The Crusade of Varna, 1443–1445: What Motivated the Crusaders?

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Assessments of what motivated crusades and crusaders are inevitably speculative,¹ some commentators seeing crusading as ‘a genuinely popular devotional activity’,² while others prefer to explain it as a search for economic or other material benefits. All, however, admit – if sometimes unwillingly – that there can be no single explanation for the phenomenon. The Crusade of Varna – a campaign in which the combined forces of the pope, the king of Hungary, the Byzantine Emperor, the duke of Burgundy, Venice, Ragusa and the emir of Karaman confronted the Ottoman sultan, Murad II³ – provides a good case study of the complexities of crusading. At one level it is easy to understand the events of 1443–5 simply in terms of Realpolitik, with the alliances during the crusade of Christian with Muslim and Muslim with Christian highlighting its secular character. The campaign was, however, still a crusade. It was a military enterprise under the leadership of the pope, undertaken by the church against an infidel enemy and, as such, it satisfies the definition of a crusade formulated in the thirteenth century by the Decretalist Hostiensis (d. 1271).⁴ Nonetheless, even if the participants in events publicly proclaimed the war to be a crusade, this does not necessarily explain their motives. The idea of a crusade can just as easily serve as a justification for an action undertaken for other reasons, as it can for inspiring the action in the first place, and this complicates the question of motivation. So too does the question of individual motives. The knights and common soldiers who took part in the campaign cannot have shared the secular goals of its leaders, nor would they have understood a crusade in the same terms as canon lawyers or cardinals. In brief, therefore, the motives that inspired the crusade of Varna were tangled and certainly not uniform.
The ideology of crusading was itself a cause of confusion both in defining the aims of the crusade and in determining the motives of the crusaders. Central to the concept of a crusade is the goal of ‘liberating’ the Holy Land from the hands of the infidels, and this was certainly something to which all participants in the crusade of Varna could subscribe. A legal justification for this goal had emerged in the early thirteenth century, when Robert de Courson had argued from Scripture that the Israelites had seized Amorite territory that was rightfully theirs. This land had passed to the church by inheritance, and so any war to recover it for Christendom was justified. In a sermon preached at the Council of Ferrara-Florence which assembled in 1438 to bring about the unity of Christendom as a prelude to the crusade of Varna, the abbot of Clarevalle, as legate of the Duke of Burgundy, was to borrow this idea when he urged the re-united Latins and Greeks to ‘seize the Holy Land from the hands of the enemies of Christ ... just as once the victorious sons of Israel proceeded to war.’ The concept of the Holy Land and its ‘liberation’ was not however a monopoly of clerics, but part of the mental world of even illiterate Christians and could therefore act to motivate all crusaders and to define the enemy for them in terms familiar to everyone from biblical narrative. For the educated, more recent history also provided an additional impetus. In a memorandum delivered to the pope in Florence in 1442, Beltrami de Mignanelli, speaking on behalf of the Jacobite Church, cites the First Crusade, launched when the ‘Church was in schism and the kingdom of Hungary almost occupied by the Turks’ as a precedent for re-uniting Christendom and conquering the Holy Land. Beltrami clearly intended the stories of Baldwin and, for the more piously inclined, Peter the Hermit, to inspire the new crusade, to provide role models for the crusaders and to define the enemy.

Bible stories and tales of the First Crusade were undoubtedly inspirational and, since they embodied a set of beliefs to which all could subscribe, undoubtedly also provided a shared ideal around which the participants in the crusade could unite (compare and contrast Bale’s analysis of Christian belief and the role of outsiders on p. 24). The problem with them was that they were fantasies, and as such could divert attention from the real goals of the crusade of Varna.

To begin with, the aim of the crusade was not to ‘liberate’ the Holy Land, but to end Ottoman rule in the Balkan peninsula. The Ottoman enemy was, it is true, Muslim, but theologians and canon lawyers, while enthusiastically embracing the idea that church could conduct a crusade against heretics, were less certain about crusades against Muslims outside the Holy Land. This probably did not matter, since there were