

Barbarians or Infidels?

Attitudes towards Ottoman Turks in the Speeches of Johannes Vitéz of Zredna

Kornél Illés

Department of Medieval Studies, Central European University; Quellenstraße 51 1100 Vienna, Austria; illes.kornel.an@gmail.com

Received 26 August 2022 | Accepted 10 November 2022 | Published online 26 January 2022

Abstract. After the fall of Constantinople, Pope Nicholas V initiated a crusade against the Ottoman Empire. While several major conferences were assembled to provide backing for the great endeavor, the military campaign was never launched. During these negotiations, the Hungarian standpoint was represented by John Vitez of Zredna, chancellor of King Ladislas V and bishop of Oradea, first to papal legate Giovanni Castiglione, then at the diet of Wiener Neustadt. The present paper examines the stereotypes John of Zredna employed in his depiction of the Turks in the speeches he composed for these events. Careful analysis of the texts shows that the chancellor used the standard ideas about the Ottomans that were immensely popular at the time when the orations were produced. By connecting his message to the newly spread *topoi* of the alleged limitless bloodshed and cruelty during the Turkish siege of the Byzantine capital and by considering the Ottomans as greedy barbarians, he connected to the cultural attitudes that became truly influential in Western literature just after the fall of Constantinople, while by portraying European–Ottoman relations as a characteristically religious conflict he made connections to the older, but still prominent ideas of the crusading literature.

Keywords: John of Zredna, Ottoman Empire, crusading literature

Much Ado About Nothing

The capture of Constantinople by the Ottoman Empire in 1453 was indisputably one of the most impactful events of the fifteenth century: not only did it mark the end of the Byzantine Empire but it also painfully reminded the great powers of Europe that the threat posed by the Ottomans should be taken seriously.¹ Pope Nicholas V acted in accordance with this sentiment when he initiated a joint response in the form of

1 Supported by the ÚNKP-21-3 New National Excellence Program of the Ministry for Innovation and Technology from the source of the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund.

a crusade against the expanding empire. As the Holy See attempted to gather the necessary support from the princes of Western Christianity, he reached out to Ladislaus V, the recently crowned adolescent king of Hungary and Bohemia through a diplomatic mission led by Giovanni Castiglione.² Logically, the main actor in the negotiations regarding the crusade was not the young prince, but Frederick III, the Holy Roman Emperor. On his call, a general diet was assembled in Regensburg during the spring of 1454, with such illustrious attendees as Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy.³ Although the assembly was closed without considerable results, another one was convened in Frankfurt, where substantial pledges were made regarding the military to be sent against the Ottomans: a total force of 10,000 horsemen and 32,000 infantrymen was promised, but the elaboration of the details concerning the collection of the army was delegated to another diet held in Wiener Neustadt.⁴ The third and last conference started in February 1455, however the discussion was quickly averted from the matters of the crusade and transformed into a dispute about German internal affairs.⁵ Moreover, the general political climate of Central Europe changed in such a way that it significantly impaired the cooperation of the powers that backed the idea of the crusade: Ulric of Celje regained the trust of Ladislaus V, and when he returned to the court of the young king, so did the policy of hostile relations with Frederick III.⁶ Accordingly, the conference at Wiener Neustadt did not yield any success: it was declared that due to the recent death of Nicholas V and the fact that it was too late to launch an attack in the same year, the diet was closed.⁷

One of the diplomats who worked on the negotiations was John Vitez of Zredna, bishop of Oradea.⁸ He delivered two orations in the name of his king in

2 Matić, *Bishop John Vitez*, 51–52; Boronkai and Bellus, ed. and trans., *Vitéz János levelei és politikai beszédei*, 442. Fraknói, *Vitéz János*, 90.

3 Schwoebel, *The Shadow of the Crescent*, 32–33. Hóman and Szekfű, *Magyar történet*, 453.

4 Matić, *Bishop John Vitez*, 55; Schwoebel, *The Shadow of the Crescent*, 33; Hóman and Szekfű, *Magyar történet*, 452–53; Fraknói, *Vitéz János*, 99–102.

5 Schwoebel, *The Shadow of the Crescent*, 33; Hóman and Szekfű, *Magyar történet*, 453–54; Fraknói, *Vitéz János*, 104–12.

6 Matić, *Bishop John Vitez*, 56–57.

7 Matić, *Bishop John Vitez*, 57; Hóman and Szekfű, *Magyar történet*, 454; Fraknói, *Vitéz János*, 112–13.

8 While the bishop was traditionally referred to as John Vitéz (Vitéz János) in the works of historians (see for example Fraknói, *Vitéz János*, or Boronkai and Bellus, ed. and trans., *Vitéz János levelei és politikai beszédei*), it is clear that during his lifetime he was never called ‘Vitez’, rather than John of Zredna, and the surname Vitez was given to him by Antonio Bonfini, the court historian of King Matthias of Hungary (1458–1490). See Pajorin, “Vitéz János vezetéknévéről” and Matić, *Bishop John Vitez*, 6–7. Henceforth, for the sake of clarity and easy identification, I employ the name John Vitez of Zredna in the title and at the first mention, but henceforward, I will use the shortened form John of Zredna. I prefer the ‘Zredna’ form over ‘Sredna’ considering

front of Giovanni Castiglione and was one of the main speakers at the diet of Wiener Neustadt.⁹ It would not be an exaggeration to consider John of Zredna one of the most influential figures of Hungarian politics and cultural life at the time. He rose to power as a confidant of John Hunyadi, one of the greatest magnates of the Kingdom, who also served as a governor during the turbulent years between the death of king Wladislas I and the beginning of the reign of Ladislaus V.¹⁰ Although he managed important diplomatic correspondence for Hunyadi, his political significance grew truly robust when he became the high chancellor of Ladislaus V in 1453: after the young king had moved to Prague in 1454, John of Zredna, Ulrich von Nussdorf, and Prokop of Rabštejn formed one of the most influential groups in the royal court.¹¹ Nonetheless, his impact on the cultural life of fifteenth century Hungary may be even more noteworthy than his political activity, as the scholarly literature usually heralds him as one of the men who introduced humanist ideals and learning to

that an inscription from Esztergom—where he served as an archbishop—uses ‘Zredna’ when stating his name; see Matić, *Bishop John Vitez*, 6.

- 9 For the orations addressed to Giovanni Castiglione, see Johannes Vitez de Zredna: *Orationes* 4 and 5 (Boronkai, ed., *Johannes Vitez*, 242–52). For the speeches composed for the diet of Wiener Neustadt, see Johannes Vitez de Zredna: *Orationes* 7, 8 and 9 (Boronkai, ed., *Johannes Vitez*, 255–73). Iván Boronkai argues that an oration traditionally attributed to Nicholas Barius, delivered at the diet of Frankfurt, should be considered a work of John Vitez of Zredna based on the style of the text, and thus he includes it in the collected extant works of the bishop, among the orations, under number six (see Boronkai, ed., *Johannes Vitez*, 252–54, and Boronkai and Bellus, ed. and trans., *Vitéz János levelei és politikai beszédei*, 442). However, Matić shows that, according to archival sources, John of Zredna was not a member of the Hungarian delegation sent to the said diet; see Matić, *Bishop John Vitez*, 55.
- 10 After the death of King Albert, son-in-law and heir of Emperor Sigismund, Hungary succumbed to civil war. One party backed Ladislaus Posthumous, the later Ladislaus V, the infant son of Albert, who was born just after the death of his father and was crowned as a newborn by his mother, Elizabeth who fled to Frederick III with the child after the passing of her husband, while the other backed Wladislas III, king of Poland from the Jagellonian dynasty. First the Jagellonian-party prevailed. However, Wladislas fell during the battle of Varna in 1444, which left Ladislaus the only legitimate candidate for the throne. Nevertheless, he was unable to fulfill his duties as he was still in the custody of Frederick III at the time, who did not agree to release him before 1452. During the interim years, the Kingdom was controlled by a council of seven captains at first, then a sole governor, John Hunyadi from 1446. For a comprehensive overview of the events summarized above, see Engel, *The Realm*, 280–92. Tamás Pálosfalvi published valuable remarks about the way Wladislas was elected; see Pálosfalvi, “Két (király)választás,” 459–503. Regarding the early career of John of Zredna, see Matić, *Bishop John Vitez*, 18–46.
- 11 The letters he wrote for Hunyadi were preserved in his *Epistolary* compiled by Paul of Ivanić in 1451; see Boronkai, *Johannes Vitez*, 27–168. Regarding the *Epistolary*, see Kiss, “Origin Narratives,” 488; Zsupán, “János Vitez’ Book of Letters,” 117–39. His mainly diplomatic function in the entourage of Hunyadi is explored by Szakály Ferenc: Szakály, “Vitéz János,” 9–38. Regarding his influence at the court of Ladislaus V, see Matić, *Bishop John Vitez*, 46–55.

the Carpathian Basin.¹² This is not extraordinary considering the immense importance of his oeuvre that many scholars have analyzed from various perspectives.¹³ However, one of the aspects of the orations addressed to Giovanni Castiglione and the diet of Wiener Neustadt has not been fully explored, namely the way John of Zredna depicts the Ottoman Empire, its ruler, and its people.¹⁴ On the following pages, I will examine the passages of the speeches that describe Ottoman Turks, their characteristics, and their way of life and war, in order to identify the stereotypes that presumably influenced the image John of Zredna tried to convey about the most dangerous foes of his homeland.

Ruins of a Great City

In 1453, the Ottoman Turks occupied not only the city of Constantine the Great but also the minds of numerous writers: the fall of Constantinople was an immense trauma for the learned men of the West, prompting them to turn their pens against the menacingly rising empire of the Orient.¹⁵ The fall of the Byzantine capital caused great disturbance in Europe due to the unparalleled cultural and historical role the city had played. In addition, the siege demanded an unusually large number of civil casualties, unlike previous military encounters between the West and the Turks, such as the battles of Nicopolis and Varna, where the victims were mainly soldiers.¹⁶

Presumably, this was the root of the *topos* appearing in mid-fifteenth century literature that depicted the siege as a limitless rampage and bloodbath. Niccolo Tignosi

12 See, for example, Horváth, *Az irodalmi műveltség megoszlása*, 61–62; Huszti, “Pier Paolo Vergerio,” 521; V. Kovács, *Magyar humanisták levelei*, 7; Boronkai and Bellus, ed. and trans., *Vitéz János levelei és politikai beszédei*, 6; Szakály, “Vitéz János,” 33.

13 Some of the influential studies regarding the works of John of Zredna and his role in the dispersion of humanism in Hungary: Boronkai, “Vitéz János és az ókori klasszikusok,” 219–33; Boronkai, “Vitéz János retorikai iskolázottsága” 129–44; Földesi, *A Star*; Klaniczay, *A magyar akadémiai mozgalom előtörténete*; Pajorin, “Vitéz János műveltsége,” 533–40; Prokopp, “Vitéz János váradi püspök,” 44–54; Kiss, “Origin Narratives,” 471–96.

14 Klára Pajorin examines the connections of the works produced by John of Zredna and the crusading literature of his time, but she analyzes only one letter and does not consider the speeches noted – see: Pajorin, “Korai törökellenes adhortatiók.” She asserts in another article that John of Zredna had a major role in ‘establishing the anti-Turk literature’ outside of Italy, but only cites his letter written to Nicholas V about the battle of Varna. Although she mentions the orations of John of Zredna, she does not connect them to the previous statement; see Pajorin, “Keresztes hadjáratok,” 9.

15 Pajorin, “Korai törökellenes adhortatiók,” 1; Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 62; Hankins, “Humanist Crusade Literature,” 112.

16 Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 62–63.

called the Ottoman forces “butchers”, while Poggio Bracciolini underscored that his compatriots lamented the cruel slaughter of the inhabitants of Constantinople. Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini was even more avid in his portrayal of the horrors the great city had to endure: according to him the sultan himself raped members of the Byzantine royal family on the altar of the Hagia Sophia.¹⁷ It is worth noting, however, that these exalted accounts of brutality are not without parallels in earlier centuries of the Middle Ages: in the twelfth century, similar depictions circulated about the crimes Muslims committed in Jerusalem during the crusades.¹⁸

John of Zredna paints a very similar picture of the events that took place during the siege. In one of his speeches delivered in Wiener Neustadt, he directs Frederick III’s attention to the unimaginable torture the people of Constantinople and the Greek lands had to suffer and claims that the city is filled with the woes of newly captured slaves and the clamor of victors.¹⁹ The fate of the captives was a major concern for John of Zredna, as he notes in one of his orations addressed to Giovanni Castiglione: good Christians can do nothing but weep when they hear about their fellows suffering at the hands of the Turks and viciously sold.²⁰

John of Zredna employs the strongest imagery regarding the devastation carried out by the Ottomans. In another speech delivered in Prague in front of Castiglione he states that after the capture of the city, every single Turkish warrior committed horrendous atrocities, but the sultan, Mehmed II was the cruelest of all. According to John of Zredna, Mehmed usually engaged in reckless rampage while clenching his teeth like a madman, simply because he despised Christians and torturing them was his greatest delight. In this process—John of Zredna tells us—the sultan acted

17 Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 63.

18 Hankins, “Humanist Crusade Literature,” 119.

19 “Videres nunc, de votissime cesar, in urbe et regione illa nichil sancti, quod non corrui, nichil iniqui, quod non invaluit; videres continuum hostilem fremitum, continuum gemitum servilem: horum casum, illorum plausum; videres—inquam—per singula fere horarum discrimina ex mutua commiseracione piorum tam tristes integrari lacrimas, ut tota illa patria migrasse putaretur in funera. Subacte sunt condicione simili et plures partes Grecie pluresque Cristianorum familie, que omnes servitute gravi, obprobriis variis, preda et ruinis ac impio commercio deformate quid aliud, quam Dei nostri iniuriam sonant?!” – John of Zredna: *Orationes* 7.54–55. (Boronkai, ed., *Johannes Vitez*, 260).

20 “Tetigit preterea superius reverendissima paternitas vestra de casu, vel potius occasu orientalis imperii—ne dicam: capte urbis illius—, et item de prophanatis sacrariis ac de iugo, nece ac prostitutione Christianorum capitum victoris Turci ludibrio subiectorum. De quibus commemorando quid aliud, quam refricato commiseracionis vulnere nove lacrimae reddi possunt, quandoquidem eo eventu inter et post alia horrenda verisimiliter apparuit non odio solum apud hostes, verum contemptu eciam et negligencia apud socios nomen Christianum laborare.” – John of Zredna: *Orationes* 4.15–16 (Boronkai, ed., *Johannes Vitez*, 244).

very much like a wild beast.²¹ John, just like Piccolomini, depicts the sultan not only as the head of the Turkish state and troops, but also as the unofficial head of the violence that accompanied the occupation of Constantinople. However, they are not the only authors in the 1450s that painted Mehmed II in such tones. For example, the already mentioned Tignosi hints at the sultan's madness by comparing him to Caligula, while according to Robert Schwoebel Jean de Lastic, the Grandmaster of the Johannites at Rhodes labeled him as a 'wild beast' exceptionally inhumane toward Christians.²² However, we should remember that, in medieval literature, Muslims were regularly depicted as animal-human hybrids.²³

Furthermore, a noteworthy detail of the imagery expounded above is that it imitates Rufinus of Aquileia.²⁴ Maybe it is not coincidental that it was incorporated into a speech directed to a cleric on a diplomatic mission for the pope, as the bull issued by Nicholas V regarding the future crusade stated that the current sultan was a menace to all Christians, a son of Satan. Thus, denigrating Mehmed II embellished with some clerical tones probably pleased the addressee.²⁵ Nonetheless, John of Zredna also expands the geographical horizons when depicting the horrors that the Turkish army brought to the lands where it arrived by linking the assaults carried out by the Ottomans at the border of Hungary to the devastation of Constantinople. In the same oration, he asserts that, for an incredibly long time, the Turks were constantly attacking the lands of Ladislaus V while ravaging the neighboring countries, not only imprisoning but also killing their nobility, and implanting constant fear in the population.²⁶

21 "Capta enim ipsa urbe efferbuit in omnem seviciam feritas paganorum, ac sicuti semper agere sunt soliti: post victoriam vix rarum repperisses aut nullum, qui non sibi summi esse delicti duceret, nisi aliquid ludibrii aut sceleris in Christiana capita ac divina humanaque sacra intulisset. Illi vero precipuo crudelitatis auctori mos iam usu inditus esse dicitur, rabiem accendi post victoriam, atque ex venienti prospera sorte, veluti draconum calice potato, furere, frendere ac palam insanire. In quo licet super hec et alia multa ingenii pravitas esse dicatur, qua in omnes homines, tum precipue ab ipsis prope ephebis in Christianam gentem ferebatur, nunc tamen ex speciali quadam sevicia prima sibi oblectamenta primamque virtutis palmam ducit piorum carnibus inhiare, ita ut facile credatur diligenti sua nequicia inmanitate beluas, crudelitate feras, atrocita te bestias superare." – John of Zredna: *Orationes* 5.30–32 (Boronkai, ed., *Johannes Vitez*, 249).

22 The text of Tignosi is bifold in its comparisons, as Mehmed is equated to Caesar and Alexander the Great along with Caligula; see Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 87–88; Schwoebel, *The Shadow of the Crescent*, 7–8.

23 Arjana, *Muslims in the Western Imagination*, 52–57.

24 Boronkai, "Vitéz János és Aquileiai Rufinus," 216.

25 Schwoebel, *The Shadow of the Crescent*, 31.

26 "Igitur a tempore, cuius iam prope duodeviginti lustra numerantur, infi delis barbaries sup-ratacta regnorum, que nunc ipsius regie maiestatis iuris sunt, latera pulsare incipiens quid

Bloodthirsty Barbarians

As we have seen, the portrayal of the fall of Constantinople as a massacre laid the grounds for the Turks' bad reputation. The alleged brutality of Ottoman occupiers founded the new cultural trend in the fifteenth century of depicting Turks as cruel and horrendous barbarians, very much like those that antique authors described. In the earlier years of the Middle Ages, Muslims are not usually called barbarians in the sources, probably because during the dissolution of the Roman Empire the term 'barbarian' had lost its edge, since the main political forces of the time were 'barbarian' kingdoms. Although a few centuries later 'barbarian' regained its place as a highly derogative term applied to people seen as uncultured, the term was still not commonly used in connection with Muslim people, ostensibly due to the advanced state of their science, apparent to learned Europeans of the time.²⁷

Humanism, and especially the occupation of Constantinople, fundamentally changed that trend: even before the siege of the Byzantine capital 'barbarian' was occasionally used in texts about the Ottomans, nonetheless, after the said event, calling the Turks 'barbarians' was a widely used commonplace in Europe to the extent that, after a while, it was unnecessary to clarify in state documents that 'the barbarians' were the Ottomans, as it was assumed to be common knowledge. Likewise, the term gained considerable significance in humanist literature: Donatio Acciaiuoli, Poggio Bracciolini, and Benedetto Accolti frequently used it.²⁸ Along with these notions, after long hibernation, antique stereotypes regarding barbarians regained their power and were applied to the Turks. For example, Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, following the classics, claimed that the Ottomans were ignorant of agriculture and ate the flesh of disgusting animals and unborn fetuses.²⁹ Sophia Rose Arjana concludes: "as the Ottomans increased in power, the Turk became an icon of difference and a symbol of monstrosity."³⁰

The speeches discussed show that John of Zredna readily used the fashionable vocabulary of his time. He employs the word *barbaries* in a speech directed to

quantumve iniuriarum et angustie, quot funera cedesque ediderit, cogitari magis in dolore, quam in verbo referri potest. Verumtamen id precipuum constat, tanta eos hostes in indigenas vicinos feritate debachatos, ut servitute occupatorum non contenti, omnium nobiliorum capitum penas cum sanguine expeterent. Cumque iugularentur pagano furore passim quam plurimi, iam ipsis mortibus pene gravior videbatur metus mortis, dum unusquisque assiduo vexatus insultu et quasi in procinctu semper positus, per momenta singula speraret occidi." John of Zredna: *Orationes* 5.18–20 (Boronkai, ed., *Johannes Vitez*, 247–48).

27 Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 73.

28 Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 71–72.

29 Hankins, "Humanist Crusade Literature," 121.

30 Arjana, *Muslims in the Western Imagination*, 58.

Giovanni Castiglione, however, the term gains the greatest significance in an oration delivered at the diet of Wiener Neustadt where he uses *barbarus* and *barbaricus* three times.³¹ The negative stereotypes tied to being a barbarian are also present in the speeches: John of Zredna describes the Ottomans and the sultan as incredibly greedy, overly arrogant and ferocious people, who are always eager to shed Christian blood due to their innate cruelty, hatred towards the followers of Christ, and wish to rule the entire world.³²

31 “Igitur a tempore, cuius iam prope duodeviginti lustra numerantur, infidelis barbaries supratacta regnorum, que nunc ipsius regie maiestatis iuris sunt, latera pulsare incipiens quid quantumve iniuriarum et angustie, quot funera cedesque ediderit, cogitari magis in dolore, quam in verbo referri potest.” John of Zredna: *Orationes* 5.18 (Boronkai, ed., *Johannes Vitez*, 247–48). “Miseratus scilicet miseriam temporis huius, in quo redemptarum animarum nec casus satis reputantur nec salus, quin ymmo Cristiane libertatis gloria vesanie barbarice succidanea prosternitur.” John of Zredna: *Orationes* 7.8 (Boronkai, ed., *Johannes Vitez*, 255–56). “Hucusque cetus Christi obprobria, sputa, flagella, clavos, crucem et lanceam in fornace mutui odii et irarum per vices bullientium conflantes, sacrosanctum Christiane universitatis precium insultantium barbarorum ne vocibus solum blasphemari, sed fedis actibus contaminari paciuntur.” John of Zredna: *Orationes* 7.61 (Boronkai, ed., *Johannes Vitez*, 260). “Itaque non fortuna modo, sed etiam ratio cum barbaris stabit.” John of Zredna: *Orationes* 7.99 (Boronkai, ed., *Johannes Vitez*, 263).

32 “Nullo crudelitatis, nullo furiarum genere vacat, iactantiae studiosus est, arrogantia elatus supra omne, quod possidet, soli adhuc Deo et Machameto paululum defert. Ira vehemens fertur, ambitione iactatur, odio furit, carnalibus illecebris et omni luxu quam sepius occupatur. Que omnia spei nostre non parvum vigorem afferunt, quandoquidem ubi hec officiant, animus parum providet; sola adhuc eum sevicia armat, in qua magnum sortitus est principi patum. In hac cum omnes parentes vicerit, interdum in hac et se ipsum vincit, dum a pravitate inhumana nec innocencia sistitur, nec paciencia retar datur, nec humano frenatur timore, nec inhibetur pudore, pernix et pronus ad omnem ferociam, potencia terrena et pompa mensura nescia comitatus, presertim cum respondeant ei plurimi effectus potencie sue, et plausus pompe arrideant sceleribus perpetratis.” John of Zredna: *Orationes* 7.87–90 (Boronkai, ed., *Johannes Vitez*, 262–63). “Hee omnes avidam eius voraginem exsaciare non possunt, nec ambitioni sue vel terminos vel modum imponere. Increpare solet Alexandrum, quod post orientem evictum victricia illa arma occidenti non vinxerit; criminatur Pirrum, quod victor in Ytalia quasi victus discesserit. Effert et prefert se omnibus animo, omnia sibi regna et omnem potestatem spondet, que sua etas prevalebit, armis circumagere. Quare age attende et intende, quid sibi arroget tam infrenis ambitio, quid tam seva intencio velit, et quid possit tam copiosa potencia [...]” John of Zredna: *Orationes* 7.108–111 (Boronkai, ed., *Johannes Vitez*, 264). “Tanta ei vehemencia in hoc bello gerendo, tanta sedulitas fuit, ut vix diem interesse, vix quidem horam recolatur sponte passus inter Cristianam pestem et suam predam. Odium ei precipuum in Cristi cultores singularis quedam sevicia suggerit, ac desperata condicio sua gloriam reputat Deo nobis nato frui, solaciumque ducit fungi malignitate ex pene mora.” John of Zredna: *Orationes* 7.42–44 (Boronkai, ed., *Johannes Vitez*, 259). “Novissime horrendum divorcium inter fidei comites deploratum est; apicem orientalis imperii hostilis rapacitas sustulit, cum quo simul ibi iusta et legitima imperia occiderunt. Profunde percussi sumus, digne pro meritis, dure pro viribus. Desevit in nos Turei hostis per dives malicia, nostris adaucta erumnis, nostro dedecore decorata exultat et insultat; it

John of Zredna also assures that, due to these characteristics, there is no real possibility to establish an acceptable *modus vivendi* with the Ottomans, even after a decisive military victory. He states that Turks are no more than wild beasts, who need to be eradicated.³³ Along with that notion, he also claims that the Turkish advance is basically some form of illness or epidemic that ravages the inhabitants of Christian lands, and the princes of Europe should take measures against it in order to cure the already infected and prevent the spread of the disease to the unaffected.³⁴

The Shadow of the Crusaders

The revival of the term ‘barbarian’ in connection with enemies from the East brought a considerably new taste to the Western perception of the people from the Middle East. However, older stereotypes regarding the relationship between Christians and Muslims, which stemmed from the literary output of clerics who supported the crusades in the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries, also had an immense influence on the texts concerning the Turkish advance written during the first half of the fifteenth century. The fundamental belief of that concept was that the clashes between military forces from Europe and the Middle East were part of the constant fight between Christianity and Islam, as the two religions were *per se* enemies of each other, thus conflicts of their followers were not just worldly bloodshed, but rather a war between the true religion (naturally, Christianity for authors in the West) and the perniciousness of the Devil.³⁵

While humanist writers successfully detached themselves from some elements of their medieval heritage, the concept of the Christian–Muslim warfare as a religious antagonism found its way to the writings of such an important early figure

in omne nefas, studet potentatui, spirat minas ac cedes speratque, ut iam Iordanis totus influat in os suum.” John of Zredna: Orationes 7.25–27 (Boronkai, ed., *Johannes Vitez*, 257). “Hostis tuus ac noster communis et suapte natura ad nocendum sollicitus umore apparatus istius sollicitior factus est [...]” John of Zredna: Orationes 9.13 (Boronkai, ed., *Johannes Vitez*, 272). See also: Fraknói, *Vitéz János*, 108.

33 “Unde apparet non cum tali hoste Christianam rem agi, quem victricibus armis socium ex hoste faceres: in beluas astringendum est ferrum, dandusque pro libertate anime aut hauriendus erit saguis.” John of Zredna: Orationes 7.36 (Boronkai, ed., *Johannes Vitez*, 249).

34 “Veterana pestis multum florem magnumque fidelium robur depasta hactenus ledendo crevit et crescendo lesit.” John of Zredna: Orationes 7.20 (Boronkai, ed., *Johannes Vitez*, 257). “Nequaquam certe cedendum esset unius hominis non tam potencie, quam furori, quin ymmo occurrendum est ei apto tempore, quo tam labor militum, quam impensa facilius erit, quatenus et ab infirmis auferatur morbus, et sanos non contingat.” John of Zredna: Orationes 7.142 (Boronkai, ed., *Johannes Vitez*, 267).

35 Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 13–30.

of the humanist movement as Coluccio Salutati, since the Florentine chancellor in a letter written to Tvrtko, king of Bosnia stated that the sultan, Murad I wanted to completely obliterate the religion of Christ.³⁶ Another influential humanist author, the already mentioned Poggio Bracciolini, employed the previously expounded concept in a text written to John Hunyadi himself: in it he declares that a war against the Turks needs to be launched as they are enemies of the Christian faith, moreover their religion might be linked to Satanism.³⁷

The writings of fifteenth century intellectuals were not only influenced by the spiritual background of the crusades, but the crusades themselves also gained remarkable importance in them. Another prominent writer, Flavio Biondo, in a 1453 text wants to persuade Alfonso of Naples to attack the Ottoman Empire by referring to the crusades and citing the great leaders of the First Crusade as examples worthy of emulation.³⁸ In 1455, Giannozzo Manetti mixes similar references to earlier crusades with constant Ciceronian allusions: while he mainly built his speech on the oration of the great Roman statesman about the Manlian Law, when he tried to convince Pope Callixtus III to support the above-mentioned Alfonso as the leader of the upcoming crusade, he lists previous crusading popes, stating that Callixtus should follow in their footsteps in order to preserve Christianity.³⁹ These are not isolated examples: as Hankins emphasizes, humanist writers produced roughly as much literature about crusading and related ideas as authors active in the ‘classical age’ of the crusades.⁴⁰

The impact of the crusading ideal and the religious antagonism of Christianity and Islam can also be detected in the speeches produced by John of Zredna. He claims that Mehmed II did not only intend to expand the boundaries of his empire by capturing land after land in the Balkans, but wanted to shatter the Christian faith and the Catholic Church. According to John, the sultan was simply a sacrilegious man, just like the founder of his religion, Mohamed. Mehmed II appears as the fearful leader of a horrible sect, which is essentially moved by the dark forces of the universe in their constant persecution of Christ’s followers.⁴¹ John of Zredna believes that from

36 Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 22.

37 Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 24–25. See also Pajorin, “Korai törökellenes adhortatiók,” 5–10.

38 Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 25–26.

39 Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 26–27.

40 Hankins, “Humanist Crusade Literature,” 117.

41 “Suscitavit namque hiisdem novissimis temporibus antiquus vere fidei hostis ex apparitorum suorum numero Machometh illum Tureum immanem, qui parentum suorum tirannidem potius, quam locum possidens violencia superbissimi belli ius phasque omne confudit, et veterem illum Machometum sacrilegum ducem suum sacrilega mente secutus, diversis corruptionibus nostre fidei seorsum scisma componens, propriam sectam et proprios adauget

that inherent malevolence towards Christ's religion was derived the Turks' attitude to the sacred Christian places. He asserts that the Ottomans insulted the Christian faith not only verbally, but also physically.⁴² These assaults are further elaborated when John expounds the fate of the churches the Turks found in Constantinople: he describes that the occupiers desecrated all the altars and temples of the city to the extent that it was impossible to hold church services anywhere. However, according to John of Zredna it was not just collateral damage during military operations, or political acts on behalf of the sultan and the leaders of the Ottoman army: in his speech delivered in Wiener Neustadt, it is clearly stated that the Turks found immense joy in defiling anything they thought was sacred to Christians, thus they deliberately chased every opportunity to cause harm to Christian communities.⁴³

The image John of Zredna painted of the physical manifestations of religious intolerance has its parallels in mid-fifteenth century European literature. Francesco Filelfo, for example, in an *adhortatio* addressed to King Wladislas I of Hungary

sectatores. Hoc igitur truculentissimo preside ab illa sua et socia sibi tenebrarum gente persecutionem patitur genus piorum; hoc infideli ductore impugnatur fides nostra, qua sola et in qua unica katholice ecclesie splendor profecit; hoc denique imperatore impio moventur prelia et inducuntur bella non solum pro terrarum spaciis aut provinciarum possessionibus, sed pro sacrosanctis Christiane religionis ritibus ac animabus fidelibus prophanandis. Quidquid ad obturbendam pacem Christianam nancisci poterit, molitur, indignum forte putans ad aliquam equabilem quietem illum trucem animum posse resolvi, quem ferme quotidie undatim Christianorum profusus eruor pro voto duraret." John of Zredna: Orationes 5.5–7 (Boronkai, ed., *Johannes Vitez*, 246). "Crede indubius: non porcionem aliquam solam Cristiane societatis ipse ledere conatur, sed ipsa catholice religionis fundamenta convellere, utque deinceps crebrioribus impugnationibus omnium fidelium membra pulsentur, et nulla piorum porcio—quantum in eo consistet—ab huiusmodi infestacione sit libera, ita ut periculis nec ocia distancium careant, nec labores vicinorum." John of Zredna: Orationes 7.112 (Boronkai, ed., *Johannes Vitez*, 264).

42 "Hucusque cetus Christi obprobria, sputa, flagella, clavos, crucem et lanceam in fornace mutui odii et irarum per vices bulliencium conflantes, sacrosanctum Christiane universitatis precium insultancium barbarorum ne vocibus solum blasfemari, sed fedis actibus contaminari paciuntur." John of Zredna: Orationes 7.61 (Boronkai, ed., *Johannes Vitez*, 260).

43 "Templum civitatis regie, quod manebat adhuc ab omni prava contagione intactum, et a maiori-bus nostris captivis perduraverat asyllum, omni dedecore prophanatum, omni inmundicia pollutum cognovimus. Quid de ceteris templis, quid de clero, quid de salutaribus ecclesie sacramentis—que vasa quedam graciarium confitemur—, quid denique de violata sanctorum reverencia dignum pietate referam? Omnis fama illius calamitatis minor est vero, appellaciones certe admissis facinoribus desunt. Ara illesa nusquam, nec immolacio tuta, sed nec libamina legitima—, prevaricacio tamen est et lapsus continuus et ruina multorum. Delectatur hostis contaminasse loca sancta, que iuxta religionis morem vidit divinis supplicacionibus consecrata; predatur pietatem, impietatem auget, tyrannidisque sue assueta sacrilegia piorum cruore delibat." John of Zredna: Orationes 7.49–54 (Boronkai, ed., *Johannes Vitez*, 259–60).

stated that the drunk Mehmed II fantasized about turning Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome into a brothel.⁴⁴ Benedetto Accolti used similar images in a speech he delivered at the Congress of Mantua in 1459: he claimed that the Turks constantly harassed Christians and pillaged their places of worship while adoring demons.⁴⁵ Like in the oration of Accolti, the devastation of churches is strongly connected to the torturing of individual Christian believers in one of the texts John of Zredna produced for the diet of Wiener Neustadt: in his speech, every Christian who lived under Ottoman rule carried out a very peculiar *imitatio Christi*, as by abusing the body of the innocent believer, the Turks essentially crucified Christ himself, thus the Christian who endured constant persecution by the Ottomans spiritually partook in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.⁴⁶

Conclusions

The characteristics of John of Zredna's speeches addressed to Giovanni Castiglione and the diet of Wiener Neustadt clearly show that the chancellor of Ladislaus V used the most prevalent contemporary stereotypes regarding the Ottomans while trying to assure Castiglione that his lord was committed to participating in the planned crusade and to persuade the princes attending the assembly that the Turkish threat needed an immediate reaction, preferably in the form of backing the crusade. The events that followed the fall of Constantinople stirred up the intellectual discourse regarding the Ottoman Empire and the relationship between Christians and Muslims. The bloodiness of the siege turned into a commonplace in the accounts of the occupation of the city, thus laying the foundations of the fearful image of the Turks. While the older paradigm regarding the relation of the two great religions, that imagined the Christian–Muslim antagonism as a primarily religious conflict based on the ideology of the crusades remained prevalent, a new model started to rise that based its principles on the ancient point of view about otherness, and started to consider the Ottomans chiefly not as infidels, but rather as reckless barbarians.

The texts of John of Zredna incorporate several of the stereotypes regarding the Muslim enemy, as outlined above. By recalling the *topoi* of the massacre and slave trading in the aftermath of the fall of Constantinople, as well as the cruelty of the occupiers, John of Zredna connected his message to the general anxiety that swept through the ranks of learned men in Europe after the Ottomans had taken

44 Pajorin, "Korai törökellenes adhortatiók," 2–3.

45 Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 28.

46 "In hiis impius hostis persequitur pium Cristum, hunc crucifigit in membris ut reum, quem non credit crucifixum hominem Deum." John of Zredna: Orations 7.57 (Boronkai, ed., *Johannes Vitez*, 260).

the former capital of the Byzantine Empire. Strongly associated with those images of devastation, he repeatedly called the Turks ‘barbarians’ and directed listeners’ attention to their alleged ferociousness, arrogance, and brutality. However, he did not neglect the more traditional way of thinking about the Muslim people of the Middle East: he assured his audience that the aim of the Ottomans was to destroy Christianity, which came not only from their geopolitical interests but their inherent contempt of everything the followers of Christ considered sacred. Thus, in order to achieve his political goals, in the orations John of Zredna addressed both the deeply rooted ancient attitudes on which Western elites usually based their image of Islam, and the more recent cultural ideas about the Ottoman advance, mainly rooted in classical views of the despised foreigner rather than in Christian doctrine.

Literature

- Arjana, Sophia Rose. *Muslims in the Western Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199324927.001.0001>
- Bisaha, Nancy. *Creating East and West: Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812201291>
- Boronkai, Iván. “Vitéz János és az ókori klasszikusok” [John Vitez and the Classics]. In *Janus Pannonius: Tanulmányok*, edited by Tibor Kardos, 219–233. Budapest: Akadémiai, 1975.
- Boronkai, Iván. “Vitéz János retorikai iskolázottsága” [Rhetorical Education of John Vitez]. *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 79, no. 2 (1975): 129–44.
- Boronkai, Iván, ed. *Iohannes Vitéz de Zredna: Opera quae supersunt*. Budapest: Akadémiai, 1980.
- Boronkai, Iván and Ibolya Bellus, ed. and trans. *Vitéz János levelei és politikai beszédei* [The Letters and Political Speeches of John Vitez]. Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1987.
- Boronkai, Iván. “Vitéz János és Aquileiai Rufinus” [John Vitez and Rufinus of Aquileia]. *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 94, no. 2 (1990): 213–17.
- Engel, Pál. *The Realm of St Stephen: A History of Medieval Hungary, 895–1526*. Translated by Tamás Pálosfalvi. New York: I. B Tauris, 2001. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755699926>
- Földesi, Ferenc, ed. *A Star in the Raven’s Shadow: János Vitéz and the Beginnings of Humanism in Hungary*. Budapest: National Széchényi Library, 2008.
- Fraknói, Vilmos. *Vitéz János esztergomi érsek élete* [The Life of John Vitez, Archbishop of Esztergom]. Budapest: Szent István Társulat, 1879.
- Hankins, James. “Humanist Crusade Literature in the Age of Mehmed II.” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 49 (1995): 111–207. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1291712>

- Hóman, Bálint and Gyula Szekfű. *Magyar történet, I–V*. [History of Hungary, I–V]. Budapest: Királyi Magyar Egyetemi Nyomda, 1936.
- Horváth, János. *Az irodalmi műveltség megoszlása. Magyar humanizmus* [The Distribution of Literary Knowledge. Hungarian Humanism]. Budapest: Magyar Szemle Társaság, 1935.
- Husztai, József. “Pier Paolo Vergerio s a magyar humanizmus.” [Pier Paolo Vergerio and the Hungarian Humanism] *Filológiai Közöny* 1, no. 4 (1955): 521–33.
- Kiss, Farkas Gábor. “Origin Narratives: Pier Paolo Vergerio and the Beginnings of Hungarian Humanism.” *The Hungarian Historical Review* 8, no. 3 (2019): 471–96.
- Klanciczay, Tibor. *A magyar akadémiai mozgalom előtörténete* [The Early History of the Hungarian Academic Movement]. Budapest: Balassi, 1993.
- Matić, Tomislav. *Bishop John Vitez and Early Renaissance Central Europe: The Humanist Kingmaker*. Leeds: Arc Humanities, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2pvf6w1>
- Pajorin, Klára. “Vitéz János műveltsége” [The Education of John Vitez]. *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 109, no. 5–6 (2004): 533–40.
- Pajorin, Klára. “Keresztes hadjáratok és a humanizmus megjelenése Magyarországon” [Crusades and the Appearance of Humanism in Hungary]. *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 110, no. 1–2 (2006): 3–14.
- Pajorin, Klára. “Korai törökellenes adhortációk és hátterük (Francesco Filelfo, Poggio Bracciolini és Vitéz János episztolája)” [Early Adhortations against the Turks and their Background (Francesco Filelfo, Poggio Bracciolini and a Letter of John Vitez)]. Accessed August 6, 2022. http://iti.mta.hu/Gyula/TANULMANYOK/Pajorin_K.pdf
- Pajorin, Klára. “Vitéz János vezetéknevéről” [About the Surname of John Vitez]. In *Ritoók Zsigmondné Szalay Ágnes 70. születésnapjára*, edited by Zsuzsanna Tamás, 18–19. Budapest: Balassi, 2001.
- Pálosfalvi, Tamás. “Két (király)választás Magyarországon: Habsburg Albert és Jagelló I. Ulászló Magyar királysága” [Two (kingly) elections in Hungary: The Hungarian Kingdom of Albrecht Habsburg and Wladislas I the Jagellonian]. *Századok* 156, no. 3 (2022): 459–503.
- Prokopp, Mária. “Vitéz János váradi püspök (1445–1465), királyi főjegyző majd fő- és titkos kancellár európai jelentőségű kulturális és politikai tevékenysége.” [The European-scale Cultural and Political Activity of John Vitez, Bishop of Oradea (1445–1465), chief notary, later chief any privy chancellor]. In *Erdély reneszánsza I*, edited by Csilla Gábor, Katalin Luffý and Gábor Sipos, 44–54. Kolozsvár: Erdélyi Múzeum Egyesület, 2009.
- Schwoebel, Robert. *The Shadow of the Crescent: The Renaissance Image of the Turk*. Nieuwkoop: B. de Graaf, 1967.

- Szakály, Ferenc. “Vitéz János, a politikus és államférfi (Pályavázlat – kérdőjelekkel).” [John Vitez, the Politician and Statesman (Outline of a Career – with Some Questions)]. In *Vitéz János emlékkönyv*, edited by István Bárdos, 9–38. Esztergom: Balassa Bálint Társaság, 1990.
- V. Kovács, Sándor. *Magyar humanisták levelei. XV–XVI. század* [Letters of Hungarian Humanists. 15th–16th Centuries]. Budapest: Gondolat, 1971.
- Zsupán, Edina. “János Vitéz’ Book of Letters: Prologue.” In *A Star in the Raven’s Shadow: János Vitéz and the Beginnings of Humanism in Hungary*, edited by Ferenc Földesi, 117–139. Budapest: National Széchényi Library, 2008.

