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“... Let her remain in the faith of the Greeks”

The Marriage Plan between the Noble Families of Hunyadi and Celje in the Light of the Ecclesiastical Union (1448, 1451)

One of the interdisciplinary resources for the research on mixed marriages is the history of law and the history of the medieval family. Some of the regulations of the ecclesiastical union in 1439 refer to the possibility of performing mixed marriages or engagements between the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox in medieval Hungary. This study analyses two such prominent cases from the Hungarian Kingdom, emphasising the practical consequences of mixed marriage, especially its ability to overwrite hostility between opposite families.

Keywords: ecclesiastical union – Hungarian Kingdom – John of Hunyadi – *Laetentur Caeli* (1439) – Orthodox-Catholic engagements

European ecclesiastical background

On 6 July 1439, the Council of Florence and Ferrara through the Bull “*Laetentur Caeli*” declared the union of the Western and Eastern Churches. The Byzantine Emperor John VIII (Palaiologos) signed the document; his main purpose was to manage military support against the threat of the Ottomans. But his efforts in Florence were futile; the Byzantine Church put up resistance against this Bull. It was not the first attempt at creating an union between the two Churches. In 1274, the Council of Lyon also had declared the union. But both attempts were brief and forceful. In 1439, Pope Eugene IV pressed the Emperor to sign the Bull for Western military aid in the face of the threat from the Ottomans.¹ In terms of the Byzantine part in the ecclesiastical negotiations in Florence, Cardinal Bessarion played

the main role, and one of his great successes was to reach an agreement on the union.²

After this ecclesiastical union, from my point of view, the legal or canonical objections against mixed (interconfessional) marriages also softened. We know from earlier centuries that mixed marriages could be very useful for the dynasties involved (kings, queens, princes, princesses) for the purpose of creating inter-dynastic political alliances. One such example can be found especially between the dynasty of the Hungarian Arpads and the family of the Byzantine emperors.

The aim of my present article is to provide a tentative answer to the question of whether the existence of this momentary ecclesiastical union did in any way facilitate these mixed marriages? Is there a less complicated possibility of having mixed marriages or engagements between the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox in Hungary in the middle of the 15th century? Was there any political solution, for this purpose, in the circle

¹ SZABO, 1440, 30–32.; IDEM, Let the Heaven rejoice 2020, 63–64.

² TALBOT, Bessarion 285.

of the major participants of the Hungarian medieval policy?

We know the fact that, in Hungarian history, the Governor of Hungary, John of Hunyad (Iancu de Hunedoara), during the war of the leagues of barons, had twice attempted to create peace between him and two of his rivals by engaging into mixed marriages. These cases refer to the Despot George Branković and Count Ulric of Celje.³

Political background of the Hungarian Kingdom

Both occasions took place in the time of the government of John of Hunyad (1446–1452), in 1448 and 1451. His main aim was the reorganization of the separated regions of the Hungarian Kingdom. For this purpose, he put a lot of effort into defeating the municipal powers of the barons. First of all, the family of Celje were also relatives of the Hungarian royal family and of the Serbian Despot, George Branković.

The opportunity for a closer connection with the family of Celje was not to be waited for long. After an unsuccessful military attempt to take revenge for the abuses of Ulric of Celje in Slavonia and Croatia (because from the 11th century the Hungarian monarch reigned these lands in a personal union), John of Hunyad wanted to reach an agreement with Frederick III, the Habsburg German-Roman Emperor, through him. Father and son, Frederick of Celje and Ulric of Celje were both permitted to hold their conquests in Slavonia.⁴

They also made an engagement between the older son of the Governor, Ladislaus of Hunyadi, and the daughter of Ulric of Celje, the granddaughter of George Branković, Elisabeth of Cel-

je. A contemporary charter (DF-DL 44 516, which was written on 18 June 1448) reports this event⁵ in Latin: "...Ladislaio filio suo naturali et legitimo praefatam principissam juvenculam dominicam Elisabeth. Hac vire unicum nostram carissimam filiam in sponsam et legitimam conthoralem suis polcitationibus et promissionibus desponsarunt et matrimonialiter copularunt."⁶ In my English translation: "to his (i.e. the older son of Governor Ladislaus of Hunyadi) legitimate and natural son [they gave] the young, aforementioned princess, Elisabeth. Therewith they engaged and married, our only and most beloved daughter – as legitimately engaged couple by their promise and pledge."

From this charter we know not much about the confession of the parties. By this time Ladislaus of Hunyadi was already a Roman Catholic, but Elisabeth was an Orthodox. For the purpose of this article this is an interesting issue. The Hunyadi family had originally been Orthodox, but after the settlement in the Hungarian Kingdom (around 1409), the members of this family (Voicu, the father of John of Hunyadi, and his brother, Radu) later converted to the faith of the Roman Catholic church. We know the Catholic name of Radu from a charter in 1419: Ladislaus.⁷ This planned marriage must therefore have been a mixed or interconfessional marriage. This agreement and marriage contract temporarily brought a breathing space in the hostility between the Hunyadies and the Branković-Celje.

John of Hunyadi had to make another political compromise in order to preserve his governing power. To organise another political league, the Governor created another conjugal connection as a pledge of his power. For example, in 1449, he also negotiated with Jan Žižka, who was a

³ Szabo, 1440, 56; Engel, Kristo, Kubinyi, Magyarorszag története 206.

⁴ TEKE, Hunyadi János 157; PÁLOSFALVI, A Hunyadiak 30, 34.

⁵ Nr° DL 44 516 (Hungarian National Archives, Budapest); LUPESCU, A Hunyadiak, 16; ERDÉLYI, Married 109.

⁶ TELEKI, Hunyadiak kora 305.

⁷ KOVÁCS, Matthias Corvinus 9, 22.

radical Hussite commander (one of the military leaders and a member of 'Taborites') in the Northern part of the Hungarian Kingdom, after a long war. Probably one of the young sisters of John of Hunyad had to marry Žižka, but due to his resistance this plan failed.⁸

The engagement of 1451

In 1448, the aforementioned agreement between the Hunyadi family and the families of Celje and Branković did not come to fulfilment either, because the Governor turned against the Despot; after the second battle of Kosovo Polje (against the Ottomans), the Governor was in the captivity of Branković. His older son – Ladislaus of Hunyad – had to go to the court of the Despot as a hostage. But eventually they renewed their earlier engagement.⁹

The second engagement attempt was in 1451. This was also an exceptional historical moment, which overwrote their hostility. The antecedents were very interesting. After his captivity, John of Hunyad took revenge on Despot Branković, who was condemned by the Hungarian parliament for having committed the crime of high treason (*crimen nota infidelitatis*) in March 1450.¹⁰

This was a very sensitive situation, because the power of Branković not only depended on the Hungarian Kingdom – as a vassal of the Hungarian king – but on the Ottomans, or Sultan Murad II, too. One of his daughters, Mara, was at the court of the Sultan, not only as his hostage, but as one of the Sultan's legal wives. This was a very infrequent legal marriage between a Muslim Sultan and an Orthodox princess. This

was not an interconfessional, but an interreligious marriage.¹¹

In 1450, the Governor invaded Serbia, in order to liberate his older son from the prison of the Despot. Finally, Branković gave him Ladislaus of Hunyad, as mentioned by the Hungarian chronicler, John of Thuróc.¹²

On 7 August 1451, through the mediation of Hungarian nobles, the members of the Senate of the country, Nicolas of Újlak, Ladislaus of Pálóc, Johannes of Zredna (or Vitéz) ratified another (or second!) agreement between John of Hunyad and Ulrik of Celje and George Branković in the castle of Smederevo. One contemporary and Palatine charter has survived and informs us about the articles and conditions of the agreement.¹³

This document was issued by the Palatine Ladislaus of Gara. We can read that, in the presence of the Hungarian Palatine,¹⁴ Branković made some solemn pledge. On this ceremonious occasion, in the castle of Smederevo, almost all members of the Branković family were present, his wife [V]erina¹⁵ (Irene Kantakouzene) and his sons Gregory and Stephen. Accompanying the Despot were also his other son, Lazar, and the daughters of the Despot, Katherine Branković (Katherina, who was the wife of Ulrik of Celje) and Margaret Branković, as well the granddaughter of the Despot, the aforementioned princess, Elisabeth of Celje, daughter of Katherine Branković and Ulrik of Celje.

This charter informs us about the hostility and many grievances (in the Latin language: "pluraque gravamina") that had been inflicted between the Despot and the Governor over three

⁸ TEKE, Hunyadi János 178; DÜMMERTH, A két Hunyadi 94.

⁹ TEKE, Hunyadi János 174.

¹⁰ THURÓCZY, A magyarok krónikája 297.

¹¹ SZABO, 1440, 101.

¹² THURÓCZY, A magyarok krónikája 297.

¹³ Nr° DF-DL 37 614 (Hungarian National Archives, Budapest).

¹⁴ In the Latin language: palatinus, in the Hungarian language: nádor. This was the second highest office, after the King, in the royal court of Hungary.

¹⁵ This is a greek letter digamma or J in the charter.

years ("a tribus Citra vel Paulo ultra Annis"),¹⁶ i.e. since 1448. From that date both parts strove for reaching peace ("pro pace utriusque partis laborantium"). The charter mentions also the participants of this negotiation: "We mediated the peace between them (Palatine Ladislaus of Gara) John of Zredna, the bishop of Warad (today: Oradea), Nicolaus of Újlak, woiwoda of Transylvania and Ladislaus of Pálóc, the chief judge of the royal court." This peace was confirmed by an alliance of marriage and the Eternal and Holy Union of the brotherhood ("affinitatis atque perpetue et sacramentalis unionis") between the Despot and the Governor.¹⁷

Elisabeth of Celje, who was then ten years old ("nunc in decimo anno constitutam"), was engaged with the younger son of the famous Lord Governor, Matthias of Hunyad ("egregio Mathie filio annotati domini Johannis Gubernatoris")¹⁸ through the Holy rite of the Christian Church, in the Holy Confederation of marriage ("Ritu sancte christiane ecclesie"). We can thereby see this new mixed marriage again.¹⁹

The Despot made an important clause or request in the subsequent text. At the beginning, I have mentioned the Council of Florence in 1439, the ecclesiastical union, and the fact that the legal or canonical bars against mixed marriages were also dissolved. But the Despot clung to the Orthodox faith after this engagement, as can be seen in the quoted charter: "Moreover, when Elisabeth has been carried into the House of the Governor, whenever she wants, by that time, the Despot will wish for her to remain in the faith of the Greeks."²⁰ This cited passage shows us the

neglect or disregard for the possibility of an ecclesiastical union.

The date of this marriage would be the day on which Elisabeth reached the age of twelve. It therefore means the year 1453, on 6 December.²¹ It is necessary that I add here a juristic remark. In Hungarian medieval common law, this age was the so called "legitima aetas" or legal age. The famous Hungarian royal tutor of jurisprudence, Stephen of Werbőcz, in his compilation of common law (Tripartitum) mentioned that the spouses of the marriage at this age were capable of entering marriage and its consumption or copulation (Part I, Title 111, § 3). There was also another important age, "perfecta aetas" or perfect age, the completeness of private rights. This age started from the age of 24 in the case of boys and 16 in the case of girls (Part I, Title 111, § 2).²²

At this point, I must make an important remark in connection with another interesting fact. This charter does not mention anything about the age of the future husband Matthias of Hunyad or about the fact that he had not reached his "legitima aetas", as Elisabeth had done. So he must have been twelve years old at the date when this charter was issued in 1451. If we take into consideration this age, then he must have been already born in 1439, and not in 1443, the generally accepted date in the Hungarian historical literature, as I pointed out in my other studies.²³

This agreement consisted of other conditions between these families. For example, all possessions of the Despot in Hungary were going to be transferred into the hands of the Governor or those of his sons, should this marriage not be concluded. We know that this marriage was

¹⁶ TELEKI, Hunyadiak kora 305.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Matthias of Hunyad or Matthias Corvin, later King of Hungary (1458–1490).

¹⁹ TELEKI, Hunyadiak kora 307.

²⁰ "Voluit tamen ipse dominus Dezpotos, ut dum et quando volente domino prefata puella Elizabeth neptis sua in domum dicti domini Gubernatoris tra-

duceretur, ipsa in ritu fidei Grecorum permaneat", in: TELEKI, Hunyadiak kora 307.

²¹ Ibid. 309.

²² WERBŐCZY, Tripartitum 238.

²³ SZABO, Egy királyi évszám 16–25; SZABO, Egy királyi évszám nyomában² 259–270.

indeed contracted, but after four years, the young princess Elisabeth died in 1455.²⁴

Additional examples

With respect to interconfessional marriages, we can find other historical examples of disregarding the legal possibility of mixed marriage. For example, in the case of Queen Elisabeth of Celje, widow of the Hungarian King Sigismund of Luxembourg (†1437).²⁵ In the internal conflict of 1440/1441, Despot Branković supported Queen Elisabeth. It had seemed that he had a dynastic plan, too, because he planned to marry the youngest son, Lazar Branković, to the Queen Widow Elisabeth. But her highness was being a proud Roman Catholic and refused this mixed marriage with sarcastic and injurious sentences, as we can read in the contemporary memoirs of her maid of honour (the wife of John Kottaner): “Gentlemen! Do not give me a pagan (sic!) to marry me, but rather a Christian peasant!”²⁶

In agreement with the aforementioned story, in the Hungarian charters of the 14th century we can see the same evaluation of the Orthodox Serbs. There are some references in connection to war against the Ottomans. Serbs are often mentioned along with the ‘Turks’ as “heretics” or “schismatic”, for example in the charter of 1392 “contra Turcos et emulos ac scismaticos” (DL 52 758). It shows us the common opinion after the Great Schism (1054) in medieval Hungary.²⁷

Finally, if we localise the Hungarian Kingdom on the religious map of Europe, at the same time – as a country of Roman Catholics – it was situ-

ated on the borderline of Roman and Orthodox Christianity. The Western neighbours, including Poland, belonged to the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern and Southern, including Serbia, to the Orthodox Church of Constantinople. Although there were many mixed marriages between the dynasties of these countries, until the 15th century, many regulations prevented further possibilities. It often happened that the future wife had to convert to the faith of her husband. In some exceptional cases the couple could remain in their respective faiths, as I mentioned before, concerning 1451.

While my objective is not to cover all the examples of the entire canonical literature of the 15th century, I tried to provide examples of marriages that query the regulation of the canon law. The Old Testament did not permit marriages between Israelite men and foreign women (or pagans). Later, the question appeared again in the New Testament and takes the shape of evangelisation or imitating and following Christ. On this matter, the apostle Paul says in one of his letters (1 Cor. 7.14): “the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband”.²⁸

Some Early Church fathers regarded marriages between Christians and pagans, Jews, and later, heretics as mixed marriages, and some of them did not accept them (Tertullian, Saint Cyprian, Saint Ambrose). In the practice of the Orthodox Church, this was more probable (John Chrysostom). Most of the ecclesiastical synods prohibited these marriages, but after the Great Schism (1054), mostly in the 14th century, the regulations became more elaborated. Marriages with non-Christians or pagans were null or invalid (“disparitas Cultus”), whereas with non-Catholic Christians (or later the Protestants) they were valid but prohibited or disallowed (“matrimonium foret validum sed

²⁴ PÁLOSFALVI, A Hunyadiak 38–39.

²⁵ She was the widow of King Albert of Habsburg and the daughter of the German-Roman Emperor and Hungarian King, Sigismund of Luxembourg.

²⁶ A korona elrablása 13.

²⁷ SZABO, 1440, 196–197.

²⁸ Holy Bible 1103.

illicitum"). This was the case of the typical "mixta religio", mixed marriage.²⁹

The most important medieval canonical code was *Concordantia discordantium canonum* by Magister Gratianus. This Code regulated the marriage between believers and unbelievers (Part II, Cause 28, Question 1, Canon 14).³⁰ Canon 15 orders that the faithful must not marry the non-faithful ("Fideles infidelibus non sunt coniugio sociandi").³¹ The following Canon (16) further specifies this cause: "The Catholics with heretics shall not combine in the matrimonial bondage." ("Cum hereticis catholici non miscerant coniugia.")³² A mixed marriage may be valid between the faithful depending on the evaluation of the Orthodox and the Catholics, in what concerns the faith of each other.

The Papal Bull "Laetentur Caeli" of 1439 did not regulate mixed marriage, it just proclaimed the union of Western and Eastern Christianity.³³

In brief, this ecclesiastical union should have made mixed marriages easier, as it seemed to rule out canonical obstacles.

Conclusion

Before the Synod of Ferrara and Florence the participants had to convert to the Catholic faith, but after this Council they could remain in their own faith. These were the first cases when members of the noble class could keep their own confession or rituals if they were married with a spouse of a different confession.

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²⁹ GROCHOLEWSKI, *Tanulmányok* 14.

³⁰ *Decretum Magistri Gratiani* 1087.

³¹ *Decretum Magistri Gratiani* 1088.

³² *Decretum Magistri Gratiani* 1089.

³³ GASPARRI, *Codicis Iuris* 69–71; SZABO, *Let the Heaven rejoice* 2020, 66–67.

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