

A Millennium of Belgrade (Sixth-Sixteenth Centuries) A Short Overview

Abstract: This paper gives an overview of the history of Belgrade from the reign of Justinian I (527–565), i.e. the time of Slavic settlement, to the Ottoman conquest in 1521. The millennium can be divided into three thematic and chronological units: the Byzantine era (up to 1204), the Serbian era and, finally, the Ottoman era (fifteenth–sixteenth centuries). Within the Byzantine cultural orbit, and especially during the twelfth century, the city played a major role in the relations between the Byzantine Empire and Hungary. Byzantine emperors sojourned in Belgrade on multiple occasions. The city reached its peak during the reign of Despot Stefan in the early fifteenth century. After his death in 1427, the Ottoman threat cast its shadow over the city. Its inhabitants, the Serbs, defended Belgrade for almost a century (1427–1521), thus defending the whole of Central Europe. Belgrade's fall into the Ottoman hands was followed by the demise of the Kingdom of Hungary in 1526. Even Vienna was threatened by the Ottomans, in 1529.

Keywords: Belgrade, history, Byzantine Empire, Serbian capital, King Dragutin, Despot Stefan Lazarević, Hungary, Serbs and Ottomans

The Byzantine Era

At the time of the migration of populations, Singidunum was attacked by various peoples crossing the Balkan Peninsula in their campaigns or halting in the nearby Danube and Tisa basins. The Huns came first, in 441, followed by the Ostrogoths and the Heruls. Their looting raids came one after another, causing great tribulation in the settlements on their paths. Devastation and destruction caused immense damage and gradually threatened the very survival of the late Roman order in this region. It became clear that only a complete reconstruction of the defence system could save the Empire. Justinian I (527–565) tried to do just that; he took steps to adapt the isolated border fortresses on the Danube to the possibilities of the time and the needs of the land. He renovated old fortresses and built new strongholds. The society of the sixth century was not capable of defending the large military camp in Singidunum. During this period, like elsewhere in Europe, new smaller strongholds were being built inside Roman fortifications. The partially destroyed military camp of Singidunum was also

renovated and, it seems, made smaller.¹ The city underwent other changes too. Due to the innovations introduced by Emperor Justinian I, as well as to developments in everyday life, bishops assumed role of greater importance in the region that had gained some administrative rights. With the co-operation of a small body made up from the ranks of prominent men and administrative officials, they obtained various tax and judicial functions in the town. The Bishop of Singidunum played an active role in the events of 579, particularly in the negotiations with the neighbouring Avars.

But a new danger was to threaten Singidunum in the second half of the sixth century. The Avars entrenched themselves in the territory of Pannonia and started, together with the Slavs, to attack the neighbouring areas. In 568–569, the Prefect of Illyricum, Vitalian, was forced to save the Danube basin after an abortive Avar attack on Sirmium, while, in 573–574, the Empire agreed to pay a permanent tribute to the Avars. When Sirmium fell into their hands in 582, an attack on Singidunum became a matter of time. It was conquered in the summer of 584. Somewhat later, the Empire managed to win back Singidunum, but another fierce Avar attack followed in 596. It was only thanks to the help of the military leader Priscus that the fortress held strong. Reconstruction began, requiring great effort.

Attacks from Slav tribes began in the 540's. Sources record that there was a particularly powerful onslaught in 550–551 encompassing the area of Naissus before penetrating far to the south of the Balkan Peninsula. From that time, the Slav tribes contributed, alone or in cooperation with other peoples, to the devastation of Illyricum. The fortresses continued to withstand their attacks, although, as a rule, they were not heavily garrisoned.

The wave of Slav settlement assumed great proportions in the early seventh century. It encompassed mainly the rural areas but also the more important towns. It was during the time of Emperor Heraclius (610–641) that Singidunum, Viminacium, Naissus, Serdica and Salona fell. Constantine Porphyrogenitus mentions Serbs in Belgrade on the occasion of events that may be dated to around the year 630.²

¹ Procopius, *De aedificiis* IV, 5, ed. Jakob Haury (Lipsiae 1913), 126; Franjo Barišić, "Vizantijski Singidunum", *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* [ZRV] 3 (1995), 4–6; Ljubomir Maksimović, "Severni Ilirik u VI veku", *ZRVI* 19 (1980), 21–26, 37–38.

² A large body of literature is devoted to Slavic settlement in the Balkans. For basic data, see Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, ed. Gyula Moravcsik, trans. R. J. Jenkins (Budapest 1949), 152. Translation and a selection of literature: Konstantin VII Porfirogenit, trans. and comm. Božidar Ferjančić, in Georgije Ostrogorski, ed., *Vizantijski izvori za istoriju naroda Jugoslavije* II (Belgrade: Naučno delo, 1959), 47–49; Božidar Ferjančić, "Invasion et installation des Slaves dans les Balkans", in *Villes et peuplement dans l'Illyricum protobyzantin*, Actes du colloque organisé par l'Ecole française de Rome, Collection de l'Ecole française de Rome 77 (Rome: Ecole française de

The town appeared under a Slav name in the ninth century (Belograd, Beograd), and it was under Bulgarian rule in the ninth and tenth centuries. It was not until the beginning of the eleventh century that the Byzantine Empire succeeded in reconquering the greater part of the Balkan Peninsula. Defeating the Emperor Samuel, it conquered Belgrade and Srem. That frontier area became included in the Empire's military and administrative system. It was entrusted to one of the most capable Byzantine military leaders, Constantine Diogenes, while the Bishopric of Belgrade was placed under the authority of the Greek Archbishopric of Ohrid.

A period of long Hungarian-Byzantine battles in the region of Belgrade began in the second half of the eleventh century. The Hungarian army attacked the city for the first time in 1071 under the command of King Coloman himself. Bitter fighting waged for over two months, the crews of the Byzantine ships on the rivers putting up fierce resistance. The attackers made use of siege-breaking devices and managed to cause large-scale fires in the town. Belgrade could not withstand without considerable reinforcements, and the Byzantine military commander of Belgrade, Nicetas, surrendered the town. In their withdrawal, the defenders took with them a particularly revered icon of the Mother of God. Sources recorded that the Hungarian army obtained rich spoils and later continued its raid towards Naissus.

Somewhat later, the Byzantine Empire recaptured Belgrade, while Zemun was to stay permanently under Hungarian rule. And that was how an important inter-state border separated two neighbouring towns for a long time and to a great extent determined their histories. Only occasionally could the inhabitants of those settlements achieve some form of relatively close cooperation. One such occasion was in 1096, when large numbers of ill-equipped Crusaders arrived at Zemun. In search of food and booty, divisions under the leadership of Peter the Hermit started a true siege of the town. After several days of battle, they conquered Zemun, leaving absolute devastation in their wake. The Byzantine commander of Belgrade was then cooperating with the authorities in Zemun and, when it was assessed that there could be no successful resistance to the attackers, he ordered the army and the people to withdraw towards Naissus (Niš) and safer locations.

Relations between Hungary and the Byzantine Empire deteriorated sharply at the beginning of the twelfth century. Hungary was implementing its policy of vanquishing the Balkan peoples systematically. It had subjugated Croatia and, somewhat later, Bosnia too. Its major rival was the

Rome, 1984), 89–91; Gordana Marjanović-Vujović, "Slavic Belgrade", *Balkanoslavica* 2 (1973), 1–15. Jovanka Kalić, "Vesti Konstantina VII Porfirogenita o Beogradu", *ZRV* 21 (1982), 33–36.

Byzantine Empire, which was then undergoing a renewal of its military strength. Under the Comnenus dynasty, the Byzantium was vigorously intensifying its presence in the Balkan countries. A conflict with Hungarian interests in the same region was inevitable, while the central Danube basin, and particularly Belgrade, became the focal point of that conflict. Few economic contacts that linked Belgrade to Zemun and the Hungarian hinterland were cut. Clashing over a wide area, the Byzantine Empire and Hungary most frequently waged war in the frontier zone. The Hungarian King Stephen II (1116–1131) started his offensive by attacking Belgrade in 1127. The city was captured and, as ordered by the Hungarians, razed to the ground. Judging by an account of these events, it seems that part of the stone from the demolished ramparts of Belgrade was hauled to Zemun to be used for the restoration of its walls. The Hungarian army then attacked Braničevo and penetrated to the south along the river Morava.

The Byzantine emperor John II Comnenus (1118–1143) hastily put up a counter-offensive. A huge army was sent up the Morava valley towards the banks of the Danube, expecting the ships that had been sent from the Black Sea. The Byzantine Empire then took the fighting onto Hungarian territory. The war ended with a peace treaty, whereby Belgrade remained under Byzantine rule.³

However, peace was short-lived. A new Hungarian-Byzantine war flared as early as 1149, but this time on a far larger scale and with more complex objectives. Serbia, siding with Hungary, joined the large anti-Byzantine coalition of European powers. The strengthened Byzantium under Emperor Manuel I Comnenus (1143–1180) immediately went over to the attack. After a victory over the Serbs in autumn 1151, the Byzantine ruler directed all his forces against Hungary. Belgrade became a large military camp where preparations were carried out for upcoming battles in Srem. Emperor Manuel I Comnenus himself was there, and it was from Belgrade that attacks went out into Srem. Zemun was conquered after bitter fighting. A Hungarian counter-offensive was then undertaken, in the name of the ruler, a Serb, *ban* Beloš. He tried to force the Byzantine army into retreat by

³ *Ioannis Cinnami epitome rerum ab Ioanne et Alexio Comnenis gestarum*, ed. Augustus Meineke (Bonnae: Impensis Ed. Weberi, 1836), 10. Translation and literature: *Vizantijski izvori za istoriju naroda Jugoslavije IV*, eds. Georgije Ostrogorski and Franjo Barišić (Belgrade: Vizantološki institut Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1971), 7–14; Jovanka Kalić-Mijušković, *Beograd u srednjem veku* (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruža, 1967), 44–47; Jovanka Kalić, “Zemun u XII veku”, *ZRVI* 13 (1971), 13–56; Gyula Moravcsik, *Les relations entre la Hongrie et Byzance à l'époque des Croisades* (Paris 1934), 3; Ferenc Makk, *The Árpáds and the Comneni* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1989), 24–25.

attacking Braničevo. After a successful takeover a truce between the warring sides was soon concluded.

Fighting restarted in 1152 and 1153, although not in Belgrade. However, everything that was happening on the border had a direct effect on life in the city. Byzantine emperor Manuel introduced a major administrative change. He entrusted the administration of the frontier region towards Hungary to his relative Andronicus Comnenus. It seems that the region encompassed the towns of Belgrade, Braničevo and Niš. Andronicus, known for his unsettled personality, allowed himself to be led into treachery because of his disagreements with the Byzantine Emperor and his personal ambition. After taking over his position on the border, he negotiated both with Hungary and Germany, searching for allies and military support in his struggle for imperial power. Andronicus offered the regions under his control to the Hungarian King Geza II, but he did not succeed: his activities were uncovered and at the end of 1153 he was arrested. However, the Hungarian king went over to the attack and besieged Braničevo in 1154. Emperor Manuel personally led an army that via Niš headed towards the theatre of war. Upon hearing that the enemy was approaching, the Hungarian army halted its attack on Braničevo and retreated towards Belgrade, in order to cross over the Sava into Srem. A section of the Byzantine army pursued the attackers and, under the command of Basil Cinciluk, the pursuing forces entered into battle with the enemy forces in the vicinity of Belgrade. They suffered a heavy defeat, and the commander himself barely escaped.

All these developments had the effect of transforming the internal conflicts in Belgrade into a veritable uprising. Some of the inhabitants rebelled in order to free the city from Byzantine rule. Many were killed, and many fled the city. Emperor Manuel was therefore forced to entrust John Cantacuzenus with a broad spectrum of powers and to send him with an army to stifle the rebellion and punish the culprits. When that had been done, the fortress was supplied with reliable manpower. The Byzantine Empire did not allow anyone to jeopardise its authority in Belgrade. Somewhat later, a peace treaty concluded between Hungary and the Byzantine Empire confirmed such a stand.

But, the balance of power was to change in the Danube basin in the 1160s, for the Byzantine Empire returned to the offensive. There were many reasons for that. By meddling adroitly in the internal affairs of Hungary, and particularly in the complex dynastic relations, Emperor Manuel tried to extend his rule over Central Europe too. He gave assistance to pretenders to the Hungarian throne and sent an army to support them. Emperor came himself to Belgrade. It was during his reign that the reconstruction of the city's fortifications was carried out. Several towers and new ramparts were

built according to the principles of Byzantine military architecture. A citadel was created on the strategically most important part of the Kalemegdan plateau. It was an irregular deltoid in shape approximately 135 metres long by 60 metres wide. The remnants of that citadel have recently been discovered. The ramparts were between 2.60 and 2.80 metres thick, while the width of the walls around the tower was between 2.20 and 2.50 metres. The fact that the Byzantine Empire was carrying out building works in Belgrade demonstrates its interest in that region. Those works were, for a while, directed by the Emperor's relative Constantine Angelus and by Basil Tripsih.⁴

Emperor Manuel stayed in Belgrade once again in 1163. He negotiated through envoys with the Hungarian court in Buda. He offered to establish family links with the Hungarian court, proposing that his daughter Maria marry Bela, the son of King Geza II of Hungary, with the stipulation that Croatia, Dalmatia and Sirmia (Srem) be conceded to the Emperor's son-in-law. The contract was concluded, but the Hungarian court was not prepared to give what was called Bela's heritage to the Emperor. That led to a war that lasted from 1164 to 1167 and once again brought fighting to the border regions. Emperor Manuel visited Belgrade in 1165. After much effort, his army managed to take Zemun. Defeated in Srem once again, Hungary in 1167 agreed to a peace treaty ceding Srem to the Byzantine Empire. That was the greatest territorial change on the Byzantine border by Belgrade.

But changes were to come at the end of the twelfth century. After the death of Emperor Manuel I Comnenus in 1180, Hungary went over to the attack. Hungarians took Belgrade and Braničevo as early as 1182, and then, in alliance with Stefan Nemanja, the ruler of Serbia, continued the conquering of Byzantine territories. Somewhat later in 1185, Byzantine Emperor Isaac II Angelus succeeded in winning back Belgrade by diplomatic means and negotiations with the Hungarian court in Buda. The last time a Byzantine emperor was to visit Belgrade was late in the autumn of 1190.⁵ A

⁴ Cinn. 212–215, 221–227, 231–248; *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, ed. J. A. van Dieten (Berolini: Novi Eboraci: de Gruyter, 1975), 127, 135–136; Gyula Moravcsik, *Byzantium and the Magyars* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1970), 82–85; Ferenc Makk, “Megjegyzések III. István történetéhez”, *Acta Universitatis Szegediensis: Acta historica* 66 (1979), 29–43; *Vizantijski izvori* IV, 56–87, 130–137 (Jovanka Kalić). Western European authors (F. Chalandon, P. Stephenson, P. Magdalino) without local knowledge in the area of Hungarian-Byzantine strife in the twelfth century.

⁵ *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, 434. A substantial body of both domestic and foreign literature is devoted to this subject: Ferenc Makk, “III. Bela es Bizanc”, *Századok* 1 (1982), 55–59; Makk, *The Árpáds and the Comneni*, 118–124; Nikita Honijat (Besede), transl. and comm. Božidar Ferjančič, in *Vizantijski izvori* IV, 225–23.

weakened Byzantine Empire no longer had the strength to defend the border on the Danube and, as early as 1192–1193, King Bela III of Hungary was preparing to reconquer the Danube towns.

The Byzantine Empire suffered a catastrophe at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Crusaders conquered Constantinople in 1204, after which the Byzantine Empire ceased to exist for many years. Its authority over Belgrade vanished forever. The city came under the rule of Hungary, which held it with short interruptions throughout the thirteenth century. It seems that Belgrade entered into the newly created *banovina* of Mačva (*banat*, province), which was formed by the Hungarian king in the middle of that century.

In the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Belgrade had been known as an important stopping point on the land route between Central Europe and the Middle East. Many travellers, pilgrims and even entire armies stayed in the town or just passed by Belgrade. The strengthening of Christianity meant that more people from Hungary and the Slav countries could use that route, as registered in 1026 when Prince William of Angouleme travelled along it. The travellers would usually obtain food and other supplies en route. Trading did take place, but so did looting, and there were many conflicts. Zemun and Belgrade faced particularly great trials in 1096, when a huge number of Crusaders made their way by land towards Constantinople. Completely unprepared for such a venture, they inflicted enormous damage on the settlements on their path. Some crusaders committed a massacre in Zemun, while others relentlessly seized livestock from the inhabitants of Belgrade. The population opposed the attackers and fled wherever they could.

Some extremely prominent travellers were to stay in Belgrade for a short time. An army of French landed gentry led by Godfrey de Bouillon, his brother Baldwin and other knights passed in the late autumn of 1096. In the twelfth century there passed the large army of the German King Conrad III, who also had a considerable number of ships. That same year (1147), King Louis VII of France stayed in Belgrade with his lavish and colourful retinue. These were all looked upon with great distrust by the Byzantine border authorities. And, finally, there was the German Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa in 1189. Sources recorded that Belgrade, half-destroyed, was in a miserable condition.⁶

⁶ Konstantin Jireček, *Die Heerstrasse von Belgrad nach Konstantinopel* (Prag 1877), translation: *Zbornik K. Jirečeka* I, sp. eds. vol. 326 (Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Sciences, 1959), 75–149.

Serbia and Belgrade

Belgrade came under Serbian rule in the thirteenth century. That important change was rendered possible by the close family links between Serbian King Stefan Dragutin and the Hungarian court. King Stefan Dragutin was married to Catherine, the daughter of Hungarian King Stephen V. After having abdicated in 1282, Stefan Dragutin administered part of Serbian state territory to the north and the west. Those territories included Mount Rudnik with the surrounding area. Two years later, in 1284, the Hungarian ruler made him governor of Mačva and Belgrade. Serbian sources call Stefan Dragutin the “Sremski kralj” (King of Sirmia), for Srem, at that time, also encompassed regions south of the Sava, the whole region of Mačva and part of northern Serbia.

Belgrade was under rule of Stefan Dragutin for over thirty years. He often stayed there and encouraged its overall development. Combined with its natural hinterland, the town obtained exceptionally favourable living conditions. The settlement spread to beyond the ramparts, and traces of it were recently discovered in Dorćol, near today’s Cara Dušana Street. It was in Stefan Dragutin’s time that an Christian Orthodox cathedral was built, where the highly revered silver icon of the Mother of God was kept. During the reign of King Stefan Dragutin, the Serbian church in Belgrade was very active in spreading Orthodoxy. New churches were built in the surrounding areas in which services were performed by Orthodox priests. News of these changes reached Rome and provoked protest by Pope Nicholas V, who called the Bishop of Belgrade a schismatic and had only words of condemnation for his activity. The Serbian Queen Simonida, the wife of King Stefan Milutin, visited the Belgrade Metropolitan church during her stay in the town in 1314.⁷

A dispute concerning Belgrade arose after the death of King Stefan Dragutin in 1316. Serbia wished to keep the city, while Hungary demanded that it be ceded. Dragutin’s successor on the throne of Serbia King Stefan Milutin (1282–1321) tried in many ways to prevent Belgrade from falling into the Hungarian hands, including the strengthening of the city’s fortifications and preparing its defence. Hungary attacked Serbia in 1319. After several months of fighting and particularly bloody clashes in Belgrade, the Serbian army was forced to retreat. The city suffered great devastation. It once again went to Hungary and was made part of the *banovina* of Mačva.

⁷ *Istorija srpskog naroda* I (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga [SKZ], 1981), 441–442; Mihailo J. Dinić, *Srpske zemlje u srednjem veku* (Belgrade: SKZ, 1978), 123–147; *Istorija Beograda* I, ed. Vasa Čubrilović (Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1974), 147–150; Marko Popović, “Srednjovekovna crkva Uspenja Bogorodice u Beogradu”, *Zbornik Narodnog muzeja* 9–10 (1979), 497–512.

Fourteenth-century Serbian rulers waged war with Hungary on several occasions. Despite occasionally proving themselves stronger, neither Emperor Stefan Dušan (1331–1355) nor Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović (1371–1389) managed to change the state of affairs to any great extent. That was a time when Belgrade had little opportunity for peaceful development. Everything created under King Stefan Dragutin was brought into jeopardy. Hungary had always considered Belgrade as a fortress of exceptional strategic importance in that part of the Balkan Peninsula, and everything was accommodated to its war requirements.

It was not until the beginning of the fifteenth century, when Belgrade once again came under the rule of Serbia, that many significant changes occurred in Belgrade. Negotiations between Despot (Prince) Stefan Lazarević and King Sigismund settled relations between Serbia and Hungary on a vassal basis. Consequently, at the end of 1403 or the beginning of 1404, Belgrade was conceded to the Serbian ruler.⁸ The city had been, sources tell us, devastated and abandoned, with visible traces of previous battles. It required much effort and a great deal of resources to change that state of affairs. With the incorporation of Belgrade into the Serbian state, the old borders vanished. Life returned to the old fortress. The changes were so rapid and so profound that it seemed to the contemporaries that a new city had sprung up.

Serbia obtained a new capital. Despot Stefan systematically constructed the city as the new centre of the country. On the northern borders of his state, far from the regions directly threatened by the Ottomans, he tried, through his overall policy towards Hungary, to ensure suitable conditions for Belgrade's peaceful development. Despot Stefan consistently and persistently maintained the contractual relations with the Hungarian king. In time he even expanded them, linking Serbia with European politics. He encouraged his country's economic links with regions north of the rivers Sava and Danube. Due to an agreement he concluded with King Sigismund, Serbian merchants from Belgrade gained the right to trade in Hungary under favourable terms. They traded in nearby regions and in all the more important markets in the country.

⁸ Basic source: "Konstantin Filozof i njegov Život Stefana Lazarevića despota srpskog", ed. Vatroslav Jagić, *Glasnik Srpskog učenog društva* 42 (1875), 272, 284; transl. Lazar Mirković, *Stare srpske biografije XV i XVII veka* (Belgrade: SKZ, 1936), 72, 82–83; Mihailo Dinić, "Pismo ugarskog kralja Žigmunda burgundskom vojvodi Filipu", *Zbornik za društvene nauke* 13–14 (1956), 93–98; Jovanka Kalić, "Beogradska povelja despota Stefana Lazarevića", in Kosta Čavoški and Sima M. Ćirković, eds., *Srednjovekovno pravo u Srbia u ogledalu istorijskih izvora* (Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 2009), 189–198.

Despot Stefan devoted particular attention to populating Belgrade. He induced his subjects to settle in the city by applying a series of economic measures granting special rights. He officially acknowledged those special rights by granting a charter to the city. He exempted the settlers from various tax and corvée obligations that were customary at that time. He allowed them to move freely across the country and granted them the right to trade without paying tariffs and other duties. Such measures truly put the inhabitants of the new capital into a privileged position. In a short time the city was completely changed. It was in Belgrade that people gathered from all regions of Serbia, as well as from Bosnia and the coastal towns, particularly from Kotor (Cattaro) and Dubrovnik (Ragusa). There were also Venetians and other foreigners. Merchants, having obtained particularly favourable terms for plying their wares, built their homes and shops in the city. Ragusans were there in the greatest number, and they extended their dealings to Belgrade and beyond. Of particular prominence were merchants with large amounts of capital and extensive business links, those who provided the Court and the Serbian nobility with valuable textiles, jewellery, artisan products of the highest quality, weapons and other luxury merchandise. The most frequent objects of trade were silver and other precious metals, salt, spices, household objects, etc.⁹

Sources recorded that during the time of Despot Stefan construction activity was particularly impressive in Belgrade. It started at the beginning of the fifteenth century and continued, unabated, until the death of Despot Stefan Lazarević in July 1427. It had not taken much longer than two decades to build, at the cost of great investment and effort, the largest Serbian fortress of the pre-Ottoman era. And its fortifications illustrate the degree to which Serbia was threatened in the century. The new capital was divided into the Upper Town and the Lower Town. The Upper Town was situated on Kalemegdan hill above the confluence of the rivers Sava and Danube. That was part of the area that had formerly been covered by the Roman military camp (*castrum*), which was used to only a small extent in the Middle Ages. The Lower Town lay at the foot of Kalemegdan hill, below the Upper Town. During the reign of Despot Stefan, it extended over the area bordered by the bluffs of the slope and the banks of the Sava and Danube.

⁹ Aleksandar Mladenović, *Povelje i pisma despota Stefana* (Belgrade: Čigoja štampa, 2007), 347, 386; Mihailo J. Dinić, *Gradnja za istoriju Beograda u srednjem veku II* (Belgrade: Istoriski arhiv, 1958); Jovanka Kalić, "Beograd u međunarodnoj trgovini srednjeg veka", in Vasa Čubranović and Velibor Gligorić, eds., *Oslobodjenje gradova u Srbiji od Turaka (1862–1867)* (Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1970), 47–60. For the economy and society of Serbia in the fifteenth century, see many studies by Sima M. Ćirković. Cf. *Bibliografija akademika Sime Ćirkovića* (Belgrade: Istorijski institut, 2011), 15–103.

Despot Stefan undertook the construction of Belgrade in an extremely systematic manner and in several phases. There was first the renewal of the existing fortifications. In the western part of the Upper Town there were the so-called interior fortifications. It was there that the Byzantine Empire had built a citadel in the twelfth century and, although that citadel had been small in size, it had been located at the most favourable spot from a strategic point of view. Part of those ramparts was preserved and adapted to the new concept of fortification. The gate that had connected the stronghold to the area on the slope was walled up, and a new system of fortifications built around the new gate of the inner stronghold. Archaeological explorations have shown that the stronghold was, during the time of Despot Stefan, accessed by a drawbridge, that is through a powerfully defended entrance tower. During the same construction phase, the Nebojša Tower (*Noli timere*) had been completed. It was the most important tower in medieval Belgrade. As a part of the partition wall, it separated the inner fortifications into two parts: the western part, in which the Despot's palace was located, and the eastern part, which had a marked defensive function together with the entrance gate. The Nebojša Tower played an important role in the life of the city. It was the last refuge for defenders during enemy attacks; it served as an observation post at times of war and peace; it put fear into the hearts of the enemy; and it was admired by all who visited the town. The Italian Giovanni Tagliacozzo, who sojourned in Belgrade in 1456, recorded that the citizens were informed about the course of an Ottoman attack by the ringing of a bell in the Nebojša Tower. It was also there that the guns were positioned with which the defenders pounded Ottoman positions in 1456. That tower no longer exists in the Upper Town. Its name has been assumed by another tower, an eight-sided structure in the Lower Town, on the banks of the Danube.¹⁰

The court of the Serbian ruler was located near Nebojša Tower, as were the court chapel and treasury. It was, unfortunately, that very part of the city that was repeatedly devastated in the past. It fell finally in 1690, during an Ottoman siege, when a large gunpowder magazine was blown up and destroyed all the interior fortification buildings. In the fifteenth century, the so-called postern, or back door, was situated there, through which retreat was possible in case of immediate danger, or reinforcements could be

¹⁰ Iohannes de Tagliacotio, *Relatio de victoria Belgradensi*, in Lucas Wadding, ed., *Annales Minorum XII* (Quaracchi prope Florentiam: Ad Claras Aquas, 1931), 774–775; Jovanka Kalić, “Opis Beograda u XV veku”, *Zbornik Filozofskog fakulteta XII-1* (1974), 443–453; Jovanka Kalić, “Kula Nebojša u Beogradu”, *Zbornik Filozofskog fakulteta XV-1* (1985), 115–125. For Belgrade before desolation in the seventeenth century see Vladimir Tomić, *Breg za razmišljanje. Beograd na gravirama od XVI do XIX veka* (Belgrade: Muzej grada Beograda, 2012), Pls. 1–17.

brought during times of war. That “back door” was used several times during the large-scale Ottoman attacks on the city.

The entire interior part of the city was surrounded by a trench, so approach was possible only via the drawbridge, and it was on that bridge that the fiercest fighting took place throughout the Middle Ages.

The second phase of the works during Despot Stefan’s reign was marked by the beginning of the construction of powerful ramparts to protect the entire Upper Town. Such a defence was particularly important as the land approaches to the town were the most easily accessible. There were no natural barriers from that side, and that was where the greatest threat came from. Despot Stefan, the son of Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović, having been present at the Battle of Kosovo (1389) and having witnessed the trials and tribulations to which Serbia had been subjected after that battle, was well acquainted with the Ottoman method of warfare. It was with all branches of the land army that they would make their attacks, the rivers not yet having been mastered. That was why the greater part of the building works was carried out on the land-facing ramparts. They have been preserved up to the present day despite subsequent reconstructions of Belgrade.

With the construction of the ramparts, the Upper Town covered an area of 300m by 160m, relatively rectangular in shape. The so-called inner fortification, or inner town, was located in the western part of the area. It was named the “inner” part only after the construction of all the Upper Town ramparts. Or, as witnesses confirm, there was a small internal stronghold in the large Upper Fortress.

The Upper Town ramparts were mostly built along the remnants of the walls of the ancient military camp. That was particularly noticeable in the case of the north-eastern rampart. Only the south-eastern rampart of the Upper Town was built along a completely new line.

Belgrade was encircled with a system of double ramparts. On the north-eastern, south-eastern and south-western sides, they comprised the main rampart of some 7m in height and a lower, external rampart with a slanting stone scarp. The external rampart was crenellated. Towers were built along the ramparts, the number of towers depending on the degree to which the city was threatened. A wide ditch ran around the external side of the ramparts, over which there were drawbridges at the city gates. One side of the ditch was made up of the scarp of the external rampart.

The Upper Town had four gates, named after the four points of the compass, as was customary at that time, that is to say the gates were located on the east, south, west and north sides. The most important was the South Gate, which was part of the south-eastern ramparts, alongside a tower. It was located on the main communications direction that extended along today’s Kneza Mihaila Street. The East Gate was very important too. It was

reached by a road that went along the Danube through the present-day neighbourhood of Dorćol, and was defended by a tower constructed alongside it. Of somewhat lesser importance was the West Gate (near today's *Kralj kapija* or King Gate), as the terrain made access difficult. The North Gate linked the Upper Town to the Lower Town and was located at the site of *Defterdarova kapija* (Defterdar's Gate), on the path leading down the Danube slope of the Kalemegdan hill.

The third phase of Despot Stefan's construction works in Belgrade were on the fortifications of the Lower Town. The so-called western Lower Town on the Sava slope was situated there. That part of the Lower Town had previously been fortified, and it protected the passage between the Upper Town and the river. It was necessary to build ramparts on all sides to ensure the peaceful development of the settlement that had grown up there over the course of time. Given the configuration of the terrain, the imperative was to build the north-eastern rampart for the Lower Town. There, along the Danube, over the plain, ran an important road for the settlement. Under the supervision of Despot Stefan, ramparts were built along a length of some 330 metres. They ran from Tower VIII in the Upper Town down the slope towards the riverbank, with two gates and four approximately equidistant, rectangular towers. The ramparts there were some 2.60 metres thick and they were somewhat thinner (2.10 m) on the slope.¹¹

The city was also protected by ramparts on the river-facing side, but these were smaller and thinner (about 1,50 m). There seem to have been one large and several smaller towers there. The city then had two landing places, one on the Danube, and a smaller one on the Sava. It was there that ships were sheltered at times of war, and they were mainly used to transport troops, weapons and equipment. It is not known if there were any major river battles by Belgrade before the middle of the fifteenth century. It was not until later that the Ottomans started to jeopardise shipping on the Danube.

A settlement of merchants and artisans grew up in the Lower Town. Over the course of time, it also extended beyond the ramparts covering the area of present-day Dorćol, and then the area of today's Orthodox cathedral. It seems to have extended along all the approaches to the fortified city. There was one Serbian church there, as well as one Ragusan church. However, it was that settlement that suffered the greatest damage in the Ottoman attacks, and, unlike the intramural area, it did not enjoy the continuity of occupation.

¹¹ See Marko Popović, *Beogradska tvrđjava*, 2nd ed. (Belgrade: JP "Beogradska tvrđjava", Arheološki institut and Zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture grada Beograda, 2006), citing archeological literature.

The comprehensive and rapid development of Belgrade was reflected in all domains of life. It became the country's cultural centre. It was the seat of the Metropolitan of Belgrade, who had a very prominent role in the country's life. Metropolitan Isidor left a visible mark in the period of the Despot Stefan's reign owing to his eminence in the church and his influence in the country's general affairs. The Ragusans looked to him for help and support at the Serbian Court in their endeavour to gain favourable conditions of trade or compensation for their citizens.

The Metropolitan Church of the Dormition of the Mother of God, situated in the Lower Town, was reconstructed at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Despot Stefan's donor inscription is an important testimony to that reconstruction. The church was surrounded by gardens and endowed with estates and incomes. Among other things, the Rudište mine in the vicinity of Belgrade belonged to it, and it also benefited from the customs duties from the mine. It was there that the famous silver icon of the Mother of God was kept. Most of the church was destroyed in the Habsburg-Ottoman wars at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

As more and more settlers arrived and Belgrade grew, new churches were built. Besides the Metropolitan Church, the Church of St Petka was built and the relics of its patron saint were enshrined in it. One Orthodox Church was designated as the funerary church of the Serbian Metropolitans, while the Church of St Nicholas was located by the hospital and the foreigners dormitory. Besides the Christian Orthodox churches, there was also a Roman Catholic church, which continued to hold services.¹²

The Serbian capital was also quickly becoming a literary centre. Despot Stefan Lazarević himself was a distinguished poet and book collector. It is quite possible that he wrote his famous poem "Slovo ljubve" (*Word of Love*) in Belgrade. The Court also housed his library containing a large number of books, and that was the first library known to have existed in Belgrade. Part of that library later passed into the hands of his successor Despot Djurdj Branković and his descendants. Writers and manuscript copyists gathered in Belgrade. In his biography of Despot Stefan Lazarević, Constantine the Philosopher, who spent some time in Belgrade, later extolled the Despot's activities and, particularly, the capital itself. Marvelling at its development, he skilfully described its ramparts, towers, buildings and the Despot's palace. His richly decorated text is the best monument to medieval Belgrade on the eve of the devastation to come.

¹² Branko Vujović, "Natpis despota Stefana Lazarevića", *Zbornik za likovne umetnosti* 4 (1968), 175–187; Popović, "Srednjovekovna crkva Uspenja Bogorodice", 497–512. St Petka's church in the Lower Town was especially revered. Cf. Dušan Ivančević, *Beograd-ska tvrđava i njene svetinje* (Belgrade: Pravoslavlje, 1970), 38–44.

Besides Constantine the Philosopher, other writers were fondly working there. *Dijak* Andreja, ecclesiastic of the Belgrade Metropolitanate, copied one Panegyric upon the order of the Patriarch Nikon in 1424/5, and an anonymous monk copied eight manuscripts for *Vojvoda* (governor) Radoslav. Those books were later taken to the Radešino monastery. It seems that a Serbian genealogy was also rewritten there.¹³

Despot Stefan's rapprochement with Hungary and opening up of Serbia to the European way of life led to gradual changes in Belgrade too. Despot Stefan himself set the example. He frequently visited the Hungarian Court in Buda, and his own palace in that city was one of the most luxurious buildings of the time. He gathered around him the Hungarian nobility and, in part, adopted the Western European knightly way of life. He was a member of the well-known Order of the Dragon that was founded in 1408 for members of the most prominent Hungarian nobility. He took part, with his retinue, at international tournaments and participated in the gatherings of European rulers. He had the right to grant knightships according to the rules of feudal society, and received foreign knights into his service. Some of them were stationed in Belgrade too. Furthermore, King Sigismund visited Despot Stefan's capital several times.¹⁴

Belgrade's position depended to a large extent on overall Serbian-Hungarian relations. The Serbian ruler had received the administration of Belgrade from King Sigismund when Serbia was a necessary ally to Hungary in the struggle against the Ottomans. Untroubled relations between the two states were requisite for the peaceful development of Despot Stefan's capital. However, Stefan Lazarević began to ail at an early age, and he had no children. The question of his successor on the Serbian throne became ever more acute and, together with it, the question of the lands that Hungary had granted to the Serbian ruler as a gift. Despot Stefan designated his nephew Djuradj Branković as his heir, and it remained for the Hungarian

¹³ Writers, translators, works: Despot Stefan Lazarević, *Književni radovi*, ed. Djordje Trifunović (Belgrade: SKZ, 1979); Djordje Sp. Radojičić, *Tvorci i dela stare srpske književnosti* (Titograd [Podgorica]: Grafički zavod, 1963), 183–245; Dimitrije Bogdanović, *Istorija stare srpske književnosti* (Belgrade: SKZ, 1980), 190–234; Tatjana Korićanac, *Dvorska biblioteka despota Stefana Lazarevića* (Belgrade: Muzej grada Beograda, 2006).

¹⁴ On relations of Despot Stefan and King Sigismund, the Despot's estates in Hungary, the palace in Buda and economy, see Konstantin Jireček and Jovan Radonić, *Istorija Srba II* (Belgrade: Naučna knjiga, 1952), 355–357; Jovanka Kalić, *Evropa i Srbi, srednji vek* (Belgrade: Istorijski institut, 2006), 291–306, 653–671; Jovanka Kalić, "Despot Stefan i Nikola Gorjanski", *Istraživanja* 16 (2005), 95–102; Elemér Mályusz, *Kaiser Sigismund in Ungarn, 1387–1437* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1990), 140–146; Miloš Antonović, "Despot Stefan Lazarević i Zmajev red", *Istorijski glasnik* 1–2 (1990–1992), 15–24.

king to consent to this and to make a decision on the Despot's possessions in Hungary. The two rulers began negotiations on that subject during a meeting in Tata, in the Komarom district, in the spring of 1426. Details of their negotiations are not known, but the resulting text has survived in later transcripts. It is certain, however, that King Sigismund accepted Djuradj Branković as Despot Stefan's heir in Serbia should Stefan Lazarević die heirless, but he demanded that the region of Mačva and Belgrade be returned to Hungary.¹⁵

Despot Stefan died suddenly on 19 July 1427. At that time, the Hungarian king was in Wallachia and Djuradj Branković in Zeta. Both set off for Belgrade. King Sigismund stood before Belgrade with his army at the beginning of September intending to ensure that the terms of the Tata agreement were complied with. The Despot's successor was approaching the town at approximately the same time, and the commander of Belgrade, a Serbian *Vojvoda*, handed the city over to Djuradj Branković. A true drama was being played out in Belgrade and Serbia at that time. The Ottomans invaded Serbia, attacking Ravanica and other towns, wreaking havoc everywhere. For his part, King Sigismund sent forces into Serbia, not only to suppress the Ottomans but also to exert pressure on the new Serbian ruler. Sources tell us that Hungarians plundered too. Terror reigned throughout the country, attackers penetrating from the north and from the south. It was impossible to fight on two fronts and, under such circumstances, Djuradj Branković sought an agreement with King Sigismund. But that was made conditional upon Belgrade being surrendered to Hungary.

The inhabitants of Belgrade received the news of their inevitable fate with much bitterness. They saw it as a grievous injustice, a disaster, indeed as the descent of darkness, as can clearly be seen from contemporary records. They had long considered that city as their own. The myriad of threads linking it to the Serbian hinterland had made it, according to Constantine the Philosopher, the centre of the country at the time of Despot Stefan. The Despot's biographer painted distressing scenes of desperation in those days. People believed that Belgrade had been ceded to Hungary out of fear of the Ottomans.

The Serbian army had to leave the city together with the greater part of its inhabitants. The fortified city, first and foremost the Upper Town, was ceded to the Hungarians, who immediately established their own order. The actual takeover lasted some two months (September–October 1427), and for that entire period the Hungarian king was encamped with his army at the foot of the ramparts. King Sigismund proclaimed Belgrade his own city

¹⁵ Jovan Radonić, "Sporazum u Tata i srpsko-ugarski odnosi od XIII do XVI veka", *Glas Srpske kraljevske akademije* 187 (1941), 117–232.

at the beginning of November and called upon the inhabitants of Sopron to take up residence there. The city was, once again, forced to assume a new aspect. Serbs were forbidden access to the Upper Town, and Belgrade gradually ceased to function as a capital. That process took place more slowly in the sphere of the economy, but in the domain of cultural creativity the changes were much more rapid. Writers, artists, builders and the Serbian nobility, headed by the Court, left Belgrade. A new refuge was found outside Belgrade. Serbia was compelled to build a new capital in the vicinity, once again on the banks of the Danube and once again on a temporary basis. Smederevo sprang up quickly; it was built within a short time, but it could not have the conditions that Belgrade had.¹⁶

The Ottoman Threat (1427–1521)

Hungary attached great importance to the strategic position of Belgrade and to its incorporation into the Hungarian defence system. King Sigismund personally oversaw the ceding of the city. In the autumn of 1427, he spent several months on his country's southern border and in the vicinity of Belgrade. He agreed to changes in Serbia, and recognised Djuradj Branković as its new ruler, but he kept Belgrade firmly bound to Hungary. The city was incorporated into the region of Mačva, but it had its own commander, directly answerable to the king himself. The overall situation was highly inflammable.

After Despot Stefan's death in 1427, the Ottomans succeeded in consolidating themselves in Golubac on the Danube. So, for the first time, Ottoman ships gained a stronghold on the Danube and could attack the neighbouring regions. It was in 1433 that the traveller Bertrandon de la Brocquiere saw about one hundred Ottoman ships and boats at Golubac. That large number of vessels was a serious threat to Belgrade, and the city therefore assumed a new role in the defence of the Danube.

After the final Ottoman conquest of Serbia in 1439, Belgrade's strategic importance grew immensely. The city was surrounded on all sides by Ottoman troops that controlled all approaches to the city, by land and by river. The all-important inter-state border stretched just beyond the city ramparts. Belgrade was cut off from its Serbian hinterland, from which it had received food supplies. And it was the Serbian population that suffered the most. The settlements close to the city became the scene of frequent conflicts. Economic life gradually ceased to exist, with trade in and around

¹⁶ Miodrag Purković, *Knez i despot Stefan Lazarević* (Belgrade: Sveti arhijerejski sinod Srpske pravoslavne crkve, 1978), 132–138; *Istorija srpskog naroda* II (Belgrade: SKZ, 1982), 214–217.

Belgrade falling particularly. As business dropped off suddenly, merchants withdrew to safer places, and inter-state trade gave way to local, small-scale exchange. There was no longer any market for luxury or expensive goods; to survive was all that mattered. Many merchants ceased activity in a country where danger lurked constantly on the roads, taxes were irregular, and violence of all kinds threatened. It was rumoured that the Sultan was preparing to attack Belgrade, and the rumours soon proved to be true.

Sultan Murad II was conducting extensive preparations for war. An army was mustered from throughout the Ottoman Empire. That army, approaching Belgrade in 1440, was a terrifying sight; it numbered tens of thousands of men, including those who did not actually enter into combat. Sultan Murad II embarked upon his conquests with great confidence. Sparring neither effort nor resources, he set out to fulfil his objective. His army was equipped with various siege weapons and cannon, and the problem of strenuous transport was solved by fashioning those weapons on the spot.

The battle started with an operation by the *akinçi* (raiders), a company of plunderers led by Ali Bey, the son of Evrenos. They laid waste the entire area around Belgrade, thus preparing the ground for attack by the main body of the army. Upon arrival, the main force was deployed along all land approaches to the city. The imperial tents and those of the Ottoman commanders were erected on the most favourable sites. Small-scale clashes were taking place with the Christians even then, but the Ottomans prevailed. The cannon were positioned to demolish certain parts of the ramparts and towers and thus open up the way for the Janissary divisions. The defenders would rebuild the damaged ramparts by night, and they also built walls in the city to hold off attacks by the enemy infantry. The Sultan ordered that a tunnel be dug in order to blow up parts of the city's fortifications. But, thanks to a Serbian message from the Sultan's camp, the defenders were informed about the plan in advance. Counter-measures were immediately taken, and digging started on another tunnel in the direction of that of the Ottomans. The ensuing explosion and fire destroyed both the tunnel and the soldiers in it.

The Sultan also used other means. He tried to entice the defenders to betrayal with money and promises. But no traitor could be found. The fighting continued unabated, not even interrupted by the attempt of the Hungarian king, at the end of July, to procure a halt to the attack by sending a deputation to the Sultan. Murad II deferred his reply and tried to obtain a victory on the battlefield. The ditch around the town was filled with various materials, while the ramparts were stormed. The Janissaries actually managed to enter the city, but they were forced to withdraw in the face of the fierce resistance put up by the citizens, who were defending every inch of the ground. The Christians finally used their last resource: in

a synchronised action, flaming torches were hurled onto the attackers from the ramparts and towers. The flames enveloped the attackers, the material used to fill in the ditch, and the slope to the ramparts. The attack was finally shattered. After several months of fighting, the Sultan ordered his army to withdraw.¹⁷

In the summer of 1442, the Ottomans started the construction of a stronghold near Belgrade aiming to directly control the movements of Hungarian troops in the city. That stronghold was to be located on Mount Žrnovo (today Mount Avala), sixteen kilometres from Belgrade.¹⁸

Wide-scale expansion plans were renewed when Sultan Mehmed II (1451–1481) came to power. The Byzantine Empire was to experience the first shock. The Sultan attacked Constantinople which was unable to withstand without major external military assistance. After fierce fighting, the Ottomans conquered the Byzantine capital, and the world received the news with great consternation in the spring of 1453. That was to herald a new era of Ottoman attacks in the Balkans. Ottoman neighbours and adversaries could expect nothing good.

That same year, after the success in Constantinople, the Sultan directed his attention towards the Danube basin. In July 1453, he demanded the surrender of Smederevo and Golubac and, in September, he had the idea of taking Belgrade as well. It seems that 150 galleys and twenty large ships were equipped for that purpose.

Preparations for war had started in Ottoman Turkey during the winter of 1455/6. The Sultan sought military assistance from the Bosnian King, from Herzog Stefan Vukčić, *Vojvoda* Petar Pavlović and others. Assistance was also amassed from the Asian parts of the Empire, as was customary in case of imperial campaigns. Food and weapons were collected. Everything indicated a large-scale military undertaking of major importance. Once assembled, the Ottoman force appeared to observers like a sea of rippling waves.

Hungary was unprepared for the attack. All attempts to procure foreign assistance had proven fruitless. Only Pope Calixtus III gave his support. The crusade was declared against the infidels. That crusade was announced from the pulpits of churches in several European countries with the aim of mustering divisions of volunteers to be sent to the battlefield. The greatest response was from Germany, Bohemia, Poland, Austria and Hungary, and it came mainly from the lower strata of society. There gathered

¹⁷ On the siege of 1440 see Kalić-Mijušković, *Beograd u srednjem veku*, 110–114, 375–377 (sources and literature).

¹⁸ Aleksandar Deroko, *Srednjovekovni gradovi u Srbiji, Crnoj Gori i Makedoniji* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1950), 101–102.

peasants, the urban poor, students, monks, people of various occupations, the unemployed. They were poorly equipped for war and completely without experience for the forthcoming fighting. They were sent, via Buda, to Petrovaradin, where they assembled, and from there they went to Zemun. Franciscan friar Giovanni Capistrano placed himself at the head of that movement. Janos Hunyadi had deep doubts as to the military capabilities of the crusaders. Right up until the last moment he believed that Hungary would send the necessary reinforcements to the border. Shortages of basic foodstuffs (wheat, barley, etc.) were being felt in southern Hungary and Serbia in the spring of 1456. That was why it was decided in Buda that an army should not be assembled before August, that is, before the new harvest had filled the granaries. That did, in fact, mean renunciation of any action, as the Ottoman preparations for war had made it clear that the battle for Belgrade would be waged before then. King Laszlo finally revealed his intentions: in early June 1456, he left Buda and fled to Vienna. The border was left to the care of Janos Hunyadi and his efforts to assemble the neighbouring gentry. Hunyadi prepared the army himself. In the middle of February 1456 he mentioned a figure of 7,000 horsemen that he could send into battle, and he also offered 10,000 soldiers in the case of international action in the struggle against the Ottomans. Serbian Despot Djuradj Branković provided invaluable assistance in the defence of Belgrade.

The Ottoman army started to arrive before Belgrade in the course of the month of June. Pillaging units sacked the surrounding settlements, and a Serbian church outside the town ramparts was destroyed. By the beginning of July, the city was besieged from all sides. A group of crusaders was taken into Belgrade on 2 July, and all the town's inhabitants, including the women, were armed.

The Sultan stepped up his pressure on the city from the land, preparing an all-out attack. The damaged ramparts could no longer be repaired and, in the night between 20 and 21 July, even the experienced Janos Hunyadi, having come to the conclusion that the city could not be defended, abandoned Belgrade. The Ottomans proceeded to retaliation and intimidation methods. Prisoners were put to death before the eyes of the townspeople, some torn apart by horses.¹⁹

The general onslaught started on the evening of 21 July. The ditch around the city was filled, and the Ottomans directed their attacks particularly to the damaged parts of the ramparts. They climbed the walls us-

¹⁹ *Istorija srpskog naroda* II, 299–302; Franz Babinger, *Der Quellenwert der Berichte über den Entsatz von Belgrad am 21/22 Juli 1456*, Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Sitzungsberichte Phil. Hist. Klasse 1957, Heft 6. (Munich: Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1957).

ing ladders and other means. The defenders resisted with fire, arrows and finally in hand-to-hand fighting. Everyone went out to the ramparts, soldiers, citizens, priests, monks, even women. But the Janissaries entered the town. It was at the dawn of the new day, 22 July, that the defenders made their last attempt to counter the attack. Wood, twigs and other material were collected, bundled together, lit and hurled onto the besiegers. The fire halted the Sultan's troops who were trying to enter the city in the greatest possible number. The attack was suppressed, and then the Ottomans in the town were overcome. The attack had been thwarted, but the losses had been tremendous. Hunyadi had been watching the events from near Belgrade. As soon as he learnt that the city had not been taken, he ordered that there should be no attacks on the Ottoman positions outside the town. Mehmed II himself had been wounded in the fighting. Rumelian *beylerbey* Karadsa had been killed on the battlefield, as had the commander of the Janissaries. The Sultan ordered a retreat. "They fled the siege like rabbits," according to Promontorio de Campis.

The news of the Christian victory spread rapidly. The survivors and townsmen exulted in the triumph. No one in Europe had believed that the conqueror of Constantinople would be routed at Belgrade. The news from the battlefield was first received with disbelief, and then with joy. The participants themselves, Janos Hunyadi, Giovanni Capistrano, Giovanni da Tagliocozzo, papal legate Carvajal and others, wrote messages declaring the improbable victory. Letters and messages were sent to Italy, Germany, France, Spain, England, and even Africa. Not one single event in the history of Belgrade has echoed throughout the world as did the battle of 1456. Pope Calixtus III proclaimed 6 August as a day of festivity throughout the Christian world.

Belgrade, though, had suffered immense losses. Besides the large number of dead and wounded, the city itself had been seriously damaged by cannon fire; parts of the ramparts and the walls had been mined; fire had wrought havoc. After the withdrawal of the Ottoman army, the crusaders also left the battlefield.

But fresh misfortune was soon to befall the town. The plague struck, aided and abetted by the huge concentration of men, the shortage of food and the large number of unburied dead. It spread rapidly in the mid-summer heat and in the stench and filth the attackers had left behind them. Its victims were many. The first signs of sickness were noticed in Hunyadi and Capistrano in the first days of August 1456. Hunyadi was taken to Zemun where he died a week later, and Capistrano was taken from Zemun to Ilok, where he ailed until his death in October 1456.

The endless wars between Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, as well as the constant consolidation of the Ottomans in Serbia, also determined to a great extent the policy of the last Serbian rulers. Despot Lazar Branković

died at the end of January 1458. He had no male heirs, and old conflicts revived at his Court in Smedevero. There was a pro-Ottoman party in the country that saw the last possibility of survival in cooperation with the Sultan, while Lazar's widow, Jelena, and the Despot's blind brother, Stefan, sought support in Hungary. Divided in such a way, the Branković were bringing Serbia into direct jeopardy.

During the war of 1458, Serbia was virtually reduced to her last capital city, Smederevo. The Ottomans had taken nearly all the fortresses and, finally, the exceptionally important Golubac on the Danube (August 1458). After Smederevo fell in 1459, Belgrade's position completely changed.

Belgrade was virtually deserted on the eve of the Ottoman attack in 1521. The garrison numbered between 400 and 900 soldiers, including all the services. Wages were monthly sought in vain, even, according to Djordje Sremac, with a delay of two years. A general sense of dissatisfaction reigned; there was even the conviction that Hungary was not concerned about what would happen to Belgrade. The Serbs spoke openly of that. There was not enough weapons or food in the town. The greatest gallantry in the fighting was shown by the city's Serbian population, but that could not have any great effect on the outcome.

The Ottoman army on that campaign was headed by the Sultan himself, accompanied by extremely experienced military commanders, Piri Pasha, Mustafa Pasha, Ahmed Pasha, Bali Bey, and Husrev Bey. Sources estimated that the Sultan's army numbered between 100,000 and 200,000 men. It was excellently equipped for the forthcoming battles. The objective of the Ottomans was well known. They used the experience of previous generations which had shown that the city could not be taken by a land attack alone, and not even with the support of a river fleet, unless all the links with Hungary were severed. In order to achieve that, an attack was first made upon Šabac at the beginning of July 1521. The fortress was taken and defenders put to the sword. The Sultan ordered that a bridge be built over the Sava, and part of the forces were sent into Srem. The Ottomans destroyed everything on their way to Srem; they then took Zemun. That meant a considerable deterioration of the situation in Belgrade. And during that time the city was being battered. The defenders tried to attack the Ottoman artillery positioned around the town at the end of July, but in vain. Charges on the ramparts began at the beginning of August, with powerful pressure from the rivers, where the fortifications were weaker. After fierce fighting for every inch of the city, the Ottomans took the Lower Town on 8 August. It was a hard blow for the defenders. Having set their homes on fire, they all withdrew into the Upper Town.²⁰

²⁰ Gliša Elezović and Gavro Škrivanić, *Kako su Turci posle više opsada zauzeli Beograd* (Belgrade: Naučna knjiga, 1956), *et alia*.

Setting out on a new assault on 16 August, Ahmed Pasha tried to encourage his soldiers with falsehoods — he announced that 16 August was St Vitus day (15/28 June), well known to have been the date of the Serbian defeat in Kosovo. That best reveals whom the Ottomans considered their adversaries in Belgrade. The attack, however, did not succeed.

The destruction of the city's fortifications had a particularly crushing effect. The Ottomans had mined certain parts of the ramparts and the towers. The fighting was fierce; the number of wounded ever greater. It became clear in the second half of August that there would be no outside help, and the city had neither gunpowder nor food. The people started to become faint-hearted, and the first desertions occurred. The city's Hungarian commanders opened negotiations with the Sultan. They offered the conditional surrender of the city, seeking mercy for themselves and their men. When their offer was accepted, the city's commander was taken before the Sultan. A protocol was drawn up on the surrender of Belgrade and, on 29 August 1521, the Ottomans entered the fortress. The Sultan himself was soon to visit the battlefield.

A number of the defenders were put to death, and the remaining Serbian population was deported to Turkey. Embarking on that long and uncertain journey they took with them their holy objects, including the holy relics of St Petka and the miraculous icon of the Mother of God that had for centuries been considered the city's most precious possession. They were settled in the vicinity of Constantinople. They named their new settlements after their lost city, and the name of Belgrade has lived with them for centuries. They also built their own church dedicated to the Mother of God, which existed up to 1955, when it was destroyed in a fire.

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