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# ON THE POLITICAL OPTIONS OF THE HUMANIST NICHOLAS OLAHUS

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## Abstract

This paper aims to show that the political options of the humanist Nicholas Olahus, who entered Habsburg service in the troubled years following the death of King Louis II of Hungary at Mohács, were determined primarily by his religious allegiance, his loyalty to the Catholic Church and the Habsburg promise to collaborate with the Papacy. I have made extensive use of his correspondence from 1526-1530 to examine the evolution of his political orientation, options and arguments.

*Keywords:* Nicholas Olahus, Humanism, Habsburg Empire

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## 1. Introduction

This paper examines Nicholas Olahus' political options from 1526 to 1530, when the struggle between Ferdinand Habsburg and John Szapolyai for the crown of Hungary provoked a split in the former circle of intellectuals active at the court of Louis II of Hungary. I have made extensive use of the correspondence sent or received by Nicholas Olahus.

Correspondence was always a practical means to preserve and consolidate relationships between individuals at considerable distances from each other. Friends not only expressed their feelings of separation from their companions, but also sent gifts and the latest news pertaining to their spheres of interest (cultural, artistic, social, economic and political). Personal trust played an important role in the formation of such relationships, and the preservation of a constant correspondence nurtured the growth of personal trust. Taking these statements as a starting point, I intend to analyze how the discourse of friendly connection and correspondence offers information on the political options of Nicholas Olahus, and reveals the extent to which his decision to side with the Habsburgs against John Szapolyai was motivated by religious considerations, apart from his pro-Habsburg sympathy. For analysis I will use his correspondence from 1527-1530, published by Arnold Ipolyi at the end of the nineteenth century [1]. As is well known, Olahus was educated in a specifically ecclesiastical environment. How did he react nevertheless in circumstances

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which could have mitigated or changed his faith in the Catholic Church? Did he remain steadfast or did he react by criticizing either the new theological tendencies or the Church? This paper does examine events after 1530, when Olahus' political choice became evident, but focuses on the beginning of his career when political change, territorial losses and the dismemberment of the Hungarian kingdom forced him to analyze the political options available and his career path.

## **2. Olahus and Lutheran ideas**

I have mentioned his possible reactions on Church matters since there is debate about the spread of Lutheran ideas in and around the royal palace at Buda. One important figure in these issues was Johann Henkel, chaplain to Queen Mary. Scholars believe that Henkel, councillor to the queen, was an active Lutheran sympathizer at court and because of this was eventually removed from the queen's presence in 1530. Unfortunately there are only two letters from Olahus to Henkel. Nevertheless, their connection seems to have been long-standing and strong. When Henkel was removed from court in 1526 and a replacement sought, he had recommended Olahus as the most appropriate person for the job of secretary to the Queen. Moreover, during her residence at the royal court in Buda, Queen Mary had become sympathetic to Lutheran reform and did not consider it in conflict with the House of Habsburg. As early as 1522 the reforming ideas of Martin Luther, but also those of Erasmus of Rotterdam, were discussed by the circle of intellectuals at the royal court in Buda. I have dealt with the circulation of these ideas and Henkel's removal from court in a previous article on Olahus' relationship with Erasmus [2]. Being close to the queen, Olahus must have known about the new theological currents and was acquainted with the courtiers and humanists who entertained Lutheran ideas. B.J. Spruyt has presented arguments proving the queen's interest in the Lutheran doctrine and her acceptance of Lutheran preachers from Germany. Moreover she also permitted, and even participated in, long and heated debates [3]. Since Olahus was at court from 1526, he must have known about these debates around the queen, if not participated himself. It is impossible to find out whether he participated actively and if so, which side he took. He alludes to these discussions in one letter to Erasmus but does not comment upon them further. "*Qui hoc praesertim tempore, dum multorum cum pernicie in rebus fidei disceptatur, maxime hic esses necessarius, ut tuum, quod in rebus esset his dubiis praesens, proferres iudicium.*" (You are highly needed here, particularly in times like these, when religious matters are debated to the ruin of many. Being present at these debates, you might tell us your opinion about these doubtful discussions.) [1, p. 69]

Certainly, he was well informed about the Lutheran movement to which the crowds were attracted, the religious 'disturbances' as he calls them in a letter of 1529. "*Vides quantis nunc ubique locorum homines agitentur tumultibus, quae omnibus bonis tentantur insidiae, et quam quisque agat nunc tragoediam.*"

(You can see now how great are the disturbances which stir people everywhere and what kinds of plots are set to all valuable persons, and what tragedy lives everyone nowadays.) [1, p. 6] Olahus mentions those disturbances only rarely and tersely. In a letter to Pope Clement VII, he explains that they occurred because of the weakness of the Church and attributes the main guilt to Christian princes who had rebelled against the Emperor ("*ut religio christiana iam a multis annis internis principum seditioibus labefactata*" - the Christian religion was weakened since many years by internal rebellions of princes) [1, p. 35]. Olahus even suspected one of his friends, the Transylvanian archdeacon Emeric Kalnay, of having been involved in some ceremonies alien to the Catholic Church. "*Audiueram iam olim te satius initiatum esse, et nrsccio quibus deditum ceremoniis.*" (I have just heard that once you were better acquainted, and surrendered to I do not know what kind of ceremonies.) [1, p. 44] On that occasion he reacted in a friendly, almost fatherly tone. He wrote to Kalnay about the rumours he had heard, and after a light reprimand, expressed his hope that these were just slander. "*Quare oro te per nostram amicitiam, fac me certiozem, quis sit tuae vitae status, quis ordo, quid agas et ubi sis?*" (Therefore, I pray you for the sake of our friendship to let me know what is the state of your life, what rank, what you do, and where you are?) [1, p. 44-45]

### **3. The role of the Papacy in the anti-Ottoman struggle**

Olahus' loyalty to the Catholic Church cannot be doubted, not even in the period 1527-1530. Despite his lessening authority in the West, the Pope remained the head of Christendom and Christ's vicar on Earth ("*si tu, qui caput es Christiani populi et vicarius Jhesu in terris*" - if you, the head of the Christian people and vicar of Jesus on Earth) [1, p. 34]. At the beginning of 1530, Olahus confessed his joy at the recently signed peace between Pope Clement VII and Charles V. Perhaps he deemed it difficult to keep faith with the Papacy and to serve his lords without triggering the suspicions of the Habsburgs, who had not been on good terms with the Pope before the truce. Moreover, until the end of 1529, Olahus was dissatisfied with the choice he had made. In a letter to Emeric Kalnay in 1527 he deplored Hungary's situation, forced to seek the support of foreigners and of Christian monarchs who promised aid, but did not deliver. "*Magnam habebamus spem, futurum esse, ut ab Imperii principibus id habituri essemus, et auxilii et subsidii, quo nos Rex Ferdinandus a periculis quibus iam multos annos torquemur, facile liberare posset. Venit nunc certissimus nuntius, omnes fere Imperiales tractatus Spiraefactos in fumum transiisse, factam quidem alicuius auxilii in posterum ferendi nonnullam promissionem [...]*" (We had a great hope that in the future, as we were to receive aid and subsidies from princes of the Empire, so that King Ferdinand could easily set us free from dangers that tormented us since many years. A messenger brought certain news that almost all imperials who signed the treaty of Speyer have vanished like smoke and made no promise of future aid [...]) [1, p. 6] Another frustration was King Ferdinand I's quest to consolidate his power, neglecting the growing

Ottoman danger. Olahus understood that there were only empty promises from the West and no action to rescue Hungary until 1529.

On 4<sup>th</sup> September 1529, he confessed to Paul Gereb his suspicion that the Christian monarchs had given up on the idea of fighting for these territories in favour of seeking their own interests, foreseeing that the Ottomans would not only conquer Hungary but advance farther, towards Vienna. "*Video undequaque nobis mala imminere, quae vitari certe poterant, nisi principes nostri belli, quam pacis, et privati magis, quam publici commodi, sine ullo futurorum malorum respectu cupidi, se sua sponte in haec mala conicere voluissent.*" (I see everywhere arising perils which could surely have been avoided, had not our princes thrown us in them, preferring more war rather than peace, seeking more satisfaction of their private interests, rather than public ones, paying no heed to future dangers.) [1, p. 15-16]

In his view, salvation could come only from God, who governed all of Christendom. "*Deus qui habenas omnium habet regnorum, scit, quid sit rebus Christianorum concessurus [...]*" (God, who holds the reins of all realms, knows what things he will concede to Christians.) [1, p. 17-18] The Habsburg princes were not on good terms with the Pope until 1530. By May 1527 Clement VII had joined France, Venice and Florence in the League of Cognac, whose goal was to liberate Milan and Italy from Charles V. However after imperial troops sacked Rome that month, causing great scandal, Clement was forced to withdraw to Sant'Angelo Castle where he remained for nine months. Disappointed by his inability to gather forces to fight Charles, the Pope finally made an alliance with the Emperor through the treaty of Barcelona in June 1529. Two months later the treaty of Cambrai ended the war between Francis I and Charles V and restored Medici rule in Florence, which remained under the protection of the Empire. Receiving papal congratulations, Charles V was crowned Holy Roman Emperor and King of Italy in Bologna on 24<sup>th</sup> February 1530 [4]. Olahus considered the Christian princes, who were at war among themselves, responsible for the weaknesses of the Church, rather than its own internal problems. After peace was restored between the Pope and Charles V and the latter was crowned emperor, Olahus expressed joy and satisfaction, allowing us to guess at his former anxieties. Finally he saw the two powers working together and the promise of a brighter future ("*omnia boni sunt signa futuri et venturae pacis indicia*") and the pacification of Christianity ("*Christianitatis pacandae*") [1, p. 35].

For Olahus, the Pope remained the head of Christendom, the only authority able to control the political and military powers and persuade the Christian princes to renounce their narrow interests in favour of repelling the Ottoman threat. He was still influenced by medieval political thought, and held that the Ottoman threat and religious unrest were the consequence of Christians' sins, which explained why God had allowed them to undergo these calamities. "*Nimirum Dei in nos admissum esse arbitror fladellum, qui ex sua bonitate, ut nos a peccatis nostris ad penitentiam reuocaret, hiis tribulationibus corrigere voluit.*" (Of course, I think that God, in his goodness, sent upon us this scourge

in order to make us repent our sins, willing to correct us through these tribulations.) [1, p. 40]. In his view, the Pope, as head of the Church and protector of all Christians, was obliged to preach a great anti-Ottoman crusade.

On 11<sup>th</sup> March 1530, he sent a letter to Emperor Charles V, whom he addressed as *Caesar invictissime*, setting out the reasons which convinced him that his choice was the right one. Olahus complimented the Emperor further ("*inter alios caesares maxime enituisti*"), expressing his hope that the problems of Christendom and of Hungary would be solved („[...] *ubi pacatisomnium similiter animis, depulsis mutuis principum imperii simultatibus et internis seditionibus*" - appeasing equally all souls, and removing internal rebellions and mutual rivalries for power among princes of the Empire) [1, p. 56]. The coronation of Charles V as Emperor in February 1530 and renewed Habsburg collaboration with the Pope had relieved Olahus from the burden of his allegiance. After the previous disagreements, Olahus regarded the reconciliation between Charles V and Clement VII as a wish fulfilled, promising a happy settlement for the problems marring Christendom, an end to the Ottoman threat, and appeasement of disturbances within the Church. The fragile equilibrium achieved at the end of 1529 gave him the hope that this collaboration would facilitate the return of the princes to the true belief and the unification of western Christendom at least, because only united could it cope with the Ottoman threat. „*Nunc tu Caesar Potentissime es nobis divinitus datus, qui eam pacem nobis paraveris, et in quo uno perpetuae quietis ac salutis nostrae anchoram figere possimus.*" (Now, you all powerful Caesar, given us by God, you will have prepared that peace for us, and in whom we can affix the anchor of our perpetual peace and salvation.) [1, p. 56] In the same letter, Olahus declared to the Emperor that "*es nobis divinitus datus*" (you are our divine gift), because he could bring about eternal peace and be the saviour of all [1, p. 56]. He reminded him that all good people expected the emperor to fulfil the "*sanctum piumque propositum*", the salvation of hopeless Hungary, of the hereditary provinces Austria, Carinthia and Carniola, and all Christendom [1, p. 56].

The stakes were set at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, which was to consider not only the religious problems but also the Ottoman danger. In early October 1530, Olahus wrote an oration to Charles V, describing Hungary's dire situation and the direct Ottoman threat to the Habsburg hereditary provinces [1, p. 75-79]. Olahus was convinced that the military might of the Ottomans endangered the whole of Western Europe. Therefore Christendom had to be united against the sultan, and the emperor had to realize that this was a major threat which required immediate measures. According to Olahus, Charles V was the only monarch capable of resisting the Ottomans. Moreover, as head of a vast empire, covering a considerable part of Western Europe, the emperor had a good chance of defeating the sultan with the blessing of the Papacy. Once more, Olahus declared the emperor the only man sent by God on whom salvation and peace depended, and who could restore the old freedom („[...] *tuam scilicet Majestatem solam nobis a Deo datam, in quo uno omnis nostra salus, quies et tranquillitas pendeat, et qui nostram pristinam libertatem recuperare possit*" -

[we understood that] your Majesty is the only one given us by God, in whom we set all our salvation, cessation of cares, and tranquillity and who can recover our pristine freedom) [1, p. 77]. The *oratio extemporaria* sent to the Augsburg shows that he saw no other solution. The cooperation of emperor with pope was likely to allow the mobilization of Europe to expel the Ottomans and liberate Hungary. „*Nunc, nunc est Caesar Inclytissime tempus, nunc opportunitas rei benegerendae, nunc occasio hostis si non exterminandi, ad procul a finibus repellendi.*” (Now, most bright Emperor, is the time if not for extermination of the enemy, at least for expelling him away from our borders.) [1, p. 78]. Disappointed by the failure of negotiations in Augsburg, which concentrated on religious affairs rather than crusading plans, Olahus remained steadfast in his loyalty to the Habsburgs, though he took the liberty to criticize the princes for their inconstancy. However, he continued to style Charles V “*divinae autem misericordiae munus*”, while Ferdinand I was the king who could restore the pristine freedom of Hungary [1, p. 77]. To his dismay, the reconciliation between the Pope and the Emperor was short-lived, the good relationship being severed by conflicting interests. Although Olahus was aware of this dynamic in political developments, he continued to believe that the great plans of Christendom could not be fulfilled without collaboration between the spiritual and lay powers.

About the same time as he was writing to the Pope and the Emperor, Olahus also sent letters to King Ferdinand I, drawing his attention to the eastern parts of his realm. The four letters to Ferdinand that are preserved mirror the difficult state of Hungary, the suffering of the population and the hostile actions of John Szapolyai. They contain complaints and supplications on behalf of the territories which Ferdinand had ruled, nominally at least, since his coronation as King of Hungary on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1527. „*Eum regem et principem ex gratia Dei nos esse consequutos, qui miserum populum Hungaricum tot annis, cum hostibus fidei acerrime pugnantes et concertantes a servitute, quae iam iam nobis (nisi Deus te ministro prospexerit) imminere videtur turpissima atrocissimaque, liberare et in pristinam asserere libertatem, quietem et tranquillitatem collocare possit.*” (We had to follow him as king and prince by grace of God, who could free the wretched Hungarian people, fighting and battling each year fiercely against the enemies of faith, from the filthiest and harshest servitude, which can already be seen, and restore the pristine freedom, and who can bring cessation of cares and tranquillity.) [1, p. 12]. Three years had passed since then and nothing had been done, so that Olahus urged Ferdinand to take action as soon as possible. If Charles V was to pay attention to Hungary as part of Christendom, Ferdinand had to take care of it as his own realm and protect his possessions and the nobles of the land. By expelling the Ottomans from Hungary, Olahus argued, Ferdinand could not only obtain the submission of Szapolyai and his followers and restore the peace, but could also make possible the return of exiled pro-Habsburg noblemen (such as Olahus himself) who could recover their properties occupied by aristocrats of the opposite party („[...] *te protectore, te propugnatore liberemur et ad exilio tam*

*diuturno in patriam ad amicos, fratres, et propinquos nostros reducatur*<sup>27</sup> - through you, protector and defender, we shall be freed and brought back from lasting exile into our fatherland and to our friends, siblings, and relatives) [1, p. 32]. Thus Olahus could imagine no other solution; despite the delay in launching a crusade, he remained attached to the Habsburg princes.

After 1530, frequent allusions to his loyalty to King Ferdinand I and the dowager queen Mary in spite of his hardships appear in his letters, as in the letter to Thomas Nadasdy. „*Mea in reginam meam fides et officium id a me exegit, ut eam usquehuc sequerer.*” (My fidelity and service to the Queen have obliged me to such an extent as to accompany her till this place.) [1, p. 300] He could not change his loyalty to King Ferdinand and began to preach the same goal to his friends from Hungary and Transylvania, whom he tried to win over to the Habsburg party, going as far as to allude to benefices and rewards for those who would remain loyal to the king (“*si constanter in fide regia perseuerasses*”) [1, p. 68]. For greater effect, Olahus conceived a discursive pattern employed whenever necessary. He evoked the present condition of his friends, the social and financial advantages which they could enjoy through his help, and not least the divine blessing accompanying the political choice he recommended. A letter to his friend Nicholas Gerendi, Bishop of Transylvania, in March 1530 evoked the common misfortunes they had undergone, declared his sympathy for the hardships that his friend was suffering, but nevertheless reminded him of the clemency of King Ferdinand, to whom he owed his elevated position. “*Eadem et me quae te premit calamitas, is dolor conficit, qui te et alios nostrae sortis homines.*” “*Quare si sapis, fac tu quoque eadem sis patientia et memineris, te cum maxima difficultate ad hunc gradum honoris, in quo nunc es collocatus, peruenire potuisse, nisi principis nostri clementia tibi affuisset.*” (The same misfortune presses both me and you, this pain brings together you as well as other people of our rank. And if you are wise, proceed in like fashion, be patient and remember that you would have reached with the greatest difficulty the rank where you stand now had you not benefitted from the clemency of our prince.) [1, p. 57-58]

Olahus also tried to persuade his former friend Emeric Kalnay, the archdeacon from Transylvania, in a letter of 31<sup>st</sup> May 1529. He reproached Kalnay for preferring a life of leisure at home, and urged him to write or to join him in Znojmo, also alluding to examples of figures from antiquity who had betrayed their friends. “*Resipiscendum est aliquando, et post errorem commissum sanius consilium amplectendum, ne studiorum et rationis nostrae, qua a Deo optimo ornati sumus, omnino obliti, in inhumanitatem quandam relabamur.*” (One must recover the senses at any time and after the mistake was done, one must embrace a sounder judgment, so that we shall not sink back into inhumanity, forgetting the fruits of study and our reason with which God has adorned us.) [1, p. 10] A year later, Olahus wrote a short letter to Kalnay while in Innsbruck, deploring the various rumours he had heard about his whereabouts. According to some, he was living quietly at home, others said that he had joined the Szapolyai party, while others again swore that he was in Transylvania.

Olahus counselled his friend to guard his loyalty to King Ferdinand firmly and strongly in order to maintain his good name. "*Mirifica laude ab omnibus extollebaris, si constanter in fide regia perseuerasses.*" (If you continue steadfastly to be faithful to the King, you shall obtain an amazing praise from everyone.) [1 p. 68]

### **3.1. Criticism of the Christian monarchs**

A noticeable aspect of Olahus' political thought is his attitude towards the secular princes. His trust in the strength of the Church is in stark contrast with his criticism of the princes, whom he regarded as fallible humans. In letters to close friends such as Paul Gereb, Emeric Kalnay and Cornelius Duplicius Scepper, Olahus confessed his dissatisfaction with King Ferdinand or even Emperor Charles V, criticizing their passive attitude and the lack of consistency in applying a program which could have rescued Hungary from Ottoman rule. In September 1529 he wrote to Gereb: "I have heard that the Emperor Charles has arrived in Italy. How could this contribute to our salvation? He is probably busy with his own interests and is perhaps more preoccupied by his coronation in Rome than with the defence of Hungary." [1, p. 16] To another friend he wrote that "nowadays the princes' ears are opened only to flattery, to which they should be completely closed" [1, p. 66].

## **4. Conclusions**

Olahus' loyalty and services rendered to King Ferdinand I, Queen Mary, and Emperor Charles V had a clear political justification and were far from disinterested. His connection to Church and Pope was sincere, and his trust in the Habsburgs was supported by their good political relationship with the Papacy and motivated by interests which he declared on every occasion. He expected them to save Christendom, liberate Hungary and expel the Ottomans. At a personal level, he expected the restoration of properties lost when he left with Queen Mary and the grant of further estates in reward for his services after leaving the kingdom. The political option that Olahus embraced was not an easy one. He could have remained at home, keeping his properties and living a quiet life. The trust he placed in the Habsburg princes was guaranteed by the "eternal alliance" between Charles V and the Papacy, just as he thought that the Pope's blessing was needed for Ferdinand I's political and military plans to have the desired results. For Olahus, the salvation of Hungary had to become a priority in Habsburg plans and indeed in the plans of all Christendom.

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