

The Hungarian Military in Northern Italy during the Reign of Louis the Great

Carla Corradi Musi

The second half of the 14th century was a time of turbulence throughout Italy. Several states were involved in a struggle between the Guelf Party, which fought for papal supremacy and was supported by the Angevins of Naples, and the Ghibellines, who hoped to have their interests better served by the Holy Roman Emperor. This feud had started in the 12th century, and its long-term result was the political and economic enfeeblement of southern Italy, while the industrious bourgeoisie and ruling princes of the north made their own cities both strong and rich. There were no clear-cut alliances in the long conflict, Guelf and Ghibelline families and towns readily changed loyalties if such a switch was to their benefit.

It was in these confusing times that Hungary played a decisive role in Italian events. The first Angevin king (from the French Anjous) of Hungary, Charles Robert, died in 1342, leaving three sons. The eldest inherited the Hungarian throne as Louis I, later "the Great." His brother Andrew had been married as a child to Joanna of Naples (a distant relative). He was expected to ascend the throne of Naples with Joanna as his consort, but was assassinated in a plot supported by the Angevin princes of Taranto and, it would appear, by his own corrupt wife. Pope Clement VI did not officially recognize Louis I as ruler of the Kingdom of Naples, who claimed it by right. Therefore, the latter marched into Italy, captured Naples twice (1348 and 1350) but still could not obtain investiture of the new domain by the Pope, and, furthermore, came up against the hostility of the Emperor Charles IV and the King of France. Thus, after his troops were decimated, in 1352 the Hungarian sovereign for the time being renounced his claim to Naples which remained under the control of Joanna I.¹

By this time, however, there were a number of Hungarian warriors in Italy who had been in the service of their king. They were known to be

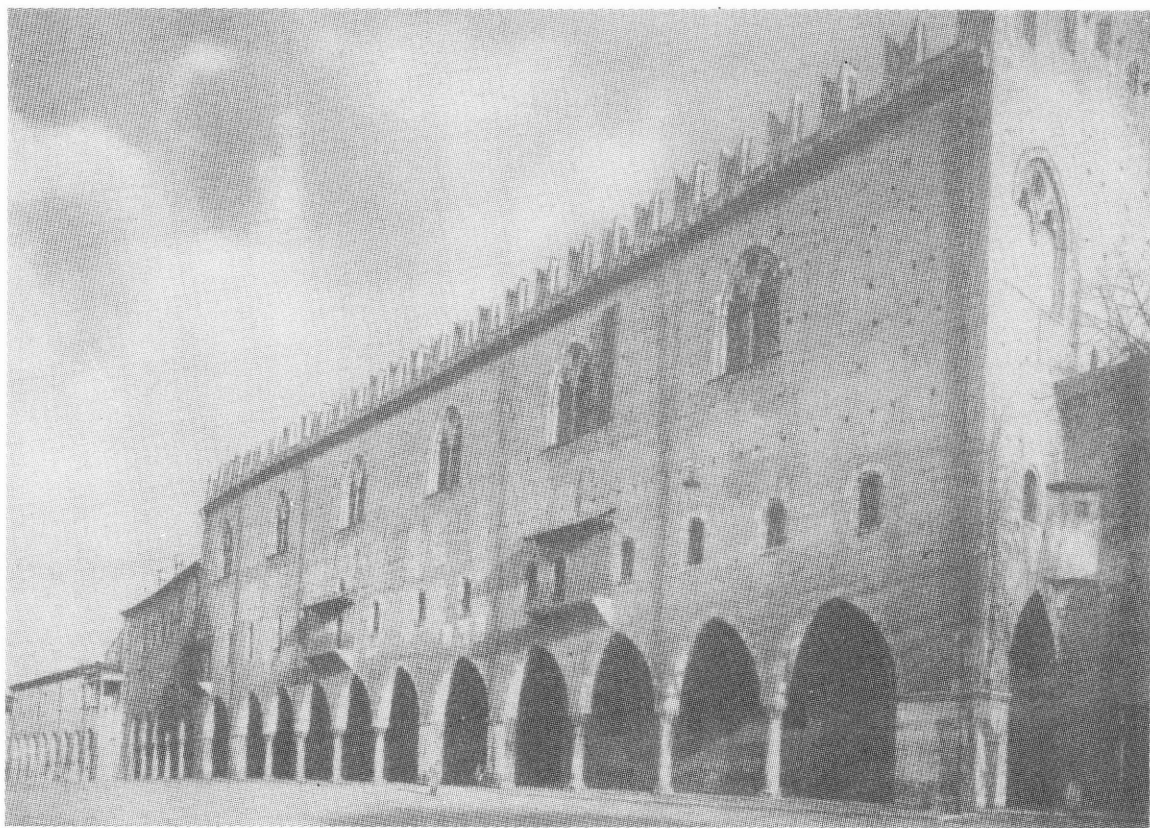
ferocious and successful soldiers and, as such, became highly sought after mercenaries. They worked for whoever offered the most for their services, regularly changing sides in a conflict and acquiring a terrible reputation among civilians, the usual victims of their plunder and looting. Often these Hungarian mercenaries fought against their compatriots who were in the pay of other masters. One of them, Nicolaus Toldi, (or Thodi) was immortalized in the long epic trilogy of the great 19th-century poet, János Arany.

Many documents, as yet not examined in detail but preserved in various Italian archives, contain rich reference to the Hungarian military presence in Italy during the 14th century. In this article we shall rely on materials available at the archives of the Gonzagas of Mantua. Perhaps most valuable among this material are letters which refer to Hungarian forces in Mantua between 1347 and the end of the century.

In 1347, when Louis I made preparations to invade the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, he had to pass through the minor state of Mantova with his troops. Taking advantage of the situation he made overtures of friendship to the Gonzagas who were, in turn, interested in initiating favourable relations. Although they were allies of the Guelfs, the Gonzagas gave their support to the Hungarian king. Pope Clement VI's bull of October 23, 1348, had called upon the Gonzagas not to render help to anyone fighting against Joanna of Naples; however, they justified their contrary actions by stating that they had received the Pope's directive too late.² As it happened, Luigi Gonzaga's son, Philip, himself escorted Louis I to Naples. On December 10, 1347, the Hungarian sovereign wrote to Philip from Mirandola, inviting him to take part in his expedition. In the letter we read explicitly, "*vestram amicitiam rogamus*" ("We request your friendship").³ Two years later, in a letter of August 7, 1349, to Ludovico Gonzaga, Louis I, as friend and ally, asked for right of passage through the territory of Mantova for his troops heading for Naples, stating it was his intention to recover what he considered to be his due kingdom.⁴ When the king returned to Hungary after his first campaign, in the spring of 1348, he left several garrisons in the Kingdom of Naples manned by his soldiers, under the command of the renowned German mercenary Konrad Wolfhardt. Now the king wanted to bolster his forces being pressed by the army of Louis of Taranto, Joanna's new husband, who had returned with his wife to reconquer Naples.

Already by mid-century, Hungarian mercenaries who had remained in Italy after Louis's first campaign operated in the northern part of the country also. They served with the Gonzagas as well as in rival armies, participating in the chaotic conflicts of the Italian states and, in general, causing calamity both for their masters and enemies.

In 1353 the new Pope, Innocent VI, sent the Spanish Cardinal Albornoz to prepare the return of the papacy from Avignon to Rome. This meant



an armed offensive against the Ghibellines — an attempt energetically challenged by the renowned Ghibelline leader, Bernabò Visconti, ruler of Milan. He, too, had Hungarian mercenaries in his service. So when Louis I, at the Pope's request, sent a sizable Hungarian mercenary contingent to relieve the besieged city of Bologna, held by Albornoz and attacked by Visconti, Hungarians in both camps met face to face.

At the same time the people of Mantua feared an invasion by the approximately 2,000 Magyars quartered near Padua, as we deduce from a letter written from Mantua on September 9 by Ugolino Gonzaga to Bernabò.⁵ There was considerable danger, the more so because all the Hungarian soldiers stationed in the north of Italy were about to meet at Bagnolo, just south of Brescia.⁶ On that occasion the Gonzagas (who had gone over to the Ghibelline side and were dependent from 1358 on the Viscontis) did not support the Hungarians⁷ and did not allow them to stay in Mantuan territory. This is made clear in the correspondence between the head of the Magyar forces and Ugolino Gonzaga.⁸

We learn of Hungarian mercenaries being transferred from the pay of Ugolino Gonzaga to that of Feltrino Gonzaga, when the latter captured Reggio Emilia. In the letters of Ugolino Gonzaga to Bernabò Visconti, sixty Magyars are also mentioned as being in the service of Bacarino di Canossa while he was occupying Reggio Emilia.⁹ At the same time, in a gesture typical of that age, Feltrino Gonzaga also offered assistance to the Hungarians who were heading for Parma, having been ordered by Louis the Great to help Pope Innocent VI and Albornoz to defeat Bernabò Visconti, ruler of that city since the death of Matteo II Visconti in 1355. Several thousand Hungarians marched to Parma, but their siege was repelled by the Parmesans: the mercenaries were reduced to pillaging the countryside and carrying off their spoils to Reggio Emilia. Subsequently, according to contemporary chronicles, more than thousand Magyars, who were poorly paid by Albornoz, transferred to the service of the Viscontis.¹⁰ They later settled in Italy.¹¹

Many Hungarians were captured by the Gonzagas after the battle at Bologna:¹² in two deeds executed before a notary in 1361, there is a list of prisoners, as well as the coats of arms of their families. The rulers of Mantua, although maintaining good relations with Louis I, behaved according to the needs of the moment with the Magyar mercenaries — a policy akin to that of the latter-day Niccolò Machiavelli.

In the 1360s, the Gonzagas became involved in the anti-Visconti league instigated by Pope Urban V. Certain Hungarian mercenary captains, after scuffles in the main square of Parma in 1368, were sent by Bernabò Visconti into battle against Mantua. The presence of Magyar soldiers in Mantua in 1368 is corroborated in a letter of May 14, written by Ludovico Gonzaga and Francesco, the imperial vicar, to Guido Gonzaga, which men-

tions certain Hungarian mercenaries who took part in an ambush in Mantova against the English,* instigated by the captains of the Church and of Mantua.¹³ When the hostilities at Mantua came to an end, these Magyars returned to Parma and we know nothing more of them. With regard to this and of special interest is a letter of September 20, 1371, sent from Parma to Ludovico Gonzaga by a Hungarian named Martinus, the son of Nicholay Zernay, thanking him for allowing, through the intervention of Louis I of Hungary, his free passage, with a company of twelve friends and servants, through Gonzaga lands without paying duties or tolls.¹⁴ It testifies to the presence of Magyars in Parma. In all probability the same Martinus was an ex-mercenary who had attained a position of influence. Some of these ex-mercenaries became rich and returned to their country for good, others settled in Italy: this was the case with Andreas de Sancto Giorgio, Johannis de Treze and Nicholaus de Fa, who asked Ludovico Gonzaga on May 6, 1374, to allocate them a distinct place in the city or on Mantuan territory so that they could settle down with sixty fellow Hungarians.¹⁵ They received a positive reply on condition that the Hungarians demonstrate good conduct.¹⁶

Magyar settlements in Mantua and the surrounding area date from the second half of the 14th century. Hungarian presence in the territory of Parma and Reggio Emilia can also be documented. At Vairo, in the Parmesan Appenines, the existence of a family called De Magiarijs is confirmed in 1559—probably descendants of the Hungarians who had conducted the futile siege at Parma during the Visconti regime.¹⁷ The so-called “Magiari” of Zurco in the province of Reggio Emilia could have their origins in a soldier who had served in Louis I’s army, or been involved in the struggle between the papacy, the Viscontis and the Gonzagas.¹⁸ The presence of Magyars in the area of Reggio Emilia is also reflected in the fact that, in Guastalla and Correggio, coins called “ongari” were minted in the late 15th century,¹⁹ and at Guastalla the surname Ongari, or Ungari, was in use.²⁰

Cordial relations between the Gonzagas and Hungary continued, notwithstanding the political intrigues of the lords of Mantua. For instance, on September 15, 1376, Louis I addressed a letter from Buda to Ludovico Gonzaga, recommending a certain Matias, a Benedictine monk who was also his chaplain. This letter of recommendation is but one example of documentary evidence of continued Hungarian friendship with the ruler of Mantua.²¹

In compliance with the orders of Louis the Great, many Magyar soldiers supported Padua against Venice in 1372–73. In the years preceding the

* Translator’s note: A reference to Sir John Hawkwood’s *White Company* (immortalized, among others, by Conan Doyle in a novel).

conflict, attacks by Hungarian mercenaries concentrated around Padua were feared, and the Magyars who were waiting at Rivoltella to obtain permission from the rulers of Verona to proceed to Padua were a source of particular concern.²² Once again, this fear of looting did not affect the substantially good relations between Mantua and Hungary, witnessed, for example, by the presence of various Hungarians in the pay of the Gonzagas in the years 1374–75,²³ and by the request from other Magyars to serve under Ludovico Gonzaga.²⁴

In 1378 Louis I had resumed the efforts of his youth to lay claim to the Kingdom of Naples and exact his revenge on Joanna. However, on this occasion he entrusted the task to his own adopted son, Charles of Durazzo (“the Little”), who was successful. Genoa, Padua, Verona and the patriarch of Aquileia sided with Hungary, whereas Venice became the ally of Joanna.²⁵

Associates of the Gonzagas tried to convince Durazzo not to pass through Mantuan territory. On July 14, 1380, Bertolino de’ Codelupi wrote to Ludovico Gonzaga that he had never seen “baser, more undisciplined, and more miserably equipped people” than the Hungarians in Charles of Durazzo’s train who had gone to Verona to ask for money.²⁶ Just two days later, Bertolino de’ Codelupi reported to Gonzaga on his meeting with Charles of Durazzo, during the course of which he repeatedly begged Charles not to enter Mantuan territory with his force but take the road through Ostiglia and over the Stellata Bridge instead, since Niccolò d’Este II, the Marquis of Ferrara, would grant him safe passage.²⁷ Although Charles promised that his troops would cause no damage, on July 28 the Hungarian soldiers seized the San Giorgio Castle in Mantua and razed several houses.²⁸ On September 7, 1380, Louis I wrote from Hungary to Ludovico Gonzaga, expressing his great displeasure at the troubles caused by the Magyars on Mantuan territory and assuring him that in the future he would ensure that Mantua’s environs would not suffer any further damage.²⁹ In spite of these repeated assurances, the march of Hungarian troops through northern Italy en route to Naples caused a great deal of worry to the various states—apparently not entirely groundless.

After the passage of Charles of Durazzo there was no longer any fear in Mantua of the Hungarian forces, but Hungarian soldiers continued to make themselves available as mercenaries. We learn from an anonymous letter, dated May 3, 1383, and sent to a Gonzaga agent operating in Bologna and Modena, that he had been instructed to enlist three Hungarian detachments, each composed of ten soldiers.³⁰

Eventually, the Gonzagas defended Mantua, a city made rich with the help of mercenaries—a city blessed with a favourable geographic location between the Adriatic and Tyrrhenian seas, midway between the north and

south of Italy. It was because of this that the territory of Mantua was attacked by the Hungarian forces directed against Joanna of Anjou. The seemingly contradictory attitude of the Gonzagas in offering friendship to Hungary, yet at the same time obstructing the march of Charles of Durazzo, arose from a wish to escape the enmity of a powerful nation and to avoid senseless danger.

The friendly rapport between the Gonzagas and Hungary continued during subsequent years, as can be seen from a letter of 1393 sent from Mantua by Ludovico Gonzaga to Paolo de Arminis, his agent in Hungary. This letter provides clear evidence of the traditional good relationship between the kings of Hungary and the masters of Mantua.³¹

The letters in the Gonzaga archives which we have consulted do not describe the behaviour of *condottieri* or politicians, nor do they pass judgment on them. They simply indicate, in great detail, the actions of individual characters, in some cases unknown, who from time to time were of importance to the rulers of Mantua. They endeavoured to preserve their own independence without inflicting injury on anyone at a time of stormy conflicts.

Our task of analysis of ancient documents concerning Hungary is intended only as the first step in a much broader effort embracing other Italian archives, such as those of Modena, Milan and Bologna. The results will not only contribute to the enrichment of our present knowledge of the relationship between Italy and Hungary, but, as we have already been able to verify from the Mantuan documents, they will also serve to demythologise many legends resulting from the interpretation of facts viewed from an ideological 19th-century standpoint. It will include a more accurate vision of personalities and situations.

As far as we know, even the archives of small towns in northern Italy will not disappoint the scholar in search of new information. Hungary had more connections with Italy than at first imagined. The activities of the Magyars are so closely interwoven with Italian history that at times it is difficult to separate them, yet the ties are real and of great significance. Gradually the relationship between northern Italy and Hungary acquired a more culturally eminent aspect: we think, in particular, of the ties between the humanists of Parma and Hungary, especially in the period of the enlightened rule of Matthias Corvinus with whom Ugolino Pisani stayed and whose adviser and librarian were, respectively, Antonio Sacca and Taddeo Ugoleto.³²

NOTES

- 1 L. Makkai, "De la conquete du pays à la defaite de Mohács (1526)," in *Histoire de la Hongrie des origines à nos jours* (Budapest, 1974), p. 100.

- 2 G. Coniglio, *Storia di Mantova* (Mantua, 1958) I: 358–59.
- 3 Gonzaga Archives, Mantua, File 532. Subsequent archival references are to this repository.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Letter folder, File 2881, Book III, No. 585.
- 6 *Ibid.*, No. 590, Mantua, 11 September 1360, Ugolino Gonzaga to Bernabò Visconti.
- 7 *Ibid.*, No. 639, Milan, 30 November 1360, Bernabò Visconti to Ugolino Gonzaga.
- 8 *Ibid.*, No. 637, “exemplum littere,” date unknown, but 1360, Simon Ungarus de Meggyes to Ugolino Gonzaga; and *ibid.*, No. 638, Mantua, 27 November 1360, Ugolino Gonzaga to Simon Ungarus de Meggyes.
- 9 *Ibid.*, No. 562, Mantua, 25 July 1360.
- 10 C. Corradi, *Parma e l’Ungheria* (Parma, 1975), p. 31.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- 12 File 48: 12 November 1361; 12 December 1361; 9 January 1362; 22 July 1362; 25 June 1365.
- 13 File 2184, (draft), “1368,” No. 534.
- 14 File 1367.
- 15 File 1288, Reggio.
- 16 File 2092, No. 53, Mantua, 7 May 1374, Ludovico Gonzaga to Andreas de Sancto Giorgio, Johannis de Treze and Nicholaus de Fa.
- 17 C. Corradi, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
- 18 C. Corradi, “I Magiari di Zurco e la loro parlata,” in *Bollettino Storico Reggiano*, Reggio Emilia, # 38 (March 1978): 59–68.
- 19 Corpus Nummorum Italicorum, *Primo tentativo di un catalogo generale delle monete medievali e moderne coniate in Italia o da Italiani in altri paesi* (Rome-Milan, 1925), IX: *Emilia (Parte I^a)-Parma e Piacenza-Modena e Reggio*, pp. 16, 101.
- 20 C. Galvani, *Notizie cronologiche di Guastalla estratte dalla storia del P. Affo dalle delibere del Consiglio di questa comunita e da altre memorie autentiche cominciando dall’ anno 603 fino all’ anno 1800 inclus.* (Guastalla, 1862), t. I, *passim* (a typewritten copy in the Biblioteca Maldotti in Guastalla).
- 21 File 532.
- 22 File 2373, No. 10, Cavriana, 12 July 1370, Ruffino di Ceresara to Ludovico Gonzaga.
- 23 File 1329, Mirandola, 7 November 1374, Francesco, Tommasino and Spineta di Morandola to Ludovico Gonzaga; *ibid.*, Mirandola, 24 December 1374, Francesco, Prendeparte, Tommasino and Spineta di Mirandola to Ludovico Gonzaga; and *ibid.*, Mirandola, 6 February 1375, Francesco, Prendeparte and Tommasino di Mirandola to Ludovico Gonzaga.
- 24 File 1591, Padova, 20 October 1375, *Demetrius* to Ludovico Gonzaga; and File 1595, Mirandola, 4 November 1375, Zuano da San Claralo to Ludovico Gonzaga.
- 25 L. Makkai, *op. cit.*, p. 101.
- 26 File 1395, Verona, 14 July 1380.
- 27 File 1595.
- 28 File 2184, (draft), No. 120, 30 July 1380, Ludovico Gonzaga to Bernabò Visconti.
- 29 File 532.

- 30 File 2184, (draft), “dal 1369 all 1399,” No. 152.
- 31 File 531.
- 32 C. Corradi, “I magiari. . . ,” pp. 35–41, 51–63.