

Institute of Balkan Studies & Centre of Thracology
at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences
(IBSCT-BAS)

DISSERTATION REVIEW

of the doctoral thesis by Milen Krasimirov Petrov entitled
*"The Holy Roman Empire and the Nicopolis Crusade (1395–1396):
Participants and Sources"*

Professional Field: 2.2. History and Archaeology Scientific Specialty:
General Medieval History

by

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Data on the Doctoral Program, Dissertation, Abstract, and Publications

Milen Petrov's dissertation was discussed and approved for public defense by a decision of the Scientific Council of the *Institute of Balkan Studies and Centre of Thracology* at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (IBSCT-BAS) dated June 3, 2026. The scientific jury was approved by Order No. 68 RD-16/15.07.2026. The procedure for announcing the public defense complies with the Regulations of the IBSCT-BAS governing the conditions and procedures for obtaining academic degrees and holding academic positions, as well as with the relevant provisions of the *Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria* (LDASRB) and its implementing regulations. The abstract meets the applicable requirements and presents the dissertation's content, scholarly contributions, and main conclusions. The results of

the similarity check conducted with *StrikePlagiarism* confirm the text's originality. Two articles directly related to the subject of the dissertation have been published.

Relevance of the Topic

The dissertation topic calls for a reconsideration of the traditional interpretation of the Nicopolis Crusade from the perspective of the Holy Roman Empire and provides a solid basis for an independent scholarly study. The prosopographical analysis of participants from the German lands offers an excellent opportunity to reconstruct political networks, personal motivations, and aspects of chivalric culture in the Late Middle Ages – an area that remains insufficiently studied in Bulgarian historiography. The topic is particularly well suited to doctoral research given the extensive and diverse body of source material available, which allows for both comparative and interdisciplinary approaches.

Content and Assessment of the Dissertation

The dissertation consists of an introduction, two main chapters, a conclusion, and a bibliography, comprising a total of 455 pages. In the introduction, the doctoral candidate clearly formulates the principal aim and five main tasks of the research. This is followed by a detailed survey of a wide range of written sources and a review of the historiography produced by both Bulgarian and foreign scholars. In this context, Milen Petrov outlines attitudes toward the events of 1396 in Christian Europe.

The first chapter, “*Sources for the Battle of Nicopolis from the Holy Roman Empire*,” has a clearly defined source-critical and historiographical focus. The doctoral candidate first reconstructs how the Nicopolis Crusade of 1396 was represented in German sources. This is a successful approach, as it allows the subject to be examined not merely as a military and political event, but also as an element of historical memory and literary construction. The author correctly observes that chronicles do not provide neutral representations of events; rather, they are texts produced within particular political and intellectual contexts. Particularly commendable is the attempt to distinguish

between different regional traditions – Bavarian, Alsatian, Franconian, Austrian, and others – since the late medieval Holy Roman Empire constituted a complex political and cultural space characterized by strong regional particularities. Particularly noteworthy is the author’s effective organization of the numerous written sources through the introduction of the concept of a “*leading narrative*.”

The attention devoted to textual and textological problems is also noteworthy. The discussion of the 1971 Bulgarian edition of Schiltberger, which is based on Valentin Langmantel’s 1885 printed edition rather than on the original Munich manuscript, demonstrates the author’s critical approach and his effort to trace the underlying manuscript tradition. The treatment of the various copies of Schiltberger’s account is particularly impressive. The careful analysis of their differences, together with the arguments demonstrating why the Munich manuscript provides a more reliable transmission of Balkan toponyms, reflects a high level of textological expertise. It is also worth emphasizing that the author does not simply accept the claims of earlier scholars, but actively seeks out evidence and critically evaluates established interpretations. This demonstrates a genuinely critical and engaged approach to scholarship.

The broad range of written evidence employed in the study also deserves positive assessment. Individual sources are examined in terms of their provenance, authorial perspective, dependence on earlier texts, and the ways in which they convey information about Nicopolis. It is precisely at this point that one of the most significant aspects of the research comes to the fore: the focus shifts from the question of “what happened?” to the more complex and nuanced question of “how and why was a particular event narrated in a particular way?” Among the principal scholarly merits of the first chapter are the author’s strong command of the historiographical literature, his attention to manuscript traditions, and his distinction between the historical event and its subsequent representation and remembrance. The author draws extensively on German-language scholarship and places the study within a broader European context.

At the same time, several points merit critical consideration. First, the conclusion that different chronicles emphasize different aspects of the same events is not, in itself,

particularly novel or surprising. A more substantial analysis would examine how these differences were shaped by the political, social, and cultural structures of the respective regions. Second, some caution would be advisable when reconstructing the motives of individual chroniclers. Although biographical context is important, it should not be given greater interpretive weight than the evidence provided by the texts themselves.

There are also some structural issues that could be addressed. The section devoted to Hans Schiltberger is so detailed that it occasionally reads like a self-contained study. Given that the subchapter focuses on sources from Bavaria, this section could perhaps be shortened accordingly. A similar reduction would be advisable in the discussion of the *Saxon World Chronicle*. The explanations concerning Eike von Repgow, the *Sachsenspiegel*, and the *Schwabenspiegel* are interesting, but somewhat peripheral to the central subject. It would be sufficient to note that the manuscript is a copy of the popular thirteenth-century *Saxon World Chronicle* to which a Bavarian continuation was subsequently added.

Overall, the first chapter demonstrates a serious and critical research approach and a clear commitment to contemporary scholarly methodology. It establishes a solid source-critical foundation for the study and transforms the German historical tradition from a mere body of evidence into an independent object of analysis.

The second chapter, “*Participants from the Holy Roman Empire: Princes and Knights*”, develops one of the most interesting conceptual strands of the dissertation. Particular attention is devoted to the appeal of the Prussian crusades and to the possibility of viewing them as a model that shaped the expectations and behavior of Western European knights who took part in the Nicopolis Crusade. A significant methodological strength is the application of the principle of least effort, known as Zipf’s Principle, as an analytical tool in historical research. This model offers a different perspective on the Nicopolis Crusade of 1396. The doctoral candidate also demonstrates a critical approach to established historiographical interpretations. He challenges the claim that the West lacked sufficient resources for crusading. Similarly, Milen Petrov revisits Attila Bárány’s argument that Western knights underestimated the Ottoman threat. He argues instead that

the experience of the Prussian crusades had fostered particular expectations about the nature of warfare that did not correspond to the reality encountered at Nicopolis in 1396. Another important contribution of the chapter is the concept of sacred geography. The use of the sources is likewise well balanced. Taken as a whole, the second chapter offers a distinctive interpretation of the Nicopolis Crusade: not simply as a military expedition that ended in defeat, but as a clash between expectations shaped by a particular crusading environment in Northeastern Europe and a fundamentally different military and political reality in Southeastern Europe.

There are, however, several points that could be improved. The argument that the Prussian crusades were relatively easy and low-risk is repeated in several places. Although this point is important to the overall argument, some of these repetitions could be reduced. The transitions between individual thematic sections could also be made smoother. For example, the transition from Burgundy and the Hohenzollerns to the quotations from Guillaume Adam concerning the military weakness of the Greeks is rather abrupt. In addition, it would be advisable to include a brief caveat regarding the limitations of the Zipf's model. Medieval behavior cannot necessarily be explained through modern rational-choice categories alone. Finally, some minor grammatical errors and omissions should be corrected.

Scientific Contributions

The dissertation constitutes a significant and conceptually coherent contribution to the comparative study of the place of the Holy Roman Empire in the historiography of the Nicopolis Crusade of 1396. Its scholarly contribution lies in its analysis of the Empire's role in the crusade, drawing on a combination of source-critical, historiographical, prosopographical, and interdisciplinary approaches. Milen Petrov demonstrates a high level of proficiency in working with both primary sources and historiographical literature. Rather than limiting his study to tracing German participation in the crusade, he also examines how different historiographical traditions represent, overlook, or reinterpret the role of the imperial lands. The doctoral candidate approaches

the crusade not only as a military event but also as an intersection of different political and mnemonic spaces – Franco-Burgundian, Hungarian, Byzantine, Ottoman, and South Slavic. In doing so, he moves beyond the traditional perspective, which has tended to focus primarily on French chivalry or the Ottoman victory.

The author convincingly justifies the territorial scope of the study, including the reasons for excluding Italy and Bohemia from its main focus, by referring to the institutional framework of the Holy Roman Empire. The terminological precision with which the concepts of “crusade,” their Latin and German equivalents, and “imperial prince” are examined should also be positively assessed. The methodological framework is clearly formulated. The aims and tasks are precise and well defined, while the incorporation of Zipf’s Principle and historical-structural analysis demonstrates a clear commitment to an interdisciplinary approach. Another substantial contribution is the author’s excellent command of the historiography. He combines modern Western European scholarship with classical studies, thereby placing the dissertation in dialogue with both established and more recent research.

The study successfully challenges several persistent historiographical stereotypes – for example, the notion that Western knights showed little or no interest in the East, or that the Ottoman threat was perceived in the same way by all participants in the crusade. Particularly convincing is the argument that experience gained during the Prussian crusades had shaped expectations that were subsequently transferred to a fundamentally different military environment.

The source base is impressive. The 46 manuscripts, 8 incunabula, and 35 early printed books cited in the dissertation attest to extensive research and raise the work well above the level of a conventional compilatory dissertation. The author’s work with manuscript collections and incunabula from the Bavarian State Library and from collections in Heidelberg, Vienna, and Paris is likewise impressive. Another significant contribution is the tracing of intertextual links between different written traditions. Particularly noteworthy is the reconstruction of the transmission of Andreas of Regensburg’s account within Bavarian historiography, as well as the identification of an

anonymous compiler's adaptation of Schiltberger's account. The dissertation also makes a scholarly contribution by revisiting earlier historiographical claims in light of new documentary evidence. Notable examples include the analysis of Burgrave Frederick VI's participation and the clarification of the fate of Ruprecht Pipan.

Another major strength lies in the concluding sections, which effectively synthesize the main findings of dissertation. The author traces the route of the crusaders from Dijon through Alsace, Bavaria, and Vienna to Buda and Nicopolis, thereby integrating individual prosopographical and source-critical observations into a coherent overall narrative.

Critical Remarks and Recommendations

The dissertation leaves the impression of an exceptionally detailed and thorough treatment of individuals, events, and translated excerpts from written sources. This level of detail is both a significant strength and a potential limitation, as in some sections the discussion extends beyond the immediate focus of the study. One example is the discussion of the *ministeriales*. Although well developed, the section could be somewhat more concise given its place within the overall structure of the dissertation. In the introduction, it would be sufficient to define the term briefly and to note the significance of the decline of the ministerial class in the fourteenth century and its implications for the recruitment of crusaders. A more detailed discussion could then be included in the relevant section on ordinary knights.

Similarly, in some sections the historical background begins to overshadow the central research topic. This is particularly evident in the discussion of Hungary. Although the sections dealing with Hungarian internal politics, Matthias Corvinus, and the Habsburgs are interesting and informative, their direct relevance to the main research question is not always clear and could be articulated more explicitly. Next, it would be advisable to avoid overly rigid distinctions between "German" and "foreign" sources. A more precise formulation would emphasize that German sources provide an internal

perspective on the Empire, whereas other historiographical traditions offer external perspectives on how the imperial lands were perceived.

I would also note a terminological issue arising from the repeated use of “Germany,” “German lands,” “Germans,” and “Holy Roman Empire” as near-interchangeable concepts. At an early stage of the dissertation, it would be useful to clarify that these terms refer to distinct geographical, political, and cultural categories. The repeated presentation of Zipf’s Principle in the aims, tasks, structure, and conclusion should likewise be avoided. Since this principle represents a methodological approach that is not commonly used in medieval studies, it would be helpful to introduce it explicitly in the methodological section and subsequently refer to it consistently as a conceptual framework for the analysis. This would prevent the impression that disproportionate emphasis is being placed on the theoretical framework before its applicability has been demonstrated. There is also no need to explain the principle again in the conclusion. Instead, the conclusion should synthesize the results of its application – namely, that the Prussian crusades functioned as a relatively inexpensive form of crusading participation, helping to explain both the scale of participation and certain expectations that proved inadequate at the Nicopolis crusade.

Another important aspect of the study concerns the interpretation of geographical knowledge and ignorance. If only 11.62% of the sources used mention Bulgaria, this should not remain merely a statistical observation. It could be connected to a broader conclusion concerning the mental and geographical distance between the Holy Roman Empire and the Balkans.

The final formulation of the dissertation should also avoid an overly apologetic tone. For a study of this scope and ambition, there is no need for the author to emphasize that he is merely making an “attempt” at a specialized study. It would be more convincing to stress that the research lays a foundation for future scholarship, challenges established historiographical stereotypes, and brings a substantial number of new or previously only partially utilized sources into scholarly circulation.

Overall, the language is of a high academic standard, but the text would benefit from eliminating some repetition, shortening overly long sentences, and drawing a clearer distinction between established facts and interpretive hypotheses. The footnotes are generally precise and rich in information. In the case of some of the longer discursive notes, however, it may be worth considering whether part of their content would be more appropriately incorporated into the main text.

Conclusion

Despite the remarks and recommendations outlined above, the dissertation constitutes a substantial, multi-layered, and interdisciplinary contribution to the study of the Bulgarian and European Middle Ages. It reflects sustained and in-depth engagement with a wide range of written sources and demonstrates a strong analytical and interdisciplinary approach. At the same time, it provides a solid foundation for further research on the Nicopolis Crusade of 1396.

On the basis of the assessment presented above, I vote in favour of awarding Milen Krasimirov Petrov the academic and educational degree of “Doctor” and recommend that the distinguished committee approve his candidacy.

13 August 2026

Veliko Tarnovo

Reviewer:

Prof. DSc Ivelin Ivanov