

# Brigandage on the Polish-Hungarian borderland in the era of Matthias Corvinus

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## ABSTRACT

The author discusses robberies on the Polish-Hungarian border during the times of King Matthias Corvinus. The source basis are documents stored in the archive in Bardejov, which were published by the Author in a separate collection. A large part of these documents are complaints written by merchants who suffered some damages while trading on the Polish-Hungarian border. The author proves that not only men but also women were involved in robbery, citing the example of Katarzyna Skrzyńska. The robber culture is also illustrated by the document of robbers from 1493, discussed by the author, preserved in the archive in Bardejov.

**KEYWORDS:** Robberies, Mathias Corvinus, Polish-Hungarian border, the robbers' letter

In the central European regions of today's Poland, Slovakia and Hungary, the history of highway robbery has become inseparably connected with the figure of the Slovak highwayman Jánosik.<sup>1</sup> However, he had many predecessors in his unusual profession. The chaos reigning in Upper Hungary in the middle of the 15th century provided particularly fertile ground for the operations of outlaws who were not so much brigands as common thieves.

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1 Sroka 2009.

Robbery was particularly rife on the Polish-Hungarian borderland. The thriving trade between the Hungarian town of Bártfa (today: Bardejov, Slovakia) and the Polish border towns meant that the winding mountain roads were frequently travelled by merchant caravans, and in the 15th century these became the favourite targets for highwaymen operating in this area. It reached the point that merchants from the border towns could hardly make a successful trip to Bártfa or back.<sup>2</sup> Robbery was not the preserve of common criminals alone, as even high officials of the region were sometimes involved, in particular the brothers Piotr and Mikołaj Komorowski, the ispáns of Liptov and Orava. Taking advantage of the prevailing anarchy, they provided protection to various gangs of thieves and robbers. Among their henchmen there were also “*bratczycy*”, bands of soldiers who hired themselves out for money.<sup>3</sup>

The source basis of this paper is provided by numerous preserved documents from the archives in Bártfa. Most of these are requests for the return of stolen goods, some of them containing detailed descriptions of the circumstances of the robberies. For the contemporary reader, they represent a real wealth of information on the lives of merchants plying their trade on the Polish-Hungarian borderland. Given the friendly relations between Poland and Hungary, one might expect this area to have been very peaceful. However, life at the borderland had its own rules, different from the official contacts between the ruling dynasties.<sup>4</sup>

Before discussing brigandage in the Polish-Hungarian borderlands during the reign of King Matthias Corvinus, it is worth mentioning here a highwaywoman who became notorious for her robberies in the relatively close vicinity of the Hungarian border. Her name was Katarzyna Skrzyńska<sup>5</sup>, and she was long considered in historiography to be Hungarian. This was based on an account in the Głogów Chronicle, in which she appears under the name “Wlokyne”, or Włodkowa, because her husband was Włodko Skrzyński (coat of arms Łabędź), who went down in history mainly as a highwayman.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Katarzyna was not Hungarian, but came from the Polish family of Słupscy from Słupia, using the Drużyna coat of arms. We know of her brother Mikołaj Słupski, to whom she pawned a coat decorated with pearls and a silver belt for 20 marks in 1440. Taking into account her profession, these items were probably procured through robbery.<sup>7</sup> During the first period of her infamous activity, Katarzyna usually accompanied her husband Włodko Skrzyński in his crimes. Over time, she quickly surpassed her husband in brigandage and it was she who took the leading role in this married duo of robbers. In 1445, Katarzyna and Włodko received in pledge the Castle of Barwałd with the surrounding villages from Mszczuj from Skrzyńno for the sum of 3,000 florins. The castle, sitting atop Żar Mountain, became the base for the Skrzyński family’s criminal activities.<sup>8</sup>

2 Sroka 2010, 86–98.

3 Gácsová 1977; Żabiński 1999; Żabiński 2000; Żabiński 2001.

4 Sroka 2005.

5 Sroka 1997–1998; Putek 1938; Szczudło 1960; Kiersnowski 1975; Stuchlik-Surowiak 2020.

6 Markgraf, *Annales* 1877, 23–24; Mrozowicz 2013.

7 Sroka 1997–1998.

8 Kuraś 1969, No. 723.

Their robberies and the regular ravaging of the Duchy of Oświęcim and Zator gained the Skrzyński family an increasingly infamous reputation and forced the Voivod of Kraków, Jan Tęczyński, to intervene. In June 1451, he sent a letter to a general assembly in Piotrków asking for help.<sup>9</sup> According to the chronicle of Jan Długosz, the king “is urged to lay siege to the castle of Barwałd from which the holder and his wife have been living in brigandage, in defiance of the law and the orders of the king... But the king having other things on his mind remains unmoved by the wrongs of his”.<sup>10</sup> In reality, however, an expedition to Barwałd was undertaken in the same year of 1451 by the Kraków chamberlain Piotr Szafraniec, but it ended in failure.

After her husband died around 1458, Katarzyna continued her criminal activities with redoubled energy. She had probably already been committing robberies of her own towards the end of her husband’s life, as reported in 1456 by the Bishop of Pomesania, Kasper Linke, in a letter to the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order, Ludwik von Erlichshausen. This shows how her robberies had gained her notoriety extending beyond the borders of the Duchy of Oświęcim and Zator.<sup>11</sup> As early as the following year, 1457, she attacked eight robbers who had escaped from prison in the Oświęcim Castle, took their horses, weapons and money, and had them beheaded.<sup>12</sup> In 1458 the author of the Głogów Chronicle, Kasper Borgen, vicar of the Głogów Collegiate Church, included an explicit description of Włodkowa in a chapter entitled “The story of a certain woman”. It is worth quoting this account here in extenso:

A certain woman called Wlekyne conducted herself in such a strong and masculine fashion that she stationed her husband as a guard in her castle, and herself with servants accompanying her, she pillaged the inhabitants of other castles. She rode a horse which was armoured and equipped with defences, just like a valiant man. She did not spare any opponent. She also plundered the castles and villages of her foes. It is also said that when she was pregnant, she stayed at home until her time came. Then she rode on horseback like a man into towns, and deprived many of their castles and estates, and defied them valiantly with her attendants. Also, as they say about her, she robbed merchants on the roads and other people, so that they were afraid of her everywhere, saying: Wlokyne is coming (in the Latin original there appears here an insertion in German: *die Wlokyne kompt*). There were whispers that there was no bow or crossbow that she could not stretch with her arms without any instruments, which no man could do, and she did it for many years. At last, she herself in her castle engaged in forging coins, and being thus caught, was burned as a forger, and so her reign and power passed away. She left behind her sons, who were also brave, and

9 Sokołowski-Szujski 1876, No. 112.

10 Długosz 2004, 118; Sperka 2001, 382–383.

11 Caro 1899, 408.; Kiersnowski 1975, 5.

12 Długosz 2004, 320.

she herself resided in the Kraków district in Poland, where her memory will be kept for many years.<sup>13</sup>

This extremely interesting account confirms the existence of a workshop managed by Katarzyna Skrzyńska producing counterfeit coins at the castle in Barwałd in the 15th century.<sup>14</sup> Skrzyńska died after 1466,<sup>15</sup> but the circumstances are not fully clear. Since she led a brigand's life and forged coins, it is natural to assume that she ended her life at the stake, the punishment in Poland under Magdeburg Law for counterfeiting.<sup>16</sup> According to some legends, she was burnt as a heretic on the market square in Żywiec, while according to others this took place on the market square in Kraków.<sup>17</sup>

The pride of the brigands is best exemplified by a letter written in 1493, which has survived to the present day.<sup>18</sup> The letter is kept in the archives in Bártfa and from the perspective of archival science it is certainly a rarity on a European scale. It is a declaration of war by a group of brigands against the town for the hanging of their four brothers. The brigands threatened the people of Bártfa with revenge if they did not receive 400 florins within three weeks. This ransom was to be deposited either at the monastery in Mogiła near Krakow or with the Carthusians in Lehnic (today: Lechnica in Spiš, Slovakia) (known as the Red Monastery). At the bottom left of the document there is a picture of gallows with the hanged, and above them inscriptions claiming their innocence. The authors of this strange letter also drew a sabre, a broom, a fire and a gun on the bottom, and wrote the names of six towns: Orawa, Muran, Dunajec, Sanok, Rymanów, and Przemyśl. Under each of these names a hole was burnt through the letter. The objects symbolised the kind of revenge promised to the townsmen of Bártfa. At the very bottom of the document, in the place where the seal of the issuer is usually attached or impressed, the brigands attached a small broom.<sup>19</sup>

The letter has already been commented on several times in the literature. Attempts were made to determine the time of its issuance and to identify its authors. Considering that the robbers called themselves brothers, historians tend to regard them as “*bratczycy*”, who were engaged in a wide range of robbery activities in Upper Hungary, especially in the second half of the 15th century. It has finally been established that the letter was issued on 25 July 1493 by the gang of Fedor Hlavatý. It was their revenge for the imprisonment and hanging of members of their group, including Fedor's brother, Vasek. The group was active for about three years. This is a relatively long period compared to other highwaymen, who were usually dealt with quite swiftly by the starosts of border towns. The names of the robbers, and

13 Markgraf, *Annales* 1877, 23–24; Kiersnowski 1975, 2.; Kiersnowski 1977, 43–44.

14 Kiersnowski 1975, 2.

15 Helcel 1870, No. 3823.

16 Kiersnowski 1975, 10–11.

17 Grodziski–Dwornicka 1987, 41.

18 Ruciński 1987; Sroka–Biesaga 2007.

19 *Ibidem*.

consequently the crushing of Hlavatý's group, were revealed by the testimonies of Staszek from Oslava and Senek from Krasny Brod, imprisoned by the Bártfa burghers. Of course, they gave their testimonies under torture. This was how the necessary information was obtained from the members of Hlavatý's group, which was then used to capture the remaining robbers and punish them.<sup>20</sup>

The vast majority of the surviving documents mention small robberies, thefts or affrays. A few examples will serve to illustrate this type of crime: In 1452, marauders robbed the reeve of Czergowa of his horses.<sup>21</sup> All kinds of goods being transported by merchants fell into the hands of robbers. It was quite often wine imported to the Polish border towns from Hungary. In 1472, a well-known townsman from Krosno, Lukasz Wylusz, had his barrels of wine stolen, and the same happened to Andrzej Igiełka of Krakow, who was robbed of four barrels of wine in the same year.<sup>22</sup> The attackers did not disdain copper and iron either. In 1457, the citizens of Lócs (Levoča, Slovakia) robbed a certain Gregory, a resident of Kraków, of copper; Queen Elisabeth of Poland intervened in his case with the captain of Upper Hungary Jan Jiskra of Brandýs.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, the surviving documents do not mention the results of these interventions. Thieves also stole other goods: bundles of yarn, fish, clothes, money, furs, livestock, pigs in particular.<sup>24</sup> The robbers did not hesitate even to attack the church in Żmigród in 1474. The vicar of Żmigród, Jakub sent a messenger with money to Bártfa in order to buy back the furnishings of the robbed church. This is how a missal and a chalice from the Żmigród church got to the parish priest in Bártfa.<sup>25</sup> It is difficult to assume that the priest was in any way involved in the attack. Most likely, the thieves sold him the stolen church paraments.

Apart from plundering merchandise, criminals operating in the Polish-Hungarian borderland also kidnapped people for ransom. In May 1456, Elisabeth of Żmigród sent a letter to the town of Bártfa asking for the release of two captured noblemen.<sup>26</sup> In the same year, Piotr Szafran and Stefan from Siary were imprisoned in the dungeon of Bártfa. Appeals for their release were addressed to the town council of Bártfa by Wawrzyniec of Strzeszyn, the burgrave of Biecz, and Jan, the squire of Gorlice.<sup>27</sup> A few years later, the starost of Muszyna, Jan Wolski, intervened with the captain of Upper Hungary, István Zápolya, for the release of his captured men.<sup>28</sup> Whether this intervention was effective and the captured regained their freedom, we do not know. The bandits attacking people in the border areas between Poland

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20 Ibidem.

21 Sroka 2000, No. 111.

22 Sroka 2000, No. 246, 250.

23 Sroka 2000, No. 145.

24 Sroka 2000, No. 146–147, 219, 247, 251, 276.

25 Sroka 2000, No. 139.

26 Sroka 2000, No. 139.

27 Sroka 2000, No. 141–142.

28 Sroka 2000, No. 181.

and Hungary did not make exceptions to those of the wealthy magnate families, nor to royal envoys. In 1479, King Casimir IV Jagiellon demanded that Bártfa reimburse the losses incurred during the robbery of Jan Ossolinski returning from Hungary to Poland.<sup>29</sup> The dangers of the road prompted some of the more cautious merchants to obtain a safe passage permit in the destination country for themselves and their goods before setting off. Many such documents have survived. In February 1472, Jan Pysczykor, a burgher from Lublin, asked the mayor and magistrate of Bártfa for such a permit for the transport of fish.<sup>30</sup>

Apart from individual robbers attempting to plunder travelling merchants, organised bands of up to a hundred men were also active in the Polish-Hungarian borderland. Their leaders are well known. The most notorious robbers in this area were Tomasz of Tarcza and Lipany, Pobuda, and Ratkowicz.<sup>31</sup> Pobuda's activities in the Muszyna area are known from a letter by Jan Wielopolski, who was the starost of Muszyna, the archdeacon of Sącz and the canon of Kielce, who – surprisingly – was accused of favouring Pobuda and sheltering him in the castle in Muszyna. This serious accusation was made against him in 1453 by the towns of Kassa (today: Košice, Slovakia) and Bártfa, and since Wielopolski was a clergyman, it was sent to the Bishop of Kraków, Cardinal Zbigniew Oleśnicki.<sup>32</sup> The case did not end there, as merely two years later the starost of Muszyna got into trouble again. This time the town council of Bártfa accused him of looting before the starost of Nowy Sącz. In each case, Wielopolski vehemently denied these accusations.<sup>33</sup>

Tomasz from Tarcza and Lipany committed robberies on a large scale. In the autumn of 1453, his group kidnapped the son of a Sącz burgher. Mikołaj Pieniążek of Witowice, the starost of Sącz and Biecz, sent a letter to Bártfa asking for his release.<sup>34</sup> The robberies of Tomasz and his companions were particularly troublesome, so in the early 1460s it was decided to attempt a peaceful solution through negotiations. In the mid-1450s, there were as many as 80 robbers in the Biała area, which did not bode well for the passing merchants. Grzegorz, the chaplain at Muszyna Castle, warned the merchants of Bártfa against them.<sup>35</sup> In his letter, he uses the story of Paweł Gładysz and his Wallachian servant Maxym to illustrate what the robbers were capable of. They pulled out Maxym's beard, and he was cruelly led through a forest where he suffered other atrocities which are not detailed in the document.<sup>36</sup> Another band of robbers, mentioned in 1459, was led by Kopyk. One of their victims was a well-known townsman from Krosno, Lukasz Wylusz, who traded with Bártfa. The councillors of Żmigród and Katarzyna, the widow of Krzesław Wojszyk from Wójcza, the former

29 Sroka 2000, No. 295.

30 Sroka 2000, No. 248.

31 Sroka 2010, No. 90–91.

32 Sroka 2000, No. 116.

33 Sroka 2000, No. 125.

34 Sroka 2000, No. 117.

35 Sroka 2000, No. 134.

36 Sroka 2000, No. 269.

chamberlain of Kraków, appealed for his release.<sup>37</sup> In later years Wylusz was still active as a merchant, which indicates that he managed to regain his freedom. In 1460, another high-wayman, Ratkowicz, gained significant notoriety. The victims of his robberies were burghers from Bártfa. Believing that Ratkowicz was a Pole, they filed a complaint to Queen Sofia of Halshany. The queen replied to the town councillors of Bártfa that unfortunately she could not help them because Ratkowicz's estates and castles were in Hungary, so they should turn to the Hungarian king with their complaint.<sup>38</sup> At the beginning of the 1460s, Homola Mountain near Krościenko became the base for a large number of brigands. They posed a threat to both Bártfa and the Polish border towns. Crown treasurer Jakub of Dębno became involved in fighting them, promising the town council of Bártfa to send adequate reinforcements.<sup>39</sup>

The above review illustrates the significant scale of the robberies committed by Hungarians on Polish merchants. On the other hand, the lack of medieval archives from the towns of Lesser Poland makes it impossible for us to determine the scale of robberies committed by Poles on merchants from Hungary. We can only assume, on the basis of scarce accounts, that Hungarian merchants were treated similarly. This is primarily indicated by a document from 1490 preserved in the archives of Bártfa, which is a letter from the town of Bártfa to the members of the commission appointed by the Hungarian king to investigate wrongdoings committed by Poles against Hungarian merchants in the border region.<sup>40</sup> It contains a list of various acts of brigandage committed by some of the Poles mentioned by name. The document is short in content and contains only a description of very few acts of violence and robberies committed in the borderland. Among other things, it describes the assaults committed by Piotr Kmita, the starost of Lubowel; the arrest of two Bártfa residents by the squire of Strzyżów, for whom the latter demanded seven florins in ransom; and the imprisonment by Stanisław Cieszkowski of two other Bártfa residents, who were chained, and for whom eight florins were demanded. In 1483, the town councillors of Grzybów were even held to account for this act before the town authorities of Bártfa, swearing that they had nothing to do with it. The document also mentions the excesses of a certain Wiliński, who stole nine draught horses from a townsman from Bártfa, at an estimated loss of nearly 100 florins. The document also mentions the theft of four horses by Ossoliński.<sup>41</sup>

The scourge of robberies in the Polish-Hungarian border region, especially around the middle of the 15th century, prompted those responsible for the security of the area to take action. Various measures to exterminate the evildoers are reported from the early 1450s. In May 1454, there was a joint meeting of the representatives of Bártfa and the starost of Podolin/Podoliniec (today: Podolínec, Slovakia), Mikołaj Pieniążek. We know about it from a

37 Sroka 2000. No. 151–152.

38 Sroka 2000. No. 162.

39 Sroka 2000. No. 191.

40 Štátny archív v Prešove, pracovisko Archív Bardejov, Magistrát mesta Bardejov, No. 2881.

41 *Ibidem*.

formal invitation sent by Andrzej Trzeszko to the lay judges in Bártfa to hold talks.<sup>42</sup> We do not know the results of these discussions. In 1461, the problem of border robberies attracted the attention of Queen Sophia, who ordered starost Mikołaj Pieniążek to deal with it.<sup>43</sup> Not until two years later, however, do we hear of negotiations between Jakub of Dębno and the captain of Upper Hungary, István Zápolya. These negotiations took place somewhere between Niedzica and Czorsztyn, on the then Polish-Hungarian border at the end of August 1463.<sup>44</sup> We learn about the details of the Niedzica talks from a letter by Jakub of Dębno to the town council of Bártfa of 4 September 1463<sup>45</sup>, which reveals that Jakub of Dębno undertook to exterminate highwaymen on his territory and Zápolya on his lands. Despite the agreement, however, Tomasz of Tarcza continued to commit robberies, which the townsmen of Sącz complained about. Dębiński himself presumed that Zápolya favoured these robberies, which made the just-concluded agreement all the more questionable. It seems that the dignitaries themselves were unwilling to take more decisive action, either out of concern for their own safety or because they were more or less in collusion with the robbers, obviously profiting from it. Proof of this can be found in the accusation against the Polish starost of Spiš, Przeclaw of Dmoszyce, that he raided Makowica Castle in 1465 and ravaged the surrounding area. In a letter to the judge and lay judges of Bártfa, Przeclaw firmly denies these accusations.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, one might not wonder at this assault on Makowica, which, as we know, was a haven for borderland robbers. It was only in 1468 that a peace agreement was concluded with Jakub Czudar, the castellan of Makowica.<sup>47</sup> However, like most agreements at the time, it remained only on paper. The aforementioned Tomasz of Tarcza was not an ordinary brigand, he was forced into such activity by circumstances related to the defence of his own estates in Sáros County. In later years, Tomasz faithfully served King Matthias, was his captain, ispán of the Liptó and Sáros counties (1474–1482). In 1477 and 1480 he took part in royal expeditions to Austria<sup>48</sup>.

Banditry in the Polish-Hungarian borderland was a serious problem for both countries. Robberies and plundering of merchants trading between border towns hampered the economic development of the region. On the other hand, robbers found shelter in the castles of both Polish and Hungarian dignitaries, whose very task it was to ensure the security of the area. The reason for this state of affairs was undoubtedly the chaos reigning in Upper Hungary from the mid-15th century onwards, which encouraged the activities of various robbers and brigand groups. The lack of a strong political and administrative authority must have led to disorder, which meant that bandits could operate in this mountainous area with

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42 Sroka 2000, No. 121.

43 Sroka 2000, No. 171.

44 Sroka 2010, No. 95.

45 Sroka 2000, No. 193.

46 Sroka 2000, No. 203.

47 Sroka 2000, No. 226.

48 Neumann 2022, 1182.



a sense of almost total impunity. Attempts to use force against them failed, as did attempts at peaceful negotiations. In the following centuries, this banditry found many followers, the most famous of whom was the Slovak highwayman Jánosik, whose exploits became legendary among the people living in the Polish-Hungarian borderland.

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## Útonállás a lengyel–magyar határvidéken Hunyadi Mátyás korában

A szerző a lengyel–magyar határon zajló rablótevékenységet tárgyalja Mátyás király idejében. Az alapul szolgáló források a bártfai levéltárban őrzött iratok, melyeket a szerző egy külön gyűjteményben publikált. Az iratok nagy részét panaszok teszik ki, melyeket olyan kereskedők írtak, akik károkat szenvedtek a magyar–lengyel határvidéken való kereskedés során. Bizonyítja, hogy nem csak férfiak, hanem nők is részt vettek a rablásokban, Katarzyna Skrzyńska példáját idézve. A rablóvilágot a rablóknak itt tárgyat 1493-as levele is példázza, amelyet a bártfai levéltárban őriztek meg.

**KULCSSZAVAK:** rablás, Hunyadi Mátyás, lengyel–magyar határvidék, a rablók levele