

# Contemporary Perceptions of the Spread of the Plague in Central and Eastern Europe Following the Battle of Belgrade (1456)\*

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**Abstract.** The study examines contemporary perceptions of the emergence and spread of the plague in Central and Eastern Europe following the Battle of Belgrade in 1456. On one hand, the Battle of Belgrade represents a significant Christian victory in the conflicts with the Ottomans during the fifteenth century. Consequently, it was utilized in crusade-related propaganda discourse and perceived as a divine blessing for the anti-Ottoman crusade. On the other hand, some prominent figures such as John Hunyadi, John of Capistrano, and Serbian Despot George Branković died shortly after the event due to the outbreak of the plague during the battle. The research aims to explore how contemporary historical sources handled this duality between the sense of triumph and the plague outbreak. It provides an overview of the areas affected by the plague due to the movement of armies and the political and economic connections between different parts of East and Central Europe. The study investigates whether and to what extent reports of the plague from the region link the Battle of Belgrade to the outbreak of the disease. Additionally, it analyses fifteenth-century sources related to the battle itself. This segment of the research examines representations of the plague outbreak, particularly the infection and death of the aforementioned Christian leaders. The research focuses on how the discourse on the plague is interpreted in relation to narratives of heroism, martyrdom, and sainthood, addressing aspects of adaptation, marginalization, and the complete omission of mentions of the plague in these interpretations.

**Keywords:** Battle of Belgrade, plague, 1456, later crusades, John Hunyadi, John of Capistrano

In the summer of 1456, Sultan Mehmed II (1444–1446, 1451–1481) launched a campaign toward the Hungarian frontier on the Danube River, deploying approximately 40,000 to 50,000 Ottoman soldiers. Repelled near Smederevo by the army of the Serbian Despot George Branković (1427–1456), the Ottomans besieged Belgrade in early July. Anticipating the assault, John Hunyadi, Voivode of Transylvania and

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Regent-Governor of Hungary, assembled an army of around 10,000 men, bolstered by contingents from various Hungarian barons. Hunyadi's forces joined an army of crusaders inspired by the preaching of the Franciscan John of Capistrano and reinforcements sent by Despot George. Christian-Ottoman clashes ensued from 4 July to 22 July. The battle ultimately concluded with a crusader victory, with heavy material and military losses on both sides.<sup>1</sup>

In the following days, the plague began to spread in the crusader camp.<sup>2</sup> The Balkan lands had experienced a severe wave of plague in the previous year, and it is likely that the disease spread in 1456 through the movement and encounters of the armies.<sup>3</sup> The two main protagonists of the Belgrade victory, John Hunyadi (d. 11 August 1456) and John of Capistrano (d. 23 October 1456), along with the Serbian Despot George (d. 24 December 1456), all appear to have succumbed to the effects of the plague.<sup>4</sup>

### Scope of research and methodology

Given the place of the Battle of Belgrade in the Ottoman-Hungarian wars, Ottoman conquests, and the later crusade movement, historiographical studies have so far explored its political, military, and cultural aspects.<sup>5</sup> However, while the outbreak of the plague during the battle has been acknowledged, it has not been extensively examined on its own.<sup>6</sup> This paper aims to provide insights into contemporary perceptions of the 1456 plague.

The research begins with an examination of plague-related records in both documentary and narrative sources about the battle and its aftermath. Its objective is to determine whether and how these accounts address the plague while referencing

1 Pálosfalvi, *From Nicopolis to Mohács*, 178–81; Housley, “Giovanni Da Capistrano,” 97–8. In a letter to the Hungarian King Ladislaus V (1440–1457), John Hunyadi highlighted the ‘great losses,’ stating that the Belgrade fortress “cannot properly be called a fortress anymore, but a field.” Bernoulli, ed., *Basler Chroniken*, vol. IV, 394–5; Mixson, *The Crusade*, 94–95; Housley, *The Later Crusades*, 104; Kalić, *Beograd*, 165–68.

2 Kalić, *Beograd*, 170.

3 Hrabak, “Kuga,” 19–37, 21; Lowry, “Pushing the Stone Uphill,” 103.

4 Kalić, *Beograd*, 170; Hrabak, “Kuga,” 21; Spremić, *Despot Đurađ*, 483, 488, 494.

5 Among the many studies that analyze the mentioned aspects of the battle, notable works include Kalić, *Beograd*, 127–70; Babinger, *Der Quellenwert der Berichte*; Babinger, *Mehmed the Conqueror*, 137–50; Setton, *The Papacy*, vol. II, 161–90; Pálosfalvi, *From Nicopolis to Mohács*, 174–87; Housley, “Giovanni Da Capistrano,” 94–115; Housley, *The Later Crusades*, 103–5, 408–10; Fodor, “The Ottoman Empire, Byzantium and Western Christianity”; Ropa, “Imagining the 1456 Siege of Belgrade.”

6 Kalić, *Beograd*, 170; Babinger, *Der Quellenwert der Berichte*, 24; Setton, *The Papacy*, vol. II, 183; Housley, *Crusading*, 112; Marien, “The Black Death,” 57, 70.

the battle and its protagonists, taking into consideration the contextual factors that may have influenced the sources' attitudes. In assessing the phrases used to describe the disease, attention is paid to their emotional meaning to determine the potential impact they had on recipients. When examining perceptions of the plague in 1456, pre-existing conceptions about the plague are considered, notably the notion of divine punishment. This is a significant aspect in the comparison of the plague-related narrative and parallel narratives of heroism, sanctity, and martyrdom, all of which were often attributed to divine intervention. The study aims to provide an overview of how the analysed sources addressed the plague, addressing the duality in the concepts of divine punishment and victory.

## The sources

Contemporary accounts of the 1456 plague draw on a range of documentary and narrative sources. The scope of the current research is confined to writings originating in or related to Central and Eastern Europe. Documentary sources include immediate post-battle letters of eyewitnesses, such as John Hunyadi and John of Capistrano, and correspondences of political, intellectual, and religious figures who reflected on the battle and its aftermath. The chronological tracking of most documentary sources extends until the close of 1456 and the commencement of 1457, when the Battle of Belgrade ceases to be the focus of correspondence. The exception is the crusading bull *Ezechielis prophete*, issued by Pope Pius II (1458–1464) on 22 October 1463, which utilizes the Belgrade battle in crusade propaganda seven years after the event.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to its primary aim of shedding light on the early perceptions of the battle, this group of sources is significant due to the noticeable enthusiasm for crusade in the narrative. Most correspondents were connected in some way to the concept of the crusade, whether through Pope Calixtus III (1455–1458) as the proponent of the idea, key political figures, such as Milanese Duke Francesco Sforza, Venetian Doge Francesco Foscari (1423–1457), Afonso V of Portugal (1438–1477), etc., or church prelates like Juan Carvajal, Jean Jouffroy, and Ludovico Trevisan, etc.<sup>8</sup>

The central theme of these letters was the triumph at Belgrade, with Hunyadi taking the spotlight as the central figure. The concept of triumph was linked to Hunyadi using terms such as *fortissimo athleta*, *Dei athleta invictissimo*, *glorioso milite dei Athleta*, etc.<sup>9</sup> These terms, particularly those in the superlative form,

7 Pius II, "Bull: Ezechielis Prophete," 141–55.

8 An overview of most of the crusading papal letters is given in Calixtus PP. III, *Il "Liber Brevium,"* 94–119.

9 Calixtus PP. III, *Il "Liber Brevium,"* 95, 96, 98, no. 82 (67), no. 83 (107), no. 87 (118).

included connotations of the hero's invincibility. Furthermore, the terms *athleta Christi* or *Dei athleta* could evoke associations with suffering and martyrdom, given their use in the Church hymnography and homilies.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, Hunyadi could be perceived as an almost saintly character by the audience.

Narrative sources encompass chronicles, memoirs, historiographical, historical-geographical works, and hagiographic writings. Given that the active crusade-propagandistic use of the Battle of Belgrade persisted until the end of the pontificate of Pius II in 1464, the analysis of the narrative sources extends approximately to that time. The works of Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini (Pope Pius II) are significant due to the author's contextualization of the events of 1456 within the history of Bohemia and Europe, as well as Pius' pronounced crusading zeal.<sup>11</sup> Although he was not a direct participant in the events, his *omniscient* point of view provides insight into the personal attitudes of the protagonists, thus potentially increasing the acceptance of the latter among the audience.<sup>12</sup>

The contemporary chronicles under consideration generally do not engage in crusade-related or sainthood propaganda.<sup>13</sup> Hagiographical works written to support the early canonization process of John of Capistrano are a different case. They include biographies of Capistrano written by Jerome of Udine (17 June 1457), Nicholas of Fara (1461/62), and Christopher of Varese (1462/63),<sup>14</sup> as well as two reports written by John of Tagliacozzo at the behest of James of the Marches: on the Battle of Belgrade (22 July 1460)<sup>15</sup> and on Capistrano's death (10 February 1461).<sup>16</sup> Given the explicit purpose of these writings, the prevalence of hagiographic and propagandistic narratives is expected. In this regard, their response to the simultaneous interaction between the plague, sanctity, and victory concepts is of particular

10 Hill and Hill, *Peter Tudebode*, 17, n. 19. For some of the hymnographic examples relating to Saints Stephen, Vincent, Lawrence, Martin, Sebastian, and others, see: Dreves and Blume, eds., *Analecta Hymnica*, vol. VII, 172, 189; vol. XVI, 252–3; vol. XXVIII, 157–58, 187–88, 217; vol. XXXIX, 200, 281, 304.

11 Piccolomini, *Historia Bohemica*, 145–49; Piccolomini, *Enea Silvio Piccolomini: De Europa*, 52–54; Pius PP. II, *The Commentaries*, 799–800; Nancy Bisaha, "Pope Pius II and the Crusade."

12 Eekhof et al., "Engagement with Narrative Characters," 414.

13 Stojanović, ed., *Stari srpski rodoslovi i letopisi*, 239–40, no. 705–8; Ebendorfer, *Chronica Austriae*, 434–35; Šimek, ed., *Staré letopisy české*, 118–19; Długosz, *Annales*, vol. XII, 253–57, 268–71.

14 Van Hecke et al., eds, *Acta Sanctorum Octobris*, vol. X, 439–541; Andrić, "Lives of St John Capistran," 214–15.

15 The text has been published multiple times, with the most frequently referenced version being published in Wadding, ed., *Annales*, vol. XII, 750–96, reprinted in Van Hecke et al., eds., *Acta Sanctorum Octobris*, vol. X, 366–81; Andrić, "Lives of St John Capistran," 216, n. 9; Setton, *The Papacy*, vol. II, 173, n. 51.

16 Van Hecke et al., eds, *Acta Sanctorum Octobris*, vol. X, 390–92; Andrić, "Lives of St John Capistran," 216.

significance. Hagiographic narratives, which incorporate highly emotional elements depicting the zeal and suffering of Capistrano, had the potential to increase readers' identification with the main character.<sup>17</sup>

A somewhat limiting factor in the research is that sources primarily reflect the perspectives of the political, intellectual, and religious circles of the authors rather than the views of the broader population. Another limitation is the former's relatively modest interest in the fate of the crusader army, with a focus instead on the figures of John Hunyadi and John of Capistrano. However, as these protagonists almost became identified with the battle, the examination of attitudes to their infection and death largely reflects the sources' general perspectives about the battle and the plague.

### Naming the plague of 1456: the impact of words

In addition to the basic function of providing information, words have the function of influencing the audience. The emotional meanings of words play a significant role in this, as is particularly noticeable in political or propaganda contexts.<sup>18</sup> The medieval emotional meaning associated with the word 'plague' is inseparable from contemporary concepts of the plague. When a concept is recalled in the human mind, sensory-motor areas are reactivated that process perceptual symbols. Therefore, when a person hears or sees a word, eye movements and perceptual representations are triggered in the same manner as if the concrete, physical event triggered them.<sup>19</sup> In the context of this research, this implies that mentioning, reading, or using a word or sentence that is more explicitly associated with the plague would be more likely to emotionally bind recipients and create a catastrophic image compared to the use of more general terms.

Terms that the analysed sources use to describe the illness that appeared after the Battle of Belgrade mainly include *pestis*, *pestilentia*, *morbus*, *molestia*, *aegrotus*, *valetudo*, and *aegritudo*. These terms have different semantic meanings. *Pestis* primarily refers to a deadly, contagious disease or plague, frequently associated with scourge, morbidity, and stench. It has connotations of a fatal, rapidly spreading illness. The term *pestilentia* is closely related to *pestis*, often emphasizing the condition of being afflicted by a plague. Both terms are directly synonymous with plague or epidemic.<sup>20</sup>

17 Kim et al., "The Presence of the Protagonist," 895.

18 Palmer, *Semantics*, 35–6, 61.

19 Goldstone, Feng, and Rogosky, "Connecting Concepts," 283–84.

20 Doederlein, *Lateinische Synonyme*, vol. II, 60–6; *Logeion*, s.v. *pestis*, *pestilentia*, <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/pestis>, <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/pestilentia> (Accessed: 11 April 2024); Slack, "Plague: What's in a Name?"

Unlike the aforementioned terms, *morbus* generally refers to any illness or disorder. It lacks direct synonymy with the plague and does not have specific connotations of widespread mortality or catastrophe. Consequently, it is less likely to involve the connotation of God's punishment. Similarly, the rest of the terms, all connected to illness or the state of health, are not connotated with the severity of the plague and lack direct synonymy with it.<sup>21</sup> For contemporary conceptualization, especially among ecclesial audiences, the biblical use of the term *pestis* for plague or catastrophic illness is significant. This usage appears in narratives such as the Ten Plagues of Egypt (Exodus 9:3, 15) and Jesus' description of pre-apocalyptic events (Luke 21:11), among other instances. In addition to particular terms, mention of the causes of infection widely accepted as initiators of the plague could also evoke connotations with the plague, as will be indicated in this research through individual examples from the narrative sources.

The selection of specific terms reflects the contemporary perception of the plague in 1456, as "each lexical choice marks the conceptual perspective that the speaker has chosen to take on that referent for that occasion."<sup>22</sup> While the choice of terms does indeed reflect the authors' attitudes and can influence readers' perceptions, the sources may not always provide sufficient data to determine why writers opt for certain terms or whether their selection was always conscious. In other words, the omission or alteration of terms related to the plague does not necessarily imply the intentional concealment or deception of readers. A thorough comprehension of attitudes requires simultaneous insight into word semantics and the narratives' political-religious setting.

### **Divine intervention and dual narratives: conceptualizing reflections on the Belgrade victory and plague of 1456**

Shortly after the Battle of Belgrade, news of the Christian victory was strategically spread to stimulate crusading enthusiasm and advocate for the continuation of the war. Hunyadi highlighted the opportune nature of the moment for further military action in his letters.<sup>23</sup> Encouraged by the triumph, Pope Callixtus III directed the opening of a new front on the Aegean Sea.<sup>24</sup> In a letter to Francesco Sforza

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21 Doederlein, *Lateinische Synonyme*, vol. II, 62; *Logeion*, s.v. *aegritudo*, *molestia*, *morbus*, *valetudo*, <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/aegritudo>, <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/molestia>, <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/morbus>, <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/valetudo> (Accessed: 11 April 2024).

22 Clark, "Languages and Representations," 21.

23 Bernoulli, ed., *Basler Chroniken*, vol. IV, 393, 395; Thallóczy and Áldásy, eds, *Magyarország és Szerbia*, 208, no. CCLXXVII; Pálosfalvi, *From Nicopolis to Mohács*, 187.

24 Setton, *The Papacy*, vol. II, 187; Babinger, *Mehmed the Conqueror*, 145; Pálosfalvi, *From Nicopolis to Mohács*, 187.

(23 August 1456), the Pope insisted that “now is precisely the time to pursue the victory promised to us from heaven.”<sup>25</sup> This sentiment was a constant element of papal letters from late August to the end of September. The focus was consistently on the potential liberation of “Constantinople, [the] Holy Land, Europe, and Asia” through the continuation of the war following the triumph in Belgrade.<sup>26</sup>

The Belgrade victory was widely perceived as a divine gift, thereby aligning with a crusade-theological model in which the triumph was interpreted as a manifestation of divine blessing and approval.<sup>27</sup> Cardinal Juan Carvajal, a papal legate in Hungary, characterized the triumph as “the work of the hand of God.”<sup>28</sup> This belief was earlier echoed in Capistrano’s report to the Pope (22 July 1456)<sup>29</sup> and can be traced in the Pope’s correspondence with the Milanese Duke and French King Charles VII (1422–1461).<sup>30</sup> A letter from the city of Nuremberg to Weißenburg (13 August 1456), reflecting on the news of the battle, highlighted divine assistance to the Christian army.<sup>31</sup> Similar sentiments were echoed in the Venetian Senate’s letters addressed to Cardinal Carvajal and John Hunyadi (12 August) and in the instructions for the Venetian secretary in Hungary.<sup>32</sup> The celebration of the victory found its liturgical expression through a special service prescribed by Pope Callixtus.<sup>33</sup> Public ceremonies commemorating the victory generally served to reinforce crusader ideology, thereby amplifying the connotation of divine triumph associated with the Battle of Belgrade.<sup>34</sup>

As reports of the victory spread across Europe, the plague took hold among the crusaders in Belgrade and Zemun. By the end of the summer of 1456, the crusader army had been disbanded, with a significant portion of its members who came from Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>35</sup> While sources mention Hungarians, Germans,

25 Chmel, ed., “Briefe und Aktenstücke,” 35; Mixson, *The Crusade*, 124.

26 Calixtus PP. III, II “*Liber Brevium*,” 91–95, no. 70 (65), no. 71 (37), no. 74 (45), no. 75 (46), no. 78 (59), no. 81 (66); Setton, *The Papacy*, vol. II, 187–88, n. 109.

27 Housley, *The Later Crusades*, 104; Hamilton, “God Wills It,” 96.

28 Thallóczy and Áldásy, eds., *Magyarország és Szerbia*, 211, no. CCLXXIX; Mixson, *The Crusade*, 113.

29 Wadding, ed., *Annales*, vol. XII, 429–30; Mixson, *The Crusade*, 87–8.

30 Chmel, ed., “Briefe und Aktenstücke,” 123; Raynaldi and Baronius, eds, *Annales Ecclesiastici*, vol. XXIX, 84.

31 Kern, “Zur Geschichte des Kampfes um Belgrad,” 372–74; Mixson, *The Crusade*, 121–22.

32 Pop, “The Battle of Belgrade,” 443–44.

33 Mixson, *The Crusade*, 142–45.

34 Gaposchkin, “Christian Crusading, Ritual, and Liturgy”; Gaposchkin, *Invisible Weapons*, 226–55.

35 Kalić, *Beograd*, 162–63.

Austrians, Czechs, Poles, Bosnians, and ‘Sclavi’<sup>36</sup> among the peoples constituting the army, detailed information about their specific regions or towns of origin is lacking.<sup>37</sup> Fragmented reports on the plague’s spread during 1456 and 1457 suggest that the wave affected Hungary, Serbia, Bosnia, the Eastern Adriatic, Poland, and parts of Central Europe. It further extended to the Apennine and Iberian peninsulas, reaching as far as France in the west and Constantinople in the east.<sup>38</sup> By comparing the directions of the plague’s spread with data on the crusader army’s composition, it may be assumed that the disbandment of the army in the summer of 1456 at least partially contributed to the subsequent transmission of the plague in East Central Europe.

The contemporary perception of the 1456 plague was shaped by a pre-established plague discourse developed during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The theological dimension of this discourse reflected the belief that the occurrence of the plague was a manifestation of God’s punishment. Divine retribution could be both individual and universal.<sup>39</sup> The understanding of the plague encompassed diverse triggers, including astrological or uncommon natural phenomena. It could also be attributed to more physical factors, such as bad air, but even then, the underlying cause was typically metaphysical, i.e., God’s vengeance for human sins.<sup>40</sup> The crusade theology added another layer of complexity to the perception of the plague following the Belgrade victory. It linked participation in the crusade to indulgences and the forgiveness of sins and associated sinfulness with crusader defeat and failure.<sup>41</sup> This complex interplay of theological concepts marked the challenging task faced by authors describing the aftermath of the Battle of Belgrade. They found themselves struggling with parallel and contrasting divine aspects of victory and plague in their narratives.

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36 Norman Housley associates the term either with Dalmatians or with “Slavonians (i.e., northern Croatians).” Housley, *The Later Crusades*, 103; Housley, *Crusading*, 113. The term was used to describe the other Slavic groups, as well. Uličný, “Latinské etnonymá Slovákov”; Mesiarkin, “The Name of the Slavs.”

37 Iorga, ed., *Notes et extraits*, vol. IV, 131, no. LXVI; Thallóczy and Áldásy, eds, *Magyarország és Szerbia*, 471, no. XII (DXXXIII); Długosz, *Annales*, vol. XII, 254; Van Hecke et al., eds, *Acta Sanctorum Octobris*, vol. X, 373.

38 Hrabak, “Kuga,” 21; Biraben, *Les hommes et la peste*, vol. I, 380, 390, 396, 410, 422, 441; Varlık, *Plague and Empire*, 157; Smoljanović, Ristić, and Hayward, “Historic Exposure to Plague.”

39 Carmichael, “Universal and Particular,” 21, 25–34; Stearns, “New Directions,” 1366–67; Horrox, *The Black Death*, 126–43.

40 Hays, *The Burdens of Disease*, 43; Horrox, *The Black Death*, 193–94.

41 Portnykh, “God Wills It!,” 480–86.

## The (non)distribution of news about the plague in documentary sources on the battle

News of the battle, as shown, initially circulated through letters. The earliest reports by John of Capistrano (22 and 23 July)<sup>42</sup> and John Hunyadi (23 and 24 July)<sup>43</sup> stress the significant destruction of the Ottoman army and make no mention of the plague outbreak. This omission is expected since the letters were sent a day or two after the victory, allowing insufficient time for the plague to spread.<sup>44</sup> Friar John of Tagliacozzo, in a letter sent from the battlefield to an unnamed Franciscan from Abruzzo (28 July 1456), also failed to mention the disease.<sup>45</sup>

The initial reference to the plague appears in a letter from Capistrano to Pope Callixtus III (17 August 1456).<sup>46</sup> While reporting on the current situation at the Christian-Ottoman frontier, the friar mentions the death of John Hunyadi, stating that he “lost his life to pestilence [*ex peste*].”<sup>47</sup> The mention of Hunyadi’s death cause is unambiguous but remarkably brief. Although the letter provides a detailed account of the conditions of both the Crusader and Ottoman armies, it does not note the occurrence of the plague among the soldiers. The note on Hunyadi’s death from the plague is inserted among the enthusiastic reports of crusader potential and the information that army leadership was assumed by Count Nicholas of Ilok.<sup>48</sup> The primary objective of the letter was to provide a report on the current situation at the front and, more importantly, to emphasize the need to continue the war, which was expected “not only to recover Greece and Europe, but [...] the Holy Land.”<sup>49</sup> Therefore, the inclusion of the occurrence of the plague among the soldiers would potentially have had a negative impact on the desired image of a strong army ready to continue the campaign. It is noteworthy that Hunyadi, referenced in a single sentence, is not the dominant figure in the letter. That position is held by Count Nicholas, to whom an entire section of the letter pertaining to army leadership is dedicated.

In a letter to Jean Jouffroy, the Archbishop of Arras (24 August 1456), the Pope celebrated the victory at ‘the key to the Kingdom of Hungary’ and highlighted the

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42 Wadding, ed., *Annales*, vol. XII, 429–30; Mixson, *The Crusade*, 87–91.

43 Dobner, ed., *Monumenta historica Boemiae*, vol. II, 417–8; Thallóczy and Áldásy, eds, *Magyarország és Szerbia*, 208–9, no. CCLXXVII; Mixson, *The Crusade*, 91–3.

44 The typical incubation period for the plague is two to six days or longer. Dennis and Mead, “Plague,” 476.

45 Thallóczy and Áldásy, eds, *Magyarország és Szerbia*, 380–88, no. V (DXVIII).

46 Wadding, ed., *Annales*, vol. XII, 430–2; Mixson, *The Crusade*, 104–7.

47 Wadding, ed., *Annales*, vol. XII, 431; Mixson, *The Crusade*, 107.

48 Mixson, *The Crusade*, 107; Wadding, ed., *Annales*, vol. XII, 431–32.

49 Mixson, *The Crusade*, 106.

role of Hunyadi without mentioning his death.<sup>50</sup> Hunyadi's death is also absent from Calixtus' crusade-propaganda letters from September 1456, which adhere to the heroic narrative patterns.<sup>51</sup> A brief note about Hunyadi's death, without specifying the cause, was provided by the Pope in a letter to the orator in France (October 1456). Hunyadi retains his previous image of invincibility through the use of the term *gloriosus*.<sup>52</sup> In a letter to Cardinal Alan of Avignon (8 October 1456), the Pope more elaborately addressed Hunyadi's death. He stated his intention to honor Hunyadi with "appropriate titles and a diadem," but that God had "adorned [...] with an immortal heavenly diadem" the voivode "who can be reckoned as fortunate among the martyrs."<sup>53</sup> The letter does not mention the occurrence of the plague in the army, which may be partly explained by the Pope's lack of information. However, Callixtus also omits to mention the plague as the cause of Hunyadi's death, speaking of his passing in terms closely related to saintly glorification. The concept of sanctity, to some extent already present in the papal letters written during Hunyadi's lifetime, retained primacy, while the opposing concept of the plague remained unmentioned, whether intentionally or not.

An anonymous letter to Henry of Eckenfelt, a Carthusian from Gaming (November or December 1456), characterizes the deaths of Hunyadi and Capistrano as two of the four "heavenly plagues [*coeli plagas*]" that befell humanity that year.<sup>54</sup> While portraying the Belgrade victory as a divine blessing, the author criticizes Christians' lack of repentance after the battle, which is why God sent the 'plagues.'<sup>55</sup>

The crusade-propagandistic use of the victory at Belgrade demonstrated its persistence, as evidenced by its mention in the papal bull *Ezechielis prophete* of Pius II.<sup>56</sup> The Bull declared an anti-Ottoman crusade in relation to the context of the earlier Venetian declaration of war against the Turks (28 July 1463), followed by Hungarian (12 September) and Burgundian (19 October) participation.<sup>57</sup> The mention of the battle is brief, emphasizing the Hungarians as almost the sole defenders of Christendom, the Christian triumph and the Ottoman's catastrophic defeat. As anticipated, there is no mention of the plague or any other disease.

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50 Theiner, ed., *Vetera monumenta historica Hungariam sacram illustrantia*, vol. II, 280–1, no. CCCCXLIII.

51 Calixtus PP. III, *Il "Liber Brevium"*, 95–6, no. 82 (67), no. 83 (107).

52 Raynaldi and Baronius, eds, *Annales Ecclesiastici*, vol. XXIX, 89; Calixtus PP. III, *Il "Liber Brevium"*, 97, no. 85 (117).

53 Raynaldi and Baronius, eds, *Annales Ecclesiastici*, vol. XXIX, 89; Calixtus PP. III, *Il "Liber Brevium"*, 98, no. 87 (118).

54 Pez, *Thesaurus anecdotorum*, vol. II, pt. III, 343; Mixson, *The Crusade*, 138.

55 Mixson, *The Crusade*, 139–40.

56 Pius II, "Bull: Ezechielis Prophete," 142.

57 Setton, *The Papacy*, vol. II, 241–50.

## Narrative sources on the battle, plague, and the death of protagonists

Most of the narrative sources engage with the Battle of Belgrade at a certain temporal distance and within different post-battle settings, providing the opportunity for narratives to be carefully shaped. Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini described the Belgrade victory in the works *Historia Bohemica*, *De Europa*, and *Comentarii*. In *Historia Bohemica*, Piccolomini recounts the crusader struggles, omitting any mention of the plague among the troops.<sup>58</sup> While he praises Hunyadi and Capistrano as leaders in the battle, he attributes post-victory vanity to both, particularly to Capistrano. This critique, formed in the context of Aeneas Sylvius' opposition to the friar's canonization, stems, in Piccolomini's own words, from the access to Capistrano's and Hunyadi's letters.<sup>59</sup> The accusation was seemingly primarily addressed to Capistrano, as Hunyadi remained portrayed as an ideal crusader.<sup>60</sup> Capistrano's cause of death is stated as ordinary 'old age,' and Hunyadi's as 'illness (*morbis*),' with no specific reference to the plague or any sort of infection in either case.<sup>61</sup>

Piccolomini glorifies Hunyadi in the work through the traditional narrative of a warrior who had "saved the land of Hungary [...] for Christ."<sup>62</sup> While Piccolomini, on other occasions, both literally and figuratively, refers to the plague as *pestis*,<sup>63</sup> in Hunyadi's case, he employs a different term. Moreover, he transforms a typical plague image in order to highlight the hero's Christian feat. Specifically, when describing the 'stench of human decay' around Hunyadi's dying body, Piccolomini portrays it as a moment when Hunyadi 'overcame himself in illness,' confessing and receiving communion.<sup>64</sup>

Given his access to Capistrano's correspondence, Piccolomini could have learned the actual cause of Hunyadi's death. However, by transforming the term *pestis* into a more sophisticated *morbis*, he allowed Hunyadi's zeal to manifest without the risk of associating him with an unworthy death.<sup>65</sup> With no mention of the plague or infection among the crusader army, there were few links through which readers could identify Hunyadi's 'illness' as the plague. A similar though

58 Piccolomini, "Historia Bohemica," 137–38; Piccolomini, *Historia Bohemica*, 145–46.

59 Piccolomini, *Historia Bohemica*, 146–47; Andrić, *Čudesna*, 79–80.

60 Muresan, "John Hunyadi," 35–42.

61 Piccolomini, "Historia Bohemica," 138.

62 Piccolomini, "Historia Bohemica," 139; Piccolomini, *Historia Bohemica*, 148.

63 Piccolomini, "Historia Bohemica," 102–3, 110, 141–42.

64 Piccolomini, "Historia Bohemica," 139; Piccolomini, *Historia Bohemica*, 149.

65 For a contemporary perception of death by plague as 'unworthy [*indigne*]' in the context of King Ladislaus V's death, widely attributed to the plague, see: Gelcich and Thallóczy, eds, *Raguza és Magyarország*, 604, no. 356. On Ladislaus' death, see: Papaják, "V. László magyar és cseh király halálának oka."

slightly shorter account of the battle is presented in *De Europa*, where Hunyadi's cause of death was also attributed to 'illness.'<sup>66</sup> In *Comentarii*, Piccolomini provides the most concise account, noting that both Hunyadi and Capistrano died from an illness.<sup>67</sup>

Hagiographic sources related to Capistrano did not solely seek to create and propagate his cult; rather, they played a nearly polemical role. This was particularly significant given that the idea of Capistrano's early canonization faced opposition, with influential prelates such as Cardinals Piccolomini and Carvajal among the opponents.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, it is possible to assume that the biographers carefully considered the terms by which they represented their teacher.

Alongside the general perceptions of the plague, the views of Capistrano himself regarding the theological nature of this disease are important due to their potential influence on both the authors and readers, many of whom were the Observant Franciscans. Specifically, in his teachings, Capistrano emphasized, through biblical, historical, and patristic arguments, the causality between the plague and various sins, including blasphemy.<sup>69</sup> Within this theological framework, his disciples likely found less room to associate the death of their revered teacher and candidate for sainthood with the plague.

In a biography written by Jerome of Udine, the description of the Battle of Belgrade is evidently employed to underline the friar's sanctity. Jerome's narrative portrays Capistrano as the leader of the crusaders (with Hunyadi subordinate to him), who courageously ventures onto the battlefield to inspire the soldiers yet remains unharmed.<sup>70</sup> According to Jerome, Capistrano desired martyrdom, and although he did not directly experience it, he achieved a 'bloodless martyrdom.'<sup>71</sup> When describing Capistrano's death, Jerome attributes it to "severe illness [*acerba valetudine*] due to excessive labours."<sup>72</sup> Hence, Capistrano is reported to have contracted the illness not from an infection but rather from zeal-related exhaustion. In further text, Jerome listed Capistrano's sufferings from labour, fevers, diarrhoea, etc. The author was with Capistrano for most of the battle and during his death, and he possessed a medical education that may have enabled him to recognize the

66 Pius PP. II, *Enee Silvii Piccolominei postea Pii PP. II De Europa*, 82–85; Piccolomini, *Enea Silvio Piccolomini: De Europa*, 52–54.

67 Pius PP. II, *The Commentaries*, 799–800; Pius PP. II, *Comentarii*, 601.

68 Andrić, *Čudesas*, 79–80, 139–74.

69 Gecser, "Giovanni of Capestrano on the Plague," 42–44.

70 Van Hecke et al., eds, *Acta Sanctorum Octobris*, vol. X, 487–88.

71 Van Hecke et al., eds, *Acta Sanctorum Octobris*, vol. X, 488. The topos of 'bloodless martyrdom' is common in Capistrano's hagiography. Andrić, *Čudesas*, 63, n. 37.

72 Van Hecke et al., eds, *Acta Sanctorum Octobris*, vol. X, 488.

symptoms of the plague.<sup>73</sup> However, he chose to omit any mention of the plague both in the report on the battle and the friar's death. By transforming the plague into a general 'illness' and placing it in causal relation to Capistrano's zeal, the author placed his character's 'bloodless martyrdom' at the centre of the narrative.

Nicholas of Fara and Christopher of Varese did not personally witness the Battle of Belgrade or Capistrano's last days. Nicholas relied on Jerome of Udine's and John of Tagliacozzo's accounts, and Christopher of Varese expanded Nicholas' report.<sup>74</sup> Consequently, their biographies adopted the topos of 'bloodless martyrdom' and the omission of the plague. Nicholas of Fara omitted to mention any illness while writing about the friar's death, stressing that during the Belgrade battle, Capistrano undertook "so many labours that his frail body [...] was exhausted."<sup>75</sup>

Following the previous patterns, Christopher of Varese highlighted that "due to immense labours, cares, vigils, and hardships" during the battle, Capistrano "began to fall seriously ill." He reposed after several days of "suffering from a severe diarrhoea [*valida fluxus aegritudine*] (by which also Saint Bernardino died)."<sup>76</sup> The note on Bernardino of Siena is significant for identifying Christopher's *fluxus aegritudine* with diarrhoea, as well as drawing a saintly parallel between Capistrano and his teacher.<sup>77</sup> Besides the general connections between these two Franciscans, there is a noteworthy 'recycling' of Bernardino's miracles in the writings for the purposes of Capistrano's canonization.<sup>78</sup> In the case of Christopher of Varese's biography, the 'recycling' extends to the causes of death of both figures. Moreover, Bernardino was canonized relatively early, merely six years after his passing, as it was intended to be done with Capistrano.<sup>79</sup> It is conceivable that these parallels, including those concerning the cause of death, were intended to underscore the legitimacy of Capistrano's canonization. Notably, none of the three mentioned biographers documented the

73 Andrić, "Lives of St John Capistran," 214. Many of the symptoms listed by Jerome align with those which Galen underlines as plague indicators. Littman and Littman, "Galen and the Antonine Plague," 246–48. Galen's work was quite influential in medieval and Renaissance medicine, and Jerome probably had insight into some of his writings. Further on this issue, see: Michael McVaugh, "Galen in the Medieval Universities"; Fortuna, "Editions and Translations of Galen."

74 Andrić, "Lives of St John Capistran," 215.

75 Van Hecke et al., eds, *Acta Sanctorum Octobris*, vol. X, 472.

76 Van Hecke et al., eds., *Acta Sanctorum Octobris*, vol. X, 533.

77 On St Bernardino's death, see Henschenius and Papebrochius, *Acta Sanctorum Maii*, vol. V, 100, 113. For further insight into the medieval term *fluxus* or *fluxus aegritudine*, denoting diarrhoea, sometimes with fatal outcomes, see: Sela, ed., *Abraham Ibn Ezra*, 516; Bobio, *Incipit tractatus*, 93v.

78 Andrić, *Čudesna*, 176–78.

79 Manselli, "Bernardino."

plague among the crusaders, suggesting a different focus in their narratives. This omission also deprived the audience of a link between the friar's illness and the plague infection contracted at Belgrade.

While John of Tagliacozzo was an eyewitness to the battle, his primary objective of highlighting Capistrano's sainthood shaped the content of his account known as *Relatio de victoria Belgradensi*. Tagliacozzo writes that Hunyadi "fell ill" and "passed from this world," refraining from specifying the illness.<sup>80</sup> Following the report of Hunyadi's death, Tagliacozzo writes that "stench had begun to rise from the bodies of the Turks" and mentions the infection of the crusaders in Belgrade and Semlin (Zemun).<sup>81</sup> Although this infection was not directly referred to as *pestis*, the connection between the disease and the foul air from the corpses was probably associated with the plague among the contemporaries.<sup>82</sup> Tagliacozzo specifically linked the cause of the stench, i.e., the plague, to the "bodies of the Turks." This approach echoed Pope Callixtus III's perspective during the Crusade of 1456. Attributing the plague to undesirable 'others,' both Tagliacozzo and Callixtus demonstrate continuity with prior medieval plague discourse.<sup>83</sup> According to Tagliacozzo, John of Capistrano and Cardinal Carvajal tried to find a safe place to isolate themselves from the infection.<sup>84</sup>

Tagliacozzo's second writing, on Capistrano's death, more strongly points out the friar's leadership in the army and his commitment to the crusade.<sup>85</sup> All his exertions are portrayed as a contribution to a 'bloodless martyrdom.' Following the victorious campaign, Capistrano began to fall ill "due to the force of fevers and various pains afflicting his tired body."<sup>86</sup> At the same time, in contrast to the *Relatio*, Tagliacozzo explicitly states that Cardinal Carvajal and Hunyadi contracted the plague (*pestis*).<sup>87</sup>

In line with the *Relatio*, Tagliacozzo describes a widespread infection emerging "from the corpses of the dead."<sup>88</sup> This 'trouble (*molestia*),' seemingly the plague,

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80 Mixson, *The Crusade*, 213.

81 Mixson, *The Crusade*, 213–14.

82 Hays, *The Burdens of Disease*, 43; Horrox, *The Black Death*, 17, 40–41, 49, 56, 100–1; Aggarwal, "Medieval Scourge," 24. Tagliacozzo's description of the infection is accepted in historiography as a reference to the plague. Kalić, *Beograd*, 170; Hrabak, "Kuga," 21.

83 Calixtus attributed the 'new plagues' to the Ottoman attacks in his bull *Cum his superioribus annis* (29 June 1456). Calixtus PP. III, *Bulla Turcorum*, 1r; Mixson, *The Crusade*, 89. On associating the Jews and the Ottomans with the spreading plague, see: Cohn, "The Black Death and the Burning of Jews;" Horrox, *The Black Death*, 110; Pilat and Cristea, *The Ottoman Threat*, 210.

84 Mixson, *The Crusade*, 214.

85 Van Hecke et al., eds, *Acta Sanctorum Octobris*, vol. X, 390–91.

86 Van Hecke et al., eds, *Acta Sanctorum Octobris*, vol. X, 391.

87 Van Hecke et al., eds, *Acta Sanctorum Octobris*, vol. X, 391.

88 Van Hecke et al., eds, *Acta Sanctorum Octobris*, vol. X, 391.

was not presented as the one that affected Capistrano because the friar, supposedly at Carvajal's request, was sent to Zemun to isolate himself from an environment where "almost everyone was being sickened." The plague further spread to the crusader camp in Zemun, whose hygiene conditions are described as particularly poor, and the cardinal sent Capistrano to Calancha (Slankamen).<sup>89</sup> On both occasions, Tagliacozzo attributes Capistrano's escape from the plague to Carvajal's initiative, though in *Relatio* both of them seek refuge together. Judging by documentary sources, Carvajal was not in Belgrade by 29 July.<sup>90</sup> The initiative to move could have come from Capistrano himself. Indeed, Capistrano, in his teachings, approved of the clergy's fleeing from the plague when done for the greater good of the Church.<sup>91</sup> Nevertheless, such a motive, though theologically justified, would be in contrast with the image of Capistrano as a selfless imitator of St Francis who unquestionably helps the sick.<sup>92</sup> This was avoided by highlighting Carvajal's role in Capistrano's relocation.

John of Capistrano did not stay long in Slankamen, passing away in the Franciscan monastery in Ilok.<sup>93</sup> After his death, his body was bathed, placed in the church, and exposed for the faithful to pay their respects.<sup>94</sup> The Franciscans abandoned the planned public procession during the funeral, supposedly out of fear that the crowd might seize the deceased.<sup>95</sup> The treatment of Capistrano's body indicates that the circle of Franciscans around him did not attribute his demise to the plague or at least sought to downplay the actual cause of death.<sup>96</sup>

News about the battle from contemporary chronicles is mostly brief and with less specific ideological bias. The last part of the Hungarian *Buda Chronicle* of András Hess, published in 1473 but written earlier, briefly mentions the events without any reference to the plague.<sup>97</sup> The passages from the last section of the chronicle, especially until 1458, are very concise and focused on political events.<sup>98</sup> Hence, the author evidently chose to omit the plague from such a narrative, likely considering it less relevant within the prevailing context.

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89 Van Hecke et al., eds, *Acta Sanctorum Octobris*, vol. X, 392.

90 On 29 July 1456, Carvajal sent a letter from Ilok to Francesco Sforza. Thallóczy and Áldásy, eds, *Magyarország és Szerbia*, 210–1, no. CCLXXIX.

91 Gecser, "Giovanni of Capestrano on the Plague," 39–40.

92 Van Hecke et al., eds, *Acta Sanctorum Octobris*, vol. X, 391–92, 401.

93 Andrić, *Čudesas*, 57–64.

94 Van Hecke et al., eds, *Acta Sanctorum Octobris*, vol. X, 401; Andrić, *Čudesas*, 65–6.

95 Van Hecke et al., eds, *Acta Sanctorum Octobris*, vol. X, 401.

96 Stanko Andrić notes that the treatment of Capistrano's remains was used in the service of cult creation from the very moment of his death. Andrić, *Čudesas*, 66.

97 Podhradczky, ed., *Chronicon Budense*, 351.

98 Spychała, "Chronicon Budense," 314.

The Old Serbian chronicles from the late medieval period, with variations that are not significantly relevant to the subject of this research, document that “Iankul [Hunyadi] [...] with the crusaders” triumphed over Sultan Mehmed “under Belgrade.”<sup>99</sup> Following this account is a note on Hunyadi’s death, the sighting of the “tailed star” (Halley’s Comet), and the declaration: “and the plague was all over the land,” or, in an alternate version, “there was a death scourge [‘smr’tonosie’] in Novo Brdo.”<sup>100</sup> Serbian chroniclers, directly confronted with the wave of the plague, apparently perceived it as an inherent component of the turbulent events of 1456.

Thomas Ebendorfer’s *Chronica Austriae*, written in Lower Austria between 1450/51 and 1464, presents a report on the battle that generally adheres to the idea of victory as a divine gift.<sup>101</sup> However, the narrative of Hunyadi’s heroism is not predominant, and his significance derives from commanding the crusader troops. The army itself is portrayed as the primary contributor to the victory.<sup>102</sup> Although the text does not explicitly mention the plague, it speaks of “an infection of the air because of the stench of human corpses.”<sup>103</sup> Ebendorfer attributes this infection, which, as demonstrated in Tagliacozzo’s case, could have been perceived by contemporaries as the plague, as the cause of the deaths of John Hunyadi and “the most reverend father and lord of Kalocsa.”<sup>104</sup>

Brief reports from the Old Czech chronicles focus on the course of the battle and note Hunyadi’s death without any reference to the plague.<sup>105</sup> Individuals from Bohemia were present in the crusader army at Belgrade.<sup>106</sup> King Ladislaus V’s death in 1457 was attributed to the plague in the chronicles, and fear of its spread was evident.<sup>107</sup> However, the extent and very existence of the 1456/57 plague in Bohemia still remain unknown, providing no basis for further analysis.

The most important contemporary source for the analysis of the perception of the plague in 1456 in Poland is Jan Długosz’s *Annals or Chronicles of the Famous*

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99 Different versions of the texts, with notes on the variations, are given in Stojanović, ed., *Stari srpski rodoslovi i letopisi*, 239, no. 705–8.

100 Stojanović, ed., *Stari srpski rodoslovi i letopisi*, 239–40, no. 706–8. Novo Brdo was mentioned in the *Sečenički* chronicle, which is focused on the history of this town. Jakšić, “O imenima,” 229. Haley’s comet was also perceived as a herald of King Alfonso V’s death (1416–1458). Martínez and Marco, “Fifteenth Century Comets,” 57.

101 Ebendorfer, *Chronica Austriae*, 434–35.

102 Ebendorfer, *Chronica Austriae*, 434–35.

103 Mixson, *The Crusade*, 221.

104 Ebendorfer, *Chronica Austriae*, 435; Mixson, *The Crusade*, 221.

105 Šimek, ed., *Staré letopisy české*, 118–19.

106 Długosz, *Annales*, vol. XII, 254.

107 Papajík, “V. László magyar és cseh király halálának oka,” 124.

*Kingdom of Poland*.<sup>108</sup> Although the plague is not mentioned in the thorough account of the Battle of Belgrade, Długosz registered it in the description of the comet's appearing across Poland, Prussia, Lithuania, and Italy, after which the Black Death hit these areas. Długosz notes, "during the same period, death took away Jan Hunyadi."<sup>109</sup> Hunyadi's death is situated among the ominous events predicted by the comet, and its cause is later explicitly attributed to the plague (*pestilencio morbo*).<sup>110</sup> In addition to the previous report, Długosz details the outbreak of the plague in 1456 in "Buda and nearly all Hungarian lands" and in the "Kingdom of Poland, in the areas around Krosno, Żmigród, Strzyżów, and Rymanów."<sup>111</sup> Capistrano's death was not attributed to the plague but rather to a list of diseases which were followed by the friar's "trouble about matters of faith."<sup>112</sup>

In the context of oral tradition, it is noteworthy to mention the accounts of Byzantine Greek historian Laonikos Chalkokondyles. In *The Histories*, written around 1464, he offered a detailed account of the battle.<sup>113</sup> Chalkokondyles' primary historical value is in transiting Ottoman and non-Ottoman oral history.<sup>114</sup> He noted that the Hungarians refrained from pursuing the Ottomans "due to the plague that had broken out in the Hungarian camp [...] so that they did not recover from it for a long time."<sup>115</sup> Chalkokondyles initially reports Hunyadi's death from battle wounds and later presents an alternative version: "it is also said that he was carried off by the plague and died that way."<sup>116</sup> The term Chalkokondyles used to describe Hunyadi's death cause is *loimos*, meaning literally 'the plague.'<sup>117</sup> Whether Chalkokondyles' work targeted a Byzantine audience within the Ottoman Empire or, more likely, one in emigration, it did not involve a particular need to emphasize the crusaders' heroism and strength.<sup>118</sup> The phrase 'it is [...] said' suggests reliance on oral tradition, affirming that information about the plague's occurrence may have existed in these accounts.

108 Długosz, *Annales*, vol. XII, 253–56.

109 Długosz, *Annales*, vol. XII, 256–57; Długosz, *Roczniki*, vol. XII, 289–90.

110 Długosz, *Annales*, vol. XII, 268.

111 Długosz, *Annales*, vol. XII, 271; Długosz, *Roczniki*, vol. XII, 304.

112 Długosz, *Annales*, vol. XII, 269.

113 Chalkokondyles, *The Histories*, vol. II, 226–43.

114 Chalkokondyles, *The Histories*, vol. I, xii–xiii.

115 Chalkokondyles, *The Histories*, vol. II, 241–42.

116 Chalkokondyles, *The Histories*, vol. II, 242–43.

117 *Logeion*, s.v. "λοιμός," <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/λοιμός> (Accessed: 14 April 2024); Jančovič, "»Before Him Went Pestilence«,," 535, 548–49.

118 Further on the problem of Laonikos' audience, see: Akışık-Karakullukçu, "A Question of Audience."

The Battle of Belgrade continued to captivate the attention of narrative sources until the close of the fifteenth century, although later reports emerged from different contextual and temporal settings.<sup>119</sup> Works by subsequent Hungarian writers like Johannes de Thurocz, Pietro Ransano, and Antonio Bonfini document the Battle of Belgrade, consistently portraying Hunyadi as a hero. Thurocz's narrative, later adopted and expanded upon by Ransano and Bonfini, makes no mention of the plague, attributing Hunyadi's demise to illness or exhaustion.<sup>120</sup> The *Turkish Chronicle* by Konstantin Mihailović, written in Poland toward the end of the fifteenth century, omits any references to the plague, focusing instead on Ottoman sorrow.<sup>121</sup> It appears that the memory of the plague following the Belgrade battle had largely faded in subsequent decades. The extent to which this was due to a decrease in narratives about the plague or, perhaps, the latter's relatively lower mortality rate and prevalence in Central and Eastern Europe remains an open question for further research.

## Conclusion

The research has shown the significant influence of prevailing narratives on the perception of the plague outbreak after the Battle of Belgrade. Contemporary views were shaped by discourses associating the plague with sinfulness, divine retribution, and unworthy death, and victory with divine blessing. Correspondences promoting the continuation of the war emphasized the army's strength, constructing heroic narratives, especially concerning its leader John Hunyadi, while mentions of the plague were minimal. Narrative sources, situated in diverse political and ideological contexts, presented varied perspectives on the plague. Texts focused on crusade-related propaganda or the glorification of Hunyadi and Capistrano generally avoided allusions to the plague either by omitting to mention the disease or using general terms with no connotations of catastrophic, God-punishing illness. This avoidance is most apparent in the hagiographic writings created to support John of Capistrano's canonization. While John of Tagliacozzo documented the plague among those outside the scope of glorification, i.e., the crusading army, Cardinal Carvajal, and even Hunyadi, details of Capistrano's infection were consistently omitted, with illness attributed to zeal-induced exhaustion. Sources not tied to crusade

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119 Boreczky, "Historiography and Propaganda"; Figliuolo, "Ranzano, Pietro"; Mihailović, *Janičarove uspomene*, 57–70.

120 Thurocz, *Chronica Hungarorum*, vol. I, 267–73; Ransanus, *Epithoma rerum Hungararum*, 146–52; Bonfinis, *Rerum Ungaricarum decades*, vol. III, 182–91.

121 Mihailović, *Memoirs of a Janissary*, 100–3, 106–9.

or canonization propaganda show a greater degree of explicit documentation of the plague's appearance.<sup>122</sup>

The majority of the analyzed sources, laden with historical biases, struggled to balance concepts involving God's blessing and punishment, consciously or unconsciously marginalizing the plague in narratives of victory, heroism, sanctity, martyrdom, or crusade propaganda. Consequently, mentions of the plague following the Belgrade victory were infrequent and fragmented. Descriptions of the plague's spread in Central and Eastern Europe in 1456 suggest a perception of the phenomenon largely detached from the aftermath of the battle.

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