



#### Summary :

The battle of Varna (10 November 1444) was an outcome of the last great "crusade", undertaken by Western powers, particularly Hungarians, Serbs, Venetians and the Pope, in order to stem the Ottomans' advance into Europe. This particular "crusade" included a series of expeditions in the wider Danube area during 1443-1444, negotiations (truce of Adrianople, July 1444), as well as the campaign culminating in the battle of Varna (September-November 1444), which was decisive for the geopolitical balance in the Balkans.

#### Date

10 November 1444

#### Geographical Location

Plain on the Black Sea shore near Varna (Bulgaria)

## 1. Historical framework

The fifteenth century was a period of radical change in the balance of power in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans in general. The aggressive appearance of the [Ottomans](#) and the concomitant shrinking of the Byzantine state made necessary the mobilization of neighboring states that were directly threatened by Ottoman expansion and, consequently, a change in their political goals. Already since the end of the previous century the advance of the Ottomans in to Hungary (1394) marked a new danger threatening the West from the east and the Nicopolis "crusade" (1396) revealed a shift in crusading objects, no longer the conquest of the Holy Land, but the suppression of the Ottoman threat. Indeed, from 1430 onwards the Ottomans adopted a clearly offensive policy, pointed against the Byzantines ([attacks against Constantinople](#)), the Venetians (attacks against Venetian bases in Greece and Albania) and the Serbs (attacks against Serbian strategic positions in order to expand into Transylvania) and aiming at Ottoman expansion and domination over the Balkans (cf. their efforts to maintain control of Wallachia).<sup>1</sup>

The [Varna "crusade"](#) (1443-1445) falls within this framework.<sup>2</sup> The idea of a "crusade" was born during the negotiations for the [Union of the Churches](#) in the Council of Ferrara - Florence (1439), where the Byzantines proposed a plan of attack against the Ottomans. There followed diplomatic actions on the part of the Byzantines and the Pope, aiming either at causing distractions (e.g. revolts in Anatolia, Albania and elsewhere), or securing allies, as well as preparations for organizing and conducting the "crusade" (procuring funds, arms and troops, forming a war plan).<sup>3</sup>

### 2. The Varna "crusade"

The initiative for organizing the "crusade" came from pope Eugenius IV and cardinal Giulio Cesarini, who took to task Ladislaus III, king of Hungary. After the Ottoman invasion of Serbia (1439/40), because of which Hungary was exposed to the Ottoman threat, Ladislaus seemed willing to take the offensive against the Ottomans and placed a distinguished general, János Hunyadi, in charge of his military forces. The Venetians, who aimed at maintaining their economic hold on Romania, decided to participate by furnishing a fleet.<sup>4</sup> Other participants in this coalition also included George Branković, ruler of Serbia, and Philip, duke of Burgundy, who aimed at pushing back the Turkish threat.<sup>5</sup> The "crusade" plan called for an army to march along the Danube from Hungary to the east, supported by a fleet stationed at the Dardanelles, providing protection to [Constantinople](#) and severing communications between Anatolia and Europe, blocking the Ottoman advance. Negotiations for the assembly of the fleet, to which Ragusa also contributed, lasted throughout 1443. In August 1444 a fleet of about 30 ships finally reached the Bosphorus.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, an army comprising approximately 25,000 soldiers set off from Hungary (Buda) and moved southeast, crossing the Danube and reaching Belgrade (October 1443). There followed clashes with the Turks in the area around Niš and Sofia, as well as in the passes of Zlatitsa and Kunovitsa, the outcome of which was successful for the Crusaders (November 1443 - January 1444).<sup>7</sup> The coming of winter put an end to the so-called "long campaign" and forced the army of the Crusaders to return to its base. In the spring and summer of 1444 negotiations were initiated between Ladislaus, Hunyadi and Branković on the one side and Murad II on the other. These negotiations ended in an agreement for a ten-year truce (truce of Adrianople, 12 June 1444), while they caused dissent among Crusaders and became an object of disagreement for contemporary writers, as well as modern researchers.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, preparations for military operations continued and in September 1444 an army of approximately 16,000 men,<sup>9</sup> led by Ladislaus, Hunyadi and Cesarini headed south from Transylvania (Szeged/Szegedin) and forded the Danube at Orşova, following a course south-southeast along the river. Branković, who had remained neutral after the truce of Adrianople, did not participate in this campaign. En route the army passed through Vidin, Nicopolis, Novi Pazar, Provadiya and Varna, as well as numerous other areas along the Danube.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, at Nicopolis the army was reinforced by a military force (4,000 or 7,000 soldiers) of Vlad Dracul, the voevod of Wallachia.<sup>11</sup> After a series of victories against the Ottomans, the Crusaders reached Varna, which they took (November 1444). However, the Crusaders' fleet could not block the transportation of Ottomans forces from the Bosphorus to the shores of Bulgaria.<sup>12</sup> Murad was already at Adrianople since October 1444 and in November of that year his generals had managed to control the heights and passes around Varna.<sup>13</sup> On 10 November 1444, the opposing forces clashed outside Varna, at a level plain near the sea.

### 3. Description of the battle

The Crusaders' forces deployed in a single line in front of the lake surrounding the city's walls as far as the shore. Hunyadi took the left, Ladislaus the centre, while the right wing was covered by Cesarini and other bishops with their troops. A reserve force of Wallachian warriors was stationed behind the centre. The Ottomans deployed opposite the Crusaders: Murad was at the centre, along with the Janissaries, while Anatolian troops under Karaça Bey were placed on the right and European troops under Şihâbeddîn Paşa on the left. The left wing was also protected by units of irregulars (*akıncı*) and foot soldiers (*azap*), who were the first to charge the Crusaders' right flank. Although the Ottomans' first attack was fruitless, the second was successful, since the simultaneous charge of the Anatolian *sipahis* (cavalry) led to a breakthrough in the Crusaders' right wing. Meanwhile, Hunyadi and Ladislaus attacked the Anatolian troops and forced them to retreat, while they also succeeded in killing their commander, Karaça Bey. After that, Hunyadi attacked Murad's European troops, managing to drive them off the field and, consequently, to cut off the sultan. Thus Ladislaus, who was awaiting the outcome of Hunyadi's assaults, was presented with the opportunity to turn against the sultan. According to the testimony of Chalkokondyles, the reason behind this attack was prestige.<sup>14</sup> The Janissaries, however, defeated Ladislaus and his troops dispersed when they were informed of their leader's death. The return of the Ottoman cavalry to the battlefield completed the rout of the Crusaders' forces and put an end to the battle. The opposing forces suffered great losses, while the fate of Ladislaus and Cesarini, which remained uncertain for several weeks, gave rise to legends and fanciful tales.<sup>15</sup> Hunyadi managed to escape and reached Wallachia, where however he was captured by Vlad Dracul. After he was ransomed, he returned to Hungary.<sup>16</sup>

### 4. Evaluation of the battle's outcome

From a military point of view, Varna was a pitched battle, fought on an open field by large numbers of troops. The main factors to influence its outcome were exploitation of time, the number and type of troops, co-ordination of their movements, organization of reserves and the warriors' morale. Thus, the Turkish forces' numerical superiority (the Crusaders were outnumbered by the Turks three to one) and their advantage in choosing the battlefield, the light artillery with which the Crusaders were supplied and which was possibly not used in the battle, the lack of co-ordination between Hunyadi and Ladislaus and the latter's initiative of attacking the sultan alone, the army's panic, as well as omissions in organizing barricades and securing escape routes relative to the terrain (marshy area around Varna), all these significantly contributed to the defeat of the Crusaders. The fact that the fleet ultimately failed in its mission to support the ground forces was certainly an added and essential negative factor.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, the last phase of the "crusade" of 1443-1444 ended in failure because of defective organization, lack of co-ordination and diversion from the war's main objective.<sup>18</sup> The latter cause of course is connected to the outcome of the battle on a political level.

The controversy that broke out between the pope and the Venetians regarding the fleet's role, the Venetians' decision to sign a peace treaty with [Mehmed II](#) (1446) and the moral blow dealt to western Christendom, according to Ciriaco de Ancona, were some of the most important aspects of the political crisis that followed.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the Crusaders' defeat was considered a "prelude"



to the [Ottoman conquest of Constantinople](#)<sup>20</sup> as the Union of the Churches and the crusading idea collapsed. On the contrary, Ottoman power in the Balkans expanded (campaigns against [Constantine Palaiologos](#) in the Peloponnese [1446], Skanderbeg in Albania [1448, 1450] and Hunyadi in Kosovo [1448]).<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the Ottomans also benefited on a military level, enriching their battle tactics with new methods and means (muskets/cannon).<sup>22</sup>

1. Chasin Martin, "The Crusade of Varna", Setton, K.M., Hazard, H.W., Zacour, N.P. (eds.), *A History of the Crusades 6: The Impact of the Crusades in Europe* (Wisconsin 1989), pp. 264, 280; Imber, C., *The Crusade of Varna 1443-45* (Aldershot 2006), p. 7 (where the competition between Ottomans and Hungarians for control of the Balkans is noted, as well as that between Venetians and Genoese for control of the coastal areas of the Balkans and between Ottomans and Karamanids for domination over Anatolia).
2. On the Varna "crusade" we draw information from the work of the Byzantine historians Chalkokondyles and Doukas, the correspondence of Ciriaco de Ancona, a poem by Michel Beheim, the chronicle of Jehan de Wavrin (*Anciennes Chroniques d'Angleterre*), the work of an anonymous author in the service of Murad and a multitude of other sources (letters, documents); cf. Imber, C., *The Crusade of Varna 1443-45* (Aldershot 2006), pp. 37-39; Chasin Martin, "The Crusade of Varna", Setton, K.M., Hazard, H.W., Zacour, N.P. (eds.), *A History of the Crusades 6: The Impact of the Crusades in Europe* (Wisconsin 1989), p. 291.
3. See for instance Chasin Martin, "The Crusade of Varna", Setton, K.M., Hazard, H.W., Zacour, N.P. (eds.), *A History of the Crusades 6: The Impact of the Crusades in Europe* (Wisconsin 1989), pp. 269, 272-273, 282-283, 293-294 etc. Imber, C., *The Crusade of Varna 1443-45* (Aldershot 2006), pp. 27-28.
4. Nicol, D.M., *Byzantium and Venice* (Cambridge 1988), p. 384.
5. Chasin Martin, "The Crusade of Varna", Setton, K.M., Hazard, H.W., Zacour, N.P. (eds.), *A History of the Crusades 6: The Impact of the Crusades in Europe* (Wisconsin 1989), pp. 289-290.
6. Chasin Martin, "The Crusade of Varna", Setton, K.M., Hazard, H.W., Zacour, N.P. (eds.), *A History of the Crusades 6: The Impact of the Crusades in Europe* (Wisconsin 1989), pp. 288-290, 294-298; Setton, K.M., *The Papacy and the Levant (1204-1571) 2* (Philadelphia 1978), pp. 84-85.
7. Chasin Martin, "The Crusade of Varna", Setton, K.M., Hazard, H.W., Zacour, N.P. (eds.), *A History of the Crusades 6: The Impact of the Crusades in Europe* (Wisconsin 1989), pp. 270-271, 291-293.
8. Chasin Martin, "The Crusade of Varna", Setton, K.M., Hazard, H.W., Zacour, N.P. (eds.), *A History of the Crusades 6: The Impact of the Crusades in Europe* (Wisconsin 1989), pp. 271-272, 298-303; Setton, K.M., *The Papacy and the Levant (1204-1571) 2* (Philadelphia 1978), p. 84; Gill, J., *The Council of Florence* (Cambridge 1961), pp. 331-332; Imber, C., *The Crusade of Varna 1443-45* (Aldershot 2006), pp. 20-27, esp. 23-26; Ostrogorsky, G., *Ιστορία του Βυζαντινού κράτους 3* (Athens 1989), p. 348, n. 262.
9. On the numerical strength of the Crusaders' military forces, which varies in the sources, see Chasin Martin, "The Crusade of Varna", Setton, K.M., Hazard, H.W., Zacour, N.P. (eds.), *A History of the Crusades 6: The Impact of the Crusades in Europe* (Wisconsin 1989), pp. 304-305; Setton, K.M., *The Papacy and the Levant (1204-1571) 2* (Philadelphia 1978), pp. 89-90; Καλλιγός, Π., *Μελέται Βυζαντινής Ιστορίας* (Athens 1894), pp. 668-669.
10. The sources' testimonies on the crusading army's line of march are contradictory and do not facilitate a clear recreation; see Imber, C., *The Crusade of Varna 1443-45* (Aldershot 2006), p. 29; *idem*, *The Ottoman Empire* (Istanbul 1990), pp. 130-131; Chasin Martin, "The Crusade of Varna", Setton, K.M., Hazard, H.W., Zacour, N.P. (eds.), *A History of the Crusades 6: The Impact of the Crusades in Europe* (Wisconsin 1989), pp. 304-306.
11. On Branković's neutral stance and the participation of the voevod of Wallachia at the final stage of the "crusade" see Chasin Martin, "The Crusade of Varna", Setton, K.M., Hazard, H.W., Zacour, N.P. (eds.), *A History of the Crusades 6: The Impact of the Crusades in Europe* (Wisconsin 1989), pp. 302-303, 305.
12. On the fleet's mission and role see Setton, K.M., *The Papacy and the Levant (1204-1571) 2* (Philadelphia 1978), pp. 84-89; Chasin Martin, "The Crusade of Varna", Setton, K.M., Hazard, H.W., Zacour, N.P. (eds.), *A History of the Crusades 6: The Impact of the Crusades in Europe* (Wisconsin 1989), pp. 306-308.
13. On the Turkish army's line of march and numerical strength see Chasin Martin, "The Crusade of Varna", Setton, K.M., Hazard, H.W., Zacour, N.P. (eds.), *A History of the Crusades 6: The Impact of the Crusades in Europe* (Wisconsin 1989), pp. 308-309.
14. Χαλκοκονδύλης, Α., *Ιστορία*, I. Bekker (ed.), *Laonici Chalcocondylae Athiniensis Historiarum libri decem*, Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae (Bonnae 1843), pp. 335-336.
15. Setton, K.M., *The Papacy and the Levant (1204-1571) 2* (Philadelphia 1978), pp. 90-91; Chasin Martin, "The Crusade of Varna", Setton, K.M., Hazard, H.W., Zacour, N.P. (eds.), *A History of the Crusades 6: The Impact of the Crusades in Europe* (Wisconsin 1989), pp. 308-310; Imber, C., *The Crusade of Varna 1443-45* (Aldershot 2006), p. 31 and p. 310 n. 99.
16. On the battle see Chasin Martin, "The Crusade of Varna", Setton, K.M., Hazard, H.W., Zacour, N.P. (eds.), *A History of the Crusades 6: The Impact of the Crusades in Europe* (Wisconsin 1989), pp. 308-310; Imber, C., *The Crusade of Varna 1443-45* (Aldershot 2006), pp. 30-31.
17. Chasin Martin, "The Crusade of Varna", Setton, K.M., Hazard, H.W., Zacour, N.P. (eds.), *A History of the Crusades 6: The Impact of the Crusades in Europe* (Wisconsin 1989), pp. 307, 309-310; Imber, C., *The Crusade of Varna 1443-45* (Aldershot 2006), p. 31.
18. Nicol, D.M., *Byzantium and Venice* (Cambridge 1988), p. 385.
19. Setton, K.M., *The Papacy and the Levant (1204-1571) 2* (Philadelphia 1978), pp. 91-96 n. 57 (where the relative passage from Ciriaco's letter may be found); Imber, C., *The Crusade of Varna 1443-45* (Aldershot 2006), pp. 32-35. Another facet was the destruction of the kingdom of Hungary.
20. Setton, K.M., *The Papacy and the Levant (1204-1571) 2* (Philadelphia 1978), p. 90.
21. Imber, C., *The Crusade of Varna 1443-45* (Aldershot 2006) pp. 35-36; Chasin Martin, "The Crusade of Varna", Setton, K.M., Hazard, H.W., Zacour, N.P. (eds.), *A History of the Crusades 6: The Impact of the Crusades in Europe* (Wisconsin 1989), pp. 274-275; *idem*, *The Papacy and the Levant (1204-1571) 2* (Philadelphia 1978), pp. 97-103.
22. Chasin Martin, "The Crusade of Varna", Setton, K.M., Hazard, H.W., Zacour, N.P. (eds.), *A History of the Crusades 6: The Impact of the Crusades in Europe* (Wisconsin 1989), pp. 275, 310.

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	<b>Nicol D.M.</b> , <i>Οι τελευταίοι αιώνες του Βυζαντίου, 1261-1453</i> , Αθήνα 1996, Κομνηνός, Σ. (μτφρ.)
	<b>Λαόνικος Χαλκοκονδύλης</b> , <i>Αποδείξεις Ιστοριών δέκα</i> , Bekker, I. (ed.), <i>Laonici Chalcocondylae Athiniensis historiarum libri decem</i> , Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae, Bonn 1834
	<b>Nicol D.M.</b> , <i>Byzantium and Venice. A study in diplomatic and cultural relations</i> , Cambridge 1988
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Sources

Bekker, I. (ed.), Laonici Chalcocondylae Athiniensis historiarum libri decem (Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae, Bonn 1843), pp. 335-336.

For a compilation of the sources on the Crusade of Varna, see Imber, C., The Crusade of Varna 1443-45 (Aldershot 2006), with the texts translated in English.

Quotations

Laonikos Chalkokondyles recounts the attack on the Murat's European army and the death of Karaca Bey:

Ιωάννης μὲν οὖν, ὡς ἐτρέφεται τὸ τῆς Ἀσίας στρατεύμα, ἀφίκετο ἐπὶ Λαδισιάν βασιλείᾳ, παραινῶν αὐτῷ ἴσασθαι καὶ ἰδρῦσθαι κατὰ χώραν, μὴδὲ προείναι ποι συμβαλοῦντα τοῖς πολεμίοις, ὡς ἂν ἐπιόντι κατὰ τοῦ βασιλέως χαλεπὸν ἀποβαῖν, καταφυγῆ ἕκ τῆς μάχης γένοιτο. καὶ παρεγγύα μὴρηνι τῶν ἀμφ' αὐτὸν ἐπιτρέπειν ἄλλη πῆ ἀπίενα, ἀλλ' αὐτοῦ μένοντας ἐπιμένειν, ἐς ὃ ἂν μαχεσάμενος καὶ τὸ τῆς Εὐρώπης στρατεύμα τρεψάμενος ὑποστρέψῃται, καὶ τότε ἐπὶ τὰς θύρας ἄμα, ὑπολειπομένον τοῦ ἀγῶνος τούτου, ἐλθοῖ μετὰ ταῦτα εἰπὼν ἀπὴι συνταξάμενος ἐπὶ τὸ τῆς Εὐρώπης στρατεύμα, ὃ ἐπὶ τοῦ βασιλέως παρετάσσετο μέρος, καὶ συμβαλλῶν ἐμάχετο ἐπὶ χρόνον τιὰ. ἐγένετο δὲ ἡ μάχη οὕτως, ὡς συμβάλλοιεν οἱ Παῖονες ἐς χεῖρας ἐλθόντες, τρεψάμενοι τοὺς Τοῦρκους ἐδίωκον, ἕως οὐ ἐγένοντο ἀγχοῦ τοῦ στρατοπέδου αὐτοῦ. μετὰ δὲ εὐθὺς συστρέψαντες οἱ Τοῦρκοι ἐδίωκον τοὺς Παῖονας χρόνον ἰκανὸν ἄχρις οὐ γένοιτο καὶ οἱτοὶ ἐν τῷ στρατοπέδῳ αὐτῶν. καὶ ὅποτε μὲν βιασάμενοι οἱ Παῖονες τοὺς Τοῦρκους ἐπικέκοντο διώκοντες, ἐνταῦθα συχνοὶ τῶν Τοῦρκων ἐπιπτον καταπατούμενοι ὑπὸ τῶν Παῖονων. καὶ μὲν δὴ καὶ Παῖονες ἐν τῇ ἀποχωρήσει πολλοὶ ἀπεγίνοντο, ὅποτε δὴ αἰδοὶ ἀποχωροῦντες. ἐν τούτῳ πίπτει Καραζῆς ὁ τῆς Εὐρώπης στρατηγός, ξίφει Παιωνικῶ βληθεὶς κατὰ τὸ στήθος, δορατίου τραύματι. τὰ γὰρ Παιωνικὰ ξίφη σχεδὸν τι δὴ, καὶ τὰ τῆς Γερμανίας ἀπάσης, ἐληλαμένα τυγχάνει ἐπὶ μῆκιστον καὶ ὄξεια, οὐ μόντοι ταῦτα οἷα καταίροντα κόπτειν διὰ καὶ ἄξια λόγου, ὡς τὰ βαρβαρικὰ ἢ καὶ Ἰταλικὰ.

Bekker, I. (επιμ.), Laonici Chalcocondylae Athiniensis historiarum libri decem (CSHB, Bonn 1843), p. 335

From an Ottoman tax register for the region of Nikopolis. c. 1450. The tax surveyor blames the flight of villagers on the Crusade of Varna:

The village of Raviç; this is reported to have been the timar of Kadizade. [The villagers] are reported to have dispersed since the infidels came to Varna. It is now contracted to Mehmed son of Yusuf, on condition of going to war and reviving [the village]. Because no one else has requested it, it has been registered in his name.

Imber, C., The Crusade of Varna 1443-45 (Aldershot 2006), p. 189.

Chronological Table

November 1443 - January 1444: The "long campaign" (crusading operations against Niš and Sofia and clashes in the passes of Zlatitsa and Kunovitsa).

12 June 1444: Truce of Adrianople.

August 1444: The Crusaders' fleet assembles at the Bosphorus.

September - November 1444: Fighting between Crusaders and Ottomans along the Orşova - Varna route.

10 November 1444: Battle of Varna.