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MILITIA PORTALIS

Summary. The *militia portalis* system was introduced in Hungary in 1397. According to royal decree, each landowner was required to equip one mounted archer for every 20 peasant plots (*porta*) on his estate. Members of the lesser nobility were required to join their financial resources and do the same for every 20 peasant plots. This system was employed against the Ottomans and other opponents of the realm, though it was most effective against Turkish light cavalry, as their way of warfare was similar to that of Hungarian light cavalry. Warriors serving in the banderia of ecclesiastical and secular lords cannot be regarded as mercenaries in the proper sense of the word (though sometimes they received money for their services) – in most cases they served their lords for subsistence, provisions, land donations, and support for rise in social status. From a military point of view, the soldiers of ecclesiastical banderia were the most effective, and the ones serving in the units of secular lords and the counties were less useful on the battlefield. During the rule of King Matthias (1458–1490) the first mercenary army in Hungarian history was organised, but the *militia portalis* system was also upheld. In the Jagiellonian period (1490–1526) the system was reinvigorated and served successfully against smaller-scale Ottoman forces, but it was incapable of withstanding the all-out attacks in 1521 and 1526.

Keywords: army supply, mobilisation and deployment, Ottoman wars, battle worthiness

The Ottomans landed in Europe in 1354 for the first time and immediately set about conquering the European parts of the Byzantine empire and the territory of the Balkan states. In 1389 Serbia suffered a decisive defeat at the hands of the Ottomans, and two years later the first incursions into the parts of medieval Hungary took place. King Sigismund of Luxembourg (1368–1437) took the threat seriously, personally leading several minor counter attacks against Ottoman raiding parties, as well as a full-scale counterstrike in the form of a crusade in 1396, in which several European realms represented themselves with their military contingents. The campaign ended in the disastrous defeat of Nicopolis,[1]

[1] About these events *vide*: D. Nicolle, *Nicopolis 1396*, Oxford 1999; P. Engel, *Magyarország és a török veszély a Zsigmond-korban* [*Hungary and the Turkish Threat in the Era of King Sigismund*], [in:]

which marked a turning point in the military policy of King Sigismund against the Ottomans: from the offensive he turned to the defensive. His new military doctrine relied on three pillars: alliance with the Balkan states already under pressure by the Ottomans, build-up of a strong line of castles along the borders of his realm, and the creation of a military force capable of successfully deterring the Turks, as its warfare would be similar to that of its opponent.

The third element of the king's military policy is the point we are concerned with here. After his adventurous return from the battle of Nicopolis, Sigismund convened the Diet of Temesvár (today Timişoara, Romania), where he issued a decree[2] concerning the defence of Hungary against the Ottomans. According to this decree, each landowner should equip one mounted archer for every twenty peasant plots in his possession. Those members of the lesser nobility who possessed less than twenty plots should send a mounted archer jointly for every twenty peasant plots (*porta* in Latin). The fact that the decree demanded mounted archers is worth noting. By 1397 the events of the Hundred Years' War were well-known, and the English victories at the battles of Crecy[3] in 1346 and Poitiers[4] in 1356 could have justifiably contributed to the employment of massed archers, whose firepower was capable of breaking the French knights' attack. It is true that the English archers fought in the above-mentioned battles on foot, but for greater mobility and adaptability they campaigned on horseback. It is also true that Ottoman armies employed a different type of warfare from that of their European foes, as it had turned out at Nicopolis. On the other hand, the Turkish light cavalry was quite mobile, so to counter this threat, Sigismund had to field a similarly mobile force instead of an army centred around the traditional heavy cavalry base. That means that Sigismund's idea of creating a force capable of countering the Ottomans had a fundamentally sound base.

Nagy Képes Milleniumi Hadtörténet [*Great Millenary Military History*], ed. Á. Rácz, Budapest 2000; P. Engel, *Szent István birodalma* [*The Realm of Saint Stephen*], Budapest 2001, pp. 173–174 (English version: P. Engel, *The Realm of Saint Stephen*, London 2001).

[2] F. Döry, G. Bónis, V. Bácskai, *Decreta Regni Hungariae. Gesetze und Verordnungen Ungarns 1301–1457*, Budapest 1976, pp. 157–174. Article VI concerns *militia portalis* on pp. 161–162.

[3] D. Nicolle, *Crécy 1346*, Oxford 2000; A. Ayton, P. Preston, *The Battle of Crécy, 1346*, Woodbridge 2005; for a conflicting view *vide*: M. Livingstone, K. Devries, *The Battle of Crécy. A Casebook*, Liverpool 2015; M. Livingstone, *Crécy. Battle of Five Kings*, Oxford 2022.

[4] D. Nicolle, *Poitiers 1356*, Oxford 2004.

How much of this reform, however, was actually put into effect? Earlier historiography tended to voice misgivings about the king's military reform, doubting whether it was observed in reality. However, later research has unearthed information which might be related to the employment of this decree. In 1427, Sigismund ordered his authorities to perform a comprehensive survey of peasant plots (*porta*), about which some sources relating to some north-eastern counties survive.[5] The king obviously wanted the number of peasant plots to be counted in order to calculate how many warriors he could expect in the upcoming campaign against the Ottomans. In 1428, King Sigismund unsuccessfully besieged the castle of Galambóc (Golubac, Serbia), which had been handed over to the Turks by its castellan instead of to him, as the Agreement of Tata made with George Branković would have required.[6]

The evolving system of *militia portalis*[7] worked in the following way: the prelates and secular aristocrats of the realm mobilised their retinues (*banderia*) on the basis of the number of peasants living on their territories, that is, they equipped one mounted archer for every twenty peasant plots, which provided them, depending on the number their plots, with retinues of different sizes. Those nobles who possessed less the twenty plots, sent a soldier jointly to the county *banderium*, which was led by the *comes comitatus*.

Who made up the members of the retinues and the county *banderia*? In Hungary a special variation of feudal bondage[8] can be observed in the sources of the high Middle Ages called *familiaritas*.[9] According to this system an aristocrat provided members of the lesser nobility the opportunity to serve him in times of war and peace, in the former as warriors, in the latter as officials of estates, representatives in legal affairs, bodyguards, retinue members, etc. In return for their services they received food, accommodation, land donations, and sometimes

[5] P. Engel, *Kamarahaszna-összeírások 1427-ből* [*Lucrum Camerae Conscriptions from 1427*], „Új Történelmi Tár" [New Historical Thesaurus]. Fontes Minores ad Historiam Hungariae Spectantes, vol. 2, Budapeszt 1989.

[6] T. Pálosfalvi, *Nikápolytól Mohácsig, 1396–1526*, Budapest 2005, pp. 59–64.

[7] *Magyarország hadtörténete. A kezdetektől 1526-ig*. [*The Military History of Hungary. From the Beginnings till 1526*], ed. R. Hermann, Budapest 2017, pp. 237–239.

[8] M. Bloch, *La société féodale*, Paris 1939 (Translated into English as *Feudal Society*, London 1961). Bloch's work is by now outdated in many respects, but is definitely still worth considering. For a more modern approach *vide*: S. Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals. The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted*, Oxford–New York 1994.

[9] G. Szekfű, *Szerviensek* és *familiárisok* [*Servientes and Familiares*], Budapest 1912.

money from their lords, but mainly support and opportunity of rise in social status. The quality of these troops was generally high, as the soldiers serving in retinues of prelates or aristocrats spent their whole life in warlike circumstances, so they were well-versed in the use of weapons, and their morale was also high, especially in the retinues of prelates. These members of the lesser nobility served their masters in times of war as members of their retinue.

Those members of the lesser nobility, who had their own lands but had a smaller number of peasant plots and were unable to field a whole *banderium* on their own, sent their soldiers to the *banderium* of the respective county where they lived contributing to the creation of the county contingent. Their warriors were either their own family members or sometimes peasants or town dwellers, so their battle-readiness was usually lower than that of the ecclesiastical and secular retinues, and their morale was also lower.

These soldiers cannot be regarded as mercenaries in the true sense of the word, as they did not make a living from warfare. Real mercenaries received their pay almost exclusively in cash, and in times of peace they offered their services to other masters who were engaged in war, so for them participation in combat was the sole activity they were accustomed to and good at, they had no other means of making a living. Warriors serving in the *militia portalis* system, however, served their masters in several ways both in times of peace and of war; their service was often lifelong; they served the same masters their fathers and grandfathers had served. Only at the end of the medieval period did a new type of warrior, called *servitor*, begin to emerge. These warriors tended to change their masters more often than their forefathers had, and they sometimes (but not exclusively) received their pay in cash, so the bonds between lords and servants began to weaken in the last decades of the Middle Ages in Hungary. In summary, we can conclude that although these soldiers were paid for their services and they sometimes even received money from their masters, in most cases their masters provided for their living in kind, so they cannot be regarded as mercenaries in the strict sense of the word.

As to the equipment of warriors serving in the system of *militia portalis*, we possess relatively rich source references, but in most cases they refer to the requirements and not to the actual armament of these soldiers. When the system was introduced in 1397, the decree insisted on mounted archers whose way of warfare could easily be adapted to Ottoman light cavalry. Later

requirements varied – according to decrees issued by the kings of the 15th and 16th centuries, the laws demanded *banderia* of 50% heavy cavalry and 50% hussars (in Hungary, 'hussars' referred to light cavalry, unlike the later Polish heavy cavalry known by the same name). Theoretically, heavy cavalry in this period would be equipped with full body plate armour, a long lance for mounted shock combat, and various hand weapons such as a sword, a mace, a battle-axe or a dagger for close quarter combat. However, the equipment of a heavy cavalry man was very expensive, so the sources (especially at the beginning of the 16th century) tend to complain that *banderia* consisted mostly of light cavalry, whose equipment was considerably cheaper. The warriors were fielded on lighter horses and equipped with less armour. On the basis of 16th-century parallels we can conclude the Hungarian light cavalrymen went to war wearing a helmet, a breastplate made of steel (but in many cases simply of leather), had a light lance, a sabre, a dagger, and a shield for defence. In point of fact, these *huzarones* were more adaptable to the changing circumstances of the Ottoman front, and could defy Turkish incursions, but in case of a major campaign like in 1521 and 1526, they were not able to withstand the Ottoman onslaught. In the 16th century, some towns in Hungary were required to field infantrymen, some equipped with a musket, and royal towns were required to supply guns and powder.

During the time of King Matthias (1458–1490), the importance of the *militia portalis* system decreased, especially after the king organised his mercenary army (the 'Black Army,' as it was called after the king's death). However, it must be stressed that even during the rule of Matthias, the prelates, secular lords, and counties mobilised their forces in times of war on the basis of the *militia portalis* system. On the Ottoman front these contingents, which mainly consisted of light cavalry, but sometimes also included the units of counties and towns which were partly or exclusively infantry, were apt to keep the Turks at bay. In point of fact, they were more effective against the Ottomans than was the king's mercenary army, as they demonstrated in 1476.[10] In response to the Turkish raid in 1474, which reached as far as Nagyvárad (now Oradea, Romania) and devastated its suburbs, King Matthias retaliated with the siege of Szabács (now Šabac, Serbia) in late 1475 and managed to occupy the fortress in early 1476. Though the campaign was a limited success, the heavily armed mercenaries were almost

[10] T. Pálosfalvi, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

useless against the Turks, while the retinues of prelates and lords took the brunt of the fight and proved their battle worthiness.

The same can be said about the battle of Kenyérmező in Transylvania (now Câmpul Pâinii, Romania) in 1479. When the Ottomans attacked the south of Transylvania with a substantial force, they were met by an army of Transylvanian troops led by voivode István Bátori. Although the Transylvanian troops' system of mobilisation was different from that of the troops of Hungary proper, the *banus* of Temesvár, Pál Kinizsi, came to Bátori's aid with his troops, which were mobilised on the basis of the *militia portalis* system. The resulting battle ended in a devastating defeat for the Turks, who did not dare to enter the territory of Hungary again until 1521. This battle proved once again that light cavalry troops supported by some contingents of heavy cavalry were capable of defeating the Ottomans, in spite of their superior numbers.[11]

After the death of King Matthias, Hungary was in upheaval and on the verge of internal strife, from which King Vladislaus II emerged victorious in 1492. His success was partly due to the employment of Matthias' mercenaries, the so-called Black Army. However, after his military victory, the new king was unable to pay his mercenary army any longer, and it was disbanded. The decree of 1492 returned to the *militia portalis* system as the main military force of the realm.[12] This system was much cheaper, as formerly King Matthias had paid 3 florins a month to each foot soldier and 6 to each heavy cavalryman, which amounted to an exorbitant sum, which Hungary was hardly able sustain even under Matthias' reign. Under the *militia portalis* system, in contrast, the soldiers were partly paid by their ecclesiastical and secular lords and partly by the king's treasury, which conceded 50% of the king's tax as *pecunia exercitualis* to the prelates and lords in return for deploying their troops in times of war. During the period of the Jagellonian kings (Vladislaus II, 1490–1516, Louis II, 1516–1526) the *militia portalis* system remained in effect, but with certain modifications. In times of peace with the Ottomans, land owners had to mobilise one warrior for every 36 peasant plots, with the exception of southern Hungary, where the original system (one warrior for every 20 plots) remained in force. The decree of 1498 enumerated those prelates and secular lords who had to mobilise a *banderium*

[11] *Ibidem*, pp. 151–162.

[12] S. Kolosvári, K. Óvári, *Corpus Iuris Hungarici 1000–1526*, Budapest 1899, pp. 490–492 (articles 19–21).

– in theory each would have contained 400 warriors, which would have meant quite substantial force if they had been mobilised in reality.[13] However, in times of war, mobilisation posed serious problems, as food and fodder prices were relatively high before harvest time and by the time prices fell back to the normal level, the Ottomans were already at the borders of the realm. In most cases, only about 50% of the above-mentioned contingents could be fielded, due to financial difficulties.

The composition of the troops mobilised on the basis of the *militia portalis* system also changed during the Jagellonian period. Originally the decrees ordered the prelates and lords to send heavy cavalry to their *banderia*. Later, although the experiences on the Ottoman front led to the realisation that light cavalry troops are more useful in countering the Turkish raiding parties, the decrees still insisted that 50% of troops in the banderia should be heavy cavalry. Prelates and barons, and especially the counties, were reluctant to supply heavy cavalry in great numbers, however, because they were more expensive to equip. The fact that the royal decrees kept repeating the requirement that the *banderia* should be 50% heavy cavalry and 50% light cavalry proves that in most cases the prelates and secular lords sent light cavalry troops, by that time called *huzarones* (hussars).

A few decades later open war broke out between Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, which led to the fall of Nándorfehérvár (now Belgrade, Serbia) in 1521 and the battle of Mohács in 1526, a devastating defeat for Christendom. Hungary lost her independence and huge territories of the realm became parts of the Ottoman Empire for 150 years.

After 1521, Hungarian military leadership felt the necessity for the creation of a more effective military force, so steps were taken to set up a mercenary army in addition to the *militia portalis* system, as well as for seeking aid from other Christian countries. Mostly due to financial reasons, however, these ideas could only partly be put into effect. As a result, most of the Hungarian forces participating in the battle of Mohács were still mobilised on the basis of the *militia portalis* system.

In conclusion we can establish that the system introduced by King Sigismund and modified by later rulers proved its effectiveness against smaller Ottoman raids, but it was unable to counter the full-scale campaigns of Sultan Suleiman, whose military machine was by far the most fearsome in contemporary Europe.

[13] *Ibidem*, pp. 606–608 (articles 20–22).

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Streszczenie. System *militia portalis* został wprowadzony na Węgrzech w 1397 r. dekretem królewskim, zgodnie z którym każdy właściciel ziemski był zobowiązany do wystawienia i wyposażenia jednego konnego łucznika na każde 20 chłopskich działek ziemi (*porta*) znajdujących się w jego dobrach. Przedstawiciele mniej zamożnej szlachty zobowiązani byli połączyć swoje zasoby finansowe, tzn. podzielić się kosztami, i także wystawić jednego konnego łucznika na każde 20 parcel chłopskich. Powyższy system został wdrożony jako obrona przeciwko zagrożeniu ze strony Osmanów i innych przeciwników Królestwa Węgier, ale okazał się najbardziej skuteczny przeciwko tureckiej lekkiej kawalerii, której sposób walki był zbliżony do stylu węgierskiej lekkiej kawalerii. Wojownicy służący w pocztach (*banderia*) kościelnych i świeckich możnowładców, choć czasami otrzymywali pieniądze za swoje usługi, nie mogą być uważani za najemników we właściwym znaczeniu tego słowa – w większości wypadków służyli swoim panom w zamian za utrzymanie, wyżywienie, nadania ziemi i protekcję w celu podniesienia statusu społecznego. Z militarnego punktu widzenia żołnierze kościelnych *banderii* byli najskuteczniejsi, a ci służący w oddziałach panów świeckich i oddziałach ziemskich byli mniej przydatni na polu bitwy. Za panowania króla Macieja Korwina (1458–1490) zorganizowano pierwszą w historii Węgier armię złożoną z najemników, ale utrzymano też system *militia portalis*. W okresie panowania Jagiellonów (1490–1526) system ten został wzmocniony i z powodzeniem służył jako obrona przeciwko mniejszym siłom osmańskim. Nie był jednak w stanie przeciwstawić się zmasowanym atakom, które nastąpiły w 1521 i 1526 r.

Słowa kluczowe: zaopatrzenie armii, mobilizacja i rozmieszczenie wojsk, wojny osmańskie, zdolność bojowa