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Hungarian Mercenaries in Italy in the 14th Century: An Analysis of a Mercenary Contract of 1361

Summary: Hungarian mercenaries began to operate in Italy in the 1340s. The reason for their appearance in the Kingdom of Naples was the planned dynastic link between the Neapolitan and the Hungarian branches of the Angevin family. Hungarian warriors arrived in Italy in greater numbers during the campaigns of King Louis I, who intended to occupy the Neapolitan kingdom for himself after the assassination of his younger brother, Andrew, by accomplices of his wife, Joan of Naples. After the failure of these campaigns, a considerable number of Hungarian warriors stayed in Italy and undertook mercenary service there. This study seeks to analyse a mercenary contract surviving from 1361, which was concluded by the king and queen of Naples and the mercenary company called *Magna Societas Ungarorum*. The text provides us with an excellent insight into the conditions under which these warriors fought and the expectations on behalf of the contracting parties. It also allows us to conclude to what extent the points of the agreement could be put into practice.

Keywords: Hungarian mercenaries, Kingdom of Naples, *Magna Societas Ungarorum*, mercenary contract, conditions of mercenary warfare

The first mention of Hungarian mercenaries operating in 14th-century Italy appears at the start of the 1340s. King Louis I the Great aimed to forge a dynastic alliance with the Kingdom of Naples. To accomplish this, he followed in the footsteps of his father, King Charles I of the Angevin lineage, who had come to Hungary as a child in 1300. After a lengthy and challenging struggle for power, he secured the Kingdom

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of Hungary and established stability by the mid-1320s. It was he who proposed marrying his younger son, Prince Andrew, to Joan of Naples, aiming to unite the kingdoms of southern Italy and Hungary in Central Europe under one dynasty — the French-origin Angevin family. King Charles I journeyed to Italy in 1333 to facilitate his son's marriage. Accompanying him were some Hungarian knights and warriors, marking the start of 14th-century Hungarian-Italian military ties. However, it was not until the early 1340s, when Prince Andrew travelled to Italy, that Hungarian soldiers began to participate actively in the Kingdom of Naples as part of the prince's retinue.

The real onslaught of Hungarian military culture in Italy is associated with a tragic event. In September 1345, Prince Andrew was murdered in Aversa, which was probably instigated by his wife.¹ King Louis I swore vengeance against the killers of his brother and decided to lead a campaign to Italy to conquer the Kingdom of Naples with sheer force and take this realm under his rule. As it turned out later, this idea was doomed to be a failure, but the king was quite determined to achieve his goal. He led his first campaign to Naples on land. Hungarian troops arrived in Italy at the beginning of autumn in 1347, while the king himself followed them in November. This first campaign soon turned out to be a successful one. The king occupied the Kingdom of Naples, Queen Joan and her lover managed to escape, and only pockets of resistance remained behind. However, the pope refused to accept Louis as the king of Naples and was also reluctant to accept the idea of the Queen's liability for the murder of Prince Andrew. King Louis returned from Italy in the spring of 1348, leaving Hungarian garrisons in the strongholds of the Kingdom of Naples.² His return coincided with the outbreak of the black death, which caused the most devastating epidemic in Europe in the Middle Ages.

After the king's return, his troops were led by István Lackfi, voivode of Transylvania, a capable military leader, who successfully fought against the armies of Queen Joan and Louis of Taranto in 1348 and 1349, but it became necessary for King Louis I to intervene in person in 1350. This time he travelled across the Adriatic Sea and landed in the Kingdom of Naples, but the main body of his army may have gone along the peninsula following approximately the original route taken in 1347. King Louis I's second campaign turned out to be an inconclusive one, leaving no other solution open than establishing a peace treaty in 1352. In this treaty, the king acknowledged the Kingdom of Naples to be the inheritance of Queen Joan and her husband, Louis of Taranto, but retained his claim to the Neapolitan throne.

The Hungarian way of warfare experienced by the Neapolitan forces was a complete surprise for warriors who had been accustomed to the contemporary Western European fighting traditions. Though by this time, the ways the Hungarians fought had

1 Weisz B. (ed.), 2023, 263.

2 Hermann R. (ed.), 2017, 203–206.

changed a lot after the establishment of the Christian state by King Saint Stephen in the year 1000 and became more and more similar to that of Western Europe, having elements of heavy cavalry, the members of which wore knightly armour and carried the same weapons as their western European counterparts, the Hungarian army still retained certain characteristics, which had been parts of east European nomadic fighting tradition.³ The most important elements of this fighting culture were the relatively high numbers of light cavalry in the Hungarian army, whose main weapon was the reflex bow, with which they could shoot from horseback, even when galloping, and shoot backwards when feigning retreat, they tried to encircle their opponents and kill them with a hail of arrows. This tactic, combined with the assault of heavy cavalry and foot soldiers, proved to be a very effective one on the battlefields of Italy. This light cavalry consisted of Cumanians, Szeklers, and Hungarians and became a much sought-after contingent in several mercenary companies after the completion of King Louis I's wars in Italy, when a substantial number of Hungarian warriors remained in Italy and offered their services to different employers as mercenaries.⁴ This activity became a certain possibility of a career, to achieve fame and financial enrichment. In the coming decades, the influx of Hungarian warriors into the Italian mercenary market can be documented. This also offered a way for a rise in social status for those members of Hungarian society (coming from all walks of life) who were willing to take the financial burdens of becoming a mercenary and the risks involved in this way of life.⁵ A well-known example of this type of career is that of Miklós (*Nicholas*) Toldi, whose exact social origin cannot be established due to the rarity of sources,⁶ he certainly became the vice-comes of Pozsony County, perhaps the most significant Hungarian territorial unit in northwestern Hungary, before his mercenary service. He also achieved financial success while serving in Italy, where Hungarian warriors were part of the *Magna Societas Ungarorum* and *Alba Societas*. Toldi himself fought alongside one of the most renowned mercenaries of the time, Sir John Hawkwood. At the peak of his military career, Toldi commanded approximately 1,600 to 1,800 men.

To shed light on the conditions and circumstances in which these mercenaries served, it is worth analysing a contract that I came across while preparing a source publication volume, which was meant to contain all the charters and documents relating to Hungarian history from the year 1361.⁷ The project was part of a larger-scale endeavour, which aims at publishing about 80,000 charters surviving from the age of the Angevin rule in Hungary (1301–1387) in the form of Hungarian language

3 Hermann R. (ed.), 2017, 192.

4 Hermann R. (ed.), 2017, 206–209.

5 Bárány A. (ed.), 2024, 191–214; 215–244; 265–272.

6 Mályusz E. 2003, 108–130.

7 Sebők F. (ed.), 2024, 159–161, no. 254.

excerpts.⁸ As I was preparing these charters for publication, I found the text of the contract, which I would like to describe and analyse now for better insights into this aspect of military history.

The contract was known for Hungarian historiography as it had been published in extenso in the 19th century,⁹ but it has not been analysed extensively yet. The text was discovered by Gusztáv Wenzel in the archive of Florence, and he included it in his well-known source collection. The contract came into being between the king and queen of the Kingdom of Naples on the one hand and leaders of the *Magna Societas Ungarorum* on the other hand in Amalfi, on April 25, 1361. It was written in two copies, one for the king and queen, and one for the leaders of the *Societas*.

The contract names the leaders of the *Societas*, including the captain, Miklós (*Nicholas*) Atyinai, and this provides us with the first piece of interesting information. Though the name of the mercenary company is *Magna Societas Ungarorum*, among the leaders, who must be high-ranking members of the company, as they represent the whole of the unit, there are two German *marescalli*, so we can conclude — and it is also confirmed by the text of the contract — that the company did not exclusively consist of Hungarian mercenaries. The expressions used to describe the leaders of the company are *marescalli*, *consiliari*, *comestabuli* and *caporales*.

The contract refers to the fact that the kings of Hungary and Naples came to a peace treaty, so there is no hindrance for Hungarian subjects to serve the king of Naples, the former foe of their ruler. The contract aims to expel all the Germans and members serving with them in the *Societas Annichini de Mongardo* (another mercenary company) from the territories of the Kingdom of Naples. The captives and the dead are to be handed over to the king of Naples or his representative. The captives would be held for possible ransom or perhaps for re-employment in the army of Naples. As regards the dead, their belongings, armour, and weapons could be of value, and this may explain this item in the agreement. The leaders of the *Magna Societas Ungarorum* promised to destroy the *Societas Annichini de Mongardo*, if they did not fulfil this obligation, they would be regarded as traitors both to the Hungarian and Neapolitanian kings. They also agree not to ravage the territories of the Neapolitan king and his vassals, not to cause damage, not to commit injuries and robberies, and to pay for their victuals. Taking into consideration the conduct of other mercenary companies before and after 1361, we cannot be surprised at the inclusion of this point in the contract. The question was to what extent it could be put into practice during the campaign, and we can have no doubts that this point was not observed in the letter. After the completion of the expulsion of the Germans, they agreed to leave the kingdom without causing any damage. They would serve the king against any of his enemies, and after leaving the

8 Almási T. et al., 1990.

9 Wenzel G. (ed.), 1875. 2, 571–578, no. 417.

kingdom, they would not attack it and would not serve the enemies of the king for five years. This was a customary element in contemporary mercenary contracts, but not necessarily observed in all cases. The leaders made a vow putting their hand on the Holy Scripture, that they would serve the king in Italy, on the island of Sicily, Provence, Avignon, in the *comitatus* of Venice, and in defence of the pope, the cardinals, and all the territories of the church for the usual amount of mercenary fee, which is customary in Italy. They promised to obey the commands of the Neopolitan king and his chief commander in the same way as they would obey the king of Hungary. This item is a strong testament to the fact that, though serving in Italy as mercenaries, these soldiers ultimately considered themselves subjects of the Hungarian king. If they do not fulfil this part of the contract, they should be regarded as traitors to God and the two kings. Whenever the Neopolitan troops want to depart from them, they will not obstruct them and will not cause damage to them. This point illustrates the fact that in the case of royal and mercenary troops fighting together, there may be a certain amount of distrust among the troops, which should be prevented for the success of the campaign. The leaders promised not to come to any agreement with the enemy during the campaign, the points of which would be contradictory to the items of the present contract. They agreed to make a vow in the hand of the Neopolitan king's Seneschall, touching the Holy Scripture, that all members of the *Societas* would obey these points and would not defy the commands of the king and his military leaders. In return for their services, the king of Naples will pay 37,000 golden florins in the following way: the king will pay 18,000 when he raises his flag, and they will defeat the Germans. The rest (19,000) will be paid at the final destruction and complete expulsion of the Germans from the Kingdom of Naples. After completing their task, the king will provide them with further special favours, but if they fail to perform the above-mentioned services, they cannot demand anything besides the mentioned 18,000 golden florins. The loot, horses, weapons, money, and goods taken during the campaign will belong to the Hungarians. This was perhaps the most important part of the contract because rank-and-file members of the company were the most interested in the possible loot besides their payment. This is also true for the captives, whose issue was dealt with in the next point. According to it, the Neopolitan king or his representative may select fifty high-ranking and noble captives; the rest will belong to the Hungarians. To prevent possible debates, the contract also includes the point that Neopolitan troops fighting side by side with the Hungarians may retain their part of the booty from the Germans. The next point reveals the multi-national character of the *Societas*. According to this point, German members of the *Societas* will be pardoned by the king, the queen, and their subjects for their earlier misdeeds and excesses, and the fines imposed on them will be revoked. The king, within 12 days of the destruction of the Germans, will pay the remaining 19,000 golden florins to the Hungarians in the castle of Amalfi. The king promises in the name of himself and his subjects not to cause any harm to

the Hungarians after the sum is paid. If he does not comply with this, the captain and members of the company may complain to the Pope, the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, and the king of Hungary. This copy, which is sealed with the king's secret annular seal and is retained by the leaders (*capolares*) of the *Societas*, who will also put their seals on that copy, which will belong to the king. There is a point relating to misbehaving elements of the company as well. If certain parts of the company avoid clashing with the Germans during the campaign and enter the territory controlled by Louis of Durazzo, who is currently in revolt against the king, the leaders of the *Societas* will compel them to fulfil the points of the contract. The last item deals with the issue of the wounded and ill members of the *Societas*. They may enter the territory under the king's control and heal and buy the necessary items for themselves; however, in all of these cases, they have to pay for their cure and the goods.

Analysing the points of the contract, we can arrive at the following conclusions. The contracting parties were quite precise in laying down the exact conditions and their expectations concerning the content of the contract. The most important points deal with the aim (expulsion of the Germans from the Kingdom of Naples), the costs involved on behalf of the king (37,000 golden florins), the conditions under which this sum is paid (18,000 in advance, 19,000 on completion of the task), and share of the booty (including captives and horses, armour, weapons, etc.). The contract also carefully defines how the fulfilment of the task should be secured, what course of action should be followed if the mercenaries fail to comply with the aim of the contract, and prescribes the vow their leaders are required to make. In this respect, the contract can be regarded as a carefully worded business agreement.

There are also striking shortcomings of it, which are possible to explain in my opinion. The first is that the contract does not contain a time frame; that is, the deadline for achieving the mentioned task is not prescribed. The reason for this can be the following. In case of war, exact time limits cannot be included in the contract, because the fortunes of war can quickly change, and it is next to impossible to decide when hostilities can be ceased. The other reason may hide in the character of the contract; the first part of the agreed sum is paid in advance, and the mercenaries will receive the second instalment on completion of the task, so it is in their interest to finish it by the soonest possible date. This may explain why no exact deadline is recorded in the agreement.

The second missing point is that there are no conditions set in the contract about how many warriors the company leaders should field, what the proportion of cavalry (heavy and light) and infantry should be, how the warriors should be equipped, and what weapons and armour they should carry. Again, these missing points can be explained. When the king came to this agreement with the leaders of the *Societas*, he must have had a clear picture of the number of warriors in the company (which he may have deemed enough for his purposes) and also of their equipment. If he had not

been satisfied with what he had been informed of, he would not have entered into this contract with the leaders of the *Societas*. In other words, he must have been confident that the mercenary company he was about to contract was capable of achieving the task it undertook.

On the other hand, it was the company leaders' responsibility to equip their warriors in a way that would enable them to reach their goals laid out in the contract. The other party in the contract, the mercenaries, were also confident they could expel the Germans from the Kingdom of Naples. These considerations explain why these points were not included in the contract.

The contract clearly illustrates the fact that Hungarian warriors, who appeared first in Italy as mercenaries in the 1340s and fought in the wars of King Louis I, by the 1350s and early 1360s of the century, became highly valued members of the mercenary market in Italy.¹⁰ Their number made it possible to form mercenary companies, which did not exclusively consist of Hungarian warriors, as we could observe, but in certain companies made a substantial, in the case of the *Magna Societas Ungarorum*, a predominant part of the company. In the coming decades, there was a constant flow of warriors coming from the Kingdom of Hungary to Italy, which lent a special flavour to the wars fought in the Apennine Peninsula well into the 1380s. The military experience of these soldiers gained in Italy helped the modernisation of Central European warfare, as the time of the Hundred Years' War and the age of the Great Companies¹¹ in Italy marked a turning point in medieval warfare, from which the states of Central Europe could profit in reforming their armed forces and adapting themselves to the challenges of the next century.

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¹⁰ Kristó Gy. (ed.), 1994, 752–753.

¹¹ Fowler K. 2001, 297–301.

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