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**Between Worlds:
The Age of the Jagiellonians**

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EDITION

Between Medieval Tradition and Early Modern “Military Revolution”

Warfare and Military Structures in the Hungarian Kingdom (1490–1526)*

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The period represented by the reigns of Wladyslaw II (1490–1516) and Louis II (1516–1526) in Hungary is generally characterized as a period of internal political crises, generated by noble factionalism within the kingdom¹. Such conditions seriously affected royal authority, including the matter of military leadership. The technological and organizational innovations associated with the ‘military revolution’, such as the development of fire arms and artillery, linear battle formations, the supremacy of infantry, an increase in the number of soldiers, the development of modern fortifications, the increased use of mercenary forces and standing armies², were slowly but steadily spreading across Europe. However, in some regions the so-called military revolu-

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1 The Hungarian kingdom was divided between three main political forces: the king, the lords (barons) and the county nobility, whose political power was consolidated in the decades before the battle of Mohács (1526). See A. KUBINYI, Hungary’s Power Factions and the Turkish Threat in the Jagiellonian Period (1490–1526), in: *Fight against the Turk in Central-Europe in the First Half of the 16th Century*, ed. I. ZOMBORI. Budapest 2004, 115–145; M. RADY, Rethinking Jagiełło Hungary. *Central Europe* 3/1 (May 2005) 3–18.

2 The concept of “military revolution” enjoyed a significant success in the second half of the 20th century. Much debate has been generated by this concept regarding the chronological and geographical extent of the phenomenon, the actual changes implied by this revolution and also the validity of the concept itself. See G. PARKER, “Military Revolution”, 1560–1660 – A Myth? *The Journal of Modern History* 48/2 (1976) 195–214; F. TALLETT, War and Society in Early Modern Europe 1495–1715. London – New York 1992; C. JÖRGENSEN – M.F. PAVKOVICI – R.S. RICE, *Fighting Techniques of the Early Modern World. AD 1500 ~ AD 1763. Equipment, Combat Skills, and Tactics*. New York 2005; J. BLACK, *Rethinking Military History*. London and New York 2004; J. BERANGER, Existe-t-il une révolution militaire à l’époque moderne?, in: *La Révolution militaire en Europe (XVe – XVIIIe siècle)*, ed. J. BERANGER. Paris 1999, 7–22; J. CHAGNIOT, Critique du concept de révolution militaire, in: *La Révolution militaire en Europe (XVe – XVIIIe siècle)*, ed. J. BÉRANGER. Paris 1999, 23–30.

tion, or aspects of it, encountered some political and economic obstacles, and Hungary under Jagiellonian rule provides us with an example of this.

Early modern military innovations have older, medieval origins. Warfare changed gradually, and many features of modern armies were no longer a novelty in the 16th century³. Some of the early changes in military organization, such as mercenary service, gunpowder weapons and standing armies, were familiar to Hungary in the second half of the 15th century, due to the efforts of King Matthias Corvinus (1458–1490). Beginning with the first part of his reign, Matthias managed to recruit and maintain an army of mercenaries, Hungarians and foreigners alike. It was mainly a means to achieve his political goals on the western borders of his kingdom⁴. He also made efforts to strengthen the southern frontier of the kingdom, continuing the work started by Sigismund of Luxemburg in the late 14th century⁵. But, although he had such a modern army⁶, Matthias never gave up on the traditional elements of the Hungarian army, like the noble insurrection, the *militia portalis*, or other regional military structures. For example, on the eastern border of the kingdom, in Transylvania, the defence of the country was left in the hands of contingents recruited amongst the local population. Also, very important for the protection of these borders was the military collaboration with Moldavia and Walachia. A very good example is given by a description of the army gathered in 1479 to face a Turkish attack: 10.000 heavy cavalry and 4.000 infantry with shields and crossbows (from Hungary), 16.000 Szeklers (horse archers), 18 siege bombards and other 8 siege machines, 2.000 handguners (*pixidarii*), 80 artillerymen, 2.000 Walachians from Transylvania, 10.000 mounted nobles from Transylvania, joined by the armies of the Moldavian *Voievod*, 12.000 cavalry and 20.000 infantry, and of the Walachian *Voievod* 30.000 infantry and 8.000 cavalry⁷. Although the numbers might be

3 C. J. ROGERS, *The Medieval Legacy*, in: *Early Modern Military History 1450–1815*, ed. G. MORTIMER. New York 2004, 8–22; M. KEEN, *The Changing Scene. Guns, Gunpowder, and Permanent Armies*, in: *Medieval Warfare. A History*, ed. M. KEEN. Oxford 1999, 273–291.

4 G. RÁZSÓ, *The Mercenary Army of King Matthias Corvinus*, in: *From Hunyadi to Rákóczi. War and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Hungary*, ed. J.M. BAK – B.K. KIRÁLY. New York 1982, 127–135; A. KUBINYI, *Hunyadi Mátyás, a személyiség és a király. Aetas. Történettudomány folyóirat* 3/2007, 91; P. ENGEL, *Regatul Sfântului Ștefan. Istoria Ungariei medievale*. Cluj-Napoca 2006, 329–330.

5 A. KUBINYI, *Matthias Rex*. Budapest 2008, 113–118.

6 Although well organized according to the standards of that period the Black Army, was not very well suited for frontier warfare against the Turks. See L. VESZPRÉMY, *The state and military affairs in east-central Europe, 1380–c.1520s*, in: *European Warfare 1350–1750*, ed. F. TALLETT – D. J. B. TRIM. Cambridge 2010, 100.

7 *Fontes Rerum Transylvanicarum «Acta et Epistolae» IV*, ed. A. VERESS. Cluj-Napoca 1914, 33–34 (doc. 31).

exaggerated, the description clearly shows the mixture of modern and medieval troops that were fighting in the eastern parts of the Hungarian kingdom.

For more than a century Hungary managed to stop the advance of the Ottomans without consistent aid from the western European kingdoms⁸. The Jagiellonian kings of Hungary did not underestimate the Turkish threat. During their reigns, constant efforts were made to improve the military system and to secure military and financial support from other Christian states, especially from the Holy Roman Empire and the Papal state⁹. The Papacy sent significant sums of money to help the Hungarian war effort against the Turks¹⁰, while the Habsburgs agreed to send 2.000 infantry in 1522, after Belgrade was occupied by the Turks¹¹. The Habsburgs were interested in the security of the Croatian-Slavonian border, from where the Turks might launch a direct offensive on their own territories¹². In the following years German soldiers, sent by the imperial diet, joined the war at the western end of the Hungarian frontier. Although they were not numerous, these troops were usually well equipped and skilled in the latest tactics and military technologies. For example, in a letter sent to Louis II on the 28th of February 1524, Ferdinand mentions 200 light cavalry and 600 infantry armed with handguns and pikes (*ordinavimus his diebus in defensione et presidium*

8 K. DEVRIES, The Lack of western European Military Response to the Ottoman Invasion of eastern Europe from Nicopolis (1396) to Mohács (1526). *The Journal of Military History* 63/3 (1999) 554–559.

9 W. FRAKNÓI, Ungarn vor der Schlacht bei Mohács. Budapest 1886, 47–56; B. IVÁNYI, Adalékok nemzetközi érintkezések történetéhez a Jagelló- korban I. *Történelmi tár* (1906) 139–151.

10 For example in 1501 and 1502, the Pope sent 106 733 florins to Hungary. See A. KUBINYI, The Hungarian State and the Papacy during the Reign of Jagello Kings (1490–1526), in: *A Thousand Years of Christianity in Hungary*. Budapest 2001, 79–85; in 1523 Steven Brodarics obtained 50.000 ducats that were going to be used for the recruitment of 10.000 infantry to strengthen the garrisons of the southern border, see VERESS, *Fontes*, 125 (doc. 92).

11 G. PÁLFFY, The Origins and Development of the Border Defense System Against the Ottoman Empire in Hungary (Up to the Early Eighteenth Century), in: *Ottomans, Hungarians and Habsburgs in Central Europe. The Military Confines in the Era of Ottoman Conquest*, eds. G. DÁVID – P. FODOR. Leiden – Boston – Cologne 2000, 15; by the end of 1522 the imperial diet debated about sending another 3–4.000 German soldiers, and some artillery to strengthen the Croatian border. See IVÁNYI, *Adalékok III* 345–352 (doc. XXXII, XXXV, XXXVI)

12 It has been argued that the military aid sent by Ferdinand I to Croatia was not the consequence of a treaty with King Louis II, but a consequence of negotiations with the Croatian nobility that requested the protection of the Habsburgs against the Turks. See G. E. ROTHENBERG, The Origins of the Austrian Military Frontier in Croatia and the Alleged Treaty of 22 December 1522. *The Slavonic and East European Review* 38/91 (1960) 493–498.

illorum confiniorum ducentos equites leves et sexcentos pedites pixidarios et cuspidarios)¹³.

Another important aspect of the anti-ottoman fight was the constant effort, of both king and estates, to improve the defensive potential of the kingdom. After the death of King Matthias Corvinus, the Hungarian nobility was unsatisfied with the existence of a strong and large army of mercenaries under the direct control of the monarch, an army that was threatening to financially ruin the whole country. Thus in the first years of Wladyslaw's reign the "Black Army" of Matthias was disbanded. At the same time the older military structures such as the baronial *banderia*, the conscription army (*militia portalis*) and the noble insurrection were regaining an important role in the military organization of the kingdom¹⁴. These institutions had undisputed medieval origins but they underwent a specific evolution during these decades, an evolution that was not entirely contrary to the principles of the "military revolution".

The *banderia* became one of the most important elements in the Jagiellonian military system. Small armies under the control of the most important landowners and officeholders in the kingdom, these military units consisted mostly of heavy cavalry and in some cases light cavalry units. The members of the *banderia* were hired mercenaries and *familiares*, nobles of modest economic means who were employed by magnates¹⁵. In exchange for their military service, the *familiares* received payment (money or produce), or sometimes land. In the second half of the 15th century the members of baronial *banderia* began to perform military service for a limited period of time, normally one year, and were usually referred to as *servientes*¹⁶. In the 1492 *decretum* the minimum compliment for a *banderia* was established at 400 men. This provision decreased the number of barons who could afford such a status, especially if we take into account the fact that in the 14th century there were *banderia* of only 25 soldiers.¹⁷ According to the same *decretum*, half of the troops had to be heavy cavalry and the other half light caval-

13 Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, Vienna, Hungarica, fasc.1 konv. D, f. 77.

14 The baronial *banderia* played an important role in the confrontations for the Hungarian throne, following the death of Matthias Corvinus. In the winter of 1490, most barons and their military retainers joined Wladyslaw against John Albert. See Gy. SZÉKELY, A rendek válaszüton: a dinasztiaaváltás harcai 1490–1492-ben. *Hadtörténeti Közlemények* 114 (2003) 446.

15 M. RADY, Nobility, Land and Service in Medieval Hungary. Basingstoke and London 2000, 147.

16 KUBINYI, Hungary's Power Factions 117–118.

17 J. HELD, Military Reform in Early Fifteenth Century Hungary. *East European Quarterly* IX (1977) 135.

ry, hussars¹⁸. A year later the king gave the barons the opportunity to collect the *subsidium* (*pecunia exercitua*lis) themselves and use it for the recruitment and maintenance of their own troops.¹⁹

The *decretum* from 1498 contains a list of the barons in the kingdom affording a *banderia*. The first group is represented by the ecclesiastical barons (archbishops, bishops, abbots, and chapters). The archbishop of Esztergom and the bishop of Agria raised two *banderia* each. Other important bishops, such as those from Oradea and Alba Iulia, had to maintain one *banderia*. Bishoprics with smaller domains, abbeys and chapter houses were required to recruit between 50–200 soldiers (ex: the bishop of Veszprém – 200, the bishop of Győr – 200, the bishop of Cenad – 100, the bishop of Nitra – 50, the abbot of Petrovaradin – 200, the chapter of Transylvania – 200 etc.)²⁰. On the information given by this decree we can estimate that the ecclesiastical barons should have been able to recruit an army of around 7.000, if we consider that a regular *banderia* consisted of at least 400 soldiers as the 1492 decree states. The second group is represented by the main office holders of the kingdom. These included the Transylvanian voivode, the bailiff of the Szeklers, the ban of Croatia, and the bailiff of Timiș, each of them raised one *banderia*. Together with the royal *banderia* of 1.000 heavy horsemen, the office holders were able to gather a force of at least 2.600 men²¹. The decree continues with a list of 38 barons that had the approval of recruiting a *banderia*, or had to provide a specific number of soldiers according to the number of serfs they possessed (*secundum numerum Jobagionum suorum exercituare tenebuntur*)²². The total number of soldiers provided by secular barons has been estimated at 6.700 – 12.500. The total number of fighting men (heavy and light cavalry) that could have been mobilized according to this decree was 16.300 – 22.100²³. However, the actual mobilization of such an army remains doubtful due to the constant political struggle in the kingdom and the high cost of maintaining such an army for the full length of a campaign. In spite of his limited authority Wladyslaw tried to transform the baronial contingents into something like a standing army, which could and would act promptly in the case of an external threat. A similar decree from 1504 stated that the *banderia* should always be ready to

18 Corpus Juris Hungarici I. Budae 1822, 230 (Art. 20); I. DRĂGAN, Nobilimea românească din Transilvania 1440–1514. București 2000, 375.

19 ENGEL, Regatul 375; RADY, Nobility 152; KUBINYI, Hungary’s Power Factions 117.

20 Corpus Juris Hungarici, 284 (Art.20).

21 Ibidem (Art.21)

22 Ibidem 284–285 (Art. 22)

23 For the estimations of the military effectives see A. KUBINYI, Politika és honvédelem a Jagellók MagyarországaBan. *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, 111 (2000) 405.

mobilize at the king's order, and to join the rest of the royal army, including the mercenary units employed by the king, the so called *stipendiati*²⁴.

Together with the consolidation of the banderial system, the war tax known as the *subsidium* was reintroduced. However, this tax was not always claimed by the royal treasury as it had been during the reign of Matthias Corvinus. In many years the *subsidium* was directly administrated by the barons or by the county officials for the recruitment of local military contingents. County autonomy increased considerably with the organization of these local contingents that were no longer ruled by bailiffs (representatives of royal authority), but by captains elected from the local nobility²⁵.

Another military structure that reemerged during the Jagiellonian period was the conscription army or *militia portalis*. The conscripts were recruited in each county, and represented the political interest of the local nobility. The 1492 *decretum* established a draft level of 1 horseman to every 20 *portae* or land plots. The lesser nobles, owning only one plot, had to combine their resources in order to provide for such a soldier, who was armed with a lance, a shield, a bow and, if possible, with armor (*lanceam, clypeum et arcum manuaem, et si fieri poterit, loricam*)²⁶. In 1498 the obligation of raising the *militia portalis* was limited to the nobles that were not able to maintain a *banderia*. One well equipped horseman was recruited for every 36 *portae* (*de singulis triginta sex portis, singulum unum equitem, armis bene dispositum, dare et tenere debeant*). The counties from the lower parts of the kingdom had to provide one light cavalryman for every 24 *portae*, armed with a lance, a shield, a breastplate and a helmet (*casidem sive galeam*)²⁷. During the reign of Louis II, the efforts to organize a strong and efficient conscription army were continued. The diet of Tolna, assembled in 1518, issued that each noble in the kingdom should recruit 1 horseman armed at least with a lance and a shield for every 20 serfs living on his domains. The nobles who possessed more than 50 serfs were requested to provide better weapons and defensive equipment for the soldiers recruited on their domains. Conscription was also extended to ecclesiastical domains and noble widows, at the same draft level as in the case of other noble estates. In the northern counties, where there was a greater level of urban development, infantrymen with fire weapons were recruited instead of horsemen. On this occa-

24 Corpus Juris Hungarici, 306 (Art. 24).

25 A. KUBINYI, The Road to Defeat: Hungarian Politics and Defense in the Jagiellonian Period, in: From Hunyadi to Rákóczi. War and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Hungary, ed. J.M. BAK – B.K. KIRÁLY. New York 1982, 161–166.

26 Corpus Juris Hungarici, 230 (Art. 20); D. PRODAN, Iobăgia în Transilvania în secolul al XVI-lea I. București 1967, 490; DRĂGAN, Nobilimea 375.

27 Ibidem, 283 (Art. 15,16); A. BOROSY, The Militia Portalis in Hungary Before 1526, in: From Hunyadi to Rákóczi War and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Hungary, ed. J.M. BAK – B.K. KIRÁLY. New York 1982, 62.

sion the recruitment base of the *militia portalis* was largely extended, as many exemptions from this obligation were removed²⁸.

It has often been argued that the conscripts were poor quality soldiers and that the actual mobilization of this military structure was slow and seldom inefficient. Of course the system had its flaws, but it was a pressing necessity to have more soldiers on the battlefield especially when confronting an enemy with far more resources, as the Ottoman Empire. On the other hand the increase of army size was a general trend in Europe during this period²⁹, and the *militia portalis* was one of Hungary’s reactions to this trend. The idea of a proportional conscription was not abandoned after the battle of Mohács. The Transylvanian principality maintained this military system. Until the middle of the 17th century the Transylvanian diet regularly issued articles regarding the recruitment of peasant soldiers or hired mercenaries from the domains of the county nobility³⁰. The enduring attraction and use of proportional conscription is illustrated by a case outside our particular temporal and geographical boundaries. One of the most famous examples of military conscriptions in the 17th century was the Swedish army of Gustav Adolf. In 1620 the king of Sweden established strict legislation regarding a standing army recruited from the free peasants of the kingdom. Every male over 15 years could be recruited for military service. The draft level was es-

28 Ibidem 325 (Art. 2,3,4,6); BOROSY, *The Militia Portalis* 67.

29 An increase in the number of soldiers in 16th century European armies was a wide spread phenomenon but there were particular developments in different regions. In the Spanish armies of Charles V it was an increase in infantry, mainly pike men in the first decades of the 16th century. See G. PARKER, *The Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road 1567–1659*. Cambridge 1972, 6. There are several theories about why such an increase occurred. For example, Geoff Mortimer considers the system of military contracts and war contributions (war taxes) as the main reason for the numerical strength of early-modern armies, while other authors, such as Geoffrey Parker and Frank Tallett, link this process to the development of modern fortifications. See G. MORTIMER, *War by Contract, Credit and Contribution: The Thirty Years War*, in: *Early Modern Military History 1450–1815*, ed. G. MORTIMER. New York 2004, 116; TALLETT, *War* 10; PARKER, “Military Revolution” 195–199; IDEM, *The Limits to Revolutions in Military Affairs: Maurice of Nassau, The Battle of Nieuwpoort (1600), and the Legacy*. *The Journal of Military History*, 71 (2007) 331–332.

30 The Transylvanian principality inherited certain military structures established in Hungary before the battle of Mohács, one of them being the conscription army. The rate of conscription changed often while it was still supported by both the prince and the estates. The highest rate of conscription was introduced by Prince Gabriel Bethlen – 1 soldier for each *porta fiscalis* – while the lowest was established during the short reign of Andrew Báthory – 1 soldier for 100 serfs. In the second half of the seventeenth century the conscription army entered a period of decline as other military structures, such as mercenary service, were being consolidated. F. ARDELEAN, *Oastea portală în Transilvania princiară (1542–1653)*. *Banatica* 20/2 (2010) 157–175.