

STATEMENT

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Kalin Yordanov Kirilov

Institute of Balkan Studies with Centre of Thracology – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

regarding the dissertation for awarding the educational and scientific degree Doctor (PhD)

Field of Higher Education: 2. Humanities

Professional Field: 2.2. *History and Archaeology*

Scientific Specialty: Medieval General History

Institute of Balkan Studies with Centre of Thracology – BAS, Section “Medieval Balkans”

Doctoral Candidate: Milen Krasimirov Petrov

Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Vladislav Ivanov

Topic: *“The Holy Roman Empire and the Crusade of Nicopolis (1395–1396): Participants and Sources”*

The procedure for announcing and conducting the competition for awarding the educational and scientific degree *Doctor* complies with the regulatory framework; the submitted documentation is precise, and no violations have been committed. The regulations and the minimum national requirements of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Rules for its Implementation, as well as the Rules of the Training Centre at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS) have been duly observed. The candidate meets the minimum requirements of BAS, as well as those set by the Academic Council of the Institute of Balkan Studies with Centre of Thracology of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. The abstract correctly and reliably presents the aims, methodology, main structural components, and conclusions of the dissertation, highlighting the principal authorial theses and contributions. Doctoral candidate Milen Petrov has participated with papers in scholarly forums and has produced the required number of publications related to the dissertation topic, published in specialized periodicals and collected volumes. The procedure for defending the doctoral degree is fully legitimate.

The presented dissertation comprises a total of 454 pages and consists of an introductory section, a main exposition (divided into two principal parts, each structured into distinct chapters and subsections), a concluding section, a bibliography of the sources and studies used, and numerous integrated appendices in the form of tables, diagrams, and illustrations. The methodology of the dissertation is based on historical-structural analysis and synthesis, while also drawing to some extent on an interdisciplinary approach. Alongside comparative analysis and critical commentary of narrative written sources and scholarly studies on the topic, the work employs methods from the fields of textual criticism, codicology, and prosopography, as well as iconographic analysis of miniatures from late medieval illuminated manuscripts, engravings from early printed sources, and stone sculptures.

The study presents a clearly delineated and logically structured scholarly problem. Inversely to the subtitle of the dissertation, the main focus of the research lies both on the narrative written sources and historiographical tradition of the Holy Roman Empire relating to the Crusade of Nicopolis in 1396, and on the German participants (the German-speaking crusaders from the Holy Roman Empire) in this pan-European anti-Ottoman military expedition. The subject of investigation and the research scope are judiciously selected, given the absence to date of a historical study that comprehensively addresses the topic of German sources and German participants in the Crusade of Nicopolis in 1396. Milen Petrov's research constitutes a serious and promising attempt to fill this lacuna in both Bulgarian and international historiography.

The introductory section of the dissertation, which begins with a broad historical excursus devoted to the climatic, political, economic, social, confessional, and ethnic transformations in European societies during the fourteenth century – thus outlining the epoch and context of the study – clarifies and precisely formulates the chronological and geographical scope, the state and relevance of the scholarly problem, as well as the aims, tasks, methodology, and terminology of the research. The first part of the dissertation is devoted to the narrative sources from the Holy Roman Empire concerning the Crusade of Nicopolis in 1396 (chronicles, dynastic histories, travel accounts, histories, poems, etc.), presenting and critically analysing a total of 43 sources (in Middle High German, Early New High German, and Latin). This extensive corpus is organised geographically, offering a detailed overview and in-depth textual analysis of individual sources originating from Bavaria, Franconia, Alsace, Switzerland, and the Austrian lands. The second part of the dissertation focuses on the study, identification, and

reconstruction of German participation in the crusade of 1396 and in the fateful battle of Nicopolis, which marked the end of the expedition. Three principal groups of German crusaders are critically examined: the military-monastic orders (primarily the Teutonic Order, but also partially the German Hospitallers led by Friedrich Hohenzollern), the major imperial princes, and the ordinary counts, knights, squires, and burghers of the Holy Roman Empire.

The dissertation constitutes a scholarly study of high value, distinguished by its ambitious scope, original character, modern and interdisciplinary methodology, professional academic style, and undeniable contribution to the study and interpretation of the Crusade of Nicopolis in 1396 in the light of new, lesser-known, and insufficiently researched sources. Owing to his philological training and his work with original manuscripts, incunabula, and early printed editions in the archives and libraries of Heidelberg, Munich, and Budapest, the doctoral candidate has succeeded in locating and incorporating into the study an extensive corpus of 43 narrative written sources, including several lesser-known and insufficiently examined texts. The dissertation also includes 19 of his own translations into Bulgarian language of sources that had not previously been translated. Among the indisputable contributions of the study, it should be noted that in the critical presentation and analytical examination of the narrative sources from the Holy Roman Empire, attention is paid not only to the content relating specifically to the Crusade of Nicopolis and the German participation in it – analysed in detail within the context of the individual works (depending on the presence or absence of interest on the part of their authors in the topics of the Ottoman Turks, the Balkans, crusading, and the Orient) – but also to the identification of specific influences, interconnections, and dependencies among individual authors and works. The study traces the migration of certain narrative motifs and topoi across different texts and authors, as well as the formation of enduring regional historiographical models and traditions associated with the memory of the dramatic events of 1396 and the German participants involved. The relationship of the Holy Roman Empire, the German lands, and German knighthood to the Crusade of Nicopolis is also examined in the context of the well-known French, Hungarian, South Slavic, Byzantine, and Ottoman narrative sources, while other types of sources – such as charters, financial documents, and iconographic material from illuminated manuscripts and early printed works – are incorporated in certain sections of the study, lending additional solidity and comprehensiveness to the research.

With regard to the investigation of German participation in the Crusade of Nicopolis, the dissertation critically and thoroughly analyses the role and influence of the Northern

Crusades on the organisation of the anti-Ottoman crusading expedition of 1396, proposing a conceptual model for explaining this interrelation based on the so-called Zipf's Law or "principle of least effort." The study highlights the observation that many of the German aristocratic families involved in the organisation and conduct of the Crusade of 1396 – or in the battle of Nicopolis – had prior military experience in the Northern Crusades in the Baltic region and, in numerous cases, maintained close ties with the Teutonic Order. At the same time, through critical analysis of the sources, the dissertation convincingly debunks the persistent historiographical myth regarding the participation of Teutonic Knights in the Crusade of Nicopolis, demonstrating that it was entirely impossible for the Prussian and Livonian branches of the Order to engage in the anti-Ottoman expedition in the Balkans at that moment. The question of possible participation by Teutonic Knights from the Holy Roman Empire (specifically from Franconia) in the Crusade of Nicopolis is left open. The study also partially examines the participation of German Hospitallers in the same crusading expedition.

Particular attention is devoted to the participation of the principal princes of the Holy Roman Empire in the Nicopolis Crusade: Sigismund of Luxembourg – Margrave of Brandenburg and perpetual imperial vicar of the Holy Roman Empire; Burgrave Johann III of Nuremberg of the Franconian Hohenzollern dynasty; and Count Palatine Ruprecht Pipan of the Rhenish Palatinate. Through in-depth critical analysis of the sources, the dissertation elucidates the role and significance of the Margrave of Brandenburg and King of Hungary in the organisation, course, and consequences of the crusading expedition within the dynamic political situation of the Holy Roman Empire at the time. It sheds detailed light on the otherwise neglected participation and role of Elector Ruprecht Pipan of the Rhenish Palatinate in the Crusade of Nicopolis and definitively debunks the historiographical myth concerning the participation of Burgrave Friedrich VI of Nuremberg in the expedition, while thoroughly examining the involvement of his brother, Johann III.

Special attention is also devoted to the identification, geographical and social systematisation, prosopographical analysis, and presentation of the third group of German crusaders in the Crusade of Nicopolis: the ordinary counts, knights, squires, and burghers of the Holy Roman Empire. The study identifies 46 such individuals originating from Bavaria, the Upper Rhine, Franconia, Hesse, Austria, and Swabia, with a more detailed prosopographical analysis conducted for the Bavarian knights in the form of a case study, including five comprehensive biographical profiles of Bavarian crusaders who participated in the expedition.

As a result of the thorough critical analysis of the sources, the total number of individually identified German participants in the Crusade of Nicopolis established in the study amounts to fifty-two.

A further contribution of the dissertation is the etymological study of the toponym “*Schiltau*”/“*Schiltarn*” (the German designation for the medieval Bulgarian town of Nicopolis) in late medieval German-language literature. Based on the linguistic analysis conducted, the study concludes that the toponym fits within a widely attested naming tradition in the German lands, whereby fortresses located in close proximity to rivers or lakes receive names formed according to a similar pattern. Another significant contribution is the resolution of the historiographical problem concerning the identification of the figure Hans Bodman, mentioned in several German sources on the Nicopolis Crusade. For a long time, historiography maintained the view that this name referred to Tsar Ivan Sratsimir (1356–1396), ruler of Vidin during the same period. Through critical analysis of the available sources and linguistic examination of the evidence, this identification is placed under serious doubt and categorically rejected as historically untenable, while the study proposes instead an identification with the German knight Hans Bodman, originating from a Swabian ministerial family.

Alongside the identification of the merits and contributions of the research, several minor shortcomings and imperfections in the dissertation may also be noted, although these could be easily corrected. It is noticeable that, in his pursuit of comprehensiveness, the doctoral candidate occasionally provides overly extensive and panoramic historical excursuses, which not only exceed the chronological and thematic framework of the dissertation but also move beyond the researched problem, and at times even beyond the medieval period itself. In certain sections, this shifts the thematic focus of the study and unnecessarily burdens the exposition. Some repetitive elements and duplication of information can also be observed, both in the main text and in the footnotes.

To these minor critical remarks, several brief recommendations may be added, relating primarily to the deepening of the research through tracing the crusading family traditions and connections of certain German noble families of the Holy Roman Empire (such as the Counts of Katzenelnbogen and Mömpelgard/Montbéliard) with earlier pilgrim expeditions to the East, including the Fourth Crusade, as well as with their significant role in the governance and politics of the Latin states in the Balkans (the Latin Empire of Constantinople and the Kingdom of Thessalonica) and in the Eastern Mediterranean (the Kingdom of Jerusalem and the Kingdom

of Cyprus) during the preceding 13th century. These aspects may be examined as factors contributing to the formation of a specific interest in the Orient, and to the motivation and participation of certain representatives of these families in the Crusade of Nicopolis in 1396. Such a perspective would introduce an additional Balkan-focused dimension to the study and would lend even greater depth to the prosopographical analysis and the reconstruction of the biographies of individual families and participants in the Nicopolis expedition.

In conclusion, I wish to emphasize my entirely positive impression of the dissertation and of the professional preparation of its author. With this opus, he presents himself worthily as a well-formed and promising young researcher in the field of medieval studies. I take the liberty of recommending to the esteemed members of the academic jury that they duly award Milen Krasimirov Petrov the educational and scientific degree *Doctor (PhD)*.

Sofia, 6 September 2026

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Kalin Yordanov Kirilov