

The Battle of Nicopolis

On 25 September 1396, on the plains south of the central Bulgarian city of Nicopolis a battle was fought. It was what military historians used to call a 'decisive battle', a battle which changed history.

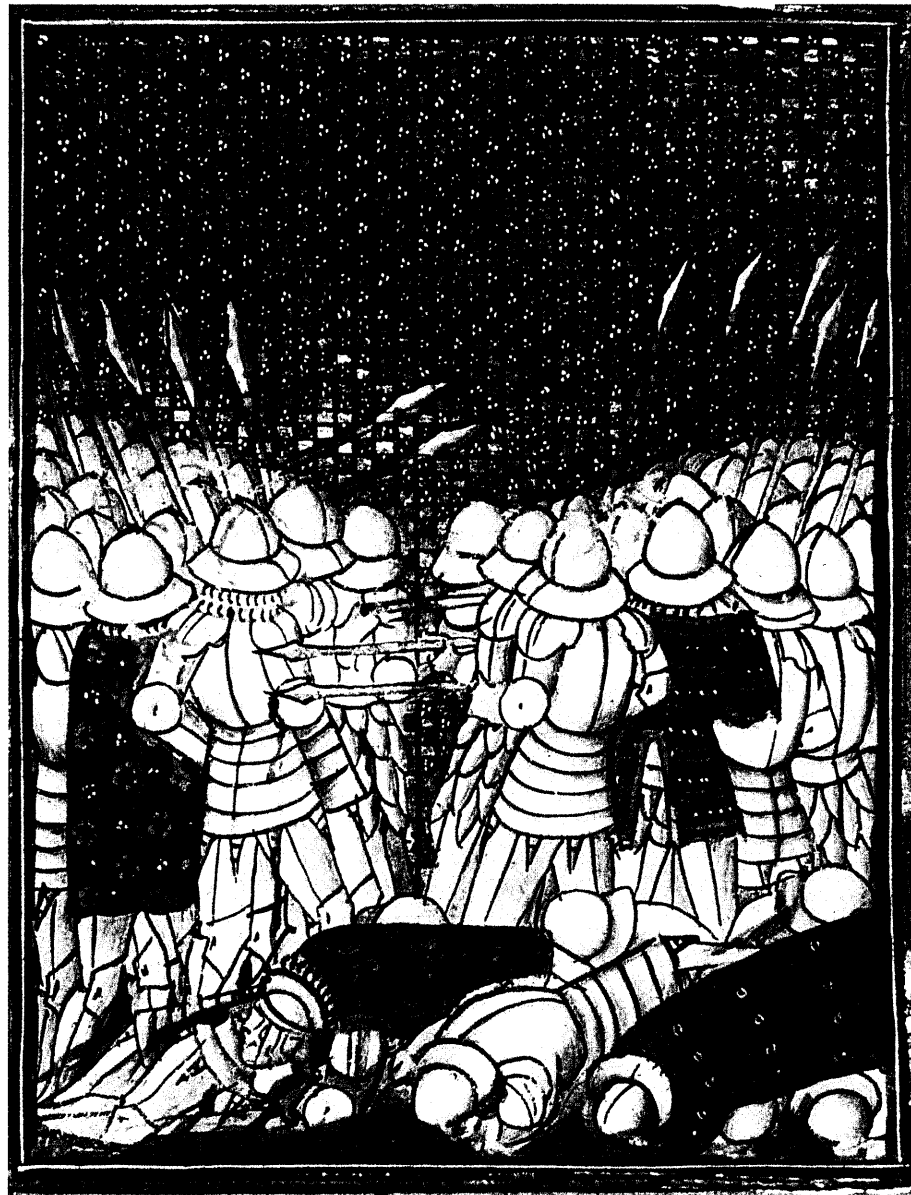
It was truly a diverse soldiery on the field that day. On the one side, Bayezid I, Sultan of the Ottoman Turks, led a force manned by troops from

his homeland, Asia Minor, and from his and his predecessors' conquered and vassal countries, namely Serbs, Bulgarians, Bosnians, and Albanians. Added to

these was the Turkish janissary corps, filled with young Christian tribute-children and prisoners of war, now converted to Islam and dedicated to the defeat of their old religious allies.

The total Turkish number, estimated by contemporary chroniclers, mostly western writers, at more than 100,000, was probably closer to 15,000.

Opposing Bayezid was a force composed of allied troops from throughout western and central Europe. Called a Crusade army by all contemporary western authors, it was composed of Hungarian, Wallachian, Transylvanian, Hospitaller, German, Burgundian, French, and English soldiers. Fewer in number than the Turks, although closer to a total of 12,000 than to the 100,000 found in contemporary sources, it



The Battle of Crecy (Froissard's *Chronicle*, Besançon, end of fourteenth century - Bibl. mun., no. 864 folio 138 - copyright BM Besançon)

Right: The Battle of Poitiers (Bernard Guy's *Fleurs des Chroniques*, Besançon, Bibl. mun., ms. 677 folio 96v - copyright BM Besançon)



was controlled by the Franco-Burgundian cavalry troops and their leaders. This control became a problem, for these soldiers were foreigners to the region, and they refused to listen to the advice

of those who lived closer to this enemy. In particular, the Franco-Burgundian generals — Philip of Artois, the Constable of France; Jean II le Meingre dit Boucicault, the Marshal of France; Jean de Vienne, the Admiral of France; Guillaume de la Trémoille, the Marshal of Burgundy; Sir Enguerrand de Coucy VII; and the twenty-three year old John the Fearless, whose succession to the throne of Burgundy gave him titular leadership over all of the Franco-Burgundian forces — were reluctant to listen to the recommendations of the Hungarian king, Sigismund I. Their collected experience in military conflict, extremely impressive as it was, seemed more important to them than Sigismund's knowledge of and experience in fighting the Turks.

Nicopolis was the first battle where the Ottomans encountered a western European army. To this point, rivals of the Ottoman Turks had been either Byzantine armies or local, southeastern European militias. Of course, the Ottoman Turks were not an old political entity. In fact, they had existed for only about a hundred years; mythical origins aside — and these are numerous in later centuries — the Ottomans seem to have originated as a small, familial clan

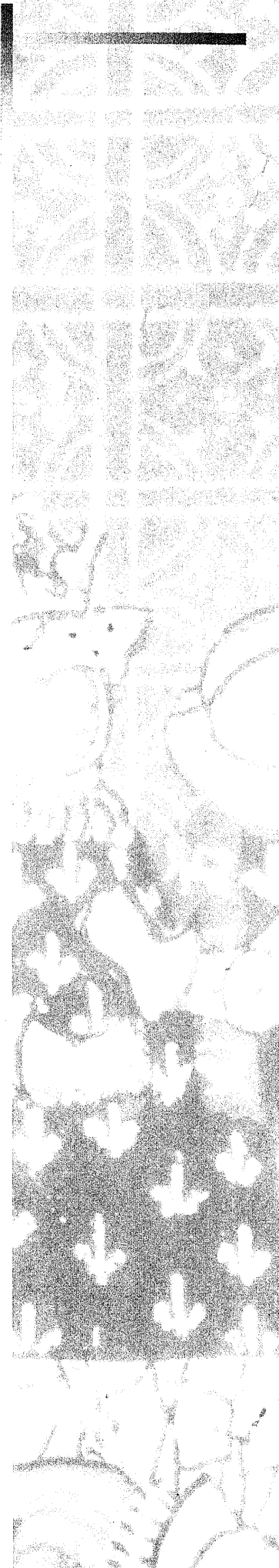
of Osman I (1280-1324) quickly grew from their local Asian Minor geography to conquer much of the eastern Mediterranean and southeastern European peoples. By 1396 they controlled most of Asia Minor and much of the Balkan peninsula. Among the casualties of these conquests was the once extensive Byzantine Empire which had shrunk to little more than Constantinople and its neighbourhoods, with other states disappearing altogether.

Western European powers began to worry about the Ottoman Turks from their earliest beginnings. The Ottoman speed of conquest and their European targets caused some, especially those of the papal court, to become frightened at the prospect of having to fight an Islamic enemy closer to their homelands than the Middle East or Spain. Already by 1345 Pope Clement VI wrote separate letters to both King Philip VI of France and King Edward III of England asking them to stop their conflict and to unite to go on Crusade. 'Oh, how much better a Crusade against the Turk enemies of our faith, than the present fratricidal strife', the pontiff wrote to the English king. And in 1370, a new pope, Urban V, repeated a call to Crusade to the kings of France and England. But the Hundred Years War was in full swing at

or English monarchs were willing to make peace and redirect their bellicose activities towards the Ottomans. Meanwhile, the various German and Italian political leaders had neither the strength nor the inclination to fight a Crusade against Islam. Only the Hungarians, primarily because of the proximity of the early Ottoman conflicts, began to prepare both an offensive and a defensive military response to these Turkish enemies.

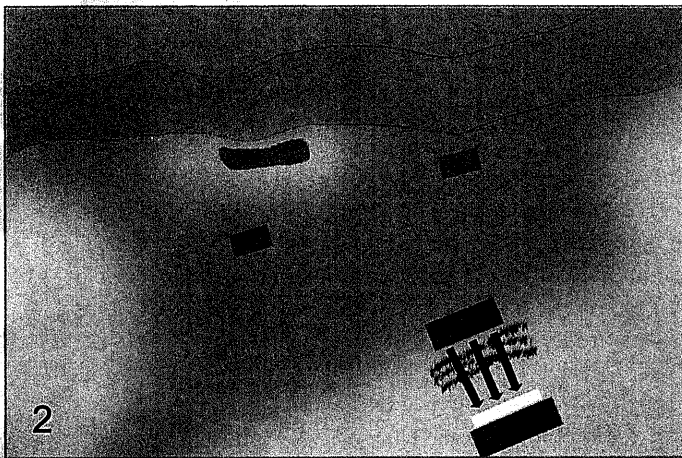
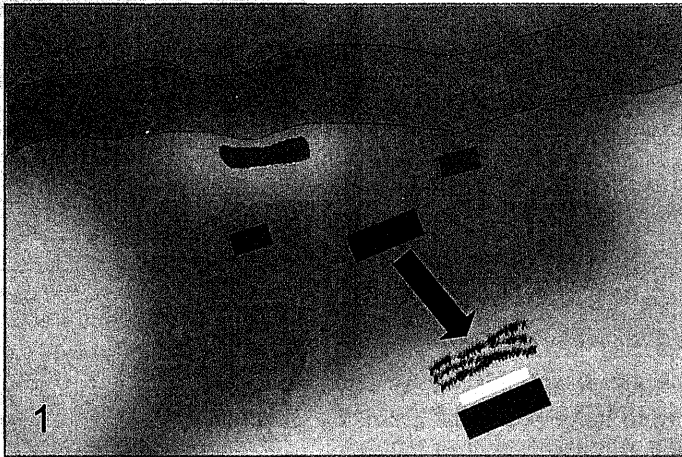
By the late 1370s, however, the intensive fighting of the early Hundred Years War was beginning to diminish, with the new kings of France and England, Charles V and Richard II respectively, desiring peace more than their predecessors. One of the motivations for this peace was a Crusade against the Ottoman Turks. A most influential voice in this call to Crusade was the French preacher and writer Philippe de Mézières. In almost all of his writings and sermons, he asks for peace between the warring western kingdoms. In his Letter to King Richard II, written in 1395, he is especially eloquent in his pleas for peace between England and France. Praising the English king,

Everyone, both French and English, knows that . . . since the consecration and rule of the young King Richard, the evil



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- 1) Crusader heavy cavalry (purple) charges the Ottoman lines
- 2) Crusader cavalry loses coherence as it passes through the field of sharpened stakes
- 3) Having pushed back the Ottoman irregular infantry (yellow), the Crusader cavalry regroups for a second charge



so often referred to, has spilled out less poison than at any time in the last sixty years, Mézières compares him to a lodestone who is not only loved by his own subjects, but, what is more, has attracted his enemies, accepted by long habit as natural enemies, namely, the good men of France, and indeed, our much loved King Charles himself.

This lodestone has odd powers, but one of the greatest is that it was able to stop the flow of blood, especially that which had been lost in the war between France and England. This would allow the two kings, now at peace, to take their subjects on a 'Holy Passage' to regain the Christian lands acquired by Mézières' so-called King Vigilant, the Sultan of Babylon.

Thus it happened that in 1396 a twenty-eight-year truce was arranged in Paris, dependent on the marriage of the still young English monarch, Richard II, to Isabella, one of the latest French king, Charles VI's, daughters, and a co-equal Anglo-French attendance on a Crusade to the east against the Ottoman Turks. Initially, it was expected that both kings of France and England would lead the Crusade, but before long they had passed this responsibility onto their relatives, Louis, duke of Orléans, Philip the Good, count of Burgundy, and John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster. Soon, however, they too had sidestepped this responsibility and leadership tasks fell to the young John the Fearless and his cadre of French military leaders.

The Crusaders gathered at Dijon on 20 April 1396, from where they marched quickly and without difficulty throughout central Europe to Buda, in Hungary,

There John the Fearless gathered his troops and those who had joined the Crusade along the way. He also listened to those who had witnessed Ottoman warfare first-hand, and he discussed strategy and tactics with his generals and with Sigismund I, the king of Hungary. All, except for Sigismund, decided to march directly against the nearest Ottoman holdings, fortifications and towns which lay south of the Danube River, the king of Hungary counseling for a defensive posture, one where the Crusaders helped him to defend his land against what he felt was an imminent Ottoman invasion. But he was overruled by the other leaders.

Initial attacks against these fortified locations were quite successful. Vidin and Rahova (today's Oryakhovitsa) surrendered after strong attacks from the Crusading soldiers. However, news of these victories soon reached Bayezid, then attacking the remnants of Byzantium, and he moved quickly to counter the western armies' advance. He did this seemingly without the Crusaders discovering his plans or knowing his progress. Indeed, it would not be until the day before the battle, and within only four miles of Nicopolis, that John the Fearless knew that the Ottomans were close-by and were willing to fight against him. The Crusaders, who had been besieging the town of Nicopolis before the arrival of Bayezid's army, broke off their siege and prepared for battle.

John the Fearless called a council of war. Sigismund recommended that his and the other central European troops, almost entirely infantry, should be in the vanguard, there to meet the irregular infantry of the Turks who stood in front of their own

- 4) The second Crusader charge is again disrupted by the field of stakes
 5) The Ottoman forces (cavalry in red) counter-attack
 6) Despite infantry reinforcements (brown), the Crusader forces are routed, and, hemmed in by the Danube and the city of Nicopolis (grey), many are killed. A few manage to escape across the Danube

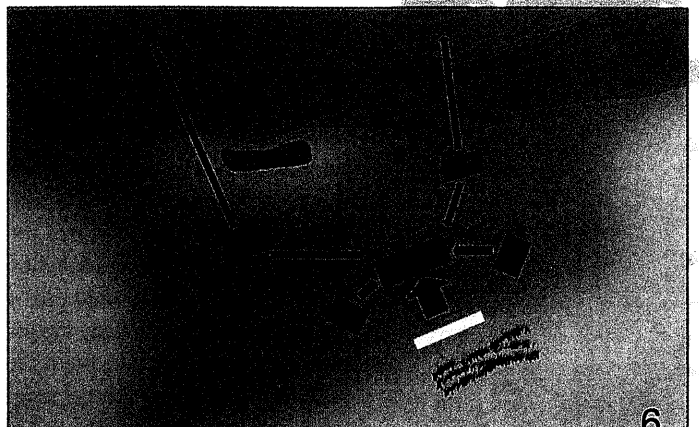
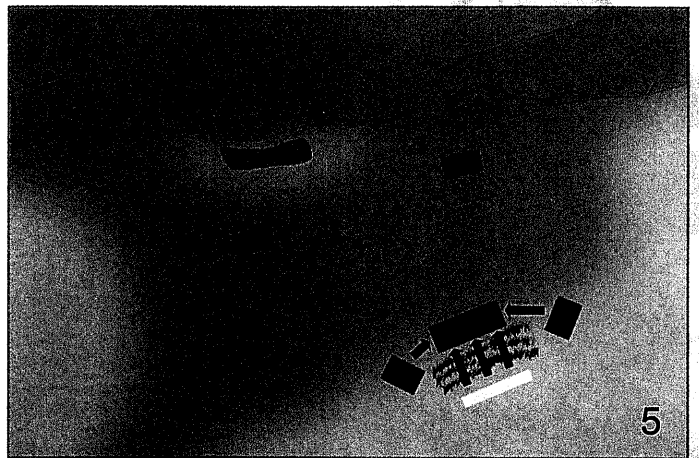
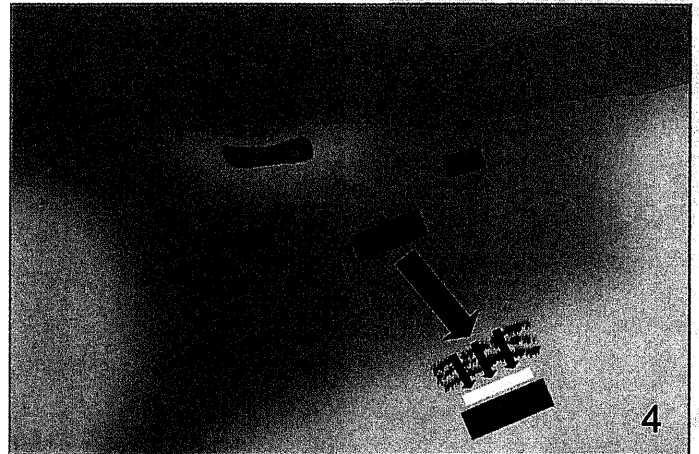
sive stance and try to provoke the Ottoman army into a charge which would either be defeated at the contact of the two infantry forces or could be reinforced by the strong Franco-Burgundian cavalry ordered in the rear. This, the Franco-Burgundians refused to do. Despite agreement with Sigismund by Enguerrand de Coucy, perhaps the most sage and experienced of the Franco-Burgundian leaders, Robert of Artois used his influence and constabulary office to counter the Hungarian king's proposal. According to Jean Froissart, he replied with these words:

Yes, yes, the king of Hungary wishes to gain all the honour of the day. He has given us the vanguard, and now he wishes to take it away, that he may have the first blow. Let those who will believe what he sends to us, but for my part I never will . . . In the name of God and Saint George, you shall see me this day prove myself a good knight.

These were not novel tactics that Robert of Artois proposed. Western European battles had for several centuries been dominated by heavy cavalry, and these cavalries' use of the shock charge had often brought them victory. On many occasions, infantry armies which tried to defend against these charges would evaporate at the very sight of the heavily armoured warriors mounted on expensive warhorses riding down upon them. At other times, such as at the famous battle of Hastings, numerous cavalry charges would eventually wear down those standing against them until the defensive lines became weakened and vulnerable.

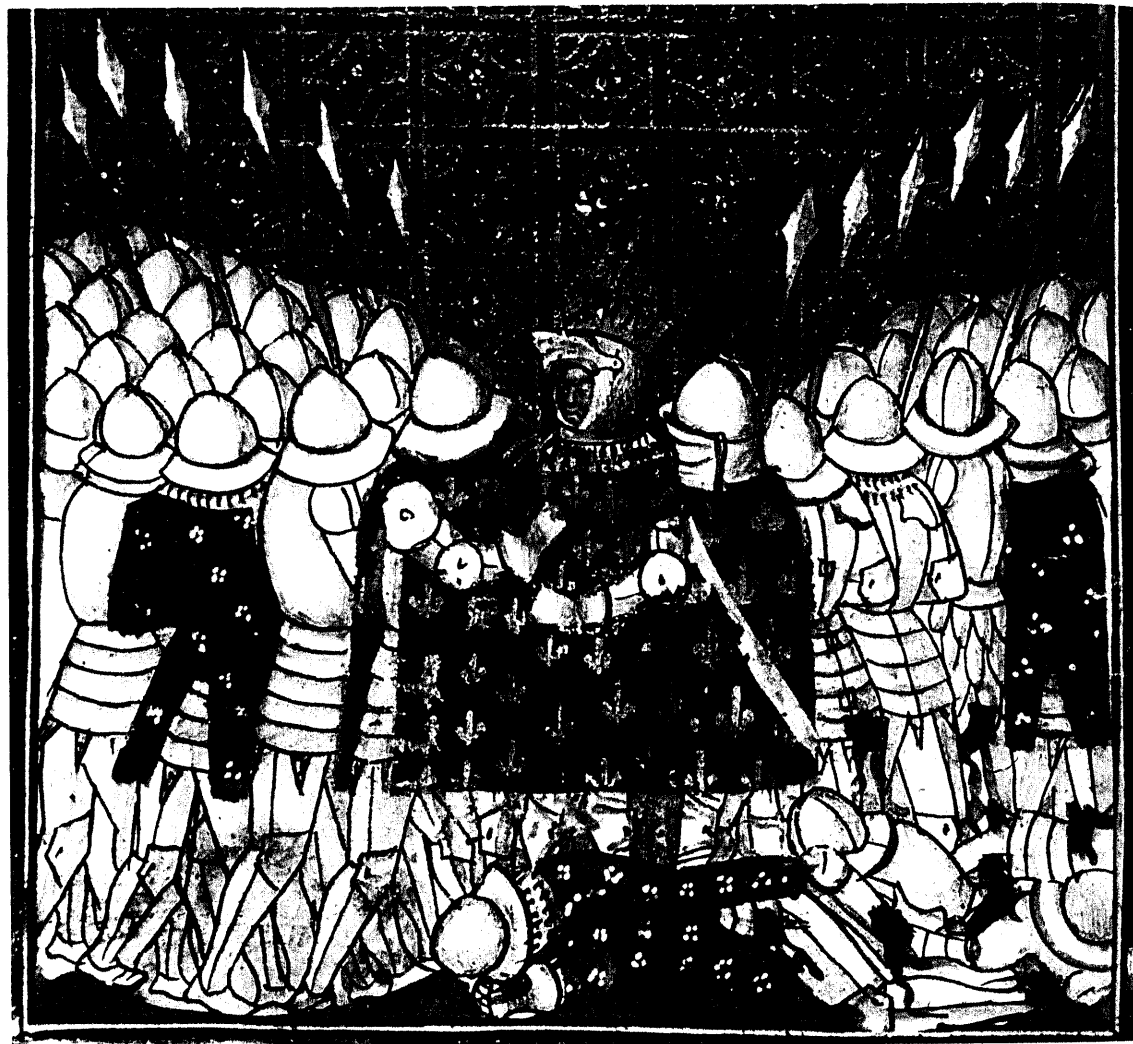
However, within the last

these mounted shock tactics had begun to be countered and defeated. Fourteenth-century generals found that if they could organize a strong and thick formation of infantry to withstand these types of cavalry charges, while at the same time keeping them both from fleeing that formation and from being attacked on the flanks and rear, they had a chance of victory. By the early fourteenth century Flemish, Scottish, Swiss, Frisian, and Liégeois infantry soldiers all had begun to gain victories over largely cavalry-based French, English, Austrian, and German armies. Soon specific tactics used by these armies for victory evolved: after choosing a suitable site for a battle and/or preparing the battlefield so that their opponents had only one course of attack, the frontal assault, the infantry were ordered in a defensive formation in one or more solid lines to await a charge. When the charge did come, it quickly became disordered and confused. The impetus was lost, and the cavalry hit their target with little force. Horses would not penetrate the infantry lines and cavalry soldiers were pulled from their horses. There they became vulnerable to attacks from their opponents' weapons; lances, spears, swords, axes, daggers, and other short-range weapons proved effective against all who faced them, no matter who they were or how well they were armoured. Future charges, if there were any, also failed. So effective were these tactics that by the 1330s English armies had begun to dismount their cavalry to serve on foot with their infantry, and this had been the source of their defeats of the Scots at Dupplin Moor, Halidon Hill, and Neville's Cross, and the



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Below: Jean II taken prisoner at Poitiers (Froissard's *Chronicle*, Besançon, - Bibl.mun., ms. 864 folio 172 - copyright BM Besançon)



Poitiers. But the French had not yet adopted the new infantry-based tactics. French leaders, like the 1396 Crusade generals, continued to believe that superiority on the battlefield lay in the heavy cavalry and the mounted shock charge. That was the tactic which the Franco-Burgundian leaders decided would be used at Nicopolis. And it was, with little doubt, the cause of their army's defeat that day.

So it happened: with a flurry of pride and enthusiasm the Franco-Burgundian cavalry charged headlong into their Turkish opponents, infantry safely guarded behind a line of stakes.

Initially, the force of this mounted shock charge brought success, breaking through the stakes and pushing the Turkish irregular infantry back. But the Ottoman Turkish lines did not break, instead quickly reforming their organization and order in the lull before a second charge could be mounted. That second Crusader attack achieved similar success. Yet, still the Turks did not flee, and when a counter-attack came from Bayezid's regular troops — cavalry, infantry, and archers — the impetus of the Crusader soldiers had been spent and, even though some German and Hungarian infantry troops rushed to

reinforce them, all were routed. Those who could, tried to retreat from the battlefield, but the Danube River blocked their path and few were actually able to leave the scene of what had become a slaughter-house. Among those who were able to flee were the Walachians and Transylvanians. They had not been involved in the fight on that day; instead, they had, when the tide of battle turned against their allies, refused to go to their fellow Crusaders' aid. King Sigismund himself retreated to the Danube, boarded a boat and sailed to safety. The battle had lasted probably no more than an hour.

The effects of the battle of Nicopolis were quickly felt. On the battlefield, Franco-Burgundian soldiers, used to the protection of ransom in western warfare, were instead hewed down without mercy. Only after the capture of John the Fearless were prisoners accepted, and even then several hundred more Christian troops were summarily executed at the Sultan's order. A mere three hundred, from a total of perhaps as many as six thousand who had been involved in the fighting, were eventually spared. Their ransom paid, an amount of more than 200,000 ducats, they returned home some nine months later. The Turks had also suffered huge losses, perhaps giving a reason for their blood-thirstiness, but they suffered far less than did the Crusaders. They had won the battle after all.

It took time for the news of this defeat to reach western Europe. To some, like the great Crusader propagandist, Philippe de Mézières, whose speeches and writings had done much to instigate the journey to Nicopolis, it was a time to criticise those who had been defeated. In his Letter of Lamentation and Conciliation he accuses the Crusaders of following the 'three daughters of Lucifer' — 'pride, cupidity, and luxury', instead of the four virtues of good governance — 'order, the discipline of chivalry, obedience, and justice'. To others, like French poet Eustace Deschamps, it was a time for honouring the dead. In a poem entitled 'Pour les Français morts à Nicopolis' ('For the French Dead at Nicopolis'), Deschamps praises the Crusaders for 'they carried the banner of Our Lady against the Turks; but these devoted men were slain by the lance. May God have mercy on each of their souls'. However,

most received the news only with sadness and mourning. Marshal Boucicault's biographer writes:

When the reports [of defeat] were made known and published, nobody could describe the great grief which they caused in France, both on the part of the duke of Burgundy, who doubted whether he would be able to get his son back for money, and [thought] that he would be put to death, and on that of the fathers, mothers, wives, and male and female relatives of the other lords, knights and squires who were dead. A great mourning began throughout the kingdom of France by those whom it concerned; and more generally, everybody lamented the noble knights who had fallen there, who represented the flowers of France ... All our lords had solemn masses for the dead sung in their chapels for the good lords, knights and squires, and all the Christians who had died ... But it may be well that we had more need of their prayers on our behalf, since they, God willing, are saints in Paradise.

Beyond the nature of the battle of Nicopolis itself, with the Ottomans winning and the Crusaders losing, perhaps the most interesting aspect is how long it would be before another western European army would contend against these Islamic warriors from the eastern Mediterranean. For a long time after this battle there were to be few more 'saints in Paradise', to use the phrase of Boucicault's biographer. The battle of Nicopolis was to be the last unified engagement of western troops fought against the Turks for more than 140 years. Not even did the fall of Constantinople in 1453 inspire a western military response. In fact, it was only after the battle of Mohács, fought in 1526, also a defeat for

Christian forces, causing the loss of Hungary, and the unsuccessful Turkish attack on Vienna in 1529, that there would be another large western army which would oppose Turkish invasions into southeastern and central Europe. Why this was the case might certainly be explained by the amount of international and civil warfare which tormented the western powers throughout the fifteenth century. With the French, English, and Burgundians all fighting in the Hundred Years War, little thought could be devoted to the idea of fighting another Crusade so far from home. But this may not have been the entire reason for western European reluctance to face the Ottomans again. With the Ottoman Turkish execution of so many prisoners at the end of the battle of Nicopolis, a different way of warfare was introduced. By the slaughter of these prisoners, the Ottomans had done what was strictly against the customary laws of war, customary even when fighting occurred between Christians and Muslims: no prisoner of war was ever to be executed, especially if he was a noble! It was this act more than any other which caused the mourning throughout Europe, and it was this act which stayed in the memory far longer than even the defeat in battle did. Invariably, it provoked an outpouring of Ottoman atrocity stories, stories which would grow and be embellished throughout the next century and longer. The Ottoman Turks, showing this first at the battle of Nicopolis on 25 September 1396, had proven themselves an enemy to be reckoned with for many centuries to come.

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Further reading

Aziz Suryal Atiya, *The Crusade of Nicopolis* (New York: AMS Press, 1978)

David Nicolle, *Nicopolis 1396: The Last Crusade*, illustrations by Christa Hook, Osprey Military Campaign Series, 64 (Oxford: Osprey, 1999)

