

Illés HORVÁTH:

The Role of Trial by Poison in the Representation of the Power of the Luxembourg Dynasty. Attempts on the Lives of Emperors of the Luxembourg Dynasty 1313–1437*

The paper uncovers the role of trial by poison in the representation of the power of the Luxembourg dynasty. After the death of Emperor Henry VII, the contemporaneous sources reported poisoning a few days after the Emperor had passed away, with a great outrage. In my study, I intend to explore how the death of Henry VII affected the dynastic memory and the representation of the family. Furthermore, I also intend to focus on how Holy Roman Emperors Charles IV and Sigismund of Luxembourg reflected on the attempts on their lives and what was the role of trials by poison in their representation of power.

Key words: trial by poison, Emperor Henry VII, Emperor Charles IV, Emperor Sigismund, sainthood, sacrifice. 14th and 15th centuries.



In that proud stall, On which, the crown, already o'er its state
Mayst at the wedding sup, — shall rest the soul
Of the great Harry, he who, by the world
Augustas hail'd, to Italy must come,
Before her day be ripe..."

(Dante Alighieri: *Divine Comedy. Paradise, Canto XXX*).¹

I. Introduction

We find narratives of attempted murders against individual kings, emperors in the history of almost every European royal house, however, the Luxembourg dynasty and their supporters are unrivalled among the royal houses in the skilled use of the attempts committed against them in

*  Nemzeti Tehetség Program

„Supported by the NTP-NFTÖ-16 National Excellence Program of the Ministry of Human Capacities” I also owe special thanks to Géza Gonda, who gave professional support to the creation of this study.

their political and power representation.² Henry VII of Luxembourg, the Holy Roman Emperor (1312–1313) barely 40 years old at the time, had been at war for three years with the Guelphs of Italy, when on 24 August 1313, on the day of the Apostle Saint Bartholomew during the siege of Siena, he died under mysterious circumstances after taking the Communion. The entourage and supporters of the Emperor were shocked by the news that the young ruler died at the peak of his glory, and soon word spread in the military camp that the ruler was murdered. What is more, when soldiers of Henry heard the news they whispered that the assassination might have been committed by Bernard de Montepulciano, the Dominican confessor of the ruler, who may have killed the emperor by poison concealed in the holy wafer, presumably under the commission of Robert the Wise, king of Naples and his Guelph allies. The suspicion of poisoning spread like wildfire in Europe and soon chroniclers, writers, poets were inspired by the mysterious death of Emperor Henry VII, and supporters of the Luxembourg dynasty started to elevate him to the level of Alexander the Great, one of the most revered historical and literary figures of the Middle Ages, who was also murdered by poison administered by his enemies during his glorious campaign. At the same time, Henry VII's passion story and the respect of the ancient *strategos* imbued members of the Luxembourg House and their dynastic representation, and eventually various representative responses were created by the dynasty to the trials by poison. From 1313 until 1437, with the exception of John of Luxembourg King of Bohemia (1310–1346), Charles IV of Luxembourg (1355–1378) and his son, Sigismund of Luxembourg (1433–1437), also a Holy Roman Emperor, put on trial by poison by their adversaries several times, but each of these attempts failed. In my study I intend to explore how the death of Henry VII affected the dynastic memory and the representation of the family. Furthermore, I also intend to focus on how Holy Roman Emperors Charles IV and Sigismund of Luxembourg reflected on the attempts in their lives, and what was the role of trials by poison in their representation of power.

II. The first blood. Henry VII's sacrifice

The emergence of the Luxembourg dynasty started at the beginning of the 14th century. Balduin of Luxembourg, the brother of Henry VII became the archbishop of Trier in 1307, which involved obtaining the rank of prince-elect. Balduin proved to be a very talented politician, since within a very short time he gained extremely high influence in the empire, by which he

¹ *The Vision; or, Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, of Dante Alighieri*. Transl. Henry Francis CARY. London. 1819. p. 184.

² Franck COLLARD: *Histoire du crime du poison au Moyen Âge*. Paris. 2003. p. 32.

arranged for the coronation of his brother, Henry VII to be the King of Germany, then in 1310, together with Peter, archbishop of Mainz, he started supporting the idea of crowning him emperor within the shortest possible time.³ After Henry was crowned king, his prestige grew constantly. Since the Přemysl dynasty died out on the male line, the Kingdom of Bohemia reverted to the German king, so he could donate it on feudal right to his son, John of Luxembourg in 1310.⁴ Simultaneously, in an effort to strengthen his power, Prince John got engaged with Elizabeth of Přemysl (†1330) daughter of Bohemian king Wenceslaus II (1278–1305).⁵ In the same year, the ruler followed the practice of the Hohenstaufs and attempted to restore the control of the empire in Italy. At that time the city states of Italy were characterized by extremely murky political conditions. The struggles between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines that had been going on for one and a half century broke up order, and the papacy in Avignon also had a serious impact on the system of political conditions of the peninsula. Taking advantage of this situation, Henry VII crossed the Alps with his troops and asserted his control, one by one, over Milan, Padua, Verona, Parma, and then captured Brescia by his army.⁶ In order to stabilize his power, he appointed germanophile, pro-Ghibelline families as leaders for each captured city. The campaign of the emperor soon inspired Dante Alighieri, who praised Henry as nothing less than the “saviour” and “liberator” of Italy, and also hoped that the German ruler would liberate pro-Guelph Florence with his army, and then he would be able to return finally to his beloved native city, through the immense grace and righteousness of the emperor.⁷

Henry continued his march and headed for Rome with his entourage in June 1312, however, before he arrived, Robert the Wise and his Guelph allies sent troops to defend the *Urbs* and revolted the city in an effort to prevent the crowning of Henry as the emperor. The enraged German ruler broke into the city from the direction of Porta Appia and scorched the Guelph castles and fortresses near Capo di Bove and on the Aventine hill.

³ Martin PERSCH: ‘Balduin von Luxemburg’. In: *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon* 15. Herzberg, 1999. p. 55–57; *Der Weg zur Kaiserkrone. Der Romzug Heinrichs VII. in der Darstellung Erzbischof Balduins von Trier*. Ed. Michel MARGUE – Michel PAULY – Wolfgang SCHMID. Trier, 2009. p. 73.

⁴ Daniel BAGI: Csehország 1204–1389 [Bohemia 1204–1389]. In: *„Kelet-Európa” és a „Balkán” 1000–1800. Intellektuális-történeti konstrukciók vagy valós történeti régiók*. Ed. Endre SASHALMI. Pécs, 2008 (Kelet-Európa és Balkán Tanulmányok, 4.) p. 24–36, 70–80.

⁵ Gyula KRISTÓ – Ferenc MAKK – Tamás KATONA: *Károly Róbert emlékezete*. [Remembrance of Charles Robert] Budapest, 1988. p. 5.

⁶ Henry BOGDAN: *Histoire des Habsbourg des origines à nos jours*. Perrin, 2002. p. 35.

⁷ E. Claire HONNESS: ‘Ecce nunc tempus acceptabile’: Henry VII. and Dante’s Ideal of Peace. *The Italianist* 33 (2013), p. 484–504, here: p. 484.

The Guelph troops had to withdraw but held their ground in the Trastevere quarters, thereby prevented the ruler from reaching Saint Peter cathedral. Slowly a stalemate developed in Rome, thus the pro-Guelph and pro-Ghibelline troops had been facing each other on the barricades for almost an entire month. Cola di Rienzo Roman people's tribune wrote about this period in July 1350, in his letter addressed to Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV. Rienzo explained that one day Emperor Henry, the grandfather of Charles got fed up with inaction, disguised himself and joined a group of pilgrims, so he can finally see the place where Charlemagne and other former emperors were crowned. At the time the streets were full of barricades and checkpoints, but luckily, the locals knew the secret passage-ways not patrolled by the Neapolitan soldiers, so the emperor could get to the Saint Peter Cathedral relatively easily.

However, while he was saying his prayers piously, one of the pilgrims recognized him and alerted the guards immediately, telling them that the ruler was hiding among the pilgrims in disguise. The Neapolitan garrison immediately closed the crossing points, then it was announced that whoever turned in the German ruler would receive a great and rich reward. A young peasant boy helped Henry hide from the guards, who found a safe place for the ruler in a nearby tavern, which happened to be the property of the family of Rienzo at the time. The mother of the people's tribune nursed the emperor who was disguised as a sick pilgrim, for 10 to 15 days until the soldiers gave up the search for him. At that point Henry returned to his troops to the Aventine Hill, then left the city, never to return. The people's tribune added that for some time they themselves did not realize that the mysterious pilgrim was the emperor himself. The locals whispered that at that time there was a woman who bore a child by him, although the locals never revealed who that woman would be. Rienzo wrote that he himself had heard this story for the first time when he returned to Rome, it was told to him by the priest to whom his mother confessed the last time.⁸ The letter of Rienzo contains much useful information and is certainly an important resource for the power representation of Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV, since it is known that in 1355, before he was crowned emperor, himself used disguise and visited the most important pilgrim churches of Rome as a

⁸ Ronald G. MUSTO: *Apocalypse in Rome: Cola di Rienzo and the Politics of the New Age*. Los Angeles. 2003. p. 25–26; Ronald G. MUSTO: *Avignon and Rome: Clement VI, Cola di Rienzo and the buono stato*. (Conference paper: University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Center for Medieval Studies, Avignon Conference, April 27) 2002. p. 22. https://www.academia.edu/6256376/Avignon_and_Rome_Clement_VI_Cola_di_Rienzo_and_the_buono_stato (Access: 02-05-2017).

peregrine.⁹ Presumably, the story told by the Roman people's tribune inspired Charles IV to follow the example of his grandfather and walk the streets of Rome as a pilgrim himself.

Another interesting bit of information is the story of the pregnant woman, which is most certainly a figment of the imagination of Rienzo, since we know that Henry hid in the tavern of the family in June 1312, while the Roman people's tribune was born in 1313, so it is beyond any doubt that he wanted to refer to himself, i.e. that he might be the illegitimate child of Henry VII. To make his story even more credible, he also added that his father was not in the city at all at the time. Apparently, this passage of the letter of Rienzo is not credible, but it is especially interesting that the memory of the pilgrimage of the emperor in disguise had remained in the fantasy of the citizens of Rome emphatically and for a relatively long time.

The skirmishes in the streets of Rome had been dragging on until 29 June 1312, as this was the date by which the ruler reached an agreement with Pope Clement V (1305–1314) on the crowning. Under their agreement, the papal legate placed the imperial crown on the head of Henry in the archbasilica of St John in Lateran, which was quite extraordinary. After the ceremony, Robert the Wise, King of Naples demanded that the emperor should appoint his son as the vicar of Tuscany, however, he emphatically rejected the demand of the king of Naples, since he did not give up his plan to subdue the region. As the Holy Roman emperor he increasingly felt that now nothing could stop him, so he put aside the papal investiture and appointed a captain to govern Rome, then left the city leaving behind 400 cavaliers, heading for Tuscany to get prepared for the war against Florence and Siena.¹⁰ As part of this endeavour, in 1313 in Poggiobonsi he ordered the rebuilding of the castle that he renamed as *Mons Imperialis*, then on 10 March he continued his way to Pisa, the center of the Ghibelline party, where the emperor excommunicated the pro-Guelph cities and condemned Robert the Wise to death by sword¹¹ for failing to present himself as his vassal, and mainly because the emperor made an alliance with Florence behind his back.¹² On 8 August Henry was finally ready to capture Florence

⁹ Johannis Porta de ANNONIACO: *Liber de coronatione Karoli IV. Imperatoris*. Ed. Ricardus SALOMON. Hannoverae–Lipsiae. 1913. (Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptorum in usum scholarum separatim editi, 35) p. 38.

¹⁰ Maria Elisabeth FRANKE: *Kaiser Heinrich VII. im Spiegel der Historiographie*. Köln. 1992. p. 38–39.

¹¹ Mária PROKOPP – Zoltán György HORVÁTH: *Nápoly középkori magyar emlékei* [Medieval Hungarian Art Relics of Naples]. Budapest. 2014. p. 45.

¹² Johann Nikolaus von HONTHEIM: *Prodromus Historiae Trevirensis Diplomaticae & Pragmaticae: Exhibens Origines Trevericas Gallo-Belgicas Romanas Francicas Germanicas Sacras & Civiles Aequalium Scriptorum Fide Et Monumentorum Autoritate Assertas*. Augustae Vindelicorum. 1757. p. 828–829.

and Naples, but before that he wanted to subdue the pro-Guelph city of Siena. On 24 August, on the day of the Apostle Saint Bartholomew, the emperor set up his camp in Bounconvento during the siege of Siena. During the night he participated in the mass of Bernard de Montepulciano, but a few hours later he died under mysterious circumstances at the age of 39.¹³

Modern research usually attributes the death of Henry VII to malaria, however, the contemporaneous sources reported poisoning a few days after he had passed away, with a great outrage. After the soldiers of the emperor got word that their vigorous ruler died suddenly in such a tragic way, they became more and more convinced that he had been poisoned, and the soldiers started to spread the gossip that the perpetrator was Bernard de Montepulciano, the confessor of the emperor, a Dominican monk, who concealed the poison in the holy wafer. The confessor of the emperor was all the more implicated because during the night Bernard escaped to his home diocese, Arezzo.¹⁴ Word spread about the death of the ruler extremely quickly. Upon hearing the news about the death of the emperor, Robert the Wise, King of Naples and his allies in Florence did not conceal their satisfaction, they were relieved that Henry VII, mocked as *tirannus saevissimus*, was dead, but within the few days it was rumoured that the Florentines wrote in a letter to Robert that the death of Emperor Henry VII would solve many issues.¹⁵ As a result, it became even more obvious for the supporters of the emperor that Henry was poisoned, and that the murder was masterminded by the Guelphs. The emperor was buried on 2 September 1313 in Pisa. The outraged crowd attacked the Dominicans in the burial, then the imperial army plundered the chapter houses while marching north after the funeral. Despite the obvious differences, the mourning troops did not spare the Franciscans either, since they saw Bernard, the sly murderer of the emperor in the person of every monk.¹⁶ Two days later, on 14 September 1313, the authorities of Arezzo investigated the case of Bernard for fear of retribution, then concluded that the Dominican confessor did not commit a crime, but this just outraged the mourners even more. The letter of cardinal Guillaume to the archbishop of Milan, dated 14 April 1314, gives us reason to believe that as late as one year after the outrage still had not dissipated, as the words of the Cardinal show:

¹³ William M. BOWSKY: *Henry VII in Italy*. Lincoln. 1960. p. 59.

¹⁴ *Gesta Trevirorum. integra lectionis varietate et animadversionibus illustrata ac duplici instructa nunc primum adiderunt*. Ed. Johannes Hugo WYTENBACH – Michael Franciscus Josephus MÜLLER. Lintz. 1838. p. 230.

¹⁵ Franck COLLARD: L'empereur et le poison: de la rumeur au mythe. À propos du prétendu empoisonnement d'Henri VII en 1313. *Médiévales* 20 (2001), p. 113–131, here : p. 115.

¹⁶ Iohannis VITODURANI: *Chronica*. Ed. Friedrich BAETHGEN. Berlin. 1924. (Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores rerum Germanicarum Nova Series, 3) p. 66–69.

"The people of Lombardy degenerated into all kinds of misdemeanours, and they attacked Dominican preachers who either retreated into their chapterhouses or fled."¹⁷

Between the 14th and the 16th centuries about 65 works of fiction were created about the death of Henry VII. Of these 16 pro-Guelph authors mention death for natural causes, apparently for a good reason, while 49 mainly German, French and pro-Ghibellin writers and poets tell that the ruler had been poisoned. These stories show differences concerning the place where the murder was committed, the exact time of death, the person and fate of the murderer. According to *Liber certarum historiarum* of Johann von Viktring, after the attempt Bernard fled to Siena, then to Florence, where he was appointed into high offices and even received a fee for his deed.¹⁸ Apparently, this is how the chronicler wanted to reflect on the fact that the Dominican confessor was not condemned in Arezzo. According to the narrative of *Chronographia regum Francorum*, during his last hours the emperor was aware that he had been poisoned, what is more, he even commanded his confessor to escape from the camp because the emperor's soldiers would exact revenge on him. According to the chronicle, when medical practitioners arrived to make Henry VII vomit, the emperor refused to take the medications that might have saved his life, since he would not throw up the holy wafer in which Bernard concealed the murderous poison, as by this he would have desecrated the body of Christ. So he justified his decision of choosing the certain death by saying that he would rather die in Christ than survive without him. According to the chronicle, by his passion and death Holy Roman Emperor Henry VII assumed the role of Christ and the sacrificial lamb.¹⁹

It was between 1313 and 1430 that the "Story of the passion of Henry VII" unfolded, eventually epic poems were written about him and a broad mythology was built up around his person. The authors increasingly highlighted the victorious character of the military campaign of the ruler. In the Chronicle of Mathias von Neuenburg Henry was merely called *flos germinis Germanorum*,²⁰ in contrast, in his work titled *Die Metzzer Chronik über*

¹⁷ Franck COLLARD: *Jacobita secundus Judas. L'honneur perdu des Prêcheurs après la mort d'Henri VII.* In: *Religion et mentalités au Moyen Âge. Mélanges en l'honneur d'Hervé Martin.* Ed. Sophie CASSAGNES-BROUQUET – Amaury CHAUOU – Daniel PICHOT. Rennes. 2003. p. 221–234, here: p. 224–225; Fritz BÜNGER: *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Provinzialkapitel und Provinziale des Dominikanordens.* Leipzig. 1919. p. 71.

¹⁸ Iohannis abbatis VICTORIENSIS: *Liber certarum historiarum.* I–II. Hannoverae et Lipsiae. 1909–1910. (Monumenta Germaniae Historica Scriptorum rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum separatim editi, 36/I–II) II. p. 55.

¹⁹ *Chronographia regum Francorum.* Ed. Henri MORANVILLE. Paris. 1891–1897. p. 197.

²⁰ *Die Chronik des Mathias von Neuenburg.* Ed. Adolf HOFMEISTER. Berlin. 1924. (Monumenta Germaniae Historica Scriptorum rerum Germanicarum. Nova Series, 4) p. 93.

die Kaiser und Könige aus dem Luxemburger Hause Jacques d'Esch saw, while singing about the glory of the Luxembourg House, an invincible emperor, a new Charlemagne in the person of Henry, whose adversaries had to resort to such terrible infamy to defeat him. On account of this, the chronicler glorified the emperor by such epithets as "*virum pacis, iustum, pium, sanctum et mansuetum*", whose death, he explained, was as valuable as those of the martyrs.²¹ D'Esch also recounted that Pope Clement V forbade the Dominican friars to administer the Eucharist with the right hand, owing to the crime of Bernard de Montepulciano.²² Although it is certainly an interesting bit of information that the papal prohibition on the liturgy of the Dominican friars is mentioned, this is just a figment of the fantasy of the chronicler, since this unusual Eucharistic practice of the order derives from a provision of their rules going back to 1260.²³ According to other authors, the death of Henry is parallel with the death of Alexander the Great, one of the most popular heroes of the chivalric era, who was also poisoned during one of his campaigns. For Geoffroi de Paris the death of the emperor is an *exemplum*, since poison is one of the instruments of inconstant fortune, which will hit its victim when he is at the peak of his glory, and this is why Henry VII can be elevated to the level of the ancient *strategos*.²⁴

We have very little information on the relationship between the dynasty and the Dominican order. All that we know from the Chronicle of Geoffroi de Paris is that John of Luxembourg, king of Bohemia, exacted revenge on the Dominican Order for the death of his father. According to the chronicler, he first confiscated their wealth, then drove them away from his country.²⁵ The Dominicans could not find peace in the Holy Roman Empire either, since owing his investiture fights, Louis of Bavaria tried to use the blame of poisoning to make their situation untenable. In addition, the Franciscans, the most loyal followers of the emperor also had their share of the campaign of defamation against the Dominicans, apparently out of self-defence, since the supporters of the Ghibellins spread word brazenly that in addition to the confessor, Bernard de Montepulciano Franciscan preacher was also involved in the assassination of the emperor.²⁶ As a result, while fighting for

²¹ Jacques D'ESCH: *Die Metzzer Chronik über die Kaiser und Könige aus dem Luxemburger Hause*. Ed. Georg WOLFRAM. Metz. 1906. (hereafter: D'ESCH 1906) p. 16–17.

²² D'ESCH 1906, p. 16–17.

²³ *Ordinarium juxta ritum sacri ordinis fratrum Praedicatorum*. Collegium Angelicum. 1921. p. 255–266.

²⁴ *Chronique rimée de Geoffroi de Paris*. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. ms. fr. 4963. (hereafter: *Chronique*) p. 140.

²⁵ *Chronique*. p. 140.

²⁶ *Petri AZARII Liber gestorum in Lombardia*. Ed. Francesco COGNASSO. Bologna. 1926–1939. (*Rerum Italicarum scriptores* 16/4) p. 25–26.

their good reputation the Franciscans gave passionate preaches in order to exonerate themselves. So almost half a century after the murder the Franciscans of Prague also fed the gossip that Charles IV would take revenge on the murderers of his grandfather. It is an especially interesting bit of information that in fact, Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV no longer harboured any hatred towards the order, what is more, his relationship with the friars was particularly good. He even granted an audience to the master of the order in Prague in 1359, which gave an opportunity to the Dominican preachers to spread word eventually that they were under the protection of Charles. In fact, Charles IV gave several gifts to the Dominican friars, however, there is no proof in the sources available today that the order was placed under his protection.²⁷ It is also important to note about him that in 1348 in Prague he established a church in the honour of Saint Henry and Saint Kunigunde, which was named for Holy Roman Emperor Henry II and (Saint) Kunigunde of Luxembourg, but in reality it was intended to preserve the memory of his grandfather, Henry VII.²⁸

III. The descendants: Charles IV and Sigismund of Luxembourg as invulnerable Emperors

Following Holy Roman Emperor Henry VII, his grandson, Charles IV was put on trial by poison by his political adversaries several times, and often even by his own family. But before I write about the attempts on his life, a few words about the life of Charles IV are in order, since there was hardly any ruler in the 14th century who felt such a reverence for the saints as him. As the firstborn child of John of Luxembourg, King of Bohemia and Elizabeth of Přemysl, he received an excellent education from the greatest intellectual authorities of his day and thereby he was very much ahead of his contemporaries intellectually. As a *rex iunior* with King John, he pursued a very ambitious political agenda, and, since he inherited the passion of his mother in collecting relics, in his power representation he attached very much weight to presenting the dynastic saints of the Luxembourg and Přemysl dynasties. His life, full of miracles and visions, encouraged Charles IV that by applying the ideal of the sanctity of kingship he should not only increase his own power, but also make the promise of salvation accessible with the assistance of the saints to his empire and its subjects. The young prince was seven years old when his father sent him to the court of Capet

²⁷ *Brevis historia ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum*. Éd. Edmond MARTÈNE – Ursini DURAND In: *Veterum scriptorum et monumentorum historicorum, dogmaticorum, moralium amplissima collection*. 6. Paris. 1729. col. 378.

²⁸ Klára BENEŠOVSKÁ: Gotická podoba kostela sv. Jindricha a sv. Kunhuty na Novém Meste pražském a jeho stavebník [Gothic Church of St Henry and St Kunigunda in the New City of Prague]. *Pruzkumy památek* 2 (1995), p. 87–90.

Charles IV, king of France, who arranged his confirmation and had him marry Blanche of Valois.²⁹ In the French court Charles received an excellent education, since his tutor was Pierre Roger, the Benedictine abbot of Fécamp, who was elected pope in 1342 with the name of Clement VI (1342–1352). In 1330 Emperor Charles returned to Luxembourg, but soon thereafter King John sent him to Italy, to help to defend the family estates. Two years later, on 25 November 1332, on the day of Saint Catherine, Charles IV left off to relieve San Felice with the militiamen of Parma, Cremona, Modena and Reggio. During the night this army was defeated by the enemy in a battle fought near the castle, but by morning, thanks to divine Providence – as he himself noted in his autobiography – he won a huge victory, then was granted the rank of knight together with two hundred comrades. After the battle the prince continued his campaign to Lucca, where he got prepared for the war against Florence, as part of that, he ordered the construction of a fortress above the Nievole Valley, which he named Montecarlo (*Mons Caroli*).

One of the attempts on the life of Charles IV happened exactly during this campaign. On 29 March 1331, Good Friday, the ruler was staying in Pavia, getting ready for the festive mass. In order to receive the Eucharist in the mass, he wanted to hold a fast, but when he changed his mind and was going to have a snack, he heard that members of his entourage got sick unexpectedly. At the table Charles IV noticed a stranger who pretended to be deaf. He had him captured immediately and subjected him to torture. A few days later the assassin confessed that he mixed deadly poison into the food on the order of Azzo Visconti, and that poison killed Johannes de Berge, the seneschal of Charles, as well as Johannes de Honkirin and Symon de Keyla. The ruler noted in his autobiography that he only escaped the attempt thanks to the protection of divine grace (*ego divina me gracia protegente evasi*).³⁰

²⁹ “*ipso regnante in Francia anno incarnationis domini millesimo trecentesimo vicesimo tercio; misitque me meus pater iam dictus ad dictum regem Francie me existente in septimo anno puericie mee. Fecitque me dictus rex Francorum per pontificem confirmari et imposuit michi nomen suum equivocum, videlicet Karolus, et dedit michi in uxorem filiam Karoli, patruī sui, nomine Margaretam, dictam Blanca.*” *Vita Caroli Quarti*. Ed. Johann Friedrich BÖHMER. Stuttgart. 1843. (hereater: VCQ) Cap. III. I. (*Fontes rerum Germanicarum I*); *IV. Károly Császár önéletrajza – Karoli IV imperatoris romanorum vita ab eo ipso conscripta*. Transl. et ed. Balázs NAGY. Budapest. 2010. cap. III.

³⁰ “*In die autem pasche, scilicet tertia die postquam veneram, intoxicata fuit familia mea, et ego divina me gracia protegente evasi, quia missa magna prolixè agebatur, et communicaveram in eadem et nolui comedere ante missam. Cum autem irem ad prandium, dictum fuit michi, quod familia mea subito in infirmitatem ceciderit, et specialiter illi, qui ante prandium comederant. Ego autem sedens in mensa comedere nolui, et eram omnes territi. Et sic aspiciens, vidi hominem pulchrum et agilem, quem non cognovi, qui deambulabat coram mensa, fingens se mutum. De quo habita suspicione ipsum captivare feci. Qui post multa tormenta tertia die locutus est et confessus fuit, quod ipse in coquina cibariis toxicum*

Another interesting story is recounted by Matteo Villani, a chronicler of Florence, who tells us that in 1348 Charles IV was poisoned accidentally by his wife, who made him drink a love potion that theoretically would have mitigated the unbridled lust of the ruler. Unfortunately, we have no information whether it was Blanche of Valois or Anne of Bavaria who made Charles drink the love elixir, however, the chronicler told us that this concoction put the ruler into a life-threatening condition, but eventually his body overcame the poison, and apart from losing his hair, the poison did not have any other adverse side effects.³¹ However, as soon as Charles recovered from the trauma mentioned above, only a few years later in October 1350 his half-brother, Prince John attempted to kill him, this time he probably used arsenic³² to get his brother out of the way. According to the narrative of Henri Rebdorf, Prince John resorted to this horrible deed because earlier his brother had taken away the county of Tirol from him, and in that he was supported by the Czech nobility. Once again, Charles had divine grace on his side, since he survived this poisoning as well, however, according to the chronicler, the poison paralyzed the extremities of the ruler fully for one year.³³

As we can see, the life of Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV was not free of poisoning either. However, the ruler survived several poisoning attempts, and eventually he did not refrain from using poison either, which is why French chronicler Jean Froissart granted the fame of being an expert in therapies against poison to the ruler (*expert en thérapies anti-poisons*). The chronicler mentions that when the cousin of the Emperor, French King Charles V became the victim of a case of very severe poisoning, he immediately approached his uncle, urging him to use his miracle medicines to help him.³⁴

In contrast with Henry VII, we can hardly find any information in the sources about the trials by poison committed against Charles IV. The contemporaneous German chroniclers apparently did not attribute much significance to those attempts that the emperor survived, so it is primarily in the biography of Charles IV and in the chronicles of Matteo Villani and

immiserat de iussu et procuracione Luce(ni)i vicecomitis Mediolanensis. De illo autem toxico fuerunt mortui: Iohannes dominus Berge, magister curie mee, Iohannes de Honkirin, Symon de Keyla, qui deserviebat mense mee, et quamplures alii." VCC, cap. IV.

³¹ Matteo VILLANI: *Istorie*. Firenze. 1581. I. p. 34.

³² Louis LEWIN: *Die Gifte in der Weltgeschichte. Toxikologische allgemeinverständliche Untersuchungen der historischen Quellen*. Berlin. 1920. p. 244.

³³ *Die Chronik Heinrichs Taube von Selbach Chronica Heinrici Surdi de Selbach*. Ed. Harry BRESSLAU. Berlin. 1922. (Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores rerum Germanicarum, Nova Series I) p. 101.

³⁴ *Les Chroniques de Jehan Froissart*. I–III. Ed. Jean Alexandre BUCHON. Paris. 1835–1852. II. p. 70–110.

Jean Froissart that we see the attempts on his life mentioned. According to Charles IV, the attempt on his life probably failed because he was under the protection of divine Providence. The chronicles of Villani and Froissart clearly attribute some kind of resistance against poisons to the ruler, and Froissart goes even farther by claiming that having been subjected to poisoning so many times, the Emperor himself became some kind of poisoning specialist. However, it is still not this strange attribute, but divine Providence itself and resistance to poisons what determines the power representation of the family from this point on. The last member of the dynasty, who was subjected to poisons by his adversaries several times, was Sigismund of Luxembourg, King of Hungary and Holy Roman Emperor. We know a case from the memoirs of Eberhard Windecke, the chronicler of Sigismund that in 1404 someone tried to poison him and Austrian Prince Albert IV (1395–1404) at the siege of Znojmo, by black pepper. As the story goes, Albert and Sigismund were laying siege to the fortress of Znojmo because of a rogue bandit named Schakozir, who had caused lots of problems earlier in the Moravian Margravate, in the Austrian provinces, and in Hungary. The fight lasted for several days, and when the allies had almost captured the fortress, Sigismund and Prince Albert were poisoned by black pepper. Albert died not much later in Klosternburg, while Sigismund was taken by the Hungarian troops to the fortress of Korlátkő (Cerová, Slovakia), where he stayed for a long time, since he could not march on because of his disease. When the Austrian Prince William got word that Sigismund of Luxembourg had been poisoned, he sent a physician from Vienna to the Hungarian King, who was apparently treated by the Austrian specialist with great expertise. The physician had the Hungarian ruler hanging upside down with his chest touching a pillow placed on the ground, and while he was hanging for 24 hours in this position, "*lots of impurities were leaving his body.*" However, this unusual treatment made Sigismund so sick that the entourage of the king meted out a tough punishment to the physician, who responded by pointing out that nature would not have tolerated the poisons fighting their way down in the body.³⁵ Windecke added two important bits of information to this case. The first is that with the help of God, the physician did a wonderful job in having the king recover and work even more miracles, and the second bit of information is that others also tasted this food, such as Endres Lant, the herald of Prince Kunzel of Bavaria, who became paralysed and blind before the end of his life, then died from the poisoning. Therefore the story indicates clearly that thanks to divine grace Sigismund escaped certain

³⁵ *Das Leben Koenig Sigmunds von Eberhard Windecke*. Ed. Thomas von HAGEN. Leipzig. 21899. p. 100.

death, while others died from the poisoning immediately, or at least shortly after they ingested the poison. Otherwise, Thomas Ebendorfer also mentions this incident and the poison, but he only describes it as *letalem potum* in his chronicle, he makes no further reference to its origin and nature. Presumably, the Hungarian king recovered from the poisoning without any side effects worth mentioning.³⁶

We also know of another attempt on the life of Sigismund. In 1410 Venice started a war to recapture Dalmatia, to which Sigismund responded by starting his own military action in 1411. Led by Pipo Spano, his army broke into Friaul and smashed the land army of Venice at Conegliano. One year later the Republic of Venice raised another mercenary army, against which Sigismund sent another army under the command of Nicholas Marcal, but his army was defeated at Motta on 9 August 1412. In 1413 Sigismund went to war against the Venetians personally, but eventually he had to realize that he would not be able to suppress the power of the Venetians on land, so on 17 April 1413, in Castelletto of Friaul he made a truce with the city state for five years. During that time Sigismund realized that Venice would have to be smashed financially so it can be defeated, and for this purpose he elaborated a grand plan. In 1412 he instructed the Hansa cities to sever their commercial relations with Venice, and import their goods from Genoa instead, or from Kaffa, the trading post on the Crimean Peninsula, or from Kilian in the Danube delta, via Hungary.³⁷ Slowly, the economic measures against Venice came to be felt in the Italian city state, so the doge and the leadership of the city came up a plan to get the Hungarian king out of the way. There is a document dated to 3 July 1415 in the secret archives of Venice, which contains proof of the opportunity of an attempt planned against Sigismund and his ally in Verona, Brunero della Scala. According to the document, whoever manages to poison Sigismund and Brunero will receive a reward of 35,000 ducats from the doge of Venice. A certain Michelet Muazzo of Crete volunteered for the task, and the Signoria promised, by its decision of 19 May 1419, to make available all kinds of poisons to him if he kills the three cruel enemies who were trying to choke their state economically. Sigismund can be said to have luck once again, since on 16 August 1419 his brother, Wenceslaus IV, king of Bohemia (1378–1419) passed away, which made him lift the pressure off Venice and turn his attention to the Kingdom of Bohemia. It is the piquancy of fate that the poisons concocted by the Venetians probably did not seem efficient enough,

³⁶ Thomas EBENDORFER: *Chronica Austriae*. Ed. Alphons LHOTSKY. Berlin – Zürich. 1967. (Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptorum rerum Germanicarum. Nova Series, XIII.) p. 321.

³⁷ Norbert C. TÓTH: *Luxemburgi Zsigmond uralkodása 1387–1437* [Reign of Sigismund of Luxembourg 1387–1437]. Budapest. 2013. p. 17.

so presumably it was one of the reasons why the plan to murder Sigismund was abandoned.³⁸

IV. Conclusion

To sum up the questions explored in the introduction of the study, concerning the attempts on the lives of emperors of the Luxembourg dynasty, it can be said that the dynasty and its allies made use of these attempts in their representation. The quasi-mythographic image of a ruler poisoned on the peak of his glory served to sanctify (*sanctifier*) him while also making him a hero, since a death of this kind practically elevated the ruler to the level of Alexander the Great. Nevertheless, it is also remarkable that high importance is attributed to poisoning at the founder of the dynasty already, and thereby the lives of the descendants of the family are destined to fight against the evil forces, since poison is closely related to the devil and sin, as can be inferred from the passion of Henry VII. Furthermore, it is also significant that after the murder of Holy Roman Emperor Henry VII, by some kind of miracle the Luxembourg descendant became resistant to poison, even though the attempts were frustrated in time, or they were saved thanks to the exceptional expertise of a physician in their entourage. It can be seen in this latter case too, that for instance, all other rulers who were poisoned like Sigismund died from the poison immediately, they never even had a chance for survival. The invulnerability assumed that way fulfills its legitimising function perfectly. By his unexpected recovery of 1404, Sigismund is distinguished from the unfortunate Habsburgs who were abandoned by divine providence, but at the same time, he follows the model of his father, Charles IV, who was also target for murder, i.e. it emphasizes a message that is nothing else that he was chosen by God, supported by some kind of predestination, *divina me gracia protegente*, as we read in the works of Eberhard Windecke and Charles IV. What is more, the fact that the Venetians reneged on their plan also carries the hallmark of divine protection, God's grace.



³⁸ Franck COLLARD: D'Henri VII à Sigismund de Luxembourg: une dynastie impériale à l'épreuve du poison. In: *Emperor Sigismund and the Orthodox World*. Ed. Ekaterini MITSIOU – Mihailo POPOVIĆ – Johannes PREISER-KAPPELLER – Alexandru SIMON. Vienna. 2010. p. 9–16, here: p. 10.