

György Domokos

THE PLAGUE AND THE CHEETAH
REPORTS FROM HUNGARY BY ERCOLE PIO, IPPOLITO I D'ESTE'S
AGENT, 1508–1510*

The goal of the Vestigia I (2010–2015, OTKA no. 81430) research project was to find and process, to the extent possible, documents preserved in four public collections and relevant to Hungary in the period 1300–1550, two in Modena and two in Milan. The choice of the two libraries and the two archives, made in 2010, was dictated by practical concerns but also by the fact that the Sforza-court and the Este-court were stable and important contacts in Italy for the Hungarian royal court. Vestigia II (2018–2022, NKFIH no. K 128797) aimed, on one hand, to extend the research on these collections into the 1550–1600 period, and on the other, to expand it to include the archives of Mantua.

Naturally, most of the documents preserved in the State Archives of Modena are connected to the Queen of Hungary, Beatrice of Aragon,¹ and her nephew, Ippolito I d'Este.² One coherent set of the documents currently being processed consists of Ippolito's account books, which provide a detailed picture of the financial situation, as well as of everyday life in Hungary at the turn of the 16th century. It goes without saying that the letters written by the two prominent personalities themselves give a great deal of important information, but the reports and letters by those agents, envoys and emissaries who had been sent from Ferrara to Hungary are at least as important – and have hitherto perhaps been the subject of less research. These were largely Ippolito's delegates, tasked with representing the political and material interests of their lord – who had long been absent from Hungary – in Esztergom (Strigonium, Gran), Buda (Ofen), Eger (Agría, Erlau) and elsewhere.

The title of the present paper was inspired by the fact that the Italian agents in question often report events and circumstances that by their very nature

* The paper was published originally in Italian: Domokos, “La peste e il pardo: Testimonianze di Ercole Pio, agente di Ippolito d'Este in Ungheria negli anni 1508–1510.” Then in Hungarian: Domokos, “A pestis és a gepárd: Ercole Pio, Estei Hippolit egy ügynökének beszámolói Magyarországról (1508–1510).” Since then all the letters of Ercole Pio have been published with an introductory essay on his life and correspondence: Domokos, *A jámbor Herkules: Estei Hippolit bíboros egri kormányzója, Ercole Pio beszámolói Magyarországról 1508–1510*. The citations are taken from this later edition.

¹ Beatrice of Aragon (1457–1508), Queen of Hungary, wife of King Matthias (1476–1490), wife of King Vladislaus II (1490–1500).

² Ippolito I d'Este (1479–1520) Archbishop of Esztergom (1486–1497), Bishop of Eger (1497–1520), Cardinal (1493–1520).

would not normally find their way into official documents. Here we would like to present some incidents from the letters of a relatively well-known agent, Ercole Pio, bishopric of Eger's governor – concerning, among other things, the plague and a cheetah –, and thereby illustrate the typical features of this kind of sources, which could potentially be invaluable for the study of Hungarian history.

Ercole Pio was one of the dozens of agents, envoys and emissaries who came to Hungary in the service of Ippolito I d'Este. He spent two years in Hungary, from the winter of 1508 to the autumn of 1510. The State Archives of Modena preserves 25 letters written by him during this period.³ His activities can be traced in at least 14 other documents preserved in Hungarian and Slovak archives (as the Database of Archival Documents of Medieval Hungary indicates):⁴ these are mostly tithe contracts, invoices and loan receipts, which will be analysed in detail in another study.

Ercole Pio's provenance from the noble Pio di Savoia family is evidenced first and foremost by his seal, which he used on nearly all the documents he wrote, whether preserved in Modena or in the territory of the former kingdom of Hungary. On the seal the governor's initials (*H. P.*) are added the coat of arms of the Pio di Savoia family. He generally signs his letters *Servulus Her.Pius*, *Her. P.*, *Hercules Pius* or, in Italian, *Hercule Pio*. He occasionally jokes with his name in the context of the letter, e.g. by adding "unhappy and faithful servant, who regrets being a merciless Hercules to himself, while merciful to others,"⁵ or by writing *Impius* instead of *Pius*, because he is "the first among the unhappy, your faithful servant, Hercules not merciful to himself."⁶

³ The letters written by him personally are found in the fond called *Archivio Segreto Estense, Cancelleria ducale, Carteggio ambasciatori, Ungheria* of the State Archives of Modena (ASMo), unit "busta 4," bundle 6; the draft of the accompanying instructions (also cited in this paper) is found in bundle 7.

⁴ These digitalized documents can be found under the numbers HU-MNL-OL-U-DF 229370, 216983, 208937, 210538, 264566, 67503, 217018, 229383, 22035, 46943, 229385, 217021 in the database, dated between 21 June 1509 and 1 August 1510, the original ones currently are preserved in the Komárom-Esztergom County Archive (originally in the Esztergom Cathedral Chapter Notarial Archive), the Heves County Archive (originally in the Private Archive of the Eger Cathedral Chapter), in the Levoča State Archive (originally in the Szepes [Spiš] Archive, Slovakia), the National Archive of Hungary (originally in the Szirmay family's archive and other archives) and in the Poprad State Archive (originally in Bártfa [Bardejov] and Eperjes [Prešov], Slovakia).

⁵ *"Io infelicissimo e fidelissimo servitore di Vostra Signoria, quale si pente esser nato Hercule crudele a sé medesimo, pio cum gli altri"* Ercole Pio's letter to Ippolito I d'Este, 4 February 1510 ASMo ASE C. Est. Amb. Ungh. b. 4/6,12, f 8r. (Vestigia database no. 1768, 1769).

⁶ *"fra gli scontenti il primo suo di servi fidelissimo Hercule Impio a sé medesimo"* Ercole Pio's letter to Ippolito I d'Este, 11 February 1510 ASMo ASE C. Est. Amb. Ungh. b. 4/6,14, f 2v. (Vestigia database no. 1771).

The coat of arms of the Pio di Savoia family, also recognisable on the seal Ercole used in Hungary, is of the following description: in the first quarter of a quartered shield is a cross argent on a field azure with bezants. The second and third quarters each feature two stripes argent and two stripes gules, while the fourth quarter a lion rampant vert on a golden field. This quartered shield is crested with an eagle. Ercole Pio's identification is further corroborated by the fact that in the address of the instructions from Ippolito, dated 1510 and discovered in the same fond, his name is given as *Her. Pio de Sabaudia*, and in documents from Hungary he calls himself *Hercules Pius de Sabaudia Carpi*.

Within the family, and in the period in general, the name Ercole is by no means unique: Ippolito's father was Duke Ercole d'Este, and there is another, more famous, Ercole Pio in the governor's own family (scil. the third lord of Sassuolo, 1540–1576). The protagonist of the present paper, however, is without doubt the second son of the founder of the "Sassuolo branch" of the family, Prince Marco II (1430–1494). His mother was Eleonora del Carretto.⁷ What we know of his life comes from Girolamo Tiraboschi's notes in the *Biblioteca Modenese*,⁸ and what Anna Maria Ori has found in the relevant documents in the City Archives of Carpi. These show that his tutor (and the tutor of his brothers) was Giovanni della Porta, and that he was destined for an ecclesiastical career, which was secured for him by his father in 1460, when he was about four years old, in the form of the benefice of the Sant'Antonio Abate church. In 1508 he resigned this benefice to a certain Paolo Brusati, perhaps because Ippolito offered him a more lucrative position. In the same year he also resigned the benefice of the San Michele church in Vienne, which he had enjoyed since 1502. One of Ercole's numerous siblings was Emilia Pio,⁹ who is mentioned in Baldassare Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*¹⁰ as well as towards the end of Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*.¹¹ Ariosto's schoolmate in childhood, Alberto Pio¹² was Ercole's cousin from the other branch of the family. Ariosto's name also features in some of Ercole's letters, in which he recommends to Ippolito's secretary potential candidates to replace him in Eger.¹³ It is well known

⁷ I am indebted to Anna Maria Ori, excellent local historian of Carpi, for this piece of information. The most important source is: Litta, *Famiglie celebri italiane*.

⁸ Tiraboschi, *Biblioteca modenese, o notizie della vita e delle opere degli scrittori natii degli stati del serenissimo signor duca di Modena*, IV:203–4.

⁹ Emilia Pio di Savoia (?–1520), wife of Antonio da Montefeltro.

¹⁰ Castiglione refers to her in the form Emilia Pia, as Antonio Montefeltro's wife (widow): Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*.

¹¹ Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso e opere minori scelte*, II. 1279.

¹² Alberto III Pio (1475–1531), Prince of Carpi.

¹³ Ercole Pio's letter to Tommaso Fusco, secretary of Ippolito I d'Este, Buda, 24 August 1509 ASMo ASE C. Est. Amb. Ungh. b. 4/6,7, f 1r. (Vestigia database no. 1763).

that Ariosto's loss of rapport with cardinal Ippolito was the consequence of his unwillingness to accompany him to Hungary.¹⁴

Besides biographic details, Ercole also left behind two sonnets. These are included in the *Collettanee* assembled and printed in 1504, in memory of the celebrated improvisational musician-poet of the period, Serafino Ciminelli¹⁵ after his death.¹⁶

He arrived in Hungary after a long journey in the winter of 1508. He made his way via Austria. The city named as Hala in one of his letters can only be identified as Hall in Tyrol, famous at the time for its mint (and not as Halle in Saxony, as suggested by the later mistaken addition of the word "Sassonia" on the letter). It seems that he had travelled to Hall overland: he arrived here at the end of 1508, reporting back as soon as he arrived, "still with his spurs on his heels."¹⁷ From Hall he sailed down the river Inn to Passau, then continued down the Danube. He arrived in Vienna on 2 December, together with his companions and his strange cargo. In Hungary he was stationed in Eger, Ippolito's nominal episcopal seat and the main source of his income. The job offered to Ercole was to take over the governorship of the Eger bishopric from the ailing and tired Taddeo Lardi,¹⁸ a task which, as his letters reveal, he set about with great energy. Based on these data we may estimate Ercole's age as 51 or 52 when, after resigning from his ecclesiastical benefices, all trace of him in Italy is lost.

In all his letters, Ercole uses endless lists of excessively flattering formulas, and the letters written in his own hand are sometimes fourteen or even sixteen pages long. He calls Ippolito his "sole lord and patron,"¹⁹ and mentions in several of his letters that he only took the job for one year. He soon came to realise, however, that a job which had looked so easy from a distance was complicated by many difficulties, chief among which were the Hungarians themselves, who disliked foreigners. To quote from a 1509 letter of his:

¹⁴ Ariosto, *Satire*, 127–39; Ferroni, „Ludovico Ariosto,” 363.

¹⁵ Serafino Ciminelli/Serafino Aquilano (1466–1500), Italian poet and musician.

¹⁶ Bologna, "*Collettanee*" in *morte di Serafino Aquilano*.

¹⁷ "*cum gli speroni in piedi*"; Ercole Pio's letter to Ippolito d'Este, 21 November 1508 ASMo, ASE C. Est. Amb. Ungh. b. 4/6,1, f 1r. (Vestigia database no. 1753).

¹⁸ Taddeo Lardi, Governor of Bishopric of Eger (1501–1508, 1510–1512).

¹⁹ "*Illustrissimo mio unico Signore e patrono*" e.g. in Ercole Pio's letter to Ippolito I d'Este, 21 November 1508 ASMo ASE C. Est. Amb. Ungh. b. 4/6,1, f 1r. (Vestigia database no. 1753).

As Your Grace knows well, we need to be very dexterous in handling them because they believe that we Italians take away all the gold of the country, and then of course they are not keen on our nation – naturally I am here talking about those of the lower ranks, not His Majesty the King or the barons, who are all excellent and who are full of goodness and virtue.²⁰

In addition, as soon as he arrived in Hungary he realised that the entire country was being ravaged by plague. We do not know where he got his information, but he reports in detail that the king's court had moved temporarily to Nagyszombat (Tyrnavia, Tyrnau, today Trnava, Slovakia), and he was also aware that cardinal Tamás Bakóc²¹ had fled to Eger, his former seat, because of the epidemic. On arriving in Eger, Ercole Pio reported back on 12 January 1509:

Because of the great plague that has broken out in Buda, I decided that this would present a grave danger to the animals that Your Grace has sent, so I prolonged my journey by seven days lest I should be compelled to return here or to Buda, because that would increase my expenses twentyfold.²²

In the same letter Ercole proceeds to describe their reception at the king's court in Nagyszombat in his colourful style. What made the occasion special was that he brought, among others, a live cheetah as a gift from Ippolito to King Vladislaus II²³ – it was with this animal that he had not wished to travel to Eger and then back. Besides the cheetah they were also taking hunting dogs and hawks as well as handlers (called Rizzo and Mirandola) to accompany the animals.

From Vienna he sailed as far as Pressburg (Posonium, Pozsony, today Bratislava, Slovakia) in constant fear, as he claims, that the Danube might freeze any time. He adds details to the eventful journey with the imagination of a well-rounded novelist: the Italians rowing through icy winds past plague-rid-

²⁰ *“come scia Vostra Signoria meglio di me, bisogna gubernarsi fra costoro cum grandissima destreza, e pargli a loro che noi italiani debiano sorbire tutto lo oro del regno, ultra che naturalmente non sono molto amici al nostro nome delli tristi parlo, non della Maestà del Signor Re, né de Signori baroni, quali sono tutti excellentissimi e pieni di ogni bontate e virtute.”* Ercole Pio's letter to Ippolito I d'Este, 27 March 1509 ASMo ASE C. Est. Amb. Ungh. b. 4/6,5, f 2v. (Vestigia database no. 1758).

²¹ Tamás Bakóc (1442–1521), elected Bishop of Eger (1493–1497), Bishop of Eger (1497–1498), Archbishop of Esztergom (1498–1521), Cardinal (1500–1521), Chancellor (1491–1521).

²² *“per la peste grande che era in Buda; unde me deliberai per ogni periculo che havesse potuto intervenire de quelli animali mandati per Vostra Signoria Illustrissima transferire sino lie e alongare il camino delle sette giornate com'io feci, che havere poi a tornare o lie o a Buda che saria stato vinti volte più spesa che non fu.”* Ercole Pio's letter to Ippolito I d'Este, 12 January 1509 ASMo ASE C. Est. Amb. Ungh. b. 4/6,3, f 1r. (Vestigia database no. 1755–1756).

²³ Vladislaus II Jagiellon/ Vladislav II Jagellonský (1456–1516), King of Bohemia (1471–1516), King of Hungary (1490–1516).

den riverside villages with 500, 1000, even 1500 dead, with Ercole himself rowing too to set an example and lift his companions' spirits. He depicts vicar of Bakóc in Esztergom, Tommaso Amadei,²⁴ in a particularly unfavourable light, after he had denied accommodation to his compatriots in the middle of the night and shut the door on them.

The following excerpts from this letter are given here in order to illustrate the style of the narration, and to introduce this peculiar piece of literature from the poet Ercole Pio. The first extract describes the occasion when Ercole Pio meets the Hungarian king, Vladislaus II in the temporary royal court at Nagyszombat. It is very rare in Hungarian sources to find such vivid descriptions of similar scenes, down to the very gestures and words of the king.

His Majesty remained standing all the time while I was speaking, at which all those present – and there were many – were very much surprised, and said that, according to the many Italians present, they did not remember any occasion when His Majesty had been so kind to a foreigner, or had spoken to one in such friendly words as he had to me.²⁵

The audience had been secured for Ercole Pio by an Italian chamberlain of the king (or perhaps a certain János Deák mentioned in the letter). Is the king's friendly demeanour a realistic element, or is Ercole Pio trying to present himself to Ippolito in as favourable a light as was possible by describing such a ceremonial reception?

The following excerpt describes how the gifts were presented to the king:

Then I told him that Your Grace had sent some presents to him, and I praised these and described them in as colourful terms as seemed best to me; and that when he so ordered I would show them, and he responded most graciously that he was ready. There was a cheetah on the back of a horse, which His Majesty looked at from the window of a ground-floor hall; and he was very much surprised and asked me what it was good for. I told him, and also how swift it was, and he was too pleased with this for words.²⁶

²⁴ Tommaso Amadei, Vicar of Archbishop of Esztergom (1495–1510).

²⁵ *“sua Maestà sempre stete in piedi mentre ch'io parlai gli cum grande admiratione de tutti gli astanti quali erano una gran moltitudine, afirmando ciascuno, per quanto me diceano molti italiani che ancho vi erano, che non se ricordava haver mai visto Sua Maestà tanto acarezar forastiero ne sì domesticamente parlare come facto havea meco.”* Ercole Pio's letter to Ippolito I d'Este, 12 January 1509 ASMo ASE C. Est. Amb. Ungh. b. 4/6,3, ff 1r–1v. (Vestigia database no. 1755–1756).

²⁶ *“Dissegli poi Vostra Signoria Illustrissima havergli mandato alcuno presente, honestando e arricchendo il presente come meglio me parse, quando gli piacesse ch'io gli presentassi; risposemi gratissimamente che era a posta mia. Ivi erano disposti il pardo a cavallo quale vide*

A little later in the same letter, Ercole Pio tells of the impact that the appearance of the exotic animal had on the Hungarians present:

My Dear Lord, if Your Grace had seen how those Hungarians stared at the cheetah, you would have been surprised; it seemed as if the whole country had come together to see this marvel while we had to wait for our admission.²⁷

The vogue of hunting with cheetahs had probably been imported to Italy from Byzantium, perhaps via the dignitaries coming to the synod of Ferrara–Florence in the middle of the 15th century. This is suggested by, among other things, the fresco painted by Benozzo Gozzoli on the wall of the Chapel of the Three Magi of the Medici-Riccardi palace in Florence (cca. 1459), in which one of the magi is represented with a cheetah on his saddle. It is possible that the menageries of Ferrara and Pavia had cheetahs at this time, and since King Matthias I (1458–1490) had also been presented with a lion by the Republic of Florence,²⁸ it is a plausible assumption that this highly exquisite form of the presentation of aristocratic gifts is repeated here in 1508, in Nagyszombat. In a later letter Ercole reports that the king marvelled only at the speed of the cheetah at that time, but the animal features in yet another letter two years later, which reports that indeed it had been used for hunting, and even became a royal present:

And to bring you news of the cheetah, Your Grace may wish to know that His Majesty the king was happy to hunt with it on several occasions, and seems to have been helped by the Heavens too, since each time he had a respectable catch, especially once in Bohemia, where it killed a two- or three-year-old stag in front of his horse's legs. And now he is sending the cheetah as a magnificent present to the king of Poland,²⁹ along with Rizzo, who has been close to death, the poor man.³⁰

Sua Maestà per una finestra da una camera terrena ove stava et molto lo miròe dimandandomi a che era bono. Dissegli a che et di quanta velocitate era che gli fu tanto caro quanto dire sia possibile.” Ercole Pio’s letter to Ippolito I d’Este, 12 January 1509 ASMo ASE C. Est. Amb. Ungh. b. 4/6,3, f 1v. (Vestigia database no. 1755–1756).

²⁷ “*Signor mio caro, se Vostra Signoria Illustrissima havesse potuto vedere quanta admiratione porgea quello pardo a quelli ungari, sariasse spantata de maraveglia, credo che tutta quella terra venne in uno subito li a questo miracolo.*” Ercole Pio’s letter to Ippolito I d’Este, 12 January 1509 ASMo ASE C. Est. Amb. Ungh. b. 4/6,3, f 1v. (Vestigia database no. 1755–1756).

²⁸ This is evidenced by a letter from the Republic of Florence to King Matthias I dated 23 December 1469 as well as by Mathias’ response dated 17 February 1470, cf. Fraknói, *Mátyás király levelei, külügyi osztály*, 1:241–242., 243., respectively).

²⁹ Sigismund I the Old (Jagiellon)/Zygmunt I Stary/Žygimantas II Senasis (1467–1548), King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania (1506–1548), brother of King Vladislaus II.

³⁰ “*Et per darli novella del pardo: intenderà Vostra Signoria come la Maestà del Re ne ha preso molte volte piacere a caccia, e è parso che habia havuto uno influxo celeste, in tale effecto, però che sempre ha facto honorevole preda, ma specialmente in Bohemia di uno cervo di dui on*

When Ercole arrived in 1508, however, the king was even happier with the other presents sent by Ippolito: the hunting dogs and the hawks.

The dogs were taken to him in the hall, as were the hawks, and he wanted to know everything about the former as well as the latter. I told him what purpose they served, praising them all. He seemed to take greater delight in the dogs than in the hawks. After I gave him all these, I told him that Your Grace had sent masters along with the animals who knew how to feed them and handle them, if His Majesty thought that it was to his liking and if he so wished I could leave them there or take them with me according to his orders. With deep gratitude to Your Grace he answered that he was happy to accept them, as well as the animals. [...] After this I also gave him my own small presents, first some balm in an antique-looking porcelain container, which I find really pretty, and seeing this His Majesty took it out of my hand at once, and seemed very pleased with it, and said these very words: “Balsamum est istud?,” taking a little into his hand.³¹

The chamberlain who had secured the meeting later reported that the king had talked about the gifts even at dinner, and had applied the balm to his ulcerous legs. Presents of smaller value were also given to the king:

Then I gave him about twenty-five beautiful glass vessels, one by one, with which he was very pleased, and then the other things: salamis, large and beautiful cheeses, marzolino, fresh citrons, lemons and oranges, then eight saplings as well as different products: vinegar, fine rose water, and I tried to make him taste these, but he resisted and kept saying “non oportet, non oportet.”³²

tri anni, amazateli quasi inanti a piedi del cavallo.” Ercole Pio’s letter to Ippolito I d’Este, 25 April 1509 ASMo ASE C. Est. Amb. Ungh. b. 4/6,16, f 2v. (Vestigia database no. 1773).

³¹ “*Gli cani forno conducti in camera e cossi gli falconi e del uno e l’altro vuolse informatione. Dissegli a che erano boni, laudandogli summamente l’uno e l’altro, delli cani mostròe più piacere che de falconi. Cossi presentatogli il tutto dissi che ancho Vostra Signoria ultra gli animali gli havea mandati gli maestri da nutrirgli e adoperargli ad ogni bisogno acciò Sua Maestà ne potesse a voglia sua havere piacere, quando gli piacesse, ch’io ero per lassargli et ricondurgli secondo la mi commandaria. Me rispose rigratiando assai Vostra Signoria che l’uno e l’altro acceptava voluntieri. Poi gli feci anch’io quelli poveri presentuzi in nome mio, dandogli prima il balsamo in uno vassetto alla anticha de porzolana, a juditio mio assai bello, il che inteso che era, subito Sua Maestà lo tolse in mano mostrandone tanto contento quanto sia possibile, dicendo proprio queste parole: balsamum est istud e tenendo in mano un pezo.*” Ercole Pio’s letter to Ippolito I d’Este, 12 January 1509 ASMo ASE C. Est. Amb. Ungh. b. 4/6,3, f 1v. (Vestigia database no. 1755–1756).

³² “*poi gli presentai circa 25 pezi di vetri bellissimi che gli forno ultra modo grati, cossi ad uno ad uno gli dèi gli altri, e salami e forme de formagio molto grande e bello e marzolini e cedri e limoni et aranzi freschi e 8 albergli grandi di confecti varii de vinaceto et uno pieno di iuleb rosato domasino perfectissimo et di questi vuolse gli io fare la credenza, non vuolse mai dicendo non oportet, non oportet.*” Ercole Pio’s letter to Ippolito I d’Este, 12 January 1509 ASMo ASE C. Est. Amb. Ungh. b. 4/6,3, f 1v. (Vestigia database no. 1755–1756).

Finally, we come to the moment of parting, and the governor again quotes the king verbatim.

I turned to His Majesty and said I would happily stay as long as he ordered, not only three or four days but even three or four years, but it was true that my desire was to be allowed to leave, and I would return whenever he so ordered, but I was now afraid that the Danube would freeze – of course I was ready to obey till death. He then replied to me: ‘*Tam cito vultis a nobis discedere?*’ I said I would never leave if he ordered me to stay. Then he extended his hand to me and said: ‘*Eatis feliciter!*’ I kissed his hand and, having paid humble homage, took my leave. When I was already at the door, I turned back to bow to him, and – upon my faith – he also nodded with his head, acknowledging me with so great kindness that it is hard to imagine.³³

After this cordial audience, the Italian company (apart from the animal handlers) were to leave for Eger. In Pressburg they embarked again and sailed as far as Esztergom in the hope of accommodation arranged by the Italian vicar Tommaso Amadei. The journey is again presented vividly:

[...] after we had embarked once more we started as soon as we could, fearing that we would meet what we eventually did: the frozen Danube. Because, My Lord, the entire river was frozen over when we were about ten miles before Esztergom [...] meanwhile God knows how great a danger was threatening us on account of the plague; people were dying like dogs in the villages. Eventually, since we could not sail on, partly because of the ice, partly because of the cold wind, the snow and the hoarfrost [...] I was compelled to disembark in a town where more than five hundred had already succumbed to the plague.³⁴

³³ „*Io mi volsi a Sua Maestà dicendogli che non solo ero per quanto mi commandava quella, 3 o 4 giorni ma 3 o 4 mesi e anni, che era vero ch'io desiderava havere per alhora bona licentia quando gli piacesse per venirmene qua, perciò ch'io temeva molto che'l Danubio non si congelasse, non di meno ch'io ero per hubidirla sino al morire. Risposemi proprio Essa: tam cito vultis a nobis discedere? Io dissi che non mai era per partire se pur se dignava commandarmi ch'io restassi. Alhor di novo mi porse la mano, dicendomi: eatis feliciter, io di novo la bacciai et cum humile riverentia presi comiato. Quando poi fui al uscio mi rivoltai di novo a fargli inchino, per mia fe che mi fece una inchinata de capo cum una accoglientia tanto grata quanto sia possibile pensare.*” Ercole Pio's letter to Ippolito I d'Este, 12 January 1509 ASMò ASE C. Est. Amb. Ungh. b. 4/6,3, f 1v. (Vestigia database no. 1755–1756).

³⁴ “[...] *resalita la barcha se inviassimo al camino nostro cum ogni sollicitudine possibile per tema di non incontrare quello che incontrassimo che fu il Danubio gelato, perciò Signor mio, che in una nocte tutto si congelòe apresso Strigonio cum quanto pericolo de peste Dio lo scia, che in ogni loco morivano come cani, al fino non potendo ire più ultra, parte per il giazzo grossissimo et parte per il vento crudelissimo et neve et pruina [...] mi fu forza smontare in una villa lie ove erano morti più di 500 persone di peste.*” Ercole Pio's letter to Ippolito I d'Este, 12 January 1509 ASMò ASE C. Est. Amb. Ungh. b. 4/6,3, f 2r. (Vestigia database no. 1755–1756).

It is already night when they board coaches in this unnamed, plague-ridden town ten miles from Esztergom (the phrase *carro da cozzo* refers to coaches made in the nearby town of Kocs). Ercole does not miss a single opportunity to let his master know of all the risks he runs, and the heroic endeavours he undertakes to serve him.

I arrived in Esztergom, having written in advance with kind words to that treacherous lord Tommaso the vicar, informing him that I was coming, and kindly asking him to find a room for me for money, whatever the cost. We arrived at night, about half one or two o'clock,³⁵ amid so much snow and sleet that we had nearly died [...] while it snowed, he kept us waiting for an hour, then he came out of the house with a single candle in his hand and excused himself disingenuously, saying he could give us no accommodation [...] Eventually this scoundrel went back into his house and shut the door on us. I left the place with sinking heart: we were in the middle of the plague in Esztergom, where 1500 people had died in that one city alone, and we did not know what to do.³⁶

The rest of the journey is as eventful as the preceding parts: bandits are waiting for the poor travellers everywhere, and they are forced to bivouac on an island in the Danube. The fact that at that time Esztergom cannot have had more than two or three thousand inhabitants is a testament to Ercole's powers of imagination.

Nevertheless, it is well known that the only reason for sending the agents to Hungary was to collect as much money as possible for the cardinal in Ferrara, who had a habit of indulging in worldly pleasures, and spent much on clothes and display. Meanwhile, in Eger, the castle supposedly under the cardinal's care suffered shortages of nearly everything, so that even Ercole Pio writes that as the new governor, his main task was to save money on all fronts: he sent away soldiers, reduced the food rations – and especially the daily amount of wine. He is proud to report that before his arrival a cask lasted two days, or two and a half at most, while now it lasts four. There are regular shipments of money, horses, and sometimes even hunting dogs to Ferrara.

³⁵ It is unclear whether he means the time of the night in the modern sense or two hours after sunset.

³⁶ “[...]vennemi a Strigonio, havendo prima scritto amorevolissimamente a quel traitore de Messer Tho. vicario com'io ero lie, e la cagione perché, supplicandolo mi volesse fare trovare una stanza per denari e non guardasse a spesa. Ivi giunto credendo quel tristo havesse facto il debito suo vi giungessimo a una hora e mezo o due di nocte cum tanto giazo e pruina che eramo come morti [...] sempre nevicando ci fece dimorare una hora al fine venne fuori dalla casa cum un pochetto di candela di sevo in mano, scusandosi vilanamente di non ci volere alloggiare [...] Al fino quel cane reintròe in casa e serròci l'uscio incontro. Io mi ritrovava de assai tristo core, essendo al termine ch'io ero nella peste sino agli occhi che in Strigonio solo sonovi morte più di 1500 persone, non sapeamo che consiglio pigliare.” Ercole Pio's letter to Ippolito I d'Este, 12 January 1509 ASMo ASE C. Est. Amb. Ungh. b. 4/6,3, f 2r. (Vestigia database no. 1755–1756).

At the same time, the situation in Hungary is becoming difficult. Defence expenses are mounting, and so are the king's. With the treasury facing insolvency, royal emissaries appear at the doors of the rich barons, demanding a "loan". In the spring of 1509, while the king is about to leave for Prague for the coronation of his son Louis II³⁷ as king of Bohemia, his envoy János Székely knocks on Ercole Pio's door in Eger, to ask for a loan of 3000 florins towards the king's expenses. Ercole gives a detailed account, several pages long, to his master Ippolito, who is always dissatisfied with the amount of money coming from Hungary. The cunning governor eventually gives the king 500 florins, after a lengthy explanation of why he cannot give more.³⁸ He is well aware that these payments are loans in name only. Indeed, when in 1521, after Ippolito's death, canon Giuliano Caprili³⁹ tried to recover from the king, and from the Hungarian barons and bishops, all the money that Ippolito had lent them over the years, he is largely unsuccessful.⁴⁰ Ercole therefore adduces arguments which the king's envoy cannot counter: expenses related to the defence of the castle, the large number of soldiers to cater for (both somewhat disingenuous arguments), and, lastly, that Ippolito was himself about to turn to the king, for financial help towards work on the castle cathedral. In fact, however, studies on the history of the cathedral reveal that after the great era of construction in the 15th century there were no changes made to the building in Ippolito's time.⁴¹

[...] I swore to him it would have never occurred to me that in this country the king would ask me for money, but knowing him well I was aware that His Majesty was very religious, Catholic, generous and munificent, and I had planned to ask him for some help towards this sanctuary, which we must build as an embellishment for the entire kingdom [...] I reminded him that if the construction of the sanctuary was suspended, or if there was a need for armed men, I would not be at fault if I was unable to carry out the royal decree.⁴²

³⁷ Louis II Jagiellon (1506–1526), King of Hungary and Bohemia (1516–1526).

³⁸ Ercole Pio's letter to Ippolito I d'Este, 27 March 1509 ASMo ASE C. Est. Amb. Ungh. b. 4/6,5, passim. (Vestigia database no. 1758–1759).

³⁹ Giuliano Caprili Agent of the Este House, Canon of Cathedral Chapter of Eger (1519–1525).

⁴⁰ Giuliano Caprili's letters to the Ferrara court: ASMo ASE C. Est. Amb. Ungh. b. 4/28, (Vestigia database no. 1910–1927), as well as the instructions sent to him: ASMo ASE C. Est. Amb. Ungh. b. 4/27, 29, 30. (Vestigia database no. 1909, 1929–1932., 1933).

⁴¹ Buzás, "Az egri székesegyház XIII–XIV. századi gótikus épülete."

⁴² "giuravo che non solo havea mai creduto che in questo stato dovessero essere richiesti denari dal Signor Re prefato ma ch'io havea terminato cognoscendo Sua Maestà Religiosissima né meno catholica che ampla e grandiosissima supplicargli per qualche subsidio a questo sanctuario havendo a cedere a dovere di tutto questo suo regno, nondimeno che come dicto gli havea non gli volea fare limitatione alcuna, ma che bene gli racordavo che è il sanctuario se intermetterebbe, e se ancho accadesse bisogno delle genti armate che non sarei da essere imputato s'io non potessi exeguire el precepto regio." Ercole Pio's letter to Ippolito I d'Este, 27 March 1509 ASMo ASE C. Est. Amb. Ungh. b. 4/6,5, ff 2r–2v. (Vestigia database no. 1758–1759).

That said, Ercole Pio's stint of nearly two years in Hungary was not altogether successful. The one-year mission, subsequently prolonged for another year, was concluded when, in the spring of 1510, he was practically ordered to return to Ferrara, and to take the account books with him. The general tenor of the "dispaccio" (letter of instruction) which he received is rather menacing: Ippolito is dissatisfied with his agent because of the insufficient money he has received, the frequent delays and the recurring excuses. The situation was now different in Hungary, the Turkish threat has made it difficult to collect income and send it to Italy. The tone of the letter is illustrated by the following excerpts:

[W]e are more than a little surprised by what you write, to wit, that it is difficult to change money [...] we conclude by saying that we are dissatisfied with your dither [...] we are not just a little displeased and confused by what you wrote in your letter, to wit, that you would be arriving with little money in your hands.⁴³

Perhaps the last letter which Ercole wrote from Hungary was sent from Nyitra (Nitria, Neutra, today Nitra, Slovakia). The situation is reminiscent of the time two years earlier: the royal court is compelled to sojourn far from Buda because of the threat of plague. The letter is full of complaint: the difficulty in changing money that Ippolito found hard to accept meant that no one was willing to change the money he had collected to gold. It is perhaps because of fears of a looming war that even Tamás Bakóc is unwilling to part from his gold.⁴⁴ All this hindered his return home, angering his lord considerably.

After 1510 we hear no more of Ercole Pio. We do not even know for certain whether he complied and returned to his irate lord, the extravagant cardinal Ippolito, in Ferrara – though his escape would have caused an outcry and left traces. A family chronicle claims that Ercole died in Germany in 1510, on his way home from Hungary.⁴⁵ At any rate, his 25 letters from Hungary, and the instructions he received, allow us to reconstruct some aspects of the life of a 16th century Italian poet.

⁴³ *"pigliamo anchora non poca admiratione che habiati diferito insino a questi tempi ad rifare quelle monete [...] concludemo di questo resater non molto satisfacti [...] Haveressimo anchora preso dispiacere et turbatione che ni scrivete per dicta vostra cioè che in mane vi resta poca summa de denari."* Ippolito I d'Este's letter to Ercole Pio, undated, actually 1510 ASMo ASE C. Est. Amb. Ungh. b. 4/7,1, passim. (Vestigia database no. 1783).

⁴⁴ Ercole Pio's letter to Ippolito I d'Este, 11 September 1510 ASMo ASE C. Est. Amb. Ungh. b. 4/6,22, ff 1r–2r. (Vestigia database no. 1779).

⁴⁵ BAMi, Archivio Falcò Pio di Savoia, busta 258 (formerly N. 4), fasc. 2; *Sommario della Cronica Pia*.

Ercole Pio's particular vantage point provides us with interesting glimpses into the everyday life of the governor of Eger, as well as of the notables of contemporary Hungary with whom he was in contact. A thorough reading of the sources found in Modena and Milan can still shed light on many points of interest for Hungarian historiography.

(Translated by András Cser)