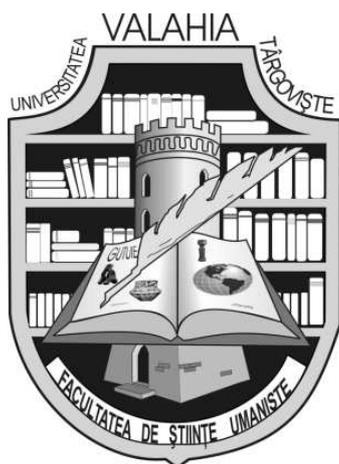


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# ANNALES



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## Of Mircea the Elder's Rule. Historiographic Views on the so-called Battle of "Rovine" and its Consequences

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**Abstract: Historiographic Views on the so-called Battle of "Rovine" and its Consequences of Mircea the Elder's Rule.** Mircea the Elder remains one of the outstanding figures of the Romanian Middle Ages in a stage in which southeastern Europe was deeply marked by the Ottomans' ascension in Asia Minor. The policy of territorial reunification pursued in the prejudice of the Kingdom of Hungary, which was undergoing the change of the powerful Angevine dynasty, and of the Ottoman Empire, which had reached as far as the mouths of the Danube, prefigured an important reign. In terms of an ample historical analysis, the evolution of Wallachia, in late 14<sup>th</sup> century, still clusters several conflicting aspects. The battle called by the Serbian chronicles that of "Rovine" marks such a moment. Whether we talk about the chronology of the event or the place where this formidable confrontation occurred, historiography was unable to reach common ground. It is thus necessary to once again lay stress on the important historiographic contributions and establish the consequences of the Romanian victory.

**Key words:** alliance, chronicle, military campaign, pretender, prince.

Mircea I's rule is of exceptional importance in the medieval history of the Romanian space, as it brought the first major political-military confrontation between a Romanian state and the Ottoman Empire which was on the rise in the central parts of Europe.

For this reason, the rule of Mircea the Elder became a particularly interesting concern of both Romanian and foreign historiography. The conflicting interpretations, the lack of a documentary base and the divergent positions of the historians have pushed the research further in the realm of speculations without clearing the way towards removing uncertainties. Consequently, controversial issues of chronological nature or those related to fact interpretation are still far from being resolved.

We can assert, without departing from the truth, that the period of time covering the first Wallachian-Turkish military confrontation and the so-called 'crusade' tragically stopped at Nicopolis gathers most of the unclear aspects

which have the Romanian prince in the foreground.

Before focusing on the issues related to this particular time, we find it useful to include Wallachian policy within a general framework of relations with the major countries of the area, during the last quarter of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1386, Mircea I, the son of the former prince Radu I, came to the throne of Wallachia. The political context in which this ascension occurred lay under the sign of the Ottoman expansion in the European territories started by sultan Murad I. If the first part of the 14<sup>th</sup> century had found the Romanian space engaged in the interests of Hungary, Poland and the Golden Horde, the latter was replaced, after the fall of the Bulgarian tsardoms, by the Turkish power. The weaknesses of the two catholic kingdoms, Hungary and Poland, were endangering the evolution of Wallachia as an independent state in the context of an evident Turkish expansion towards southeastern Europe.

Under the Anjou dynasty, the Kingdom of Hungary had attained not only political stability but also a coherent plan of subordinating the eastern European states. The death of Louis I of Anjou, in 1382, entailed the breach of the Hungarian-Polish dynastic alliance and the beginning of fierce internal struggles which would remove Hungary from the anti-Ottoman front, settled along the Danube. Poland's walk-out from the Hungarian trusteeship took sometimes the shape of military conflicts gradually quenched by the formation of a new dynastic Polish-Lithuanian union following the accession to the throne of Władysław Jagiełło (P. Engel, 2001).

Between these reorganisations, the measures taken by the new Wallachian prince can be considered courageous as they were part of a territorial consolidation plan designed to annex several territories which were under Hungarian and Turkish authority. The seizure of much disputed territories, the Banate of Severin, Amlaş, Făgăraş, and their inclusion in the royal title\* brought further tensions to the relations with Hungary even amid the nobiliary revolts that had preceded the taking-over of the throne by Sigismund of Luxemburg.

Therefore, the Wallachian state was forced to quickly find foreign support in order to stop a possible military response. The good relations with the other Romanian state, Moldavia, smoothed the way towards an alliance with Poland. Materialised in 1389, it appears rather as a military union directed, in effect, against the Hungarian Kingdom.

The ascension of the Ottoman Empire after the victory of Kosovo Polje in 1389 made king Sigismund of Luxemburg reconsider the relations with Wallachia. The new sultan, Bayezid I, who had come to the fore on the Kosovo Polje battlefield, would abandon the system of gradual expansion of his predecessors and initiate the plan to unite Anatolia with the European parts (T. Gemil, 1991).

The Ottoman campaign against Bulgaria and Dobruja in 1388 and subordination of Serbia, following the defeat of the last great Christian coalition at Kosovo Polje, had changed the geopolitical configuration of the area (S. Turnbull, 2003). The entry corridor to Transylvania and Hungary by subjugating Wallachia was taking shape and could not be

neglected by Sigismund of Luxemburg. A rapprochement between the two Christian states became a necessity.

The Wallachian campaign of 1388-1389 to annex Dobruja after expelling the Turkish domination should be judged considering both the context of the trade blockade on the Danube and the idea of destroying a perfect base of attack against Wallachia. It was the first sign of defiance to the empire that had proved unforgiving of such acts of disobedience in the case of the Bulgarian tsardoms.

The first attacks against Wallachia took place in 1391-1392 and were carried out with the main purport of plundering; at the same time, they are analysed as an integrant part of the imperial policy which aimed to intimidate the Wallachian state, forcing it to adopt a neutral position south of the Danube (T. Gemil, 1991). Some Ottoman chronicles mention voivode Mircea's response, namely the attack on the Ottoman base of Karanovasa, east of the Balkans, alongside the bey of Sinope (A. Decei, 1978).

In 1393 Turnovo Tsardom became a Turkish pashalik and the powerful fortifications of Nicopolis and Silistra, on the Danube, were conquered by the Ottomans, which permanently pushed Wallachia on the anti-Ottoman front alongside Hungary, and the Empire, in its turn, was well aware of that. The last obstacle represented by the presence of Timur Lenk in Anatolia had been surpassed. The powerful khan of Central Asia was to unexpectedly leave the Anatolian offensive following the outbreak of conflicts in the Sirvan area (R. Grousset, 1948).

The Ottomans' invasion beyond the Danube was open and meant the beginning of Turko-Wallachian confrontations in which the Hungarian kingdom was forced to intervene in its turn in order to secure its borders. Sultan Bayezid I's offensive was to reveal the amplexity of its proportions within two years. Blockade against Constantinople was initiated, Thessaly and Morea were occupied and Albania fell under the Ottoman rule (H. Inalcik, 1996).

So, at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Wallachia appeared as the first Christian outpost facing the wave of Islamic expansion towards central Europe. Thrown into the Ottoman vortex, the Wallachian prince received no actual military support from Hungary, not even in the last minute, therefore he was forced to organise the

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defence with his own internal forces, directly interested in maintaining a number of privileges which were to be in danger in case of subordination to the Turkish power.

The Ottoman campaign against the Wallachian state still raises questions related to the chronology and location of several events that have not found a final answer at historiographic level. The place of occurrence of the main battle between the two armies is one of the issues that have received various interpretations.

Late Wallachian seventeenth and eighteenth-century chronicles point to the first location of the famous Ottoman-Wallachian confrontation stating that Mircea defeated Bayezid's army on the bank of the Ialomița river\*\*. The opinion was little used by modern historians who proved its groundlessness, for that matter.

From late 19<sup>th</sup> century dates the first historical localization of the battle, somewhere around Craiova, the entire demonstration being based on a Serbian source, an account on the death of Marko Kralević (B. Petriceicu-Hașdeu, 1884). The great Romanian historian Nicolae Iorga would use part of this information asserting that, after the Ottoman army had crossed the Danube, Mircea the Elder would withdraw towards the centre of the country choosing a "strong position" on the road to the Argeș to face the Turkish force (N. Iorga, 1899). The theory was to be amplified by outstanding representatives of Romanian historiography who suggested precise locations situated in the vicinity of Curtea de Argeș, capital city of Wallachia (N. Constantinescu, 1981).

The simple conclusion would be that the terrible confrontation occurred somewhere on the road to the Argeș river, in a place not accurately located, mentioned in Serbian chronicles under the name of "Rovine" that would designate an area with ravines, trenches or a marshy place. However, primary sources of Slavonic and Byzantine chronicles do not support this terminology, which explains its absence in the Romanian historical tradition (S. Iosipescu, 1987).

As for chronology, historiographically speaking, discussions have focused on two dates, 10<sup>th</sup> October 1394, 17<sup>th</sup> May 1395, while the outcome of the formidable clash raises the same heated debates. We shall not insist on the endless

controversies related to the dating of the event. We shall nevertheless attempt to make a brief and natural presentation of the stages recorded in historiography.

A new source, brought into discussion in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, would change the historical opinion regarding the date of occurrence of this event (C. Litzica, 1901). The document in question is a gift given in October 1395 to a Byzantine monastery for the commemoration of Constantin Dragaș, perished during the Ottoman campaign in Wallachia. The document points out that his death had occurred barely six months before, which is extremely relevant to our discussion.

Reference works of interwar Romanian historians (I. Minea, 1919; D. Onciul, 1968) continued to support the date of 10<sup>th</sup> October 1394, assimilated with the first phase of the sultan's campaign in Wallachia. The next stages marked, according to them, the continuation of the Turkish advance along the Argeș river and the battle of 17<sup>th</sup> May 1395 that presumably acknowledged Constantin Dragaș's death.

Discussions would be reanimated on the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the great voivode's accession to the throne and would continue until the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the appearance of new studies and reference works which equally embraced both dates. We shall put forward two examples, just as valuable in terms of the accuracy of using resources.

The identification of a passage in a Florentine chronicle helped its discoverer see a succession of events as follows (Ș. Papacostea, 1998). In autumn 1394, sultan Beyazid I undertook a campaign in Wallachia where he underwent defeat. Aware of the imminence of the Turkish attack, Mircea I met the Hungarian sovereign in Brașov, in early spring 1395, in order to strengthen the political-military alliance. The new Turkish offensive occurred in May 1395 and the empire got the victory materialized by installing as head of the country a submissive prince, namely Vlad I.

In contrast, another opinion, based predominantly on the analysis of Serbian sources, leads to the conclusion that the only expedition of the sultan took place in spring 1395, therefore the battle of the place known as "Rovine" occurred on 17<sup>th</sup> May, 1395. Furthermore, according to the author of the study, the same Florentine chronicle

points out, by mentioning the month of May 1395, that the theory advanced was correct (A. V. Diță, 2000). A source discovered at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century but translated entirely into Romanian only a decade ago was to support this dating (D. Năstase, 2002). This document generally known as the anonymous Bulgarian chronicle states that sultan Bayezid I, while retreating from Wallachia, crossed the Danube, caught and killed the Bulgarian tsar Shishman on 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 1395. If we were to completely trust this controversial (in point of origin and dating) chronicle, then there would be only one campaign of the sultan which ended sometime in late spring 1395 with the banishment of Mircea I and enthronement of the pretender Vlad.

A relatively recent study introduced a general comment on the event which is absolutely worthy of attention in the given context. We refer to the fact that many historians search for a specific day of the confrontation, though certain reliable sources indicate that the battle lasted a whole week (D. I. Mureșan, 2004).

In conclusion, we may admit that in the last century historiography has generally adopted the view according to which the battle of Rovine took place on 10<sup>th</sup> October 1394 and ended with the clear victory of the Wallachian army (N. Iorga, 1993; P. P. Panaitescu, 1944; Ș. Ștefănescu, 1970). The second major confrontation with the Ottoman armies occurred on 17<sup>th</sup> May 1395 and had an indecisive result, enough however to impose to the throne a prince with Philo-Turkish sympathies, Vlad I. Sovereign Sigismund of Luxemburg's presence in Wallachia in the summer of 1395, at Câmpulung and Severin\*\*\*, where he even issued documents, reinforces the idea of the existence of a new Turkish campaign. If, between these two confrontations, we could place other military clashes as well, it is hard to say. It would not be impossible that voivode Mircea's retreat to Transylvania, in early 1395, should have taken place in the context of another confrontation meant to further undermine his internal support.

Certainly, Beyazid I's campaign launched in early autumn 1394 aimed to eliminate the Wallachian state from the anti-Ottoman front on the Danube. However, there is little reason to believe that the Wallachian prince simply waited for the Turkish troops in a strategic place without trying to decimate the enemy's forces by short

raids carried out on the road between the Danube and the Argeș. The lack of such tactics should be viewed as at least strange given that, six years later, in 1400, during a Turkish attack on a smaller scale, described extremely suggestively in the work of a Byzantine chronicler (L. Chalkokondyles, 1953), Mircea the Elder would choose precisely the solution of starting the fight when an inimical unit separated from the bulk of the army in search of food or to loot cattle.

Therefore, one must keep in mind that a single decisive confrontation reduced considerably the chances of success of Wallachia and questions the very result of the battle hailed as victory. The disproportionate manpower of the Wallachian state as against the Ottoman army pushes the adoption of such a solution to the absurd.

Mircea the Elder's success was temporary in character mainly because of Sigismund of Luxemburg's initiative to attack the Moldavian state. Prepared to intervene in Wallachia and informed of the Wallachian triumph, the Hungarian sovereign chose to push into Moldavia on an attempt to remove this state from Poland's sphere of influence. The reason: before Stara Wieś congress, which was to reunite the two royal families of Hungary and Poland and the ruler of Lithuania, Sigismund of Luxemburg wished to appear as the 'puppeteer' of the situation in the Romanian countries who directly controlled the anti-Ottoman front opened along the Danube (C. Rezachevici, 2001).

As for the situation in Moldavia, towards the end of 1394, voivode Roman I died and his eldest son, Stephen I, succeeded him to the throne, having a more overt position against Hungary and a more submissive attitude to the Polish sovereign, Władysław Jagiełło, who had brought him to power.

The king of Hungary had been aware, ever since December 1394, of the political change in Moldavia. While in Transylvania, partly influenced by the favourable result of the Wallachian-Ottoman confrontation, Sigismund of Luxemburg was to invade the Moldavian state in early 1395. As pointed out in documents, the Hungarian troops, on retreating after several fierce battles, were defeated at Hindău\*\*\*. A campaign that had been supposed to be a simple training exercise for the anti-Ottoman war on the

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Danube would have a completely unhappy ending for the Hungarian kingdom.

The oath sworn to Poland shows Moldavia's determined attitude in foreign policy. Voivode Stephen engaged to give and receive military support against the Hungarians, the Turks, the Tatars, the Teutonic Knights and the voivode of Wallachia (M. Costăchescu, 1932).

Thus, the evolution of events in the Moldavian state had negative implications on Mircea the Elder's position as ruler, as well. Under voivode Stephen I's authority and with the tacit approval of Poland, a group willing to enthrone the pretender Vlad I emerged in Wallachia (P. P. Panaitescu, 1944).

The solution chosen by the Wallachian prince was to reach out to Hungary. The treaty signed in Braşov in March 1395 was intended to guarantee the continuation of the anti-Ottoman fight and, at the same time, to put pressure on the Wallachian nobility that was becoming increasingly willing to accept his replacement with a ruler that would be more open to an agreement with the Ottoman power. The absence of the large seal, on signing the first act of anti-Ottoman alliance in the history of the Wallachian state, shows in a way the hastiness of concluding the oath and the stringent need of external support capable of guaranteeing the Wallachian prince internal stability as well.

Evidence prompts us to consider that, when the alliance of Braşov was concluded, Mircea the Elder was the ruler of the entire Wallachia as he granted the royal army the right of free passage through any region, city or port of his country\*\*\*. The intromission of the pretender Vlad I must have occurred only in the second half of 1395. Otherwise, Sigismund of Luxemburg would have given less importance to his plan of anti-Ottoman crusade which included even a major military action in the Balkans, ultimately stopped when his wife, Mary of Anjou, died and dynastic issues re-emerged in relation with Poland (V. Pervain, 1975).

Vlad I's accession to the throne should be judged in relation with the triangle of forces represented by Poland, Moldavia and the Ottoman Empire that circumstantially joined the first two in an attempt to rid of an inconvenient adversary, namely Mircea I. The Turkish offensive launched in spring 1395 paved the way for the replacement of Mircea the Elder. The

defeat suffered by Sigismund of Luxemburg lit the flame nurtured by Poland and Moldavia which had received support for Vlad I from some of the Wallachian boyars.

The accession to the throne of Argeş of another prince remains clearly recorded in the letter written by the bishop of Transylvania on 21<sup>st</sup> March 1396 in which there is a mention of the royal emissary Ioan Tatar, whom voivode Vlad entrusted with a mission\*\*\*. Restoring relations with Poland and admitting vassalage, which required a certain amount of time to accomplish, pushed his final installation towards late 1395.

The king of Hungary himself accepting to maintain diplomatic relations with Vlad I ultimately confirmed that, at that time, full power was no longer in Mircea the Elder's hands.

In conclusion and somewhat surprisingly, the first triumph against the Ottoman Empire paved the way for a development with unsuspected consequences. The prince who, through his military genius, had decisively contributed to this Romanian success was forced to accept the political games of the great powers, partially or totally losing the rule for more than a year. The last crusading action of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, tragically ended at Nicopolis, was to quickly restore him to full power in Wallachia. This time, the illustrious voivode Mircea would be able to find a way through all the scruffiness of foreign policy and succeed in bringing Wallachia undeniable prestige in Europe at the beginning of the new century.

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