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The Description of the Siege of Székesfehérvár by Wolfgang Lazius. A Hidden *Oratio Funebris* in a Historical Work

The siege of Székesfehérvár in 1543 that led to the city's one-century-long Turkish occupation was narrated by Johannes Martinus Stella (an Italian soldier), Miklós Istvánffy (the most famous Hungarian historian of the 16th century), and György Szerémi (a Hungarian priest working under János Szapolyai). The former two mainly focused on the events of the siege, while the latter used the 15th century's religious conflict as a focus point. A common point in all of their works is that they all briefly mention György Varkocs, the captain of Székesfehérvár. On the contrary, the historian of Ferdinand I, Wolfgang Lazius devotes the part dealing with the siege of Székesfehérvár in his monumental historical work to writing an obituary to György Varkocs. In my presentation I show how did Wolfgang Lazius use the siege's events that were appropriately narrated by the aforementioned authors, to hide a well-written oratio funebris of György Varkocs in the historical description of the siege of Székesfehérvár.

Keywords: Johannes Martinus Stella, Miklós Istvánffy, György Szerémi, Wolfgang Lazius, letter, *commentarius*, historical work, *oratio funebris*

The description of a siege can be used with many different intentions in mind. In light of these possibilities, in this study I will concentrate on two questions. Specifically, how and for what purpose can such a description be used? How much does the narrative of an event change depending on each possibility?

The first question can be answered in several ways and is the easiest to answer since we have limited options to choose from. Firstly, a work like this can be employed as part of a larger historical work or as a standalone description. It might be the subject of a letter, or a *commentarius* on which other writers can base their historical works, or even the

basis for an *oratio funebris*. These are just a few examples of how to employ a siege description; in the history of Hungarian literature, such a description has been used as a basis for a poem or even a song; but, for the time being, I will concentrate on the first four options.

The siege in question in this study is that of Székesfehérvár, also known as Alba Regia, which is recounted in the afore-mentioned four types of writings, namely a letter, a *commentarius*, a historical work, and a kind of *oratio funebris*. The siege of Székesfehérvár was not the only one that year: in 1543 the Ottoman Empire launched a military campaign in Hungary in order to clear the way for a future campaign against the Habsburg Monarchy.¹ The Turks took control of the capital city of Buda in 1541, which gave them control over the road leading to the centre of the country.² From Buda, the army moved to Esztergom, which was and still is the religious capital of Hungary. After days of warfare, the city was taken by the middle of August 1543. According to our sources, the defenders of the city most likely gave up the struggle when the Turkish army arrived at Székesfehérvár, the crowning and burial city of the kings of Hungary, on the 20th of the same month, after burning down Tata, one of Mathias Rex's Renaissance palaces.³

In the 16th century, the city's position made it difficult for any army to take Székesfehérvár, which was located in the middle of a swamp. This was in fact its strongest defence, as the walls of the city were mostly made of wood and mud, as they were in many other parts of Hungary. The only exceptions were the stone walls and towers enclosing the inner city, mostly built at the command of Ferdinand I, as the city was under Habsburg rule at the time. It was exactly this swamp that in previous years had prevented the Turks from attempting a siege at Székesfehérvár. György Varkocs was the captain of Székesfehérvár from the middle of the Summer of 1543.⁴ The last military assistance from the Habsburg king in the form of some cannons was followed by a modest Habsburg detachment that arrived at the city just before the start of the siege. At that time the city was inhabited by a mix of civilians from the

¹ BÁNLAKY (2001: IV. b).

² BÁNLAKY (2001: IV. b).

³ BÁNLAKY (2001: IV. b).

⁴ MAGONY (2014: 35; 100).

city and its neighbouring villages, as well as several Hungarian, Italian, and Habsburg mercenaries. The city's whole defence force numbered between five to eight thousand people, which was reduced to about three to four thousand people by the start of the Siege.⁵ This was the state in which the Turkish army found Székesfehérvár in 1543.

Since in this paper I focus on other aspects of the descriptions of the Siege, I will forego the details, and will focus, instead, more on the way the events were described according to the following sources: Johannes Martinus Stella, who wrote a letter about the Siege, György Szerémi, who wrote a *commentarius*, and Miklós Istvánffy, who wrote about the Siege as part of his historical work, as well as Wolfgang Lazius who, similarly to Istvánffy, incorporated the description of the Siege in his monumental work.

Despite the fact that two of these three authors were alive at the time of the Siege, none of them were present. As for Martinus Stella, he was a soldier who fought alongside the Italian mercenaries in Hungary, primarily in Esztergom. Although he was not in the country at the time of the Siege of Székesfehérvár (he left for Vienna in August), as a soldier he was able to learn about the battle from his fellow men who had fled to the Habsburg capital after the Siege ended. He wrote four letters about the Turkish military campaign of 1543 to his relatives living in Amsterdam.⁶ We don't know if these were real or imagined relatives, but this is a minor matter as far as the letters are concerned. The letters were published a year after the Siege, making them one of the earliest sources of information from that time period; the third letter, written in Vienna in early September 1543, covers the events under Székesfehérvár.⁷

Although the text has the basic structure of a typical letter, it reads more like a war diary, with facts listed one after the other, without any trace of partiality. Given his background as an Italian soldier, it is no wonder that his letter focuses more on the Italians' role in the events. He does not blame them for losing the city, nor does he blame anyone else. In his opinion, the tragedy was the result of ill-fortune that no one could

⁵ VERESS (1990: 50–57).

⁶ KULCSÁR (2004).

⁷ STELLA (1746: 619).

have prevented. He even goes on to describe the state of the Italian soldiers that had fled from Esztergom to Komárom at the end of the letter.⁸

György Szerémi was the second writer who could have been present during the Siege. He was a priest under János Szapolyai, and following the king's death, he moved to Transylvania with the widowed queen and his son, where he lived for the rest of his life.⁹ At the request of the famed Hungarian humanist Antal Verancsics, he wrote a long *commentarius* titled *Epistola de perditione Regni Hungarorum*. The *commentarius* covers events from the middle of the 15th century to 1543. It is not a continuous narrative but a compilation of small stories, and the Siege of Székesfehérvár represents one of these episodes.¹⁰ The way he uses the Latin language to describe what he wants to say proves that he is not a well-versed humanist. Although his work is not easy to read, it showcases a huge range of folklore and everyday gossip, as well as his own thoughts on current events.

Although his work deals with the events in question, the focus is not on the Siege itself. The Siege is just a pretext for entering into a religious debate about the punishment of the Lutheran citizens of Székesfehérvár for their wrongdoings. In this debate, the Turkish army and the Siege are seen as the punishment of the citizens for abandoning true Christianity and becoming Lutherans. Surprisingly, the sultan in his account is a positive character who is not anti-Christian. On the contrary, he shows interest in learning about the faith which Szerémi calls 'our' religion, referring to Christianity rather than Lutheranism, the religion practiced by the citizens of Székesfehérvár, with whom the sultan nonetheless engages in conversation with. In his work, Szerémi portrays the sultan as a man who wants to liberate Christianity from the influences of the Reformation. In light of this, the Siege becomes merely an excuse for having the debate, rather than being its main subject.

Miklós Istvánffy, the third writer, wrote about the Siege almost half a century after it happened, in the early years of the 17th century. He was a politician, a poet, and a humanist who, unlike Szerémi who worked for Szapolyai, worked for the Habsburgs and was well-versed in Latin. He

⁸ STELLA (1746: 618–619).

⁹ BARTONIEK (1975: 60).

¹⁰ SZERÉMI (1857: 388–397).

incorporated the description of the Siege into his great work, *Historiarum de rebus ungaricis libri*.¹¹ He was heavily influenced by Paolo Giovio's work, and in this particular case he closely follows him, which may explain why the only thing we learn in this episode is that the Habsburg soldiers did everything they could to save the city, with no explanation as to who is to blame for the defeat. The text claims that the Habsburg mercenaries held meetings, fought to their deaths, guarded the walls, and did many other things to protect the city, despite the fact that they ultimately failed.

This account is part of a larger historical work and it meets all the expectations of the genre. It describes the city, its history and significance, the military state it was in, and even the strategic decisions made prior to the Siege. It is a well-written and consistent description of the events, free of bias, in which the author aimed to include everything he knew about events happening in and around Székesfehérvár at the time. At the end of the episode, he also briefly mentions the overall state of Europe in 1543, and as an outside observer, he concludes that the unfortunate events in Hungary were by-products of Europe's larger political problems, making the fall of the city inevitable.¹²

Following this summary of the authors and their works, I will continue with the second question I proposed at the beginning of this paper. How much does the narrative of an event change depending on the purpose? Some events of the Siege are mentioned by all three writers, and this provides the possibility to answer the question. In chronological order, the first event is the filling of the swamp around Székesfehérvár.¹³ It was the first thing the Turks did when they arrived at the city, in order to get close to the outer city walls and launch an onslaught. It was described as a long and difficult task, carried out by almost all the Turkish soldiers as well as the villagers residing around Székesfehérvár who were forced by the Turks to participate in the undertaking.¹⁴ After days of continuous wood chopping and swamp filling, the Turks succeeded in their task.

The second thing mentioned by all authors was the fog on the morning of the day the city fell. As fog is quite common in places filled with

¹¹ ISTVÁNYFY (1622: 165–167).

¹² ISTVÁNYFY (1622: 167).

¹³ STELLA (1746: 616); SZERÉMI (1857: 391); ISTVÁNYFY (1622: 165).

¹⁴ SZERÉMI (1857: 391); ISTVÁNYFY (1622: 165).

swamps, its appearance on the 2nd of September was perceived more as a misfortune than a surprise.¹⁵ In his work, Stella mentions that some believed the fog was the product of witchery, although he traces it to natural causes.¹⁶ Protected by the fog, the Turks got inside the outer walls of the city unnoticed, and after days of bombarding, the final battle began. As the end of the military season for the Turks drew nearer by the day, this proved to be a turning point of the Siege. Székesfehérvár was the last city attacked by the Turks that year, and despite their efforts to seize it as soon as possible, the city held out for nearly two weeks.

The third event, mentioned in each text, relates to the closed gate leading to the inner city of Székesfehérvár which the soldiers encountered when repelling the enemy in the outer city and deciding to retreat to relative safety.¹⁷ Nobody knows why the gate was closed, but it was not opened even when the captain of the city requested it.¹⁸ The fourth event is linked to this incident: because of the closed gate, soldiers were forced to battle the Turks head-on, and this resulted in the death of György Varkocs. He died on the front line protecting his men. Both Stella and Istvánffy mention that the enemy cut off not just his head, but his right arm, too.¹⁹ Stella specifies that the Turks paraded his severed arm in mocking.²⁰ However, according to Istvánffy, the Turks cut off Varkocs's arm out for the golden rings he was wearing.²¹

¹⁵ STELLA (1746: 617); ISTVÁNYFFY (1622: 166). Szerémi, unlike Stella and Istvánffy, does not openly state that there was fog, but he alludes to it. As for the date, Szerémi does not mention it, Istvánffy uses the modern version, and Stella uses the Roman version.

¹⁶ STELLA (1746: 617).

¹⁷ STELLA (1746: 617); SZERÉMI (1857: 392–393); ISTVÁNYFFY (1622: 166).

¹⁸ Stella claims that it is debatable whether the gate was closed by accident or because someone ordered it to be closed. Istvánffy writes something similar, stating that while he believes it was an accident, he also considers the possibility that the gate was locked due to panic generated by the circumstances or because of plotting. Szerémi, on the other hand, claims that the Lutheran citizens of Székesfehérvár closed the gate on purpose to keep the Christian soldiers out.

¹⁹ STELLA (1746: 617); ISTVÁNYFFY (1622: 166). Interestingly, Szerémi does not mention the captain's death in the chapter dealing with the Siege; he only mentions it in later chapters of his work.

²⁰ STELLA (1746: 617).

²¹ ISTVÁNYFFY (1622: 166).

The city captain, György Varkocs, was a Silesian soldier in the service of Ferdinand I and a close friend of the king. We do not have much information about his earlier life and how he became a Habsburg soldier, but we do know that he began serving for Ferdinand I in 1536, when Charles V recommended Varkocs to his brother.²² He was present at the battle of Buda in 1541 and remained in Hungary afterward.²³ He was named captain of Székesfehérvár in 1543, but only at the last minute, which is why in the middle of the Summer he was not even in the country and arrived in Székesfehérvár just before the Siege began.²⁴

As I mentioned earlier, the description of a siege can be utilised as an *oratio funebris*. Wolfgang Lazius, a historian of Ferdinand I, utilised *The Description of the Siege of Székesfehérvár* as an *oratio funebris* of the city captain. Wolfgang Lazius was a humanist, a historian, a cartographer, and a physician who, like György Varkocs, was present at the battle of Buda in 1541.²⁵ In the second half of the 16th century, he wrote a monumental historical work entitled *Rerum Austriacarum Decades*. The 5th *decas* of this work is about Hungary,²⁶ with the events concerning Székesfehérvár making up for the entirety of the fifth book of this *decas*.

Although *The Description of the Siege of Székesfehérvár* is expected to be humanist, it serves more as a means to highlight the good character traits of György Varkocs, making him the hero of the Siege. What is more, Lazius accomplishes all this with scattered half-sentences hidden within the description. According to him, Varkocs encouraged the soldiers to hold out whenever they lost faith, such as when the enemy filled in the swamp, causing panic among the citizens, or when the bombardment lasted much longer than expected.²⁷ Lazius highlights the

²² MAGONY (2014: 93).

²³ MAGONY (2014: 95–99). According to GEÖCZE (1896: 119–121) this information can be concluded from his letters written in the time period between the two events.

²⁴ According to MAGONY (2014: 35; 100) in the summer of 1543 Varkocs was in Gorizia, Italy and arrived at Székesfehérvár not long before the Turkish army.

²⁵ KRATOCHWILL (1985).

²⁶ KASZA (2018).

²⁷ LAZIUS (fol. 161v): *Etsi enim nec consilia Warkhesio nec animus deessent, nox quoque nulla quieta foret, in tali tamen, praesertim gentium colluvie non satis nec loco nec homini credere oppidanos in urbe atque hostes extra urbem in castris iuxta metuere, circumspectare omnia, et omni strepitu adesse, alio atque alio loco milites adhortari, prorsus naturam ipsam*

captain's good communication skills, which he considers to be one of the most well-known traits of Varkocs.²⁸ It also shows that he cared about the people he was responsible for. Not long before the last day of the Siege, he warned the Hungarian soldiers, the *hajdús*, to be more alert and to remain loyal to the Habsburgs.²⁹

It should be mentioned that Lazius is the only writer of the four who claims that the reason for losing Székesfehérvár was the betrayal of the Hungarian troops, since they abandoned their posts and the Turks were able to get into the outer city unnoticed.³⁰ As a result, he included the siege of Székesfehérvár as one of the sieges in 1543 that ended due to treachery. Despite this, the fact that the city captain forewarned the soldiers shows that he honoured his pledge to Ferdinand I, and his loyalty was unwavering, even in the desperate conditions of a siege.

György Varkocs was also present in the final combat in the outer city, where he fought alongside his soldiers and tried to safeguard their lives, before leading them back to the inner walls when it became clear that the Turks would triumph. When the gate remained shut even despite his orders for the inhabitants within to open it,³¹ he was the first to

imperitantem mortalibus improbo labore evincere conabatur. Sed (quod in proverbio est, ne Hercules contra duos) consilio suo saluberrimo, ut nec omnium pectora erigere potuerat, ita nec suum omnibus robur in arma largiri, tametsi omnia sua necessaria, vitam, opes, honores post uniuscuiusque commodum duceret.

²⁸ LAZIUS (fol. 162r; 163v): *Neque tamen ea in rerum difficultate procul Warkhesius a suis aberat, homo indefessi ingenii manuque plus quam prompta, et qui pluribus annis plurium linguarum commercio contra tot gentes efferas ordines duxerat. and Quin et Hungaros ea vis doloris tantique viri amissi cura attigit, partim quod in eius regni ditione satus, et linguae commercio, et longa militia acceptissimus fuerat.*

²⁹ LAZIUS (fol. 161v): *Quos etsi saepenumero Warkhesius moneret, ne studio pugnandi aut spe praedae longius progredierentur [...].*

³⁰ LAZIUS (fol. 161v): *Erant in oppido Hungarorum aliquot centum ex ea hominum colluvie, qui boves agitando simul rapinis adsuescunt, incultum genus hominum et ferox, sub dio, praeter panem et aquam nullos cibos norunt, gentilitia Hungaris lingua Heydokhii appellati, et a latrocinii ob audaciam in ista penuria militum, tot caesis exercitibus, ad belli aperti speciem traducti. Quos etsi saepenumero Warkhesius moneret, ne studio pugnandi aut spe praedae longius progredierentur, deinde etiam quid iniquitas loci incommodi haberet, proposuisset, erumpentes tamen clam duce aliquoties, locis occultis in hostem ruebant, et re feliciter gesta, spoliis capitibusque praecisis onerati in castra nostra redierant.*

³¹ LAZIUS (fol. 163r–163v): *Inter haec Warkhesius cum iniquo loco pugnari, hostiumque continuo augeri copias cerneret, permetuens suis, ad stationes oppidi clamat, petens portam aperiri, ut quae*

turn around and confront the enemy; and although his right hand was severed, he fought to his dying breath.³² An interesting detail to notice is that the Habsburg historian is the only one of the authors who claims that Varkocs's arm was cut off before his death. If we consider the statements of the other two writers to be true, this little change can be seen as an attempt to make the death of Varkocs much more heroic.

According to Lazius he died a hero's death, befitting of a dedicated and ever-faithful soldier. To demonstrate his greatness, Lazius claims that the death of Varkocs was such a horrible event that the enemy stopped fighting to pay their respects to the fallen captain.³³ György Varkocs was a friend of Ferdinand I, and as the historian of the king, it was the job of Wolfgang Lazius to write the obituary Varkocs deserved even if it was concealed within the account of the siege he died in. Varkocs and Lazius both fought in the siege of Buda in 1541, and considering the way Lazius portrays the captain, there could have been some sort of friendship between the two. As a result, the *oratio funebris* hiding beneath the description of the Siege can be seen as a tribute or a parting gift from a writer to a dear friend.

In conclusion, it can be confirmed that a siege description can be presented in a variety of ways, such as a letter, as we saw in Stella's case, with the purpose of sharing information, a religious debate, as in Szerémi's work, with the intention of defending one's own beliefs, or a simple historical account, as presented by Istvánffy, recounting the events with the goal of remaining objective. Nonetheless, one of the

supererant cohortes, intra oppidum ex pugna reciperentur. Sed res erat in celeritate posita, nec praesidium, quod intra moenia fuerat, re nova stupefactum, titubantibus omnium ut mentibus, ita etiam manibus, tam cito recludere portam poterat. Neque permittebant Hungaricae gentis oppidani, qui nostros numero superabant, et omnem apertionem odio gentis nostrae prohibebant, vel quod hostium una simul ingressum timerent, vel quod desperatis rebus nostros caedibus exponere cupiebant novamque sibi apud tyrannum gratiam ista in Germanos impietate mercari.

³² LAZIUS (fol. 163v): *Cum acerrime cominus pugnaretur, hostes loco et numero, nostri virtute confiderent, dumque laborantibus ipse Warkhesius succurrit atque integros pro sauciis accersit, circumventus ab hostibus alterum brachium saucius amisit, nihilo tamen timidior, etsi trunco corpore pugnam inter confertos instaurabat, ac strenui militis bonique ducis simul officia exsequabatur.*

³³ LAZIUS (fol. 163v): *Ex cuius morte luctus non apud regem inclytum magis, quam ipsos etiam hostes fuit.*

most interesting uses of *The Description of the Siege of Székesfehérvár* is undoubtedly the one by Wolfgang Lazius as a hidden *oratio funebris*.

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³⁴ The Latin text can be read in Péter Kasza's transcript, who is currently working on it to be published.