

RULERS AS *MILITES CHRISTI* ON THE VERGE OF THE
ELEVENTH AND TWELFTH CENTURIES:
RECEPTION OF RELIGIOUS PATTERNS AND POLITICAL
CONCEPTIONS ON THE EDGE OF THE MEDIEVAL LATIN
WEST*

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ZUPKA, Dušan. Rulers as *Milites Christi* on the Verge of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries: Reception of Religious Patterns and Political Conceptions on the Edge of the Medieval Latin West. *Historický časopis*, 2025, 73, 3, pp. 459-487, Bratislava.

This article examines the adoption and adaptation of the *miles Christi* (soldier of Christ) ideal in Central Europe during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a pivotal era in the formation of Christianized monarchies in Hungary, Poland, and Bohemia. The study investigates how spiritual warfare, originally rooted in monastic and ascetic traditions, was gradually reinterpreted and appropriated by secular elites—particularly rulers—who were increasingly portrayed as Christian warriors in defending both faith and polity. Drawing on a wide range of narrative, normative, and hagiographic sources, the following pages trace the ideological development of *miles Christi* through the lives and legacies of key figures such as King Stephen I of Hungary, Bolesław III of Poland, and other Central European rulers and saints, arguing that the concept functioned not merely as a rhetorical embellishment, but as a foundational component of political legitimacy, royal sanctity, and dynastic identity. The research here underscores the heuristic value of spiritual and martial metaphors in medieval historiography and explores how these ideals influenced social order, the self-representation of elites, and ecclesiastical alignments in the region. Ultimately, the article demonstrates that the *miles Christi* ideal was central to the sacralization of kingship and the integration of Central European realms into the Latin Christian world.

Keywords: Medieval Central Europe. Rulers. *Miles Christi*. Arpadian Hungary. King Stephen of Hungary. Cultural patterns. Social order.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/histcaso.2025.73.3.2>

* The study was carried out within the project VEGA 2/0028/22 *Medieval society in the Kingdom of Hungary (structure, coexistence and confrontation of social groups until the end of the 13th century)*, at the Historical Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences.

True realism in history is knowing that human reality is multiple.
Marc Bloch¹

The period of the eleventh and twelfth centuries marked a crucial stage for the countries of Central Europe which were on their way to the formation of Christianized monarchies and in a broader context, to their incorporation into the world of Latin Christianity. Recent scholarship has sufficiently described several of these integration processes, especially in political, social and cultural spheres.² The present study seeks to analyze the aforementioned phenomena by focusing on the development and dissemination of concepts and ideas originating within the spiritual and religious spheres that contributed to the formation of Latin Christendom (*orbis Christianus*, *Christianitas*) and the community of believers (*populus Christianus*) residing within it.³ An integral part of the development of the cultural and religious mentalities of medieval people was the dissemination as well as the reception of the concept of the *miles Christi*, i.e. the warrior (soldier) of Christ, which represented an idealised form of a publicly active, usually high-ranking man emulating biblical models and patterns of behaviour. The ideal of the *miles Christi* could assume several forms in contemporary society: the pious and righteous ruler, the courageous but God-fearing warrior, or the spiritually and morally pure hermit or prelate. Each type of the *miles Christi* ideal fought in his own characteristic way, yet all were united by the essential idea and vision of the warrior of Christ fighting both visible and invisible enemies, with visible and invisible weapons.⁴

The Concept of *miles Christi* is tightly connected to the performance of the spiritual warfare that dominated Christian thought from its earliest stages. This was reserved at first for communities of early martyrs and believers, and later transferred to ascetic hermits and monks living in complete solitude in order to

- 1 BLOCH. *Technique et évolution sociale réflexions d'un historien*. In BLOCH. *Mélanges Historiques*. Paris 1963, p. 838: Le vrai réalisme en histoire, c'est de savoir que la réalité humaine est multiple.
- 2 WIHODA. *The Making of Medieval Central Europe: Power and Political Prerequisites for the First Westernization, 791–1122*. Lanham 2024; *The Routledge Handbook of East Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 500–1300*. Ed. Curta. London 2021; CURTA. *Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages (500–1300)*. Leiden; Boston 2019; VERCAMER and ZUPKA, eds. *Rulership in Medieval East Central Europe. Power, Rituals and Legitimacy in Bohemia, Hungary and Poland*. Leiden; Boston 2022 and ZUPKA, ed. *Continuity and Change in Medieval East Central Europe. Social, Ruling and Religious Transformations*. London; New York 2024.
- 3 BARTLETT. *The Making of Europe. Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change, 950–1350*. London 1994, especially pp. 243–268.
- 4 GAPOSCHKIN. *Invisible Weapons: Liturgy and the Making of Crusade Ideology*. Ithaca; London 2017.

focus on their spiritual fight against the devil and sin.⁵ However, such behaviour and thinking did not remain restricted only to monastic communities and the clergy, laymen and laywomen adopted and adapted mechanisms of spiritual warfare into their religious rituals in the early Middle Ages. A turning point came with the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when monastic writers applied military rhetoric to almost every aspect of everyday life in the cloister, defining themselves as spiritual warriors in the tradition of the ancient Israelites and Roman martyrs. They borrowed in a distinctive martial language and applied terminology from contemporary military culture.⁶

The process was reciprocal, however. As Katherine Allen Smith pointed out: After the turn of the first millennium, the concept of the *miles Christi* underwent a significant transformation, as spiritual warfare became increasingly entangled with the developing ideology of holy war. The traditional dominance of monks on the spiritual battlefield was now contested by crusaders, members of military orders, and devout lay warriors more broadly.⁷

Therefore, the contemporary sources in all their variations, (narrative, diplomatic, hagiographic or legal), contain a great deal of detailed depictions of important figures of period society such as rulers, warriors and clergymen, all representing the ideal of *miles Christi* in their own unique way.⁸ Despite the traditional scepticism of historiography that neglected or rebutted these sources as empty rhetoric or a collection of meaningless tropes, current trends in medieval studies argue that we should pay much more attention to the heuristic value. Texts of contemporary authors speaking about spiritual warfare expressed their own understanding of existence and their place in the ongoing struggle between good and the evil, as true warriors of Christ.⁹ After 1000 AD, these concepts and self-identifications moved from the monastic environment to the world of secular rulers, lords and warriors. As a consequence, these ideas became deeply rooted in the mentalities of the secular elites, leaving an indelible mark on the way their identities were expressed in contemporary sources.¹⁰

5 HARNACK. *Militia Christi. Die christliche Religion und der Soldatenstand in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*. Tübingen 1905; MARKSCHIES. *Zwischen den Welten wandern. Strukturen des antiken Christentums*. Frankfurt am Main 1997.

6 SMITH. *War and the Making of Medieval Monastic Culture*. Woodbridge 2011, p. 198.

7 SMITH, *War and the Making of Medieval Monastic Culture*, pp. 1-6.

8 FAGIOLO. The Pious Knight in Medieval Hagiography, c. 930–1058. In *Cerae*, 2019, 6, pp. 45-60.

9 SMITH, *War and the Making of Medieval Monastic Culture*, p. 198.

10 VAUCHEZ. La notion de Miles Christi dans la spiritualité occidentale aux XII et XIII siècles. In AURELL and GIRBEA, eds. *Chevalerie et christianisme aux XII et XIII siècles*. Rennes 2011, pp. 67-75; FLORI. *La guerra santa. La formazione dell'idea di crociata nell'Occidente Cristiano*. Bologna 2003, pp. 359-370; BULL. *Knightly Piety and the Lay Response to the*

What follows is an attempt to analyse the preserved normative, narrative and hagiographic source material from Central Europe to trace the concept of *miles Christi* and its reception and influence on the social order in the Přemyslid, Arpad and Piast realms during the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

I.

The idea of the *miles Christi* has its roots in Pauline theology, particularly Ephesians 6:10-17, which describes Christian life as spiritual warfare. This imagery was adopted and expanded by Church Fathers such as Augustine, who emphasized the moral struggle against sin. In the medieval context, especially post-Carolingian and into the 11th century, *miles Christi* became a multifaceted ideal applied to monks, bishops, and—quite significantly—lay rulers.¹¹ With the rise of Christian kingship in Central Europe, the *miles Christi* concept provided a theological justification for warfare, especially when undertaken in defence of the Church or Christian society. The figure of a ruler as both protector and penitent emerged in tandem with growing clerical influence on courtly ideology.¹²

The oldest example of the penetration of the ideas of spiritual warfare and the shaping of the *miles Christi* ideal in Arpadian Hungary is preserved in one of the earliest written texts of this era called *Libellus de institutione morum*. Between 1015 and 1030, an anonymous author from Western Europe, active in the court of King Stephen I of Hungary (997/1000–1038), wrote this short treatise in the style of the popular *specula principum*.¹³ The work was written in the name of King Stephen to his young son and heir-to-be, Prince Emeric (d. 1031).¹⁴ This

First Crusade : The Limousin and Gascony, c.970–c.1130. Oxford 1993.

- 11 ERDMANN. *The Origin of the Idea of Crusade*. Princeton 1977, pp. 57-94; VAUCHEZ. La notion de Miles Christi dans la spiritualité occidentale aux XII et XIII siècles, pp. 67-75; DUBY. *The Chivalrous Society*. Berkeley 1977, pp. 104-107, 167-170, 180-181.
- 12 ZUPKA, “Rulers between ideal and reality,” In *The Routledge Handbook of East Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 500–1300*, pp. 174-190; DUBY, *The Chivalrous Society*, pp. 104-107; ERDMANN. *The Origin of the Idea of Crusade*; For the close connection and cooperation between Christianisation and royal Christian power in Central Europe, see pertinent chapters in the collective volume *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus’, c. 900–1200*. Ed. BEREND. Cambridge 2007.
- 13 BAGGE. *Political Thought of the king’s mirror*. Odense 1987; BERGES. *Die Fürstenspiegel des hohen und späten Mittelalters*. Leipzig 1938; ANTON. *Fürstenspiegel des frühen und hohen Mittelalters*. Darmstadt 2006, pp. 3-37.
- 14 *Libellus sancti Stephani regis de institutione morum ad Emericum ducem*. In *Scriptores rerum Hungaricarum I: Tempore ducum regumque stirpis Arpadianae gestarum* (henceforth as SRH). Ed. Balogh. Budapest 1938, pp. 611-627; NEMERKÉNYI. The Religious Ruler in the Admonitions of King Saint Stephen of Hungary. In *Monotheistic Kingship: The Medieval Variants*. Eds. Aziz Al-Azmeh, János M. Bak. Budapest 2004, pp. 231-247; NEMERKÉNYI. *Latin Classics in Medieval Hungary: Eleventh Century*. Debrecen; Budapest 2004, p. 31.

remarkable treatise written in the tradition of Carolingian sacral kingship of Christian monarchs provides a unique example of the transfer of ideals and ideas from Western parts of Europe to the peripheral zone of Central Europe. The text is permeated with the rhetoric of spiritual warfare, with the King depicted as a true soldier of Christ.

The most important feature of the righteous king is to be permeated by the holy Catholic faith. In the spirit of Pauline metaphors, Stephen admonishes his son to lift up the shield of the faith and to protect himself by the helmet of the salvation (Eph. 6: 16-17), encouraging him to fight with these spiritual weapons against enemies visible and invisible.¹⁵ Spiritual and physical warfare combined in the person of the ruler enables him to claim the office of the anointed of the Lord. Emeric also needs to pay heed to the prelates of the Hungarian church, most notably the bishops of the realm who have the power to intercede with God on behalf of their ruler. The spiritual support of the bishops is mentioned third in order of importance in the *Libellus*.¹⁶ The Christian ruler was supposed to make sure that peace reigned throughout his country,¹⁷ therefore Emeric is urged to rule as a *rex pacificus* in order that his kingdom become a *regnum pacis*, which should be provided by peaceful and just cooperation with the nobles (*principes*) and the warriors (*milites*). Just and tempered treatment of these groups will enable the king to be loved and respected, and therefore to secure their loyalty.¹⁸ Prince Emeric was the personification of a pious religious ruler, as witnessed by other sources related to his life.¹⁹ Nevertheless, King Stephen recommended he observe continuous prayers as one of the pillars of the royal rule for the sake of the well-being of his kingdom.²⁰ Only with constant prayers and pure devotion would the prince be able to fight against the invisible (spiritual) and visible enemies (physical opponents), and then reach the status and reputation of the invincible king (*rex invincibilis*).²¹ According to the author of the *Libellus de*

15 *Libellus sancti Stephani regis de institutione morum ad Emericum ducem*, cap. 1.

16 *Libellus sancti Stephani regis de institutione morum ad Emericum ducem*, cap. 3.

17 See, most recently: *A Cultural History of Peace in the Medieval Age*. Ed. Simons. London 2024. For the early medieval period, the best treatment is to be found in KERSHAW. *Peaceful Kings: Peace, Power and the Early Medieval Political Imagination*. Oxford 2011.

18 *Libellus sancti Stephani regis de institutione morum ad Emericum ducem*, cap. 4.

19 *Legenda sancti Emerici ducis*. Ed. Bartonek. In SRH 2. Budapest 1938, pp. 449-460; VESZPRÉMY. "Royal saints in Hungarian chronicles, legends and liturgy." In *The Making of Christian Myths in the Periphery of Latin Christendom (c. 1000–1300)*. Ed. Mortensen. Copenhagen 2006, pp. 217-45, here pp. 218-219.

20 For the importance of intercessory prayers for the stability and well-being of monarchies in the Ottonian period see MANGANARO. *Stabilitas regni. Percezione del tempo e durata dell'azione politica nell'età degli Ottoni (936–1024)*. Bologna 2018.

21 *Libellus sancti Stephani regis de institutione morum ad Emericum ducem*, cap. 9.

institutione morum, the scale of the royal virtues is the ornament of the royal crown and it enables a connection to God, the true King of kings (*rex regum*), and the support of the celestial army. Emeric is urged to act as a real *miles Christi*, basing his rule on the Ten Commandments and Christianized royal virtues, especially piety and leniency (*pietas et misericordia*).²² In an eloquent summary, the *Libellus* claims that all royal things earthly and celestial are mutually tied and deeply interconnected, forming the necessary prerequisites for both the royal government and the eternal kingship.²³

II.

Our knowledge of eleventh century Hungary is heavily influenced by the dearth of contemporary sources, especially domestic material. The local historiographic tradition was officially penned only in the Angevin royal court during the 1350s, in the lavishly depicted *Chronicle Composition of the 14th Century* (known also as the *Illuminated Chronicle*).²⁴ Although some scholars suppose that the earliest segments of the chronicle were created in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, this remains only a hypothesis that cannot be substantiated by sound arguments.²⁵ Therefore, some speak of the “invented eleventh century” in Hungary.²⁶ The picture can be complemented from hagiographical sources. The three legends of the first king of Hungary, Stephen I, were composed between the 1080s and 1110s and provide good material to examine the ideas and discursive strategies applied by contemporary authors on the verge of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.²⁷ Significant transformations occurred later in this period in

22 ZUPKA. *Ritual and Symbolic Communication in Medieval Hungary under the Árpád Dynasty, 1000–1301*. Leiden; Boston 2016, pp. 191–194; BEJCZY. *The Cardinal Virtues in the Middle Ages: a Study in Moral Thought from the Fourth to the Fourteenth Century*. Leiden; Boston 2011.

23 *Libellus sancti Stephani regis de institutione morum ad Emericum ducem*, cap. 10.

24 The most recent English/Latin edition is *The Illuminated Chronicle Chronicle of the Deeds of the Hungarians from the Fourteenth century*. Eds. János M. Bak, László Veszprémy, and Norbert Kersken. Budapest; New York 2018; The standard edition is *Chronici Hungarici compositio saeculi XIV*. Ed. Szentpétery. In SRH I. Budapest 1937.

25 VESZPRÉMY. *History Writing and Historians in Hungary of the Árpáds*. Budapest 2024, pp. 115–165; *Studies on the Illuminated Chronicle*. Eds. János M. Bak, László Veszprémy. Budapest; New York 2018; BAGI. Problematik der ältesten Schichten der ungarischen Chronikkomposition des 14. Jahrhunderts im Lichte der ungarischen Geschichtsforschung der letzten Jahrzehnte—einige ausgewählte Problemstellen. In *Quaestiones Medii Aevi Novae*, 2007, 12, pp. 105–127; CSÓKA. *A latin nyelvű történeti irodalom kialakulása Magyarországon a XI–XIV. században*. Budapest 1967.

26 VESZPRÉMY. The Invented 11th Century in Hungary. In *The Neighbours of Poland in the 11th Century*. Ed. Urbańczyk. Warsaw 2002, pp. 137–154.

27 The most recent overview is provided by the editors and translators of the latest English/Latin

Central European political and religious life, like the Gregorian Reform, the Investiture Controversy, and the Christianization of ruling dynasties, which shaped the ideological landscape of Bohemia, Poland, and Hungary. Amid these shifts, the concept of *miles Christi* emerged as a prominent ideal that combined martial valour with Christian virtue. As a spiritual warrior and earthly ruler, a *miles Christi* embodied the synthesis of secular and religious authority.²⁸

The development of the *miles Christi* ideal can be followed in the context of the image of King Stephen created in hagiographic literature, namely the *Legenda Maior Sancti Stephani regis* (c. 1080), the *Legenda minor Sancti Stephani regis* (c. 1095–1108), and the *Legenda Sancti Stephani regis ab Hartvico episcopo conscripta* (c. 1112–1116).²⁹ The *Legenda maior* attributes the label *miles Christi* (*tyronis Christi*) surprisingly not to Stephen's father, Grand Duke Géza (c. 970–997) to appreciate his supposed conversion to Christianity and support of Christianisation in Hungary,³⁰ but to Vojtech (Adalbert) the bishop of Prague and later patron saint of emerging Central European Christianized monarchies in Bohemia, Hungary and Poland.³¹ Here we face an alternative use of the *miles Christi* epithet: to describe a devout prelate and fervent missionary who not only devoted himself to building the Church organization, but also helped with the conversion of the pagan *gentes* on the borders of the Latin Christendom.³²

version *The Sanctity of the Leaders: Holy Kings, Princes, Bishops and Abbots from Central Europe (11th to 13th Centuries)*. Critical edition. Eds. Gábor Klaniczay, Ildikó Csepregi. Budapest 2023; VESZPRÉMY. *History Writing and Historians in Hungary of the Árpáds*, pp. 271–330.

- 28 ZUPKA. *Meč a kríž. Vojna a náboženstvo v stredovekej strednej Európe*. Bratislava 2020, pp. 70–82, 234–240; WIHODA, *The Making of Medieval Central Europe*, pp. 257–300; VESZPRÉMY, *Royal saints in Hungarian chronicles, legends and liturgy*, pp. 217–245; *The Sanctity of the Leaders*, pp. 1–18.
- 29 *Legenda sancti Stephani regis maior et minor, atque legenda ab Hartvico episcopo conscripta*. Ed. Bartoniek. In SRH 2 pp. 363–440. The modern English/Latin edition is to be found in *The Sanctity of the Leaders*, pp. 39–175.
- 30 For context of the spread of the concept of *miles Christi* in the age of Géza and Stephen I, see: DRUGA. *Panovník ako miles Christi? K otázke (dis)kontinuity christianizačnej politiky kniežaťa Gejzu a kráľa Štefana I*. In *Panovnícka moc v stredoveku*. Eds. Martin Štefáňik, Ján Steinhübel. Bratislava 2021, pp. 149–178.
- 31 On the role of Vojtech for Central Europe see especially LABUDA. *Święty Wojciech: biskup-męczennik, patron Polski, Czech i Węgier*. Wrocław 2004. In English cf. FIGURSKI and PAC. *Saints and relics*. In *The Routledge Handbook of East Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 500–1300*, pp. 338–353; *Saints of the Christianization Age of Central Europe (Tenth–Eleventh Centuries)*. Ed. Klaniczay. Budapest; New York 2013, pp. 91–181. See also selected chapters from NEMEŠ and KOŽIAK, eds. *Svätý Vojtech – svätec, doba a kult*. Bratislava 2011.
- 32 *Legenda sancti Stephani regis maior*, cap. 2–4. Compare also *Legenda sancti Stephani regis ab Hartvico episcopo conscripta*, cap. 3.

The author of the legend then concentrates his depiction of King Stephen as the ultimate personification of the *miles Christi* ideal. First, the young King of Hungary established peaceful relations with his neighbours in order to fully devote himself to the unification of his young kingdom, which was tightly connected to the spread of the Christian faith among Hungarians. The warrior of Christ, however, faced severe opposition from some groups of Hungarian pagan nobility who were unwilling to accept the new norms of political and cultural conduct, which was deeply rooted in the acceptance of the new Christian religion. Stephen therefore attacked his opponents under the protection of the cross, the Virgin Mary and under the banners of military saints par excellence, Saint Martin and Saint George:³³

*“Protected, however, by the most famous sign of the cross and he was aided by the merits of the Mother of God and the Ever-Virgin Mary, when under the banner of the God-loving Bishop Martin and the holy martyr George, he killed their leaders, soon subjugated them all to his service and forced them through loyal priests, granting them salutary admonitions, that those washed with baptismal water worship one God. And so, after the defeat of the enemies, the warrior of Christ, full of spiritual joy, decided to fully devote all his abilities to the spread of the gospel.”*³⁴

The military conquest, political unification and spread of Christianity were intertwined processes, being all part of the agenda of an ideal king.³⁵ Stephen is praised for the quick conversion of Hungarians, which was, as witnessed by the legend, far from being simply a peaceful and non-violent process. The first King

33 FLORI, *La guerra santa*, pp. 137-174; WHITE, *Military Saints in Byzantium and Rus, 900–1200*. Cambridge 2013; GERÁT, *Sváti bojovníci v stredoveku. Úvahy o obrazových legendách sv. Juraja a sv. Ladislava na Slovensku*. Bratislava 2011, pp. 7-14.

34 *Legenda sancti Stephani regis maior*, cap. 6-7: “*Quos omnes eum protegente gloriosissime crucis signaculo, patrocinantibus Dei genitricis ac perpetue Virginis Marie meritis, sub vexillo Deo dilecti pontificis Martini Sanctique martyris Georgii ducibus eorum interfectis in brevi suo servitio subegit, et baptismatis unda lotos unum Deum colere, monita salutis per fideles sacerdotes distribuendo, compulit. Dævictis ergo Christi miles hostibus gaudio spirituali repletus, totius ingenii consilium evangelici seminis decrevit fore receptaculum.*” Cf. *Legenda sancti Stephani regis ab Hartvico episcopo conscripta*, cap. 6.

35 The best monograph on King Stephan is still the classic book GYÖRFFY, *István király és műve*. Budapest 1977, especially pp. 122-133. The abridged English version was published as GYÖRFFY, *King Saint Stephen of Hungary*. New York 1994. However, Györffy’s assessment of Stephen is sometimes too eulogizing. For a soberer assessment see also: ENGEL, *The Realm of St Stephen: A History of Medieval Hungary, 895–1526*. London; New York 2005, pp. 25-48; KRISTÓ, *Magyarország története 895–1301*. Budapest 1998, pp. 89-114; ZSOLDOS, ed. *Saint Stephen and his Country. A Newborn Kingdom in Central Europe: Hungary*. Budapest 2001.

of Hungary applied the model *compellere entrare* to make his Christianising efforts more efficient.³⁶ The legend then presents Stephen as a *miles Christi*, fully concentrated on his Christianising efforts and also paying strict attention to his personal devotion, represented by longish prayers while lying on the floor with his face turned down.³⁷ The servant of God and the most Christian prince (*servus Dei et princeps Christianissimus*) proceeded (with papal approval) to establishing the church province with bishoprics and a metropolis in Esztergom. To strengthen Stephen's ties with the supernatural even more, the author of the legend connects the establishment of the Pannonhalma abbey as a gift to St. Martin for his support of the king in his battles with non-Christian enemies.³⁸ In this case, the author combined the act of establishing the monastery in Pannonhalma by Stephen's father Duke Géza in 996,³⁹ the devotion to St. Martin, which characterised Stephen during his reign, and the fact that Saint Martin of Tours was born in the Roman town of Sabaria, located in Pannonia and part of the Kingdom of Hungary in the eleventh century.⁴⁰

The *Legenda maior* also hints on other aspects of the ideal Christian warrior. As defined by decrees of the peace councils in the tenth and eleventh centuries within the context of the Peace of God movement, or later in the twelfth century during the process of sacralization of knighthood (via ceremonies and liturgy), one of the most characteristic aspects of the *miles Christianus* was to protect the poor, women and children (*inermes*) from the violence of armed disruptors.⁴¹ As depicted in *Legenda maior*, King Stephen promulgated strict and just laws, especially protecting widows and orphans and expressed his religious patronage by endowing shrines as well as sponsoring church institutions such as monasteries.⁴²

36 KAHL. *Heidenfrage und Slawenfrage im deutschen Mittelalter*. Leiden; Boston 2011, pp. 483-564; ZUPKA, *Meč a križ*, pp. 43-45.

37 *Legenda sancti Stephani regis maior*, cap. 7.

38 *Legenda sancti Stephani regis maior*, cap. 8.

39 See the interpolated charter issued by Stephen I in 1001. *Diplomata Hungariae antiquissima: accedunt epistolae et acta ad historiam Hungariae pertinentia I*. Ed. Györffy. Budapest, 1992, no. 5, pp. 26-41 and the discussion in historiography THOROCZKAY. Szent István pannonthalmi oklevelének historiográfiája. In TAKÁCS, ed. *Mons Sacer I*. Pannonhalma 1996, pp. 90-109.

40 SELÁF. Saint Martin of Tours, the Honorary Hungarian. In *Hungarian Historical Review*, 2016, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 487-508, here at 488; KOSZTA. Szent Márton tiszteletének magyarországi kezdete: Megjegyzések Pannonhalma alapításához. In *Tiszatáj*, 2001, 55, pp. 79-84.

41 ZUPKA, *Rulers between Ideal and Reality*, pp. 175-178; FLORI. Chevalerie et liturgie; remise des armes et vocabulaire chevalresque dans les sources liturgiques du IXe au XIVe siècle. In *Le Moyen Âge*, 1978, 84, no. 3, pp. 247-278; no. 4, pp. 409-442; FLORI. *L'idéologie du glaive : préhistoire de la chevalerie*. Genève 1983, pp. 135-157; *A Cultural History of Peace in the Medieval Age*, pp. 36-38.

42 *Legenda sancti Stephani regis maior*, cap. 9. See also: *Legenda minor Sancti Stephani regis*,

One specific nature of Stephen's devotion is visible in his fervent and steadfast dedication to the Virgin Mary, to who's honour he created and established a magnificent basilica at the royal seat of Székesféhérvár (Alba), which remained his favourite residence for the rest of his rule.⁴³ Stephen's veneration of the Mother of God is a unique feature of eleventh century Hungary, as her cult in western parts of the continent only began to spread in great scale in the twelfth century. It is thus no coincidence that the chivalric ethos of the twelfth century was deeply connected to the cult of the Virgin Mary.⁴⁴ On another occasion, the military aspects of the Hungarian king are well depicted in the legend. In 1030, Hungary was invaded by an expedition lead by Holy Roman Emperor Conrad II (1024–1039).⁴⁵ According to preserved historical accounts, Stephen I acted under extraordinary circumstances in the spirit of a true *miles Christi*. After consultations with the prelates and nobles, he summoned the troops to face the imperial invasion. However, before setting off to war, Stephen acknowledged that nothing could be achieved without the help of Christ. In a symbolically rich gesture, he raised his hands to the heavens and entreated the Holy Virgin Mary to intercede on behalf of his kingdom, which he symbolically handed over to her. After successfully repelling the attacks of Conrad's army and the invaders withdrawal from Hungary, the King prostrated himself on the floor and praised the Mother of God and Jesus Christ for their help and support.⁴⁶ Other related

cap. 2.

- 43 *Legenda sancti Stephani regis maior*, cap. 10. Compare *Legenda minor Sancti Stephani regis*, cap. 4; STARK. The Formation of the Regnum Marianum. Exploring the Church Network of Early Árpáadian Hungary and the Place of Marian Patrocinia. In *Power in Numbers: State Formation and Christianization on the Eastern Edge of Europe*. Eds. Vargha and Štefan. Turnhout 2024, pp. 219–228.
- 44 KAEUPER. *Holy Warriors. The Religious Ideology of Chivalry*. Philadelphia 2009; pp. 159–162. For the Hungarian context see: STARK. The Authority of the Virgin: The Use of the Marian Cult in the Legitimization of Power in the Kingdom of Hungary before 1300. In *The Cult of Saints and Legitimization of Elite Power in East Central Europe and Scandinavia until 1300*. Eds. Pac, Hope, and Viðar Sigurðsson. Turnhout 2024, pp. 57–80.
- 45 KRISTÓ. *Az Árpádkor háborúi*. Budapest 1986, pp. 57–58; VESZPRÉMY, *History Writing and Historians*, pp. 292–293.
- 46 *Legenda sancti Stephani regis maior*, cap. 14, s. 389–390: “*Contra quem rex consultum habens episcoporum et principum, ad tuendam patriam armatos totius Ungarie contraxit. Prius tamen recolens se nichil posse sine suffragio Christi, manus et cor levans ad ethera, domine sue perpetue virgini, dei genetrici Marie iniurias commendans, talem erupit in vocem: Si placet tibi, domina mundi, tue hereditatis ab inimicis devastari et novella plantationem christianitatis aboleri, non mee, precor, imputetur desidie, sed potius dispositioni voluntatis tue.*” See also *Legenda sancti Stephani regis ab Hartvico episcopo conscripta*, cap. 16. For more details cf. ZUPKA. Religious Rituals of War in Medieval Hungary under the Árpád Dynasty. In *Christianity and War in Medieval East-Central Europe and Scandinavia*. Eds. Kotecki, Selch Jensen and Bennett. Leeds 2021, pp. 141–157.

contemporary sources indicate that Stephen even actively supported the spiritual preparations of his subjects. According to Wipo, the chronicler of Conrad II, he ordered fasts and prayers to be performed throughout the kingdom to make sure God will be supporting his troops.⁴⁷

In the remaining chapters of the legend, the author depicts Stephen as the *rex Christianissimus*, the founder of monasteries and churches (in Hungary, Rome, Jerusalem, Constantinople), frequently denominating him as the holy king or the warrior of Christ. He supposedly acted even as a thaumaturge, capable healing the sick and having miraculous visions as an oraculum.⁴⁸ His care for his heir Emeric is stressed by his devotion to Christ and Mary and by composing the aforementioned *Libellus* to teach and instruct his successor.

III.

Approximately a generation later, the author of the second vita, the *Legenda minor* (c. 1095–1108), built on the idea of the *miles Christi* in the spirit of the Pauline epistles (Rom: 8-17) from the very beginning of the text, mentioning the praiseworthy model of those who remained steadfast warriors for Christ and who were crowned for their battles. Accordingly, the King of the Pannonians, Stephen, is obviously counted among these people.⁴⁹ This is especially evident in chapter three of the minor legend, which recounts the struggle of Stephen against rebellious pagan noble Hungarians refusing to adopt the Christian values and religion imposed on them by the king. A decisive battle at Veszprém is described in the spirit of the Old Testament Holy Wars waged by the Israelites against the enemies of God.⁵⁰ In imitation of the prophet Moses and King Saul in their fight against the Amalekites, Stephen marshalled his warriors relying solely on the support of the heavenly powers.⁵¹ To stress the essential difference between the royal Christian army and the pagan rebellious troops, the author of the legend emphasises that Stephen and his warriors put their trust in their faith (spiritual weapons), while the latter only valued their physical weapons

47 WIPO. *Gesta Chuonradi II. imperatoris*, MGH SSrG 61, c. 26, p. 44: “*Rex autem Stephanus minime sufficiens adversus imperatorem orationibus et ieiuniis in universo regno suo indictis praesidium Domini tantummodo flagitabat.*” *Magyarország hadtörténete*, vol. 1: A kezdetektől 1526. Ed. Hermann. Budapest 2017, pp. 99-101.

48 *Legenda sancti Stephani regis maior*, cap. 11-13. Cf. *Legenda minor Sancti Stephani regis*, cap. 4 and 6.

49 *Legenda minor Sancti Stephani regis*, cap. 1, p. 393: *Ipsi fideliter pro Christo certaverunt et feliciter pro certamine coronati sunt.*

50 SIGNORI, ed. *Dying for the Faith, Killing for the Faith: Old-Testament Faith-Warriors (1 and 2 Maccabees) in Historical Perspective*. Leiden; Boston 2012.

51 SMITH, *War and the Making of Medieval Monastic Culture*, pp. 12-15. See also Exodus 17:11.

(*hi in fide, illi vero tantum in armis confidentes*).⁵² The sacralisation of Arpadian warfare is well illustrated by the mention of the legendist that after the victorious battle, Stephen renounced all loot and donated everything to the construction of a basilica dedicated to St. Martin, by which he meant the Pannonhalma Abbey.⁵³

The military role of the ruler is a key element in the narrative of the *Legenda minor*. There are detailed accounts on Stephen's fighting against the pagans and the enemies of the Christian faith and church, similar to the greater legend, further details are provided and special rhetoric emulating the Old Testament holy wars. The figure of the King of Israelites, David, and his war with the Philistines is mentioned in this context (1 Sam 30). The setting is provided by the (supposed) fight of Hungarians against the nomadic Pechenegs looting and raiding the country.⁵⁴ The troops of King Stephen fought under the grace and protection of God and his saintly patron in times of war, Saint Martin. The subsequent victory was therefore attributed to God's grace, who was supposed to be venerated and thanked directly by the victorious King.⁵⁵

IV.

Additional information can be gleaned from the third legend composed by the Bishop of Győr, Hartvic, between 1112–1116, which was dedicated to King Coloman I the Learned (1095–1116). The Hartvic legend builds on material from the two older legends and in some cases provides additional information or more nuanced details.⁵⁶ What connects all three versions of Stephen's vita is the determination to depict the holy king as the true *miles Christi* and for that reason, special emphasis is put on depicting his military deeds as well as spiritual warfare, represented in acts of piety, humility and penance. In chapter 6, Hartvic rephrases the account of Stephen's fight against the upsurging pagan opponents and their decisive clash at Veszprém. This episode is central to Hartvic's understanding of the role of the pious ruler of the Hungarians. However, unlike in the *Legenda maior*, Hartvic did not mention the protection of the sign of the cross and Virgin

52 *Legenda minor Sancti Stephani regis*, cap. 3.

53 *Legenda minor Sancti Stephani regis*, cap. 3. See also *Legenda sancti Stephani regis ab Hartvico episcopo conscripta*, cap. 6.

54 There is no firm evidence that could confirm whether this expedition took place or only served as a model for enhancing the status of *miles Christi* for King Stephen. Györffy believes the raid happened in 1015–1017, while Spinei dates it to c. 1028. GYÖRFFY, *King Saint Stephen*, p. 143. Both remain only hypotheses than cannot be proved. See most recently with further references PAROŇ, *The Pechenegs: Nomads in the Political and Cultural Landscape of Medieval Europe*. Leiden; Boston 2021, pp. 373–374.

55 *Legenda minor Sancti Stephani regis*, cap. 5.

56 *Sanctity of the Leaders*, pp. 21–38. MARSINA. *Ku koncepcii a vývoju slovenskej historiografie*. Bratislava 2013, pp. 241–246.

Mary, and only includes the banner of St. Martin and St. George.⁵⁷ Despite this omission, the key message remains clear; Stephen fights under the protection of the heavenly war patrons and therefore his fight is successful. The battle is understood not only as a just war, as through its sacralisation by the protection and blessing of divine intercessors it becomes a holy war.⁵⁸

Another interesting point is to be found when examining the process of imposing religious virtues and conduct based on Christian virtues on the military elites of the realm. Hartvic's legend provides a reference on the fact that the servant of God and most Christian prince, Stephen, ordered that the military commanders from the royal court become Christians and adopt Christian-like conduct. They should adopt the Catholic faith and those who were found to be unorthodox were to be harshly corrected.⁵⁹ This measure was evidently deployed to strengthen the mutual symbiosis of the territorial expansion and political unification of the emerging Hungarian kingdom, with the purpose of full Christianization of the population. These two processes were inseparably bound in Stephen's policy throughout his rule.⁶⁰ Surprisingly enough, the same passage is also found in the *Legenda minor* written few years earlier. Almost identical words were used by the author, but the description of the conversion of the military elites is attributed to Stephen's father, Grand Duke Géza.⁶¹ One might wonder what the reason was for this change. It does not seem to be likely that Hartvic's exchange of Géza for Stephen resulted from a scribe error. The passage in question is also provided in a different place in the legend's narrative, and in a different chapter. Therefore, it seems that Hartvic deliberately choose to transfer the credit of Christianizing the military elites of the realm from father to son in order to strengthen the role of Stephen as the ideal soldier of Christ who imposed the same values and rules of conduct on his most valued warriors. A similar narrative strategy is observable in the *Legenda maior*, where the author also tries to diminish the role of Géza in the process of Christianization only to give more credit to the efforts made by his son Stephen.⁶² Be that as it may, the story provides another example of the process of sacralisation of Arpadian

57 *Legenda sancti Stephani regis ab Hartvico episcopo conscripta*, cap. 6.

58 RUSSELL, *The Just War in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge 1975, pp. 16-39; ERDMANN, *The Origin of the Idea*, pp. 8-9; FLORI, *La guerra santa*, pp. 289-292; TYERMAN, *Fighting for Christendom. Holy War and the Crusades*. Oxford 2004, pp. 95-124.

59 *Legenda sancti Stephani regis ab Hartvico episcopo conscripta*, cap. 8.

60 GYÖRFFY, *King Saint Stephen of Hungary*, pp. 83-146; ENGEL, *The Realm of St Stephen*, pp. 25-48; KLANICZAY, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses: Dynastic Cults in Medieval Central Europe*. Cambridge 2002, pp. 134-147; KRISTÓ, *Az Árpádok háborúi*, pp. 48-58.

61 *Legenda minor Sancti Stephani regis*, cap. 2.

62 *Legendy stredovekého Slovenska*. Ed. Marsina. Budmerice 1997, p. 356.

warfare and of the ways how the *miles Christi* ideal spread in the environment of the eleventh and twelfth century intellectual milieu.

The same pattern is present in the remaining chapters of the legend, some building on the information taken from two older *vitae*, while the last chapters provide original input from bishop Hartvic.⁶³ The vision of Stephen as the *miles Christi* remains comparable to the other sources under scrutiny. The King promotes Christianity—both peacefully and through the use of force when needed, establishes ecclesiastical organizations, sets up tight connections to the spiritual and secular leaders of contemporary Latin Christendom (Pope Sylvester II and Emperor Otto III), is even supposedly granted with apostolic privileges to establish bishoprics and monasteries and has a cross carried in front of him as the symbol of his priest-like status. In the latter aspect, one can find a semblance to the Carolingian and Ottonian concept of the *rex et sacerdos*.⁶⁴ This is quite surprising, as Hartvic generally prefers to stress the decisive role of the papacy in spiritual matters related to Hungary.⁶⁵ In line with other legends and written sources referring to Stephen's rule, Hartvic emphasised a deep veneration of the Holy Virgin Mary. This seems especially relevant in instances of military campaigns. Stephen dedicated his kingdom under the protection of the Mother of God and it was with her help that he believed himself to be victorious in his struggles with enemies.⁶⁶

V.

The three legends of King Stephen were written considerably after his death (between 1080s and 1110s). However, there are sources that enable us to observe the first King of Hungary from a closer perspective in the references composed during his lifetime or shortly after his death by contemporary observers from different regions of Medieval Latin Europe. The fame of King Stephen had to be substantial during his lifetime as he left a remarkable imprint in works written by contemporaries hundreds of kilometres from Hungary. His impressive efforts in building a Christianised monarchy on the eastern periphery of Christendom found multiple iterations in local historiographies.⁶⁷ The reports are diverse and have a different emphasis, but there is one aspect connecting all these narratives; they unanimously depict Stephen I as the ideal embodiment of the *miles Christi*

63 Especially *Legenda sancti Stephani regis ab Hartvico episcopo conscripta*, cap. 17-27.

64 KANTOROWICZ. *The King's Two Bodies. Studies in Mediaeval Political Theology*. Princeton 1957, pp. 89, 117-18; ERKENS. *Herrschaftsakralität im Mittelalter. Von den Anfängen bis zum Investiturstreit*. Stuttgart 2006, pp. 166-167.

65 *Legenda sancti Stephani regis ab Hartvico episcopo conscripta*, cap. 9-12.

66 *Legenda sancti Stephani regis ab Hartvico episcopo conscripta*, cap. 12, 14 and 16.

67 GYÖRFFY, *King Saint Stephen of Hungary*, pp. 1-5.

concept. According to Rodulfus Glaber (985–1047) Stephen converted the Hungarians to the Christian faith, which enabled him to open the land route for Christian pilgrims from France and Italy on their way to Jerusalem, boosting the number of pilgrims to the Holy Land.⁶⁸ In addition, he led a pure Christian life himself, which brought a positive reputation among his traditionally Christian allies from abroad. This was materialised in his wedding of Gisela, sister of German King and Holy Roman Emperor Henry II (1002–1024).⁶⁹

In the previously mentioned report written by the imperial chaplain Wipo of Burgundy (995–1050) capturing the failed invasion of Conrad II to Hungary in 1030, Wipo decided to stress the holiness and pure Christian virtues of King Stephen of Hungary to explain the unexpected failure of the imperial campaign. In Wipo's rendition, Stephen was a deeply religious ruler who put all his trust in the hands of Christ and Virgin Mary. In a ritualised gesture, he had pledged his loyalty to the heavenly powers and dedicated his kingdom to the Mother of God.⁷⁰ In order to secure a positive outcome for the military encounter, he even ordered the performance of penitential rituals in the whole kingdom, including public prayers and fasts in the spirit of the Carolingian liturgy of war.⁷¹ This heavenly protection of the *miles Christi* was, according to Wipo, the ultimate reason why the imperial army was forced to withdraw without achieving anything.⁷² To strengthen his arguments, Wipo even adds that Conrad had no legitimate right for waging the war. The Hungarians were defending themselves from the attacks of the Bavarians, plus Conrad had invaded an independent kingdom ruled by a pious Christian King.⁷³ Even though the outcome of the campaign was doomed from the beginning, King Stephen acted as a *miles Christi*, defending his land and his subjects by deploying both visible and invisible weapons.⁷⁴

Shorter accounts were also preserved in other contemporary reports. In the Chronicle of Thietmar of Merseburg (975–1018), Stephen is praised for

68 For the numbers and names of known pilgrims in the eleventh century prior to the First Crusade, see most recently HURBANIČ. Kresťanské púte do Svätej zeme a stredná Európa (1000 – 1095). In ZUPKA, ed. *Historica. Zborník Filozofickej fakulty Univerzity Komenského v Bratislave*, No. LIV, Bratislava 2024, pp. 76–93.

69 Rodulfus Glaber, *Rodulfi Historiarum libri quinque*. Ed. France. Oxford 1989, III 1.2.

70 *Legenda sancti Stephani regis maior*, cap. 14.

71 For the concept of the liturgy of war in medieval historiography see MCCORMICK. The Liturgy of War in the Early Middle Ages: Crisis, Litanies, and the Carolingian Monarchy. In *Viator*, 1984, 15, pp. 1–24; GAPOSCHKIN, *Invisible Weapons*; ZUPKA, *Meč a kríž*, pp. 207–214.

72 WIPO, *Gesta Chuonradi II. imperatoris*, MGH SSrG 61, c. 26.

73 BAGGE. *Kings, Politics, and the Right Order of the World in German Historiography c. 950–1150*. Leiden; Boston; Köln 2002, p. 210.

74 GAPOSCHKIN, *Invisible Weapons*; ZUPKA, *Meč a kríž*, pp. 27–28.

establishing bishoprics, which brought him the hand of the sister of Henry of Bavaria and also later the anointment and crown from the hands of Emperor Otto III.⁷⁵ Generosity and piety were virtues attributed to Stephen by contemporary French Chronicler Adémar of Chabannes (989–1034), who described how he welcomed the count of Angoulême on the latter's journey through Hungary with great courtesy.⁷⁶ Undoubtedly the most telling account was provided by the Chronicle of Hermann of Reichenau (1013–1054), another contemporary of King Stephen. In his entry for the year 1038, he provided the ultimate evaluation that laid the foundation for the later transfer of the *miles Christi* ideal to the King of the Pannonians:

*"In the same year died Stephen, King of the Hungarians, very many years after he had converted, together with all his people, to the faith of Christ, after he had built many churches and bishoprics, and had bestowed great pains on the government of his kingdom, being most gentle towards the virtuous."*⁷⁷

These presented examples from contemporary sources show that the image of Stephen as a just, righteous, pious and especially skilled ruler circulated in the narrative sources during his lifetime and shortly after his death, paving the way to transform his image into the ideal *miles Christi*. In these sources, we find the constituent elements of the characteristics that would later become the essence of the Hungarian legends written on the verge of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The impact of Stephen's personality and his rule was evidently enormous and it was only a question of time when he would be perceived as the model figure of the soldier of Christ, acknowledged as a holy person by the Catholic church. What is more, he became the first ruler in history to achieve canonization solely due to a pious and religious life, without having to undergo martyrdom.⁷⁸ This status, so vehemently emphasised by the Hungarian legends of King Stephen, was obvious to foreign historians as well. Bernold of St. Blasien (1054–1110) noted in his Chronicle to the year 1083 that King Stephen of Hungary, who

75 *Thietmari Merseburgensis episcopi Chronicon*. Ed. Holtzmann. MGH SS RG 9. Berlin: 1935, IV.59.

76 *Ademari Cabannensis. Chronicon*. Ed. Bourgain. Turnhout 1999, III, 65. Cf. QUERET PO-DESTÁ. Poland and Hungary in the Chronicle of Adémar de Chabannes. In *Hungaro-Polonica: Young scholars on medieval Polish-Hungarian relations*. Eds. Bagi, Barabás, Máté. Debrecén 2016, p. 27.

77 *Herimanni Augiensis Chronicon, ad a. 1038*. MGH SS 13. Ed. Harry Breslau. Hannover 1881: *Stephanus Ungariorum rex bonae memoriae obiit, qui se ipsum cum tota gente sua ad fidem Christi ex gentili errore convertit*. The English quotation is according to *Eleventh-Century Germany. The Swabian Chronicles*. Ed. Robinson. Manchester; New York 2008, p. 71.

78 ZUPKA, *Meč a križ*, p. 71; KLANICZAY, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses*, pp. 114–154.

converted himself and his people to the faith of Christ, was distinguished by miracles after the fortieth anniversary of his death.⁷⁹ Adam of Bremen (1050–1081/1085) succinctly noted in his *Chronicle of the Church of Hamburg* that Stephen, who under the influence of his wife Gisela, converted himself and his people to Christianity, became a saint deservedly.⁸⁰ It is evident that the picture of Stephen generated by *Legenda maior*, *Legenda minor*, and *Hartvic's legend* does not generally differ from the image already painted by his contemporaries in the narrative sources of (mainly) western origin.

VI.

There is no doubt about the centrality of Stephen in the earliest (hagiographic) sources from Hungary dated to the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. He is perceived as God's chosen holy king who was sent by divine providence to convert Hungarians and to create and establish independent church organization and the foundations of a Christianised monarchy. Both the *Legenda minor* and *Hartvic's legend* even compare Stephen to God by labelling him as the true light that was sent to shine among the darkness, meaning, to bring the Word of God (John 1, 1-14) to pagan Hungarians.⁸¹ He represented the ideal model of the *miles Christi*, especially in his deep devotion, pious acts of Christian humility and penance, by establishing religious communities and shrines, and by steadfastly spreading the Christian faith, especially in his fight with the non-Christian groups of society. But the ideal of the warrior of Christ could take diverse forms and could be applied to other personalities of Arpadian society of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Stephen's son Emeric represented a type of pious ruler that devoted his entire life to acts of Christian charity and incessant meditation. Leading a monk-like life, he voluntarily accepted life-long virginity despite being married and despite his designation as the heir-to-be of the first King of Hungary.⁸² His premature death caused not only a delicate personal tragedy for King Stephen, it represented a real threat to the continuity of the Christian character of the country as envisaged by his royal father.⁸³ That continuity was then provided by King Ladislas in the last part of the eleventh century, the man responsible for

79 *Bernoldi Chronicon, ad a. 1083*, MGH SS 5. Ed. Waitz. Hannover 1844, pp. 438-439; *Swabian Chronicles*, p. 271.

80 *Adam Bremensis, Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae Pontificum*, MGH SS rer. Germ. 2. Ed. Schmiedler. Hannover 1917, II.43, p. 104.

81 *Legenda minor Sancti Stephani regis*, cap. 2.

82 KLANICZAY, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses*, pp. 158-161.

83 *Legenda sancti Emerici ducis*, pp. 449-460. BOLLÓK. Szent Imre alakja középkori krónikáinkban. In *Philologia Nostra. Bollók János összegyűjtött tanulmányai*. Budapest 2013, pp. 191-205.

the canonization of Stephen and Emeric in 1083.⁸⁴ With them, the first martyred bishop Gerard was canonized. This figure is another interesting version of the application of the *miles Christi* ideal, drawing sanctity from his status of a hermit, theologian, educator, bishop and later martyr.⁸⁵ In a similar vein, hermits St. Zoerard (Svorad) and St. Benedict fought for Christ in their own special and spiritual ways.⁸⁶ We could also add other variations of the *miles Christi* ideal into our consideration, especially when turning to neighbouring regions of Central Europe like Bohemia and Poland. Personalities like St. Vojtech/Adalbert, St. Václav/Wenceslas, or pious rulers such as Mieszko II and Boleslaw III from Poland, Boleslav II and Břetislav II from Bohemia are represented as variations of the wide-spread and well established ideal of the *miles Christi*.⁸⁷

Two examples will be provided for comparative purposes, to examine the similarities and differences in the spread of the *miles Christi* ideal in the region. One extraordinary case is preserved in the narrative account of the *Chronicle of the Czechs* (*Chronica Boemorum*) composed by Dean of the Vyšehrad Chapter Cosmas of Prague before 1125.⁸⁸ Surprisingly enough, the main protagonist and personification of the soldier of Christ ideal is not a member of the ruling Přemyslid dynasty. On the contrary, one of the main heroes of Cosmas' account is the archenemy of Kings Vratislav II, the knight (*miles*) Beneda. This approach is understandable if we consider the motivation of dean Cosmas. His whole chronicle is a fervent apology for the traditional constitutional framework of the Bohemian principality. The power and rule in the duchy were in the hands of rulers from the Přemyslid dynasty who were elected and confirmed by the community of free Czechs, the nobility. Vratislav II, despite being one of the most talented and skilled rulers of eleventh century Bohemia, became a less than enthusiastically valued ruler by Cosmas.⁸⁹ The reason for this unappreciated judgement resulted from Vratislav's royal tile, which he received from the hands

84 Recently, a nice overview is presented in *Szent László Emlékkönyv*. Budapest 2021. An older, but still relevant edited volume is *Athleta patriae. Tanulmányok Szent László történetéhez*. Ed. Mezey. Budapest 1980. For the canonisation processes see KLANICZAY, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses*, pp. 123-134.

85 *Legenda sancti Gerhardi episcopi*. Ed. Madzsar, SRH 2, pp. 461-506.

86 *Legenda SS. Zoerardi et Benedicti*. Ed. Madzsar, SRH 2, pp. 347-361.

87 ZUPKA, *Rulers between Ideal and Reality*, pp. 174-190; KLANICZAY, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses*, pp. 161-194; ANTONÍN, *The Ideal Ruler in Medieval Bohemia*. Leiden; Boston 2017; DALEWSKI, *Vivat princeps in eternum! Sacrality of Ducal Power in Poland in the Earlier Middle Ages*. In *Monotheistic Kingship: The Medieval Variants*. Eds. Al-Azmeh, Bak. Budapest 2004, pp. 215-230.

88 Most recently a detailed companion to Cosmas was provided by WIHODA. *Kosmas*. Prague 2024.

89 REITINGER. *Vratislav. První král Čechů*. Prague 2017, pp. 55-127.

of the Archbishop of Trier Egilbert by the grace of Emperor Henry IV (1054–1105). This act was perceived by Cosmas as an attack on the constitutional pillars of the Czech political community, leaving out the free nobles and neglecting their right to choose a ruler.⁹⁰

To balance this picture, Cosmas devoted special care to depict *miles* Beneda as the true *miles Christi*, and the first fully developed knight in Bohemian context serving as *martyr Dei*. He is the only secular protagonist to achieve such a valuation from Cosmas, as all of the other instances are reserved to saints and martyrs.⁹¹ Cosmas introduces Beneda as a certain knight, but quickly adds that he was of a noble origin, robust stature and with courage and military skills comparable to Hector of Troy. For an unknown reason, he fell out with Vratislav II and supposedly dishonoured him. As a consequence, Beneda had to go into exile and worked in the service of Queen Judith, wife of Duke Vladislav Hermann of Poland (1079–1102). After two years, Beneda tried to regain the favour of the Czech King, asking for intermediary help from Wiprecht of Groitsch and the Bishop of Meissen Benno.⁹² Beneda met the King in his military camp and went with him under a false guarantee of protection. He was attacked, fighting valiantly with the King, but was finally killed when one of the royal *milites* pierced his body cowardly from the back with a javelin.⁹³ This story personified all the virtues of the pious, just and God-fearing warrior, in great discrepancy with the image attributed to Vratislav II. His reputation was acknowledged presumably by his contemporaries, as shown by a short gloss written most likely by the Monk of Sázava to the A3 manuscript of Cosmas's Chronicle, which reads *Dei martyr miles Beneda*.⁹⁴ The status of martyr of God could therefore be attributed to just and pious warriors who remained steadfast in their battles and did not cede before sinful behaviour.

At approximately the same time Cosmas of Prague was composing his *Chronicle of the Czechs* and bishop Hartvic wrote his version of the *Legend of King Stephen*, an anonymous monk in Krakow composed the first historical account of Piast Poland called *Gesta Principum Polonorum*. The author, known

90 TŘEŠTÍK. Počátky českého politického myšlení. In *Politické myšlení raného křesťanství a středověku*. Eds. Herold, Müller, Havlíček. Prague 2011, pp. 404–446; TŘEŠTÍK. *Kosmova kronika. Studie k počátkům českého dějepisectví a politického myšlení*. Prague 1968; WIHODA. *První česká království*. Prague 2015, pp. 119–169.

91 See a detailed description provided in VLK. *Milites ducatus Bohemie*. Ostrava 2023 (PhD. dissertation), pp. 337–352. The only other instance was the bishop Otto of Bamberg.

92 WIHODA, *První česká království*, s. 20; ANTONÍN, *The Ideal Ruler in Medieval Bohemia*, s. 144–145.

93 *Cosmae Chronicon Boemorum*. Ed. Bretholz. MGH SRG NS 2. Berlin 1923, p. 145.

94 *Cosmae Chronicon Boemorum*, p. 145; VLK, *Milites ducatus Bohemie*, p. 337.

as Gallus Anonymus, provided the first compact historical narrative of the Piast rulers in Poland.⁹⁵ He directed praise on two monarchs especially, Boleslaw I the Brave, the first King of Poland (996–1025) and Boleslaw III the Wrymouth (1103–1138). The latter became the greatest hero of his narrative, which is not surprising as the Piast Duke was his benefactor and initiator of the *Gesta* written by the anonymous monk. Gallus purposefully depicted his duke as the true *miles Christi* who expanded the territory of the Piast domain to regions formerly inhabited by pagan peoples (especially the Pomeranians), and at the same time promoted the Christianisation of the newly acquired territories.⁹⁶ Boleslaw III's conquest of Pomerania is narrated in the spirit of Christian holy war. Gallus adapted the idea of a Christian just war to be fought in defence of Christian people and lands, for the just cause of bringing true faith and salvation to the pagan opponents, lead by a legitimate authority, and turned it into a holy war to legitimise the Piast conquest of the Pomeranian territory. He also established the holy war tradition in the Piast dynasty, which will later be turned into crusading family tradition by subsequent princes, such as Henry of Sandomierz and Casimir II the Just.⁹⁷ In the *Gesta principum Polonorum*, the main protagonist is Duke Boleslaw III, who acts as an ideal *miles Christi* by defending the Christians in his realm (supposedly threatened by pagan attacks from beyond the borders) and by spreading the Catholic faith to newly conquered territories.⁹⁸ The strong emphasis on holy wars and crusading rhetoric is not surprising in the works of Gallus. Historians suppose that he came to Poland from Hungary, but he originally migrated to Central Europe from southern France, probably from the St. Gilles monastery in Provence. This was one of the core regions of the formation and spread of the crusading movement, especially in times of the first crusade (1096–1099).⁹⁹

Gallus became one of the earliest propagators of holy war and crusade rhetoric, applying the narrative strategy to his depiction of events in Piast Poland in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. This is clearly seen in his depiction of

95 The best overview to Gallus Anonymus is provided in the introduction by the editors of *Gesta principum Polonorum*. Eds. Knoll, Schaer. Budapest; New York: 2003, pp. xix- lxxvii. See also *Anonim tzw. Gall. Kronika Polska*. Ed. Plezia. Wrocław 2008.

96 GÜTTNER-SPORZYŃSKI. *Poland, Holy War, and the Piast Monarchy, 1100–1230*. Turnhout 2014, pp. 77-106.

97 GŁADYSZ. *The Forgotten Crusaders. Poland and the Crusader Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*. Leiden; Boston 2012, pp. 50-64; GÜTTNER-SPORZYŃSKI, *Poland, Holy War, and the Piast Monarchy*, pp. 135-159, 174-178.

98 *Gesta principum Polonorum*, Liber. III.

99 RILEY-SMITH. *The First Crusade and the Idea of Crusading*. London; New York 2003, p. 138; GÜTTNER-SPORZYŃSKI, *Poland, Holy War, and the Piast Monarchy*, pp. 79-83; *Anonim tzw. Gall. Kronika Polska*, pp. VII–XIV.

military campaigns such as the siege of Gniezno (1097), Nakło (1109), Glogów (1109) or the battle at Trutina (1110).¹⁰⁰ Here we find another example how the ideas of religious warfare, based on the holy war rhetoric and the ruling ideal of the *miles Christi* spread and were incorporated among the circles of Central European society, especially the ecclesiastical and political elites. The *Gesta* then resembles a panegyric of Bolesław III who appears as God's chosen ruler blessed by and under the protection of St. Gilles. He is victorious in all his wars and provides an example worthy to be followed by members of the military elite of Piast Poland.¹⁰¹ In this way, Gallus attempted to gain support for the ongoing campaigns to Pomerania among a wider strata of Piast society. The most efficient way for him was to depict Bolesław III as the chosen ruler blessed with divine favour that enabled him to succeed in all his campaigns. He is depicted as the imitator of *Old Testament* war leaders (*Machabeorum imitator*), the invincible Duke of the North (*dux septentrionalis*), and one who paid considerable attention to the performance of penitential and liturgical rituals of war.¹⁰² In some instances, he even appears as a true embodiment of the *miles Christi*, bringing faith and salvation to the pagan peoples living beyond the Piast border, as in the case of the ruler of Czarńków, who, after being defeated, was raised from the baptismal font by the hands of Duke Bolesław III himself.¹⁰³ The message of Gallus Anonymus is clear: Bolesław is the true *miles Christi* and therefore all his actions are just and righteous, most prominently in the military campaigns and expansion of his realm. The whole process of Piast Poland's territorial expansion to Pomerania is legitimised by the sacralisation of warfare and the sacralisation of the role of the just ruler, equating him with soldier of Christ status. This was likely the essential message Gallus tried to convey to his readers and listeners in the Piast court, and through them to the wider social groups of Piast Poland at the beginning of the twelfth century.

VII.

In order to examine the ideas, mentalities and imaginative patterns of a certain medieval society, one has to acknowledge the people's unique ways of thinking about existence, contemplating its order and creating meaningful interpretations.¹⁰⁴

100 *Gesta principum Polonorum*, II. 6; III. 1; III. 3-6; III. 23.

101 GÜTTNER-SPORZYŃSKI, *Poland, Holy War, and the Piast Monarchy*, pp. 77-106.

102 *Gesta principum Polonorum*, II. 34, p. 180: *Tandem sicut Machabeorum imitator; diviso exercitu et patrie defensor extitit et iniurie vindicator*; III. 2, p. 226: *Boleslauus, dux septentrionalis...*

103 *Gesta principum Polonorum*, III. 44.

104 For significant historiographic approaches see *Ordering Medieval Society: Perspectives on Intellectual and Practical Modes of Shaping Social Relations*. Ed. Jussen. Philadelphia 2001;

In this way, we can approach the narrative, normative and even hagiographic sources from a new epistemological and heuristic perspective. By accepting these premises, even the creation, spread and reception of cultural models such as the *miles Christi* ideal can provide important and rich information about contemporary society and the social order representing its values. Historians have pointed out that human beings do not orient their behaviour toward real events and circumstances, but rather toward the image of them, which is never a faithful reflection of such circumstances. By this they meant that people organize around patterns of conduct, which through the course of history are adapted. In order to understand the relationship between social structures and their notion of themselves, we must account for: 1) the given social reality, 2) the image people have of it, 3) the behaviour of people that results from this image, which in turn creates and shapes reality.¹⁰⁵ This approach stems from Durkheim's sociological notion that social life is wholly made up of representations. As such, Marc Bloch was able to state that historical facts are, by their very nature, psychological facts or mental phenomena.¹⁰⁶ In addition, medieval reflections on the estate were at once normative and based in reality, which contradicts modern thought. Therefore, these medieval modes of understanding social reality cannot be grasped using the modern opposition between ideal and reality.¹⁰⁷

Georges Duby masterfully showed that cultural patterns of social upper classes, including religious belief and attitudes, literary and artistic creations etc., tend to become popularized, to spread and gradually to reach even the lower strata of society. It was the social milieu of the princely court which served as the crystallization point of the collective imagery, shaped especially by representatives of the secular and spiritual elites.¹⁰⁸ The process of creating and subsequently spreading the ideal of *miles Christi* can be examined in a similar way. The concept of the *miles Christi* was deeply rooted in the tradition of the spiritual and physical fight of the pious Christians against their visible opponents (physical political and military enemies) as well as the invisible foes (sin, devil).¹⁰⁹ What seems like a naïve or topical trope to modern reader, in fact

Medieval Concepts of the Past: Ritual, Memory, Historiography. Eds. Althoff, Fried, and Geary. Washington, DC 2002.

105 DUBY. Histoire sociale et idéologie des sociétés. In Le GOFF and NORA, eds. *Faire de l'histoire I: Nouveaux problèmes*. Paris 1974, pp. 147-168; OEXLE. Perceiving Social Reality in the Early and High Middle Ages. A Contribution to a History of Social Knowledge. In *Ordering Medieval Society*, p. 94.

106 BLOCH. *Historian's Craft*. New York 1953, p. 194.

107 OEXLE, Perceiving Social Reality in the Early and High Middle Ages, p. 100.

108 DUBY. The diffusion of cultural patterns in feudal society. In *Chivalrous Society*. Berkeley 1977, pp. 171-177.

109 SMITH, *War and the Making of Medieval Monastic Culture*, pp. 198-199.

was deeply rooted in the mentality and collective imagery of medieval people. It reflects perfectly how medieval people thought, how they contemplated their existence and how they tried to explain the world around them. According to László Veszprémy, modern historians should accept the fact that medieval kings really believed in heavenly intercession on the battlefield and that the general population sincerely implored God's or saints' help by participating in religious rituals of war. These practices and ideas express the cultural patterns and collective imagination of contemporary people and deserve to be treated as such by modern historians as well.¹¹⁰ As a consequence of late medieval nominalism in regard to cognitive mode of the scholarly disciplines, historical knowledge can no longer be understood as true knowledge, the agreement between the mind and the thing. As put by Otto Gerhard Oexle, in historical scholarship, the one, ultimately always attainable, true interpretation of the world and society has been replaced, once and for all, by a multiplicity of propositions about the world and society.¹¹¹

More detailed investigation in this respect, approached from a wider Central European perspective, can bring fruitful and even maybe surprising results. One possible strand would be to observe how the gradual sacralisation of warfare as military success is consistently presented as evidence of divine favour. Another direction could explore the ecclesiastical alignment, as source evidence shows that the rulers were not judged based only on their military victories, but also by their own moral conduct and the support of the church. Another interesting attempt would be a detailed, source-based analysis of ritual symbolism, as the penance, religious rites of war, liturgy of war, blessings of armour and weapons etc. all served as ritual affirmations of the *miles Christi* identity.¹¹² The scope of the present study does not allow a deeper investigation into other aspects closely related to the topic. For instance, the analysis of the *miles Christi* ideal in the 10th century, which despite being often neglected, represents a period of crucial development and spread of the Christianised image of rulers in the Central European region. The example of writings of Bruno of Querfurt from the early 11th century in which he presented his reflections on the *miles Christi* ideal in connection to emperors Otto III and Henry II or local rulers such as Boleslaw

110 VESZPRÉMY, *The First Great War of the Kingdom of Hungary and the Power of Prayer*. Online https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/culture_society/war_kingdom-of-hungary_power-of-prayer_king-stephen/ Accessed 2 July 2025. See also: VESZPRÉMY, *History Writing and Historians in Hungary of the Árpáds*, pp. 292-293.

111 OEXLE, *Perceiving Social Reality in the Early and High Middle Ages*, p. 125.

112 Some preliminary ideas have been explored previously in ZUPKA. *Religious Warfare at the Eastern Borders of Latin Christendom: The Case of the Kingdom of Hungary in the Later Middle Ages*. In *Religious Rites of War Beyond the Medieval West*. Volume 2: Central and Eastern Europe. Eds. Kotecki, Maciejewski and Leighton. Leiden; Boston 2023, pp. 209-243.

I the Brave of Poland and Vladimir the Great of Rus' provides substantial source material for further examination in this respect. Last but not least, further works should examine the processes and the ways that the thoughts about the ideal of the *miles Christi* spread from the highest echelons of the society among the wider social groups.

From the sources examined in this article, several preliminary conclusions can be drawn to serve as a basis for future research. The construction of the ruler as a *miles Christi* had a significant influence on the formation of social consciousness in Early and High Medieval Central Europe. This ideal reinforced the legitimization of royal power not only in the eyes of the elites, but also in the minds of the wider population, as the monarch was perceived as a representative of God on earth, the guarantor of justice and the protector of faith. The cult of the holy kings created a spiritual framework for loyalty to the dynasty and the church, while providing a model for the aristocracy, which was to emulate the model of the Christian knight in the monarch. These ideas were also reflected in religious practices, the founding of monasteries and public displays of piety. Society thus gradually consolidated around the Christian monarchy as not only a political, but also a spiritual authority, fully integrating Hungary, Poland and Bohemia into Latin Christian Europe. Sources preserved from the eleventh and twelfth centuries bear witness to the previously described process of interpretation and presentation of the history of a certain community (or a nation) in order to find and express their place (and identity) in the Christian scheme of things.¹¹³ The adoption and adaption of the ideal of *miles Christi* on the rulers, knights and religious figures of the Arpadian, Piast and Přemyslid era provides one possible variant.

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113 MORTENSEN. Introduction. In *Making of Christian Myths*, p. 7.

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