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a cura di
MARCO MERLO, ANTONIO MUSARRA, FABIO ROMANONI E PETER SPOSATO



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“Bad Christian”

Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta in Crusade or Ancient versus Early Modern in the Humanistic Discourse

by DMITRY MAZARCHUK

ABSTRACT: Mantuan congress proceedings in 1459 showed that the national or territorial interests of separate states considered in the first place by their heads and representatives. The only practical embodiment of Pius II' ideas of crusade was a military expedition to Morea led by Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta.

For Pius II the crusade was seen as an attempt to bring to life the humanistic fantasies obviously doomed to failure. For Malatesta the campaign could be an attempt to realize his political ambitions. The activities of Malatesta represented a new stream of political rhetoric. Condemned and excommunicated from the standpoint of morality, Malatesta turned out to be a representative of the archetype of a «virtuous ruler».

KEYWORDS: Christian, Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta, Pius II, Crusade, XV centuries.

The active phase of the crusading movement did not end after the fall of the Acre in 1291. During the XIV-XV centuries, the warriors of Western European countries acted more than once under religious slogans. As a rule, the campaign aimed to repulse the enemy from the East. Thus, in most cases, the initiators of the announcement of the crusade were the countries on the border of the Islamic world: the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, Cyprus, and Hungary. However, in the second half of the XIV century the idea of a crusade was discredited first of all by the papacy, which used it in the political struggle with its rivals.

In the XV century the rhetoric of the crusades not only did not subside but also acquired a new impetus. We are talking about the ideas of reforming the Catholic Church, which received recognition in various forms after the end of Great Schism. For about a century after the Council of Constance and the election of Martin V, the ideas of reforming the church and freeing the Holy Land in the East

accompanied one another in polemical discourse. This is no coincidence; “the links between crusade and the reform of the Church were strong and persistent”¹.

Probably one of the main reasons for that in the XV century propaganda of the idea of the crusade movement was in the hands of humanists is a formation of a new class of educated and socially active people. Humanists strove for the knowledge and revival of both ancient literary achievements and ancient political traditions. The ideal of an active public life they adopted was reflected, among other things, in calls for a pan-European crusade. At the same time, they saw the campaign as a means of correcting social and Church misconduct. As a result, according to Margaret Meserve, “the fortunes of the humanists and the problem of the crusade were closely linked at a number of levels”².

First, the notion of a Turkish (or more broadly Islamic) threat was used by humanists as a means to push divided Christendom towards unity. A striking example is the theory of history by the Milanese humanist Andrea Biglia. According to him, the success of the Muslims was predetermined by the break at the end of antiquity between the main institutions of the Western world – the papacy and the empire. Restoring harmony between the latter will make it possible to return to the glorious times of the ancient glory of the united Christian empire³.

All humanists were characterized by the unification of three themes into a single ideological complex: the correction of the Christian world, the restoration of its unity and the crusade against the Turks. Using the appropriate rhetoric in their works, the humanists actually relied not on ancient ideals, but on a medieval socio-political construct. The idea of *pax Christiana* was for them, if not an objective reality, then a realizable ideal.

At the same time, it is necessary to take into account the fact that the idea of *res publica Christiana* was formed under certain historical circumstances. As Björn Weiler showed, it grew out of numerous and repeated calls to stop mutual extermination and take up arms against the infidels. Of course, during the period

1 Norman J. HOUSLEY, *Crusade and Reform, 1414-1449: Allies or Rivals?*, in Norman J. HOUSLEY (ed.), *Reconfiguring the Fifteenth-Century Crusade*, London 2017, p. 45.

2 Margaret MESERVE, *Italian Humanists and the Problem of the Crusade*, in Norman HOUSLEY (ed.), *Crusading, the Fifteenth Century. Message and Impact*, New York 2004, 2004, p. 15.

3 ID, pp. 17-21.

of Ottoman expansion there was a revival of this idea. However, practice has shown that the “Christian world” has always been a rhetorical turn, coming from the pope, or some other authority. In specific cases of its application, one should look for specific goals facing those who put forward and used this slogan⁴.

As Nancy Bisaha showed, the humanistic response to the Turkish threat was the tool that formed the idea of a “European” and “civilized” identity⁵. A significant role in this process was played by the emerging tradition of writing essays *de origine Turcorum*. The most common motif of the ethnic origins of the Turks was ancient Scythia. In this case, papal Rome, which grew up from the ancient Roman Empire, was opposed to conditionally eternal (also erected in time to antiquity) barbarian Scythia. This dichotomy emphasized the papal nature of the proposed crusade. In addition, in the mouths of the propagandists of the crusade, it was an additional justification – not religious, but secular (pseudo-ancient) – for the unity of Christian Europe.

Implementation of the idea of a crusade in the XV century turned out to be much more difficult than rhetorical exercises. So, the calls of the Franciscan Giovanni da Capistrano did not find support from the emperor and the German princes. In fact, the crusade was limited to the Hungarian political space. It is not clear whether the personal charisma of the preacher, or the imminent danger, prompted the Hungarian magnates, led by regent János Hunyadi, to gather troops and launch a campaign. The result of their actions was the withdrawing of the Turkish siege of Belgrade (1456)⁶.

The example of the Capistrano’s crusade demonstrates well that by the mid-1450s became a reality. No one in Europe wanted to go to the Holy Land or even the Balkans anymore. The campaign against the Turks remained a popular topic of sermons and political treatises, but was difficult to put into practice. The princes of the Western world began to realize the priority of national-territorial interests, which henceforth became the determining factor in foreign policy in

4 Björn WEILER, «Negotium Terrae Sanctae and the Political Discourse of Latin Christendom, c. 1215-c. 1311», in *International History Review*, 2003, vol. 25, pp. 1-36.

5 Nancy BISAHA, *Creating East and West: Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks*. Philadelphia 2004.

6 Norman J. HOUSLEY, *Giovanni da Capistrano and the Crusade of 1456*, in Norman J. HOUSLEY, (ed.), *Crusading in the Fifteenth Century. Message and Impact*, New York. 2004, pp. 97-98.

Western Europe. The final point in the development of the political concept of the humanists was the perception of the idea of a crusade exclusively as a matter of the papacy⁷.

The activities of the humanist pontiff Pius II (Enea Silvio Piccolomini) and his secretary Flavio Biondo were the last attempt to implement medieval political concepts in the form of a crusade against the Turks. Despite all the efforts of the pope and the circle of his associates, this attempt as a whole was unsuccessful. The beginning of the enterprise was to be the pan-European congress in Mantua (1459). However, the sovereigns called to the congress and their representatives were in no hurry to come, so it began its work a few months after the scheduled date. The meetings of the congress revealed difficulties in uniting the interests of participants from different countries, primarily France and Germany.

The meetings of the congress showed that the national interests of individual European states now stood in the first place for their leaders. Despite all the erudition and oratory skills of Pius II and Cardinal Bessarion of Nicaea, who consistently spoke at the general session of the congress on September 26, most of the delegates were cool about the idea of the Eastern campaign. In particular, the congress participants rejected the proposal to charge a special tithe in favor of the campaign. In general, as Emily O'Brien noted, "most of the princes who did appear [in Mantua] actively and successfully resisted the pope's efforts to secure their financial and military contributions to his campaign"⁸.

Later, Bessarion acknowledged the failure of the Italian rulers to pursue their own interests and the lack of attention to the Turkish threat. The validity of this assessment is confirmed by the speeches at the congress of the Duke of Milan. After a three-hour speech by Pius II, the ruler of Milan, Francesco Sforza, "with a soldier's eloquence" (*militari eloquentia*), offered his own help and the resources of the duchy in the upcoming war against the Turks⁹.

However, when the next day the delegations of the Italian states discussed

⁷ MESERVE, *Italian Humanists* cit., p. 25.

⁸ Emily O'BRIEN, *Commentaries of Pope Pius II (1458-1464) and the Crisis of the Fifteenth-Century Papacy*, Toronto 2015, p. 99.

⁹ Margaret MESERVE, Marcello SIMONETTA (eds.) *Pius II. Commentaries*, vol. II, Cambridge 2007, pp. 138-139.

the practical steps to organize a military expedition, Sforza was the first to suggest to raise troops “from areas nearest the Turks, where the people knew the enemy’s habits and understood their tactics”. Condottiere had in mind Hungary, which was constantly fighting against the Turkish threat. As for the Italian states and even more distant countries, they will only make a financial contribution. According to Sforza, there can be no talk of sending soldiers from Italy, because it “would cost a fortune”. The opinion of the Duke of Milan was supported by the ambassadors of the Kingdom of Naples and representatives of other Italian states. The Venetians offered to equip a fleet of 30 galleys and 8 cutters, which would be enough to carry out an operation on the Hellespont¹⁰.

So, the meeting of the Italian session of the Congress of Mantua demonstrated the inability of propagandists, including the pope, to combine the efforts of princes and governments together and organize a common campaign. At the same time, there was one voice that stood out strongly from the background of others. We are talking about the ruler of Rimini, Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta, who, among others, participated in the work of the assembly. Speaking after the others, also “in his abrupt military manner”, Malatesta presented a different conclusion based on Sforza’s arguments. According to him, the peoples closest to the Turks have long been defeated by them and therefore are afraid of them. Therefore, he proposed to recruit Italian cavalry and infantry into the army, which should wage war. To this, Pius replied that it would be preferable to wage war with an Italian army, although local generals prefer to fight among themselves, and not outside of Italy¹¹.

The only military operation against the Turks under Pius II was in Morea. At the beginning of 1464, the authorities of Venice appointed Sigismondo Malatesta as captain general of their troops there. In July of that year, 1,400 heavy cavalry, 400 mounted crossbowmen, and 300 infantry under the command of Malatesta landed in Greece. The actions of this contingent were relatively successful, in particular, the Venetian army managed to occupy the unfortified part of Mistra¹². Despite the fact that at the end Malatesta and his soldiers had to leave Greece,

10 *Id.*, pp. 142-145.

11 *Id.*, pp. 144-147.

12 Kenneth Meyer SETTON, *The Papacy and the Levant (1204-1571). The Fifteenth Century*, vol. II, Philadelphia 1978, pp. 251-252.

their efforts to win back the heritage of the Palaiologos were highly appreciated. Previously excommunicated by the pope, in the spring of 1466, Malatesta received from the hands of the new pontiff, the Venetian Paul II, the Golden Rose – the highest distinction for secular rulers¹³.

Did the pope himself realize the unreliability of the crusade he had proclaimed? To answer this question, let us turn to the famous *epistola* of Pius II to the sultan Mehmed II (autumn 1461)¹⁴. The main content of this text is the call addressed to the sultan to accept Christianity and, as a result, to become the most powerful ruler of the West. The central argument of the pontiff is the thesis about the superiority of the Christian faith over Islam. As one knows, “the tradition of his [message] interpretation is long enough, and it always considered the “Message” as a puzzle or oddity”¹⁵. Very interesting Paparelli’s interpretation, according to which the letter was addressed not so much to the sultan as to the Christian rulers, with the aim of simultaneously shaming them and inspiring a new crusade¹⁶.

It is possible that the crusade should be regarded as the personal enterprise of *pius Aeneas*, the culmination of his career, to which he went throughout his life path¹⁷. As for the “Message” to the sultan, it can be assessed as a special literary work. According to Yuri Zaretsky, the imaginary “Message” was a kind of exercise in erudition, rhetoric and classical philology: “It was a humanistic epistle, i.e., an essay suggesting that its communicative function and even its addressee are not important. The main thing in such an essay is the perfection of style, proximity to Ciceronian and Ovidian models”¹⁸. In this case, Pius pursued the goal of leaving behind a wonderful “monument not made by hands”.

Was not the crusade proclaimed by him the same “monument”? It is no coincidence that in the auto-epitaph compiled in 1460, Pius literally predicted

13 Id., pp. 253.

14 Klaus WOLF, Jonas GÖHLER (hg.), *Papst Pius II. an Sultan Mehmet II. Die Übersetzung der Epistola ad Mahumetum durch Michael Christian*, Berlin–Boston 2016.

15 Franco GAETA, «Sulla “Lettera a Maometto” di Pio II», in *Bullettino dell’Istituto storico italiano per il medio evo e Archivio Muratoriano*, 1965, vol. 77, pp. 177-178.

16 Gioacchino PAPARELLI, *Enea Silvio Piccolomini (Pio II)*, Bari 1950, p. 323.

17 Nancy BISAHA, *Pope Pius II and the Crusade*, in Norman HOUSLEY (ed.), *Crusading, the Fifteenth Century. Message and Impact*, New York 2004, pp. 39-40, 50.

18 Зарецкий Ю. П. Стратегии понимания прошлого. Теория, история, историография. М., 2011. С. 302.

his own death during the crusade – 4 years before the gathering of troops in Ancona¹⁹. In a slightly later address to the cardinals, Pius II indicated his intention to repeat the path of Christ until death. It turns out that, faced with clear and harsh opposition to his plans, the humanist pope was forced to transfer the crusade from a pan-European movement into his personal project, including taking control of the smallest details of military planning²⁰. The changed scale of the enterprise predetermined the insignificance of the results achieved.

The main reason for the failure of papal propaganda was that by the middle of the 15th century the medieval model of the socio-political structure began to be replaced by a new, territorially oriented one. Traditionally, from the end of the 11th century, participation in a crusade was a means of increasing prestige, a kind of sign of the presence of certain claims. Thus, by organizing a pan-European crusade, Pius II tried to return to the papacy the role of the supreme arbiter and regulator of *pax Christiana*.

The symbolic significance of the crusade in the organization of the political universe was well understood by the rulers of European states. Even in the late Middle Ages, they more than once turned to the relevant topic, although cases of direct participation were much rarer. A striking example is the unsuccessful crusade of 1396, called by the French king Charles VI as the first among Christian sovereigns. As everyone knows, among the leaders of the campaign was the Duke of Burgundy, Jean the Fearless.

Under the conditions of the proclaimed independence of the Gallican Church (the Bourges Pragmatic sanction of 1438), the use of crusading rhetoric by the French monarchs could seriously damage the claims of the popes to supreme sovereignty in the Christian world. Thus, by proclaiming a crusade, Pius II seized the initiative from the French monarch²¹. Obviously, this could not but cause counteraction. In this situation, on the side of the French monarch, who ignored the pontiff's calls for a campaign, they coincided with the interests of other European sovereigns.

19 Giuseppe BERNETTI, *Saggi e studi sugli scritti di Enea Silvio Piccolomini, papa Pio II (1405-1464)*, Firenze 1971, p. 43.

20 Nancy BISAHA, *Pope Pius II* cit., p. 50; O'BRIEN, *Commentaries of Pope Pius* cit., pp. 100-101.

21 O'BRIEN, *Commentaries of Pope Pius* cit., p. 99.

In fact, the promise of Louis XI to send 70,000 cavalry and infantry against Mehmed II, as well as the abolition of the Pragmatic sanction by him, were given in exchange for the recognition of the Angevin inheritance in Naples – the claims of a side branch of the Capetians to the throne of the southern Italian kingdom²². The rich lands of the Apennine Peninsula in the situation of the ongoing struggle for Naples – that’s what really interested Louis XI. The pragmatism of his approach to the issue of organizing a crusade is especially expressive against the background of the views expressed by Pius II. The views of the two rulers – spiritual and secular – were based on completely different worldview foundations. The worldview of the pope, formed in the humanistic discourse, did not distinguish between the realities of life and the world of cultural images built “with the help of old books”²³. The failure of the Congress of Mantua, as well as the general failure of Pius II’s crusade, reflected the poorly chosen ideological foundation of this undertaking.

Under these conditions, the act of the condottiere Sigismondo Malatesta at first glance seems rather strange and inconsistent. Known for his military conflicts, first against the Duke of Urbino, then against Pope Pius II, Malatesta was not once excommunicated. The failures of this Romagna *signoria* began with the conclusion of peace in Lodi in 1454. Being excluded from this all-Italian agreement, Malatesta found himself in the face of numerous enemies. As a result, over the next few years, he gradually lost his hard-earned acquisitions in the Romagna and Marche²⁴.

In April 1462, Sigismondo Malatesta was damned by Pope Pius II and excommunicated. Three effigies of the condottiere were solemnly burned in Roman squares. The inscription on the effigies was: “This is Sigismondo Malatesta, the king of traitors, the enemy of God and man, condemned to fire by the decision of the sacred college”. Such an exceptional measure on the part of the pontiff, which attracted the attention of other Italian sovereigns, was due to the fact that the previous excommunication of Malatesta had no effect²⁵.

22 SETTON, *The Papacy and the Levant* cit., p. 232.

23 Баткин Л. М. Итальянские гуманисты: стиль жизни, стиль мышления. М., 1978. С. 112.

24 Philip James JONES, *Malatesta of Rimini and the Papal State: A Political History*, Cambridge 1974, p. 211-238.

25 Anthony F. D’ELIA, *Pagan Virtue in a Christian World. Sigismondo Malatesta and the*

The only ally of Sigismondo at the last stage of the conflict was the Venetian republic, whose mediation led to the pacification at the very end of 1463. As Pius II wrote in the *Commentaries*, “if the Venetians took up arms for Malatesta, all Italy would again split into factions and forget about the crusade against the Turks”²⁶. The conditions of the peace turned out to be extremely difficult for the Malatesta family, which “never to recover from the blows inflicted by Pius II”²⁷. Only one city of Rimini remained in the possession of Sigismondo and after his death it should have returned to the Papal states (this condition was later canceled).

Despite a long confrontation with the pontiff, it was Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta who responded to his call for a crusade. It is noteworthy that other Italian condottieri refused to participate in the sea campaign, including the famous warrior, the main opponent of Sigismondo in the recent war, Duke Federigo of Urbino. Malatesta was the only condottiere who supported the pope’s call for a pan-European action against the Turks. However, the effectiveness of the short-lived campaign in the Peloponnese was not high.

What were the motives for the performance of the condottiere at the Mantua cathedral and subsequent participation in the expedition to the Morea? The answer to this question can be given by appeal to the humanistic discourse of a later time.

The failure of the papal crusade is a striking precursor to the humanistic discourse of Italian unification. Its most famous representatives are Guicciardini and Machiavelli. Here are just two quotes. The first is Francesco Guicciardini’s reasoning about the collapse of the all-Italian accord after the death of Lorenzo de’Medici in 1492: “His death was indeed most untimely for the rest of Italy... also because he had been the means of moderating, and practically a bridle, in the disagreements and suspicions” between Ferrante of Naples and Lodovico Sforza²⁸. Guicciardini’s *History of Italy* was written during the Italian wars and reflects, in addition to the transmission of events, his regrets about the suffering of a divided Italy in the face of external aggressors.

Italian Renaissance. New York 2016, p. 1.

26 MESERVE, SIMONETTA (eds.) *Pius II* cit., p. 90-93.

27 JONES, *Malatesta of Rimini* cit., p. 239.

28 Francesco GUICCIARDINI, *History of Italy, The classic history of Italian Renaissance in its first translation into English*, New York 1969, p. 9.

The second passage is from the famous final chapter of *The Prince* by Niccolò Machiavelli: “So, having reflected everything I have written about above, I have been musing over the question whether in Italy at present it is propitious to recognize a new prince – whether there exists in Italy the matter that might offer a prince who has prudence and *virtù* the opportunity to give that matter form, bringing honor to him and prosperity to the majority of her people. It seems to me that so many circumstances are converging to further a new prince that I can think of no period more appropriate than the present...

Therefore, in order that after so long a time Italy may behold her redeemer, this opportunity must not be allowed to slip by. I cannot express with what love that redeemer would be received in all those regions that have suffered from these inundations of foreign invaders: with what thirst for vengeance, what determined loyalty, what devotion, what tears. What doors would be barred to him? What people would withhold their obedience from him? What envy would set itself against him? What Italian would withhold homage from him? This barbarous tyranny stinks in the nostrils of all mankind”²⁹.

Unlike Guicciardini, who complains about the misfortunes of Italy, Machiavelli directly expects and calls for the unification of the principalities and republics of the Apennine peninsula into a single political unit. As one knows, Cesare Borgia, who exterminated his condottieri and committed other criminal acts, was one of the possible unifiers of Italy expected by Machiavelli. At the same time, Machiavelli excluded the Florentine *gonfaloniere* of justice, Pietro Soderini, who is characterized as the embodiment of mercy, philanthropy and patience, from such “promising” politicians for the fate of the entire Apennine peninsula. Such a distinction is directly related to the new understanding of political expediency put forward by Machiavelli in his works. Despite his cruelty, Cesare Borgia is merciful, because he returned the Romagna united by him, “exhausted” from strife, robberies, violence, to peace. On the other hand, Soderini’s actions tended to “his personal benefit” and in no way contributed to the achievement of the main goal – the unification of Italy.

The saturation of the political life of Renaissance Italy provided generations of historians with an extensive gallery of images and types capable of humanizing

²⁹ Niccolò MACHIAVELLI, *The Prince*, translated by James B. ATKINSON, Indianapolis–Cambridge 1976, pp. 373, 381, 383.

almost any conclusions and generalizations. It can be assumed that the binary opposition of the rulers (politicians) of the all-Italian and local levels was a kind of archetype in Machiavelli's time. In this case, the Borgia / Soderini pair finds its counterpart a generation earlier in the figures of Sigismondo Malatesta and Pope Pius II. Although Machiavelli did not write about Malatesta, his person like no other was suitable for expressing the ideas of the great Florentine “about paganism, war, glory and male prowess”³⁰.

Paradoxically, *signore* of the Rimini represents in this pair a potential unifier of Italy, while the pontiff is the embodiment of a medieval political model. Both politicians lived and acted in a period of breaking old social relations and traditional mental attitudes. It was a time of mixing old and new elements in various areas of public and private life, and the unsuccessful crusading project of 1459-64 was a prime example of such a mix.

It is no coincidence that after this failure the themes of the journalistic discourse of European humanists changed. As noted above, until now, Renaissance rhetoric about the crusade has been dominated by the themes of the sinfulness of Christian Europe, which led it to disunity and weakness, and the onslaught of Muslim Turks as a means to restore stability in Christian states, and then unite them³¹.

By 1470, Cardinal Bessarion of Nicaea put forward a new propaganda project regarding the Turks, trying to explain the motives of the Turkish sultan and the internal circumstances of his actions with the means available to him. Bessarion significantly departed from the traditions of the humanists of the previous generation, to which both he himself and Pope Pius II belonged. In the picture he presented, the sultan turned out to be the same sovereign as the Christian princes. Changes in rhetoric led in the long term to diplomatic relations and political cooperation with the Turks, which was carried out in the next century first by the French and then by other political nations.

30 D'ELIA, *Pagan Virtue in a Christian World* cit., p. 279.

31 MESERVE, *Italian Humanists* cit., pp. 36-37.

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