CHAPTER 14

Creation and Union through Death and Massacre: the Crusade of Nicopolis and Philippe de Mézières’ *Epistre lamentable et consolatoire*

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Ce grant meschief et dommaige recurrent devant Nicopoly en Turquie les Franschois et furent tous mort et tout pris.¹

This terrible and damaging accident happened at the gates of Nicopolis in Turkey, and the French all either died or were captured.

With these words, Jean Froissart, the famous French medieval chronicler, described the fate of the expedition of Nicopolis, during which the forces of Sultan Bayazid I crushed the crusading efforts of Western chivalry.² Many knights died or were imprisoned; most of them were never able to return to their homelands. Although the battle was an important victory for Bayazid, who with this victory was able to implant Turkish governance in Eastern

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² The disaster at Nicopolis was the final development of intricate political, religious, and intellectual events. Western kingdoms answered a call for help of King Sigismund of Hungary, who saw the Ottoman troops menace the borders of his kingdom. The crusaders (Christian central European kingdoms, French, German, and Burgundian, assisted by the Venetian navy), who saw the liberation of Hungary as the first stage on their journey to free Jerusalem, were obliterated by the Ottomans, in what is considered the last crusade of the Middle Ages with the Crusade of Varna (1443-44). The best account of the origins and consequences of the expedition can be found in Aziz Suryal Atiya, *The Crusade of Nicopolis* (London: Methuen & Co, 1934), in which the author examines both Eastern and Western sources on the crusade, and presents original documents helping to understand the crusade in the numerous appendixes to the volume. The bibliography proposed by Emmanuel Antoche in his ‘Les Expéditions de Nicopolis (1396) et de Varna (1444): une comparaison,’ *Mediaevalia Transilvanica IV* (2002), pp. 47-78, is also a great source of scholarship and crucial references on the battle. Finally, the strategic and military dimension of the battle, and especially the reason why it was such a massacre and a disaster for the knights is at the core of David Nicolle’s *Nicopolis 1396, The Last Crusade* (Westport: Praeger, 2005).
Europe for many centuries to come, Ottoman literature of the period did not overly emphasize the exploit. Elizabeth Gaucher comments, ‘Ottoman texts present that event [Nicopolis] as a minor accomplishment, compared to Tamerlane’s exploits in Anatolia’. However, she also underlines the huge impact that this defeat had on European monarchies: ‘There were many more Occidental sources retelling the massacre, and they stress how traumatic this defeat was for Christianity’. This essay will focus on the traumatic emotional reaction to the massacre in literature with particular emphasis on Philippe de Mézières’ *Epistre lamentable et consolatoire*. Philippe – an ardent defender of crusading and one of the original promoters of the expedition that tragically finished in Nicopolis – advocates for the creation of a new knighthood, one that would emulate the principles of St Augustine’s City of God, born on the ashes of this trauma. This new order is presented as a Christian community, posing as a potential model for the struggling French kingdom.

Defining trauma for a community is not an easy task, as there are many different theoretical approaches to the issue, which permit different definitions of the notion. However, it is commonly accepted that communal trauma in general is thought to involve force, violence, and events that are ‘imposed’ on a group, whether it is a community or an ensemble of individuals, who share the same norms of reaction. Jeffrey C. Alexander explains that cultural traumas occurs ‘when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon the group consciousness’. This helplessness severely damages the ‘fabric of community or a system of belief’. The defeat of Nicopolis is traumatic in that sense, because it was a wound in the fabric of the society, to use the original meaning of the word. What was


4 On the different branches and approaches of trauma theory and how they can be used in literary analysis, see Michelle Balaev, ‘Literary Trauma Theory Reconsidered’, in *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, ed. Michelle Balaev (New York: Palgrave-McMillan, 2014), 1-14.


8 τραύμα, ‘wound, damage’