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## The Road to Nicopolis, Part 1.

### The Route of the Crusade of 1396 through Hungary

#### Nikápolyhoz vezető út 1. rész

Az 1396. évi kereszties hadjárat magyarországi útvonala

#### Abstract

*In the past decades, or even during the last hundred years, many books and articles have been published on the Crusade in 1396 and on the Battle of Nicopolis. The interest is not surprising, because this was one of the iconic late medieval crusader events. Serious preparations were taken. This includes the parade as well. The theme is huge, so the study is going to deal only with Hungary and the western section of the route of the Hungarian troops.*

*The deployment route of the marching battalions/armies is far from being as clarified as one might think. My study attempts to answer the following questions: When did the Western crusaders reach Buda, and when and on what route did they proceed south? When did the Hungarian king and his barons – and with them the Hungarian troops – join the crusaders? How many columns were involved in the advancement? The study shows that Sigismund, after receiving in Buda the Western leaders, made an important diplomatic detour to the Hungarian-Polish border. The arrival of Western leaders to Buda should be placed on the first half of June. After that the study will take into account the possible routes of the Western and Hungarian Crusaders. Another part of the crusader army was the minor army columns which advanced through Transylvania to Wallachia and were led by the faithful baron of the Hungarian king, Voivode Stibor.*

**Keywords:** *crusade of 1396, King Sigismund of Luxembourg, Ottoman, Nicopolis, Battle of Nicopolis*

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## Absztrakt

*Az elmúlt évtizedekben, vagy akár az elmúlt száz év alatt sok könyv és cikk jelent meg az 1396-os kereszties hadjáratról és a nikápolyi csatáról. Az érdeklődésen nem csodálkozhatunk, hiszen a késő középkori kereszties vállalkozások egyik emblematikus eseménye volt. Komoly előkészületek előzték meg. Ehhez tartozik a felvonulás is. A téma nagy, ezért a tanulmány most csupán a magyar és a nyugati csapatok útvonalának magyarországi szakaszával kíván foglalkozni.*

*A vonuló csapatok/sereg útja korántsem tekinthető annyira megoldott problémának mint azt eddig hinni lehetett. Tanulmányomban az alábbi kérdések megválaszolására vállalkozom: mikor érhettek Budára a nyugati keresztiesek, illetve innen mikor és milyen útvonalon indulhattak délnek? A magyar király és bárói – velük a magyar hadak – mikor csatlakozhattak a keresztiesekhez? Hány hadoszlopban történhetett az előrenyomulás? A tanulmányból kiderül, hogy Zsigmond a nyugati vezérek budai fogadása után még fontos diplomáciai kitérőt tett a magyar–lengyel határszél felé. Ezzel együtt az is, hogy a nyugati vezérek Budára érkezését június első felére érdemes helyezni. Ezt követően a tanulmány sorba veszi a nyugati és a magyar keresztiesek lehetséges útvonalait. Továbbá kitér a kereszties fősereggel párhuzamosan tevékenykedő kisebb, Erdélyen keresztül Havasalföldre nyomuló hadoszloppal, amelyet a magyar király hűséges bárója Stibor erdélyi vajda vezetett.*

**Kulcsszavak:** 1396. évi kereszties hadjárat, Luxemburgi Zsigmond, oszmán, Nikápoly, nikápolyi csata

It is no wonder that the crusade of 1396 still intrigues many, being one of the emblematic Christian undertakings in the Middle Ages. By assuming the old spirit of the crusaders, Europe was, if only for a short time, coaxed into collaboration. Historical literature discusses mostly the participants, the financing and, first and foremost, the battle and its failure. Less attention is given to the crusade itself.

It is hardly surprising, then, that military operations are mainly identified with the Battle of Nicopolis, which is to some extent understandable as the outcome and aftermath of the battle that forced Christian Europe to come to serious conclusions concerning the Ottomans. Still, we should not observe this event from one point of view only, given that the military campaign and thereby the battle was preceded by considerable preparatory and organisational work. Deployment, among others, was one of these matters, and a relatively broad issue at that, therefore my investigations will only focus on a smaller segment of this field. In this context, I intend to deal with a smaller aspect of the deployment of the crusader armies, which is only partly known: the Hungarian section of the route of Hungarian and Western troops.

The deployment route of the marching battalions/armies is far from being as resolved as one might think. My thesis attempts to answer the following questions: When did the Western crusaders reach Buda, and when and on what route did they proceed south? When did the Hungarian king and his barons – and with them the Hungarian troops – join the crusaders? How many columns were involved in the advancement?

## 1. The route of the King of Hungary

The route of King Sigismund of Luxembourg (1387–1437) within the Kingdom of Hungary prior to the campaign may be of interest. In Hungarian literature, for a long time it was considered a fact that after the arrival of the Westerners in Buda, Sigismund stepped up as the leader of an already united crusade and started south along the Danube. This is a plausible idea, evidenced by the fact that several Hungarian researchers hoped to identify the crusaders' route in Hungary based on this assumption.<sup>2</sup> It would have been recommended that the Hungarian king and the Western troops move together – but that was not the case.

The new pieces of information available in Sigismund's itinerary<sup>3</sup> outline a different picture of the Hungarian phase of the crusade and make possible to refute in part the theory behind it.

Prior to the commencement of the military operations, the Hungarian king left Buda for the town of Lubló (Stará Ľubovňa) in Northern Hungary (today Slovakia), which often hosted Polish–Hungarian negotiations.<sup>4</sup> He left Buda shortly after 14 June and issued a diploma on the 24<sup>th</sup> in Lubló.<sup>5</sup> There is evidence that the Hungarian king spent five days in Lubló, between 24 and 28 June.<sup>6</sup> We have no information on the reasons for his trip, but the ruler's purposeful travel and the location indicate the importance of the matter. It is not too outlandish to assume that he may have attempted to temporarily settle the Polish–Hungarian relationship, which had been tense since his accession to the throne (1387).<sup>7</sup> In particular, the Polish attack against Hungary in 1395 may have prompted Sigismund to try to settle relations between the two countries, even if temporarily, before the campaign against the Ottomans was launched.<sup>8</sup>

Having concluded his task, Sigismund's escort headed south to Várad (Oradea) through Eperjes (Prešov) and Kassa (Košice). He sent a letter dated 8 July from Kassa, and on the 9<sup>th</sup> from Vizsoly.<sup>9</sup> It may have been in order to mitigate the costs of the impending crusade that the Hungarian king spent time in Eperjes and Kassa, two towns

<sup>2</sup> Relevant parts of the royal itinerary compiled by Mór Wertner: Buda, 4, 7 and 14 June; Várad (Oradea), 1 and 7 July; under the castle of Orsova (Orşova), 13 August; camp near Novigrad, August 18; Nicopolis, 15, 26, 27 and 28 September. Mór Wertner, 'A nikápolyi hadjárat 1396-ban,' *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 26 (1925), 224–225; Gyula Rácz, 'A Zsigmond-kori Magyarország és a török veszély (1393–1437),' *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 20 (1973), 416.

<sup>3</sup> Pál Engel and Norbert C. Tóth, *Itineraria regum et reginarum, 1382–1438* (Budapest, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> *Magyar békeszerződések 1000–1516*, ed. by József Köblös, Szilárd Süttő and Katalin Szende (Pápa: Jókai Mór Városi Könyvtár, 2000), 163–172.

<sup>5</sup> Engel and C. Tóth, *Itineraria*, 71. See more about the route in Károly Kranzieritz, 'A Nikápolyhoz vezető út: a kereszties hadak útvonalai a Magyar Királyság területén' [The Road to Nicopolis: The Crusaders' Routes in the Kingdom of Hungary], in *Micae Mediaevales IV. Fiatal történészek dolgozatai a középkori Magyarországról és Európáról*, ed. by Judit Gál, István Kádas, Márton Rózsa and Eszter Tarján (Budapest, 2015), 159–160.

<sup>6</sup> Engel and C. Tóth, *Itineraria*, 71.

<sup>7</sup> Pál Engel, 'A török–magyar háborúk első évei 1389–1392,' *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 111 (1998), 573–574.

<sup>8</sup> See more about the Polish–Hungarian relationship in Károly Kranzieritz, 'Havasalföld szerepe az 1396-os kereszties hadjárat előkészítésében és végrehajtásában [Wallachia's Role in the Preparation and Execution of the Crusade in 1396], *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 129 (2016), 3–20. See more about the Polish–Hungarian war of 1395 in Norbert C. Tóth, 'Az 1395. évi lengyel betörés. A lengyel–magyar kapcsolatok egy epizódja,' in *Honoris causa. Tanulmányok Engel Pál tiszteletére*, ed. by Tibor Neumann and György Rácz (Budapest–Piliscsaba: MTA TTI–PPKE BTK, 2009), 447–485.

<sup>9</sup> Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén Megyei Levéltár IV. 501/e. 1223/1837; Engel and C. Tóth, *Itineraria*, 71. See more about the route in Kranzieritz, 'A Nikápolyhoz vezető út,' 160–161.

known to be prosperous. It is well-known that on 12 June 1396, Sigismund levied taxes on several provost administrations for the campaign against the Ottomans and other enemies of the country.<sup>10</sup> Hence I believe that these two cities in Northern Hungary have not been exempt from the financial burdens of the undertaking.

The Hungarian king was in Várad between 14 and 17 July. According to Gyula Rázsó, Sigismund led the troops to Várad, as part of the first stages of the crusade.<sup>11</sup> Rázsó was unfamiliar with the king's detour in Lubló, which may be the reason why he came to a false conclusion. However, it is not inconceivable that there were indeed crusaders in Várad, as in other major Hungarian cities. We also cannot ignore the fact that the king could have gone straight from the Polish-Hungarian border to Temesvár (Timișoara), but instead he stopped in Várad and stayed there for a relatively long time.<sup>12</sup> I can give two possible explanations for this in the given situation. The primary reason for his visit could have been sacral, meaning none other than a visit to the grave of the Hungarian knight king, Saint Ladislas I (1077–1095) in Várad and praying to him for the success of the planned campaign. Secondly, it can be reasonably assumed that a war council was convened due to the impending campaign, more precisely to discuss its Wallachia section. The Hungarian military successes of the previous year, 1395, seemed to vanish in Vojvodina, which may have prompted Sigismund to intervene again in the events in Wallachia. His purpose may have been twofold: on the one hand, to assist his ally, Voivode Mircea (1386–1394/95, 1397–1418), who had to contend with the Ottoman supporter Voivode Vlad and his troops; on the other hand, to secure the northern deployment route of the crusader army along the Danube, which was the natural border line between Wallachia and the Bulgarian territories by then under Ottoman rule. He assigned one of his most loyal barons, Voivode Stibor of Stiboricz in Transylvania (1395–1401)<sup>13</sup> to lead this campaign.<sup>14</sup>

On 17<sup>th</sup> July, the Hungarian king was still in Várad, while three days later, on 20 July, we find him in Temesvár.<sup>15</sup> The reason for his stay in Temesvár, in my opinion, was the gathering of his army.<sup>16</sup> The latter is merely an assumption, based primarily on the role of the municipality in other operations in Vojvodina. Due to the geographic location of the city, the troops gathered here had an easy and quick march to Serbia and Wallachia.

<sup>10</sup> *Zsigmondkori oklevéltár I.*, ed. by Elemér Mályusz (Budapest, 1956) (Magyar Országos Levéltár Kiadványai II. Forráskiadványok 1.), Nr. 4438., quoted by József Deér, 'Zsigmond király honvédelmi politikája,' *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 37 (1936), 189 note 84.

<sup>11</sup> Rázsó, 'A Zsigmond-kori,' 416.

<sup>12</sup> Even before the 1392 Ottoman campaign, the king stayed near the Polish–Hungarian border in Lőcse (Levoča) on April 24, then on March 27, in Kassa (Košice), he rushed to Temesvár (Timișoara), the starting point for the operations, where he could arrive around May 3. (Engel, 'A török-magyar' 574–575; Engel and C. Tóth, *Itineraria*, 65.)

<sup>13</sup> Engel, Pál: *Magyarország világi archontológiája 1301–1457.* I–II. (Budapest: História Könyvtár, 1996), II. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Gusztáv Wenzel, 'Stibor vajda.' *Életrajzi Tanulmány. Értekezések a történettudomány köréből.* IV/2 (Budapest: História Antik Könyvesház, 1874), 96–103. Nr. 65. Cf. Zsigmondkori oklevéltár I., Nr. 5102. The action of Voivode Stibor received scholarly attention only in the late twentieth century: László Veszprémy, 'A nikápolyi hadjárat értékelése az újabb hadtörténetírásban,' *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 111 (1998), 605. Károly Kranzieritz, 'A nikápolyi csata magyar résztvevői' [Hungarian participants of the Battle of Nicopolis], *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 128 (2015), 171–172; Kranzieritz, 'A Nikápolyhoz vezető út,' 161–162; Tamás Pálosfalvi, *From Nicopolis to Mohács. A History of Ottoman-Hungarian Warfare, 1389–1526* (Boston: Brill, 2018), 58–59.

<sup>15</sup> Engel and C. Tóth, *Itineraria*, 71. See you more about the route in Kranzieritz, 'A Nikápolyhoz vezető út,' 162.

<sup>16</sup> Wenzel, 'Stibor vajda,' 96–103. Nr. 65.

The scene in Temesvár is confirmed by a deed of gift issued by Sigismund to Stibor of Stiboricz on 8 December 1397, which states that the crusader armies in the 1396 campaign had their campgrounds designated on the route from Temesvár towards Bulgaria (*'nosque per Themeswar versus Bulgariam castra metati fuimus'*).<sup>17</sup> Based on this, we can reasonably assume that the last gathering place of the crusader army before crossing the Danube at Orsova (Orşova) and treading on enemy territories was in Temesvár. This assumption is further supported by a document dated 13 November 1397 by Palatine Detre Bebek, which states that the sons of Miklós Kalanai went to Temesvár with János Szepesi, the former bishop of Zágráb (Zagreb) (1395–1397) to join the royal war against the Ottomans, but the king dismissed the bishop from service. It is known that Sigismund attempted to organise another crusade in 1397, which failed due to lack of support.<sup>18</sup>



Figure 1. *The route of the King of Hungary before the crusade*

Source: compiled by the author

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Károly Kranzieritz, 'Változások a Délvidéken Nikápoly után. Az 1397. és 1398. év katonai eseményei' [Changes in the Southern Borderline after Nicopolis: the Hungarian Military Campaigns of 1397 and 1398], in *Micae Mediaevales II. Fiatal történészek dolgozatai a középkori Magyarországról és Európáról*. Ed. by Péter Jakab, Gábor Mikó, Bence Péterfi and András Vadas (Budapest, 2012).



Leaving Temesvár, Sigismund marched south, joining an already united crusader army, along the river valleys of the Temes (Timiș) and then the Cserna (Cerna).<sup>19</sup> He stayed on 29 July at the camp near Cseri, then on the 30<sup>th</sup> near Hódos (Hodoș), and on 1 August near the river (Karán)Sebes (Caransebeș), and then on 13 August at Orsova (Orșova), where the army successfully crossed the Danube.<sup>20</sup> Given that they were not yet moving in hostile territory, they may have reached Orsova in several stages from Temesvár in order to move faster and more efficiently. Sigismund spent 23 days in the area, which can hardly be explained by anything other than the gathering of the crusaders.

To the question raised earlier as to when and where Sigismund managed to join the gathering crusader army, the answer is that no later than 20 July 1396, in Temesvár. But we must not forget that he previously launched a small column from Várad under the leadership of the Transylvanian voivode in the direction of Wallachia.

## 2. Western Crusaders in the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary

The first question is, when the Western crusaders arrived from Vienna<sup>21</sup> to Buda.<sup>22</sup> The dates given in the literature vary widely. These include seasonal dates such as mid-summer,<sup>23</sup> and answers by month, such as May,<sup>24</sup> mid-June<sup>25</sup> and end of July.<sup>26</sup>

The chronicle of János Thuróczy also commemorates the stay of the Westerners in Buda. In this connection, he writes that the newly arrived Western militants hung painted panels displaying their coats of arms on the walls of the Dominican monastery of St. Nicholas of Buda, but does not mention the time of their arrival.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>19</sup> The route from Temesvár to Orsova was used by Sigismund and his army for several military actions. Beyond the 1396 Crusade, it has been proven that he led his armies four times: in 1392, 1395, 1419 and 1428. Engel and C. Tóth, *Itineraria*, 65–66, 70, 104–105, 123.

<sup>20</sup> The Hungarian king was in Orsova between 13 and 15 August. Engel and C. Tóth, *Itineraria*, 71–72. See more about the route in Kranzieritz, 'A Nikápolyhoz vezető út,' 163.

<sup>21</sup> L. Kupelwieser, *Die Kämpfe Ungarns mit den Osmanen bis Schlacht bei Mohács, 1526* (Vienna–Leipzig: Forgotten Books, 1895), 15; Wertner, 'A nikápolyi,' 226; Rázsó, 'A Zsigmond-kori,' 416.

<sup>22</sup> It could take several days for each army to arrive, as the train lines could stretch for tens and hundreds of kilometers. Not to mention the non-military people who accompanied the army, who meant a significant mass of people and slowed down the march. It was a hindrance if live animals were driven with the army for food.

<sup>23</sup> Pálosfalvi, *From Nicopolis to Mohács*, 58.

<sup>24</sup> Milleker Bódog, 'A törököknek első betörései Dél-Magyarországba Zsigmond és Albert királyok idejében és Keve és Krassó vármegyék megszűnése' (Temesvár: Csanád-egyházmegyei Sajtó, 1914), 12.

<sup>25</sup> Gustav Kling, *Die Schlacht bei Nikopolis im Jahre 1396* (Berlin: G. Nauck, 1906), 18; Wertner, 'A nikápolyi,' 226–227; Rázsó, 'A Zsigmond-kori,' 416; Pál Fodor, Klára Hegyi and Mária Ivanics, *Török és tatár hódítók* (Budapest: Kossuth, 1993), 16. According to Kelly Devries, too, it is June, but the western crusaders arrived at the end of that month. *A középkor nagy csatái, 1000-1500: Hastings-től Konstantinápolyig* (transl. Csaba Antóni) (Budapest: Kossuth, 2007), 161.

<sup>26</sup> Aziz Suryal Atiya, *The Crusade of Nicopolis* (London: Methuen, 1934), 54; Kenneth Meyer Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant 1204–1571*. I. (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1976), 348; Steven Runciman, *A history of the Crusades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955) 457; David Nicolle, *Nicopolis 1396: The Last Crusade* (Oxford: Osprey, 1999), 37, 87.

<sup>27</sup> 'Quorum nobilitatis armorum insignia Bude in clastro sancti Nicolai confessoris erga fratres predicatorum tabulis arte pictoria inscripta ac parietibus affixa meos usque ad annos pro memoria steterere.' Johannes de Thurocz, *Chronica Hungarorum 1. Textus*. Ediderunt: Elisabeth Galántai et Julius Kristó (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1985), 214.

Froissart's account suggests that the crusaders arrived in Buda in May.<sup>28</sup> Considering that John the Fearless, Count of Nevers arrived in Vienna on 24 May and had a lengthy stay due to the supply of food to his contingent, launched in 70 ships on the Danube towards the Kingdom of Hungary,<sup>29</sup> and also considering that the distance between Vienna and Buda takes at least a day and a half, it turns out that John the Fearless, Count of Nevers could have hardly reached Buda before the end of May.

It is also not clear from Sébastien Mamerot's 15<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript discussing the history of the crusades whether Sigismund received the Western crusaders in Buda. In addition, there are three miniatures in Mamerot's work concerning the crusade of 1396. The first picture shows the Hungarian king receiving crusaders, presumably in Buda, led by John the Fearless, Count of Nevers, heir to the throne in Burgundy.<sup>30</sup>

Contemporary narratives only relate that the Hungarian king held a reception in person for the leaders of the Western crusaders, which is not surprising in view of the enterprise and its size. It would be much more important to determine the date. The answer is provided in the itinerary of the Hungarian king, which states that Sigismund stayed in Buda for the last time before the campaign began between 4<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> June.<sup>31</sup> For this reason I believe that the arrival of the Western contingent in Buda should be put in the first half of June, when the Hungarian monarch was still there, as opposed to dates considered so far.

Sigismund crossed the border of the Hungarian Kingdom at Orsova following 15 August.<sup>32</sup> What were Western troops doing in the meantime? Following the arrival of the Western contingent in Buda, they waited for Sultan Bayezid to fulfil his promise from previous years, that is, to attack the Kingdom of Hungary.<sup>33</sup> There was no shortage of threats from the sultan, more so of any steps taken to follow through. At least we do not know of any armed intent of Sultan Bayezid that targeted the Kingdom of Hungary. It is justified to probe what chances there could have been at the end of the spring of 1396, or at the beginning of the summer, for Bayezid to march against Sigismund? The answer is simple: almost none! Most of the sultan's forces have been occupied with the siege of Constantinople since 1394.<sup>34</sup> Neither the actions of the Hungarian king, nor his whereabouts, indicate that he was expecting a direct attack. We hardly know anything about the Western crusaders' route from Buda to Orsova in Hungary. Still, inquiries must be made of what we do know about the movement of Western troops within the Hungarian kingdom.

<sup>28</sup> *Les Chroniques de Sire Jean Froissart. Tome III*, ed. by J. A. C. Bouchon (Paris: A. Desrez, 1835), 236.

<sup>29</sup> Wertner, 'A nikápolyi,' 226; Setton, *The Papacy*, 348.

<sup>30</sup> Sébastien Mamerot, *Une chronique des croisades. Les passages d'outremer. Édition complète, adaptée et commentée* (Hong Kong–Köln–London: Taschen, 2009). Review by László Veszprémy, *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 123 (2010), 355–356.

<sup>31</sup> Engel and C. Tóth, *Itineraria*, 71.

<sup>32</sup> Engel and C. Tóth, *Itineraria*, 71.

<sup>33</sup> Lajos Thallóczy, *Mantovai követjárás Budán 1395* (Budapest: MTA, 1905), 107–108. Nr. VII.; *Les Chroniques de Sire Jean Froissart*, 236–237: 'car le dit Amorath lui avoit mandé, dès le février, qu'il fût tout conforté et qu'il seroit à puissance en Honguerie avant l'issue du mois de mai et le viendroit corabatre, et passeroit la Dunoe dont on avoit grand'merveille comment ce se pourroit faire.'

<sup>34</sup> Gábor Ágoston, Bayezid I. (Yıldırım, or Thunderbolt), in *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. by Gábor Ágoston and Bruce Masters (New York, 2009), 81.

Source/Literature	Route
Froissart	Froissart stipulates the line of the Danube river. <sup>35</sup>
Bódog Milleker	The crusaders reached Orsova (Orșova) along the Danube. <sup>36</sup>
Mór Wertner	Sigismund left from Buda and crossed the Danube eight days later. <sup>37</sup>
Kenneth M. Setton	They took a route along the Danube. The point of crossing is not given specifically, only that it was near the Iron Gates. <sup>38</sup>
Nicolae Constantinescu	Constantinescu specifies the line of the Danube river with Temesvár (Timișoara) as the destination. <sup>39</sup>
Steven Runciman	The crusaders reached Orsova (Orșova) along the left bank of the Danube. <sup>40</sup>
Gyula Rázsó	Led by Sigismund, they left from Buda and followed the Danube south. <sup>41</sup>
Tamás Pálosfalvi	They left Buda along the left bank of the Danube. <sup>42</sup>

Any of the options listed are acceptable, except the one that places Sigismund's departure in Buda.<sup>43</sup> The possible routes, however, are worth considering from the army's point of view as well. One possibility is following the Danube line along the Buda – Kalocsa – Újlak (Ilok) – Nándorfehérvár (Belgrade) – Keve (Kovin) route all the way to Orsova. The left bank of the river was surrounded by extensive swamps throughout the year, so it was advisable to choose the right bank. It was advantageous to stay close to the river from the point of view of supply, since food supplies and other logistical facilities were transported by water on the Danube.<sup>44</sup> One consideration against this route is the Iron Gate strait, which renders the terrain between Keve and Orsova difficult. Its passing had posed a challenge for many armies before, but it is not impossible to overcome.<sup>45</sup> For this reason precisely, it is questionable whether crusader armies would choose this challenge without compelling and urgent circumstances.

The answer, in my opinion, is no, since Westerners, lacking local knowledge, probably got their information and guides, and possibly supporting troops, from the Hungarians, in which case the direction chosen could hardly have been the Iron Gates strait. Instead, there are two available routes on which Western crusaders could march: the one is Buda–Szeged–Temesvár and the other is Buda–Kalocsa–Szeged–Temesvár. In terms of terrain, this is a flat terrain with occasional smaller hills, suitable for a military march, as opposed to the Iron Gates strait, which could only result in a waste of time and considerable effort.

However, the Iron Gates strait does not end at Orsova, it merely widens to a valley, thus providing a more suitable terrain for crossing the river.<sup>46</sup> To the south-east, the

<sup>35</sup> *Les Chroniques de Sire Jean Froissart*, 238.

<sup>36</sup> Milleker, *A törököknek*, 12.

<sup>37</sup> Wertner, 'A nikápolyi,' 228.

<sup>38</sup> Setton, *The Papacy*, 348.

<sup>39</sup> Nicolae Constantinescu, *Mircea cel Bătrîn* (București, 1981), 119.

<sup>40</sup> Runciman, *A history*, 458.

<sup>41</sup> Rázsó, 'A Zsigmond-kori,' 416.

<sup>42</sup> Pálosfalvi, *From Nicopolis*, 58.

<sup>43</sup> See the reasons above.

<sup>44</sup> Géza Perjés, 'Az oszmán birodalom európai háborúinak katonai kérdései (1356–1699),' *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 13, no 4 (1966), 355.

<sup>45</sup> The 134 km long Iron Gate system consists of several sections rather than a single strait. András Mócsy, 'Az Al-Duna első szabályozása,' *História* 4 (2000), 3–4.

<sup>46</sup> The former settlement was moved off due to the damming of the Danube. The historic Orsova is under water today. László Pásztai, 'Újorsova erődje,' *Várak, kastélyok, templomok* 1, no 3 (2005), 32–34.



strait narrows again between Orsova and Szörényvár (Drobeta-Turnu Severin),<sup>47</sup> but the right bank of the Danube provides a more negotiable route for soldiers. If the account is to be believed, the crusaders made the crossing in more than eight days and then continued to advance in hostile territory along the Danube.<sup>48</sup>

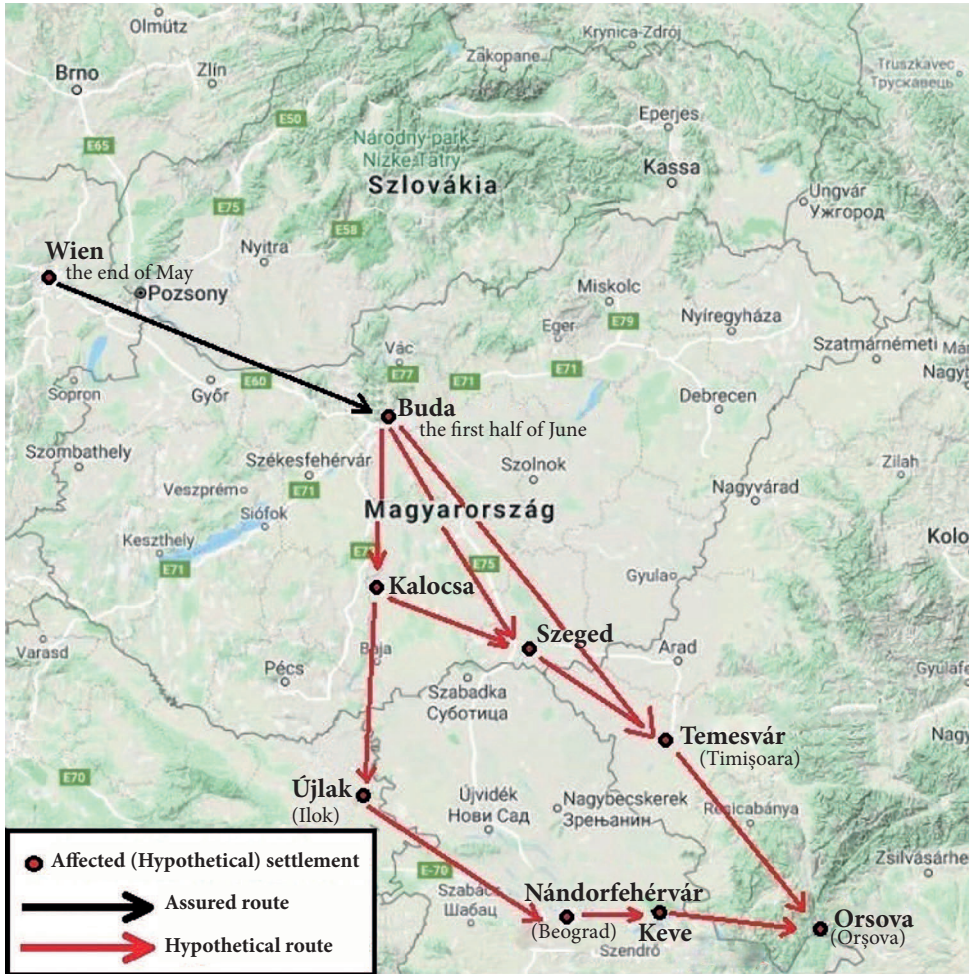


Figure 2. The probable route of Western Crusaders in the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary  
Source: compiled by the author.

<sup>47</sup> Setton, *The Papacy*, 348.

<sup>48</sup> 'mirent plus de huit jours avant qu'ils fussent tous outre...' *Les Chroniques de Sire Jean Froissart*, 238.

### 3. Crusader deployment through Transylvania

While discussing the marching routes of the main forces, it should be noted that the crusader army had another column passing through Wallachia. Its task was to settle the insecure domestic political situation in Wallachia as soon as possible, and to secure the northern, Wallachian section for deployment.

During his stay in Várad, Sigismund also made arrangements for his faithful voivode, Baron Stibor of Stiboricz, to leave for Wallachia with his army, a second, smaller column of the crusade.<sup>49</sup> His mission was to assist the Hungarian-allied Voivode Mircea against Ottoman-allied Voivode Vlad; then, in all likelihood, to join the main forces of the crusaders.

Transylvanian troops could gather somewhere inside Transylvania, or even near one of the major cities close to the operational areas, Nagyszeben (Sibiu) or Brassó (Braşov). From Várad, where troops may have been gathering for the main army, only a smaller team led by Stibor may have left.

The voivode of Transylvania had two options to march to the Hungarian–Wallachian border from Várad. One of these, and the most probable, is the Várad – Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca) – Torda (Turda) – Medgyes (Mediaş) – Nagyszeben (Sibiu) route, where the army could invade Wallachia along the valley of the Olt River, through the Vöröstoronyi-szoros (Turnu Roşu Pass) and the Southern Carpathians. This direction is reinforced by the fact that the Olt River flows into the Danube at the castle of Little Nicopolis. So Stibor, following the river, could arrive under the castle of Greater Nicopolis, where he could unite with the main crusader army.

Undoubtedly, in the absence of data I have no proof of these routes, so I must outline another army-friendly alternative. The other route goes through Várad – Kolozsvár – Torda – Medgyes – Segesvár (Sighisoara) – Brassó. In this case, the Törösvári-szoros (Bran Pass) offered the most suitable terrain for accessing the territories in Wallachia.<sup>50</sup> As to which direction Stibor chose, it cannot be determined with absolute accuracy, only assumed; it may have been influenced by many factors, both natural and military.

Considering the length of the routes and the terrain, the road to Nagyszeben was favourable, as the army had to overcome about 330 km here, while the direction to Brassó was 430 km long. Thus, the Várad–Nagyszeben distance at a constant horse-riding speed would take six to seven days, while the Várad–Nagyszeben route eight to nine days. Even so, there was a significant increase in travel time. But other factors may have deterred deployment, such as the terrain, the weather, or the logistical staff riding along with the army.<sup>51</sup> At present, there can only be assumptions as to where the army of the Transylvanian voivode crossed the Hungarian–Wallachian border. The aforementioned Olt valley and the Bran Pass provided a suitable passage

<sup>49</sup> Transylvanian Voivode Stiborici Stibor, 9 October 1395 – 27 April 1401. Engel, *Magyarország*, I. 13; 8<sup>th</sup> December 1397. Wenzel, 'Stibor vajda,' 96–103, Nr. 65.

<sup>50</sup> The Hungarian king launched the 1395 Wallachian campaign from Brassó. Zsigmond Jakó, 'Három erdélyi vajda Zsigmond király korában,' in *Mályusz Elemér Emlékkönyv*, ed. by Éva H. Balázs, Erik Fügedi, Ferenc Maksay (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1984), 204.

<sup>51</sup> Those who carry out the logistical support of the army include, but are not limited to, non-weapons personnel who were responsible for repairing or supplying armaments. They could also significantly increase the number of troops.

through the Southern Carpathians to inner Wallachia. It is not known for sure, but an option is that Stibor may have fought with Vlad's army somewhere near Argeş. This does not narrow the circle either, as it was possible to approach Argeş from the Bran Pass – as is known to have happened in a similar campaign of Sigismund in 1395 –, as well as from the valley of the Olt River.<sup>52</sup>



Figure 3. Probable routes of the Hungarian army through Transylvania to Wallachia, led by Stibor  
Source: compiled by the author.

## 4. Summary

In response to the questions raised in the introduction, my study presents the following findings regarding the deployment of the crusade of 1396 within the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary.

The arrival date of the Western crusaders in Buda should be considered to have taken place while the Hungarian King was staying there, that is, in the first half of June. From here, they could have left between the end of July and the beginning of August towards the last pre-campaign assembly point, Temesvár. Only a part of the Western crusaders' deployment route could have run along the Danube line, if at all. In my

<sup>52</sup> Kranzieritz, 'Havasalföld szerepe,' 10–11.



opinion, Western crusaders could have travelled along the Buda–Szeged–Temesvár or Buda–Kalocsa–Szeged–Temesvár routes.

Based on the available data, we can conclude that the Hungarian king did not leave Buda with the crusaders, and only joined a united crusader army in Temesvár after a detour of Hungarian–Polish diplomacy. It is also important to note here that Hungarian crusaders may have gathered at several locations within the kingdom, and then they, too, had to arrive in Temesvár.

The crusade had two distinct columns, subsequently merging under the castle of Nicopolis. One was a relatively smaller column led by Transylvanian Voivode Stibor and Voivode Mircea, heading north to south, presumably along the Olt River Valley. The second, more substantial main force, led by King Sigismund and John the Fearless, count of Nevers, headed from west to east along the Danube.

There are many more questions to be investigated in connection with the crusade of 1396. This is also true for the present study, as it may be of interest to investigate the route of the crusaders between the Orsova and the castle of Nicopolis.

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