

# **FAMILIARES, EGREGII AND HOMINES DESPOTI NONNULLI: THE RETINUE ON THE HUNGARIAN ESTATES OF DESPOT GEORGE BRANKOVIĆ AND ITS SOCIAL CAPACITY (1427-1456)**

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## **Resumen**

Las propiedades que los gobernantes serbios tardomedievales tenían en el reino de Hungría no son desconocidas para las historiografías nacionales modernas de Europa Central. Estas propiedades se encontraban principalmente en el sur, este y noreste de ese país y fueron inicialmente concedidas por el rey húngaro (y soberano del Sacro Imperio Romano Germánico) Segismundo de Luxemburgo. Este artículo explora las capacidades sociales del entorno “cosmopolita” del déspota serbio George Branković en sus dominios en Hungría (1427-1456) y considera cómo tales capacidades impulsaron el avance social de estos hombres pero también la interacción del déspota (escasa integración) con sus entornos húngaros, haciendo particular hincapié en sus relaciones con la corte regia. En este grupo híbrido “cosmopolita” y socialmente diversificado, se advierte cómo sus avances pudieron estar anclados en sus redes familiares, el conocimiento personal y sus habilidades o servicio militar y cortesano. No obstante, su característica más significativa era la lealtad extraordinaria, que todos los hombres y delegados del déspota –independientemente de su origen social, étnico o religioso– mostraron hacia su señor feudal. Por medio de ese recurso confirmaron sus patrimonios, así como lograron avances posteriores en su estatus, modificando la relación cercana con el déspota y provocando el cambio de una nobleza antiguamente marginalizada desde el punto de vista territorial hacia una nueva nobleza feudal.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Déspota George Branković – Serbia medieval – Reino de Hungría - *familiaritas*

## **Summary**

The estates which late medieval Serbian rulers held in the Kingdom of Hungary are not unknown to the modern national historiographies of Central Europe. These estates were cored in southern, eastern and north-eastern Hungary, initially granted by Hungarian King (and Holy Roman Emperor) Sigismund of Luxembourg. The pa-

per explores the social capacities of the “cosmopolitan” entourage of Serbian Despot George Branković on his domains in Hungary (1427-1456) and seeks an answer to how these capacities operated in prompting these men’s social advancement but also Despot’s interaction (hardly integration) with his surroundings in Hungary, with a particular focus on his relations with the royal court. In this hybrid “cosmopolitan” and socially diversified group, one can notice as their advancement may have been grafted upon their familial networks, personal knowledge and skills or military and courtly service, but its most significant feature was an extraordinary loyalty which all Despot’s men and proxies –regardless of their social, ethnic or religious background– showed to their feudal lord. It is through this concept that they had their personal assets confirmed, as well as their further status advancements, close relationship with the Despot and change from an ‘olden’ territorial marginalised into the new feudal nobility.

KEYWORDS: Despot George Branković – Medieval Serbia – Medieval Kingdom of Hungary –*familiaritas*

The estates which late medieval Serbian rulers held in the Kingdom of Hungary<sup>1</sup> are not unknown to the modern national historiographies of Central Europe<sup>2</sup>. These estates were cored in eastern and north-eastern Hungary, initially granted by Hungarian King (and Holy Roman Emperor)

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<sup>1</sup> Some of Despot’s territorial possessions in Hungary can be found specified in *Monumenta Hungariae historica* (MHH), I.-*Diplomataria-Okmánytarak (=Diplomataria)*, vol. 33: *Magyarország melléktartományainak okleveltára, II. Kotet: A Magyarország es Szerbia közti összeköttetések okleveltára (1198-1526)*, ed. Lajos Thallóczy and Antal Áldásy, Budapest, 1907, no. CCXXIX (May 9, 1450), p. 159: *castrum Munkach vocatum in comitatu de Bereg habitum cum omnibus suis pertinentiis, item opida Rivulidominarum, necnon Zathmar et Nemethy in Zathmariensi ac Debrechen nuncupata in Bihoriensi comitatibus situata simulcum urburis in pertinentiis dicti opidi Rivulidominarum existentibus necnon omnibus et singulis ipsorum utilitatibus et pertinentiis quibuslibet, scilicet possessiones Bezermen et Dada vocatas in comitatu de Zabowch habitas, similiter cum omnibus earum utilitatibus et pertinentiis quovis nominis vocabulo vocatis*. A more detailed elaboration on literature on how Despot George’s property was acquired by his predecessor Despot Stefan Lazarević held can found in Aleksandar KRSTIĆ, “Dokumenti o ugarskim posedima despota Djurdja datim u zalog Jovanu Hunjadiju 1444. godine (Documents about Hungarian domains of Despot George leased to John Hunyadi in 1444)”, *Mešovita gradja*, 32 (2011), 132-154 and ID., “Familiares of the Serbian despots in and from the territory of Banat (1411-1458)”, in Zoltan IUSTIN (ed.), *Politics and Society in the Central and South-Eastern Europe (13<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries)*, Cluj-Napoca, Mega, 2019, pp. 94-95.

<sup>2</sup> Literature on this subject is extensive. Hereby, just a few titles, indicative of the debate: Ludwig Thallóczy, “Prilozi k objašnjenju izvora bosanske historije: K historiji despotske porodice Brankovića”, *Glasnik Zemaljskog Muzeja*, 5/2 (1893), 175-219; Mihailo Dinić, “Pismo ugarskog kralja Zigmunda burgundskom vojvodi Filipu (The Letter of King Sigismund to Burgundian Duke Phillip)”, *Zbornik Matice srpske za društvene nauke*, 13-14 (1956), 93-98; *Istorija srpskog naroda (History of the Serbian People)*, Belgrade, SKZ, 1982, vol. 2, pp. 70-74. On the vassalage of Despot Stefan Lazarević to King Sigismund (1403 of 1404) and the transfer of his domain in Hungary to his nephew George, see *ibid.*, pp. 71-122. Sima Ćirković, “*Poslednji Brankovići (The last Brankovići)*”, *Istorija srpskog naroda, Belgrade, Srpska književna zadruga*,

Sigismund of Luxembourg (King of Hungary 1387-1437/Holy Roman Emperor 1432-1437) to Serbian Despot Stefan Lazarević (Prince 1389/Despot 1402-1427), as a guarantee of their anti-Ottoman alliance; following Stefan's death, these estates passed to his nephew, Despot George Branković (1427-1456)<sup>3</sup>, who further augmented them with property close to the country's southern border by private grants of King Sigismund and his successors, Kings Albert (1438-1439), and Ladislav Posthumous (1440-1457), to be inherited by his son and heir, Despot Lazar Branković (1456-1458). The earlier historiography substantially debated the estates' chronology and location, while recent scholarship turned to its human resources and the role which these resources played in the estates' overall functioning –which is especially important when one remembers that the Serbian Despots did not reside regularly in these estates, largely seeing them as a useful additional landed asset and a potential refuge to the safety of the Christian world across the border which they would need in case of a more substantial Ottoman attack<sup>4</sup>–. This paper delineates some new considerations about retinue recorded on these estates. As its key focus, it will have the period of Despot George Branković and his power over this domain. This period was the central stage of the Serbian control over Despots' estates, and as such it can provide the best ground for analysing the trends in the Branković power, collaboration and social exchange with this region.

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1982, book 2, pp. 445–464; Momčilo Spremić, *Despot Djurdj Branković i njegovo doba (Despot George Branković and his times)*, Belgrade, SKZ, 1994, pp. 149-167.

<sup>3</sup>MHH, *Diplomataria*, vol. 33, no. CLI (May 5, 1429), p. 82, etc. as an example of a derivate of his common title *Nos Georgius dei gracia Regni Rascie despotus et Albanie dominus and illustres principes, dominus Georgius, regni Rascie despotus et dominus Albanie*. Hungarians used to call him “Racz deszpota [Rascian/Serbian Despot],” e.g. in Emile A. Picot, *Les Serbes de Hongrie. Leur histoire, leurs privilèges, leur Église, leur État politique et social*, Prague, Grégl-Dattel, 1873; Frigyes Pesty, *Brankovics György rácz deszpota birtokviszonyai Magyarországon és a rácz deszpota cím (The estates of George Brankovic in Hungary and the title of Despot)*, Budapest, MTAK, 1877; Thallóczy, “K historiji”, pp. 175-219; Jovan Radonić, “Sporazum u Tati 1426. i srpsko-ugarski odnosi od XIII-XVI veka (The Agreement in Tata of 1426 and Serbo-Hungarian relations since 13th-16th century)”, *Glas Srpske kraljevske akademije*, 187 (1941), 145-149; Ivica Prlender, “Sporazum u Tati 1426. godine i Žigmundovi obrambeni sustavi”, *Historijski zbornik*, 44/1 (1991), 33–39; Gerald Schwedler, “Rituelle Diplomatie. Die persönlichen Beziehungen Sigismunds von Luxemburg zu Benachbarten Königen und den Herrschern des Balkans”, in Karel HRUZA and Alexandra KAAR (eds.), *Kaiser Sigismund (1368-1437). Zur Herrschaftspraxis eines europäischen Monarchen*, Wien–Köln–Weimar, 2012, pp. 416-417.

<sup>4</sup>Spremić, *Despot*, pp. 149-167; Adrian Magina, “Câteva documente privind comitatul Torontal în prima jumătate a secolului al XV-lea (Some documents regarding the county of Torontal in the first half of the 15th c.)”, *Banatica*, 22 (2012), 63-65; Krstić, “Familiales”, pp. 93-110; ID., “Szerb despoták és nemesek Magyarország államszerkezetében 1404 és 1459 között (Serbian despots and nobles in Hungarian state structure between 1404 and 1459)”, in Árpád Homyák (ed.), *A keresztény Európa határán-fejezetek az ezeréves magyar-szerb együttélés történetéből (On the border of Christian Europe –chapters from a thousand-year of Hungaro-Serbian coexistence–)*, Újvidék, Forum 2020, pp. 73-88.

In his monograph dealing the Despot George, Mihailo Spremić pointed out to several prominent members of Despot's retinue in Hungary, noting an interesting "division" of their responsibilities. According to Spremić, this division went along the retainers' ethnic background, hence Hungarians appeared as leading in the domain's high administration and its relations with the central government of the Hungarian court, while Serbs stood out as more oriented on Despot's military affairs. A more recent inquiry by Aleksandar Krstić, covering a somewhat larger period (all three Despots' holdings, 1411-1458), but in a more limited space of Serbian rulers' southern domain in the region of Banat, further clarified Spremić's premise, bringing in some new prosopographical data and explaining the wide distribution of Despot's Hungarian retainers as a consequence of his tensions with the domain's local neighbours (during the 1430s), while his employment of Serbs came as a later response to Hungary's internal tensions of the 1440s, as well as Despot's needs to preserve his Serbian nobles. Krstić's study also pointed out to several circumstances important for understanding the power of the Serbian Despots in Hungary and their interactions with the local social milieu, namely: 1) that prior to Despot George, some of his most visible retainers in Hungary had already been involved in a service to the country's magnates (*barons*) who controlled the Kingdom's southern borders, some even participating in the magnates' activities within the Serbian territory; 2) in consequence, some of these retainers fluctuated between the Despot's Hungarian estates and Branković's Serbia, and 3) serving the Despots, these retainers developed efficient social and familial alliances that prompted their further progression<sup>5</sup>.

These conclusions lead to some new questions about the nature and role of retainers in the Branković's domain, especially interesting when one remembers that the Serbian late medieval elite was seen as a foreign element in the Kingdom of Hungary, certainly of a far lesser prominence and power than the Branković enjoyed in their Serbian territories. Hence, the central question of this paper is what social capacities prompted the retainers to ally, operate and advance under the "foreign" Branković. Also, how did they change under this special setting of a seigneurial power? And, whether/how did they affect the broader integration of their lords into the Hungarian ruling practice and social milieu of the Kingdom's south –especially important given that this region operated at the time as the Kingdom's border and *antemurale* to the Ottoman expansion, as well as the starting point of Hungarian counter-offensives to the Balkans?<sup>6</sup> – To understand these questions, in this paper I shall focus on the retainers' "social fabric" and "social capital" –a

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<sup>5</sup> Spremić, *Despot*, pp. 149-167; cf. Krstić, "Familiares", pp. 93-110.

<sup>6</sup> Lygia Boldea, "Political Mechanisms at the Southern Frontier of the Hungarian Kingdom in the Fourteenth Century", *Transylvanian Review*, 22, supp. 4 (2013), 145-146.

nod of assets and individual/group aptitudes that facilitated their ability to connect, collaborate and built their ties of proximity towards a broader change— between themselves, their local environment, their Branković overlord and their sovereigns<sup>7</sup>.

In the majority of documents that mention the domain of Despot George in Hungary, his retainers are often referred to as *familiares*. For long, this epithet was taken by scholars as a mere honorary “title”, and only recently they have started to debate its significance in the context of the retainers’ personal proximities with their overlord<sup>8</sup>. The central proximity point was certainly the loyalty of retainers’ service based upon which they were included in their lord’s household. How did the Despot’s retainers become his *familiares*? Certainly the most common model was military service, but there were some other ways and one of them was through courtly offices. The best example of this pattern of affiliation comes from Despot’s chancellor János Kállay. János’ clan originated from a branch of Egyed in the Kingdom’s East, the *Szabolch* county<sup>9</sup>, reaching its peak in the early-modern period; in the late Middle Ages, however, they still represented somewhat lower territorial aristocracy controlled by the region’s baronial elite. Usually identified in sources as *Nagykállói (de Callo)*, some of their kinsmen managed to differentiate by the 15<sup>th</sup> c. and enter the royal administrative system as provincial/county leaders (*főispánok*); the family’s ambition went even beyond this aspiration,

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<sup>7</sup> Frane Adam and Borut Roncevic, “Social Capital: Recent Debates and Social Trends”, *Social Science Information*, 42/2 (2003), 155-183.

<sup>8</sup> For a general view of the issue, see Damir Karbić, “Familiares of the Šubići. Neapolitan influence on the origin of the institution of familiaritas in medieval Hungary,” in Noel COULET and Jean-Michel MATZ (eds.), *La Noblesse dans les territoires Angevins à la fin du Moyen Age*, Rome, Ecole française de Rome, 2000, pp. 131-147. Viewed as an honorary epithet, in the 15<sup>th</sup> c. it denoted proximity to of a man to his lord, as well as his security deriving from this relationship, donated land, office-holding, military service or administration bestowed by the lord. By comparing this system to other forms of retainership in medieval Europe (“bastard feudalism” as defined by Michael Hicks, *Bastard Feudalism*, London-New York, 1995, pp. 43-68), Martyn Rady, *Nobility, Land and Service in Medieval Hungary*, London, Palgrave, 2000, p. 110 claimed that *familiaritas* was not the degeneration of a better system but a system in its own right, not implying a private usurpation but rather a set of defined private relations between a man and his lord. In this, a lord did not have full authority over his *familiaris*, so the legal status of men could equal that of their lords (e.g. both could be nobles), or ties to the king. For specific examples of *familiaritas* in the immediate surrounding of Despot George, see Cosmin Popa-Gorjanu, “Despre familiares și familiaritas în cazul familiei Himfi (About familiars and familiaritas in the case of the Himfi family)”, *Apulum*, 44 (2007), 363-382; Suzana Miljan, “Familiaritas i klijentelski sustav unutar plemićkog društva Zagrebačke županije za vrijeme vladavine Žigmunda Luksemburškog (1387.-1437.) (Familiaritas and the clientele system within the noble society of the county of Zagreb during the reign of Sigismund of Luxemburg, 1387-1437)”, *Zbornik Odsjeka za povjesne znanosti Zavoda za povijesne i društvene znanosti Hrvatske akademije znanosti i umjetnosti*, 33 (2015), 103-132.

<sup>9</sup> The kindred was recorded since the time of King Andras II (1216-1224). Genealogical position of this János is not entirely clear. The family generated individuals in several branches with this name.

and by the reign of King Matthias Corvinus (1458-1490), we find János' close kinsmen already in the royal entourage<sup>10</sup>. Prior to János' service to Despot George, some branches of the kindred also seem to have expanded militarily, and this expansion seems to have been specially enhanced by their close relationship with Count Palatine and *de facto* ruler of Hungary at the time, Nicola II Garai (1402-1433)<sup>11</sup>.

János' identity and closer position in his kindred are not entirely clear, but two documents of his family's archive seem to shed more light to it. One of these documents is a letter of Palatine Garai to *Nicholas Kállo* and his son János from February 1431, from which we find out that the Kállay loyals had reportedly attacked Despot's domain around Debrecen short before this date, for which reason Garai (addressing the father and the son with friendly words and an affectionate tone, thus signalling their personal proximity) warned the two Kállay that they should indemnify the Despot<sup>12</sup>. Importantly, the document identifies Nicholas Kállay (alispán in Szabolcs county 1399-1402) as the "son of *Lewkews [Lököš]*" and the same person (*Lewkews*) is found in the identification of János Kállay who served as the Despot's secretary. Concluding that Nicholas' son János was this secretary might seem logical, however, it seems too hasty –namely because one other document, dated to 1446, mentions János as dead, notifying, at the same time, his remaining son, bearing the same name as his father<sup>13</sup>–. So, could János, Despot's secretary (documented as active even in the early 1460s), be János Kállay junior, the son of a deceased János, who was the son of Despot George's rival Nicholas, mentioned in 1431? The answer seems confirmed by the second document, the one of April 21, 1450, in which Despot's secretary János was, just like Nicholas and his offspring, also identified through *Lewkews*, clearly their common ancestor<sup>14</sup>. One other hint might additionally confirm this

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<sup>10</sup> The Kállays' preference towards the ruling circles by working in court offices, e.g. on the position of chancellors, is attested among several other kinsmen of the time –e.g. the second son of János (IV), Pál Kállay who was the chancellor of King Matthias Corvinus, as from MNL OL, DL-DF 55789 (February 28, 1464)–. In the period prior to the 15th century, these posts were considered as honours (*honores*), but from the 15th century, they were replaced by salaried positions.

<sup>11</sup> MHH, *Diplomataria*, vol. 33, no. CLXI (February 23, 1431), p. 89. Garai used to refer to them (specifically to *Nicholai filio Lewkews* and his son *Johanni de Kalló*) as to *amicis nobis sincere dilectis*, stressing the friendly nature of their relation, but also showing his authority over them in mediating in their conflict with the Despot. Garai's titles of ban of Macsó, Usora, Só, Slavonia, Croatia and Dalmatia best reflected his ambitions towards the Slavic South; he also ruled Braničevo, Syrmia, Bačka, Banat and Baranya regions through his vassals and the Kállay may well be the part of this network.

<sup>12</sup> MHH, *Diplomataria*, vol. 33, no. CLXI (February 23, 1431), p. 89. Cfr. Spremić, *Despot*, p. 181, noting that such conflicts intensified for the Despot around 1435.

<sup>13</sup> János is found documented in Despot's entourage from 1440s. For his chronology, see nn. 9 and 16.

<sup>14</sup> MHH, *Diplomataria*, no. CCXXVIII (April 21, 1450), p. 158: *Egregie vir fidelis nobis dilecte. Egregio viro Johanni Lewkws dicto de Kalló nobis grate dilecto etc.*

conclusion. It is found in the correspondence of Despot's secretary János, which reflects him as a highly educated intellectual who kept in touch with Florentine Humanists<sup>15</sup>. A search for him in student matriculation books of the renown Italian university centres where education and connections with Humanist Florence could be easily established (e.g. the law circle at the University of Bologna) did not give results. However, student lists from the University of Vienna from the late 1430s do mention one student with the same name<sup>16</sup>. Given the relative chronological coincidence of János the student and János junior, one might conclude that Despot's secretary mentioned 1440s-1460s may have well been the son of János senior and grand-son of Nicholas who, following his studies in Vienna, returned home and entered Despot's service<sup>17</sup>.

How János entered the Despot's service is even more unclear than his origin and ancestry. Central to his link to the *Lewkews'* branch seems to have been Palatine Garai. Garai was on good terms with the Kállay, as attested by the amicable words and tone of his communication in 1431, but it is also clear that he was more powerful than them, as can be concluded from his authority to demand from them to indemnify the Despot in 1431. With the Despot, Garai shared an even closer, familial connection that went through his first wife, Despot's maternal aunt Theodora. Positioned through these bonds of kinship solidarity and family exchange, Garai was able to centrally manage both parties, including engineering the very vassalage of Despot George to the Hungarian throne<sup>18</sup>. Seeing these alliances through his aspi-

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<sup>15</sup> E.g. Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár, Oklevelek (=MNL OL), DL- DF 45004 (March 20, 1463).

<sup>16</sup> Anna Tüskés, *Magyarországi diákok a bécsi egyetemen 1365–1526 (Students from Hungary at the University of Vienna, 1365–1526)*, Budapest, ELTE Levéltára, 2008, no. 2646 (April 14, 1438), p. 151.

<sup>17</sup> However, this entire assumption needs some further confirmations, namely because some genealogical data from the archives hint that there may have been several kinsmen of the same generation named with the same name, but belonging to various branches, cf. Iván Nágy, "Kállay család (The Kállay family)", in *Magyarország családai czimerekkel: Kézikönyvtár (Hungarian families with their heraldry: a manual)*, vol. 1-2, table VI (placing Lökös as a more distant ancestor of Nicholas' branch); or, cf. a document from the MNL OL, DL-DF 55323 (1446, March 7), interpreted by Nágy, *Magyarország családai*, vol. 6, 27, p. 439, mentions a János (IV) close in age to the one in Nicholas' branch as the son of a Szániszló. By March 7, 1446, however, this person had already been dead, leaving behind his son, again named János (V).

<sup>18</sup> Stanko Andrić, "A Garai főnemesi család és a Horvát Királyság/Velikaška obitelj Gorjanski i Hrvatsko Kraljevstvo [The aristocratic Garai family and the Kingdom of Croatia]", in Pál Fodor, Dénes Sokcsevits, Jasna Turkalj and Damir Karbić (eds.), *A horvát-magyar együttélés fordulópontjai: Intézmények, társadalom, gazdaság, kultúra/Prekretnice u suživotu Hrvata i Mađara: Ustanove, društvo, gospodarstvo i kultura (The Turning Points of the Croatian-Hungarian Co-habitation: Institutions, Society, Economy and Culture)*, Budapest-Zagreb, MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Történettudományi Intézet, Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2015, pp. 481–492 and 543–554. Garai's first marriage brought him in direct familial relation with Despot George, while his second marriage with Anna of Cilly put him close to King Sigismund, whose wife Barbara was Anna's sister. On these connections, see Tünde Árvai, "A házasságok szerepe a Garaiak hatalmi törekvéseiben (The role of marriages in the Garais'

rations to the South Slavic lands across Hungary's southern border –where he showed highly active in terms of politics and military action– Garai must have prompted the Kallay's service to Despot Branković as a useful strategy of controlling the ambition of his violent proxies and prompting his own territorial appetites.

Serving Despot George as his personal secretary, János Kállay performed a number of tasks closest to power-making, and it is not by surprise that he soon developed a close personal friendship with the Serbian Despot and also this one's trust<sup>19</sup>. One of his tasks was to represent his lord *in persona domini sui*, which he did until this one's death (December 24, 1456), continuing to also serve Despot's son and successor Lazar (1456-1458)<sup>20</sup>. János' representation involved communication with various segments of Hungarian royal legislation and participation in the settlement of Despot's disputes with his Hungarian neighbours. These disputes were usually over the domain's boundaries, hence they also requested formal arbitrations and informal networking, requiring, in all this, also the use of refined diplomatic skills. Performing the tasks of such a complexity made János a special "bridge" between the Despot and his Hungarian environment, often forced to balance not just his personal friendship and official tasks, but also his loyalty between the Despot and the Hungarian crown<sup>21</sup>.

While János Kállay can be taken as an apparent example of advancement in status through Despot's office, personal capacities in administration, and familial networking, he cannot be found among the executors of the Branković seigneurial justice<sup>22</sup>. There, several other Hungarians were mentioned, most of them as having had already served locally in the royal administration of Banat, but also in other sections of Hungary's southern border zone (indicatively, especially Bács-Bodrog and Torontál counties). One of them was a László Kátay, judge of Külsőszolnok (died before November

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attempts to rise)", in Tamás Fedeles, Márta Font and Gergely Kiss (eds.), *Kor-Szak-Határ (Age-Specialisation-Border)*, Pécs, Pécsi Tudományegyetem, 2013, pp. 103–118.

<sup>19</sup> MHH, *Diplomataria*, no. CCXXVIII (April 21, 1450), p. 158: *Egregio viro fidelis nobis dilecte. Egregio viro Johanni Lewkws dicto de Kalló nobis grate dilecto etc.* On two small (ring impressa) seals of Despot George preserved in the Kallay archive, see MHH, *Diplomataria*, p. LIV.

<sup>20</sup> The name of János Kállay is found even after the 1460s, which seems to confirm an assumption that János junior was the one who served Despot George. Cf. above n. 9 on a problem in confirming János' identity.

<sup>21</sup> MNL OL, DL-DF 14275 (June 28, 1449); MNL OL, DL-DF 14277 (June 29, 1449).

<sup>22</sup> An almost identical situation is recorded in the domain of Counts of Cilly (also foreign nobility stationed on Hungary's southern border, in the region of Slavonia), cf. Suzana Miljan, "Grofovi Celjski, njihovi službenici njemačkog porijekla i Zagorsko kneštvo (*Comitatus Zagoriensis*) krajem srednjeg vijeka (1397-1456) (Counts of Cilly and their officers of German origin and counts of Zagora (*Comitatus Zagoriensis*) at the end of the Middle Ages 1397-1456", *Godišnjak Njemačke zajednice/ DG Jarhrbuch*, 19 (2012), 97-117.



22, 1443)<sup>23</sup>; the other was Gáspár Felekházy of Bács<sup>24</sup>, but certainly among the most remarkable figures one finds a Mihály de Geszth (*de Cesth, Geszti, Geszty*, originally *Fekete-Geszth/Black Geszth*)<sup>25</sup>, with his “dynastically” aligned family which comprised of his son László (most remarkable) and László’s sons Mihály, László and János<sup>26</sup>. Mihály was recorded since the early 1430s

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<sup>23</sup> Judge László Kátay was judge of Külsőszolnok in 1436 and he must have died before November 22 1443, when a document issued by King Ulászló required the Despot to decide whom he wanted to appoint at his new *főispán* in this place, cf. MHH, *Diplomataria*, vol. 33, no. DXXV (November 22, 1443), p. 461. This document is important as it indicates how Despot was actively involved in the royal management of provincial administration. On the Kátay family, see Maksay Ferenc, *Magyarország birtokviszonyai a 16. század közepén, I kötet: Magyar Országos levéltár kiadványai, II, forráskiadványok 16*, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1990, 106, p. 1094; id., *Urbáriumok XVI-XVII század: Magyar Országos levéltár kiadványai, forráskiadványok II. 7*, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1959.

<sup>24</sup> On Gáspár Felekházy, see Iván Nagy, *Magyarország családai*, Pest, Mór, 1853, vol. 4, p. 150, noting his relocation in 1447 from Buda to Bács, to later enter the royal courtly service. According to Béla Kempelen, *Magyar nemes családok (Hungarian noble families)*, Budapest, 1912, vol. 4 [at <https://www.arcanum.com/hu/online-kiadvanyok/Kempelen-kempelen-belamagyar-nemes-csaladok-1/4-kotet-56A5/?page=8>, accessed January 15, 2022] this family can be found in the 17th-18th c., densely ramified and ennobled by Ferdinand II. In this period, they were based in Gömörmegye’s Zolyom, Liptó, Szepes, Abauj-Torna, Borsod, Heves and Nógrád. In the 18th century they were connected in marriage with the Helumba family, which attests to the long duration of the familial networks, maintained among the local nobility.

<sup>25</sup> Iván Nagy, *Magyarország családai*, Pest, Mór, 1853, vol. 3, pp. 385-386. Among some other Gesztyts from this period (1430), we also find a Martinus, son of Andreas, cf. Georg Fejér, *Codex diplomaticus Hungariae ecclesiasticus ac civilis*, vol. 10: VII, Buda, Typographia Universitatis Regiae Hungaricae, 1843, p. 211. The branch is the part of a larger kindred that originated from the domains of the Csáki bans in Bihar, where they appeared in the 14th c. under the name *de Fekete-Geszt* (of Black Geszt); in the first half of the 18th c, a part of their original medieval castle (north-eastern section) still existed, while the rest was restored in this period by László Tisza, cf. MNL OL, DL-DF 14395 (August 17, 1450). The sons Despot’s loyal László’s, László and Mihály, operated as judges in Csongrád.

<sup>26</sup> MHH, *Diplomataria*, vol. 33, no. CLXXXII and CLXXXIII, pp. 106–110. The sources uniformly resonated the family’s violent activities, cf. Nándor Kapocs and Mihály Kóhegyi, *Katymár és környékének középkori oklevelei a Zichy okmánytárban (Katymár and its surroundings in medieval charters of the Zichy archive)*, Baja, 1983, pp. 70 and 72 (here the Geszty’s conflict with László Tötös and his son Pál in p. 71, also on László’s son, mentioned in the service of János Hunyadi). Cf. MHH, *Diplomataria* 33, no. CCXIX (June 21, 1448), p. 150 issued in Buda by the Kingdom’s governor János Hunyadi. Miljan, “Grofovi Celjski”, pp. 97-117, considers them personal officers. Interestingly, the Gesztyts of the junior generation (especially János and Mihály) seem to have preferred to individually look for seniors, rather than acting together as did their grandfather Mihály and father László. János, for instance, was mentioned in the 1450s in charge of several military and administration posts while serving the ban of Macsó (Mačva), cf. Jovanka Kalić-Mijušković, *Beograd u srednjem veku (Belgrade in the Middle Ages)*, Belgrade, SKZ, 1967, p. 139. His brother László in 1453 was alispán of Bodrog and Mihály served King Matthias 1459-1460 as his master of chamber, see Ernő Kammerer, “A zichi és vásonkeői gróf Zichy-család idősb ágának okmánytára (Archive of the senior branch of the Zichy family, count of Zichy and Vasonkeő)”, *Codex diplomaticus domus senioris comitum Zichy de Zich et Vasonkeo*, Budapest, Magyar Történelmi Társulat, 1899, vol. 9, pp. 183, 302, 372, 457, 365 and 457; Loránd Szilágyi, *A Magyar király kancellária szerepe az államkormányzatban (The role of the Hungarian King’s Chancellery in state government)*, Budapest, Franklin, 1930

as the castellan of Érdsomlyó of the Caraş county, circulating later through other counties, as well as did his son László and other offspring (e.g. László serving in Tokay and Tállya/Zemplen; Munkács in the Bereg county)<sup>27</sup>.

Just like the service of János Kállay, these men's responsibilities were fairly complex, and linked with the institutions of the royal administration. In the areas under the control of the Gesztys, their residential seats (fortified towns serving as the centres of the county) but also other parts under these centre's control, they acted as *comites*, exercising administrative and juridical powers as *főispánok* (main judges), local officials who were under the immediate and supreme control of the Hungarian royal court, not their Branković overlord<sup>28</sup>. As the same time, these men were commissioned to the military post of *castellanus*<sup>29</sup>. By default, this post made the *castellani* the key persons of the Despot's military, and defences in the first place. However, in medieval Hungary, the function of the *castellani* was also directly linked with the administration of the Hungarian royal castle system (*várszervezetés*)<sup>30</sup>. This overlapping of administrative/juridical and military power and its gathering

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–offprint from *Turul*, 44 (1930)–, pp. 51, 74, 252 and 256; Frigyes Pesthy, *Krassó vármegye története* (A History of Krassó county), Budapest, Atheneum, 1882, vol. 3, pp. 340–342.

<sup>27</sup> MNL OL, DL-DF 55117 (December 04, 1437), on the common activities of the father and son recorded in the time of King Sigismund (since the 1420s) in Bács-Bodrog county. KRSTIĆ, “Familiares”, p. 102 suggests a possibility that he entered Despot George's retinue as a retainer of his uncle, Despot Stefan. Also, Samu BARABÁS, *A zichi és vasonkeői gróf Zichy-család idősb ágának okmánytára. Codex diplomaticus domus senioris comitum Zichy de Zich et Vasonkeo*, 7/1, Budapest, Magyar Történelmi Társulat, 1903, p. 449 (January 1420). On the Gesztys and, in particular, their position as *castellani*, see MHH, *Diplomataria*, vol. 33, no. CLXIX (July 19, 1433), p. 96; no. CLXXVIII (December 28, 1435), pp. 101-102; no. CLXXXII (March, 1437), pp. 106-107; no. CLXXXIII (June 29, 1437), p. 108; no. CLXIX (July 19, 1433), p. 95: *Georgius dei gratia regni Rascie despotus et Albanie dominus etc... fidelis nostro egregio Ladislao filio Michaelis de Gezth castellano nostro in Talya et comiti*. Also see for the service of László's brother János, Pál ENGEL, *Magyarország világi archontológiája, 1301–1457 (Secular Archontology of Hungary, 1301–1457)*, Budapest, História-MTA Történettudományi Intézete, 1996, vol. 1, p. 444. Also see, András KUBINYI, “A kaposújvári uradalom és a Somogy megyei familiárisok szerepe Újlaki Miklós birtokpolitikájában: Adatok a XV. századi feudális nagybirtok hatalmi politikájához (The role of the Kaposújvár estate and the Somogy county familials in miklós Újlaki's land policy: data on power politics of the feudal great estate of the 15th century)”, *Somogy megye múltjából*, 4 (1973), p. 17, documenting the Gesztys's position of judges in Baja.

<sup>28</sup> MNL OL, DL-DF 17820 (May 05, 1476) mentions László Geszty as dead and his three sons as continuing with juridical tasks in the Csongrád county.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. a trend among the Cilly who predominantly appointed Germans as their castellans, Suzana Miljan, “Grofovi Celjski i Nijemci, službenici njihovih utvrda u Zagrebačkoj i Križevačkoj županiji u kasnom srednjem vijeku (1385.-1456.) (Counts of Cilly, the servicemen of their fortifications in Zagreb and Križevci county in late Middle Ages, 1385-1456)”, *Godišnjak Njemačke narodnosne zajednice-DG Jahrbuch*, 20 (2013), p. 21.

<sup>30</sup> Éva B. Halász, “*Iobagio castri-nobilis castri-nobilis Regni*: Castle Warriors-Castle nobles-Noblemen. The Development of a Social stratum in Country of Križevci”, *Banatica*, 26 (2016), 119-134. During the Arpadian period (c. 1000-1301), fortifications were controlled by the King directly, while in later medieval period, their control went to the nobility (Hung. *várszervezet* – a castle district, Hung. *várispánság*–).

in the hands of one person made the positions of the *castellani* “neuralgic” power points, with frequent tensions between seigneurial and royal power<sup>31</sup>. A documentary note about Despot’s request to the townsmen of Debrecen to redirect their juridical appeals to his loyal László Geszti (then in the capacity of the *castellanus* of Tályá, possibly acting as Despot’s *magister tavarnicorum*) instead of to the royal court in Buda may be a good indication of Despot’s trust to László –but it is certainly an even more important sign of a process by which Despot attempted to impose his own power over the royal control of this town<sup>32</sup>–.

It seems that the Despot’s particular demand for the Hungarian *castellani* was especially strong during the late 1430s, following the death of King Sigismund (December 9, 1437) when he clearly tried to reinforce his full seigneurial power of his Hungarian domains and was prevented in this by his neighbours and a tacit approval of the Hungarian royal court that aimed at affirming its control over the domain. This was manifested by an increased number of courtly arbitrations coming from the Despot or his neighbouring rivals (loyal to the royal throne), eventually leading to several laws that prohibited the participation of foreigners in the Kingdom’s government (King Albert’s in 1439 as the first one of them). For this reason, one could say that the Despot’s reliance on Hungarians in this period was meant to ensure a secure strategy for his efficient control over his domain, as well as his political survival in the foreign region under his control, both showing that the Despot was well involved and focused in running his Hungarian estates. The court, from its end, ensured the loyalty of Despot’s retainers by its very sovereignty, and also with additional posts that they invested to Despot’s people prior to and after the time when the Branković power collapsed and soon after his death, also that of his son Lazar<sup>33</sup>. From his end, how did the Despot ensure the loyalty of his men? On the one level, this was certainly by granting his retainers ample landed property within his domain, but also grading his re-

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<sup>31</sup> Miljan, “Grofovi Celjski”, pp. 106-107, noting Cilly castellans as involved also in legal affairs. For an example of the the Geszti castellans’ interventions with the King in local disputes on behalf of the Despot MNL OL, DL-DF 222017 (December 28, 1435) and MHH, *Diplomataria*, vol. 33, no. CLXXVIII, pp. 101-102, complaining on a violence and damage which he suffered from his local neighbours, *Vllyei László* and *Chegledi László*. Also, see István Bakács, “Iratok Pest megye történetéhez 1002-1437 (Documents for the History of the Pest County)”, *Pest Megye Múltjából*, 5 (1982), p. 413.

<sup>32</sup> MHH, *Diplomataria*, no. CLXIX (July 19, 1433), pp. 95-96. For an assumption of Geszti’s function of *magister tavarnicorum* (*tavarnicorum*), see Krstić, “Familiares,” p. 103. Probably deriving from an earlier local practice, in Angevin Hungary, the *magister tavarnicorum* appears fully formatted as a highest administration officer, also with the role of the main judge presiding juridical cases in towns. See Boglárka Weisz, “Magister tavarnicorum and the towns in the Hungarian Kingdom in the Angevin Era”, *Mesto a Dejiny*, 5/2 (2016), 6-17.

<sup>33</sup> E.g. MNL OL, DL-DF 17820 (May 5, 1476).

tainers with a higher degree of independence<sup>34</sup>. This independence may have been additionally enhanced by Despot George's usual physical absence from his domains, but also by a general pattern of power distribution that operated on Hungary's eastern and southern border (e.g. Transylvania and Slavonia), where, due to the frequency of cross-border conflict, the *castellani* indeed enjoyed rare and special privileges<sup>35</sup>. These allowed them to increase their personal domains, on which they built their own circles of loyals bonded by the principle of *familiaritas* (belonging to their lords' households)<sup>36</sup>. A closer look into the prosopography of Despot's *familiars* and lower ranked "men" suggests that these groups were not exclusively organised on ethnic segregation, but rather tended to include both Despot's local Hungarian serfs and the Slavic emigres already settled on his domains (or recruited from Serbia)<sup>37</sup>.

Among the material benefits which Despot's highly positioned Hungarian *castellani* enjoyed, one first notices their landed grants. Importantly, these grants were not the usual *feuda* resulting from the retainers' feudal service *per se*, but rather represented the expressions of the Despot's private favour to his retainers' loyalty, intended to reward and motivate them for their further service to their Serbian lord –and keep them escaping the loyalties required by the royal power and its favourites in the Branković surroundings–. Because of these generous grants, some of these estates projected a special symbolics of power. On one occasion, for instance, the Despot granted his retainer *Sandrinus de Helumba* the estate of *Lypto* in today's Romanian section of Banat. This estate counted as the Branković's central county residence<sup>38</sup>, and was thus a major honour asset for *Sandrinus*. This is confirmed some time later, when *Sandrinus*' son László (*Ladislaus Sandrini*) started to identify himself through this estate as *de Lypto*, leaving out the pristine identity (*de Helumba, Halumba, Helumbinus*) which his ancestors had used before him. Another similar example comes from the same family, relating to the territory in Göncs granted by Despot as his personal grant to *Sandrinus*. Mentioned in the latter's hands 1453-1456, this estate was located in the county of Zemplény, where *Sandrinus* had previously operated as a

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<sup>34</sup> In late medieval Hungary, the post of *castellani* could be transferred through family and the Gesztys case seems to confirm it, for examples see widely Pál ENGEL, *Közepkori Magyar genealógia/Magyarország világi archontológiája 1301-1457*, I-II, Budapest, Historia-MTA Történettudományi Intézete, 1996. Cf. A. A. Rusu, "Castelani din Transilvania in secolele XIII-XIV (Castellani in Transylvania in 13th and 14th centuries)", *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie și Arheologie Cluj-Napoca*, 22 (1979), 71-98.

<sup>35</sup> Pál Engel, *Honor, vár, ispánság. Válogatott tanulmányok: Szabolcs megye birtokviszonyai a 14–16. Században*, Budapest, Osiris Kiadó, 1982.

<sup>36</sup> MNL OL, DL-DF 81385 (February 6, 1460).

<sup>37</sup> MNL OL, DL-DF 15897 (December 13, 1463), mentioning Katalin the widow of László and their son Mihály as borrowing 2000 gold forints.

<sup>38</sup> MNL OL, DL-DF 222349 (May 31, 1448); MHH, *Diplomataria*, vol. 33, no. CCXVII (May 31, 1448), pp. 147-148; CCXXV (May ?, 1448 –sic-cf. archival original dated to May 31–), p. 158.

*castellanus* (1439)<sup>39</sup>. *Sandrinus* run it independently and with no interference from the Despot, until he donated it on the condition of free and irrevocable donation to the local monastery of St. Catherine which he patroned<sup>40</sup>.

With distinguished posts in the Despot's army, administration and household, as well as ample grants of land within the Despot's estates, his Hungarian retainers advanced on the social ladder too. Interestingly, the majority of these men were aristocrats by origin, but their families were usually of a lower rank, deriving from the traditional, so called "kindred aristocracy". This aristocracy identified itself by common land and still largely operated upon strong ties of blood and familial solidarity typical for the earlier medieval period and the rule of the Hungarian national dynasty (c. 1000–1301). With the feudalisation of the Kingdom under the French Angevins in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, many of these kindreds were detached from the sources of the ruling power and restricted from accessing the royal court, thus remaining on their ancestral land but on the margins of the new feudal system<sup>41</sup>. Within this setting, some individual kinsmen could occasionally differentiate, reinforcing their status by various forms of feudal loyalty, especially in relation to the magnates who aspired to control broader zones within those regions<sup>42</sup>. How this development looked like in the case of Branković men, can be seen from an example of his retainer *Sandrinus* Helumba (Alexander/Sándor). *Sandrinus* of Helumba (*possessio Helumba, Helemba, Halimba*) was recorded among Despot's loyal retainers from the Krassó-Szörény/*Caraş-Severin* county (today largely in Romania)<sup>43</sup>. He was considered one of Despot's closest loyals, acting as his *castellanus* and clearly advising him on important political affairs –as can be best seen from the accusations of János Hunyadi upon this one's imprisonment by the Despot following the Battle at Kosovo Polje (1448)<sup>44</sup>–. Prior to *Sandrinus*, other members of *Sandrinus'* family had

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<sup>39</sup> MNL OL, DL-DF 107325 (December 17, 1456).

<sup>40</sup> Rady, *Nobility*, pp. 110-131; János M. Bak, "Unaeademque nobilitas? Domini i familiares među srednjevjekovnoim plemstvom Kraljevine Ugarske", in Suzana Miljan and Marko Jerković (eds.), *Izabrane teme iz hrvatske povjesti (Selected themes from the Croatian past)*, Zagreb, 2007, pp. 85-96. For the Himfy acting as patrons (they had served Despot Stefan Lazarević), see Cosmin Popa-Gorjanu, *Medieval Nobility in Central Europe: the Himfy Family*, Cluj-Napoca, Mega, 2019, pp. 138-144.

<sup>41</sup> A similar pattern combining kinship, administration of a clan's ancestral territory (*župa*) and familial ties, among the Cilly's local officials is recognised by Miljan, "Grofovi Celjski", p. 110.

<sup>42</sup> Katalin Prajda, *Network and Migration in Early Renaissance Florence: Friends of Friends in the Kingdom of Hungary*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2018, p. 69 noting the rise of a new elite by Sigismund as an answer to the uprising of 1397. Cf. Elemér Mályusz, *Zsigmond király uralma Magyarországon, 1387-1437 (The Rule of King Sigismund in Hungary, 1387-1437)*, Budapest, Gondolat, 1984.

<sup>43</sup> PESTHY, *Krassó vármegye*, vol. 3, no. 211 (May 20, 1424), pp. 303-305.

<sup>44</sup> MNL OL, DL-DF 253500 (March 13, 1450). Interestingly, *Sandrinus* appeared at one point as sharing the post of *castellanus* (of Tálya, in 1448) with another person (László Pataki,

already stood as notable leaders, aspiring to take over the entire valley of the local river Borzwa (Borza, Bârzava). Among them, as particularly notable we find *Sandrinus*' father Tamas and grandfather *Emericus* (Imre), operating together in a "dynastic" type of bond, and notorious for their violence. The Helumba elders were reported as active in the early 1420s and prior to the Despot, they had been formally subjected to the count of Temesvár, at the time controlled by King Sigismund's favourite, Florentine mercenary and high court favourite, Pipo (Spano) of Ozora (1369-1426)<sup>45</sup>. We do not know much about the nature of Helumbas' relation with Pipo, but it is indicative that their excessive violent raids were recorded in 1422-1424, thus coinciding with the last years of Pipo's life. In this period, it is also clear that these Halumba kinsmen ramified from the rest of their kindred, leading a military band of their closest relatives, other kinsmen and their clients against their local neighbours<sup>46</sup>. *Sandrinus*' service to the Despot rose him above this group, as can be concluded from the fact that he appeared as the leader of a company that included his son László, his brothers, other kinsmen and their clients. *Sandrinus* may have been Despot's loyal of a huge trust, yet his power was of a short duration –it could not be fully transferred to the next generation as *Sandrinus*' namely because his own son and heir had died before him<sup>47</sup>–.

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another loyal of Despot Branković), as from MNL OL, DL-DF 222349 (May 31, 1448); MHH, *Diplomataria*, no. CCXVII (May 31, 1448), pp. 147-149, no. CCXXV (1448 –sic-cf. above May 31– above), pp. 154-155. Later, he was recorded at the position of *castellanus* of Boldogko, DL-DF 222523 (April 3, 1453/August 8, 1453); MHH, *Diplomataria*, no. CCXXXIX (April 3, 1453), pp. 168-170. On Branković's tension with Hunyadi, see Spremić, *Despot*, pp. 344-346, 349-351, 365-366.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. other local families, Popa-Gorjanu, *Himfy*.

<sup>46</sup> A document in PESTHY, *Krassó*, vol. 3, no. 211 (May 20, 1424), pp. 303-305, hinting at a ramification of the kindred by mentioning *Sandrinus* and his brothers as acting together with their collaterals; the same document mentions them as noble (*Nobilium de Helomba*). PESTHY, *Krassó*, vol. 3, no. 209 (December 19, 1422), pp. 301-302, mentions that *Sandrinus*' elders confronted the kinsmen of their rival Stefan of Remeta over a mill on the river of *Kiralythawa* and river *Borzauize*. RADY, *Nobility*, p. 100, noted different inheritance rules maintained by different kindreds, suggesting that this practice should be further checked in the broader perspective of the Hungarian southern border, and the local families' response to the growing Ottoman danger.

<sup>47</sup> For *Sandrinus*' branch and their individual networks, see Pesthy, *Krassó*, vol. 3, no. 211, pp. 303-304, *Sandrinus* and his brothers (*fratri uterini*) and *Ladislus filius Sandrini* [...] *pro se ipsis personaliter et pro vniversis fratribus et proximis ipsorum*. Ladislus' mention in this document suggests that *Sandrinus* may have already started to transfer some degree of his military and familial leadership to his son in this period. *Sandrinus* must have died after March 24, 1456, which is when he was documented as sick and preparing his last will MNL OL, DL-DF 284169 (original and copy) (March 24, 1456). This document reveals that László had already been dead by this time, leaving behind his widow (Catharine) who was about to give birth to their child, whom *Sandrinus* invested with significant portions of his property (the date in the context of his widow's pregnancy would date László's death to a period between July 1455 –*ante quem non*– and March 1456).

In his Hungarian estates, Despot Branković employed his Serbian subjects too, bringing some directly from Serbia, or perhaps “inheriting” a number of them from his uncle’s Hungarian domain. Among these, modern scholarship knows well of a Vukosav, the *castellanus* of Világosvár, and his vice-*castellanus* Brajan or *vajda* Jakša, with his own ample network of retainers, family and relatives<sup>48</sup>. Jakša’s Slavic origin and arrangement of power (also signalled by his title of *vajda*/Serb. *vojvoda*, deriving from Lat. *dux*<sup>49</sup>) generally corresponded with the tasks similar to those of his Hungarian peers –most importantly, military loyalty and leadership of Despot’s military bands, where they commanded their compatriots, Serbian freemen and dependent peasants–. In those bands, the power of Despot’s Serbian retainers was based on their ancestral practices that formed the part of the Serbian customary law, namely because the Serbs were not subject to the Hungarian royal justice<sup>50</sup>. It is for this same reason that Serbian *vajdák* could neither administer Despot’s Hungarian subjects as thus they essentially challenged (and disconnected!) Hungarian royal administration in the counties where the Despot would appoint these people as *castellani*. The Serbian *castellani* were, therefore, subject only to the Despot<sup>51</sup>, and where their appointment would happen, those counties were seen by the King’s administration as Despot’s open threat to the royal instances of power. This explains frequent disputes with his neighbours and these people’s allegations over Despot’s Serbian retinue, as well as the mutual violence that was directed against

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<sup>48</sup> For Brajan MNL-OL, DL 55345; Engel, *Archontológia*, vol. 1, p. 210, n. 304. A *Nicholas Raacz* (Serb) was documented as the *castellanus* of Munkach MNL OL, DL-DF 221558; DL 12252; Engel, *Archontológia*, vol. 1, pp. 369–370, or a *Stepan* (MNL OL, DL 71964; P), cf. Krstić, “Familiars,” p. 107, where some more Serbs were identified around the castle of Világosvár, recognised by Krstić as a point of Despot’s conflict with Hungarian governor János Hunyadi. For men in Torontál and other estates, see Krstić, *ibid.*, p. 108 and p. 105, n. 56, also suggests that one of Despot’s Serbian *vaydas/vojvodas* employed in Hungary may have been his highly ranked official from Serbia, Mihailo Angelović.

<sup>49</sup> Momčilo Spremić, “Porodica Jakšić u Banatu”, *Banat kroz vekove: slojevi kultura Banata–Zbornik radova (Banat through centuries: layers of cultures of Banat–Collected works)*, Belgrade, Vukova zadužbina, 2010, pp. 33-34.

<sup>50</sup> This is, however, hard to follow in detail as the kin aristocracy in Serbia and their organisation had already changed by this time. For a different interpretation of the local Slavic leaders subject to the Cilly in Slavonia (that the *vojvode* were not of aristocratic background), Miljan, “Familiaritas”, p. 127. For Slavic emigres in Hungary, Dušanka Dinić-Knežević, “Slovenski živalj u urbanim naseljima srednjevekovne južne Ugarske (Slavic population in urban settlements of southern Hungary)”, *Zbornik Matice srpske za istoriju*, 37 (1988), 7-41.

<sup>51</sup> The article XXV of King Albert’s law of May 29, 1439: *Item iuxta requisitionem regnicolarum nostrorum nos unacum eisdem operabimus, quod despotus Rascie et comes Cilie ceterique magnates, dominia, videlicet possessiones, castra, fortalitia, civitates, opida et alia bona in hoc regno Hungarie habentes et tenentes huiusmodi castra, fortalitia, opida civitates et possessiones non advenis et forensibus, sed Hungaris hominibus pro honore dare debeant*, in János M. Bak, *Online Decreta Regni medievalis Hungariae–The Laws of the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary*, p. 502 [at digitalcommons.usu.edu/lib\_mono/4, accessed December 30, 2021].

the rivals' territories and dependents<sup>52</sup>, while Despot parallelly complained to the royal court claiming himself to be a victim of these conflicts<sup>53</sup>, and the royal court's attentively observed the situation, reacting with arbitration in cases when it deemed it worth to mediate in a conflict. All these issues took place in the last years of King Sigismund's rule, culminating with the law that decisively prohibited the participation of Despot's Serbs in Hungarian administration (1439)<sup>54</sup>. Later this situation further escalated, leading to an open conflict, after Despot Lazar (1456–1458) took part in the dissensions between the supporters of King Ladislaus V and the Hunyadi<sup>55</sup>. Given this, the Despot's favouring of his Serbs as military leaders and their frequency of appearance in the 1440s may have been regarded as his justification for piling up of the forces needed for the anti-Ottoman defence, but it surely represented a more sophisticated power play between his ambitions to integrate his Serbian loyals into the Hungarian structures of provincial power, and the urge of Hungary's royal administration to protect the domain from the interference of foreigners.

The Despot's Hungarian and Serbian retinue clearly mutually collaborated best in military matters. In that, they relied upon a pool of Despot's lower retainers and serfs<sup>56</sup>. These people were largely of a common origin and their service, in most cases, was the part of their feudal obligation, both to the Despot's retainers and him in person. Little is known about the prosopography or social milieu of these men and the documents usually impersonalised them as *homines* or *nonnulli populi despothi*<sup>57</sup>, indicating that they did not have a common identity and that they were close to the lower social margin,

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<sup>52</sup> MHH, *Diplomataria*, vol. 33, no. DXXVI (June 10, 1448), p. 10 and no. DXXVII (November 9, 1448). Cf. with Slavonia, Miljan, "Grofovi Celjski", p. 106, who sees it as the result of the castellan's *praepotenza*.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. László's intention to donate land to a Vardai Miklos and his cousin Perlek that had previously been in possession by Despot George, PEsthy, *Krassó*, vol. 3, no. DXXIV (August 1, 1440). A document from MHH, *Diplomataria*, no. CLXVIII (July 16, 1433), p. 93.

<sup>54</sup> Hungarian laws made after the death of King Sigismund: King Albert (May 29, 1439), chapter XXV; Coronation Paternt of King Wladislas I (1440-44) of Hungary (July 20, 1440), chapter IV; Law of the Diet of Hungary (March 25, 1447), chapter XXXII (Bak, *Online Decreta*, pp. 502, 536, 602); additionally strengthened by Despot's formal promise to János Hunyadi that he wouldn't bring his men.

<sup>55</sup> Momčilo Spremić, "Despot Lazar Branković", *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta*, 50 (2013), 899–912.

<sup>56</sup> For similar examples of multi-ethnicity in nearby Transylvania, see Cosmin Popa-Gorjanu, "Multi-Ethnicity and Memory in Medieval Transylvania", in Przemysław Wiszewski (ed.), *Memories in Multi-Ethnic Societies: Cohesion in Multi-Ethnic Societies in Europe from c. 1000 to the Present*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2020, vol. 1, pp. 73-92.

<sup>57</sup> This type of service seems to be widespread in the Kingdom's marginal areas, and we also find it in Slavonia, as well as in Upper Hungary and Danube area, which came out of defence needs and the opportunity to increase its supplies with the resources of the local land-owners.



despite the fact that, as Martyn Rady noted, these “men” usually bore the core weight of serving the domain<sup>58</sup>.

A more detailed look, however, into the source fragments mentioning these people, one can realise that this group was more diversified than one would assume, as this diversification went through both ethnic and social criteria<sup>59</sup>. Ethnically, Despot’s men represented a mix of Hungarians and Serbs, which made them equally “cosmopolitan” as Despot’s highest retainers, but, unlike them, the “men” were more diversified socially. Among them, one finds *iobagyok* – a fluctuating mass of castle warriors granted with lands for their service and initially formally subject to the King, but by this time reduced to tax-paying soldiers–. Others were dependent serfs-peasants, or free soldiers entitled to use (but, unlike *iobagyok*, not to own!) land in exchange for their military service<sup>60</sup>. Unlike Despot’s noble retainers, whose position was conditioned greatly by their personal proximity to their lord and the Branković personal grants, these men’s obligations and rewards were the outcome of various levels of a feudal service, first and foremost in Despot’s military company.

Sometime after Despot George’s death, the power of a foreign (ruling by the change, novelty, conquest) elite, settling and governing a new region, was defined in a paradigm of rulership elaborated by Nicholo Machhiavelli. In his *Prince* (1513), Macchiavelli proposed the “new” rulers to use three types of rulership: to destroy, to permanently settle or to position loyal collaborators instead<sup>61</sup>. Despot George Branković died long before the *Prince* was publis-

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<sup>58</sup> Rady, *Nobility*, p. 59.

<sup>59</sup> These men were usually mentioned in evidence about the Despot’s military and their campaigns against his neighbours. Cf. Dinić-Knežević, “Slovenski živalj”, pp. 7-41; Spremić, *Despot*, p. 600. A similar disposition towards “foreign” retainers was noted in the case of German retainers to the Counts of Cilly, as from Miljan, “Grofovi Celjski”, pp. 112-113, understanding it as a pattern by which the Counts of Cilly favoured their German compatriots.

<sup>60</sup> According to Halász, “*Iobagio castri*”, pp. 119-134, the castle warriors held the offices of the castle district, linking them with royal domain, while the *castrenses* (Hung. várnépbéliek), providing the castle with due vigilance, had lesser liberty and wider service than the *iobagiones castri*. Halász also pointed out to status change of these groups in the 13th century, when some of them were reduced to serfs or elevated to noble positions but also in some parts of Hungary (North to the river Drava) merging both terms. In Slavonia the situation was a little bit different, additionally blurring *castrenses* with castle warriors. Generally, the lands of castle warriors were taxable and sellable, while *castrenses* only used the lands but could not own them. This also made a more visible line between their economic status, with the former considered as rich and latter as poor.

<sup>61</sup> Nicolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* (trans. W. K. Marriott) [at The Project Gutenberg eBook of *The Prince*, by Nicolo Machiavelli, accessed December 01, 2021], chapter 5: “Whenever those states which have been acquired as stated have been accustomed to live under their own laws and in freedom, there are three courses for those who wish to hold them: the first is to ruin them, the next is to reside there in person, the third is to permit them to live under their own laws, drawing a tribute, and establishing within it an oligarchy which will keep it friendly to you. Because such a government, being created by the prince, knows that it cannot stand

hed, so he could not be aware of this advice for his ruling practice, but his rulership was certainly among those paradigms that informed Machiavelli's elaboration of a "foreign" government –in which the lord did not have to be immediately present in his foreign domain to be able to efficiently control it, and even more importantly, actively use it in his political pursuits–. Despot George did it by relying upon his hybrid, "cosmopolitan-like" elite<sup>62</sup> that consisted of both local Hungarians and Despot's ethnic Serbs<sup>63</sup>, both groups providing their lord with a service –military and/or administrative–. How they did it was largely due to their personal capacities, but also some common models of advancement, in which lower local territorial kindreds, fairly marginalised by then, generated new forces ready to advance by rendering services (largely military, but also courtly) to a new foreign lord, in exchange for open paths of social advancement and ample possessions and privileges. Was it a "fair trade"? Up to some point certainly yes as, apart from the men's gain in properties and privileges, the Despot too received a company of diverse, capable, and relatively young entourage, well-connected locally, with comprehensive understanding and capacity of rendering military and courtly service, through which he could not just maintain or defend his domain when he was absent, but also start expanding his power. This he clearly attempted to do by imposing his seigneurial power over the royal control of his counties and keeping here his most loyal retainers to conveniently bridge the post in his domain's administration and jurisdiction to those of the provincial royal institutions of power. This was not, though, Despot's attempt to integrate himself or his Hungarian officials, administrators and *castellani*, or their Serbian peers (who were systematically segregated by the royal authorities and laws), but, in fact, represented something quite the opposite –Despot's attempt to neutralise the royal control over his domain and impose his own control all around his domain's borders–. The court of his Hungarian sovereign was quite aware of this and it is not by accident that Despot's men were increasingly involved in local violence and conflict, just as it should be no surprise to learn that soon after the Despot's death (1456)<sup>64</sup>, the "soft fabric" of his retinue's social capacity –especially its ties of feudal solidarity, personal

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without his friendship and interest, and does its utmost to support him; and therefore he who would keep a city accustomed to freedom will hold it more easily by the means of its own citizens than in any other way".

<sup>62</sup> A similar case is found elsewhere in the broader area where the border line went between the Latin/Roman Catholic and the "Greek"/Orthodox Christian world went. For the Neapolitan Tocco of the Ionian islands and the "cosmopolitanism" of their rule see Thekla Sansaridou-Hendrickx, "The worldview of the Chronicle of the Tocco", *Byzantiaka*, 21 (2000), 195-241.

<sup>63</sup> This is particularly seen with possessions in Maros-Boros-Jenő and Világos in the times of King Ladislas.

<sup>64</sup> Spremić, *Despot*, pp. 600-601 notes that by the final take-over of Serbia by the Ottomans, all these possessions had already been taken from the Despot for a reason that cannot be completely answered today.

skills, kinship relations of aristocratic clans and their alliances, and, above all, loyalty– simply just switched to a new overlord.

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