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**'MEN IN EXOTIC DRESS', SIXTUS IV AND CRUSADE: A FRESCO OF
CORSIA SISTINA AND ITS MEANING'**

Keywords: Renaissance, Crusade, Sixtus IV, Ospedale li Santo Spirito, Hungary, Moldavia

Corsia Sistina – an outbuilding of L'Ospedale di Santo Spirito, built on the occasion of the 1475 Jubilee – features a painted biography of Pope Sixtus IV, one of the first historical biographies of the Renaissance. It was possible to identify the biographic character by correlating the images with the biography of pope written by Bartholomew of Platina¹. Named Vatican Librarian by Sixtus IV, Platina published in 1479 an edition of the *Lives of the Popes*; however, the chapter dedicated to the life of Sixtus IV (until the year 1474) was finally not included in the printed book. In late 19th century, the manuscript of the work was rediscovered and published in the collection *Italicarum rerum scriptores*, along with the inscriptions for the scenes in Corsia Sistina. It stands to prove that Bartholomew of Platina elaborated and supervised the execution of the iconographic cycle between 1475-1478, a fact proved by the correlation be-

* This work was supported by a grant of European Research Council, ERC-2014-CoG no. 646489.

¹ Petro de Angelis, L'Ospedale di Santo Spirito in Saxia, II, Rome, 1962, p. 395-406.

tween the text and the iconographic contents.² Being considered an exaltation of pontifical monarchy, the cycle of frescoes depicted Sixtus IV as a founder of Rome and in the same time as a defender of Christendom against the Ottoman threat³. If for the episodes between 1471-1474 is not any doubt, concerning the scenes depicting events that occurred after the year 1474, the situation is more complicated. In their case, the interpretations require a careful analysis of the political context and of the Pope's actions, independently from Platina's text.



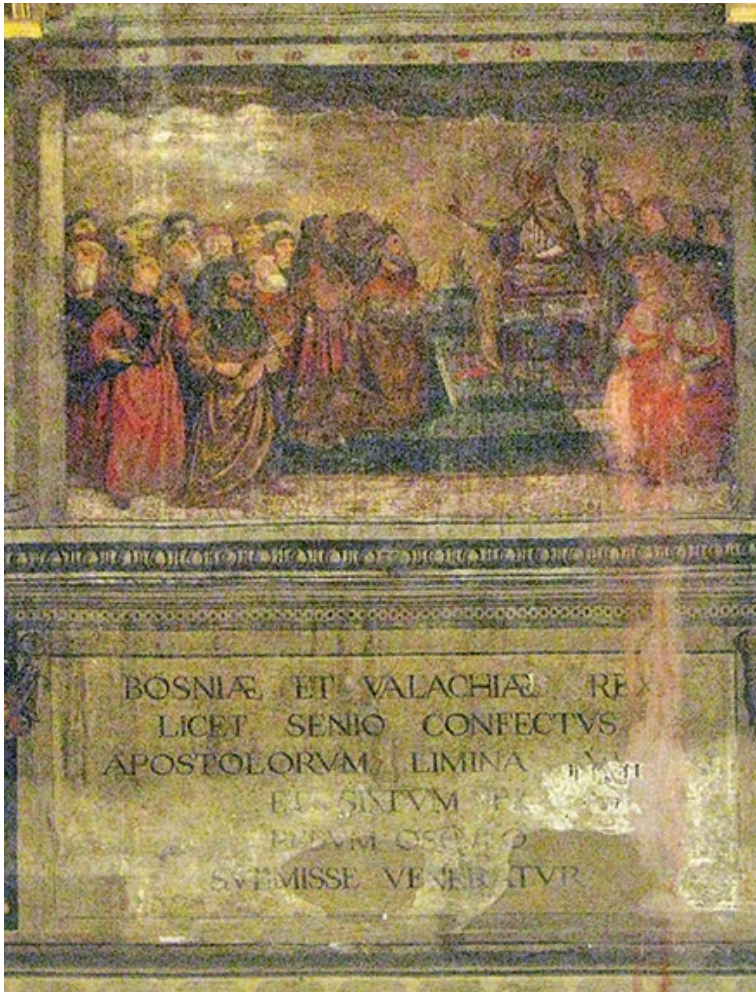
Corsia Sistina (inside view)

It's the case of scene no. 34, in the Lancisi hall, whose inscription reads that the Bosnian and still Walachian king, despite fatigue and old age, came to see the Holy See of the Apostles. Overwhelmed by humility, he kissed the feet of the pope:

² Eunice D. Howe, *Art and Culture at the Sistine Court: Platina's "Life of Sixtus IV" and the Frescoes of the Hospital of Santo Spirito*, Rome, 2005.

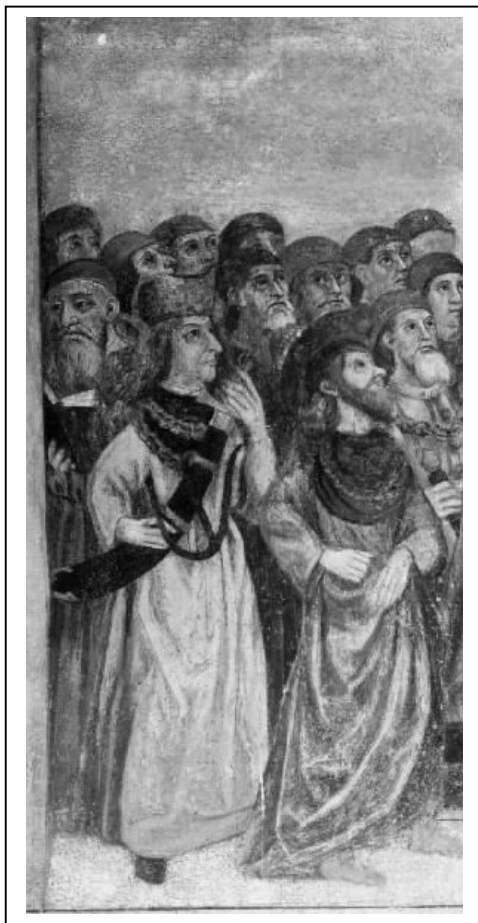
³ Massimo Miglio, "Una biografia pontificia per immagini. Sisto IV e l'Ospedale di Santo Spirito", *Il Veltro-Rivista della Civiltà Italiana*, XLV (2001), 5-6, pp. 111-124.

„Bossinae et Valachiae licet senio confectus Apostolorum limina visit et Sistum IV pedum osculum submisce veneratur”. The scene depicts the Pope, flanked by two cardinals and four ministrants seated on the throne and wearing a tiara and blessing the king. In front of the throne, the Bosnian king wearing a crown kneels and his arms are raised as in prayer, “flanked by men with beards and in exotic dress.”⁴



(photo by Márk Aurel Erszegi)

⁴ Howe, *Art and Culture*, p. 88.



On a closer look, however, it may be noticed that the description of the group using such a laconic formula is inappropriate, because the artist paid special attention to the Bosnian king's entourage. A character in the foreground bears a sword, while another one reads a book; both attitudes are in disagreement with the solemnity of the moment. The list of bizarre aspects is even longer. Surprisingly, the inscription fails to mention the king's name and it is known that the last Bosnian king – Stephan Tomashevich – had died in 1463 and that his widow, Catherine, had sought refuge in Rome, under the Pope's protection.

The union between the crown of Bosnia and Walachia is equally curious, because they actually had nothing in common. Based on historical sources, the Bosnian king was identified as Nicholas of Ilok, who came to Rome as a pilgrim for the Jubilee, in the spring of 1475⁵. On 21 February 1475, he arrived to Ferra-

⁵ Florio Banfi, "Romei Ungheresi del Jubileo del 1475. Niccolo Ujlaki re di Bosnia in un affresco nell' Ospedale di Santo Spirito dell' urbe", *Archivio di scienze, lettere ed arti della società italo-ungherese Mattia Corvino*, III (1941), 2: 503-510; Tamás Fedels, "Bosniae [...] rex [...] apostolorum limina visit. Ujlaki Miklos 1475-ös romai zarándoklata", *Történelmi Szemle*, L (2008), 4, p. 461-478; Stanko Andrić, "Od Ilok do Rima: talijansko putovanje Nikole Iločkoga", *Hrvatska Revija*, 1 (2015), p. 54-61.

ra accompanied by a numerous retinue and he was welcomed by Ercole II d'Este, Duke of Modena, brother-in-law of the Hungarian king.⁶ This is an important detail because Nicholas of Ilok was a Hungarian noble, who in 1471 had received from the Hungarian king the temporary title of "rex Bosniae." In the context of the Ottoman conquest of Bosnia, the title represented a simple claim⁷ and it is hard to believe that in Rome Nicholas of Ilok was considered a real king. In order to understand his role, it's necessary to analyze the political interests of his king, Matthias of Hungary, in the crusade against the Turks, promoted by Sixtus IV.

As early as the first years of his pontificate, Sixtus IV was concerned with the organization of a crusade against the Turks, acting to unite the Christian rulers and providing support to sovereigns coming from the territories occupied by Ottoman, seeking refuge. Crusading against the Ottomans represents an important element in the biography of Sixtus IV and it has been pointed out that four scenes in Corsia Sistina depict this aspect: the victory of the pontifical fleet on the Turks, the receive of the Bosnian and Walachian king, the receive of Charlotte, Queen of Cyprus, and the receive of Eastern sovereigns.⁸ However, unlike the other sovereigns, forced to seek refuge in Italy, the Bosnian king was in a particular situation. He was a subject of the Hungarian king, and the connection between the scene and the crusade is explained by the relationship between the Pope and Matthias Corvinus. The papacy considered that Hungary was indispensable for any crusade project, while Matthias Corvinus was

⁶ Ludwig Pastor, *The History of the Popes from the Close of the Middle Ages*, IV, translated by Frederick Igantius Antrobus, London, 1900, p. 281-282.

⁷ John van Antwerp Fine, *The Late Medieval Balkans*, Michigan, 1994, p. 588-589.

⁸ Giorgio Vespignani, "Il matrimonio di Zoe Paleologhina con Ivan Vasil'evič, gran principe di Mosca (1472) in un affresco sisitino dell'Ospedale di Santo Spirito in Sassia a Roma", *Porphyra*, XX (2013), p. 93-94.

open to any pontifical initiative concerning the Ottoman threat, which led to a special relationship between Hungary and the Holy See.⁹ Hungary was considered “the bastion and bulwark of Christendom,” and King Matthias said he was ready to give his life in the fight against the Turks. In reality, Matthias did not intend to initiate a large-scale military action against the Turks, but he used the crusade propaganda to obtain the financial subsidies provided by the Pope.¹⁰

In 1475, the political actions of the Hungarian king intensified: he was going to receive 200,000 ducats collected by Holy See, during the Jubilee year. In January 1475, a solemn embassy of the Hungarian king was in Rome to pay reverence to the Pope and to seek support against the common enemy. The Hungarian envoys – the Bishop of Veszprém and the Ban of Croatia included – were solemnly welcomed on 2 February 1475. Ladislau Vetési – the nephew of the Bishop of Veszprém – delivered the speech, which was considered a great success; it was actually printed in Rome in two editions¹¹. The message insisted upon the need to unite the Christians, to help *divus Matthias* fighting against the Turks, and on Hungarian people's wish to visit Rome for the Jubilee. In addition, the speech mentions the siege of Shkoder fortress and the intention of the Ottoman army to march towards Rome¹². At this point, we have a first element explaining the connection between Bosnia and Walachia.

⁹ Péter E. Kovács, “Hungary, the Ottomans and the Holy See (1437–1490),” in *A Thousand Years of Christianity in Hungary / Hungariae Christianae Millenium* (Budapest, 2001), p. 69.

¹⁰ Pál Engel, *The Realm of St. Stephen: A History of Medieval Hungary, 895–1526* (London and New York, 2005), p. 307; Benjamin Weber, “La croisade impossible: Étude sur les relations entre Sixte IV et Mathias Corvin (1471–1484),” in *Byzance et ses périphéries: Hommage à Alain Ducellier*, ed. Bernard Doumerc and Christophe Picard (Toulouse, 2004), p. 320–321.

¹¹ Banfi, “Romei Ungherese”, p. 65–66.

¹² Ferenc Toldy (ed.), *Analecta monumentorum Hungariae historicorum literariorum maximum inedita*, Budapest, 1886, p. 160.

In August 1474, the Rumelian army, led by Süleyman Pasha, received the sultan's order to stop Shkoder's siege and to march towards a new destination. It was however not Rome, but Moldavia. Mehmed II intended to punish Stephen of Moldavia, who had dethroned the Walachian prince in the previous year and subsequently replaced him with a prince who was loyal to him. Much to everyone's surprise, on 10 January 1475, the Rumelian army was crushed in the Battle of Vaslui. The consequence was a bloodbath which lasted, according to some chronicles, no less than three days, the casualties of the Ottoman army being estimated at approximately 40,000 dead and 4,000 prisoners¹³.

On 25 January 1475, Stephen of Moldavia addressed an encyclical letter to Christian rulers, announcing them the victory obtained against the Turks and stating that the common enemy of Christendom could be destroyed. Warning about the imminence of a new Ottoman attack, the prince appealed for Christian princes unity, considering that the loss of Moldavia will be a huge blow for all of Christendom¹⁴. However, the way in which the news of the victory arrived in Rome drew the attention of contemporaries. According to the chronicle of Jan Długosz, Moldavian prince sent gifts to Pope Sixtus IV and requested his support in order to crush the Turks.¹⁵ In the subsequent paragraph, the chronicler relates how King Matthias took the merits for the victory; he falsely wrote to the Pope, to the emperor, and to other Christian rulers that his army, led by Stephen, had defeated the Turks.¹⁶ Długosz's statement was connected to the title of "capitaneo generale del re d'Ungheria," fea-

¹³ Andrei Veress (ed.), *Acta et epistolae relationum Transylvaniae Hungariaeque cum Moldavia et Valachia*, I, Budapest, 1914, p. 8.

¹⁴ I. Bogdan (ed.), *Documentele lui Ștefan cel Mare*, II, București, 1903, p. 323.

¹⁵ Joannis Długossii, *Annales seu cronicae incliti regni Poloniae*, XII, Krakow, 2005, p. 352.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 353.

tured on the copies of the letter sent by the Moldavian prince, preserved in Milan. A study based on the diplomatic elements confirmed the statement made by Dlugosz and showing how the encyclical letter was mystified to the benefit of the Hungarian king, which occurred in late February - early March 1475.¹⁷

It was the period when Nicholas of Ilok was heading to Rome. Other chronological and itinerary-related details confirm that the Bosnian king brought the news of the victory from Vaslui to Italy. Before leaving Italy, Nicholas of Ilok arrived in Venice at 9 April 1475. Domenico Malipiero recorded that the king of Bosnia came from Rome, via Loreto¹⁸. On 14 April 1475, from Cremona, Jacob Bonarello reported to the duke of Milano some news about a copy of letter addressed to all Christian princes and sent by the general captain of Hungary, named Stephan voivode, regarding his victory against the Turks¹⁹. Loreto is very close to Ancona, so most probably the copies of Moldavian prince's letter were spread by Nicholas of Ilok. However, there is also a direct statement in this respect, which explains the connection between Bosnia and Walachia. According to Luigi Torelli, the Bosnian king was congratulated by the Pope for “una gran rotta, che diede à Turchi Stefano Vaivoda, lò Palatino della Vallachia, e della Moldavia”²⁰.

At 30 March 1475, Nicholas of Ilok still was in Rome and he met the Florentine ambassador²¹. In a letter from 31 March 1475, the pope congratulated the prince of Moldavia on his vic-

¹⁷ Ștefan S. Gorovei, “Informație, propagandă, mistificare: scrisoarea din 25 ianuarie 1475”, *Analele Putnei*, III (2007), 2, p. 21-26.

¹⁸ Domenico Malipiero, *Annali veneti dall' anno 1457 al 1500*, (Archivio Storico Italiano, VII/1) Firenze, 1843, p. 244.

¹⁹ N. Iorga (ed.), *Acte și fragmente privitoare la istoria românilor*, III, Bucharest, 1897, p. 54.

²⁰ Luigi Torelli, *Secoli agostiniani ovvero historia generale del Sagro Ordine Eremitano del gran dottore di Santa Chiesa S. Aurelio Agostino vescovo d'Hippona*, VII, Bologna, 1682, p. 235.

²¹ Francesco Filarete, Angelo Manfredi, *The Libro Cerimoniale of the Florentine Republic*, Geneva, 1978, p. 114.

tory, encouraging him to continue the fight against the Turks, but also warning him that he would not be able to send subsidies too soon, because they had already been directed toward the knights Hospitallers in Rhodes and the kingdom of Hungary.²² In the following day, the pope composed a letter to the king of Poland, in which Sixtus VI pressed him to leave aside any differences with the king of Hungary and to start the war against the sultan.²³ An undated document, but which contains information pointing to the same period, was sent to the king of Hungary. The pope acknowledged Matthias Corvinus' important role in the victory obtained by the prince of Moldavia, congratulating him for the bravery and the expediency he had displayed²⁴. It's obvious that news about the victory against the Tuks in Moldavia reached the papal curia through the agency of Hungarian emissaries.

For these reasons, I believe that scene no. 34 represents a mixture of the Hungarian diplomatic actions conducted in 1475, which stands to explain the bizarre aspects mentioned in the beginning. The character holding the book may be interpreted as an evocation of the speech held by Ladislau Vetési. The sword worn by the character in the foreground looks like a Turkish sword and, by the manner of holding it, it looks like it was going to be gifted to the Pope. Hence, it evokes the victory of the Moldavian prince and the gifts sent by him to the Pope and mentioned by Dlugosz. In a letter from 1475, Sixtus IV thanks the Hungarian king for the Turkish military insignia that he had sent, and the only victory against the Turks in 1475 was the one of Vaslui.

²² Hurmuzaki, II/1, p. 8.

²³ Edmund Martene (ed.), *Veterum scriptorum et monumentorum, historicorum, dogmaticorum, moralium, amplissima collectio*, II, Paris, 1724, col. 1490-1491.

²⁴ Hurmuzaki, II/1, p. 10.



(The Archive of Italian Ministry of Culture)

Other aspects suggest that the scene depicts the gifting of the golden rose. On the fourth Sunday of the Great Lent, (also called *Quaresima*, *Laetere Jerusalem*, or *Domenica Rosae*), the Pope blessed a golden piece in the Church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme. Along with the blessed sword and helmet (gifted on Christmas), the golden rose became an instrument with an important propagandistic function that the Pope benefited from, even concerning a potential crusade. Beyond the liturgical ceremonial of blessing, which I will not detail here, there was a second ritual of offering the rose. When the recipient was in Rome, he received the rose from the Pope, in the pontifical chapel, in the presence of cardinals, kneeling and kissing the feet of pope, who sat on the throne.²⁵ When the recipient was not in Rome, the rose could be granted through a representative; the ritual was the same, bearing the following message: “Take this

²⁵ Carlo Cartari, *La Rosa d'oro pontificia*, Rome, 1681, p. 44.

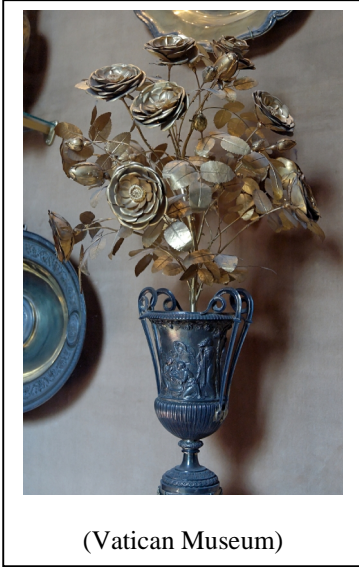
rose to our beloved son...which we offer, on the advice of our cardinals, for his merits, which are to our satisfaction and to the satisfaction of the Holy See.” Afterwards, the envoy kneeled and kissed the Pope’s feet; he received the rose in the right hand.²⁶

The available data show that Nicholas of Ilok arrived to Rome before *Domenica Rosae* (12 March 1475) and that he left the city after Easter (26 March 1475). Considering the positioning of the characters, the scene depicts a similar ceremonial to the offering of the golden rose (the Pope sits on the throne, flanked by cardinals; the kneeling Bosnian king waits for the Pope’s gesture). The red clothes worn by the cardinals and the Pope, which may be related to the rose-offering ceremonial, represent another important detail in this respect. The Bosnian king arrived to Rome during the Great Lent, and the only day during the Great Lent when the Pope and the cardinals wear red is *Domenica Rosae*.



(photo by Márk Aurel Erszegi)

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 46.



(Vatican Museum)

The item drawing the most attention is the vase of flowers near the Pope's throne, where it's worth highlighting the unitary chromatic presentation of the flowers and the leaves. In addition, from a compositional perspective this item plays no role: it does not create a vanishing point, but it blocks the linear perspective created by the line where the wall and the floor meet. In terms of shapes and chromatic nuances, the item is similar to the rose gifted by Sixtus IV to the Vatican Library; however, it is impossible to state beyond doubt that the item would represent a golden rose.

There is no information available on the golden rose received by Matthias Corvinus, Stephen of Moldavia, or Nicholas of Ilok. Furthermore, the painting was restored in late 16th century²⁷. Given this context, the item in question must have suffered alterations in shape or chromatics, reason for which I'm cautiously not drawing a conclusion on the matter. Only at the end of the restoration process for Corsia Sistina, which began a couple of years ago, we'll be able to make new observations regarding these aspects, or at least we'll benefit from higher quality images.

²⁷ Antonella Pampalone, "Ferdinando Permei. I restauri del 1599 della Corsia Sistina", *Il Veltro-Rivista della Civiltà Italiana*, XLVI (2002), 1-2, p. 35-52.