

PIOTR TAFIŁOWSKI

**Anti-Turkish Correspondence between Matthias Corvinus
and Pope Sixtus IV: A Contribution to the History of Propaganda
in the International Relations in the Late Middle Ages**

Abstract

The paper analyzes the published correspondence between King of Hungary Matthias Corvinus (1458–1490) and Pope Sixtus IV (1471–1484). A considerable portion of letters between the two correspondents was devoted to the problems of fighting against the Turks, who threatened Christian Europe. These documents are interesting not only on account of presenting military operations carried out in the Balkans but also because they allow us to follow the duplicity of the policies practiced by the ruler, whom the Pope called the greatest defender of Christianity. Taking advantage of the argument of his involvement in the struggle against the Turks, the Hungarian King sought to attain other goals, directing his expansion towards the North West and coming into conflict with Poland. At the same time he was such a shrew politician in the international arena that Polish diplomacy was unable to oppose him.

Keywords: Turks, Poles, Hungarians, history, Christianity

Pope Sixtus IV and King Matthias Corvinus of Hungary are the figures in which I became interested already several years ago in the context of legitimation of power. I encountered their correspondence some time ago but I put the collection away until later without reading it¹. When I returned to the letters after I had completed work on my

¹ *Monumenta Vaticana Historiam Regni Hungariae Illustrantia*, series I, tomus VI: *Mathiae Corvini Hungariae regis Epistolae ad Romanos Pontifices datae et ab eis acceptae*, Budapest 1891.

Habilitationsschrift on the image of the “Turk” in Polish 15th- and 16th-century culture², I discovered with surprise that a large portion of the letters also dealt with Turkish affairs. The correspondence examined below covers the period of from 16 June 1476 to 10 March 1484, and four letters with indeterminate dates from the 1480 to 1484. There are 107 letters altogether, of which 37 (ca. 34.5%) concern the struggle against the Turks. This is not only a large percentage but the letters in question are also the most extensive. The descriptions (sent to the Pope) of victorious battles fought by the Hungarians occupy three to four printed pages whereas some letters concerning other matters are sometimes merely several lines long. The Pope’s letters not related to the Ottomans deal mainly with the matters of the Hungarian church, including the appointment to bishop’s posts and the filling of church offices, as well as for example the relationships between King Matthias with the King of Poland, Casimir the Jagiellonian (Kazimierz Jagiellończyk) (letter no. 71).

Much attention has already been devoted to the anti-Turkish plans of Popes Innocent VIII (1484–1492)³, Alexander VI (1492–1503)⁴, and first of all Pius II (1458–1464)⁵. Predecessor of Innocent and Alexander, Sixtus IV (1471–1484) is not very often mentioned in this context. It should be remembered that appeals to fight against the Turks had already been issued by Callixtus III (1455–1458) in his bulls, traces of these activities being found in the catalogues of incunabula⁶. There were particularly many publications of documents relating to the crusades, issued by Innocent VIII (47) and by Sixtus IV (53). Papal bulls were also published in collective editions (11 editions of church summary records). As will be demonstrated later, Sixtus IV was one of very fervent promoters of an anti-Turkish crusade during his pontificate⁷. We should remember that it was under that successor of St. Peter that the Turks captured Otranto (1480), when they first set foot in the lands of the Italian Peninsula.

At the beginning of his pontificate, Sixtus IV insistently encouraged King Matthias Corvinus to undertake an anti-Turkish expedition. It appears that after this early enthusiastic period the Pope found that it was not possible to spontaneously organize a crusade

² P. Tańkowski, „*Imago Turci*”: studium z dziejów komunikacji społecznej w dawnej Polsce (1453–1572), Lublin 2013.

³ E.g. K. Baczkowski, *Państwa Europy środkowo-wschodniej wobec antytureckich projektów Innocentego VIII (1484–1492)*, „*Nasza Przeszłość*” 1990, No. 74, pp. 207–235.

⁴ E.g. K. Baczkowski, *Próby włączenia Państw Jagiellońskich do koalicji antytureckiej przez papieża Aleksandra VI na przełomie XV/XVI wieku*, „*Nasza Przeszłość*” 1994, No. 81, pp. 5–46.

⁵ L. Winowski, *Mahomet w oczach Piusa II*, “*Prawo Kanoniczne*” 1978, No. 21, pp. 16–28; J. Helmuth, *Pius II. und die Türken*, in: *Europa und die Türken in der Renaissance*, herausgegeben von B. Guthmüller und W. Kühmann, Tübingen 2000, pp. 79–137; N. Bisaha, *Pope Pius II and the Crusade*, in: *Crusading in the Fifteenth Century: Message and Impact*, ed. N. Housley, London 2004, pp. 39–52; Pius II, *Epistola ad Mahumetem: Einleitung, kritische Edition, Übersetzung*, R.F. Gleis, M. Köhler (eds.), Trier 2001.

⁶ See: P. Tańkowski, *Turcica w Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke*, „*Kultura i Historia*”, Lublin, Instytut Kulturoznawstwa Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2012, <http://www.kulturalihistoria.umcs.lublin.pl/archives/4296>.

⁷ See: *Enciclopedia dei Papi*, vol. 2, Roma 2000, pp. 706–708.

in which joint European forces would take part. Since then he focused his efforts on bringing about an agreement and friendly relations between Christian rulers. Even this task turned out to be unfeasible.

In the next years it was the King who reported on campaigns against the Turks; first of all, however, he cunningly used this trump card to gain political assistance and financial subsidies. He emphasized his immense commitment to the defence of Christianity and his total obedience to the Holy See in his fights against the infidels and heretics. From the end of 1480 and the beginning of 1481 Matthias wrote mainly that he would like to attack the Turks but he could not because he was prevented by the constant threat to Hungary on the part of Emperor Frederick III Habsburg. This theme became the *leitmotiv* of the King's letters.

It should be observed that Matthias was criticized, among others in Poland, for pretending to be a crusader and thereby obtaining subsidies, which he subsequently used to fight against the state of the Jagiellonians and against the Habsburg Empire⁸. Attempts to counteract the papacy's support for Matthias Corvinus were made by Filippo Buonaccorsi called Callimachus, an Italian humanist settled in Poland, who even formulated an appropriate political programme⁹.

Already the second letter sent by the Pope to the King (August 30, 1472, no. 68) was about the Turkish threat. King Matthias was convinced that it was the Pope's foremost concern to preserve peace among the Christians, in particular in the regions which required defence and protection against vile intentions of the Turks, who increasingly threatened Christian dominions and were about to invade Italy any moment¹⁰. Unfortunately, the eternal conflicts between Croatian barons were growing stronger. Not only did they take every opportunity to fight one another but they even prayed for more horrid misdeeds on the part of the Turks. In order to prevent these feuds, the Pope sent his legate to Croatia: Prosper Camulius, a papal notary.

Next year (1473, no daily date, no. 69) Matthias was reprimanded by the Pope for attempting to reach an agreement with the Turks. Sixtus wrote point blank, like a father talking to his son, without hiding anything. And just as he was not angered by what had been reported to him, he also asked the King to accept his words without ire because when writing the letter he had the good of all Christendom in mind.

The Pope learned that Matthias sent to the Turks, the enemies of Christ, two envoys: Antonio Catharensis of the Order of Friars Minor, abbot of the monastery near Buda, and Bosnian Jan Humschi. They were seen on 16 April, crossing the Danube near Belgrade. Their mission was as follows: the King offered the Sultan peace and alliance if the latter ceded Bosnia and Serbia or other territories to Hungary. Corvinus also promised help

⁸ See for example K. Baczkowski, *Maciej Korwin, król Węgier (1458–1490) w opinii historiografii staropolskiej*, in: *Aetas media – aetas moderna. Studia ofiarowane profesorowi Henrykowi Samsonowiczowi w siedemdziesiątą rocznicę urodzin*, Warszawa 2000, pp. 363–374.

⁹ See P. Tafiłowski, „*Imago Turci*”, op. cit., pp. 148–155.

¹⁰ Here and below I discuss the contents of letters trying to keep a certain degree of their poetic.

against King Uzun Hassan provided, however, he would receive Turkish subsidies for the purpose¹¹.

The Pontiff expressed his disbelief because the King's well-known conduct was in contradiction to the most recent reports about his deeds, veritably unworthy of the royal dignity. Even the King was only a man like others and could also be fallible. He could make mistakes, hesitate, fall, and be in dilemmas. That is why Sixtus wrote to him not as if was writing to someone who was ready to cooperate with the infidels but to someone who would ask the opinion of a higher authority before acting; he appealed to the King: "Matthias, famous King, first take into account what trust you can have in deceitful people." While Corvinus followed Christ, the Turks followed Mahomet's madness. He fought against them for the Gospel; they were always ready to take up arms to defend a sect of demons. "You have your religion, and they have theirs; consequently, it will never be possible to preserve genuine concord. You would have either to drive out Christ, or always be suspicious of the Turk."

The Pope argued that Matthias must not forget the battles fought against the Turks by his father, a voivode, and by himself, and also the many defeats inflicted on both of them by the Turks¹². They first of all knew the valour of the Hunyadi, because of which they failed to gain as many acquisitions as they would have liked, that is why the Turks hated the Hunyadi and wished the death of the Hungarian King. Even if they paid compliments at the moment and talked about forgiveness, they did so for no other reason than calculation, while in reality they would remain enemies in many situations. Examples of their false faith, ill will, and deception were not difficult to find. The memories of Turkish misdeeds in Serbia and Bosnia about how they ruthlessly oppressed the unfortunate Christians were still alive. The Turks must not be believed: it would be in vain to expect compensation for friendship. Moreover, the question could not be omitted about how this alliance would be accepted by the Hungarian lords. The Hungarians had always been faithful to God, always ready to fight in the name of the Lord. What would they say, how would they judge the King for forging an alliance with the enemy, not out of absolute necessity but only for meagre gains? And the Germans would also side with his enemies for that reason.

Corvinus had attacked neighbouring Bohemia for many years, not by the decree of the Holy See and not for eliminating errors in the faith but only to enhance his dignity. For base reasons the struggle lasted for so long, with great harm to the people and with

¹¹ On the subject of maintenance of the peaceful relations between Matthias Corvinus and the Ottomans see G. İşıksel, *Friendship and the principle of good neighbourhood between Bayezid II and Matthias Corvinus*, in: *Matthias Corvinus und seine Zeit: Europa am Übergang vom Mittelalter zur Neuzeit zwischen Wien und Konstantinopel*, ed. C. Gastgeber et al., Wien 2011, pp. 33–36. See also O.J. Schmitt, *Matthias Corvinus und Skanderbeg oder die jahrzehntelange Allianz der Häuser Hunyadi und Kastrioti im Krieg mit den Osmanen: 9–14* in the same volume.

¹² See D. Dümmerth, *A két Hunyadi*, Budapest 1985; L. Elekes, *Hunyadi János*, Budapest 1951; J. Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, New York 1985.

damage to their belongings. In contrast, in the case of Bosnia and Serbia he wanted to make peace not merely with the heretics, but even worse – with the infidels.

By attacking King Uzun Hassan, Matthias Corvinus would thereby weaken his own defences, and this would be at the time when the Pope and King Ferdinand of Sicily were wondering how to split the Turks so that they would be unable to defend themselves effectively. And now Matthias would like to stand in defiance of this by negotiating with the enemy?

The letter ended with assurances of recognition of the King's previous services, his greatness, resistance to the Turks, and his struggle against heresy in Bohemia, these virtues and achievements having been highly praised. Why then did he wish to destroy his fame, reject the name of Christ's soldier, and become a benefactor of the infidels? The Pope's recognition of Matthias's services and acclaim for his deeds in defence of Christianity (for many countries he was a bulwark against the Turks) are also contained in the letter dated July 20, 1474 (no. 70).

Some historians attribute to Matthias Corvinus's ineptitude his indifference towards Turkish conquests, the long-term consequence of which was, they believe, the defeat of the Kingdom of Hungary in 1526¹³. The King devoted considerable energy to fighting against the Habsburgs¹⁴; he also planned to gain the imperial crown. In 1485 he captured Vienna, to where he even transferred his capital; he took control of Lower Austria and a part of Styria and Carinthia. These are later events than the correspondence in question; nevertheless, peace with the Turks would secure his rear, while his forces would be turned towards the direction more important to the King. Starting from the year 1464/1465 the Hungarian-Turkish war was essentially confined to border skirmishes for the next ten years whereas a constant source of turmoil was the Hungarian-Austrian frontier. I will return to the subject of the King's struggle against the Emperor later, because this theme often recurs in the letters to and from the Pope.

A few words should be devoted to the abovementioned Uzun Hassan (on the alliance with whom Sixtus wrote to Matthias already in 1475, letter no. 72). He was a Turkmen emir, who enjoyed the European reputation of the King (shah) of the Persians and even the Tartars¹⁵. Plans to involve the emir in the fight against the common enemy were also

¹³ See: P. Tafiłowski, *Mohács 29 VIII 1526*, Zabrze 2010.

¹⁴ G. Rácz, *Die Feldzüge des Königs Matthias Corvinus in Niederösterreich 1477–1490*, Wien 1973; K. Nehring, *Matthias Corvinus, Kaiser Friedrich III, und das Reich: zum hunyadisch-habsburgischen Gegensatz im Donauraum*, München 1975.

¹⁵ For more on this subject see M. Meserve, *Empires of Islam in Renaissance Historical Thought*, Cambridge 2008: 223–231; D. Quirini-Popławska, *Próby nawiązania antyturckiego porozumienia genezyjsko-polsko-tatarskiego w latach 1480–1481*, in: *Historia vero testis temporum: księga jubileuszowa poświęcona Profesorowi Krzysztofowi Baczkowskiemu w 70. rocznicę urodzin*, J. Smołucha, A. Waško, T. Graff, and P.F. Nowakowski (eds.), Kraków 2008, pp. 179–199; F. Babinger, *Z dziejów imperium Osmanów: sułtan Mehmed Zdobycyca i jego czasy*, Warszawa 1977, pp. 323–328; *Rozbiór krytyczny Annalium Poloniae Jana Długosza z lat 1385–1480*, t. 2, Wrocław 1965, pp. 291–292; B. Stachoń, *Polska wobec weneckich projektów użycia Persów i Tatarów przeciw Turcji w 2 poł. XV wieku*, in: *Prace historyczne wydane ku uczczeniu 50-lecia Akademickiego Koła Historyków Uniwersytetu Jana*

devised by the Venetians. Chronicler Jan Długosz mentioned them under the year 1472¹⁶ and first of all under 1473. The 1474 record reads that “two Venetian envoys go: one to the King of Persians Husehasan, the other to the prince of Muscovy while, through his envoy, Husehasan encourages Casimir the Jagiellonian and other Catholic rulers to begin a war against the Turks, himself also offering to come with his forces”¹⁷. Finally, under the year 1475: “The envoy of the Emperor of Persia Uzun Hassan begs King Casimir of Poland for help against the Turks; finally, he goes to King Matthias of Hungary and to the Supreme Pastor to ask for the same”¹⁸ (the note concerns the letter no. 72). The Turkmen aspirations were thwarted in the battle of Başkent on August 11, 1473 although the legend of King Uzun Hassan, held in high esteem in the West, survived for many years – the abovementioned letter was sent by Sixtus IV two years later. About more or less the same time when the fate of the “Emperor of Persia” was resolved in a decisive battle, the Venetian envoy Caterino Zeno proposed the marriage of Uzun Hassan’s daughter to the King of Poland.

The further royal-papal correspondence already dated from 1475 is concerned with battles against the Turks. In one of the letters (no daily date, no. 77) the Pope informed the King that the royal envoys, Stefan Jakchita (Serbian Stefan Jakšić) and Michael canon of Buda, brought him a flag captured from the Turks, which he gratefully accepted.

In mid-October, 1475 Sixtus received information about the capture by the Turks of the town of Kaffa in the Crimea¹⁹ (letter no. 78 of October 18, 1475) and forwarded it immediately to the Christian rulers so that they would send plenipotentiary envoys to Rome as soon as possible. Actions had to be taken to save Christendom from the threat as it was described in a separate letter. Some rulers had already sent their emissaries, others promised to do so very soon, while the Holy See closely watched the development of the situation day and night in order to wisely and prudently propose joint consultations on everything that was necessary for undertaking a military expedition as soon as possible.

The Pope insistently entreated Matthias to take part in the expedition intended to recapture Kaffa, praising his honourable services in the defence of faith and in the fight in the name of the Saviour. Moldavia was expected to join the anti-Turkish campaign (it was consistently regarded by the two correspondents as a province and fiefdom of

Kazimierza we Lwowie, 1878-1928, Lvov 1929, pp. 147–172. See also A. Contarini, *Viaggio ad Uzun Hassan re di Persia*, Venice, Hannibal Foxius, 16 January 1487.

¹⁶ J. Długosz, *Roczniki czyli Kroniki sławnego Królestwa Polskiego*, book 12: 1462–1480, Warszawa 2009, pp. 302–304. Cf. *Rozbiór krytyczny*, op. cit., pp. 291–292.

¹⁷ J. Długosz, *Roczniki*, op. cit., book 12: 1462–1480, pp. 342–343.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 373. Fights against the Turks in the early 15th century were also described by Długosz’s contemporary Hungarian chronicler János Thuróczy; however, he devoted little attention to the times of Matthias Corvinus, briefly discussing the King’s reign and military campaigns in the last chapters of his work. Cf. J. Thuróczy, *Chronicle of the Hungarians*, transl. F. Mantello, foreword P. Engel, Bloomington 1991; Johannes de Thurocz, *Chronica Hungarorum*. I. Textus, ediderunt E. Galánai, J. Cristó; II. Commentarii, Budapest 1985–1988.

¹⁹ M. Małowist, *Kaffa, kolonia genueńska na Krymie i problem wschodni w latach 1453–1475*, Warszawa 1947. The scholar was critical about the two correspondents but he presented the broader context of the events described in this article.

Hungary, the claims of the Polish Crown to the control of that country being obviously out of the question²⁰). In the letter, the Ottomans were called the godless and vilest enemy, “who has no faith, no wish to fulfil alliances, no friendship, no worship of God, no religion but only an insatiable craving for power, faithlessness, contempt for Divine and human laws, and who has endlessly shed Christian blood; whose principles you have always hated and your subjects have always treated them as an enemy with whom one cannot conclude peace in good faith”. There are many examples of lies and ill will on the part of the Turks.

Matthias answered in his letter dated November 3, 1475 (no. 79). The Pontiff encouraged him to take up arms against the Turkish Emperor who had been spilling more and more Christian blood by the day, and also demanded that the King should help Stephen, the Moldavian voivode. The letters and emissaries had enabled the Pope to learn the King’s highest desire to act against the Turks. What therefore prevented him from attacking the common enemy with his entire kingdom? Matthias explained he was preoccupied with the war in Bohemia waged in order to restore that country to the obedience of the Holy See. As soon as he was able to make peace or at least call a truce with some enemies, the whole Hungarian army would be immediately redeployed to board the fleet prepared on the Danube. These forces were kept combat-ready all the summer to defend the country’s borders against the Turkish Emperor, who spread rumours that he was concentrating a large army in the camps. He made considerable expenditures, garrisoned many border castles, almost subjected Transylvania to himself and attacked Moldavia, from which, however, he had to retreat with losses. Corvinus was ready to commit all his land forces and the Danube fleet in order to hold not only Moldavia but also to defend as many Christian provinces as he could against the ignoble invader.

On 14 January 1476 Matthias received a papal brief of October 18, about which he informed the Pope in the letter written two days later (no. 81). The brief dealt with the following issues. Firstly, it was an excellent proposal, which was put forward immediately upon receiving news of Kaffa’s fall, that a meeting of representatives of Christian rulers should be called so that this assembly would cogently and carefully discuss everything that related to starting an expedition as soon as possible, provision of necessary supplies, etc.

Secondly, it contained an admonition that the King should not give up the already begun work but should continue to actively protect the province (Moldavia), which he accepted to defend the Christian faith against the Turk. He should not be satisfied with Turkish persuasion or promises, which were made only to deceive. From the very beginning the Turks were lying, and at their earliest opportunity they would attack Hungary and other Christian countries.

Matthias accepted the first information with pleasure. Never before was it more urgent than at the moment when the infidel enemy of Christ’s name desired his annihilation so much that was collecting armies on land and at sea and militarily threatened all Christians.

²⁰ I. Czamańska, *Moldawia i Wołoszczyzna wobec Polski, Węgier i Turcji w XIV i XV wieku*, Poznań 1996, pp. 138–139.

There were also rumours that the Turks had already concluded peace with Uzun Hassan, which, however, was not certain. There was reason to believe that the enemies did it so that they could use all the forces, previously engaged in their defence, to fight against the Christians. If this happened, it was easy to guess what a great threat it would be to Christendom, when the Turk supplemented his army with reinforcements.

Regarding the second issue, the King answered he did not need additional incentives from His Holiness in order to continue the work of defending the faith against the Turks. This could be confirmed by the papal legates. Since he took over his kingdom 18 years ago, Matthias was always obedient in everything he could to the Holy See. He was always ready to act against the Turks and heretics without hesitation.

As he was appointed by the Holy See to combat heretics, he spared no pains and effort to carry out this work for all these years, defending the Catholic people against heretic attacks. Fighting on this front he could not split his forces to fight the Turks and the heretics at the same time. Nevertheless, the extent to which he was able to contribute to the defence of Christendom against the Turks could be corroborated by the testimony of the Venetian doge and German princes. The more so now, when he was freed from the duty to fight against heretics²¹, he promised to assign as many forces for defending Christianity as he could withdraw from fighting.

And finally, the third theme of the letter. Matthias complained that for so many years of hard work which he had done so far being obedient to the papacy, standing up in defence of Christianity, incurring the highest costs, sometimes more than he could bear, spilling his and his brothers' blood, sparing no efforts and facing a great threat, he received too little compensation from the Holy See, and even to the contrary, he was sometimes in trouble with the Pope. Therefore he was humbly asking Sixtus to accept in good faith what he was writing from the bottom of his heart. He went on to complain of the lack of subsidies to maintain the army which defended Christianity against the Turks and that he did not receive the promised revenues from the jubilee year, which was brought about by the chicanery of Corvinus's enemies. But these actions were not so much detrimental to the Hungarian King's interest as to the whole of Christendom. Those receiving money now would not utilize it for defence against the Turks but use it against the Hungarians and to the detriment of whole Christendom. He continued to persuade the Pope for a long time in a similar way that it was only he who was worth supporting as a truly faithful son and defender of Christianity. The next letter (no. 82), dated February 2, 1476, is similar in content. The same arguments were in fact used

²¹ George of Podebrady, the Hussite King of Bohemia in 1458–1471, was excommunicated by Pope Paul II on December 23, 1466. King Matthias, called in by the Catholic opposition, was chosen the Bohemian King in Olomouc on May 3, 1469. Since then there was a war for the Bohemian crown, which, after the death King George, took the form of a lasting conflict with Poland. On December 8, 1474 the meeting in Wrocław called a three-year truce, and on 12 February 1475 the Prague Diet decided that the Bohemian crown would remain with Ladislaus the Jagiellonian (Władysław Jagiellończyk). It was because of this war that Sixtus reproached Corvinus for fighting as much against heretics as to satisfy his own ambitions. It was from that time on that the Hungarian ruler devoted more attention to fighting against the Ottomans.

by Corvinus's opponents, arguing that financial subventions which he had obtained for fighting the Turks were used against Austria and Poland.

In reply to these complaints the Pope wrote on February 2, 1476 (no. 84) that although the envoys of Casimir the Jagiellonian of Poland requested much, he granted the Polish King nothing but jubilee indulgence funds from a monastery, the money being intended for defence against the Tartars. Some time later the Pope informed Matthias (letter no. 85, no daily date) that his plenipotentiary sent to the King with money reported that he stayed in Senj in Croatia, because he heard rumours that about 6,000 Turks were approaching, which temporarily prevented him from fulfilling his mission. The King was expected to provide a stronger escort so that the money would not be exposed to open danger. Corvinus was also promised further subsidies from tithes. That was enough for the King to assure Sixtus already on March 27, 1476 of his zeal to fight against the Turks, enemies of the faith, and in defence of Christianity, for which he wanted to win victories.

Equally courteous was the next papal letter in that year (no. 90). The Pontiff confirmed that he knew of Corvinus's utmost respect for the Holy See as well as the fervour in brave spirit with which he had been engaged, and still was, in the fight against the most ignoble enemy, the Turks. He had performed deeds most worthy of the name of a true Christian ruler. The most suitable epithet would be the invincible and most magnificent defender and champion of the Catholic faith. Regarding the proposal that the Pope and the cardinals should accompany and assist this holy expedition with all their support, it was their true desire. Negotiations concerning this same matter were carried out with Italian rulers. "You will not be left without help", Sixtus promised; however, when it came to specifics, he could eventually offer the King nothing more but the hope for support by Jesus Christ Himself.

At the same time (no. 91) the envoys of the Moldavian voivode, Stephen, arrived in Rome. Among others, they asked the Pope to grant the voivode a subvention to fight against the Turks, who were a constant threat to his country. The Pope told them that the subsidy for the year had already been promised to Matthias. However, in view of the fact that they were allies, Matthias would undoubtedly use the money appropriately to also defend Moldavia. As far as the next levy was concerned, the Holy See would do him a favour and grant him direct assistance.

The next letter from Sixtus (no. 94), which again began with praises for Matthias (who needed no further incentives to undertake the holy expedition against the most terrible enemy of Christianity), was about the negotiations with Italian princes. Most of the envoys representing the Italian states had already arrived in Rome; the others were expected to appear any day now. King Ferdinand of Sicily, who responded first, became enthusiastic about the holy work. The Pope himself neglected nothing that concerned the undertaking of the expedition as soon as possible, even if it meant he would have to spill his own blood for the purpose. However, the greatest role in the whole operation was played by the Hungarian ruler.

Shortly afterwards (no. 96) the Pope confirmed that he had received the King's letter with a sealed copy of the note by a Hungarian commander, which clearly showed that the

infidel and cruel Turks, who had oppressed Stephen, the Moldavian voivode, with cruel war and laid horrible siege to his castles, had been repulsed, not even by force of arms but only by the name of the King, so dangerous to the enemies. The Moldavians were freed from siege while the Turks retreated and were put to the most ignominious flight. This was cheerful news to the papacy and the whole of Italy, a herald of rescue to all Christendom and reason for Matthias's glory. The next papal letter was in the same tone (no. 97). Matthias performed excellent exploits defending Christianity and defeating the Turks. His army was far better than the Ottoman troops and those of all other infidels. The Pope was receiving news of voivode Stephen's victory over the Sultan; since Stephen was Matthias's liege, this victory again enhanced the King's glory.

On 8 December 1476 r. (no. 98) the King wrote that in his letters he had already confirmed the preparation and then the commencement of the expedition against the Turks. Now he was reporting about two successes of his troops. Owing to Divine grace, the Turkish Emperor had disgracefully fled from Moldavia. After his flight, one part of the Hungarian army sent against him were attacked (before the advent of the Moldavian voivode) by the Walachian ('Transalpinum') voivode (Hospodar) Basarab III the Old ('Bozorad' in the original). His forces together with Turkish garrisons and many other reinforcements (deserters from the Sultan's army and from Bulgaria) numbered ca. 18,000 men. These motley troops were dispersed by the Hungarians. Most of them were killed or taken prisoner, only very few managed to escape, including Basarab himself. After the defeat he sought shelter in one of his castles, easily defensible due to both natural features and fortifications. Knowing, however, about the pursuit and not believing it was possible to defend, he escaped in secret and fled to the Turks, having left a garrison in the fortress. Without delay, the royal army of 60,000 men laid siege to the castle and captured it several days later.

Basarab, having run away from the "kingdom", from which the Turks safely and openly made incursions into Moldavia, was caught by the Hungarians. A new Walachian Hospodar was chosen – Vlad Dracula, fighting in the Hungarian army and known for his hostility towards the Turks. Not for a long time, however: he was murdered around Christmas that year²². While praising Vlad as a brave man and warrior, Matthias did not mention the fact that he (Vlad) had spent the last years in Hungarian captivity.

Meanwhile, Matthias wrote, the second part of the royal army attacked the castle of Smederevo ('Sinedrew' in the original)²³, besieging it both from land and water. Smederevo is situated at the mouth of the Great Morava river ('Moravitz' in the original) into the Danube. Fortifications and bridges were built on both banks, the siege being so tight that the Turks were utterly terrified. That is why, fearing the siege, they burned the town situated below the castle, connected with it and surrounded by ramparts, and a moat, and fortified by a palisade, so that they could defend themselves more easily. The Hungarian

²² M. Cazacu, *Drakula*, Warszawa 2007, p. 186.

²³ The recapture of Smederevo in 1459 was the final act crowning the conquest of Serbia by the Turks, most of the country having been occupied by them in 1439. P. Wróbel, *Krzyż i Półksiężyc: Zachodnie Bałkany wobec Turcji w latach 1444–1463*, Kraków 2000, p. 80.

commanders reported that two pashas, the Anatolian and Rumelian, were getting ready to attack them with 60,000 troops but they hoped to resist the Turk with God's help.

These deeds were performed by the army, which could be easily expanded to 80,000 men. It was fighting for the Christian religion and honour of the Holy See. Unfortunately, the burden of maintaining the troops was borne by the King. That is why he once again insistently entreated the Pope, as he had done many times before, to grant him some subsidy as soon as possible, without such negligence, abandonment, disregard, and weakening of Matthias's kingdom as had often been described before.

In conclusion of his letter, Matthias complained about the Holy Roman Emperor who did not observe the peace made in Wroclaw (the abovementioned three-year truce of December 8, 1474) and constantly attacked his country by force of arms. But the King also promised that, in order to fight Emperor Frederick, he would not withdraw any soldier sent to the war against the Turks. Yielding to these requests and most likely convinced by Corvinus's achievements, Sixtus informed him in the next letter (no. 99) that he had sent him a subsidy.

Then comes a two-year break in the anti-Turkish correspondence. During this time, a turnabout occurred in the papal policy, which I have mentioned above. The next letter (no. 103) was sent to Matthias by Sixtus as late as 1479 and did not directly relate to the Ottomans. In it, the Pope informed him about his efforts to mediate peace between Christian rulers. The King answered in similar generalities (no. 104), writing that the peace between Christians was very important, discord between them being taken advantage of by the infidel enemies – the Turks.

It is only on October 22, 1479 (no. 108) that Corvinus sent a more extensive "Turkish" letter. A few days earlier he had notified His Holiness about the Venetians and the Emperor negotiating with the Turks, the most hated enemies. After they concluded such an alliance the whole ferocity of attacks would be directed at him and his Kingdom. Not long ago he had also written about the Turkish invasion launched during his absence in the Kingdom. It was planned with the support of the Venetians and carried out from the Emperor's lands, attacking such parts of the Kingdom of Hungary that the King would not know about the incursion or suspect anything (the invasion forces must have therefore crossed southern Austria – Krajina and Carinthia – and attacked western Hungary).

Then a great army of the Turks, commanded by Ezebeg, the first most-important Ottoman dignitary under the Anatolian pasha, possibly enticed by the captured spoils or more likely persuaded to do so, attacked Walachia and then Transylvania, the finest part of the Kingdom, in which there were most salt-works, and gold and silver mines which yielded the largest revenue. The forces of the invaders numbered ca. 43,000 Turks together with all the Walachian people. When returning from Transylvania and carrying huge spoils of war, they were caught by Stephen Bathory, the Transylvanian voivode, with the commander in chief, Paul Kinisi, also assisted by the troops from the inner part of the Kingdom. News of the Turkish invasion had spread and reinforcements set off to Transylvania on the King's orders. After fighting an extraordinary battle the Turkish army was defeated, with a great number of Turks and Walachians having been killed,

in particular the Walachian infantry were wiped out, while only very few cavalymen escaped. The names of the beys mentioned in the letter were distorted: Ezebeg and Zenderbeg were killed on the battleground, Manfocherciith received multiple wounds, and Alibeg was pierced with a spear but there was no sure information about his survival and escape. Those who were sent to the King from the battlefield insisted that apart from the abovementioned commanders, in that battle there were seven other dignitaries of the voivode (i.e. Walachian Hospodar Basarab IV the Young, a Turkish ally), about whose escape or death nothing certain was known except for what the King's men had learned after the victory from enemies captured while escaping, and who were still chased and caught until the day the letter was dispatched. The exact number of captives was not yet known because after the battle ended the Transylvanian voivode (i.e. Bathory) announced that prisoners should not be taken but their heads should be cut off. All enemy banners were also captured.

Seven months later, on May 22, 1480 (no. 111), Sixtus informed Matthias of collecting subventions for him for the purpose of continuing the fight against the common enemy. The King would receive over 100,000 ducats from the Pope and the Sacred College of Cardinals; the Pontiff expected to receive another 100,000 ducats promised by King Ferdinand of Sicily, the Duke of Milan was to pay a levy of 30,000 ducats, and Florence – 20,000. After being collected, the whole sum would be sent to Corvinus as one subsidy. After the next five months, on October 18, 1480 (no. 114), the Pope informed King Matthias and the Hungarian bishops about granting indulgences for the sake of assistance to the Island of Rhodes, which had resisted a siege and suffered heavy losses in the fight against most infidel Turks, consequently it needed considerable financial support²⁴.

In the autumn that year (the letter of November 6, 1480, no. 116), the King, having heard about the Turkish invasion of the Emperor's lands, immediately prepared an expedition against the invaders in order to cross their route of retreat and recover the stolen cattle, or, at least, should they leave the borders of Christendom earlier, to be able to follow them. The Hungarian relief troops set out soon after receiving the news and began pursuit of the enemy. The army marched hurriedly day and night, also trying to prevent the enemy from obtaining food. The letter read that the castles on the Sava were informed about the enemy's retreat and the split of the enemy army into groups, the areas across which they were moving having been stripped of everything. This should be taken to mean that the Turks were sending provisioning detachments to gather food and cattle. The castle garrisons ravaged the surroundings, probably taking the cattle to the castles. We learn that one such detachment of 3,000 men was wiped out by the Hungarians (only a hundred Turks managed to escape).

Meanwhile, larger and stronger troops had been amassed, which, having crossed the Sava river, intended to attack the Turks. This operation, however, was thwarted

²⁴ On the struggle between the Ottomans and the Rhodes islanders see N. Vatin, *L'ordre de Saint-Jean-de-Jerusalem. L'empire ottoman et la Méditerranée orientale entre les deux sièges de Rhodes (1480–1522)*, Paris 1994.

by the Emperor, who organized sabotage in the Hungarian rear, to the detriment of all Christendom. Therefore, although Matthias wished to fight against the Turks with all his heart, nevertheless, after consultations, he decided not to cross the Sava river. Only lightly armed troops, sent earlier in advance, were dispatched, after inspection at Jajce, to engage in skirmishes at the Turkish borders. The King himself once again set out against the Emperor with the rest of his army. However, he found Sixtus's letters waiting for him in the nearest port on the Sava, whereupon Matthias changed his mind, left Frederick alone, and in accordance with the Pope's wish, he crossed the Sava to follow the Turks. He promised he would not turn back until he could inform the Pope of another fortunate victory. He emphasized, however, that it was on papal order that he was setting off to fight the Turks, neglecting the affairs and rights of his Kingdom. That is why he asked the Pontiff to side with him in his conflict with the Habsburg Emperor, to give him financial support, and provide all kinds of assistance.

The King informed the Pope of further developments five weeks later (the letter of December 14, 1480, no. 118). First, he reminded him that in the previous letter he described the events that had happened, the incursion of the Turks into the Emperor's territory, who destroyed the German lands, capturing spoils of war and prisoners, and causing a lot of disasters in Christendom. He then called in his troops as fast as he could and set off, heedless of the plague raging in the Kingdom. Having taken shelter in the woods, he started preparations for the expedition aimed at freeing the Christian captives, should he manage to catch up with the Turks.

When the Hungarian army arrived at the Sava and the Drava it turned out that the flood prevented them from crossing the rivers easily. Building bridges took many days, which is why the Turks learned about the chase and before the Hungarians managed to cross the two rivers, the former had already managed to retreat with all their spoils.

First, lightly armed troops were sent to Vrhbosna ('Werbozanya' in the original)²⁵. This province was a base and refuge, from which the Turks launched their plundering raids. For that reason it was destroyed with fire and sword, and depopulated. The Hungarians attacked it by surprise, with the local population unaware of their arrival until they were already there, killing those inhabitants who were the first to notice the invaders. Moreover, they captured immense spoils, and Dawud Pasha himself, Beylerbey of the Roman province (Rumelia), was nearly caught in his own bedroom together with his son. However, he managed to escape because the Hungarians started plundering and raping, as it usually happens in war, and thus carelessly allowed him to flee.

When laden with spoils of war from the whole province, with things and people, the Hungarians were returning, having devastated the region, this pasha, heedless of what had happened to him, summoned the help of inhabitants of all the neighbouring provinces and the neighbouring Turks. Having gathered reinforcements, he attacked the Hungarians

²⁵ The name of the district comprising the central part of Bosnia, under Turkish rule since the mid-15th c., organized as a vilayet with the main centre in Sarajevo founded by the Ottomans. The city was established on the site of the earlier settlement Vrhbosna, whose name survived until the 16th c. as the name of the whole province.

loaded with spoils, ordering his troops to engage in battle on Wednesday because that was the day the Hungarians were first attacked by the Turks and were defeated by their power. The fight lasted intermittently for five days, until Sunday, with the Christians always winning each skirmish. But the decisive battle and its preceding skirmishes took place on Sunday. 10,000 Turks and their allies were killed at that time, while the Hungarians won a victory owing to the Divine grace. The Pasha barely escaped with very few men.

The Hungarians did not consider themselves plunderers but rather avengers. They abandoned the luggage with heavy spoils but they took light and valuable objects, easy to transport. They spent the next three days after the victory in nearby castles, planning to attack and destroy all castles in Vrhbosna, yet they learned they would not be able to do more than destroy the whole region with fire and sword since the few inhabitants who survived fled to hideaways on the river Drina (that is possibly already in Serbia). Unable to do anything more in the region thus devastated, the Hungarians additionally sent troops whose task was to burn six towns, which were not named.

Out of all the towns and provinces in the Turkish state these four were the most important of all: Constantinople, Adrianople, Skopje, and Vrhbosna (situated in a direct line from Istanbul to the west, and from Skopje to northwest). When one of them, the westernmost one, was destroyed, there is no doubt it was a heavy loss to the Turks.

The Hungarians were joined in by many Walachians from various parts of the Kingdom of Bosnia. It was incorporated into Hungary, while Bosnians were given officer posts in the army and participated in the fight against the Turks. Bosnia had belonged to the Ottomans since its conquest in 1463, the restoration of the "Kingdom of Bosnia" under the Hungarian patronage was only a longer episode in its history, which ended with the collapse of its protector in 1526.

Paul Kinisi, the Hungarian commander in chief, appointed to defend Lower Hungary ("nether parts of our Kingdom"), gathered men who were assigned for him on the King's orders and led the ships on the Danube to the distance of 30,000 steps below Smederevo. The whole of Rashka above Smederevo as far as Chrwsowacz was then depopulated, therefore many people were brought in there, and the Hungarians began the action of settlement and peopling the areas. This Chrwsowacz is Kruševac, situated south of Smederevo, in the upper reaches of the Great Morava; it was undoubtedly this tributary of the Danube that was entered by the river fleet carrying settlers led by Paul Kinisi, which headed into Rashka rather than skirting it along the Danube.

Then followed a brief description of a battle between Bosnians and Turks on ships on the Danube, in which the Turks were defeated. During that year the Hungarians fought against the Turks eleven times. There was not a single battle in which less than 3000 Turks were killed, and in which the Hungarians did not win a victory except one clash, in which many Hungarians were killed or taken prisoners. Matthias wrote about this to the Pope so that the latter remembered that the King lacked neither courage nor zeal to fight.

In the letter dated March 11, 1481 (no. 127) Matthias raised the issue of the 100,000 ducat subsidy promised by the Pope. He insisted on getting this money, saying that it

would allow him to undertake further actions against the Turks, recruit an army, and defend Bosnia. In this noble work, however, he was again hindered by the Emperor, who provoked armed clashes. In order to defend against him, Matthias had to deploy troops which he could otherwise have sent against the Turks. The Emperor had received a 50,000 ducat subvention to fight against the Turks, yet he used the money to the detriment of Matthias. The letter of July 13, 1481 (no. 134) was of similar tenor: the King again complained that the Emperor hampered his struggle against the Turks, and then he demanded subsidies once again.

Alarming overtones appear in the letter of a month later (April 14, 1481, no. 129). Matthias wrote he had always fought against the Turks, who were now directing their fury, all their troops, and their intentions against him. The King had been informed by some friends at the Sultan's court (in other words: spies or agents; we know that Poland also had them at the Sublime Porte somewhat later) that a decision was made there to take revenge on Corvinus for the damage and harm he had caused: several Christian lords would be persuaded to attack him and his territory. This information was also confirmed by commanders and spies returning from Turkey. By the day of St. John the Baptist the Sultan intended to invade Hungary in person with all his might. The news was substantiated almost word for word, *inter alia*, in the letter of Stephen, the Moldavian voivode. The whole Turkish power would be sent only against Matthias and Stephen.

Those "Christian lords" were not named but one of them, without doubt, was the Walachian Hospodar Basarab IV, a Turkish ally, who was deposed by voivode Stephen for that reason several months later. This group should perhaps also include the Croatian barons, whose loyalty to Hungary was always hesitant. Such an alliance would have allowed a pincer envelopment of the Kingdom and a simultaneous attack on it from the east, south, and west at the same time. An invasion from Vrhbosna and Croatia did indeed take place two years later.

King Matthias's letter might well have been somewhat overdramatized, and the presentation of the threat hanging over Hungary and Moldavia exaggerated, although it should be remembered that this happened shortly after the capture of Otranto by the Turks (this event not being reflected in the investigated correspondence), whereby the threat might have appeared serious enough. However, Padishah Mehmed the Conqueror died soon. Rumours of his death reached the Buda court from different directions (letter no. 132), yet initially the King did not want to believe it and waited to learn something definite. Fifteen days passed before he received more news on the subject. This time the information was certain, which he reported to the Pope, writing that the greatest enemy of Christendom, the Turkish ruler, died on May 5 or 6. His place was taken by his older son (Bayezid II). The other, younger son (Cem), who stayed in Anatolia, also claimed the throne and gathered an army against his brother. His supporters were the son of the prince of Karamania, Uzun Hassan, and the (Egyptian) sultan. The Christians had hoped for a civil war in the Ottoman Empire, but they were disappointed because it ended quickly with Bayezid's victory.

On August 7, 1481 (no. 136) Matthias informed the Pontiff that he had received his brief, in which the latter encouraged him to send troops against the Turks, taking advantage of the fact that a large papal fleet was assembled against them. The King responded to the call positively. Voivode Stephen, Matthias's vassal, gathered the necessary war equipment and armaments, Matthias having also reinforced him with his men. According to the plans, the voivode was to reach as far as the entrails of Walachia and expel the Hospodar (Basarab IV), who he had again been enthroned by the Turks. Which he did, having won a splendid victory. Basarab, who was also called Cypellews (actually *Țepeluș*, or Little Impaler), assembled many Walachians and Turks, who remained loyal to him in that province, and set off against the Moldavian voivode, but he suffered a crushing defeat. Little remained of his might, it was reported. The Hospodar himself, a Turkish ally, barely escaped alive with three associates. Over a thousand cavalymen were sent to chase him; there was yet no news of his fate, however.

For his services Matthias again expected subsidies. However, where he expected help, he encountered difficulties and obstacles. The papal legate transferred the much expected subvention for raising 10,000 cavalymen to Emperor Frederick. Corvinus bitterly complained of that injustice.

After the next two-year break, Matthias informed Sixtus on November 6, 1483 (no. 166) of a splendid victory over the Turks. News had been coming in earlier that huge Turkish forces from Missa, and mainly from Vrhbosna, had assembled in Croatia, from where they ventured as far as the Emperor's lands. Hearing heard the rumours, the King made appropriate preparations for an expedition against them. Orders were also given to the Ban of Croatia.

After crossing the river Wui (probably Gurk) and then the Sava, the Turks entered Carinthia and Styria, also ravaging other imperial lands. The Ban of Croatia, Matthias Gereb, divided his army into three columns, and took the position along which the Turks would have to pass on their way back. He also sent reconnaissance detachments which had to constantly follow the enemy closely not only to find out where the foe was heading for but also to take prisoners should an opportunity arise.

Having cruelly and barbarically ravaged many imperial lands, the Turks were returning laden with spoils of war and leading a large number of captives. Having learned, however, that the Ban had set up an ambush for them, they spent several days wandering here and there, trying to deceive the scouts, slipping out, covering up their tracks, or crossing the same river several times. Weary of waiting, the Ban called off the ambush and set off in pursuit of the enemy, posting guards at the fords. When the invaders heard that the Ban was heading towards the river, they rushed to the ford as fast as they could: however, it had been manned by one of the commanders with fifty cavalymen. Notified about the appearance of the enemy, the Ban quickly arrived with the troops and drove the Turks away from the river passage. The first battle was interrupted by the night, but fighting resumed the next day. It was on October 29. The enemy spent the night without dismounting from horses, not far away at the foot of the mountains, and flung themselves into attack as soon as dawn broke. A cruel battle ensued, in which God gave

victory to the Christians. The great invasion army was annihilated; two commanders and 2,000 Turks were taken prisoner. The rest of them were killed or drowned when trying to cross the river, and a pursuit began of those who managed to escape.

Despite the fact that there was hostility between Matthias and the Emperor, all the liberated captives, who were more than 10,000, were sent home. There were few men among them, the Turks having taken mostly women and boys captive. Matthias liberated Frederick's subjects and would like him to appreciate his gesture. The King defended the Emperor's subjects against the Turks, yet the Habsburg paid him back by invading the Hungarian territory.

During the period covered by the correspondence in question, the South-Austrian lands of the Habsburgs (Krajina, Carinthia, and Styria), seized by Matthias Corvinus for a short time several years later, were directly exposed to the plundering raids by Ottoman troops. The raids of from 1469 to 1479 were recorded in Jan Długosz's chronicle, and the invasion in 1500 was reported in the work of Maciej of Miechów (Matthias de Miechow).

This is the last letter of the two correspondents about the fights against the Turks. Finally, it is necessary to mention two letters sent by Sixtus to all Christian rulers, including Matthias (and also to King Casimir the Jagiellonian of Poland), which called them in to fight against the enemies of the Christian faith (letters of September 18, 1481, no. 139, and 10 January 10, 1483, no. 154).

Matthias continually emphasized his services in the battles against the Turks, which should be regarded as a clever propaganda ploy and an element of building the image of the defender of Christianity. The aim of skilfully playing the Turkish card as an element of Corvinus's international policy was to gain the Pope's political support and financial assistance²⁶. Facts show, however, that his overriding aim was to defeat Emperor Frederick III, who was repeatedly accused of acting to the detriment of all Christendom.

Peace with the Emperor, or rather the fact that Matthias had to fight constantly against him, was the second most important motive running in the correspondence. According to the Hungarian King it was the Emperor who continually attacked and provoked the Hungarians whereas Matthias had to defend his country, which in turn drew him away from the most important task which he would have liked to carry out and which he called his greatest desire, i.e. from fighting against the Turks. This rhetoric cannot, however, obscure the fact that by decking himself out in the borrowed plumes of the defender of Christianity Matthias sought to achieve his particularist goals which seldom had anything in common with high-flown declarations.

Even when writing about disputes with the Habsburg's supporters and that he had been wrongly accused by the Salzburg archbishop, the King added that he was defending Christianity against the Turks and complained that despite his great services he met with

²⁶ Such proposals are formulated also by Hungarian historians, including the greatest researcher of this period in the history of Hungary, the author of many publications devoted to it, András Kubinyi (see *Matthias Rex*, Budapest 2008).

so many troubles. In the dispute with the Venetians over the Isle of Węgle (Krk, Italian Veglia) one of the arguments in support of Matthias was the accusation against them of an alliance with the Turks (letter no. 112).

From Polish point of view it is important to mention that Polish diplomacy tried to prevent Corvinus's propaganda (mainly by the pen of Philippus Callimachus), however it ultimately failed to counter it effectively. The Krakow court was not able to successfully present itself as the defender of Christian Europe in order to partake of some of the papal subsidies; diplomatic victories were hard to achieve even when Matthias Corvinus was interfering in Poland's internal affairs (the issue of Warmia bishopric). The Roman Curia supported King Matthias decidedly, regarding him as the only guarantor of the expected anti-Turkish crusade, while he was perfectly able to take advantage of these sentiments.