

“Triumph der Barmherzigkeit” („Triumph of mercy“), a study by Elisabeth Watzka-Pauli in the history of the Trinitarian order in the Austrian Habsburg Monarchy, and its regard to Alba Iulia – a summary

The book covers the history of the Trinitarian order in the Habsburg Monarchy from 1690 to 1783. This particular catholic religious congregation has its origins at the end of the 12th century and as its main purpose the redemption of Christian prisoners respectively slaves in Muslim-ruled countries. In contrast to military crusader-orders like the Templars, the Knights Hospitallers and others, who eventually liberated their captive comrades with armed force, the Trinitarians freed Christian prisoners mainly by paying ransom or by exchange with Muslim prisoners.

In the wake of the second siege of Vienna in 1683 and the ongoing war between the Habsburg Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire, when thousands of inhabitants of Austria and Hungary had been brought as prisoners of war into the Ottoman Empire or its vassal states, the Tataric regions at the northern coast of the Black Sea, the installation of a professional organisation for ransoming displaced and enslaved Christians, like the Trinitarian order, became a very important task in Austria. The order's main aim was explicitly the liberation of “Christians“, because it was not only physical rescue of prisoners of war and bringing them to their home countries, but also, and even more important, the salvation of their souls from the threat of apostasy during captivity among non-believers. One has to bear in mind, that the welfare of the soul was one of the main aspects in life in this age of religion and piety. Main questions dealt in the study are, how the dangerous expeditions to this end have been implemented by the order, and how they were embedded in the contemporary social, cultural, political and military background. The Trinitarians were particularly successful in these redemption enterprises, when they cooperated with the Aulic Council of War (“Hofkriegsrat”) in Vienna and with imperial ambassadors who were sent to Constantinople on occasion of peace negotiations. Moreover, they often were supported by a far-reaching network of other catholic orders, above all the Jesuits, in their tasks. Yet within the Ottoman Empire or the Black Sea region they –as has to be stressed in particular – also relied heavily on cooperation with “natives” of different religious backgrounds, as orthodox Christians, Muslims and Jews. One of the most adjuvant patrons of the Trinitarian „Patres Redemptores“ within South-Eastern Europe was the woiwode of Wallachia, Contantin Brancoveanu, who only made possible the redemption travel to Budschak and Crimea in 1700. His court in Bucharest disposed of a network of scouts, who in advance could negotiate with Tataric slave-holders, and he also guaranteed for the safety of already ransomed persons as well as of the vast amount of cash, which the Trinitarians had to take with them for paying the ransoms. These sums in general stemmed from many smaller alms from common people, from several foundations of the aristocracy, particularly designed for the purpose of the liberation of captive Christians, and sometimes from state subsidies, too.

On the way back from such an arduous expedition,-- in most cases led from Istanbul – where the Austrian Trinitarians even managed to establish a permanent residence in 1723 – to Vienna, the Trinitarian clerics and the liberated Christians – mostly Austrians and Hungarians, but also people from

nearly all over – still had to be cautious of attacks: within the Ottoman Empire, as in Thrace and Bulgaria, they had to expect hostilities by the regional population, but also in Transylvania and Hungary, as these regions often were, more or less, war zones, in late 17th and early 18th century. Therefore, support by regional Christian rulers, like the Woiwode Constantin Brancoveanu, was particularly valuable for the Trinitarians, and the execution of him and his sons in 1714 – as alleged traitors to the Sultan – was bemoaned very much by them.

In this context, the establishment of a Trinitarian monastery, situated in the Eastern Austrian borderlands, neighbouring the Ottoman Empire, became even more important for the order, and the acquisition of a building as the seat of a residence in Alba Iulia (Karlsburg/Alba Carolina/Gyulafehérvár), the capital of Transylvania, in 1716 therefore was celebrated as a considerable success. First initiatives for this had been proposed by the Pater Redemptor Joseph a Jesu Maria already during the years 1713 to 1715, and he was able to convince both secular and clerical representatives in the region that the activities of the order were of benefit not only for Catholics, but also for the various other confessions, “Calvinists”, “Lutherans” and Orthodox Christians, who represented the vast majority of the population in Transylvania. For the order itself, an explicit instruction by the “Congregatio de Propagande fide”, to get a foothold in Transylvania, for the purpose of reconversions to Catholic faith, was an important incentive to install itself in Alba Iulia, too. As well Stephan von Steinville, by then military governor, as Sigismund Kornis, contemporary civil governor of Transylvania, advocated the foundation of a Trinitarian residence in Alba Iulia at the Aulic Council of War and Emperor Charles VI sanctioned the proposal. Even after this, some local resistance – by other catholic orders, which anticipated the Trinitarians becoming competitors for pious donations – emerged against the realisation of the Trinitarian new foundation, yet it remained unsuccessful. Finally a suitable building was found, the former house of count Nicolaus Bethlen in the town, and in 1716 the new residence of the order was established, financed by Emperor Charles VI, who ordered an annual subsidy of 880 florins for the sustenance of three Trinitarian monks.

The Trinitarian order stayed in Alba Iulia until 1783, the year when the order was abolished within the Austrian monarchy by Emperor Joseph II. By then, the state bureaucracy intended to take over the agenda of the former order itself, but it was not able to replace in an adequate manner the Trinitarians’ “international” network, which in 18th century had stretched from Spain over Italy, France and Central Europe, until the Ottoman Empire and even the so-called “Barbary-states” of Tripolis, Tunis, Algier and Morocco. The latter were the main countries of origin of Muslim pirates, who endangered Christian travellers in the Mediterranean until the end of the 18th century, whilst falling into captivity during land war between the Austrian and the Ottoman Empire already had ended to be a frequent danger.

During the nearly hundred years between 1690 and 1783 the Austrian Trinitarians had been able to liberate a total of about 4000 persons from slavery, and therefore showed in an impressive and courageous way, that the human practice of mercy could, to some extent, change seemingly inescapable destiny.