

The Battle of Belgrade in Venetian Sources

Ioan-Aurel Pop

“Babeş-Bolyai” University,
Cluj-Napoca

In the 1400', the medieval ideals of chivalry and of Christianity were gradually replaced by the political and military interests of various states. Venice was one of the first European political units to embrace such pragmatic principles, perfectly expressed in the well-known formula: *Siamo Veneziani e poi Cristiani*. Up to a certain point, the remaining Christian monarchies of Central and Eastern Europe and Venice had similar interests with regard to the Ottoman Empire: stop its advance and limit its control over the eastern Mediterranean¹.

The *Long Campaign* (1443–1444) of John Hunyadi, voivode of Transylvania, provided the Western Christian powers with the opportunity to define their position in what concerned the anti-Ottoman struggle. Among those who supported the anti-Ottoman efforts at that time we find, naturally, the Holy See (which ended up proclaiming a new crusade once every four years), Alphonse (Alfonso) I (V), king of Aragon, Naples, and Sicily, Venice, and duke Philip III the Good's Burgundy. Except for the latter leader, still animated by the ideals of Christian chivalry, all the other actors were pursuing rather selfish interests, nicely dressed in rhetoric².

As a rule, Venice conducted an anti-Ottoman policy, while showing considerable caution and realism, seeking to further its trading interests and maintain freedom of navigation in the entire Levant. To anger the *Turk* at a time when victory was not certain was a risky gamble, and, over the long term, the recovery of the Christian powers from the Balkans, Venice's rival and potential enemies, could have been less advantageous than a *pax ottomana* tolerant with regard to Venetian merchants. Consequently, the doges and the Senate had refused to commit themselves to uncertain wars, fought by isolated forces or fragile Christian alliances.

For instance, in 1443–1444 Venice did not keep its promise to send a fleet to the east. Only after the disaster of Varna (10th of November 1444) did Venice join some Hungarian noblemen, papal legate Giuliano Cesarini, the duke of Burgundy, and Alphonse of Aragon and Naples in support of a new expedition meant to repel the *Turk*. An important role in breaking the 10 years-long peace with the Turks (in the summer of 1444)³ was played by the Venetian ambassador Reguardati and the papal legate Cesarini. Even so, the republic had only a modest contribution to the campaign, and eventually concluded a peace with the Ottomans (1446). Prior to this, Hunyadi, supported by Vlad II *Dracul* (the Devil), prince of Walachia, by the Burgundian-papal fleet and the Venetian cardinal Francesco Condulmer, had resumed the anti-Ottoman offensive along the Danube (1445), but with little success.

¹ E.g. Ovidiu Cristea, '*Siamo Veneziani e poi Cristiani: Some Remarks Concerning the Venetian Attitude towards the Crusade*', *AIRCRU*, III (2001), pp. 105-116, and the studies in *Dall'Adriatico al Mar Nero: Veneziani e Romeni, tracciati di storie comuni*, edited by Grigore Arbore-Popescu (Rome 2003).

² Camil Mureşanu, *Iancu de Hunedoara* [John Hunyadi] (Bucharest 1968²); Adrian Andrei Rusu, *Ioan de Hunedoara și românii din vremea sa. Studii* [John Hunyadi and the Romanians of his Time. Studies] (Cluj-Napoca 1999); Iulian-Mihai Damian, '*La Depositeria della Crociata* (1463-1490) e i sussidi dei pontefici romani a Mattia Corvino', *AIRCRU*, VIII (2006), pp. 135-152.

³ Pál Engel, '*János Hunyadi and the peace of Szeged* (1444)', *AOASH*, XLVII (1994), 3-4, p. 255.

The city of the doges knew very well that, following the death of king Wladislaw (Władislaw, Ulászló) I (III) at Varna (1444), the position of Hunyadi in Hungary was rather fragile (a situation which lasted until his appointment as governor, in 1446). Consequently, on that occasion the galleons coming from the Lagoon refused to join those sent by the pope and by Burgundy⁴. Still, in the completely new political context of 1447, John's intention to organize a wide anti-Ottoman front, with forces from the Danube region, the Balkans, and Western Europe, had some success with Doge Francesco Foscari. He was the first Western leader to be contacted in this respect by Hunyadi, in late 1446, but the answer (received in January 1447) was disappointing: the Christian forces had failed to achieve the expected successes, and for the time being Venice believed it had done enough for the crusade.

The other messages sent by John to Venice (the mission of count *Vulchus*) during that same year led to similar results. Venice, at war with Francesco Sforza and with the papal debt still unpaid, claimed that it was unable to offer any assistance (the 1447 treaty between John and Alphonse also failed to provide concrete assistance). In 1448, another Hungarian envoy, Nicholas Laszocki, a deacon from Krakow (Kraków), was dispatched twice to Venice and Rome. He returned with the doge's and the senate's praise for the governor of Hungary and explanations for their failure to intervene (Venice's wars against Sforza and Alphonse). The lack of allies and sufficient forces led to John Hunyadi's defeat at Kossovopolje, in 1448.

The Republic maintained and expressed (chiefly indirectly) the same reservations with regard to the anti-Ottoman struggle until around the fall of Constantinople. Then, fearing the closure of the straits connecting the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, Venice decided to become more actively involved. Its involvement was indeed crucial, because at that time Venice had the largest fleet in the Christian world. In fact, during the siege of Constantinople (May 1453), the only things the Ottomans feared were the Venetian fleet and John's ground forces. A document dated 28 January 1453 shows that the Republic sent its envoy Mapheo Franco to *Iohannem, supremum capitaneum in Ungaria*⁵. Even so, despite the new attitude of Venice—now the most active Western supporter of Byzantium—, who broke the peace of 1446, the great city fell taking with it the symbol of an entire civilization.

In 1454 and 1455, John Hunyadi and his king, Ladislas (László) V the Posthumous, once again demanded Venetian help. At that time, Venice was trying to adapt to the new context by negotiating another peace treaty with the sultan (1454). Consequently, the senate gave the traditional answer: Venice will fight, but only as part of a strong Christian coalition.

Evidence in this respect is a document issued by the Venetian leadership on 15 February 1454, which details the answer to be given to *venerabilis utriusque iuris doctori, domino Alberto, archidiacono Transilvano, oratori serenissimi regis Hungarie ac illustri domini Iohannis, supremi capitanei ipsius regni ac aliorum baronum Hungarie ac spectabilis militi domino Iunio de Gradibus, oratori illustri domini despoti Servie*, who had just presented and explained to the Senate, though *credential letters* and other writs, the situation in the area and the extreme willingness of the *Hungarian Crown and of the aforementioned lords* to drive the Turks out of Greece, provided that the fleet of the Republic was there to assist, especially since support had also been promised by the pope, by the king of Aragon, and by other powers⁶.

The instructions on how to respond are clear. To praise what the aforementioned lords had done for the glory of the Almighty and of the Christian faith, and then to explain that

⁴ See the chapter concerning John Hunyadi in Eugen Denize, *Țările Române și Veneția. Relații politice (1441-1541). De la Iancu de Hunedoara la Petru Rareș* [The Romanian Countries and Venice. Political Relations: From John Hunyadi to Peter (Petru) Rareș] (Bucharest 1995).

⁵ ASVe, S.S., *Deliberazioni*, reg. 20, c. 6^r.

⁶ ASVe, S.S., *Deliberazioni*, reg. 20, c. 56^v.

Venice could take no action until the other Christian powers, chiefly the pope, Calixtus III, and the Roman emperor, Frederic (Friedrich) III, decided to finally make a move.

Hunyadi continued to militate for a coalition (contacting the Holy See, through legate Juan de Carvajal or Genoa), but to no avail. He received promises. The pope proclaimed a new crusade. In 1456, when it became clear that Mehmed II, the conqueror of Byzantium, was poised to attack Hungary at Belgrade (Beograd, Nándorfehérvár), John was, nevertheless, completely deprived of any official military and political support from the Western states.

The battle of Belgrade is seen as the last real crusade, fought by Christians from the East and the West, most of them common folk, driven (including their commander, Hunyadi), by the desire to save Christendom and their preservation of traditional values. Although Venice, bound by its peace treaty of 1454 with the *Turk*, did not intervene, it paid close attention to the unfolding events. In 1453, it had been the first Western power to hear of the fall of Byzantium, and it had brought word of it to the rest of the Catholic world. In 1456, it was among the first Western states to hear about the victory of Belgrade, and was happy to spread the news.

On August 5, 1456, Venice required that an envoy (*unus nuncius noster*) be sent with credentials *ad reverendissimum dominum cardinalem Sancti Angeli, legatum in Hungaria*. Juan Carvajal was to be told that his recent message of July 25 had helped the senate understand, *non sine animi nostri singulari molestia et displacentia*, the grave danger that had threatened the Kingdom of Hungary because of the pressure put by the Ottoman power and of their animosity towards the Christians. A response to the Spanish cardinal was also drawn up⁷.

On August 12, 1456 the Senate sent a letter to cardinal de Sant' Angelo, apostolic legate in Hungary, confirming the arrival of a courier with news from *reverendissimam dominationem vestram*. The answer had been delayed by the plague *que in hac urbe nostra presenti anno viguit*, and therefore the Senate now wished to give a detailed answer to the high prelate's message. The letter also indicates that the Venetian Republic had also received messages from the *Cardinal of Strigonium* (Esztergom, Gran) and from the *Bishop of Sibinico* (Šibenik)⁸

[The last letter included an original text from] *the illustrious John, Count of Bistrița [...], announcing his blessed victory over the Turkish emperor, who was driven away in shame, his men scattered in all directions, after losing the ballistae, the siege engines, and all the ships he had had on the Danube, some of them captured, the others set on fire.*

The Venetian authorities believed that *this had certainly been the work of Our Lord* and said that John Hunyadi's victory had *pleased their souls and filled them with such joy that words are not even able to express it*. Also included were *the most sincere congratulations for reverendissima paternitate vestra* (cardinal Juan Carvajal), and one clarification:

[The Republic] *did not consider it necessary for the time being to reply to the letter reverendissime paternitatis vestre if not to say that it hoped to learn more about the fruits of this victory and about other and more fortunate successes of the Christians, obtained with the help of the almighty God, so that the name of Christ, scorned and mocked by its enemies, would bring about their destruction and fill their hearts with fear.*

The same day, the Senate sent *its secretary*, Petro de Thomasiis, *quanto celerius potes* to Hungary, *ad reverendissimum dominum cardinalem Sancti Angeli*, to whom he was to present the usual credentials with the consecrated polite formulas and tell him about the troubles

⁷ ASVe, S.S., *Deliberazioni*, reg. 20, c. 98^f (edited in AAV, XXIII, no. 6445, pp. 155-158).

⁸ ASVe, S.S., *Deliberazioni*, reg. 20, c. 98^v (edited in AAV, XXIII, no. 6446, pp. 158-159).

caused that year by the plague that had ravaged Venice. Also, he was to tell that the courier (*tabalarium*) mentioned above (the wording is the same as in the previous letter) had brought news of the great victory from Belgrade⁹. Then come rather similar fragments presenting the battle, giving thanks to God for the victory, and congratulating cardinal de Sant' Angelo. This time, however, the Venetian authorities mentioned one *great and burning desire and hope*:

[They wanted that] *after this glorious victory, things would proceed in such a manner as to inspire the Christian princes to take action, for they must undoubtedly feel more encouraged and determined to summon their men to arms.*

The Senate also indicated that it had sent this secretary to cardinal Carvajal precisely because it wanted these matters to be perfectly understood. The legate was insistently asked to notify the Venetians on anything regarding the negotiations, so that they could stimulate the other Christian leaders and potentates to take joint action and close more agreements, indicating that the Venetians were ready to defend *the honor and the glory of the Christian faith and of the holy Church of Our Lord*, like their fathers before them.

Petro de Thomasiis was also told to visit the cardinal archbishop of Esztergom, Denis (Dénes) Szécsi, himself an apostolic legate. After the usual formalities, the legate was to be told that the Senate had received the message sent by the archbishop through a courier on 28 July, a message that included the letter of *the illustrious Count of Bistrița announcing the blessed news of his victory over the Turkish emperor*. The secretary was to thank the archbishop for his letter and tell him that the Venetians had helped his courier reach Rome with his other letter, addressed to the pope. Finally, he was ordered to notify the authorities upon the completion of his tasks and discretely inquire and draw up a report concerning the situation in that country, the preparations being made there, what the people were saying and what decisions were being made, and anything else of potential interest to the Republic.

Also on August 12, 1456, the senate sent a letter directly to *illustri et magnifico domino Iohanni de Huniade, comiti Bistriciensis et Regni Hungarie capitaneo generali*. After showing how they had learned about the Christian victory (from a letter sent by the archbishop of Esztergom and from the letter sent by John himself), the high dignitaries indicated that they:

were so overcome with joy and happiness that they could write nothing and say nothing, [that] all Christians owed an infinite debt of gratitude, first of all to the all-merciful God, who would never abandon His people and all those who have hope in Him and who is the source of all the good, [that] his excellency [John] deserved praise and eternal glory, because his virtue, generosity, and wisdom [had made all that possible]. And we [the senators], who have so much appreciation for your august person, whose supreme virtue and dedication and natural inclination to defend, save, and bring glory to Christianity have long been known to us..., wish that you fare better and better, and pray with the utmost faith to the divine majesty so that your illustrious person enjoys as long a life as possible unto the complete destruction of the unfaithful and the glory of the faith and of Christianity.

They had long believed that the Christian Republic rested on the mighty shoulders of John, on his honor, glory, and victory, and that they all shared the sincere joy of the great victory.

A less enthusiastic letter of the Senate, dated September 20, 1456, ordered the same secretary Petro de Thomasiis to once again visit Cardinal de Sant' Angelo, in Buda or wherever he may be, and do it quickly, for urgent Christian matters. At one point, the message says that the Venetian dignitaries had learned about the various rumors concerning the demise of the *illustrious and magnanimous lord John, captain of the Christian armies, a thing that most*

⁹ ASVe, S.S., *Deliberazioni*, reg. 20, c. 99^f (edited in AAV, XXIII, no. 6448, pp. 160-162).

certainly disturbed us deeply. When in Hungary, the secretary was to visit, if possible, the sons of the illustrious lord John, offer condolences and speak about the pain *nomine nostro de casu dicti patri sui, quem singulariter diligebamus*. He was to assure the sons of the sup port of the doge and of the Senate in any matter concerning their honor or their interests¹⁰.

The victory of Belgrade is appears also in a letter dated October 23rd, 1456, mentioning the venerable *prepositus Posoniensi*, the provost of Bratislava (Pressburg, Pozsony), Ladislav V's advisor and envoy, dispatched to Venice with a message from his king who demanded Venetian support against the *Turks*¹¹. The Senate indicated that Ladislav be told about the great joy caused by the glorious victory of Belgrade against the enemies of the Christian faith, but also about its great sadness, because after the aforementioned victory and after the messenger from Hungary left Venice for Rome, *we were surprised to hear of the death of illustris domini Iohannis Vayvode*, followed by the *dissolutio exercitus christianus*.

Wishing to understand these matters [the senators said], we have recently dispatched one of our secretaries to the honorable Cardinal de Sant' Angelo, apostolic legate in that region, to find out more about the terms and the conditions of these matters and thus make it possible for us to make more pertinent and better decisions. As a conclusion, we shall say that, as true Christian believers, walking in the footsteps of our ancestors, for the honor and the glory of Christianity, with our souls ready while we are still on this earth, we shall be prepared to always do our duty alongside the other powers.

As we can see from these documents, in 1456 the Venetian interest in the preparations, the events, and the consequences of the Belgrade crusade was very high, taking the form of intense diplomatic activities. Venice used the Catholic hierarchy of the Holy See (Cardinal Juan de Carvajal) and of Hungary (the archbishop of Esztergom and other local prelates), its own network of diplomats and envoys (Mapheo Franco, secretary Petro de Thomasiis), received messenger and couriers from Hungary (including a certain Albert, a Transylvanian archdeacon), Serbia, Albania, and exchanged letters with John Hunyadi himself. After having recently experienced one of the periodic plague outbreaks so common at the time, Venice saw the victory of Belgrade as a great achievement of the Christian world, and John Hunyadi as a great military and political leader, worthy of praise and recognition.

Of course, behind the polite words lay much pragmatism and vested interests, combined with the Venetian reluctance to become involved before the actual establishment by the pope and the emperor of a great Christian coalition likely to ensure victory. Venice was caught in its own web of international relations, it had treaties with the Porte, was not always certain of the cooperation of Albanian leader Skanderbeg (concerning his trading centers), feared a renewed Hungarian expansion in Dalmatia and even the revival of the Christian states from the Balkans (likely to be more hostile than the *Turk* to the Venetian interests in the area). All these elements put serious restraints on the pan-Christian zeal of the *Communitatis Venetiarum*, which would later call itself, beginning with June 15 1483, the *Serenissima*.

However, beyond the cold calculations, we find impressive warmth in Thomasiis' mission to find the sons of the late John and convey Venice's sympathy and support. Christendom's hero is referred to as count of Bistrița (Bistriz, Besztrece), as captain general of Hungary, and in a few other ways, but in the last letter discussed here he is once again *Voivode John*, the title he cherished, which he never gave up, and which had made his fame.

Belgrade was a landmark in the history of Central and Southeastern Europe, something that Venice knew full well. After the victory, the Venetians expected to see a great political

¹⁰ ASVe, S.S., *Deliberazioni*, reg. 20, c. 101^v (edited in AAV, XXIII, no. 6451, pp. 163-165).

¹¹ ASVe, S.S., *Deliberazioni*, reg. 20, c. 106^r (edited in AAV, XXIII, no. 6461, pp. 169-170).

and military mobilization of the European states, in order to press the advantage. It had become obvious to the Republic that the time of crusading enthusiasm had passed and that one needed strong political and military alliances. Unfortunately, the great general was no more! With him, the light of the world had perished—to quote the sad words of Giovanni da Capestrano—and Christian impetus was waning.

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