

The Battlefield of Varna (1444) as the Subject for One Little-known Drawing by Antoni Piotrowski:

“The Landscape Near Varna with a Mound in the Battlefield of 1444, the Place of the Death of King Vladislaus III”

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Бойното поле край Варна (1444) като тема на една малко известна рисунка на Антони Пьотровски:

„Пейзажът край Варна с могила от бойното поле на 1444 – лобното място на крал Владислав III“

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***Abstract:** The Ottoman expansion into European countries was more and more serious in the late 14th and the 15th centuries. Many battles took place between the European and the Ottoman armies in those times and the battle of Varna (1444) was one of them. It started to be paid particular attention to due to the death of the commanding king – Vladislaus III Jagelonski, who lost his life in the battlefield and became called Varnenczik (Varnensis). There are some descriptions of the Varna battlefield of 1444 deriving from some sources: chronicles or eye-witnesses' descriptions throughout centuries. One of those eyewitnesses to the battlefield in the 80s of the 19th century was Antoni Piotrowski – a Polish versatile artist: a painter, a drawer, an illustrator, a war correspondent and a publicist. His activities as a war correspondent made him find himself in the territory of present Bulgaria and see the Varna battlefield. One of the things connected with his presence in that area is a very little-known drawing titled “The landscape near Varna with a view on the mound in the battlefield of 1444, the place of the death of king Vladislaus III” (Fig. 1) which is presented in this text.*

***Key words:** Vladislaus Varnenczik; Varnensis; Warneńczyk; Antoni Piotrowski; Varna battlefield 1444; Varna mounds; Vladislaus' grave*

The 14th and 15th centuries were – for the Europe – times of resisting the Ottoman Turks that had been taking over more and more lands of the South-Eastern Europe. There were many battles between European and Ottoman armies,

but they did not stop the Ottoman expansion. In the first half of the 15th c. almost all the Balkans were under the Ottoman domination, which, in turn, became a real and more and more serious threat to the Kingdom of Hungary. In a such difficult and complicated time, the Hungarian noblemen – whose ruler had died after a failed trial of defeating the Ottomans in 1439 – offered their crown to the young, not even 16 years old Polish king, Vladislaus III Jagelonski. He accepted the Hungarian offer, involved himself eagerly in the fight against the Ottomans and – at the beginning – with a success (the Long campaign of 1443/1444). His achievements made the Ottoman ruler, Sultan Murad II, offer king Vladislaus III the peace treaty that was ratified.¹ It was just the same king Vladislaus' success that made other European rulers encourage Vladislaus to continue the fight against the Ottomans till their final expulsion from the Europe. King Vladislaus, finally, agreed to take up another military campaign despite the ratified peace truce. It ended up tragically for the young monarch: he was killed in the battle of Varna in 1444. There are some preserved descriptions of the circumstances that led to that battle, the course of the battle itself and king Vladislaus' death. Based on the witnesses' relations, that battle took place on 10th November, on the fields near the old Bulgarian fortress of Varna. The battlefield was plain of size: 9 km long and 7 km wide, situated West from the Varna defensive walls and the Black Sea. Its northern border was Franga Plateau with its hills. Its southern one – the Varna Lake along with its swamps.

The Christian army, deployed to the battle, was surrounded by the fortifications of Varna and the sea, the large lake and hills by its sides and the much bigger Ottoman army in front, commanded by sultan Murad II (**de Palatio 1891**, 459–469; **Długosz 2009**, 352–353). The battle changed its course for the advantage of one or other army but was ended by king Vladislaus' fatal attack against the janissaries, who surrounded the sultan. Undoubtedly, the aim of the king was to kill the sultan to put a stop to that fierce battle, but – as a result – it was him who was killed by the hand of one of the old janissaries – Kodja Hazra. (**Sroka 2016**, 116). King Vladislaus' death was a crucial moment during the battle for the advantage of the sultan's army, but it did not mean cessations of hostilities between armies as they continued for the next two days till all the Christian knights were killed and their bodies covered the battlefield or were thrown to the Varna Lake. The information about that tragic battle and its fatal result reached entire Europe. The reaction was different in the different countries (this question is broadly discussed, i.e., **Olejniak 2007**; **Mitev 2020**). There were contradictory rumours especially about king Vladislaus' fate. According to some of them, he managed to escape from the battlefield and was seen in many different places (**letter N° 304**, 452–453; **Długosz 2013**, 11–12; **Michałowska 1995**, 697–704).²

¹ The question of ratifying the peace treaty between king Vladislaus and sultan Murad, Vladislaus' participation in the pertractations before it was ratified and his role in breaching it are still not precisely researched and are controvertial (**Mitev 2020**, 90–97; **Sroka 1995**, 43–46).

² Such rumours could be understood due to political interest of many countries as well as the fact

However, other sources emphasised on his bravery in the battle and his glorious death at Varna because of which he received the alias Varnenczik (Varnensis). The information – about the king’s death – made some long-lasting traditions to begin: the tradition of chiming bells in Polish churches after the evening mass and the prayer “angelus” (**Urbanek 1985**, 46). The Polish people started to write poems and songs, which glorified the late ruler and his glorious death on the battlefield. The songs were sung in Polish homes even in the late 16th c. (**Grabski 1967**, 26; **Michałowska 1995**, 704). The people living near Varna began to mark the Varna battlefield with crosses (**Mitev 2020**, 128) to commemorate the killed king. Vladislaus became a hero of many legends, poems, dramas, or paintings. Nevertheless, there were many, who were not inclined to glorify king Vladislaus, and were critical of his actions, or – to be more precise – they were critical of the people who had been behind Vladislaus’ decisions and actions (**Grabski 1968**, 26–51; **Michałowska 1995**, 697–704; **Tazbir 1985**, 511–531).

Independently of how king Vladislaus was regarded, the battle of Varna and his death became an inerasable fact from the history of Poland and Europe. The further Ottoman expansion, the involvement of the European countries in the battles against the Ottomans to protect European values and territories made people remember and commemorate king Vladislaus and the battle of Varna even more often. Some people not only remembered the king but also wanted to see the place of his death – the Varna battlefield. One of those was Maciej Strykowski (Strykovijs, 1547–1593(?), the precise date of death is unknown; **Radziszewska 1978**, 5–25). He is the author of the chronicle titled “O początkach, wywodach, dzielnościach, sprawach rycerskich i domowych sławnego narodu litewskiego, zemojdzkiego i ruskiego, przedtem nigdy od żadnego ani kuszone, ani opisane, z natchnienia bożego a uprzemie pilnego doświadczenia”. In this chronicle he described the battlefield of Varna – as he saw it in the 70s of the 16th c. There he also presented the most important facts of king Vladislaus’ life and the course of

that there were not any witnesses to his death – knights having participated in the final attack, had been killed or taken prisoners. Some of them returned homes after some time, but even in such a situation it was little probable that their relations could get to any influential people – i.e. chroniclers – to give some evidence. The Ottoman chronicles were then unknown to Europe, so they could not put a stop to the spreading of the rumour. The unknow faith of the king was used by some impostors who ‘appeared’ in Poland or near and claimed to be king Vladislaus (**Lewicki 1895**, 239–245). However, the king’s alleged escape from the battlefield was contradictory to the medieval mentality in which king Vladislaus had been brought up and acted. Unfortunately, it is a serious but frequent mistake to look at those figures from the past through a modern prism, what. For example Manuel Rosa has achieved something similar with his theory that king Vladislaus escaped the battlefield and later had a son – Christofor Columbus. The author made, at least, two serious mistakes: first, he seems to misunderstand the medieval mentality, when the death for faith was a guaranty for an eternal life in Heaven. More over, the chivalrous code and manners demanded to fight and not retreat, and king Vladislaus was famous for being brave, chivalrous and pious. Thus, the medieval mentality as well as King Vladislaus’ traits of characters made him unable to leave the battlefield. The second mistake is that M. Rosa does not refer to some Ottoman chronicles, which give some light upon king’s death.

the battle of Varna in a rhymed form. Some of rhymed stanzas were dedicated just to the battlefield of 1444. It was him, who saw a large field, surrounded by the hills, the sea, and the lake there. He also emphasised his own presence there with some rhymes:

Widziałem Warnę. [...]

Widziałem to swym własnym okiem. Tym widziałem okiem

*i w przekopie, gdzie król padł, chodziłem głębokim [...]*³(Strykowski 1978, 442).

This 16th-century description is interesting due to two facts – it confirms the 15th-century descriptions of the battlefield of Varna and, additionally, it gives the information about the trench – trap, covered with branches – prepared by the Ottomans before the battle.

Deriving from much later times, the ‘rhymed’ description of the battlefield can be found in a poem written by the count Stanisław Ostroróg⁴, who was in Varna due to the outbreak of the Crimean war (1853–1856) in which Russia and Ottoman Turkey were involved. In those times, Poland did not exist as an independent state because it was divided between Russia, Prussia, and Austria.⁵ That war gave the Poles – who had already been deprived of the sovereign of the country for 60 years – some kind of hope to regain independence. It was no surprise that the Poles started to gather in some legions or military divisions to support the Turks in their fight against the Russians because the possible victory of the Turks meant the weakening of Russia and a chance for Poland to get out of its dominance. Thus, many Poles gathered in the territory of Bulgaria (then, under Ottoman domination), although the Bulgarians, on the contrary, supported Russia (Grzegorzewski 1883, 50–54). One such legion, aimed to support the Turks in that war, was concentrated around the figure of count Władysław Zamojski.⁶ That legion never took part in any battle, but left some (short lasting, unfortunately) trace of its presence in the Bulgarian lands. They constructed an obelisk which was to commemorate king Vladislaus Varnenczik and his knights who had lost their lives in the battle of Varna. It was situated on one of the mounds⁷, which were on the area of the battlefield of 1444. It was S. Ostroróg who was charged with the supervision of the executive works. On the occasion of constructing that monument – obelisk (May 1856), he wrote a poem which started with a short

³ I saw Varna [...] / I saw it with my own eye and / I walked in the deep trench where the king had died [...] – translation by the author of the article.

⁴ Stanisław Julian Ostroróg (1834/1835–1890), captain, general Władysław Zamojski’s aide-de-camp during the Crimean War. He tried to write some poems, but without success. He was well-known as a photographer.

⁵ The partitions of Poland took place in three stages: 1772, 1793 and 1795 and – as a result – Poland lost independence completely.

⁶ Władysław Zamojski (1803–1868), general; participant of November uprising (1830) and the Crimean War, where he was a general of one Turkish brigade.

⁷ According to Varna local oral tradition, one of the mound was considered to be the burial site of the king (Grzegorzewski 1911; Kaczmarek 1997, 209–227).

mention describing the battlefield as: *silent, swampy fields, surrounded by the sea, Varna town and hills*.⁸ This poem contained also some patriotic content to encourage the Poles to fight and to make other states – especially those which had parted Poland – understand that the Poles had not given up and were still ready for fight for their independence. The information on the monument construction was published in the European press.⁹ However, when Jan Matejko was in Varna and saw the battlefield in autumn 1872, he did not see any signs of that obelisk as that monument had disappeared in some mysterious circumstances, very soon after its construction.¹⁰ Matejko, on his trip from Cracow to Istanbul, visited Varna and – as it was noted by M. Gorzkowski¹¹ – *arriving into Varna, visiting its environs and the city itself aroused sad historical memories about our great king and his heroic death. Researching the place where the battle had taken place, and the later view of the Black Sea [...] evoked various impressions.* (**Gorzkowski 1993**, 59–60). It was the place where to that master of painting occurred an idea of commemorating the battle of Varna with an adequate painting. In 1879, seven years after the visit to the Varna battlefield, he finished painting probably the most popular depiction of the battle of Varna, which inspired many other painters to follow his vision of the battle.

Visiting that battlefield in 1872 J. Matejko also saw a large plain touching Varna Lake, peripheries of Varna Fortress and some hills, with two mounds dominating them. Some years later the same view was seen by one of Matejko's student – Antoni Piotrowski. It was just that battlefield, or rather – one of the mentioned mounds, which was possibly the burial site of king Vladislaus – that the artist chose to commemorate in one of his drawings.

Antoni Piotrowski (**Makowska 2003**, 210–219; **Ptaszyńska 2018**; **Zakrzewska 1981**, 461–463) was born on 7th September 1853 as the last of 13 children in Wincenty and Marianna Piotrowski's family. The next year his father died, and his mother moved to her relatives' possession where A. Piotrowski was brought up. He experienced another 'family tragedy' at the age of 10 – it was the year of the January uprising and in one of the battles, his elder brother, Franciszek, was killed. At the age of 15 he began to learn and develop his artistic skills, and his first teacher was Wojciech Gerson. Then he went to Munich to get some teachings from the painters there. After returning to Poland, he became Jan Matejko's student, but only for a short period of time. He – who represented the realistic way of painting (realism) – could not accept Matejko's interests concentrated on history. Growing misunderstanding made him go his own way and opened his own workshop. In September 1879 A. Piotrowski married Mary of

⁸ The whole poem is accessible in **Kaczmarek 1997**, 216–217.

⁹ All the documents referring the construction of the obelisk are accessible in Biblioteka Kórnicka PAN, BK 2566 k. 28.

¹⁰ Possible reasons for the disappearing of the monument are broadly discussed in **Kaczmarek 1997**; **Mitev 2020**; **Olejnik 2007** and **Zawilski 1978**, 98.

¹¹ Marian Gorzkowski (1830–1911), Jan Matejko's friend, taking care of his financial and household affairs; secretary of the Academy of Fine Arts, where Jan Matejko was a director.

Riedles family and the young couple moved to Paris, where two their sons were born and where the artist had ‘a time of stability’. Some circumstances made them return to Cracow where the artist led a peaceful, although active life, concentrating on his creative work as well as giving lessons to other future artists, i. e. to Olga Boznanska. The year 1885 was a year which brought some serious changes on the European political scene – it was the outbreak of the Serbo-Bulgarian war. It was absolutely obvious that – behind that military conflict – were interests of other powerful states, i. e. Russia and Austria-Hungary. As in case of the Crimean war, that war was also watched carefully by the Poles, who – as a state – still had not regained independence of Russia, Prussia, and Austria-Hungary. Any involvement of those countries in any military conflict might mean their weakening and, as a result, might give the Poles a chance to regain liberty. A. Piotrowski was particularly interested in the course of that war, was employed as a war correspondent by the French “Monde Illustré” and the British “Graphic London News – Illustration”. In that way he found himself on a part of the Balkans that was under a war. There he could see with his own eyes the course of war and all its cruelties and his memories of it he wrote and published in “Wędrowiec”.¹² In those circumstances he met Bulgarian prince – Alexander Battenberg and – on his commission – he painted some paintings that presented the war. Apart from them, Piotrowski drew also some drawings depicting that war. They all were presented on Piotrowski’s individual exhibition in Lvov in 1887 (**Przeździecki 1887**).

In that time Piotrowski, however, did not paint only the war scenes or anything referring to the war. There, in Bulgaria, he discovered a kind of beauty he had never seen before: its land, its women with their traditional costumes – a complete novelty, exotism. That is why he started to depict them – it was another ‘painting subject’ in his creation. It was also where he could get to learn more about the local oral tradition regarding king Vladislaus.

The year 1891 seems to have been a quite interesting year in his artistic career – then he painted the painting titled “The nymphs and satires”. That piece of art ‘announced’ some changes in Piotrowski’s way of painting: till then he had been a representative of the realism. Even the title of the painting refers to the Greek mythology, not to the then-present reality (**Piątkowski 1895**, 115–118). It was exhibited at Berlin Exhibition and prized. It is more interesting that in the same year Piotrowski drew some drawing which reflected the full reality. The drawing’s title is “The landscape near Varna with a mound in the battlefield of 1444, the place of death of king Vladislaus III Varnenczik” (*Fig. 1*).

¹² Wędrowiec – Polish illustrated newspaper, issued every week, concentrating on geography and travelling subjects, in further sequence, of social-cultural questions. It was published in Warsaw between 1863–1906. The first publication by A. Piotrowski referring to the war can be found in the issue № 24, 1886, p. 127. His memories are continued in the next issues.



Figure 1. Antoni Piotrowski. Pejzaż z okolic Warny z kurhanem na polu bitwy 1444 roku, miejscu śmierci króla Władysława III Warneńczyka (*The Landscape near Varna with a Mound in the Battlefield of 1444, the Place of Death of King Vladislaus III Varnenczik*). Muzeum Narodowe Warszawa: Rys. Pol.1 4640 MNW

It is a black and white drawing, of size: 14,2 x 21,1 cm. It is drawn on cardstock on cardboard. Piotrowski used India ink and a quill to draw it. The artist presented the king's alleged place of death and his burial site. When he was in Varna, he saw the battlefield of 1444. The mound is 'placed' in the foreground and the large Varna Lake behind it in the background. The drawing is almost unknown, although it is worth paying more attention to due to two reasons: its subject and the realistic way of painting and drawing by Piotrowski at that time. What refers to the subject of the drawing – it is rare: no artists had presented the alleged burial site before (although there were many legends connected with that place, very popular among local people and passed in oral tradition; the constructing of the obelisk there only confirmed those local traditions). The only presentations of that mound could be found in some French magazines and the Polish "Kłosy" (Kaczmarek 1997, 215–218). Taking into consideration the realistic way of painting – that A. Piotrowski had represented till that year – that drawing can be considered as a kind of a „document” – a silent drawn 'witness' to the place of death of the Polish king and (then considered) burial site. At present days the drawing is a part of the collection of National Museum in Warsaw and is deposited in one of its branches – in Muzeum Okręgowe in Suwałki. It was presented during a temporary exhibition dedicated to Antoni Piotrowski's artistic

work, organised by that museum (**Museum 2010**, no catalogue was prepared of that exhibition).

Antoni Piotrowski continued his work as an artist (finally, he returned to the realism style) as well as a war correspondent (he also painted some paintings which depicted the Russian-Japanese war, unfortunately, those paintings are presently unknown due to being lost). He led an active life almost to his death which took place on 12th December 1924, after a short illness. He was buried in Warsaw. He left many paintings, drawings, illustrations to many historical books. His name is inseparably connected with Bulgarian culture because of his paintings referring to important moments in Bulgarian history. Due to his famous painting „The slaughter at Batak” („Баташкото клане“) he became involved in a media scandal (**Vezenkov 2013**) connected to the work of M. Balewa and F. Brauenbauer (**Batak 2007**).

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