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a cura di
GIAMPIERO BRUNELLI



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Vienna, Monumento equestre al Principe Eugenio di Savoia, particolare.
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GIAMPIERO BRUNELLI (ED.),

***Giovanni Marco Isolani:
Compendio di molti anni di guerre
seguite in Ungheria.***

Edizione critica e Introduzione di Giampiero Brunelli,

Firenze University Press, Firenze, 2026.

(Biblioteca di storia 57) DOI: 10.36253/979-12-215-0908-3



The Long Turkish War (1593–1606), fought between the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Monarchy, was one of the most significant military conflicts of early modern Europe. Nevertheless, scholarly interest in this protracted struggle has remained more limited than that devoted to such conflicts as the Thirty Years' War or the Italian Wars, and the historiography of the war is consequently less extensive. This is all the more striking given the considerable number of contemporary printed and manuscript works devoted to the confi-

ct. Among these sources, Giovanni Marco Isolani's *Compendio di molti anni di guerre seguite in Ungheria* occupies a prominent place. The work has now been published in a critical edition by Giampiero Brunelli, a distinguished scholar of early modern warfare. Brunelli, who has already produced several important studies on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century military history, the anti-Ottoman wars fought in the Kingdom of Hungary, and the Italian contingents serving there, published this critical edition of Isolani's *Compendio* in 2026 as volume 57 of the *Biblioteca di storia* series of Firenze University Press.

The edition is accompanied by a substantial introductory study. In the introduction, Brunelli reconstructs the origins and history of Isolani's family, including the remarkable career of Jacopo Isolani, who was created to the cardinalate in 1413, and examines the adventurous life of Giovanni Marco himself, born in either 1572 or 1573. One of the first major turning points in his life was the murder of his father when the boy was approximately four years old. Although relatively little is known about Isolani's youth, Brunelli demonstrates from scattered evidence that Giovanni Marco belonged to a cadet branch of a senatorial family and possessed considerable expertise in mathematics, drawing, and other disciplines associated with military engineering. These abilities laid the foundations for the rise of a man who did not come from a traditional military dynasty.

Brunelli discusses in detail the presumed circumstances of Isolani's arrival in Hungary, while also engaging critically with several arguments advanced in previous scholarship, particularly in Hungarian historiography. The exact date and route of Isolani's arrival remain uncertain. Brunelli nevertheless argues that he reached the Kingdom of Hungary largely through his own network of contacts. His case was by no means exceptional. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and especially during the Long Turkish War, large numbers of Italian soldiers—including many from Bologna—served on the Hungarian theatre of war. Since the sources are largely silent regarding this phase of Isolani's life, Brunelli reconstructs his early career primarily through a close analysis of the *Compendio* itself. Drawing upon the reliability of the information contained in the text, as well as its language and terminology, he convincingly argues that although the narrative begins in 1594, Isolani himself could only have arrived in Hungary in 1596.

Isolani provides a remarkably detailed account of the Battle of Mezőkeresztes (October 1596), and he probably participated personally in the military operations of 1597, including the capture of Tata and Pápa. From 1598 onwards, his

activities can also be documented through independent archival sources. This year marked a turning point in his career. During the Ottoman siege of Várad (Varadino, Oradea), he played a crucial role in strengthening bastions damaged by artillery fire through the construction of new defensive works and internal fortifications. He personally supervised these works and suffered serious facial injuries during the fighting. The quality of his service attracted attention, and its significance was acknowledged even by Giorgio Basta himself. As a consequence, Isolani subsequently took part in the reconstruction of Várad and, in 1600, was entrusted with matters concerning the fortifications of Vienna. From there he was sent to Transylvania, where he was charged with surveying the condition of the frontier defence system.

By this point, Isolani had clearly established himself among the most capable military engineers in Habsburg service and had developed connections with several leading figures of the Monarchy's military and political elite.

In 1601, he surveyed the fortifications of western Hungary on behalf of Philippe Emmanuel de Lorraine, Duke of Mercoeur, paying particular attention to the castles of Tata, Csesznek, and Tihany. He also participated in military operations around Székesfehérvár (Albaregale) and was present as an observer and adviser during the famous but unsuccessful attempt to recapture Kanizsa (Canissa). Brunelli further reveals that, following the failure of the Kanizsa campaign, Isolani travelled to Vienna, where he proposed a bold plan for a winter siege of the fortress. The Habsburg military authorities, however, adopted a different course. At the end of the year, Isolani was appointed commander of the recently recaptured town of Székesfehérvár.

His tenure in this position proved short-lived. In 1602, he fell into Ottoman captivity together with several of his relatives. This effectively brought his military career to an end. Although the ransom and exchange of Christian captives was common practice, repeated attempts to secure Isolani's release proved unsuccessful. Brunelli argues that the Ottoman leadership attached exceptional value to his military expertise. As a military engineer and adviser, Isolani possessed specialised knowledge that was also highly appreciated by the Ottoman command, which appears to have regarded his skills as an asset of considerable strategic importance. By placing this episode within a broader framework, Brunelli demonstrates how technical and military knowledge circulated between the Habsburg and Ottoman worlds. The distinguished engineer ultimately died in Ottoman captivity in 1606. The introductory study thus provides a comprehensive and detailed biog-

raphy while also identifying a number of unresolved questions that may stimulate further research and archival investigation.

Brunelli also examines the history of the manuscript edited in the present volume. His discussion reveals that Isolani's work has been known to scholarship since 1784, owing to the efforts of Giovanni Fantuzzi. Although the original manuscript has not survived, two copies are extant: one in Bologna and another in Munich. These are not direct copies of one another but derive from a common, now lost exemplar. The Munich manuscript has long been known to Hungarian and Romanian scholarship through the work of Karl Nehring, Kálmán Benda, and Ovidiu Cristea, and parts of it have previously been edited and translated. However, the two manuscript witnesses had never been systematically compared. As a result, a number of misunderstandings and textual errors entered earlier editions, several examples of which Brunelli discusses in detail.

On this basis, he makes a compelling case for the necessity of a new critical edition. Despite more than a century of scholarly effort between 1900 and 2024, Isolani's work still lacked a satisfactory modern Italian edition. Brunelli addresses this deficiency by taking the Bolognese manuscript as his base text, while recording the variants of the Munich manuscript in the notes. The result is an impressively annotated edition containing no fewer than 567 footnotes.

The *Compendio* guides its readers through the events of the anti-Ottoman wars fought in the Kingdom of Hungary between 1594 and 1602. The narrative sections dealing with the first years of the conflict were probably based on second-hand information and contain a greater number of inaccuracies. This changes markedly once Isolani himself arrived on the theatre of war. From 1598 onwards in particular, he writes not as a compiler but as an eyewitness. The value of the work is further enhanced by the fact that this eyewitness was neither a casual observer nor an ordinary soldier, but a highly skilled military engineer with connections to the upper ranks of the Christian command structure, who frequently incorporated his own experiences into the narrative.

The volume is well organised, clearly structured, and easy to navigate. The index facilitates the identification of individual figures, while the inclusion of a genealogical table and a few illustrations further enhances its usability. Particularly noteworthy is the image selected for the cover: a contemporary engraving depicting war booty captured in the Kingdom of Hungary being transported to Vienna. The volume would, however, have benefited from the inclusion of additio-

nal maps and illustrations, especially for readers less familiar with the geography of the Kingdom of Hungary and the Ottoman–Habsburg frontier. Further contemporary engravings would also have been welcome, particularly because Isolani frequently discusses in considerable detail the condition of individual fortresses and the geographical setting of military operations.

The bibliography at the end of the volume highlights another important strength of Brunelli’s work. The edition makes a substantial body of Hungarian and Romanian scholarship accessible to an international audience, bringing into wider circulation research that has often remained underutilised outside its national historiographical traditions.

One of Brunelli’s most significant achievements is that he does not merely provide a critical edition of an important historical source but also succeeds in restoring Giovanni Marco Isolani himself to the historical narrative of the Long Turkish War. Through extensive archival research and a careful reading of the surviving manuscripts, he reconstructs the career of a military engineer whose life and writings shed valuable light on the military worlds of the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Ottoman–Habsburg frontier.

Overall, this carefully edited volume, available both in print and online, makes accessible the observations and experiences of an exceptionally valuable eyewitness while simultaneously offering the first comprehensive scholarly reconstruction of Isolani’s life and career. The volume therefore directs renewed scholarly attention to a comparatively understudied theatre and period of the Ottoman–Habsburg wars. It is likely to become a standard point of reference for future research on the Long Turkish War and an important resource for historians interested in early modern warfare, military engineering, and the history of the Ottoman–Habsburg frontier.

VIKTOR KANÁSZ

In the following page:

Battle of Esztergom 1595 Meyerpeck’s engraving from 1595 (published by Antal Leopold, *Old Views of Esztergom*, 1939). According to Meyerpeck’s engraving, the White Tower (Weiss-thurm) was a huge three-story residential block with a pentagonal ground plan, the roof structure of which was blown apart during the siege of 1595. [Wikimedia commons](#)



9. W. Meyerpeck képe az 1595. évi ostrom pusztítása után ábrázolja a palotát.
A palota tényleg meglévő helyén található a bástya romjai mellett.



Johann Georg Ziesenis (1716-1776). Portrait of Friedrich the Great (1763).
Sans-Souci Palace. Wikimedia Commons

Storia Militare Moderna

Articoli / Articles - Military History

- On the dating of the Trigonion Tower, Thessaloniki,
by DIONYSIOS HATZOPOULOS & STATHIS BIRTACHAS,
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di GIAMPIERO BRUNELLI,
 - Tra tecnica e retorica: come opporsi a un nemico più forte nei trattati di architettura militare del Cinquecento
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di ROBERTO SCONFENZA,
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par BRUNO PAUVERT,
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di PIERO CROCIANI,
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(di ROSA CARNEVALE)
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