

UNHOLY CONQUEST – UNHOLY RECOVERY? THE FALL OF BYZANTIUM AND THE MIRACLE OF BELGRADE

ALEXANDRU SIMON

Prior to the decisive confrontations between the Ottoman army and the crusaders at Belgrade (July 21–23, 1456), ‘the free Christian world’ awaited a new disaster that had to complete the catastrophe of 1453 and open *Italia* and *Germania* as well to the Ottoman power. The almost desperate attempts of Serbian despot George Branković and Walachian ruler Wladislaw II (both, until then, the ‘sworn’ enemies of hero John Hunyadi) to halt Mehmed II’s northern advance had ended badly in June. The ‘crusaders of Belgrade’ were one step away from fighting each other, for reasons of tongue or for motifs of social rank. Hunyadi’s ‘professionals’ and Giovanni da Capestrano’s ‘penitents’ had great chances of becoming martyrs if they did not kill each other before falling into Ottoman spears. However, the miracle took place. Mehmed had to retreat. The Christian dreams began. Constantinople was to be recovered, then Nazareth and eventually Jerusalem. For a good while, in that summer and autumn of 1456, many actually believed that Constantinople had been liberated¹.

At that time, John Hunyadi had died. Viewed as the true heir to the imperial crown of Constantine XI Palaeologus (by the Greeks in his entourage), as the mythical founder of Byzantium, the *Yanko bin Madyan* (by the Ottomans/Turks), the late hero had started as a misfit and reached immense power and prestige in the 1440s. It was time for another ‘set’ of misfits to take center stage and prolong the existence of the hopes and dreams born by the ‘miracle of Belgrade’. That is at least what a letter in an Italian archive suggests. In fact, it was drafted before news of

¹ For the events of 1455–1456: Johannes Hofer, ‘Der Sieger von Belgrad’, *Historisches Jahrbuch* (Stuttgart), LI (1931), pp. 163–212; Franz Babinger, *Der Quellenwert der Berichte über den Entsatz von Belgrad am 21/22 Juli. 1456* (off-print *Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, NS, VIII (1956), 6) (Munich, 1957); Norman Housley, ‘Giovanni da Capistrano and the Crusade of 1456’, in *Crusading in the Fifteenth Century: Message and Impact*, edited by N. Housley (New York, 2004), pp. 94–115; Al. Simon, ‘The Lion in Winter: John Hunyadi from Kossovopolje to Belgrade’, in *Between Worlds*, II, *Extincta est lucerna orbis: John Hunyadi and his Time* (= *Mélanges d’Histoire Générale*, NS, I, 2), edited by Ana Dumitran, Loránd Mádly, Al. Simon (Cluj-Napoca, 2008), pp. 491–522.

Hunyadi's death arrived. This might indicate that there was plenty of room for misfits which could have redeemed (the) Christian honor and resurrected an elusive dream. At any rate, it completed the background that enabled also some altogether sketchy plans for the canonization of the later hero. But he had been at least as mortal and sinful (given also his bribing that contributed to the crusader disaster of Varna) as the 'new liberators'².

I. Genoese, Jews, Ottomans and Constantinople

The Genoese had two crusader deadly sins: Nicopolis and Varna. In 1396, they had supplied to Bayezid I the plans of the crusader army. In 1444, they had provided Murad II with the ships that had allowed him to urgently return to Europe and take the 'new crusaders' by surprise. 'Obviously', not all Genoese had been involved. Nonetheless, the image of the centrifugal Genoese colonial empire bled because of the instrumental role played by the Genoese in the East during the Balkan and Pontic rise of the Ottomans and because of their slave trade (which, contrary even to 'more liberal rules', also involved many Christian slaves). However, the fall of Byzantium (for which they had been blamed too at first) had basically thrown them into the arms of the crusade. It was not just the theater of Christian duty. Venice too, Genoa's archrival, believed the crusader commitment of the Ligurian republic. It was not just a desperate involvement, but a practical one. Genoa had refused to support Hunyadi against the *Turk* because she viewed him as already too weak. In return, she had invested considerably in the fleet that to attack Mehmed II in the Eastern Mediterranean³.

² See, for instance, Stéphane Yerasimos, 'Enquête sur un héros: *Yanko bin Madyan*, le fondateur mythique de Constantinople', in *Mélanges offerts à Louis Bazin par ses disciples, collègues et amis*, edited by Jean-Louis Bracqué-Grammont, Rémy Dor (Paris, 1992), pp. 213–217 (with reference also to the matter of the feared, by the Ottoman Turks, *Benī asfer* nations in the north, to which the Magyars/Hungarians too belonged); Péter Szabó, 'Heilige Haltungen und ritterliche Merkmale im Kultus des Johannes Hunyadi', and Dan Ioan Mureșan, 'Le royaume de Hongrie et la prise de Constantinople: croisade et union ecclésiastique en 1453', in *Between Worlds*, II, namely pp. 169–171 and pp. 489–490.

³ For Genoa's oriental policies: Domenico Gioffre, *Il mercato degli schiavi a Genova nel secolo XV* (= *Collana storica di fonti e studi*, XI) (Genoa, 1971); Roberto S. Lopez, 'Venise et Gênes: deux styles, une réussite', in Idem, *Su e giù per la storia di Genova* (= *Collana storica di fonti e studi*, XX) (Genoa, 1975), pp. 35–42; Enrico Basso, 'From Cooperation to Clash of Interests: Genoa and the Turks in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries', in *The Turks*, III, editor Hasan Celal Güzel (Ankara, 2002), pp. 175–184; Francesco Somaini, 'Les relations complexes entre Sigismund de Luxembourg et les Visconti, ducs de Milan', in *Sigismund von Luxemburg. Ein Kaiser in Europa*, edited by Michel Pauly, François Reinert (Mainz, 2006), pp. 157–198; Sandra Origone, 'La fine del dominio greco nel Mar Nero', *Bizantinistica. Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Slavi* (Spoleto), 2nd series, VIII (2006), pp. 245–272 (here pp. 249–254); Al. Simon, 'The Captain and the Superba: Crusader Moments in the Relations between John Hunyadi and Genoa', in *Between Worlds*, II, pp. 333–364.

The Jews bore the cross of treason. Virtually almost all crusader movements and actual crusades had been accompanied by pogroms or, at least, by anti-Jewish decisions. At best, the Jews got off, like in Hungary or Moldavia in the 1470s, with a mass-taxation and a persecution (in Moldavia). The, nevertheless ‘accidental’, moment when the Jewish army core would join Matthias Corvinus’ conquering parade through the streets of Vienna (1485) was in the remote future. Besides, the Jews were perceived, at least as much as the *schismatics*, as loyal tools of the Muslim power. Their commercial rivalries with the Latins and the Greeks in the Orient further aggravated the condemnation of the Jews. It is certain only that, after the crusader triumph of Granada (1492), the Porte sheltered Moors and Jews alike. From this point of view, the political intelligence and the relative tolerance (namely until the second third of the 1500s) of the Ottomans was largely fatal for the crusader ‘image of the Jew’⁴.

These pariahs of the Christian crusader world were ‘granted’ the glory of fighting over the – already *holy* too – city of Constantine. The honor was bestowed upon them by the Venetians. Half a joke, half a serious rumor (at any rate it was important enough to be recorded by the only network of informants comparable to that of Venice in the Christian world), this ‘story’ made its way via a copied letter into *Italia* at the end of August 1456. Still, like most contemporaries, including those at the papal curia or those who obtained the information for the interests of Milan, the author(s) of the news did not know that Hunyadi had died two weeks earlier (August 11). They talked of Capestrano, of Ladislas V, who, after fleeing the kingdom long before the arrival of the *Turk*, could have become the great victor of that year. With or without, John, the captain who had saved his posterity at Belgrade, the, until then, frightened ‘free Christian world’ was however ready to accept and to assume the liberation of Constantinople⁵.

⁴ Mahmoud Makki, ‘The Political History of al-Andalus (92/811–897/1492)’, L.P. Harvey, ‘The Political, Social and Cultural History of the Moriscos’, in *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, edited by Salma Khadra Jayyusi (Leiden, 1992), pp. 84, 205; Andrew Gow, ‘The Jewish Antichrist in Medieval and Early Modern Germany’, *Medieval Encounters* (Leiden), II (1996), 3, pp. 249–285; Steven J. Mc Michael, ‘The End of the World, Antichrist, and the Final Conversion of the Jews in the *Fortalitium Fidei* of Friar Alonso de Espina (d. 1464)’, *Medieval Encounters*, XII (2006), 2, pp. 224–273. The Jews north of the Danube after 1453–1456: Al. Simon, *Ștefan cel Mare și Matia Corvin. O coexistență medievală* [Stephen the Great and Matthias Corvinus: A Medieval Coexistence] (Cluj-Napoca, 2007), pp. 280–282 (to which we add a document from spring 1475 misplaced, under the year 1493, in Archivio di Stato di Milano, Milan (ASM), Archivio Ducale Sforzesco, Potenze Estere, *Venezia*, cart. 381, *Giugno-Dicembre 1493*, fasc. 4, *Settembre*, nn).

⁵ ASM, A.D.S., Potenze Estere, *Venezia*, cart. 343, 1456, fasc. 8, *Agosto*, nn (August 25, 1456; both the author and the recipient of the letter are otherwise unknown and are consequently not listed in the very comprehensive *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*). Capestrano in the context of the 1450s: Iulian Mihai Damian, *Ioan de Capestrano și Cruciața Târzie* [John Capestran and the Late Crusade], PhD Thesis (Cluj-Napoca, 2008), pp. 90–94. The Greek and Latin problematic of Byzantium as a *holy city* is well revealed in Ernst Werner, ‘*Translatio Imperii ad Turcos*: päpstliche *Renovatio* und Weltkaiseridee nach dem Fall Constantinopels’, *Byzantinische Forschungen* (Amsterdam), XI (1987), pp. 465–472; Maria Cristina Carile, ‘Constantinople and the Heavenly Jerusalem?: Through the

II. The Fall and the Liberation of the City of Byzantium

In that summer (and not only) there was mixture of hope and confusion revealed also by the letter's dating: *in the porridge of* <the year> 1456.

“Sono avisato choe in Constantinopoli e stato tolto di Genovesi per lo modo infradiecto./ El capitulo della lettera dice per che el Turcho [Mehmed II] in campo haveva tolto molte/ monitoni fora di Constantinopoli et perche esse in dicto luogho grande mortalitade/ et li Turchi esi erano in guardis del dicto luogho havano abandonato et/ laserado in guardis alli Giudei, et giongendo in Constantinopoli quattro navi/ grosse di Genovesi cum persone 1800, per nave, per andare, in percorso di Capha/ et pare per quello si dice essere missono in contencione con li Giudei, cosi i Genovesi/ sono intrati in Constantinopoli” (August 25, 1456; Milanese copy, preserved amongst the Venetian secret reports, of the letter sent by patrician Antonio Murino to his friend Chilberto Dulceto, both otherwise virtually unknown characters; dated by the former: *Datum die XXV augusti, [in Venice] in papariis 1456*).

[On the same sheet, in partial at least consonance with lines from above, another copied report, also from Venice, followed].

“Copia alcune lettere de Venetiis// La nova de Ungaria vene confirmada li da terra come da mare et dice/ come fratre Giovanni da Caestrano predica e confortava la brigna [prugna in modern Italian; it had an obviously condescending meaning in regard to the ‘common’ crusaders and their mind, that is their plum] ad essi/ valenti, et come lo prevadore [title still used for John Hunyadi, who had resigned as governor of Hungary three years ago] et lo Re de Ungaria [Ladislav V the Posthumous] ene d’acordo e fano/ grandissimo aparecoso per andare in personi contro al Turcho”.

At least, for a Milanese perspective, the only time span comparable, in terms of intensity and mixture of news and plans of anti-Ottoman essence with those months of 1456, was later the period marked by the arrival of the news on the fall of Caffa and on the Moldavian-Hungarian campaign in Walachia (August 1475–November 1476). Then, for more than a year, basically not one day passed without at least one report or news on pro- or anti-Ottoman activities. However, seemingly, no other ‘liberation of Constantinople’ surfaced, though plans were still drafted for its recovery. Perhaps, the desperation and relief were not that great as they had been three years after the fall of Byzantium. Maybe also the personalities of the 1470s lacked the career and the ‘panache’ of those at Belgrade. Possibly, all was due also to the fact that the Genoese had lost Caffa, while the Jews, at least those in king Matthias’ service had other tasks too⁶.

Imperial Palace’, *Bizantinistica. Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Slavi*, 2nd series, VIII (2006), pp. 85–104; Marie-Hélène Blanchet, *Georges-Gennadios Scholarios (vers 1400-vers 1472). Un intellectuel orthodoxe face à la disparition de l’Empire byzantin* (Paris, 2008). For the Milanese system: Paolo Margaroli, *Diplomazia e stati rinascimentali. Le ambascerie sforzesche fino alla conclusione della Lega italiana (1450–1455)* (Florence, 1992).

⁶ In this context, in direct relation to the other crusader Christian-Muslim front: Lino Gómez Cañedo, *Un español al servicio de la Santa Sede, Don Juan de Carvajal: cardenal de Sant’Angelo*

The plague ravaged the Balkans since the end of spring 1456. It had pushed the Ottomans out of Constantinople. According to the ‘overwhelming’ Christian version of the events, the plague was also fatal to John Hunyadi. On the other hand, we have the Ottoman form of ‘poetic justice’. A ‘lost’ Ottoman arrow would have ended John’s life. Each version has its strengths and weaknesses. The Ottoman version also has the ‘advantage’ of shaping an image of ‘Cid of the Balkans’ for John, as the Ottomans did not reattack Belgrade afterwards (but no contemporary seems to have made use of this ‘possibility’). Regardless of how we choose to look at these depictions of one and the same summer, a unique confrontation between despairs arises, even from Ottoman perspective. Like never before or after, Mehmed II forced the decisive blow, when the resistance of adversaries could have been patiently and surely eroded. Under such circumstances, it is no wonder why Christians claimed that the sultan had wanted to commit suicide when he had realized the magnitude of his failure or why there was repeated news of the reconquest of Byzantium⁷.

Aside from the exaggerations of the Franciscans, who tried to make the most out of their brother’s exploits, from the popular exaltations that aroused Pius II’s irony (jealous of the glory won by Capestrano), or older or newer millenarist interpretations, an almost strange idea of a basically confused redemption emerges

legado en Alemania y Hungría, 1399?–1469 (Madrid, 1947); Miguel Navarro Sorní, *Calixto III Borja y Alfonso el Magnánimo frente a la Cruzada* (Valencia, 2003). For the 1470s, Al. Simon, ‘The Costs and Benefits of Anti-Ottoman Warfare: Documents on the Case of Moldavia (1475–1477)’, *Revue Roumaine d’Histoire* (Bucharest), XLVIII (2009), 1–2, pp. 37–53. The effective of the ‘Genoese armada’ was clearly exaggerated. 7.200 men on 4 ships was an immense figure, even if consider that most of them could have been slaves. The figure itself came close to that of the troops which John Hunyadi had under his command at Belgrade (in this respect, see the studies quoted in note 1 and in particular that of Babinger). On the other hand, voluntarily or involuntarily, this figure also tends to increase the credibility of the information, given, for instance, the fact that probably the constant Ottoman garrison of Constantinople consisted of approximately 1.200 men (see also the analysis of Piero Zattoni, ‘Le forze militare Ottomane secondo Jacopo de Promontorio’, *Bizantinistica. Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Slavi*, 2nd series, VIII (2006), pp. 305–330, namely pp. 309–314 in this case). As to Antonio Murino, an intriguing, yet virtually unknown, figure, we have to note the fact that he was actively involved, as a recipient and (then) as a sender, of the first news on the fall of Byzantium that reached Venice in 1453 (in this respect, see Al. Simon, ‘Unknown Dispacci on the Fall of Byzantium’, *Jahrbücher für Österreichische Byzantinistik* (Vienna), LIV (2010), forthcoming; the dispacci containing the, very, fresh news on the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople are preserved in ASM, A.D.S., Potenze Estere, *Venezia*, cart. 340, 1450–1453, fasc. 4, 1453, nn].

⁷ In general: András Hegedüs, ‘Isten segedelmével a török császárt a fent mondott várból kivetettük: Hunyadi János levele Szécsi Dénes esztergomi érsekhez a nándorféhvári győzelemről’ [*With God’s Help, with have chased the Turks out of the fortress: John Hunyadi’s Letter to Denis Szécsi, archbishop of Esztergom, on the Battle of Belgrade*], *Magyar Sion* (Budapest), NS, XLIV (2008), 1, pp. 110–120; Pál Fodor, ‘The Ottoman Empire, Byzantium and Western Christianity. The Implications of the Siege of Belgrade, 1456’, *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* (Belgrade), LXI (2008), 1–2, pp. 43–51; Al. Simon, ‘Notes on John Hunyadi’s Actions and Images’, *Analele Universităţii Oradea. Istorie* [The Annals of the University of Oradea. History], XVIII (2009), pp. 35–51.

from the utopic liberation (if we were to draw a parallel, based on political affinities and general attitudes towards *Greeks*, the Genoese ‘would be’ the more tolerant Dominicans, whereas the Venetians ‘would be’ the ‘determined’ Franciscans). Slave traders (for this is what Genoese merchants, with such large vessels, on the road to Crimean Caffa, were in the first place) freed the city, re-sanctified by its punishment of May 1453, from the hands of the first primal enemies of Christ. Whether or not the author(s) of the news and those who circulated it (until, in fall, the winds of success stopped blowing) saw, willingly or unwillingly, such meanings, is a question that can hardly be answered, first of all, due to practical reasons dating back to 1456. A few months after the miracle, Hungary entered the civil war that Hunyadi would have had to face, had he lived, while the crusader fleet in the Mediterranean drowned in piracy and financial dispute⁸.

⁸ Pietro Paschini, ‘La flotta di Callisto III, 1455–1458’, *Archivio della Società Romana di Storia Patria* (Rome), LIII–LV (1930–1932), pp. 177–254; Constantin Marinescu, ‘Le Pape Calixtus III (1455–1458), Alfonse d’Aragon, roi de Naples, et l’offensive contre les Turcs’, *Bulletin de la Section Historique de l’Académie Roumaine* (Bucharest), XIX (1935), pp. 77–97; Claudine Delacroix-Besnier, *Les Dominicains et la Chrétienté grecque aux XIV^e et XV^e siècles* (Rome, 1997); Bonnie Millar-Heggie, ‘Sanctity, Savagery and Saracens in *Capystranus*: Fifteenth Century Christian-Ottoman Relations’, *Al Masaq* (New York), XIV (2002), 2, pp. 113–121; I.M. Damian, ‘Fonti e ideologia della *crociata dei minori*’, in *Between Worlds*, II, pp. 447–462. Al. Simon, ‘Milanese Perspectives on the Hungarian Events of 1456’, in *Miscellanea Historica et Archaeologica. In Honorem Professoris Ionel Cădea*, edited by Valeriu Sârbu, Cristian Luca (Brăila, 2009), pp. 249–260 (the start of the civil war).