable firearms, and Hussite war wagons - was insufficient against the overwhelming might of the Ottoman army. It was only during the battles for the fortress of Belgrade in the summer of 1456 that the numerical advantage of the Ottomans could be countered, thanks to the sizable crusader host assembled by John of Capestrano. Contrary to previous historiography, which primarily focused on John Hunyadi's anti-Ottoman campaigns, our examination highlights his deep involvement in Central European politics, owing to his prominent position in the Kingdom of Hungary - one of the preeminent kingdoms of Christendom. In summary, John Hunyadi emerges as a multifaceted figure, ambitious and willing to negotiate politically to achieve military objectives and elevate the Hunyadi family to prominence among the noble families of Central Europe.

⁸² Tibor Neumann, Szabolcs Varga, "The Szapolyai Family's Representation of Power", Pál Fodor, Szabolcs Varga (eds.), *A Forgotten Hungarian Royal Dynasty: The Szapoyais* (Budapest, 2020), 77-79.

⁸³ Adrian Andrei Rusu, *Alba Iulia. Între fondarea eparhiei și capitala principatului Transilvaniei* (Alba Iulia, 2009), 62-64.

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