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Invocation of the Virgin as Protector against the Ottomans: Its Partisans and Critics in the Age of Confessionalization

This paper examines the transformation of Marian devotion in the Habsburg borderlands during the age of confessionalization, transforming traditional medieval piety into an instrument of confessional consolidation and political legitimation. In territories where Catholic populations faced both the Ottoman military threat and the Protestant religious challenge, the Virgin Mary was reimagined as an active military protector. Through miraculous icons like the weeping Maria Pötsch, votive images commissioned by rescued captives, pilgrimage sites, and devotional literature, Catholic elites – including the Jesuits, the Franciscans, and noble patrons like the Esterházy family – mobilized Marian devotion to resist both Ottoman conquest and Protestant influence. This study demonstrates how religious practices and political power constitute mutually reinforcing systems in contested frontier zones, with material objects and devotional rituals serving as active participants in struggles over territory, confession, and identity.

Introduction

On the morning of November 4, 1696, in the small Hungarian village of Pócs (Máriapócs) in the northeast of present-day Hungary, parishioners gathering for Mass witnessed something extraordinary. The icon of the Virgin Mary in their Greek Catholic church – a modest painting commissioned two decades earlier by a peasant named László Csigri in gratitude for his liberation from Ottoman captivity – began to shed tears. For more than a month, until December 8, the icon wept before hundreds of witnesses, and its tears were carefully collected and documented by ecclesiastical authorities. By March 1, 1697, Emperor Leopold I had ordered the miraculous image to be transferred to Vienna, where it was carried through the imperial capital in thirty-three solemn processions, passing from church to church before finding its final resting place in St Stephen's Cathedral (*Stephansdom*). Meanwhile, the village of Pócs received a painted copy – which, to the astonishment of witnesses, continued the miracle, weeping on a regular basis.[1]

[1] Among the scarce scholarly articles on the icon and the pilgrimage site, the following stand out: VON MÉHES 1990; FÖLDVÁRI 2015; FÖLDVÁRI 2022; on the modern history of the cult and the pilgrimage site, see also: ZIMMER 2005.

This was not merely a local wonder. The tears of Maria Pötsch (as the icon came to be known in German) occurred at a moment of existential crisis for Habsburg Christendom. Ottoman armies had besieged Vienna just thirteen years earlier in 1683; the Long Turkish War (1593 – 1606) remained a living memory for many; and the empire's Catholic subjects faced not only the threat of Muslim conquest but also the internal challenge of Protestant "heresy" that had fractured Christian unity across Central Europe. Yet by September 1697 – less than a year after the icon began weeping – Prince Eugene of Savoy achieved a decisive victory over Ottoman forces at the Battle of Zenta (Senta). The imperial preacher Abraham à Sancta Clara promptly attributed this triumph to the Virgin's intercession, depicting her as the woman of the Apocalypse standing on the crescent and the battle as a wine press: "Never have we had a better vintage than this year in Hungary at Zenta; yet the grapes were no Muscatels, but Muslims. From the press there flowed not the juice of the vine, but life juice; it was no must, but the blood of many Mustaphas – and in such abundance that even the River Tisza was thereby almost turned purple like the waters of Egypt. And the press was ruled and guided by her who tramples the crescent under her feet: Mary, the Queen of Heaven, who, along with God, has helped us to triumph".[2] The subsequent Peace of Karlowitz in 1699, which returned vast territories to Habsburg control, seemed to vindicate this interpretation: the Virgin Mary had heard the prayers of her Catholic faithful and restored God's favour to the empire.

The story of Maria Pötsch illuminates the transformation of Marian devotion from a traditional element of medieval piety into a sophisticated instrument of power that operated simultaneously on multiple registers: theological, political, military, and cultural. This article argues that in the Habsburg territories between approximately 1550 and 1720, and particularly in the borderlands where Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, and Muslim populations lived in close and often violent proximity, Marian devotion functioned as an instrument that enabled confessional consolidation, legitimized political authority, and constructed cultural resistance to both Ottoman rule and Protestant influence.

The scholarship on confessionalization, pioneered by Wolfgang Reinhard and Heinz Schilling, has demonstrated how the formation of distinct Protestant and Catholic identities in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries involved parallel

[2] *Niemahlen haben wir ein bessers Weinlesen gehabt / als heuer in Ungarn zu Zenta / es waren aber die Trauben keine Muscateller / sondern lauter Mußlmänner / es ist von der Preß nicht herunter geronnen der Rebensafft / sondern der Leben-Safft / es war kein Most / sondern das Blut vieler Mustaphen / und zwar so häuffig / daß auch die Theiß hierdurch fast wie Egyptische Wasser verpurpert worden / aber die Preß hat regiert und geführt / die jenige / welche den Monnschein mit Füssen tritt / Maria / diese Himmels-Königin hat / nechst Gott / uns helffen victorisieren.* Sancta Clara 1698: section "Praelium Anno 1697. Turcis praelum," 17; cf. HONSTETTER 2022: 107–108. On Abraham à Sancta Clara (born as Johann Ulrich Megerle) and his predicatory dexterity, see especially: EYBL 2012.

processes of social disciplining, institutional consolidation, and symbolic differentiation.[3] Similarly, there is extensive literature on early modern Marian devotion, including important works by scholars such as Klaus Schreiner, whose seminal work *Maria: Jungfrau, Mutter, Herrscherin* demonstrates the Virgin's adaptability to diverse social and political needs,[4] and treats the "militarization" of Marian piety not only as a Baroque curiosity, but also as a central element of early modern state formation and cultural politics.[5] The paradox was, of course, how a figure traditionally associated with maternal compassion, intercessory mercy, and feminine vulnerability could become reimagined in a credible manner as a military commander who trampled infidels and secured battlefield victories. This transformation required cultural work by multiple actors, including Jesuit and Franciscan preachers, court theologians, noble patrons, local clergy, and ordinary believers. In frontier zones characterized by demographic diversity, political instability, and military insecurity, the construction of confessional identity required more dramatic demonstrations of divine favour, more visible markers of group membership, and more emotionally compelling rituals of communal solidarity. Most of all, it required miracles.

The Virgin as a Very Special Saint

The Virgin Mary had always occupied a unique position in Roman Catholic (as well as Eastern Orthodox) theology and devotion: her status as Mother of God granted her unparalleled intercessory power, and her role in salvation history linked her directly to Christ's redemptive work. Her feminine identity made her seem more approachable than the awesome male figures of God the Father or Christ the Judge, while simultaneously allowing her to embody stereotypically feminine virtues of mercy, compassion, and maternal care. The apparent paradox of a tender mother trampling enemies beneath her feet was resolved by drawing on multiple strands of Christian tradition: the apocalyptic woman of Revelation 12 who wages cosmic battle against the dragon; the Queen of Heaven who wields sovereign authority; the New Eve who reverses the first Eve's submission to temptation; and the Mediatrix who channels divine power to earthly supplicants. By synthesizing these various biblical and theological images, Catholic writers

[3] Among the numerous articles on confessionalization written by the two authors, I single out the following: REINHARD 1981; REINHARD 1983; SCHILLING 1988. The evolution of the concept and its relevance in modern historiography has received a thorough treatment in: LOTZ-HEUMANN 2018.

[4] SCHREINER 1994.

[5] See, for example, the classical treatment in: CORETH 1959; and more recently, two excellent studies on regional Marian devotion with militant elements: PRIJATELJ PAVIČIĆ 2014; KUSLER 2024.

and artists created a multivalent Marian figure who could be simultaneously gentle and terrible, maternal and martial, merciful and militantly protective of her devotees.

Finally, we must consider Marian devotion as a systematic set of practices, institutions, and material objects through which specific political and religious objectives were pursued. This included multiple components working in concert:

a) Texts: miracle stories that authenticated divine favour, conversion narratives that demonstrated confessional superiority, captivity tales that dramatized the stakes of confessional choice, devotional manuals that taught proper Marian piety, vernacular poetry that made sophisticated theology accessible to broader audiences, and battle accounts that attributed military success to heavenly intervention.

b) Material objects: miraculous icons whose tears or bleeding authenticated their supernatural power, votive images that testified to answered prayers, pilgrimage sites that channeled devotion into specific geographical locations, architectural interventions that inscribed Marian presence into urban and rural landscapes, and devotional objects (medals, scapulars, rosaries) that allowed individuals to carry protective power with them.

c) Rituals: processions that displayed communal solidarity and celestial patronage, masses and prayers that mobilized collective supplication, translations of miraculous icons that extended their power across territories, and annual commemorations that inscribed sacred history into the calendar.

d) Institutional backing: religious orders (especially Jesuits and Franciscans) that promoted the cult through preaching and publishing, episcopal authentication of miracles and regulated devotion, noble patronage networks that funded pilgrimage sites and commissioned votive images, and confraternities that organized collective devotional practice.

Protestant-Catholic Divergence on the Ottoman Threat

From the earliest years of the Protestant Reformation, the Ottoman advance into Europe posed a theological problem that Protestant and Catholic thinkers answered in fundamentally different, indeed diametrically opposed ways. Both confessions agreed that the Turkish conquests represented divine judgment on Christian sins, but they disagreed about which sins God was punishing and what response He demanded.

For Martin Luther and his followers, the Ottoman threat fit seamlessly into their apocalyptic interpretation of contemporary events. Luther identified the papacy as the Antichrist and the Turks as the eschatological Gog and Magog prophesied in Revelation.[6] Both enemies – spiritual and temporal – assailed true Christianity

[6] Cf. RIEDL 2024.

simultaneously, and both arose as divine punishment for the corruptions of the Roman church. In his 1529 tract *On War Against the Turk*, Luther argued that resisting the Ottomans was legitimate not as a crusade (under papal authority) but as a defensive war undertaken by secular authorities. The true enemy, however, remained Rome: "For since the Turk is the rod of the wrath of the Lord our God and the servant of the raging devil, the first thing to be done is to smite the devil, his lord, and take the rod out of God's hand, so that the Turk may be found in his own strength only, all by himself, without the devil's help and without God's hand".[7] More radical Protestant voices went further. The Lutheran theologian Joachim Greff, writing from the relative safety of Wittenberg in 1541, notoriously declared that life under Turkish rule might be preferable to existence under papal tyranny.[8] His reasoning reflected not admiration for Islam but rather his conviction that Ottoman religious toleration – which allowed Christians to worship freely so long as they paid taxes – surpassed Catholic persecution of Protestants. And in the only work by Matthias Flacius Illyricus that directly addresses this subject, we find a letter incorporated that was written to him in August 1549 by his former fellow student in Wittenberg, Emericus Zigerius (Mirko Ciger, Imre Eszeki), concerning the situation in Tolna and Hungary under Ottoman rule. In his preface added to the letter, Flacius writes the following: "Until now I myself was inclined, together with others, to say that it would be better for Christian monarchs to possess Buda in Hungary rather than the Turk. And yet, as long as the Turk rules, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is freely preached; but as soon as Christians were to seize the city, preaching would cease there, and instead of Christ the Antichrist would be venerated and worshipped".[9] Similar sentiments and opinions were often expressed in the so-called *Türckenbüchlein* – printed booklets that proliferated in Protestant territories from the 1520s onwards – which combined practical information about Ottoman military practices and way of life with extended theological debates about Christian moral decline and even hints of admiration for the Ottomans' unity of faith.[10] Writing before his execution in 1525, Müntzer even suggested that the Holy Spirit might work among them: "Even if someone is born as a Turk, he has

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7 *Denn sintemal der Türcke ist unsers herr Gottes zornige rute und des wütenden Teüffels knecht, mus man zuvor für allen dingen den Teüffel selbs schlagen, seinen herrn, und Gotte die rute aus der hand nemen, das also der Türcke für sich selbs on des Teüffels hülffe und Gottes hand nun seiner macht alleine funden werde*. *Luther* 1528: 116.

8 BOHNSTEDT 1968: 20; cf. SETTON 1992.

9 *Ich wolte noch wol hewtiges tages mit andern lewten wol sprechen / das es viel besser were / das die Christlichen Monarchen Offen inn Ungern einhetten / denn der Türck / vnnd // wird doch alda jtzt / weil der Türck regirt / das Euangelium JHESU Christi gepredigt / So aber die Christen die Stadt inne hetten / würde es alda nicht gepredigt / sonder würde an Christi stadt / der Antichrist geehrt und angebetet werden*. *Flacius Illyricus* 1550: Aiij-B. I have addressed this subject in greater detail elsewhere, see: SCHUMANN 2018.

10 On the genre see especially: KAUFMANN 2008.

a germ of the same faith, the incitement of the Holy Ghost, just as all elect people have had in the beginning".[11] Such ponderings gave rise to hopes and plans to use translations of Scripture into languages and scripts used by the populations in the Ottoman-occupied territories not only to assist them in their faith, but also to convert the Ottomans themselves.[12]

Protestant critics specifically targeted the veneration of saints and Marian devotion as emblematic of Catholic error. The idea that dead humans, however holy, could intercede with God on behalf of the living directly contradicted the Protestant principle of Christ alone as mediator between God and humanity. Catholic views were thus seen as tantamount to practical idolatry – treating Mary as a goddess alongside the true God, effectively practicing polytheism under the guise of Christianity. When military defeats occurred, Protestant preachers pointed to these failures as empirical proof that Mary's intercession was worthless, or worse, that it actively provoked divine anger by perpetuating the very errors that had necessitated the Reformation.

Catholic apologists, understandably, constructed a diametrically opposite interpretation of the Ottoman threat, one that transformed Protestant criticism into proof of Catholic truth. In the Catholic view, the Turkish conquests did indeed represent divine punishment, but the sins being punished were Protestant: heresy, schism, rebellion against legitimate ecclesiastical authority, and the impious refusal to honour the Virgin and saints. God had withdrawn His protection from Christian Europe not because of excessive devotion to Mary but because of insufficient devotion, not because of superstitious saints' cults but because Protestants had fragmented Christianity and blasphemously rejected the communion of saints.

This interpretation found early expression in an anonymous pamphlet published shortly after the disaster of the Battle of Mohács in 1526. The author attributed Hungary's catastrophic defeat directly to the kingdom's tolerance of Lutheran teaching: "Is it any wonder that God has delivered us to the sword when we have allowed the Lutheran heresy to take root in our land? They deny the intercession of the saints, they reject the holy sacrifice of the Mass, they encourage rebellion against lawful authority both ecclesiastical and secular. God has sent the Turk as His instrument of justice".[13] The solution was obvious: to extirpate heresy, restore orthodox devotion, invoke the Virgin's intercession, and God would restore His favour. Evidence was sought and found in Christian victories over Muslims following intensive prayer to Mary and the saints. The Battle of Lepanto in 1571 provided the paradigmatic example, a victory attributed directly to the Rosary confraternities that Pope Pius V had mobilized to pray for Christian success. When military defeats occurred despite proper devotion, they represented either inadequate fervour (requiring intensified

[11] *Müntzer* 1524: 111. Cf. FRANCISCO 2007: 47.

[12] Cf. SCHUMANN 2018: 173ff.

[13] *Ein Sendbrieff* 1526. Cited from BOHNSTEDT 1968: 12.

prayer and ritual) or temporary divine testing (as Job was tested) rather than proof of Mary's ineffectiveness.

The practical implications of this Catholic counter-narrative were profound. If Protestant heresy had caused divine wrath to manifest as Ottoman conquest, then re-Catholicization offered the path to deliverance. Military resistance remained necessary, but it could succeed only when coupled with spiritual reconquest – the elimination of Protestant error and the restoration of authentic devotion. Every Protestant converted, every heretical church reconsecrated to Catholic worship, every new pilgrimage shrine established, every miracle publicly authenticated, represented not merely a religious victory but a contribution to military security. Conversely, every Protestant community that persisted, every nobleman who harboured Lutheran or Calvinist sympathies, every town that maintained Protestant schools or churches, weakened Christian resistance to the infidel by perpetuating the very errors that had provoked God's punishment.

The Jesuit Péter Pázmány, Archbishop of Esztergom (1616 – 1637) and the most influential Catholic voice in seventeenth-century Hungary, articulated this position with particular clarity and force. In his extensive polemical works against Lutheran and Calvinist theologies, Pázmány repeatedly linked Protestant doctrinal error to military vulnerability, arguing that Protestants, while professing exclusive devotion to Christ, in fact dishonoured Him by rejecting the intercession of the saints and the Virgin Mary, and that this rejection explained why God withdrew His protection from Christian lands.[14] One should also mention his individual polemics against Protestant preachers, such as his polemic against István Magyari, a Lutheran pastor from Sárvár (1603), which was evidently written in response to similar accusations from the other side.[15] Another name to mention is certainly Márton Kopcsányi, whose *Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, dedicated to Krisztina Nyáry, wife of Palatine Miklós Esterházy, was published for the Feast of the Annunciation in 1631.[16] The idea of Mary as the "Patrona Hungariae" is emphasized on its very cover, on the verso of which the Virgin appears as the one who is "Virgin, Mother, Patroness, who clothes and watches over the Word, humanity, Hungary".[17] In various places within this book, he denounced the Protestants expressly as the enemies of the Virgin, such as when he stated, referring to an anti-Lutheran decree of Louis II from 1523 that "it is hardly a wonder that our Hungarian ancestors decreed in

[14] These arguments pervade most of Pázmány's work, the pinnacle of which is his *Isteni igazságra vezérlő kalauz* [Guide to divine truth], published in Pozsony in 1613. Bibliography on Pázmány is vast, so I single out a recent synthesis in English that also has a curated bibliography: *Péter Pázmány* 2024.

[15] *Pázmány* 1603.

[16] *Kopcsányi* 1631.

[17] *Virgo, parens, patrona: paris vestit, moderatur. Verbum, hominem, Ungariam: pneumate, carne, prece*. *Kopcsányi* 1631.

1523 at Rákosmező that Lutherans should be arrested and burnt as the enemies of the Blessed Virgin",[18] or that "those who rebelled with the new faith grumble from their stomach because of the law of Buda, but it is in vain they complain, since we must protect the devotion of the Blessed Virgin even against their will, even if her image had to be carried in purses and preserved in iron caskets... as they would sweep out the image of the Blessed Virgin from Hungary"[19] – taking to his heart the mandate of Peter Canisius, known as the "Hammer of the Protestants", that Catholics should protect and venerate the Blessed Virgin wherever they could, in private and in public, to spite the Protestants.[20]

My final example is László Listius, a Baroque poet with a somewhat controversial biography, who wrote a set of poems titled *The Hungarian Mars, or The Memory of Perils that Occurred in the Field of Mohács* in 1653. One of these poems, bearing the title "To the Blessed Virgin Mary, Patrona Hungariae",[21] consists of thirty-eight strophes that are entirely built on this topos. After describing how the medieval kings adhered to the cult of Mary, the poet mentions "the many contrarians who scatter novelties like tares; recently every head is being turned about them, but they refuse to understand that in the end they will regret it".[22] It is quite clear that this strophe refers to the Protestants, not only because of the usual accusation of novelty or innovation, but because he goes on to accuse these ideas, or rather those who propagate them, of throwing the country into ruin, as they are "a deadly poison and worm that consumes our country, throwing it into the throat of the Turks and the nets of the pagans".[23] Then the poet turns to the Virgin, comparing the fate of the Hungarian people to that of the Jews in the Old Testament, and implores her aid in overcoming the infidels. The catastrophe of the Battle of Mohács occurred because Hungary had begun to tolerate Protestant error and thus weakened its relationship with its heav-

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18 *[nem] csudálja, hogy a keresztyén magyar eleink azt végezték 1523. esztendőben Rákos mezején, hogy a lutheránusok megfogattassanak, úgymint a Bódog asszony ellenségi és megégettessenek.* Cited from: BODNÁR 1891: 59.

19 *Bezzeg gyomorból boszankodnak az új vallás után lázadt emberek a megmondott budai vegezésért; de heában törődnek, mert akaratjok ellen is oltalmazniuk kell Bódog asszony tisztességét, midőn az ő képét erszényekben is hordozzák, sőt vasas ládájokban ugyan őrizik. De nehéz az ösztön ellen rugódozni. Ha lehet, törüljék el a Bódog asszony képét a Magyarországi aranyakról. Cf. Acts 26:14*. Cited from: BODNÁR 1891: 59.

20 Bibliography on this aspect of Canisius is extensive; see e.g. BRODRICK 1962: 281 and *passim*.

21 *Listius* 1653.

22 *A sok visszavonyó, s mint konkoly elhányó / Újságok találmánya, / Kikkel országunkban mostan újontában / Minden fej magát hánnya, / Nem veszi eszében s nincsen elméjében / Hogy végtére megbánnya*. Cited from TÜSKÉS AND KNAPP 2000: 592.

23 *Ez halálos méreg, s eszek vesztő féreg / Emészt most országostul, / Ki török torkában s pogány hálójában / Kerét tartományostul, / Ez emészti éltünk s kivánnya elvesztünk / Egész sokaságostul*. TÜSKÉS AND KNAPP 2000: 592.

enly patron. Full restoration of Hungarian greatness and security therefore required not merely military reorganization, but also spiritual renewal centred on renewed Marian devotion. Protestant Hungarians who refused such devotion were not merely theologically mistaken; they were traitors to the historical covenant between Hungary and the Virgin, betrayers of the spiritual foundation of Hungarian national existence.

Stages of Counter-Reformation Marian Militancy (1571 – 1699)

The transformation of Marian devotion from traditional medieval piety into aggressive Counter-Reformation militancy did not occur suddenly or uniformly. Rather, it developed gradually across the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, accelerating dramatically at specific moments when military victories could be plausibly attributed to heavenly intercession. These victories served as evidence for Catholic apologetics, demonstrating empirically (from a Catholic perspective) that proper devotion to Mary secured divine favour while Protestant rejection of her cult led to disaster. Four events in particular stand as crucial turning points in this process: the Battle of Lepanto (1571), the Battle of White Mountain (1620), the Siege of Vienna (1683), and the Battle of Zenta (1697).

Lepanto and the Rosary: Establishing the Paradigm (1571)

The naval Battle of Lepanto on October 7, 1571, marked a watershed not only in military history but in the history of Marian devotion. The Holy League fleet – assembled by Pope Pius V from Spanish, Venetian, papal, and other Catholic forces – confronted the Ottoman navy in the Gulf of Patras and achieved a decisive victory, destroying or capturing over 200 Ottoman vessels while suffering relatively modest losses. This triumph, the first major Christian naval victory over the Ottomans in decades, electrified Catholic Europe.[24]

Pope Pius V supplied the authoritative interpretation: the victory resulted from the massive mobilization of Rosary confraternities across Catholic Europe who had prayed intensively for Christian success. The pope had specifically called for this prayer campaign when organizing the Holy League, promoting the Rosary as a spiritual weapon that could secure heavenly intervention in earthly battles. When news of the victory reached Rome, Pope Pius V instituted the feast of Our Lady of Victory as a liturgical commemoration of Mary's intercession in the triumph.[25] In doing so, he established a template that would be replicated countless times over

[24] Since bibliography on the topic is vast, I single out several recent contributions in English that bring new insights on the subject: CAPPONI 2006; CROWLEY 2008; *Lepanto and Beyond* 2021; ČAPETA RAKIĆ AND CAPRIOTTI 2017: esp. 175ff.

[25] In 1573, the feast was renamed Our Lady of the Rosary by Gregory XIII. See: MITCHELL 2009: 87–90; GEORGE-TVRTKOVIĆ 2020: 403–416.

the following century and a half: military victory attributed to Marian intercession, followed by liturgical commemoration that perpetuated the association between devotion and divine favour.

The Lepanto victory and its interpretation had several crucial effects. First, it reinvigorated Catholic confidence after decades of Ottoman expansion. If prayer to Mary could defeat the seemingly invincible Turkish fleet, then similar devotion might reverse Ottoman gains on land. Second, it provided a powerful apologetic weapon against Protestant criticism. Catholics could now point to an empirical result: they prayed the Rosary and won, while Protestants rejected such devotion and watched Turkish armies advance across their territories. Third, it stimulated massive expansion of the Rosary cult throughout Catholic Europe. Rosary confraternities multiplied, printed Rosary manuals proliferated, and Rosary meditation became a standard element of Catholic devotional life.[26] The practice that had existed in various forms since the Middle Ages now became a defining characteristic of Counter-Reformation piety, a badge of Catholic identity worn in conscious distinction from Protestant practice.

In the Habsburg borderlands specifically, Lepanto established Marian devotion as an acceptable and encouraged response to the Ottoman threat. The Franciscans and Jesuits who led the Counter-Reformation in these regions made Rosary promotion central to their missionary strategies. They established confraternities in towns and villages, distributed printed materials explaining proper Rosary practice, and consistently emphasized that communal Rosary recitation could secure Mary's protection against Turkish raids. The Rosary thus became not merely a private devotional practice but a public ritual of community defence, a way of mobilizing collective spiritual power to supplement inadequate military resources.

White Mountain and Marian Patronage of the Habsburg Dynasty (1620)

The Battle of White Mountain on November 8, 1620, fought against Protestant Bohemian forces and constituting one of the turning points in the Thirty Years' War, profoundly shaped the development of militant Marian devotion in Habsburg territories.[27] The decisive Catholic victory near Prague crushed the Bohemian Protestant rebellion and secured Habsburg control over the kingdom for the next three centuries. More significantly for our purposes, it demonstrated that Mary's protection extended not merely to conflicts with infidels but to wars against heretics – or rather, it confirmed that heretics posed a threat equal to or greater than infidels, since both opposed authentic Christianity.[28]

[26] MITCHELL 2009.

[27] On the confessional consequences of the Battle of White Mountain, see esp. LOUTHAN 1997; WILSON 2009.

[28] See: HEAL 2007; HEAL 2011: 153–172.

The White Mountain victory also legitimated the vigorous re-Catholicization of Bohemia that followed. If Mary had secured Habsburg victory over Protestant rebels, then she clearly favoured Catholic orthodoxy and demanded its restoration throughout Habsburg domains. The expulsion of Protestant nobles, the closure of Protestant churches and schools, the installation of Jesuit educators, and the promotion of Catholic devotional life – all these measures could be presented not as mere political persecution, but as faithful implementation of the Virgin's will as revealed through military success. Her dual protection – against external infidels and internal heretics – made Marian devotion particularly attractive to Catholic elites in the frontier regions. By promoting the Virgin's cult, they could simultaneously resist Ottoman encroachment and counter Protestant influence, achieving through religious means what military and political resources alone could not secure.

Vienna Besieged and Delivered: Marian Protection at Its Pinnacle (1683)

The Ottoman Siege of Vienna in the summer of 1683 represented perhaps the single most important event for the development of militant Marian devotion in the Habsburg lands. For two months, from July to September, the imperial capital withstood Ottoman assault while Leopold I, Holy Roman Emperor fled and European powers debated whether to provide assistance. The eventual relief of the city on September 12 by Polish and Imperial forces under King John III Sobieski constituted not merely a military victory but a providential deliverance that demanded theological interpretation.[29]

Catholic sources uniformly attributed Vienna's salvation to Mary's intercession and Leopold I, returning to his capital after the Ottoman retreat, commissioned thanksgiving services that explicitly credited the Virgin with Vienna's preservation and undertook pilgrimages to various Marian shrines.[30] Printed accounts of the siege and relief, which circulated widely throughout the empire, framed the events as a cosmic battle in which heavenly and earthly forces collaborated to defeat the infidel threat. Contemporary court sermons preached before Emperor Leopold I after the relief of Vienna interpreted the victory explicitly as granted through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, invoking her as *Patrona Austriae*, *Auxilium Christianorum*, and protectress of the Habsburg lands; such Marian rhetoric formed a standard element of Leopoldine court piety and political theology.[31]

The lifting of the siege inaugurated what might be called the golden age of Habsburg Marian militancy. The following years saw an explosion of Marian

[29] A selection of recent historiography on the Siege of Vienna and the Battle at Kahlenberg Mountain: STOYE 2010; WHEATCROFT 2010; PARADOWSKI 2021; BREMM 2021.

[30] See: SERFŐZŐ 2017: 59–66.

[31] POLLEROSS 2003; CORETH 1982, esp. chapters on Hofpredigt and Marian devotion.

devotion throughout the empire: new pilgrimage churches were built or existing ones expanded, miraculous icons were transferred from peripheral regions to prestigious urban locations, Marian confraternities multiplied, printed miracle collections proliferated, and votive images commissioned by individuals grateful for survival or rescue from Turkish captivity accumulated in shrines across the borderlands.

Crucially, the 1683 victory also marked a psychological turning point. For decades, Ottoman power had seemed nearly invincible, and Christian resistance appeared futile except as a desperate holding action against inevitable conquest. Vienna's deliverance demonstrated that the tide could turn, that properly mobilized Christian forces – adequately supported by heavenly intercession – could indeed defeat Turkish arms.[32] This new confidence transformed Marian devotion from a practice oriented primarily toward endurance and consolation in suffering into a more aggressive cult oriented toward victory and reconquest.

Zenta and Karlowitz: Miraculous Icons and Territorial Restoration (1697 – 1699)

The Battle of Zenta on September 11, 1697,[33] consummated the transformation of Marian devotion into triumphalist militancy. Prince Eugene of Savoy, commanding Habsburg forces, achieved perhaps the most decisive victory of the entire Ottoman-Habsburg conflict, destroying an Ottoman army attempting to cross the Tisza River and killing the Sultan's Grand Vizier.[34] The victory opened the path to the Treaty of Karlowitz (1699), which restored vast territories to Habsburg control and marked the permanent end of Ottoman expansion into Central Europe.[35] For Catholic propagandists, the treaty's favourable terms demonstrated conclusively that renewed Marian devotion had restored divine favour to the Habsburg realms. The Virgin who had mourned Christian suffering at Pócs, who had protected Vienna in 1683, and who had granted victory at Zenta in 1697, had now secured lasting peace and territorial restoration. The subsequent decades would see the systematic re-Catholicization of the recovered territories, with Marian shrines playing a central role in this confessional reconquest of lands that had been lost not only to Ottoman political control but largely to Protestant religious influence as well.

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32 On the consequences of the 1683 defeat for the balance of power and European perceptions of Ottoman military strength, see esp. QUATAERT 2005; SUTTER FICHTNER 2008.

33 See: NOUZILLE 2005.

34 Here I single out two biographies of Eugene of Savoy: FALKNER 2024, the first in English after decades; and the classic biography by Nicholas Henderson: HENDERSON 2002, 1st ed. 1964.

35 On the Peace of Karlowitz, see: MEYER SETTON 1991: 389ff.

Patrons and Supporters

The cultivation of militant Marian devotion required sustained organizational effort by multiple institutional actors working in coordination. Among these, three groups proved particularly important: the Jesuit and Franciscan orders, and Habsburg-loyalist noble families, especially the Esterházys.

The Jesuits brought systematic theological sophistication and institutional discipline to the task of re-Catholicization. Arriving in Habsburg Hungary in significant numbers from the 1560s onward, they established colleges in key cities from which they trained clergy, educated noble youth, and directed missionary campaigns into Protestant areas. Their promotion of Marian devotion combined intellectual rigor with emotional appeal. Jesuit theologians developed sophisticated arguments defending saintly cults against Protestant criticism, while Jesuit preachers used dramatic techniques to make these arguments accessible to popular audiences. They promoted the Rosary, established Marian sodalities among students and urban populations, published meditation manuals and miracle collections, and consistently linked devotion to Mary with loyalty to the Catholic Church and the Habsburg dynasty.

The Franciscans complemented Jesuit efforts through their focus on popular piety and pilgrimage. With their tradition of itinerant preaching and their networks of rural churches and shrines, they maintained Catholic presence in areas where parish structures had collapsed or become Protestant, promoting Marian pilgrimage sites that were often connected to local miracle traditions that predated the Reformation. These shrines served multiple functions: they provided focal points for Catholic identity in mixed-confessional regions, they generated revenue through pilgrimage traffic that helped support Catholic institutions, they offered opportunities for dramatic public rituals (processions, healing services, votive offerings) that demonstrated Catholic vitality, and they created occasions for preaching that could reach audiences otherwise unavailable to regular pastoral ministry.

A characteristic example of this strategy was Mount Calvary near Eisenstadt, a pilgrimage site founded by Palatine Pál Esterházy, son of Miklós and Krisztina, who was known for his enthusiastic Marian devotion and personally compiled a book listing and describing no less than 1300 Marian icons on more than 800 pages, published in Nagyszombat in 1696.[36] The foundation is very well documented and was apparently perfectly orchestrated so as to maximize its cultic potential: in 1690, during a procession in Eisenstadt, Esterházy is said to have seen an icon of the Virgin above the gate of a doctor Römer (probably a copy of Maria Einsiedeln in Switzerland), and he immediately commissioned the local artisan Michael Felser to produce his own copy in stone, which was then transported to

[36] *Esterházy* 1696. Cf. SEMMELWEISS 1961: 32–42.

his baths in Großhöflein.[37] In 1707, the icon had already had an opportunity to assert its special powers by remaining intact during a great fire, and in 1711 the first pilgrimages took place, after which Esterházy turned to Cardinal Christian August of Esztergom, who ordered the icon to be transferred from the baths to the sacristy of the local church. Since the influx of pilgrims rapidly increased, the palatine intervened again by ordering a new transfer of the miraculous icon, this time to the sanctuary of Mount Calvary near Eisenstadt, which he had – hardly surprising – founded himself ten years before, modelled on Lanzendorf, a medieval Marian pilgrimage site that was revived in 1696 by Emperor Leopold I and received its own artificial Mount Calvary in 1709, all under Franciscan guidance.[38] It is not unimportant that this revival was a response to the disappearance of the original icon of the Virgin during the Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1683, in which Pál Esterházy also fought with his troops.[39] The palatine personally led the solemn translation ceremony on September 3, 1711, and the *Two Small Treatises on Mount Calvary near Eisenstadt* from 1716 report exhaustively on the event.[40] They were published by the Franciscans and composed with a blatant ideological purpose in service of the Counter-Reformation: the 136 healing miracles reported for the site mention 54 Protestants, both Lutheran and Calvinist, who converted as a result.[41] Such was the case of Agnes Werner from Hermannstadt, who had been blind for nine months and suffered from epilepsy for half a year because she had, as the miracle report tells us, "free-willingly renounced Lutheranism and accepted the true and only salutary faith", though she "denied it again, and adhered to the Lutheran heresy". The healing occurred at the moment of her renewed renunciation of Lutheranism.[42]

Miraculous Icons and Their Networks

Private Votive Images: Andreas Grein of Purbach

The icon of Maria Pötsch has been discussed above. While imperial translations and major pilgrimage sites attracted historical attention, countless private votive images commissioned by individuals rescued from Ottoman captivity reveal how Marian devotion functioned at the level of personal and family experience. The painting commissioned by Andreas Grein of Purbach, preserved in a church

37 *Geschichte des Calvarienberges* 1912: 28ff.

38 RITTSTEUER 1995: 93; SCHMIDT 1948: 4.

39 WEIGER 1996; GRUBER 2020.

40 *Zwey Tractätlein* 1716.

41 *Zwey Tractätlein* 1716: 154.

42 *Zwey Tractätlein* 1716: 77.

at Neusiedler Lake in Austrian Burgenland, provides a particularly instructive example.[43]

The image depicts Grein with hands bound, being dragged by rope behind an Ottoman horseman. The inscription records his capture by Tatars (Ottoman auxiliary forces) in 1647 and his salvation "through the intercession of the Holy Trinity and the Mother of God, as well as the intercession of St Nicholas". An alternative version of the story claims that Grein was captured as a married man rather than as a boy of twelve, and that he spent a year in captivity being forced to plough land while harnessed like an ox before managing to flee the night camp and walk back to Purbach.[44]

The iconographic program combines standard elements with personal specificity. The Trinity and the Virgin occupy the upper portion of the composition, hovering in clouds above the earthly scene – a conventional arrangement indicating heavenly observation and intervention in temporal events. Saint Nicholas appears as a secondary intercessor, appropriate given his role as the patron saint of captives and travellers. The depiction of Grein's actual captivity – the bound hands, the Turkish horseman, the rope – provides documentary evidence of his ordeal while simultaneously testifying to miraculous deliverance.

Such votive images served multiple functions. For the commissioning individual and family, they fulfilled religious obligations – the vow made during captivity had to be honoured through appropriate thanksgiving. They preserved memory of traumatic experience while reframing it within a narrative of divine providence and personal salvation. They demonstrated proper Catholic devotion to neighbours and fellow parishioners, marking the commissioner as someone whose faith had been tested and proven. They contributed to the visual culture of the local church, joining other votive offerings to create a collective testimony of Marian protection that reinforced communal Catholic identity. More broadly, the accumulation of such private votives in churches across the borderlands created a powerful apologetic argument. Each image testified that Mary could and did rescue individuals from Turkish captivity, that prayers offered to her secured tangible results, and thus that Catholic devotion worked. When Protestant critics accused Catholics of superstition, Catholic clergy could point to walls covered with votive images documenting answered prayers. The sheer multiplication of such testimonies – paintings, silver hearts, wax models of rescued body parts, written accounts – overwhelmed scepticism through cumulative force.

[43] The image can be viewed at https://www.oeaw.ac.at/fileadmin/_processed_/5/6/csm_Koppikreuz_3_58495dc225.jpg (accessed on September 25, 2025).

[44] RÜSSEL 2003: vol. 1, 30f; GARAMI [1937].

Baron Kuefstein's Constantinople Painting: Marian Presence in the Ottoman Territory

Baron Hans Ludwig Kuefstein's commission between 1630 and 1634 represents a particularly sophisticated example of Marian devotion addressing the Ottoman threat. Kuefstein, who served as ambassador from Emperor Ferdinand II to the Ottoman court, commissioned a painting showing the Virgin Mary hovering in the clouds above Constantinople/Istanbul after his safe return from diplomatic service.[45]

The image operates through deliberate ambiguity and multiple layers of meaning. On one level, it depicts Mary as the protector of Kuefstein himself during his sojourn in the Ottoman capital, watching over him and preserving him in body and faith while he navigated the dangers of diplomatic service in the sultan's court. The fact that he returned "unharmed in body as much as in faith" (as contemporary accounts emphasized) testified to Mary's efficacy: she had protected not only his physical safety but also his spiritual integrity, preventing conversion or compromise with Islam.

On another level, the image invokes Constantinople's Byzantine past. The city had been the most important centre of Marian devotion in Eastern Christianity, traditionally protected by the Virgin as the city's special patron. The famous icon of the *Hodegetria* (She Who Shows the Way) had been processed on the city walls during sieges, and Marian hymns like the *Akathistos* celebrated her victories over its enemies.[46] By showing Mary hovering over Istanbul, Kuefstein's painting suggested that she had not abandoned the city despite its fall to Muslim rule in 1453. She remained present, watching, waiting for the day when Christian rule would be restored and her churches reopened.

This interpretation gained support from contemporary reports of Marian visions occurring in Ottoman territories, sometimes even leading to Muslim conversions. These narratives, even if historically dubious, served important ideological purposes. They suggested that Mary's power extended into the very heart of Ottoman domains, that her appeal transcended confessional boundaries, and that divine providence was actively working toward the eventual reconquest of territories lost to Islam. The image thus functioned simultaneously as thanksgiving for personal protection, invocation of historical precedent, and prophecy of future restoration. Comparing Kuefstein's commission to standard images of urban Marian protection reveals both continuity and innovation. The basic iconographic formula remained the same, but applying it to Istanbul rather than a Christian city created semantic tension that generated additional meanings. It implied that Ottoman conquest

[45] Kuefstein Collection, Greillenstein Castle, work of Franz Hörmann and Hans Gemminger. The painting is reproduced in: *Image of the Turks* 2005: 50.

[46] Literature on the protective function of the Theotokos icons is vast, see e.g. MANGO 1998: vol. 2, 61–76; LIDOV 2004; CUNNINGHAM 1995; SCHREINER 1994: 336–340.

was temporary, that Christian claims to the city remained valid despite political reality, and that Mary's protection would eventually manifest in the restoration of Christian rule.

Conclusion

I necessarily had to omit various other types of icons produced in gratitude or for eliciting future favour from the Virgin, such as Marian pillars (*Mariensäulen*) or the icon pillars of the *Bildstock* type and the so-called "Turkish candles" (*Türkenkerzen*), characteristic of Styria and Lower Austria, or images of Mary worn on battle flags. However, even this small glimpse into the revival of Marian devotion may serve to show how the struggle for territory, both spiritual and material, on two fronts, against both the Protestants and the Ottomans, was converted into a programme that was both political and devotional, in which the nobility and religious orders promoted the cult with relentless fervour as a means of survival on the religious and even ethnic map of Europe.

This transformation succeeded because it operated on multiple levels simultaneously. Spiritually, Marian devotion offered genuine consolation and hope to believers living in constant danger. Politically, it legitimated Habsburg authority by linking dynastic interests to divine favour. Militarily, it sustained morale and provided meaning in combat through the conviction that heavenly forces fought alongside earthly armies. And apologetically, documented miracles and military victories attributed to Mary's intercession provided powerful arguments against Protestant critics who dismissed Catholic devotion as superstition.

The institutional actors who promoted this militant Marian piety – Jesuits, Franciscans, bishops, and noble patrons like the Esterházy family – deployed a sophisticated array of tools: miracle narratives, votive images, pilgrimage sites, printed devotional literature, and urban monuments. Icons like Maria Pötsch, with their carefully documented tears and imperial translation, exemplified how material objects could be mobilized to serve religious, political, and military objectives. Private votive images commissioned by rescued captives like Andreas Grein demonstrated how individual experiences of deliverance reinforced collective narratives of Marian protection. And spatial networks of shrines, pillars, and "Turkish candles" inscribed the Virgin's presence across the landscape, making Catholic identity visible and tangible throughout contested territories.

This study illustrates how religious devotion and political power functioned as mutually reinforcing systems in the specific context of the Habsburg borderlands in the age of confessionalization. The Virgin Mary's transformation from passive intercessor to an active military commander resulted from the intersection of multiple interests: genuine spiritual conviction, political calculation, institutional strategy, and popular enthusiasm.

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Zazivanje Djevice Marije kao zaštitnice od Osmanlija: Zagovornici i protivnici u doba konfesionalizacije

Ovaj rad istražuje transformaciju marijanskog kulta u habsburškim pograničnim područjima u razdoblju konfesionalizacije, kada je pobožnost prema Blaženoj Djevici Mariji iz tradicionalnog elementa srednjovjekovne religioznosti prerasla u sofisticiran instrument konfesionalne konsolidacije i političke legitimacije. U područjima gdje su katoličkom stanovništvu istovremeno prijetila osmanska vojna osvajanja i protestantska vjerska konkurencija Djevica Marija stekla je status aktivne vojne zaštitnice čija je posrednička moć, osigurana štovanjem i molitvom, mogla osigurati i pobjede na ratištu i konfesionalnu lojalnost.

Katolički odgovor na osmansku prijetnju bitno se razlikovao od protestantskog. Dok su protestantski propovjednici Osmanlije tumačili kao „Božji bič" izazvan katoličkim zabludama, osobito zazivanjem svetaca, koje su smatrali idolopoklonstvom, katolički su autori tvrdili upravo suprotno: protestantska hereza izazvala je Božji gnjev nad Europom, a spasenje treba tražiti u obnovi autentične pobožnosti, posebno u marijanskom kultu. Ključni vojni događaji – bitka kod Lepanta (1571), opsada Beča (1683), pobjeda kod Sente (1697) i Karlovački mir (1699) – tumačeni su kao dokazi da Marijino zagovaranje osigurava božansku naklonost.

Promidžba tog obnovljenog i intenziviranog marijanskog kulta, u kojoj su osobitu ulogu igrali isusovci, franjevci, biskupi i velikaški pokrovitelji poput obitelji Esterházy, sastojala se od širokog spektra sredstava: narative o čudima, zavjetne slike, hodočasnička središta, propovijedi i tiskanu nabožnu literaturu. Čudotvorna ikona Maria Pötsch, s dokumentiranim suzama i carskim prijenosom u Beč 1697. godine, primjer je kako su materijalni objekti mobilizirani za vjerske, političke i vojne ciljeve. Privatne zavjetne slike koje su naručivali oslobođeni zarobljenici poput slike Andreasa Greina iz Purbacha pokazuju kako su individualna iskustva oslobođenja jačala kolektivne narative o marijanskoj zaštiti. Mreža svetišta, marijanskih stupova i „turskih svijeća" (*Türkenkerzen*) upisala je Marijinu prisutnost u krajolik, čineći katolički identitet vidljivim i opipljivim diljem spornih teritorija.

Rad pokazuje kako su se vjerska pobožnost i politička moć uzajamno poticale i osnaživale u razdoblju konfesionalizacije. Marijina transformacija iz pasivne zagovornice u aktivnu ratnicu rezultirala je iz presijecanja višestrukih interesa: iskrene duhovnosti, političkog računa, institucionalne strategije i nacionalnog entuzijazma. Veza između katoličkog identiteta i marijanske pobožnosti koja se formirala i intenzivirana tijekom ovog razdoblja dugoročno je oblikovala srednjoeuropsku religioznost.

Ključne riječi: marijanska pobožnost, razdoblje konfesionalizacije, osmanska prijetnja, katoličko-protestantski sukob, nabožna literatura, Pál Eszterházy, bitka kod Lepanta, Bitka na Bijeloj Gori, opsada Beča, bitka kod Sente

Keywords: Marian piety, age of confessionalization, Ottoman threat, Catholic-Protestant conflict, devotional literature, Pál Eszterházy, Battle of Lepanto, Battle of White Mountain, Siege of Vienna, Battle of Zenta

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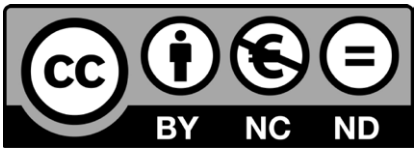
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